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# *The Image of Owls in the Han Dynasty Popular Consciousness*

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***Abstract:*** This paper explores the changes in people's perception of owl imagery during the Han Dynasty period. Prior to the Han Dynasty, from Neolithic rock paintings to artifacts such as the Shang Dynasty bronze owl-shaped wine vessel (xiao zun), owls possessed a relatively positive image. During the Han Dynasty, a significant dualistic phenomenon emerged: in the terrestrial world, represented by Jia Yi's "Fu on the Owl" (Fú Niǎo Fù), owls were regarded as omens of death and inauspicious birds; however, in the subterranean burial world, owl imagery appeared extensively in Han Dynasty pictorial stones, often depicted alongside the Four Divine Beasts, occupying prominent positions and retaining divine status. This contradictory phenomenon of "terrestrial aversion, subterranean veneration" reflects Han society's attitude toward owls—from conscious rejection to subconscious worship—demonstrating the profound vitality of owl worship in Chinese culture.

Owls, namely chixiao, are the collective term for birds of the order Strigiformes. Owls are nocturnal animals, commonly called "night cats" (yemao zi), often flying silently over farmland ridges at night, with rodents as their primary food source. In the minds of modern people, owls are considered highly inauspicious birds, and this perception is generally similar in other countries and regions worldwide. For instance, Chinese folk culture has proverbs such as "When a night cat enters the house, it never comes without cause" (yemao zi jin zhai, wu shi bu lai), which have been passed down among the people.

## 1. The Image of Chixiao (Owls) Before the Han Dynasty

In the minds of people before the Han Dynasty, owls appeared to be a relatively sacred type of bird. In some rock paintings from the Neolithic period, we can frequently observe owl imagery. The owl rock paintings of this period are characterized by two large eyes and can also be called "human face rock paintings," with their visual characteristics closely related to elements such as "sun and spirals." Of course, examples from this period remain too abstract and lack concrete imagery. For more specific and vivid examples, we can turn to bronze artifacts from the Shang Dynasty as evidence.

In the cultural relics of the Shang Dynasty, we frequently encounter bronze vessels featuring

chixiao imagery, crafted with exquisite artistry, such as the "Bronze Owl-shaped Wine Vessel from Lady Fu Hao's Tomb" (Figure 1). Such examples are abundantly rich, and this paper will not enumerate them all. It is sufficient to note that the appearance of owl imagery in Shang Dynasty bronze vessels was not an isolated case but rather a prevalent phenomenon.

Figure 1: Lady Fu Hao's Bronze Owl-shaped Wine Vessel

In other cross-cultural examples, there are similarly exquisite cultural remains, such as the Maya culture "Owl-shaped Ceramic Whistle" excavated from Jaina Island in Campeche State, now housed in the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Maya Culture Owl Ceramic Whistle

It is evident that in the pre-Han world, people's attitudes toward owls should generally be characterized as relatively positive. Otherwise, they would not have invested the time and effort to create various owl imagery. It should be noted that bronze vessels possessed extremely important ritual attributes at that time, with rare materials and extremely difficult manufacturing processes. Not all animal imagery could be used in bronze vessel production; any animal imagery selected, while not necessarily entirely auspicious, would at least not be considered evil.

Therefore, we have reason to speculate that before the Han Dynasty, even if people's attitudes toward owls were not particularly optimistic, they certainly would not have considered owls highly inauspicious. Combined with the appearance of owl imagery in bronze vessels, we have reason to believe that this speculation possesses a certain degree of rationality.

## 2. The Image of Chixiao (Owls) in the Han Dynasty

By the Han Dynasty, the aforementioned situation underwent a transformation. In the terrestrial world, the quantity of artifacts featuring owl imagery declined sharply. This was perhaps rooted in the fact that in the minds of Han people, the image of owls was no longer positive.

Jia Yi was a politician, writer, and thinker from the early Western Han Dynasty, hailing from Luoyang, Henan. He achieved fame at a young age and attained high office while still young, but later, due to court political struggles, he was banished by the emperor to Changsha. Jia Yi felt deeply

despondent, his heart filled with melancholy and unease. At precisely this moment, an owl flew into his dwelling. Jia Yi regarded this as a divine portent, believing that his life would not last much longer, and thus composed the eternally renowned "Fu on the Owl" (Fú Niǎo Fù) ("fú niǎo" being another name for owl).

Another example can be found in the "Shuoyuan" (Garden of Persuasions), which records a short story wherein an owl candidly admits that its relatives dislike its call and helplessly migrates: "An owl encountered a turtledove. The turtledove asked: 'Where are you going?' The owl replied: 'I am moving eastward.' The turtledove asked: 'Why?' The owl said: 'The villagers all detest my cry, so I am moving east.' The turtledove said: 'If you can change your cry, that would be fine; if you cannot change your cry, moving east will still make people hate your voice.'"[1]

This demonstrates how much Han Dynasty people disliked owls. The appearance of an owl signified that someone was about to die, thus transforming it into an inauspicious evil bird closely associated with death. Given this context, the near extinction of owl imagery in the terrestrial world becomes comprehensible.

However, contrary to this, we find abundant owl imagery in the subterranean world. In Han Dynasty pictorial stones, owl imagery experienced explosive development, with owl images frequently appearing alongside the "Four Divine Beasts" of traditional Chinese mythology. (The "Four Divine Beasts" are the four directional deities in traditional Chinese mythology: the "Azure Dragon," "White Tiger," "Vermillion Bird," and "Black Tortoise.") Taking a Han pictorial stone excavated from Xuzhou as an example (Figure 3), the owl image is positioned in the upper center of the composition, serving as the central narrative element of the entire image, surrounded by phoenixes, azure dragons, and divine figures. This indicates that the owl's status was not low and should also possess divine attributes. Similar examples of owls appearing in the same frame as divine beasts are numerous and constituted a prevalent phenomenon at the time.

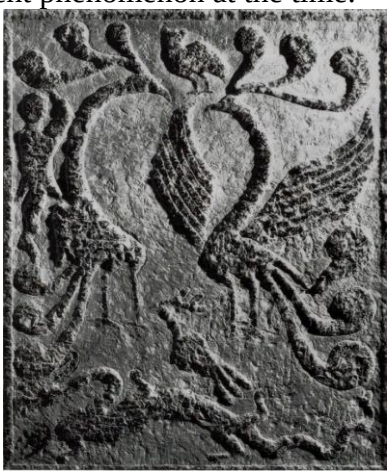

Figure 3: Eastern Han pictorial stone from Xuzhou featuring Azure Dragon, Phoenix, and Owl

It should be noted that pictorial stones appeared in subterranean burials, and burial sites were considered sacred places in the minds of Han people. Jiang Sheng argues that burial sites are special domains containing different dimensions such as life and death; they are primarily resting places for the deceased and secondarily serve as "palaces for refining form" where the dead achieve immortality after death.[2] (Like refining iron, these are palaces for tempering external form; legend holds that when people ascend to immortality after death, their physical form undergoes transformation.) Given the importance of burial sites, logically speaking, inauspicious elements would not be permitted to enter the burial world, as this concerns the deceased's grand plan for achieving immortality—no detail could be overlooked. Considering the remarkable position of the owl in the Xuzhou Han pictorial stone, we can speculate that during the Han Dynasty, although the terrestrial world's attitude toward

owls was one of aversion, in the subterranean world, people's attitudes toward owls remained unchanged. However, this positive attitude may no longer have belonged to the conscious realm but rather to the subconscious level.

This gives rise to a contradiction—a contradiction between the terrestrial and subterranean worlds. This is a fascinating phenomenon: during the Han Dynasty, although the terrestrial world had transformed its attitude toward owls, in the subterranean world, people's attitudes toward owls remained constant. Like an underground current, the difference may only be a shift from conscious worship to subconscious worship. This demonstrates the profound vitality of owl worship, suggesting that its origins reach much deeper and closer to humanity's most fundamental and primitive archetypal consciousness.

## 3. Conclusion

This dualistic phenomenon of owl imagery in the Han Dynasty reveals the complexity of cultural ideological transformation. Surface-level attitudinal changes are often merely the tip of the iceberg, while deep-seated cultural psychological structures possess greater continuity and stability. The disappearance of owls from the terrestrial world and their flourishing in the subterranean world not only reflects changes in Han Dynasty social concepts but also demonstrates the tenacious vitality of primitive worship within humanity's collective unconscious. This reminds us that in studying cultural history, we must pay attention not only to explicit ideological changes but also delve deeply into implicit cultural psychology in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the authentic character of historical culture.

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