

## On the Cultural Connotation of Pigeons

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**Abstract:** Pigeon is a common bird which plays an important role in traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese character of pigeon pronounces like “Ge”, which is the sound of the bird’s calling. Therefore, pigeons are named for their chirping. They first distributed in northern China, and then gradually spread to the southwest of China as well as the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Pigeons have been regarded as delicious food from the pre-Qin period to this day. Trained pigeons can deliver letters. Since the Six Dynasties, pigeons have become a symbol rich in Buddhist meanings in Chinese culture. At the same time, the image of obscene pigeons originating from Buddhist scriptures has little influence on the Chinese. In our country, the bird mainly conveys the meaning of auspiciousness and beauty.

### 1. Introduction

As a bird closely related to human beings, records related to pigeons are abundant in Chinese literature. But the history of relevant records is not long. The word “pigeon” can not be found in oracle bone inscriptions or bronze inscriptions. In pre-Qin jade wares, there are quite a few images similar with pigeons today, so they are often named as “jade pigeons”. But ancient jade carvings are freehand. It is difficult to distinguish pigeons from other small birds only by the outline of these rough figures. Text descriptions of “pigeons” on bamboo and silk writing materials began in Zhou and Qin classics.

### 2. The Name of Pigeon and its Distribution Observed by Ancient People

In Tang Dynasty, Shi-gu Yan commented on Ji Jiu Pian and wrote, “Pigeons look like doves, but they are green and white in color. Their sounds like Ge Ge, so it is named of Ge.” He also wrote the following paragraph in the eighth volume of Rectification of Customs.

He asked, “Why you call Cang as Gu Lu? Are there any literary quotations?” The man answered, “in the book Er Ya, there is a sentence. ‘Cang means Cang Gua. Cang and Gua refer to the same kind of bird. The birds people called as Gu Lu today are Gua Lu; Lu is the sound of their singing. The word can represent birds like cuckoos, geese, ducks, doves and pigeons. Now people in Shandong call them as Gua, which is also like the sound of their singing.”

In both annotations, Shi-gu Yan believed that “pigeon” was an onomatopoeic name which sounded “like the singing of the bird”. The author has inspected ancient dictionaries but cannot find other slight and subtle explanations on this issue. Perhaps pigeons were common and well known at that time, so scholars did not need to explain.

It seems that the distribution of pigeons was not very extensive between the Qin and Han Dynasties. There was a process of gradual expansion in the distribution area afterwards. According to the records of Tang and Song people, pigeons should be concentrated in the north before Tang Dynasty, and were rarely seen in Sichuan and regions south of the Yangtze River. The article There are no Rabbits or Pigeons in the Area of Shu in volume 7 of the Travel Notes of Feng records that,

There were no rabbits or pigeons in the region of Shu (today’s Sichuan Province) before. During the reign of Emperor Kaihuang of Sui Dynaskty, Xiu Xun became the governor of the Yi State. He ordered his attendants to send pigeons to Shu. Now pigeons are still scarce in Shu, but rabbits are in large quantity.

Zuo Dai wrote in his Journey to the West, “I came to the East Er Fo Temple in Kaifeng County

and saw pigeons as big as doves. They liked to play in pairs.” Zuo came from Jiangdong (the eastern part of the Yangtze River). He was subordinate to Yu Liu in the West Expedition in the late Jin Dynasty. When he came to Kaifeng County, he saw pigeons for the first time. Therefore, it could be inferred that there were no pigeons in the eastern part of the Yangtze River.

After that, all materials on pigeons in Sichuan area refer to this item as the earliest recording. In the early Sui Dynasty, rabbits and pigeons were introduced to Shu, but in the middle Tang Dynasty, there were more rabbits and fewer pigeons. Probably because pigeons from dry areas in the north were not well adapted to the humid and hot climate in the southwest and bred slowly. This geographical condition also restricts the distribution of pigeons in the south of the Yangtze River. As it can be seen from the quoted sentences, Zuo Dai born in Jiangdong in the late Eastern Jin Dynasty had not even seen pigeons before he came to Kaifeng.

Probably between the Song and Qi Dynasties in the period of the Southern Dynasties, pigeons began to multiply in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River from north to south. By the end of Liang Dynasty, the bird was commonly seen in areas near Jiankang. Jing Hou besieged Taicheng City at the end of Liang Dynasty. “The city was besieged for a long time; meat was nearly eaten up. The emperor can only eat one meal of meat a day. Sergeants and soldiers caught rats and birds, then smoked and cooked them to eat. Many pigeons flocked in the old hall, but then they were all caught and eaten. “ The phenomenon of “many pigeons flocked in the old hall” was related to the geographical distribution of poultry population. Another reason should be pigeon rearing affected by Buddhism.

From the Tang Dynasty, pigeon raising began to be popular among the people. People domesticate the bird for their meat, for entertainment, or to send letters. Pigeons were increasingly closely related to humans, and were gradually endowed with rich symbolic meanings.

### **3. Eating Pigeons**

As early as the pre-Qin and Han Dynasties, pigeons were regarded as superior food materials. In the chapter of Cooks in *The Rites of Zhou*, there is the saying, “cooks handle with a total of six livestock, six beasts and six birds.” Xuan Zheng quoted the saying of Zhong Zheng, “the six birds include wild geese, quails, moorhens, pheasants, doves and pigeons.” It is controversial among scholars whether pigeons belong to the “six birds” of Zhou Dynasty. If Zheng’s comments are correct, then pigeon meat should be a delicacy for the nobles of the Zhou Dynasty. The edibility of pigeons has other evidence. Da Zhao in the *Songs of Chu* mentions that, “the dish is full of meat covered with seasoning. The cook mixes five flavors to make it fragrant. There are juicy meat of cranes, pigeons, swans, and delicious broth with jackal meat!” The poet cites the delicacies of Chu to attract the souls of the deceased. The scenario described here should occur in the Huaihe River Basin. Obviously, pigeon soup has been regarded as the representative delicacy of Chu like fresh turtle, fat chicken, pickled pork and dog meat, fragrant *Artemisia* and crispy purslane, as well as fried poultry and fishes.

Since people had the custom of eating pigeons before the Han Dynasty, the bird should be widely distributed in northern China at that time. It was not difficult to catch pigeons, so they became a stable supply of food. There is a sentence in *Ji Jiu Pian*, saying “doves, quails and pigeons dead in the net”, in which the net should be a clap net set up by fowlers.

Since the Han Dynasty, the habit of eating pigeons has continued. Bian Zhu in Song Dynasty wrote *Old Stories in Qu Wei*. There is the recording in Volume 10, “the prime minister Yu-ru Han is a gastronome. His meals must be very luxurious. Han is especially addicted to pigeons.” Yu-ru Han’s hobby of eating pigeons can only exist under the background of the common habit of eating pigeons.

### **4. Sending Letters**

In ancient times, another important purpose of raising pigeons was to send letters. Pigeons are good at flying and are very sensitive to the earth’s magnetic field, so they can use the magnetic field

to navigate back to their nests from the place thousands of miles away. In the Song dynasty, Shao-yu Jiang's Pigeon Sending Letters in the 61<sup>st</sup> volume of the New Carved Imperial Court concludes that:

Ancient poem says: "There is a short note in my sleeve; I hope the two flying swallows can send the letter for me." The message can come in spring and go in autumn with a swallow. It seems that swallows can send letters accidentally. Nowadays, domesticating pigeons can really send letters. They can travel thousands of miles and come back. Shu people who work in Beijing send letters with pigeons; the message can be delivered within ten days. Merchants also communicate through pigeons in travelling.

This record identifies the difference between the description of sending letters by swallows in literary works and the communication through domesticating pigeons in real life in the Song Dynasty. Many Song people trained pigeons to communicate with each other. There were many reasons behind the phenomenon, such as developed commerce and trade, as well as the imperial examinations. Ban Liu pointed out that the outflow of population from Sichuan was frequent in the Northern Song Dynasty, but they still used carrier pigeons to communicate. The number of pigeons in Shu was large. The situation of "pigeons are still scarce in Shu, but rabbits are in large quantity" in Tang dynasty has changed.

There are not much information on carrier pigeons in the Tang Dynasty, but materials about the situation in the Song Dynasty are abundant. Pigeons were widely raised in Song Dynasty, and they were used for military purposes besides civil and commercial functions. The Story of Yi Feng in The History of Song Dynasty contains a story. In the early Southern Song Dynasty, Yu Liu established a puppet Qi regime in Shandong under the support of the Jin Dynasty. It was rumored that Yi Feng wanted to rebel. "Yu Liu published a list of successful candidates in Shandong. Yi sent people to buy flying pigeons, perhaps because he wanted to rebel." The reason Yi Feng "buys the flying pigeons" is precisely because, the military and political activities in turbulent times need timely information transmission; pigeons are of course the only choice. This record also shows that the government of the Southern Song Dynasty exercised a certain degree of control over the large-scale cultivation of pigeons among the people.

## 5. Domesticating Pigeons

Buddhism was introduced into China around the time of the Han Dynasty. A large number of Buddhist scriptures were translated; stories related to pigeons in Buddhist scriptures became widely known. The most famous ones are the story of the Shipi King cutting flesh to feed eagles and the story of a pigeon flying into the Buddha's shadow.

The earliest Chinese translation of Buddhist scripture which records the story of cutting meat to feed Eagle in detail was the Six Paramitas Sutra translated by Sheng-hui Kang in the Kingdom of Wu during the period of Three Kingdoms. The outline of the story is that the Emperor of Heaven and the King of Yibiandi transformed themselves into an eagle and a pigeon to test the virtues of the Bhagavat. The pigeon was hunted by an eagle and threw itself under the feet of the Bhagavat, hoping to be rescued. The eagle, on the excuse of starvation and hunger, demanded that the Bhagavat should cut off flesh of equal weight as that of the pigeon. The Bhagavat was fearless, but he could not cut flesh which weighed as much as a pigeon. He ordered his ministers to kill him, get his marrow and then weigh the marrow. The Emperor of Heaven saw that Bhagavat was faithful in offering everything; he was deeply moved. He changed back to his original body and explained the plan. The Bhagavat was enlightened and expressed that from now on, he would donate like this.

The equally famous story of pigeon entering Buddha's shadow was earlier seen in the un-translated Dafangbian Buddha's Gratitude Sutra in the Eastern Han Dynasty. A pigeon was chased by an eagle and flied into the shadow of Buddhist disciple Sariputra. It was still trembling and fearing. But when it moved into the shadow of Buddha, the bird became calm and fearless. This story is intended to show the difference between Sariputra and Buddha's realm. Sariputra has no great compassion; he still has worries, and practices Hinayana. But all Buddha's practices are perfect. So the dove of fear can live in the shadow of Buddha, but not in the shadow of Sariputra.

Although the two stories above were translated very early, according to existing literature evidence, they began to take effects and be accepted by Chinese people after the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The timing was roughly consistent with the period when Buddhism began to really flourish in China. Moreover, it has been proved that pigeons began to appear in the area of Jiangdong since the Eastern Jin Dynasty. According to the situation of the Southern Dynasties, the time of Chinese quoted the above two stories roughly coincides with the time of pigeons' spreading from north to south. Therefore, we can speculate that the popularity of Buddhist stories may have promoted the emergence of the habit of raising and cherishing pigeons in the Southern Dynasty.

The pigeon is the tool of Sakya in preaching Buddhist sutras. It is not unexpected that the pigeon itself is gradually regarded as a creature full of humanity and the animal be willing to be converted to Buddhism. The Story of Guang Cui in The Book of Wei Dynasty tells a story. Guang Cui believed in Buddhist Dharma. "He once sat and read Sutras in the office during the daytime. A pigeon came and stayed in front of his knees. Cui held the pigeon into his arms; the bird climbed to his shoulder through his arm. The pigeon stayed for a long time. Dozens of Buddhists and laics eulogized the scene." The Continued Memoirs of Eminent Monks: The Story of Fa Chun records that once a time, the eminent monk Fa Chun was sick. "Buddhists and laics gathered in front of his bed. There were two pigeons flying into the room, stayed on the hanger and looked at Fa Chun. The birds even remained clam when people came to touch and catch them." The above two examples are records of pigeons approaching Buddhist disciples. They are very similar to classical analogies and can be regarded as the evolution of classical stories.

Pigeons close to Buddhism are commonly called as domesticating pigeons in literature. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Buddhist monasteries have kept large numbers of pigeons. This vivid phenomenon has become a typical symbol of Buddhist culture in poems and prose of later dynasties.

## **6. The Pigeon of Obscenity and the Pigeon of Auspiciousness**

In the Song Dynasty, Dian Lu wrote the book *Piya*. The item "sparrow" in the chapter of Birds says, "the book of the West thinks that the lascivious people must bear the fruit. They will become sparrows, pigeons and ducks in the next life. Pigeons like copulation; the ladybird rides on the back of the cock during the mating, which is different from other birds." "The Book of the West", which is often seen in *Piya*, refers to Buddhist classics. As the "sparrow" chapter says, "lascivious people must bear the fruit. They will become sparrows, pigeons and ducks in next life". The idea is an important part of the Buddhist conception of retribution, and is repeatedly reflected in Buddhist classics.

Volume 2 of Zhu Fa Hu's translation of the *Carya-Bhumi-Sutra* in the Western Jin Dynasty says, "after death, those who overindulgence in sexual intercourse will fall into the hell full of hungry ghosts, and then become obscene birds like parrots, larks, pigeons, mandarins, geese, partridges, peacocks, savages and macaques in the next life." It is also a "take it for granted" principle that people who have excessive lust will become lustful animals in the next life. What is more remarkable is that the *Sutra Ksitigarbha Bab Tengah*, which has produced significant impacts on the Buddhist and folk beliefs in China since the Song Dynasty, also repeats this preaching: "Four Heavenly Kings! Ksitigahba... If you find someone who indulges in sexual desire, tell them the retribution of sparrows, pigeons and ducks". Fu Yin of Sichuan University has proved that the *Sutra Ksitigarbha Bab Tengah* was not wrote by Siksanda in Tang Dynasty. It is a forged classic which was created during the Five Dynasties. However, one of the characteristics of these pseudo-classics is that they mixed factors of religions at home and abroad. Therefore, they are more close to local situations and can become more popular. Lu's explanations of pigeons probably came into being in the context of the popularity of the *Sutra Ksitigarbha Bab Tengah*.

This record of *Piya* is obviously directly influenced by Buddhism. But there are few records of pigeons with lewd meanings in secular literature. On the contrary, pigeons have long been endowed with auspicious meanings. The chapter *Auspicious Signs* in *The Book of Song Dynasty* records a person offering white pigeons. Shuo Zhang in Tang Dynasty also said that white pigeons, purple

gas, white rabbits and sweet dew are auspicious signs. An especially important fact is that the custom of praying ceremony with pigeon-releasing activities began in the Song Dynasty. In Shi Su's Five Pomes Written in the Road of Chang-run Dao, there is the saying "last year when the willow catkins fell, snow-white pigeons flew out of golden cages." Under the sentence, he noted, "people in Hangzhou released pigeons to celebrate the birthday of their governor". This is an obvious proof that the pigeon-releasing celebration has become popular among the people in the Northern Song Dynasty.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper tries to outline the role of pigeon, a small animal, in human life through sorting out the traditional literature and Buddhist classics from three aspects of its name, functions and implications. Pigeons, named for their calling, were first distributed in northern China, and then gradually spread to the southwest of China as well as the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. As early as the pre-Qin dynasties, pigeons have become the food source; the custom of eating pigeons has continued up to now. A trained pigeon can deliver letters. Since the Six Dynasties, the pigeon in Chinese culture has become a symbol with Buddhist implication. This is one of the evidences that Buddhism has exerted tremendous influences on our culture. At the same time, the image of obscene pigeons originating from Buddhist scriptures has little impacts on the Chinese. In our country, the bird mainly conveys the meaning of symbolizing auspiciousness and beauty.

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