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CONFUCIAN VALUES PRESENTED IN DEPICTIONS OF BIRDS ON CHINESE TEXTILES from the Qing Dynasty period (1644–1912)

Birds have always fascinated people because of their ability to fly, their melodic singing and unusual appearance. It is therefore understandable that their depictions became vehicles for specific symbols.[1] They were particularly significant in China, gaining the status of divine envoys or heralds of auspicious events.[2] Birds were considered noble, bird couples were seen as spouses, their nests as homes and their territories as property in allusion to the world of humans, who also fight for social positions, for partners or to keep control of specific regions.

In Confucianism, however, this symbolism was not initially so obvious, especially because Confucius himself focused on people and society and barely dedicated any attention to animals.[3] He respected the former but

[1] To learn more about birds in art, see Alain Gruber (1988: 26); Priest (1947: 264–272).

[2] In early Middle Ages it was believed that the human soul turns into a bird after death, see Knapp (2019: 129–132).

[3] In the Analects of Confucius (*Lunyu* 论语) two passages regarding animals stand out. One claims that when a fire destroyed the imperial stable, Confucius asked how many people were saved, but "did not ask about the horses". The other fragment says that Confucius "never fished without nets or shot at resting birds", *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 10.344 ("Xing de"), see Sterckx (2005: 28).

looked down on the latter, encouraging his disciples to study classical poetry or *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs): "My young friend, why aren't you studying the Odes? Odes can wake your feelings, enrich observations, broaden your community and express your sorrows. They aid directly in service to parents and indirectly in service to lords. They widen the knowledge of terminology pertaining to birds, [other] animals and plants".[4] Confucius' teaching program regarding flora and fauna focused on specific functions or activities, such as hunting and fishing. Examples can be found among various birds of prey. Other representatives of the avian world are more often praised and admired for their beautiful plumage and melodic voices or other characteristics. This group includes the kingfisher (*feicui; Halcyon smyrnesis*), oriole (*ying*; *Oriolus chinesis*) and parrot (*yingwu*).[5] The third ornithological group in the literary kingdom of China are the so-called legendary birds, one of which rules all the rest. Its name is *feng* or *fenghuang* (typically translated as "phoenix").[6] This divine and kind creature, believed to perch only upon the branches of paulownia (*wutong; Paulownia imperialis*), is a source of inspiration in Chinese art and literature.[7] The phoenix symbolises everything good and beautiful. Rulers were particularly pleased when they received reports of "phoenix sightings", because this impressive bird allegedly appeared only when the Empire was safe and peaceful. The first such observation is said to have occurred in the ancient times, during the prosperous rule of the Yellow Emperor. In ancient Chinese documents, such as the Classic of Mountains and Seas (*Shanhai jing* 山海经) and Erya (尔雅), the *fenghuang* was described as a bird with the head of a rooster, a swallow's beak, a snake's neck, a turtle's back and a fish's tail.[8] The creature, consisting of several animals, had five varieties of plumage: black, red, green, white and yellow.[9] The five virtues of *fenghuang* can be interpreted

[4] Analect 17.9; Chan (1963: 47), after Shen (2018: 41). Confucius required that his students learn terminology regarding plants, animals and physical objects, as well as the symbolical connotations inspired by images. Without such knowledge, a young scholar's education would not be complete. See Hargett (1989: 235).

[5] Kroll (1984: 237–251); Schafer (1984: 1–3); Schafer (1959: 271–282).

[6] Zhu (2020: 122–128).

[7] Lynn (2019: 1–13).

[8] Hachisuka (1924: 585–589); Zhao (2019: 46–47).

[9] Li (2018: 81–85); Nigg (2016: 19–29).

as righteousness, humanity, chastity, fairness and sincerity.[10] For Confucius, the phoenix represented a wise monarch.[11]

E*rya* additionally contains five chapters about animals such as invertebrates and insects, fish, wild animals and domestic animals.[12] The chapter dedicated to birds includes a hint how to distinguish female birds from males: "If you cannot tell female birds from male birds, use their wings; if the right wing covers the left, it is a male, if the left wing covers the right, it is a female".[13]

In early China, the biology of animals was seen through the lens of morality, meaning that biological characteristics were interpreted mostly in analogy to human morality.[14] Classification of animals at that time functioned within a broader classification of the universe as a whole. According to the philosophy of Confucius, the universe has an inherent order and a harmony that interconnects humans, nature and the cosmos (skies). People are naturally social beings, and the order of the universe should be reflected in interpersonal relations. Decorative motifs included on the robes of officials, as well as textiles adorning furniture, embodied the balance between the earthly and the divine kingdoms.[15]

Although people were considered to be the most noble beings in the universe – the only ones capable of exhibiting virtues such as kindness and righteousness, Confucian authors attributed certain human qualities to animals.[16] In early Middle Ages, scholars began dedicating particular attention to the morality of animal behaviour. Authors of Confucian tales believed that animals can be just as virtuous as people; the belief that both groups are morally similar could have originated from the influences of Buddhism.[17] According to Keith N. Knapp, filial piety is a part of the heavens that unite all beings.[18]

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10) Nigg (2016: 19–29).

11) Legge (1879: 406).

12) Needham, Lu, Huang (1986: 186–194).

13) *Erya zhushu*, 10.10b after Sterckx (2005: 38).

14) Sterckx (2005: 28).

15) See e.g. Handler (2001:195).

16) Lynn (2017: 1–13).

17) Nylan (2019: 1–22).

18) Knapp (2019: 129–132).

The long-standing Confucian conviction that people are better than animals was overcome in early Middle Ages owing to the realisation that filial piety was an element of the ethereal aspects of every living being. Many Confucian philosophers believed that people are more important than any other creatures, because they can practice certain virtues. Philosopher Xunzi (313–238 BCE) distinguished humans from animals in the following way: "Fire and water have the life element (*qi* 氣), but do not have life (*sheng* 生). Plants and trees are alive, but have no awareness (*zhi* 知). Birds and animals have awareness, but do not have a sense of morality and justice (*yi* 有義). People have living breath, life and awareness that are complemented with a sense of morality and justice. Because of this, they are the most noble beings in the world".[19)]

Depictions of birds on textiles were often inspired by paintings and literature, and also by thorough observation of nature. Textile decorations specifically including flowers and birds originate from *huaniao* paintings (花鳥畫 – "flowers and birds"),[20)] which became popular in China already during the rule of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), but gained particular social significance near the end of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127).[21)]

Paintings in general were a source of inspiration for weavers and embroiderers, leading to the creation of textiles that could appear almost as copies of the originals they were based on; the textile decorations could also be complemented with original input from the artists. Discrete additions of trees, flowers and grasses forming backgrounds for birds or other animals are vehicles of deep, philosophical rumination, religious beliefs or simply a means of expressing the observable nature.

Human values and principles, especially literary ones, were attributed to interesting plants and animals. Textiles as elements of interior furnishings, displayed in palaces, temples and homes, are an important but often dismissed aspect of the Chinese art of textile-making. They were used for decoration and improving comfort, but these applications were tied to specific seasons or even temperatures, as well as anniversaries, birthdays and other festivities celebrated by the inhabitants.[22)] On special occasions, palace and large home interiors were richly adorned with textiles on walls and furniture. In the

[19)] After Knapp (2019: 129–132); Needham, 1969, p. 22–23.

[20)] Prasolova (2011: 51–64); Kajdański (2005: 79).

[21)] Zhang (2017: 58–61).

[22)] Gulik (1958: 3).

Emperor's court, events demanding particular grandeur included audiences, rites, meetings of family members to commemorate ancestors, birthdays and weddings.[23]

During the Qing period, artists instead of craftsmen designed most textiles commissioned by the palace – the Ministry of the Imperial Household sent specifications to one of the three southern imperial workshops, where the textiles were then created.[24] The stiffness of traditional furniture and the luxurious tastes of the Chinese elite lead to the production of upholstered covers, which – similar to costumes – were functional, decorative and hierarchical at the same time. The embroidery styles, motifs and use of textiles with various depictions were a continuation of the trends that dominated during the rule of the previous Ming Dynasty. Embroidered textiles were valued for their artistic quality and the period in which they were created.[25]

Before taking power in China, the Manchurians had perfected the Confucian art of ruling and adapted their political institutions accordingly.[26] During the Qing Dynasty period, when Confucianism was established as the paramount criterium of thought and conduct, Confucian ideals were communicated to the people via different media, starting from word of mouth for the illiterate, through basic concepts for boys attending primary school, to the *Four Books* of Confucianism (*Sishu* 四书)[27] and the *Five Classics* (*Wujing* 五經)[28] for public service candidates.[29] Having a son with a scientific degree

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[23] The meaning of rites of the Qing Dynasty period was discussed e.g. by Hevia (1993: 243–278). To learn more about the festivities during which the Emperor sat upon the throne, see e.g. Zhu (2004: 205–211). To learn more about birthday celebration in China in the Ming and Qing periods, see e.g. Young Caruso, Caruso (2010: 1–8).

[24] Brown (2001: 15); Moll-Murata (2018: 69–108).

[25] Rutherford, Menzies (2004: 9).

[26] All key Ming institutions remained unchanged, while all Manchurian Emperors were educated since young age by leading Chinese scholars; see Deng (2006: 1–60).

[27] The Four Books of Confucianism: a series of books illustrating the beliefs of the Confucian philosophy. Their titles are: Great Learning (*Daxue* 大学), Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong* 大學), Analects (*Lunyu* 论语) and Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子); Gardner (2007); Legge (2017).

[28] The Five Classics: a series of books forming a part of the Confucian canon. Their titles are: Book of Changes (*Yijing* 易经), Classic of Poetry (*Shijing* 诗经), Book of Rites (*Liji* 礼记), Book of Documents (*Shujing* 尚书), Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu 春秋); Nylan (2001).

[29] The examination system at the time was based on a model used in the Ming

was considered the highest socio-political achievement, which was why education began very early, i.e. at the age of three, and lasted until reaching success.[30] This approach was accordant with the Confucian idea highlighting human ability to perfect oneself for the good of the nation and the Emperor.[31] The belief that the country is the moral guardian of the people was reflected in many institutions. The most important was the essential bureaucracy, i.e. public service, where every official was supposed to be selected because of their moral qualities and characteristics appropriate not only for governance, but also for providing a moral example to change the people for the better.[32]

The successful passing of exams guaranteed the privilege of wearing characteristic *buzi* 補 子 rank badges, known also as mandarin squares, the highest one being a first degree rank and the lowest – a ninth degree rank. Worn on outer *bufu* 補服 coats, they were more than symbols of hard-won status – they represented the Chinese concept of the universe with a rock among waves as established elements embodying the *Yin* and *Yang* elements (Fig. 1a, 1b).[33]

The badges could be woven or embroidered, and they denoted the official hierarchy position occupied by the wearer.[34] The central element was a bird (or another animal in the case of military officers) looking at a red Sun – the Emperor's symbol – representing the official admiring his ruler.[35] In the

period. The aim of the exams was to test the knowledge of Confucian classics. Elman (2000); Qifu (2003).

[30] In accordance with the Qing law, Manchurians shared official positions with Han Chinese and the Mongols. Among the high ranks (first to third degree) in central Qing administration – government and six ministries included – a careful balance was maintained, with Han Chinese occupying around half of the positions; Deng (2006: 1–60).

[31] Buchwald (2013: 1–12).

[32] Men who perfected the six arts – rites, music, archery, coach-driving, calligraphy and mathematics were in demand as "qualified gentlemen"; Loy (2001: 209–234). During the Song Dynasty rule (960–1279), Emperors largely depended on the elite class of scientist-officials, who recruited men into the public service through a system of exams. Education, experience, competence and dedication of Song officials distinguished them not only from the aristocratic predecessors of the Tang period (960–1279), but also from the elites of any other civilisation at the time, see Kuhn (2011: 276).

[33] Jackson, Hugus (1999: 95); Priest (1936: 128–132).

[34] Vollmer (2002: 147); Cammann (1952: 71).

[35] Dusenbury, Bier (2004: 125–135).

hierarchy of social relations, every role came with clearly defined duties. Mutuality or mutual responsibility between the subordinate and the superior were the basis of the Confucian concept of human relations. At the same time, the ruler was considered as the Son of Heaven.[36] Birds could fly and they were literally close to the heavens, and thus to the Emperor – the Son of Heaven himself.[37] During the Qing Dynasty Period, officials of the first degree wore badges with a crane depiction; of the second degree – a golden pheasant, the third – a peacock, the fourth – a wild goose, the fifth – a silver pheasant, the sixth – a white heron, the seventh – a mandarin duck, the eighth – a quail and the ninth – a paradise flycatcher.[38] The crane symbolised longevity and wisdom, the golden pheasant – courage, the peacock – beauty and dignity, the wild goose – loyalty, the silver pheasant – beauty and happiness, the heron – happiness, the mandarin duck – loyalty, the quail – courage, the paradise flycatcher – longevity and happiness.

The heron (*he* 鶴) is a symbol of longevity because of its long lifespan and white feathers that are associated with old age. It represents a wise Confucian scholar.[39] Flying cranes symbolise the wish or hope of becoming a higher-ranking official. A depiction of a crane with a phoenix, a mandarin duck, a heron and a wagtail represent the five interpersonal relations – "when an old crane sings, a young one responds".[40] Five birds: the crane, the phoenix, the mandarin duck, the heron and the wagtail embody the five Confucian relationships, and in this case the crane symbolises a son's respect towards his father. Two cranes flying towards the Sun signify ambition. A crane among clouds symbolises nobility, while a pair of cranes indicate a desire for a long life in matrimony. Because the crane was believed to be the highest ranking bird, it became a symbol of the highest status in the Emperor's court, and its image on rank badges signalled that the wearer was a state official of the first degree. In these cases, the crane was pictured with a round, smooth head, often adorned with red, as well as a short, stubby tail with variegated feathers. During the Ming Dynasty period, first degree officials were represented by

36) Ching (1997: 3–41).

37) Priest, Simmons (1934: 176).

38) Priest, Simmons (1934: 128).

39) Taylor, Choy (2005: 157–158).

40) Eberhard (2001: 313).

a pair of cranes against a cloudy background.[41] The bird's longevity symbolism was occasionally highlighted by Chinese rank badge makers by placing the peach of immortality or a "spring mushroom" in its beak.[42]

The golden pheasant (*jinji* 金雞) is considered an embodiment of skill and virtuous conduct, thus it became a symbol of civil officials of the first and second degree in the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, and of the second degree during the Qing Dynasty period.[43] In China, the pheasant represents beauty, happiness and literary sophistication. It is one of the "twelve symbols of sovereignty" (*shi er zhang* 十二章紋) that denoted the Chinese imperial rule, and were included on the Emperor's dragon robes (*longpao* 龍袍) (Fig. 2).[44]

The peacock (孔雀 *kongque*) is a symbol of the Sun, virtue, dignity, beauty and love, as well as the power of the civil officials in the Emperor's court.[45] During the rule of the Ming Dynasty, the image of the peacock was used on rank badges of the third and fourth degree, and during the Qing rule – on badges of the third degree rank. In the Ming and Qing periods, the age hierarchy of officials could be determined by the number of included peacock feathers – thus, the use of peacocks in decoration could signify a desire to become an official.[46]

The wild goose (*dayan* 大雁; *e* 鵝), similar to the mandarin duck, is a symbol of fidelity and marital happiness. The geese's custom of flying in a "V" formation was interpreted as an example of order and hierarchy applicable both in familial relations and in the imperial court. An official was compared to a goose taking to the skies, which is why the wild goose also became a symbol of rank, representing a civil official of the fourth degree.[47] On mandarin badges, it was depicted with light-brown or mustard-coloured plumage on the top of its head, wings and back of the neck; the front of the neck and the breast had lighter feathers. Beneath the beak there was usually a black or

41) Juanjuan, Nengfu (2012: 419).

42) Cammann (1944: 104).

43) Juanjuan, Nengfu (2012: 419).

44) Wilson (1986: 29–32); Cammann (1952: 90); Zito (1994: 115–117); see also American Correspondent (1946: 113–119).

45) To learn more about the role of the peacock in Eastern and Western cultures, see Jackson (2006).

46) Cammann (1944: 105).

47) Cammann (1944: 77).

grey patch. The creators of mandarin squares tried to capture the somewhat square shape of the bird's head and its webbed feet.[48]

The silver pheasant (*baixian* 白鷴) with a silver-grey back and tail was consistently used to represent civil officials of the fifth degree from 1391 until 1911.[49] On rank badges, it was pictured as a bird of vivid colours, with a blue crest and wings, yellow head with a characteristic top and neck, green back and the back of the legs, red shanks and beak. Its most noticeable trait is a tail consisting of two parallel plumes, which are delicately outlined in black. During the Qing period, the bird's depictions became less realistic, but gained decorative value: it was pictured with white plumage, with five far-apart feathers, which distinguished it from the golden pheasant.[50]

The heron (*lu* 鷺) symbolises a path or a route. Depicted with a lotus flower, it tells one to "ceaselessly climb one's road".[51] A heron among lotuses represents the Confucian ideal of an uncorrupted official. It can also be interpreted as a "recurring success on the path to career", where the bird indicates the path and the official gratification, while the lotus (*lian*) – the recurring aspect.[52] Because it represents the ruling elite, the heron was selected as one of the birds to be depicted on official rank badges in China, denoting the sixth or seventh degree of civil officialdom in the 1391–1527 period, and later the sixth degree until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. During that time, the bird was depicted with white plumage, a short, wedge-shaped tail (like the duck's) and a sizeable crest of light green or yellow feathers; in the Qing period, these feathers were blue.[53]

The mandarin duck (*yuanyang* 鴛鴦) was valued in China for its significance and extravagant plumage. A pair of mandarin ducks symbolises peace, prosperity, fidelity, (marital) stability and devotion because of the belief that these birds pair up for life and die if they are separated.[54] The mandarin duck also became the symbol of officials of the seventh degree. In this case, it was depicted in vivid blue, usually with a red beak and legs, yellowish neck

48) Cammann (1944: 105), fig. 7b.

49) Juanjuan, Nengfu (2012: 419); Dusenbury, Bier (2004: 128); Tresidder (2006: 69).

50) Cammann (1944), fig. 1a, 7a, 105 fig. 10a, 10b, 10c; Jackson, Hugus (1999: 147); Bjaaland Welch (2013: 80).

51) Eberhard (2001: 46–47).

52) Quote from Bjaaland Welch (2013: 74).

53) Cammann (1944: 105); Bjaaland Welch (2013: 74).

54) Bjaaland Welch (2013: 71); Liu (1990: 256); Hall (1994: 22).

formed from two narrow feathers on two levels, a blue back with feathers forming a scale pattern, variegated wings and a short blue tail that curved slightly upwards near the end. The colours of the plumage changed depending on the author of a given badge, but regardless of the colour combination, owing to the body shape, characteristic neck and clear pattern on the back, the bird was easily recognizable.[55]

The quail (*anchun* 鹌鹑) was a symbol of peace in China. In the Ming period it denoted a civil official of the ninth degree until 1652, when the bird was given the eight rank and the flycatcher – the ninth.[56]

The paradise flycatcher (*shoudai niao* 绶带鸟) with its long tail resembling ribbons is associated with longevity, as its name contains the word *shou* 绶, meaning "band" or "ribbon", which is a homophone of *shou* 壽 that in turn means "longevity",[57] while *dai* 代 means "generation". This bird became a symbol of the desire to obtain longevity for the family's generations.[58]

In the Ming Dynasty period, badges of civil officials bore depictions of pairs of birds, one of which was presented in flight, while the other was shown on a rock formation or on the ground amidst flowers. Chinese artists usually depicted the male with lighter or more splendid plumage and the female with darker and more subdued colours. The active bird represented the *Yang* element, while the resting one indicated the passive *Yin*.[59]

In Chinese art, birds were often pictured in pairs.[60] Every pair of birds or other animals of the same or similar size were interpreted as male and female – the essential basis of an organised Confucian society (Fig. 3).

Birds were also an embodiment of the filial piety concept (*xiao* 孝) – one of the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism. Filial piety had a strong influence on the formation of Chinese values and behaviour in every aspect of life, from education to art.[61] In the Confucian context, longevity was seen as a proof of virtue granted by the heavens to those who deserved it.[62] Particularly in the

55) Cammann (1944: 106), fig. 9a, 10d.

56) Mayo (2000: 49–50).

57) Cheng, Hung, Choy (2017: 261).

58) Fang, Thierry (2016: 1–30); Johnston Laing (2004: 80).

59) Cammann (1987: 101–116).

60) Feng (2012: 268, 270), fig. 6.6a and 6b.

61) Silbergeld (1987: 103); Zhang (2017: 217–239).

62) Sullivan (1954: 87–102).

Qing period, filial piety was seen as a tool of ruling the entire nation by the Kangxi Emperor 康熙 (1654–1722).[63] This trait was an integral part of Chinese culture and thus accepted by the three main religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, but it was Confucianism with its well-documented social hierarchy that was the most supportive of the ideals of filial piety.[64] Tales about this virtue were consistently popular among all strata of society as a result of the effectiveness with which they illustrated *xiao*,[65] that shaped almost every aspect of Chinese social life: the attitude towards rulers, living models, original concepts, marital practices, gender preferences, emotional life, religious cult and social relations.[66] When Confucian authors explained interpersonal relationships (*renlun* 人倫), they focused on the father-child (*fuzi* 父子), rather than the mother-child (*muzi* 母子), relationship. In analyses of animals, filial relations were believed to put more emphasis on mutuality, with stories about birds feeding each other highlighting this idea.[67] The bird most often associated with *xiao* was the crow.[68] Interestingly, tales about filial piety in humans rarely touched on the kindness of parents, concentrating instead on the dedication of sons and daughters – there is a noticeable difference between animal stories about filial mutuality and human stories that underline the hierarchical nature of this relation.[69]

The Chinese approach to old age is socially oriented and strictly tied to the Confucian emphasis on heightened respect towards elders. This attitude also alludes to the concept of filial piety. Striving for longevity played a very important role in China; social respect for elders and individual pursuit of a long life or even immortality (a Taoist issue) were reflected in the visual arts. The white feathers of cranes, associated with old age, alluded to venerable couples when presented in pairs; similarly, small birds with white feathers were often gifted to old spouses for birthdays.[70]

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63) Rawski (1998: 138).

64) Buddhism and Taoism also supported filial piety in some of their texts, but their systems were monastic, which made it impossible for priests to be treated as filial children; Hallisey (2002: 246).

65) Fu (1999: 63–89).

66) Knapp (2005: 3).

67) Knapp (2005: 22–23).

68) Knapp (2005: 22–23); Hua (2018: 262–265).

69) Sterckx (2002: 73–76).

70) Denney (2000).

"The five moral principles" are another motif used in textile decoration in China, expressing the traditional values of Chinese society. The Five Confucian Virtues are: *ren* 仁, *li* 礼, *shu* 恕, *xiao* 孝 and *wen* 温.[71] The first virtue, *ren*, means the compassion that makes us human. It has two aspects: loyalty and mutuality. *Li* signifies sacred rites or good manners. It aids *ren*, as it is a ceremonial implementation of the kindness of human nature. The third virtue, *shu*, denotes mutuality, which means treating others the same way one wishes to be treated. The fourth virtue, *xiao*, means filial piety or dedication to one's family and is the source of all relationships in Confucianism. The last virtue, *wen*, means culture and pertains to civilisation and the beauty linked to it. Depictions of "the five moral principles" in textile decoration usually consist of images of five birds, such as a phoenix, a crane, a mandarin duck, a wagtail and an oriole. These birds symbolise the five Confucian relationships: the lord and subjects, father and son, older brother and younger brother, husband and wife and friends, in accordance with the classic "Three Fundamental Bonds" (the lord rules over the subjects, the father rules over the son, the husband rules over the wife) and the "Five Constant Values" (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity), established in the feudal code of ethics. "The five moral principles" are usually presented in a panoramic view of mountains, rocks, trees, shrubs, clouds and ponds that are complemented with images of a phoenix (standing on a rock), a crane (perched on a tree or in flight), a mandarin duck (in a pond), while the surrounding areas are filled with wagtails and orioles. Of all the birds, only the phoenix is presented alone – the rest are usually shown in pairs. This type of imagery was used e.g. to decorate tablecloths, curtains and large wall hangings. The earliest known example of such textiles is from the Song Dynasty period.[72] Birds that gather under the phoenix's supervision are the state officials gathering around their ruler – the Emperor.[73]

In Chinese art, images of the phoenix have complex symbolism. In his work *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 from the beginning of the second century, the Chinese scholar and Confucianist Xu Shen 許慎 (58–147) wrote: "When the phoenix starts to flee, ten thousand birds follow him".[74] This phrase can be

[71] Collins, Castro, Kawamata Ryan (2016: 284).

[72] Chunming (2010: 204).

[73] Mayo (2000: 19).

[74] Yucai (1974: 150).

interpreted as a reflection of the community congregating around a certain character or a leader; to Xu Shen, this person was Confucius himself.[75] In a lost fragment of the book *Zhuongzi* 莊子, Confucius was also described as a phoenix (*feng* 鳳), surrounded by five disciples.[76] The power of Confucius' teachings became shrouded in legend, according to which he had the ability to charm birds of prey with his wisdom.

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, an important role in promoting Confucian values was served by the Beijing Opera, formed in 1790. The audience at the time came from various environments, and Confucianism was considered to be the foundation of the ideological system. During this period, classic scenarios of the Beijing Opera became lessons that educated people how to think and conduct themselves in accordance with Confucian beliefs, such as loyalty and devotion to the Emperor, as well as the ideal of women submitting to men.[77] In Qing period, matrimony was promoted as a public event, in connection to the concept of acceptance by the local community.[78] The ceremony focused on two Confucian virtues: filial piety and harmonious marital relations, which were symbolically represented through the Beijing Opera's plays.[79] Marital relations were shown using lavishly decorated costumes with dragon and phoenix motifs, the two creatures serving as models of an ideal husband and an ideal wife.[80] Additionally, dragons and phoenixes embroidered on the groom and bride's garments signified a well-matched pair with an ideal marital relationship.[81]

Although the phoenix is seen as a symbol of the *yang* element, which is associated with warmth, midday and the Sun,[82] it embodies the feminine *yin* when presented with the dragon that is the phoenix's counterpart in the animal kingdom and has the male position *yang*. Because the Emperor is associated with a dragon, the phoenix became the symbol of the Empress.

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75) Lo (2008: 33).

76) Xun (1982: 1558), after Lo (2008: 34).

77) Li (2008).

78) Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions,* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press1998, p. 274.

79) Li (2008: 23); see also Gao (2003: 116).

80) Li (2008: 57).

81) Li (2008: 45).

82) Fu (1993: 1133).

Pictured together they form a whole – a married pair representing *yin* and *yang* (woman and man) (Fig. 4).[83)]

The mandarin duck, known for its "spousal" fidelity, was paired with the pheasant that symbolises loyalty and is associated with five qualities: public manners, warrior traits, courage, kindness and reliability.[84)] In turn, a heron wading through water amidst lotus flowers is a scene known as the "Charming pond" (*Man chi jiao*) – a motif used already during the Yuan Dynasty period. In this type of depiction, however, the lotus was the main decoration, complemented with wild geese, the aforementioned herons, mandarin ducks and other waterfowl.[85)]

The paramount characteristics of Confucian thought regarding moral upbringing show that the logical starting point is the idea that human beings have a good and kind nature. Although Confucius himself said little about animals, his successors attributed human traits to them, making them symbols popularising Confucian ideals among different social strata. The fundamental influence of Confucianism shaped Chinese culture and in a way ensured the survival of this ancient civilisation through the millennia. Based on familial harmony, this philosophy provided a sense of happiness which could be achieved by participating in social life. To be happy meant to thrive among people and in various social relations: the dedication of the Emperor was of the same nature and significance as the dedication of a father to his son – the Emperor's treatment of his people was to be reflected in their treatment of their sons. In this concept of society, everyone is judged by their behaviour, which is learned through studying the *Confucian Classics* since early childhood, preferably resulting in the achievement of the highest social status – not attained through birthright, but by their contribution to the nation. Meanings conveyed on everyday objects, such as textiles, reflect the Confucian vision of social success, e.g. the desire to pass the imperial exams. The message is not always so direct and simple, however, sometimes taking the form of poetic verses alluding to hidden and indirect meanings.[86)] Presented on official rank badges, depictions of birds admiring the red circle of the Sun like officials admiring their ruler – the Emperor – represent the ethics

[83)] Kajdański (2005: 69).

[84)] Sung (1993: 8).

[85)] Feng (2012: 360).

[86)] Fang, Thierry (2016: 20).

of Confucianism as the ethics of virtue based on self-perfection. As Confucius himself said: "In education, there should be no class differences".[87]

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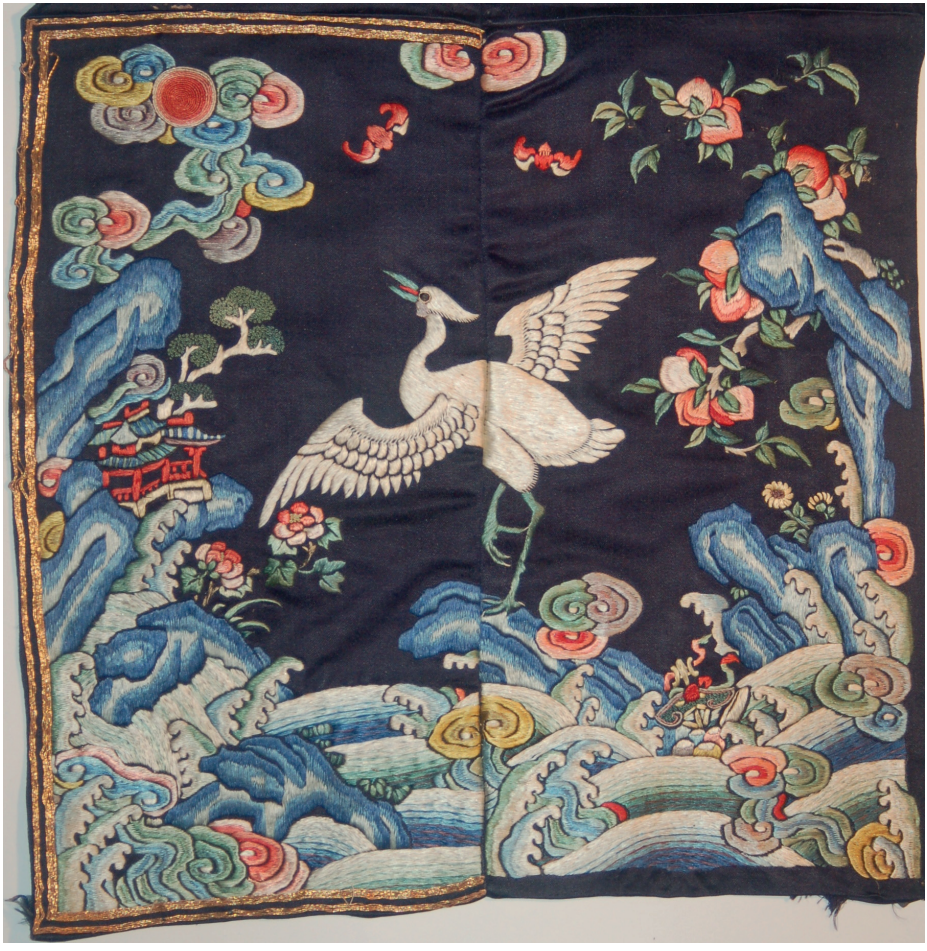
[87] Fan (2019: 175–178). Since 1313, the Zhu Xi 朱熹 philosophy (1130–1200) was the basis for official position exams in China, until their abolishment in 1905 – therefore, it was the foundation of the country's official ideology, see Tan (2019: 1–12); Elman (2000).



1a

1b

Fig. 1.
1a. Sixth rank (egret) square; 1b. Fragment of the square; The District Museum in Torun – Museum of Far East Art in the Star House; MT/DW/139; photo by K. Zapolska.

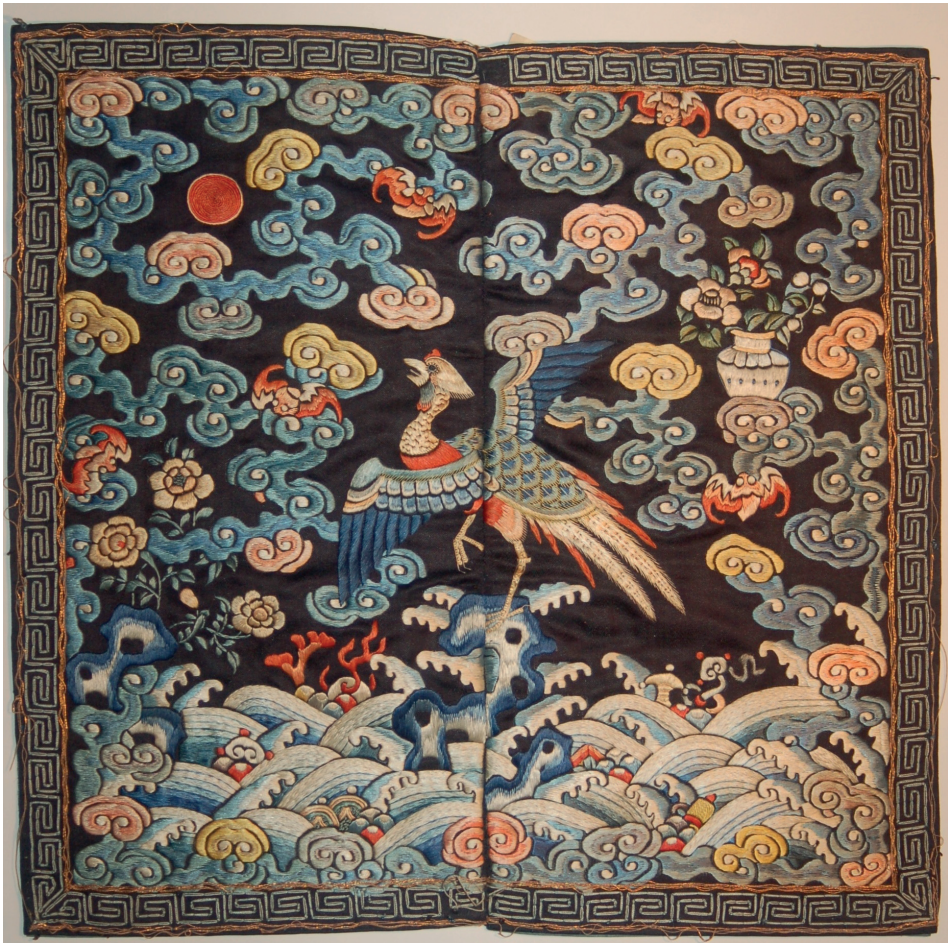


Fig. 2. Second rank (golden pheasant) square; The District Museum in Torun – Museum of Far East Art in the Star House; MT/DW/138; photo by K. Zapolska.

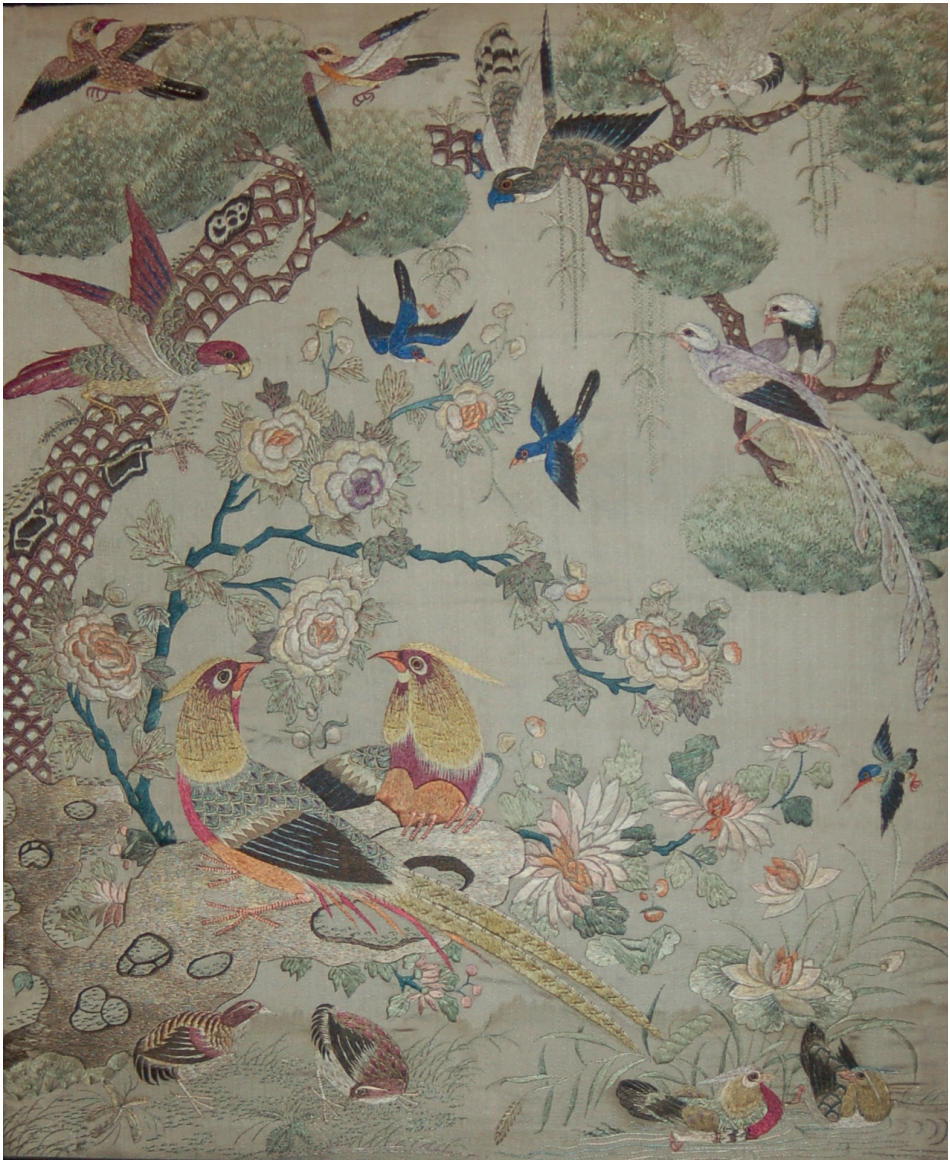


Fig. 3. Screen, 19th century.; The District Museum in Torun – Museum of Far East Art in the Star House; MT/DW/288; photo by K. Zapolska.

Fig 4. Fragment of the screen; The District Museum in Torun – Museum of Far East Art in the Star House; MT/DW/288; photo by K. Zapolska.