

History

## A Criticism of Confucianism's Social Functions from "A Fu on the Marvelous Crow"

### The Prophetic Meaning of the "Crow" in the Divination Culture

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The intensely tragic narratives of *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* show profound distrust of Confucianism while drawing heavily on ideas from Confucian classics. This reflects both the adorning quality of Confucianism in the Western Han Dynasty and the chaotic social circumstances in the Western Han Dynasty's middle and late periods. The crow in this work represents "Ren" a core principle of Confucianism that means humanity, benevolence, and love, and her death represents the decline of "Ren." The prevalent divination culture of the time serves as the context for this writing.

**Keywords:** Confucianism; Divination; *The Image of the Crow*; *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*

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ARCHAEOLOGISTS discovered *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* (written on bamboo slips) in the No. 6 Han Tomb in Yinwan Village, Donghai County, Lianyungang City, Jiangsu Province, China, in March 1993. Over 600 Chinese characters make up this Fu, an ancient literary genre from China that tells an allegory about the terrible life of a female crow. Since its discovery, a lot of research has been done on it. However, further research is required to analyze its distinctive views on Confucian philosophy and the relationship between the idea of the "marvelous crow" and the Han Dynasty's culture of divination.

### A Criticism of the Social Functions of Confucianism

Numerous classical Confucian texts, such as the *Book of Poetry*,

the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Book of Filial Piety*, and *Huainan Zi*, were cited in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*. These classics underwent some degree of change in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* (1). Due to Emperor Wu's execution of his policy of "venerating Confucianism while forbidding other philosophies" in the middle and late Western Han Dynasty, which elevated Confucianism to a respectable status, the majority of researchers concur that this fu was composed after that period. Other researchers made an effort to pinpoint the exact time of its genesis. Because it mentioned numerous verses from the *Book of Poetry* of Qi origin, Yunhe Xu claimed that it was written before Xiang Liu's compilation of *Intrigues of the Warring States* (2).

The author of *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* was skeptical of the social functions of Confucianism, despite the fact that the Confucian classics had a significant influence on the story. This

is because the experiences of the four main characters in the story did not demonstrate any positive value of “Ren,” even though they were given some relevance to “Ren.” (i) Crows were described as being noble and kindhearted by nature at the very beginning of the *Fu* (3). The crow couple nevertheless met with tragedy when the female died pitifully and abandoned the male, illustrating the decline in Confucian ideals at the time. (ii) The thief bird was supposed to be a professional scholar from a high social class family. He ought to have been a shining example of Confucian ideals, but instead he opted to take nest-building supplies from the crows and, in the course of their struggle, killed the female crow. As a result, “Ren” was symbolized by a person whose actions ran counter to what he advocated, highlighting the hypocrisy of Confucianism—or, more specifically, the discrepancy between its ideals and its actions. (iii) The prefecture chief was well recognized for his “Ren” characteristics, and his kindness and charity even extended to insects (3). The crow couple attempted to create a nest in his official mansion, which they viewed as their ideal home. The prefecture head did nothing to help the crows when they were denied shelter (stuff to build a nest). The thieving bird did not suffer any consequences for killing the female crow. Ironically, a prefecture chief who was tasked with governing alongside “Ren” failed to fulfill “Ren’s” social obligations.

In the world of *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*, “Ren” was useless because the good-hearted female crow met a tragic end; the preacher of “Ren,” the scholar (thief) bird, turned out to be the one responsible for “Ren’s” destruction; and the prefecture chief, who had the power to uphold justice for “Ren” in a large-scale social context, did nothing to carry it out. The *Fu* depicted a chaotic situation in which the Confucianism adopted by the ruling regime as its ideology to uphold social order was in peril. Many researchers have tried to find evidence in the historical record because they believe that the terrible world of the *Fu* is a representation of grim realities.

Qingfang Ma, for example, regarded the annexation of land by powerful families and the emergence of numerous refugees in the late Western Han Dynasty as the historical background of the *Fu* in his article “The Life Values of *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* and its Tragic Meaning” (4). At the end of the Western Han Dynasty, the annexation of ordinary people’s land by tycoons is easily associated with the fable of “the Turtledove Occupying the Magpie’s Nest.” In Chinese traditional literature, the fable has become a popular literary allusion. A number of similar stories have been written about this subject and can be found in *Jiao’s Yi Lin*, *Jin of Henan*, and *The Need for Festivals* (5).

The mistrust of Confucianism in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* was not new in the history of philosophy; it can be traced back to Zhuang Zi, which carries many traces of sarcasm toward Confucianism. This mistrust of Confucianism was not limited to its association with the old story of “the turtledove occupying the magpie’s nest” in terms of subject matter. However, why was Confucianism connected to a chaotic world with poor government in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* when it was presumed to be dominant or appear to be so in the middle and late Western Han Dynasty? The solution can be discovered by looking at the actual accounts of how Confucianism developed and how the

ritual and music systems were created in the middle and late Western Han Dynasty. Emperor Wu favored the dominance of Confucianism, although the religion remained a political accoutrement rather than standing on its own (6). Under Emperor Wu’s administration, officials like Hong Gongsun might rise to high office while choosing to compromise academic facts, but they are not authentic Confucian intellectuals. Goodwill, righteousness, and morality were merely the era’s disguises. An Ji said of the emperor, “Ren” was merely an external act, and his majesty had a variety of personal wishes (7). Emperor Xuan (Emperor Wu’s great grandson) claimed that the Han Dynasty had its own system that was inherently a combination of “kingcraft” and “hegemony” and that it was impossible to follow the practice of the Zhou Dynasty, that is, ruling by rituals and virtues. By then, the regime still had not developed enough recognition of Confucianism (7). Furthermore, the Western Han Dynasty made very little progress in the development of the ritual and musical systems. Emperor Wu was too busy enslaving neighboring states and fortifying his troops to devote any time to civil matters like ceremonies. The greatest method to rule people quietly, according to Ji Wang, is to improve the ceremonial system, but Emperor Xuan disregarded his suggestion. Officials advised that the “Piyong” (a central institution for education and ceremony) be restored during Emperor Cheng’s reign, but the proposal was abandoned when the emperor passed away (7). Confucianism appeared to have been honored throughout the Western Han Dynasty, but, its doctrinal stance was dubious, and there was a dearth of ritual and music system creation. It is understandable, given this historical backdrop that a literary work like *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* would attempt to capture a society this chaotic and cruel.

The author tried to figure out how to “stay away from danger and protect one’s life” in such a world. He quoted the following passages from other masterpieces towards the conclusion of the *Fu*: The net is likely to catch common birds, but the phoenix flies away. Dragons tend to hide deep in the ocean, but bamboo catchers can readily capture fish and turtles. While a horse of fine breed roams freely in the wild, a laborious horse perishes from exhaustion. “When the bird is dying, its cry is mournful,” explains Zeng Zi (3). According to some academics, this conclusion incorporated the Taoist principle of forgoing the pursuit of wealth, fame, and power in favor of one’s health (8). Confucianism’s life philosophy is actually to “be prudent and do not get engaged in activities that may jeopardize yourself.” The Confucianists have made a few statements that are comparable. For instance, “if there is justice in your country, you (a scholar) should serve the society as an official; otherwise, you (a scholar) should live in seclusion” (9, p.358); “when you are not so successful, you should remain morally decent; however, when you are successful in your official career, you should benefit the world and serve the public” (10, p.891). As a result, Confucianists and Taoists had similar perspectives on how to “avoid danger and save one’s life.” One thing is certain, though: Confucianists traditionally emphasized seclusion during the final stages of an era or during a period of degeneration; during a period of peace, they tended to be more upbeat and joyful. *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*’s culture was shown to be filled with moral ambiguity and a disintegrating social structure. We dis-

covered some phrases in the conclusion's text that appeared to be taken from classical Confucian writings. As an illustration, the idiom "dragons tend to hide deep in the sea" is taken from the *Book of Changes*, a significant Confucian text. Zeng Zi was a renowned Confucianist and Confucius' student. We assert that the conclusion was composed from a Confucian point of view as a result.

Fus from the early Han Dynasty, such as *A Fu in Memory of Yuan Qu* and *A Fu on the Owl* by Yi Jia, *A Lament for the Time* by Ji Yan, *Seven Admonitions to His Majesty* by Shuo Dongfang, *Nine Cis in Memory of Yuan Qu* by Xiang Liu, etc., have the theme of "keeping away from danger and preserving one's life" in them. Fus like these were written by knowledgeable but dissatisfied officials and intellectuals who thought it was regrettable that they had foolish emperors and lived in an unruly period (11). Instead of weeping for the common person or for society as a whole, they were lamenting for themselves. Additionally, after the initial stage in the early Han Dynasty, Fus by scholars evolved into superficial imitations of their original shapes (12). Instead of expressing their true sentiments, the writers were writing for the sake of lyricism. As a folk Fu, *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* was intense in feelings and straightforward in confronting death, so it had strong emotional power and could spark deep thought. In contrast, *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* was not a display of the writer's personal affection but rather showed concerns for the fate of others and universal social issues.

Additionally, in the universe of *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*, the concept of "staying away from danger and protecting one's life" was somewhat unrealistic. The option that the crows had to choose between surviving and avoiding danger was completely different from the choice that the early Han Dynasty scholars and Fus' authors had to make between fortune, reputation, and power and avoiding risk. Because the thief bird was attempting to steal building materials from the crows, which they intended to use to build their nest—a nest for shelter and for raising their young—the struggle between the female crow and the thief bird was about survival. The female crow, who had been wronged by the thief bird, had turned to the prefecture head for justice but had received no reaction; the offender, the thief bird, was pardoned as the victim passed away. As a result, the Confucian method of avoiding danger by living alone, as suggested in the Fu's conclusion, proved to be of no use in actual life and is in no way a fitting reaction to the harsh reality. Despite being established as the sole official doctrine from the middle and late Western Han Dynasty, the helplessness and tragic ending of the female crow demonstrated that Confucianism failed to fulfill its guiding role among common people.

### The Prophetic Meaning of the Crow in the Divination Culture

In *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*, the crow was mentioned as being "benevolent by nature" and as a "good omen." The phrase "this is an unlucky year, as a crow was murdered in a calamity" (3, p.264) was written at the beginning, signifying that the loss of the female crow was bad news for the neighborhood. This is an illustration of the long-standing divination culture that was widespread in ancient China during the middle and late Western

Han Dynasty and offered supernatural interpretations of the Confucian classics. According to Zhaoguang Ge's *An Intellectual History of China* there has long been a powerful and entrenched set of beliefs in ancient China that the universe, society, and people are all interconnected and have a common origin. It provides a broad context for how practically all ideologies, bodies of knowledge, and technological advancements have developed (13). During the reign of Emperor Wu, the idea of nature-human interaction was created on the basis of the interactions between the cosmos, society, and people. The culture of divination flourished thanks to this idea. Many works of literature from the Han Dynasty contain references to the crow's prophetic significance. For instance,

- *Baihutong* asserted that "the good qualities of the emperor are shown in birds and animals: when a wise emperor is seated, the phoenix flies, the unicorn is at its best, the white tiger arrives, the fox has nine tails, the white deer appears, and the white crow descends" (14, p.284).
- According to the *Book of Han*, "there was a raucous gathering of people on Mountain Laiwu in Taishan County one day in the first month of the third year of Emperor Xiaozhao's rule. They observed a large stone standing there that was forty-eight meters in circumference and fifteen feet high. It was buried eight feet beneath the surface of the ground. The large stone was supported by three more stones that were positioned on the ground. Crows with white feathers in their thousands swarmed around it" (7, p.3153).
- *Annotations on the Book of Poetry* suggested that crows perched on the roofs of wealthy individuals symbolized the hope of commoners for a noble-minded ruler (15).
- From the *History of the Eastern Han*, "thirty-nine phoenix, fifty-one unicorn, twenty-nine white tigers, and four yellow dragons were observed in the second year of Emperor Zhang's reign, as well as green dragons, yellow swans, divine horses, divine birds, nine-tailed foxes, three-footed crows, and red crows" (16, p.77).
- As per *Liwei and Jimingzheng*, if the world is governed by established rituals, red crows appear in the valley (17).

In these documents, the crow, like the phoenix, unicorn, and white tiger, is an auspicious animal, foretelling the emergence of a wise emperor or the establishment of a ritual system. As a result, the death of the crow represents the disappearance of good fortune, a lack of organized governance, and a decline in the ritual system. All the ominous signs, explicit and implicit, in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow* reflect social conflicts in the late Western Han Dynasty (18). We can visualize the historical background of the story, or the historical background perceived by the writer, even though we cannot identify the specific event corresponding to the ominous meaning of the death of the crow due to record limitations.

The initial illustration of the crow came from the *Classic of Mountains and Rivers* entry that reads, "There is a mulberry tree in Yanggu. Every day, a new sun rises as the previous one sets on the tree. The golden crow is hauling them" (19, p.4978). In this story, the crow is a heavenly bird that flies with the sun. The silk paintings from the No. 1 Han Tomb in Mawangdui, Changsha, and the No. 9 Tomb in Jinque Mountain in Linyi,

Shandong, as well as the murals from Bu Qianqiu's tomb in Luoyang, Henan, and the Qianjingtou tomb in the western suburb of Luoyang, all feature this picture of the crow. Additionally, historical biographies, literature, prophecy, and Confucian classics all contain references to the heavenly crow. For example,

- In *Huai Nan Zi*, it is said that “there are crows in the sun and rabbits in the moon” and that “crows can withstand the heat of the sun but cannot withstand Zhuilis” (a sort of bird), illustrating that everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses (20, p.2013).
- *A Fu on the Son of Heaven* wrote, “Today, while wandering the Mountain Yin, I encountered the Queen Mother of the West with gray hair. She resides in the cave and wears jade hair accessories. Fortunately, there are crows with three feet serving her” (3, p.90).
- According to *An Interpretation of Five Classics*, there are three-legged crows in the sun (21).
- The sun is the master of Yang in *Ling Xian*, and the Yang dynamic generates birds such as the three-legged crow. Things associated with Yang are usually represented by odd numbers (22).

People in the Han Dynasty were interested in the image of the divine crow because *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*

was well-known and well-liked at the time. It was listed in the *Yiwenzhi* of the *Book of Han*, and many of the best Confucian scholars studied it (23). In Han culture, the image of a crow is also linked to death, which is different from its meaning as a sign of the future. In his book *Views of Life and Death in Later Han China*, Yingshi Yu wrote about how the Han people thought about death. He said that they believed that when a person is alive, Hun (the soul that is separate from the body) and Po (the spirit that is tied to the body) can live together in harmony in the body. After death, Hun and Po are separated and leave the body (24). Hun goes to heaven after leaving the body, while Po goes back to earth (25). The globe is divided into three tiers on the T-shaped silk painting from the Han Tomb in Mawangdui, Changsha City. Crows live on the top layer, which stands for heaven, a mysterious place where people can go when they die. The fact that the crow is always in Han tombs shows that people want to go where the crow lives after they die. Death is a major theme in *A Fu on the Marvelous Crow*, a story about a crow that dies. The symbolism of “the marvelous crow” is similar to what the Han people usually think “the divine crow” means. The writer should have thought about what “the divine crow” meant during the Han Dynasty when he or she chose the crow to represent death instead of another animal. ■

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