PHOENIX IN FACT AND FANCY

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The Museum has lately acquired another representation of a fèng huáng, usually miscalled phoenix, and thanks to recent discoveries we can give a more complete account of this remarkable bird, which turns out to be not so fabulous as we once supposed.

Why is it that humans, not content with the fantastic and ravishing flora and fauna of our actual world, must create flowers, trees, and animals of their own? They have been doing so for a long, long time, long before they began to keep records that we call history. Many writers of fanciful things hint that we inherit memories down from those extremely unpleasant ancestors the anthropologists are always proudly trotting out for us, that in the very fabric of our minds we are still linked to those awful monsters of the primordial ooze. It would be a proud tribute to memory to believe it so. Indeed, there may be a gossamer of truth in it, but the real answer is nearer at hand.

These strange creatures, both the terrifying and the glamorous are the creations of the fresh and brilliant infant mind, invented long before we have spanked the young into thinking our world makes sense. Think back, if you can; think farther back than kindergarten, farther than talking. Then you will be at home with all poetry and music, with all the things grown-ups call art. What are grown-ups themselves to a babe but giants, some kindly but some, alas, terrifying? What is any maltese but a saber-toothed tiger? What infant does not reach for a painted butterfly and weep when it eludes him? They are all there: dragons and hippogriffs, basilisks and phoenixes. Every infant knows them intimately. Babies very early learn to keep still about them, but they forget slowly. And until they have completely forgotten, they hold their elders in secret contempt. Why in heaven’s name should anyone spend years collecting data on hippogriffs to become a doctor of philosophy, when hippogriffs are as common as mosquitoes? And why should Sinologists make such a to-do about phoenixes when phoenixes are on every twig? There is an answer to that, and if the children knew it they would feel more kindly towards us, because we are trying to arrange and catalogue the things they take as a matter of course.

This chimerical world, which all babes know and the mature call imagination and fantasy, has been set forth best of all by the Chinese. That four thousand years has not gone for nothing. The Chinese have always kept in key. They have stayed in harmony with the natural world, the laws and forces of nature. They have never entirely given up the knowledge in which for a brief moment all men are indeed equal. This is why their deities are serene and comforting and lovely; this is why their legendary birds and beasts are so real. And who ever looked at a Chinese dragon without a flicker of fear that one just might come wreathing down out of a black thunderstorm or clambering out of a whirlpool?

The pictorial flora and fauna of Chinese painting irritate our naturalists a good deal. They are quite complaisant about the ugly fish faces of Hieronymus Bosch, but they do not like a Chinese dragon or blue lion a bit. Why? Because all the Chinese fantasy creatures are so well articulated that they are just barely possible, and that to a scientist is annoying. Naturalists are even more upset when archaeologists dealing with China go heavily to work to trace pedigrees for these outrageous birds and beasts. Indeed, the archaeologists are barked out of court, and it is only once in a millennium that a naturalist will concede them
a beast or a bird. There are, of course, the Komodo dragons from the Dutch East Indies. They might do for protagonists of Carpaccio, but any Chinese village would laugh them out of town. Call that overgrown salamander a dragon! No thank you.

Now comes Captain Jean Delacour and gives us a phoenix. A phoenix? Phoenixes! A pair of them, alive and before our eyes. They are at the New York Zoological Park, and you can go and see them any day. Certainly this is the bird that has appeared in Chinese art and literature, gilded and feathered up in a thousand ways, for near three thousand years. Here is a cousin of the hua niao, the symbol of the East, and of the chih niao, the vermillion bird of the Chou emperors’ robes. Here is the imperial féng huang, the phoenix, which appeared only to emperors and was a symbol of an auspicious reign. Here is the bird which up to this day in a pair represents the emperor and the empress (féng, “male phoenix”; huang, “female phoenix”; féng huang, “phoenix”) and single or with the dragon represents the empress. It may now be seen, captured and imprisoned bird, on the coronation stamps of so-called Manchukuo, where China’s unwilling abdicated emperor and empress woefully and sadly live out their tragic days. The Chinese phoenix of the mind is in unhappy case, but the flesh and blood phoenix still sweeps proudly through the jungles of Indo-China and is still paid court to in the New York Zoological Park.

The phoenix, it at last appears, is Rheinart’s ocellated argus, and it is a glorious bird. Its pedigree, its amiable habits are described in an article in the November-December 1941 issue of the Zoological Society Bulletin. The characteristics that prove the case are those tremendously broad tail feathers, the tiny crest, the general diapered effect of the markings. Captain Delacour has illustrated his article with one of our early mirrors, being somewhat contemptuous of the gaudy creatures painted by the Chinese in the Ming and Ch’ing dynasties. Certainly Chinese painters have taken liberties—more and more as time goes on. The painted phoenix appears in any color or a dozen that strikes the painter’s fancy. It often has characteristics of the peacock or of the lyre bird (pretty things too), and the long tail feathers sometimes get frilly and curl. But it
is still the same bird, however it may bedizen itself. The Rheinart itself takes your breath away; it is so magnificent in shape and sweep, so intricate in pattern and marking, and so modest in shade and color. It is the bird, the great bird of Chinese representation, and here it is alive and at hand.

The bird is found, Rheinart’s ocellated argus. For a long time the Chinese have called it fèng huang. Westerners have generally called it phoenix. Most orientalists complain that phoenix is a misnomer and that the fèng huang has nothing to do with the Near Eastern bird that rises from the flames. But the misnomer has stuck because the fèng huang as pictured looks more like the phoenix than anything we have ever dealt with. You couldn’t call it a roc, for instance, or an apteryx or even an archaeopteryx. Florence Ayscough, being conscientious, has tried to make it into a “love pheasant.” Everybody loves Mrs. Ayscough and respects her integrity, but nobody can quite stomach “love pheasant,” no matter how good an etymological case she puts out for it. If we tried to find the bird a name from the sounds and characters which designate it, we could offer “yellow wind bird” as a possibility, but it is not good enough. What is required is a word or phrase in English that will convey the idea of a symbolic bird, a Chinese bird. We can’t make the Chinese call it Rheinart’s ocellated argus, now can we? Language doesn’t seem to travel as fast as boats or radio, but perhaps the time is close enough upon us when fèng huang can take its place in the vocabulary of every tongue. As a matter of fact Webster already gives it with a remarkably good description. The Oxford Dictionary, strangely enough, omits it but perhaps will include it in the next edition as an Americanism. Fèng huang is easy to say, easy to look at, and the Chinese characters (illustrated on page 97) are lovely.

The fèng huang by name and character appears in the earliest of Chinese writings—the Four Books and the Five Classics. Undoubtedly it is one of the birds that appear in the Shang bronzes. In her forthcoming book Florence Waterbury will state the case for the fèng huang where it appears merely as a symbol. Here, working backwards, we pursue it from the time it has a character to represent it in a language we can read. But there is one analogy...
too tempting not to mention. Again and again the early bronzes show an interlacing pictorial rebus with a bird and a beast, and the handles of the vessels represent a beast devouring a bird. We have no proof that these are an interpretation of the two original elements, yang and yin, male and female, sun and moon. But though set forth in a more brutal fashion, the beast and the bird of the early bronzes are certainly very like the dragon and the phoenix that in later times symbolize the emperor and empress (yang and yin).

The feng huang certainly is a full-fledged creature in the Classics and seems so familiar a thing it needs no footnotes or explanation. Here in the earliest recorded literature we find the feng huang already established as a symbolic bird.

In the Shih Ching, or “Book of Poetry,” we find:

The male and female phoenix fly about,
Their wings rustling,
While they settle in their proper resting place.
Many are your admirable officers, O king,
Ready to be employed by you.
Loving you, the Son of Heaven.

The male and female phoenix fly about,
Their wings rustling,
As they soar up to heaven.
Many are your admirable officers, O king,
Waiting for your commands,
And loving the multitudes of the people.

The male and female phoenix give out their notes,
On that lofty bridge.
The dryndras grow,
On these eastern slopes,
They grow luxuriantly;
And harmoniously the notes resound.

In the Shu Ching, or “Book of Historical Documents”:

When the nine parts of the service according to the emperor’s arrangements have all been performed, the male and female phoenix come with their measured gambollings into the court.

There is a remark about the feng huang in the Confucian Analects—a rather dreary one:

The Master said, “the Feng bird does not come; the river sends no map—it is all over with me.”

The chief disciple of Lao Tzü, Chuang Tzü, gives us a piece of pseudo-natural history that in one point touches the truth:

In the south there is a bird. It is a kind of phoenix. Do you know it? It started from the south sea to fly to the north sea. Except on the wu-t’ung tree, it would not alight. It would eat nothing but the fruit of the bamboo, drink nothing but the purest spring water.

Then there is the evidence of that most lovely philosopher’s geography and natural history combined, the Shan Hai Ching—or “Mountain and Seas Classic.” Here we are told of the phoenix indeed:

The Mountain of Tan-hsiüeh
Again five hundred li to the east there is a mountain called Red Cave (Tan-hsiieh). At the top there is a great deal of gold and jade.

The Red River (Tan-shui) comes out here and flows south and goes into the P’o Sea (P’o-hai).

There is a bird whose shape is like a cock. It has five colors and stripes. It is called feng-huang. [As the dragon is the chief of the animals, the phoenix is the chief of the birds. It is the symbol of happiness.] The stripes on the head are called virtue; the stripes on the wings, justice; on the back, politeness; those on the breast are called humanity; those on the stomach, honesty. This bird drinks and eats, sings and dances, by itself. When it appears the world enjoys peace.

These are the earliest references to the feng huang. As time went on many new attributes and stories surrounded it. Whenever one appeared, the event would be reported to the emperor at once, and there would be a great celebration on a national scale. The name of a place or the designation of the emperor’s reign might be changed for such an event. We can find many such records in the dynasty histories. The T’zu Yüan (Chinese Encyclopedic Dictionary) gives the five colors of the feng huang: blue, yellow, red, white, and black.

This is part of the Chinese pedigree for the feng huang. The surprising thing is that so many characteristics of the seemingly fanciful bird of Chinese legend check with characteristics of the ocellated argus. Delacour, stern ornithologist, sees the likeness in the very fancy description the Chinese give. In cold blood he points out: “From literature, the Phoenix’s characteristics can be summarized as follows: ‘It is a ground bird; it takes several years to reach maturity; sexes are different; it has the head of a cock, the neck of a snake, the chin of a swallow, the back of a tortoise and the tail of a fish; it has five colors and reaches a length of six feet.’” Westerners are not
taught to describe birds in such a way, but Captain Delacour has the adaptability to see that in its way this is a very good description of the bird. Certainly it has a head as proud as the proudest cock; certainly it has the neck of a snake; certainly it has the chin of a swallow (and there the Chinese have been better observers than we—look you next time at that full chin all swallows have); the back of a tortoise (here the reference is to the diapered markings); and the tail of a fish. The poetic links are all there; and while Dr. Chapman might have taken the Chinese to task for not using a proper terminology, I am sure he would have smiled with pleasure at the Chinese description.

As if we had not had enough troubles identifying the fêng huang as a real bird and finding a name for it, we now have upon us a third problem: to discover when and where a particular fêng huang was painted. This glorious creature is unique. There is nothing closefl like it in paint or bronze or stone. It has been cut out of a picture and remounted with a cutout sun and seal above it. The seal is a troublesome one. Much as I have bullied Han Shou-hsuan, he will make nothing out of it but the seal of a minor military Ming official. It would be easy to argue that the seal was put on later when the phoenix and sun were rescued from an earlier painting, but there it stands like a stodgy cook in a murder mystery. There is no other bird like this in Chinese art that we can find so far. It stands proudly on long legs, with neck outstretched. Certainly in its stance it is more like the fêng huang of Ming than the fêng huang of Wei and T'ang, which obligingly curl their tail feathers to fit the exigencies of design; but it has none of the froufrou of Ming birds. It is clear and sharp—one might say provincial, except for the incredible and tireless perfection of detail. In its brevity it is closer to the birds of T'ang. Note, for instance, the meticulous dots of gold on the feathers. The care is extraordinary. The bird fits into no chronology we know of. Anyone but a dolt would catch at the seal and catalogue it Ming, and so we do that, mistrusting all the while that this particular bird may be much earlier. This interesting and beautiful fêng huang was given to us by Charlemagne E. Wells. Alive, the Zoo would have got it; on paper, the Museum does—a happy thing for everybody all around.

The quotations from the Shih Ching, the Shu Ching, and the Confucian Analects are from James Legge's translation of the Chinese Classics. The reference to Chuang Tzu may be found in Herbert A. Giles's translation. The passage from the Shan Hai Ching was rendered into English by Han Shou-hsuan with the aid of the French edition of Leon de Rosny.