

# UNNATURAL HISTORY

By ALAN PRIEST

*Curator of Far Eastern Art*

This is a report as of 1943 on the twenty birds and beasts depicted on the nine civil and the nine military insignia ("mandarin squares") and the two variations of them—twenty in all.

One of the commonest souvenirs from China for many years has been a square, six inches, nine inches, sometimes almost twelve inches, with a fantastic bird or beast filling the central space and surrounded by symbols and scenery. We have learned that these squares were worn as badges of official rank; we have learned the number of the ranks; and we have learned the names of the birds and animals for each rank. But when we try to match the birds and animals with their names as we conceive them, we are instantly at loss because they do not fit our notions of the animal or bird which has the same name.

The easiest way to deal with this is to wash one's hands of it entirely and just say these are twenty fantasy birds and beasts wearing names they have no right to. That is really the best thing to do. But, bitten with a passion for cataloguing with what we certainly have to believe is scientific accuracy, we want a lion to be a lion, and we want him to look the same way in his actual flesh and in embroidery. Jabberwockies and slithy toves are all very well and no bother in *Alice in Wonderland*, but nobody would try to fit them into a natural history book, and that, when we take on the wild life of the mandarin squares, is just about what we attempt to do.

Really it is an idiot occupation, but bit by bit we accomplish it. Giles, in his *Chinese-English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1912, p. 1 of Tables) printed a table which was our first standard. By 1936 we were able to annotate and correct it a little. A revised chart was published in the June *Bulletin* of that year. Now with the acquisition of a most delightful picture we have new comments to offer.

Late in the nineteenth century the retired official Chu-wu had a bad afternoon—he says so himself—and we all know how he felt. It was dark and rainy; he was dissatisfied and restless. Suddenly he thought of officials, and, having thought of them, he at once got out his brushes and his paints and whirled off the whole parade of birds and animals that officials are entitled to wear emblazoned upon their midriffs. In his picture birds and animals are properly set forth as they are in the actual squares the officials wore to court; so we will never know whether Chu-wu thought they were maliciously funny or whether humor is so ingrained in the whole Chinese character (I think it is the latter) that he was doing simple recording. There is an apt parallel to this in our own civilization. Look, we are a great nation and a serious one, yet we smile with pleasure that our flying men go forth with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck as emblems. Think of our Flying Tiger Squadron in Chungking, and then you will be instantly in sympathy with this elaborate scheme of birds and beasts the nobles of China wore proudly to court. They did not go at it in quite as open and hilarious a spirit as we do, but the same combination of nobility and frivolity must be behind it somewhere.

But this is a note for iconographers.

Very well, here in one picture the retired official Chu-wu has set forth for us the twenty birds and beasts of the nine civil and the nine military ranks and extras. Here they are. Furthermore, at the top of the painting is Chu-wu's own essay on ranks. And from now on anyone can classify any square according to Chu-wu. That much is done.

From Chu-wu's illustrated essay we have now constructed a chart and give it to you juxtaposed to the corrected Giles chart we published in 1936.

In essentials the two are very much alike,



*A painting of the birds and beasts used as symbols of Chinese civil and military ranks. By the retired official Chu-wu. Late XIX century*

COMPARATIVE TABLE OF INSIGNIA BASED ON GILES<sup>1</sup>

CIVIL RANKS

PERIODS	FIRST RANK	SECOND RANK	THIRD RANK	FOURTH RANK	FIFTH RANK	SIXTH RANK	SEVENTH RANK	EIGHTH RANK	NINTH RANK	UNCLASSIFIED RANK
Reign of Hung Wu, 26th Year (1393) <sup>2</sup>	Crane	Golden pheasant	Peacock	Goose	Silver pheasant	Egret	Mandarin duck	Oriole	Quail	Flycatcher
Late Ming Dynasty, about 1600 <sup>3</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Oriole
Reign of Shun Chih, 9th Year (1652) <sup>4</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Not stated
Reign of K'ang Hsi, 1st Year (1662) <sup>4</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
Reign of Ch'ien Lung, 32d Year (1767) <sup>5</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Flycatcher
Late XIX Century <sup>6</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Oriole
Early XX Century <sup>7</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Flycatcher
Early XX Century <sup>8</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"

MILITARY RANKS

PERIODS	FIRST RANK	SECOND RANK	THIRD RANK	FOURTH RANK	FIFTH RANK	SIXTH RANK	SEVENTH RANK	EIGHTH RANK	NINTH RANK
Reign of Hung Wu, 26th Year (1393) <sup>2</sup>	Lion	Lion	Tiger	Leopard	Bear	Tiger cat	Tiger cat	Rhinoceros	Sea horse
Late Ming Dynasty, about 1600 <sup>3</sup>	"	"	Leopard	Tiger	"	"	"	Sea horse	Rhinoceros
Reign of Shun Chih, 9th Year (1652) <sup>4</sup>	Ch'i lin	"	"	"	"	"	"	Rhinoceros	Sea horse
Reign of K'ang Hsi, 1st Year (1662) <sup>4</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
Reign of Ch'ien Lung, 32d Year (1767) <sup>5</sup>	Unicorn <sup>6</sup>	"	North China panther <sup>10</sup>	"	"	Mottled bear <sup>11</sup>	Rhinoceros	Seal <sup>12</sup>	"
Late XIX Century <sup>6</sup>	"	"	Leopard	"	"	"	Tiger cat	"	Fabulous bovine animal <sup>13</sup>
Early XX Century <sup>7</sup>	Ch'i lin	"	"	"	"	Tiger cat	Rhinoceros	Rhinoceros	Sea horse
Early XX Century <sup>8</sup>	"	"	"	"	"	"	Tiger cat	"	"

<sup>1</sup> With chronological changes and corrections of 1936 and modifications based on the researches of Wang Chi-chen.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Ta Ming Hui Tien*, quoted in the *T'u Shu Chi Ch'ing*, part XXXVIII, book 325.

<sup>3</sup> See the *San Ts'an T'u Hua*, compiled by Wang Chi' (preface dated 1607).

<sup>4</sup> See the *Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien*, quoted in the *T'u Shu Chi Ch'ing*, part XXXVIII, book 326. In the

K'ang Hsi list only the insignia for the first ranks are explicitly stated, but the inference that insignia for the other ranks remain unchanged can hardly be questioned.

<sup>5</sup> See the *Huang Ch'ao T'ung Chih*, book 58.

<sup>6</sup> See Giles, *Dictionary*, p. 1 of Tables, following p. 1711.

<sup>7</sup> See the *Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien T'u* (Kuang Hsi edition, about 1905).

<sup>8</sup> See the *Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien Shih Li* (Kuang Hsi edition, about 1905).

<sup>9</sup> The character read ch'i lin.

<sup>10</sup> The character reads leopard.

<sup>11</sup> There is no evidence that a second variety of bear was used on the squares. Giles is the only authority to mention the mottled bear.

<sup>12</sup> The characters read sea horse.

<sup>13</sup> The characters read rhinoceros.

COMPARATIVE TABLE OF INSIGNIA BASED ON CHU-WU<sup>1</sup>  
CIVIL RANKS

FIRST RANK	SECOND RANK	THIRD RANK	FOURTH RANK	FIFTH RANK
Crane (hsien hao—the Manchurian crane)	Golden pheasant (chin chi—the golden pheasant)	Peacock (k'ung ch'iao—the peacock, the Burmese green peafowl)	Cloud goose (yün yen—an unidentified wild goose)	Silver pheasant (pai hsien—the white or silver pheasant)
SIXTH RANK	SEVENTH RANK	EIGHTH RANK	NINTH RANK	VARIOUS OFFICERS
Egret (tu tz'ü—long-feathered silken bird, the Eastern egret)	Waterfowl (ch'i ch'ih—river-commanding bird—by tenuous guess, see Giles, the mandarin duck)	Quail (an shun—the perfectly behaved bird, the quail)	Flycatcher (lien ch'iao—the silken bird, the paradise flycatcher)	Oriole (huang ji—the yellow beauty, the oriole)
OFFICE OF THE CENSORATE hsieh chai ("brave free beast")				
DUKES, MARQUESSES, IMPERIAL SONS-IN-LAW, EARLS ch'i lin (miscalled unicorn) and pai tsé ("white shining beast")				
MILITARY RANKS				
FIRST RANK	SECOND RANK	THIRD RANK	FOURTH RANK	FIFTH RANK
Lion (hsiu shieh tzü—the embroidered lion)		Tiger (hu—the tiger)	Leopard (pao—the leopard)	Bear (hsiang pi—the bear)
SIXTH RANK	SEVENTH RANK	EIGHTH RANK	NINTH RANK	SUBSTITUTE OR WAITING OFFICIALS
	Tiger cat (piao—the tiger cat)		Sea horse (hai ma—the sea horse)	Rhinoceros (hsi niu—the rhinoceros)

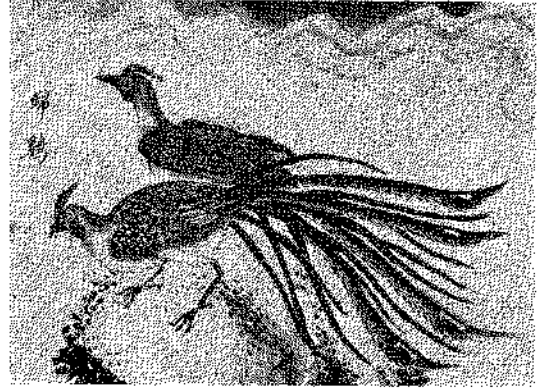
<sup>1</sup> Annotated by Li Lung



*The "brave free beast" (hsieh chai)*

and we give them both, but for practical purposes owners of mandarin squares will find Chu-wu's easier to use. Chu-wu is at least sure of his birds and of his beasts—they are exactly (or almost) as they appear on the squares, and each one is labeled. But there is one trouble for Westerners in Chu-wu's chart and Chu-wu's essay. The essay is what we might almost describe as prose poetry, and as its author balances it, phrase for phrase, we are not quite sure whether, when he says, "First, second—the crane and the golden pheasant," he means "one and two" or whether he means "either, or." Nor are we sure, when he comes to the fifth rank, both civil and military, for which he gives only one bird and animal, whether this is fact or a literary frill.

Were the symbols of certain ranks interchangeable or were they set? They appear in a number of Chinese encyclopaedias and records, with variations from reign to reign, and Giles made a first-rate attempt to put them in sensible order; but his chart, shorn certainly of literary frills, shows in the lower civil ranks



*The golden pheasant (chin chi)*

and most of the military ranks considerable indecision. Sooner or later somebody will be able to complete the chore.

With the aid of Chu-wu's picture we can at least set forth the birds and animals of the ranks. Thus we go far towards explaining the orthodox mandarin squares, and we make the beginnings of what I hope will become a Chinese bestiary. We have had occasion to deal with the fêng huang and the dragon, which do not appear in the chart, and to mention the ch'i lin and several others, which do. In time we might produce a really impressive fantasy natural history of Chinese beasts and birds. There is one splendid Chinese bestiary in existence; the late Baron von Staël-Holstein had a copy which I often borrowed, but it was concerned only with beasts. I wait for another to turn up. Meanwhile we capture beasts and birds as we can.

*Shortly we will put out a picture book with proper enlargements of the twenty birds and beasts from Chu-wu's painting.*