Auspicious Symbols of Rank and Status

Byron Breedlove
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Isaac Fung
Georgia Southern University, Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, cfung@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/bee-facpubs

Part of the Biostatistics Commons, Environmental Public Health Commons, and the Epidemiology Commons

Recommended Citation
Breedlove, Byron, Isaac Fung. 2020. "Auspicious Symbols of Rank and Status." Emerging Infectious Diseases, 26 (5): 1056-1057: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. doi: https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2605.ac2605 source: https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2605.ac2605
https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/bee-facpubs/182

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Environmental Health Sciences, Department of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Environmental Health Sciences Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
While walking along the bustling streets of Beijing, Chengde, Shenyang, Wuhan, or other Chinese cities during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), people would regularly brush past bats, cranes, pheasants, peacocks, egrets, or ducks; slow their step so a lion, leopard, tiger, rhinoceros, or bear could hurry past; or yield to allow passage to a dragon, unicorn, or qilin (a chimera with horns, a dragon’s head, fish scales, an oxen’s tail, horse’s hooves, and multicolored skin). Of course, it was not those actual animals jostling their way through the crowded causeways but rather myriad Chinese statesmen, civic officials, military officers, and members of the imperial court, as well as their wives, all of whom indicated their rank and status by wearing embroidered badges featuring images of those creatures on their outer coats.

From the late 14th century until the early 20th century CE, these ornate rank badges (called buzí or Mandarin squares) featured fierce animals to denote military officials, various bird species to identify civic officials, and exotic and imaginary creatures to signify members of the imperial court. Art historian Mary Dusenbury writes, “Qing badges generally include an abbreviated cosmic diagram with an earth-mountain in the lower center, and a multitude of auspicious symbols filling up the surrounding space. In the center, the animal or bird looks up at a prominent red sun, symbol of the emperor.”

This month’s cover image is an 18th century Qing military rank badge that depicts a muscular leopard standing on a small piece of light brown, green-tinged
land amidst flowering plants and fruit trees. The surrounding sky is filled with swooping bats and tendrils of clouds. Stylized ocean waves rise and swell, and breakers reach out like fingers on a hand. What may be lingzhi mushrooms, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine and are also symbols of immortality, sprout from the junction of ocean with land. The small red sun disk in the upper left represents the emperor and provides a focal point for the leopard. The leopard itself symbolizes power, important for military officers. Combined, the various elements related to the sky, sea, and land denote the universe, and the bats indicate good fortune. The bold colors and textures of the finely woven threads stand out in contrast to the black background, and an intricately designed gold border wraps the edges of the badge.

According to the University of Michigan Museum of Art, “During the Ming dynasty, the leopard and tiger shared the third and fourth ranks and in the early years of the Qing dynasty the tiger was the third rank. From 1662 to the end of the Qing dynasty, the leopard solely represented the third military rank.”

Other changes in rank, which correspond to the start of Emperor Kangxi’s reign, included assigning the qilin and lion to represent the first and second military ranks, respectively—both ranks had previously been symbolized by lions. These woven or embroidered badges could be removed and replaced should the official or office be promoted to a higher rank. Although the design of the squares evolved from one dynasty to the next—for instance, Qing badges were smaller than Ming badges and featured decorative borders—the specific birds and animals used to denote rank remained more or less constant.

The birds and animals featured on the various rank badges (excepting, among others, dragons, unicorns, and qilin) may also serve as zoonotic reservoirs capable of transmitting viral pathogens that can cause respiratory infections in humans. For example, some of the birds that signify ranks among civic officials can transmit highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses. Bats, a mainstay on many badges because of their association with good fortune, are reservoirs for Hendra and Nipah viruses and for the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) coronavirus. Coronaviruses are also found in many different species of animals besides bats, including swine, camels, and cattle.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is caused by a coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. Many factors affect interactions among humans, animals, plants, and the environment, creating greater opportunities for novel pathogens, such as SARS-CoV-2 to emerge. Perhaps one’s rank and status might confer favor in some circles, but they offer no protection from human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and other viral respiratory infections and illnesses.

Bibliography
1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Situation summary [cited 2020 Apr 1]. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/summary.html
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One Health basics [cited 2020 Apr 1]. https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/basics/index.html
3. Chan JF, Kok KH, Zhu Z, Chu H, To KK, Yuen S, et al. Genomic characterization of the 2019 novel human-pathogenic coronavirus isolated from a patient with atypical pneumonia after visiting Wuhan. Emerg Microbes Infect. 2020;9:221–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2020.1719902
4. Chan JF, Yuen S, Kok KH, To KK, Chu H, Yang J, et al. A familial cluster of pneumonia associated with the 2019 novel coronavirus indicating person-to-person transmission: a study of a family cluster. Lancet. 2020;395:519–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30154-9
5. Dominguez SR, O’Shea TJ, Oko LM, Holmes KV. Detection of group I coronaviruses in bats in North America. Emerg Infect Dis. 2007;13:1295–300. https://doi.org/10.3201/eid1309.070491
6. Dusenbury MM. Flowers, dragons, and pine trees. Asian Textiles in the Spencer Museum of Art. Manchester (VT): Hudson Hills Press LLC; 2004. p. 125–35; 170–2.
7. Han BA, Kramer AM, Drake JM. Global patterns of zoonotic disease in mammals. Trends Parasitol. 2016;32:565–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pt.2016.04.007
8. Sarajo. History of Chinese rank badges [cited 2020 Mar 28]. https://www.sarajo.com/history-chinese-rank-badges/
9. Li C, Ji F, Wang L, Wang L, Hao J, Dai M, et al. Asymptomatic and human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in a family cluster, Xuzhou, China [cited 2020 Apr 1]. Emerg Infect Dis. 2020;26. 2020 Mar 31;26(7). Online ahead of print. https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2607.200718
10. Lu R, Zhao X, Li J, Niu F, Yang B, Wu H, et al. Genomic characterisation and epidemiology of 2019 novel coronavirus: implications for virus origins and receptor binding. Lancet. 2020;395:565–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30251-8
11. Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. Rank badge with leopard, wave, and sun motifs late 18th century [cited 2020 Mar 3]. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/68969
12. Monto AS, Cowling BJ, Peiris JS. Coronaviruses. In: Kaslow RA, Stanberry LR, LeDuc JW, editors. Viral infections of humans. Boston: Springer; 2014. p. 199–223.
13. Schuyler C. Birds and Animals as Ming and Ch’ing Badges of Rank. Arts of Asia Magazine. May–June 1991;21-90.
14. University of Michigan Museum of Art. Qing-dynasty rank badges late 18th century [cited 2020 Mar 3]. https://www.umich.edu/resoures/26228#2
15. University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum. Rank and style: power dressing in imperial China. Section 3. Lions and tigers: rank badges for military officials [cited 2020 Mar 30]. https://pacificasiamuseum.usc.edu/files/2018/07/Section-3.pdf

Address for correspondence: Byron Breedlove, EID Journal, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd NE, Mailstop H16-2, Atlanta, GA 30329-4027, USA; email: wbb1@cdc.gov