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Beijing is a brilliant place to watch birds. More than 460 different types have been recorded in the Chinese capital, which beats London, Paris, New York and Tokyo. And, even inside the 2nd Ring Road, birds can be found!

Most common birds can be found in central Beijing’s parks and green spaces. During migration season (Spring and Autumn), many more species will be possible.

雀桥仙
Immortals at the Magpie Bridge
by Qin Guan (Song Dynasty)

织云弄巧，
飞星传恨，
银汉迢迢暗度。
金风玉露一相逢，
便胜却人间无数。
柔情似水，
佳期如梦，
忍顾鹊桥归路。
两情若是久长时，
又岂在朝朝暮暮。

Clouds float like works of art,
Stars shoot with grief at heart,
Across the Milky Way the Cowherd meets the Maid.
When Autumn’s Golden Wind embraces dew of Jade,
All the love scenes on earth, however many, fade.
Their tender love flows like a stream,
Their happy date seems but a dream,
How can they bear a separate homeward way?
If love between both sides can last for aye,
Why need they stay together night and day?
On the evening of the seventh day of the seventh month on the Chinese lunar calendar, don’t forget to look carefully at the summer sky. You’ll find the Cowherd (a bright star in the constellation Aquila, west of the Milky Way) and the Weaving Maid (the star Vega, east of the Milky Way) appear closer together than at any other time of the year. Chinese believe the stars are lovers who are permitted to meet by the queen of Heaven once a year. That day falls on the double seventh (七夕 in Chinese), which is China’s own Valentine’s Day.

Most Chinese remember being told a romantic tragedy when they were children on the double seventh. In the legend, the cowherd and the Weaving Maid will meet on a bridge of magpies across the Milky Way once a year. Chinese grannies will remind children that they would not be able to see any magpies on that evening because all the magpies have left to form a bridge in the heavens with their wings.
To Love and to Wait -- A Romantic Legend

The legend holds that an orphaned cowherd was mistreated by his elder brother and sister-in-law, who eventually gave him an old ox and chased him out. The cowherd worked hard, and after only a couple of years he owned a small farm and house. He was lonely, however, with only the company of that faithful old ox.

One day the ox suddenly opened its mouth and talked, telling the cowherd that the heavenly Weaving Maid and her sisters were going to bathe in the Silver River. The Weaving Maid was said to be the youngest of the seven daughters of the Queen of Heaven. With her sisters, she worked hard to weave beautiful clouds in the sky.

The ox told the cowherd that he should go there to rob the Weaving Maid of her clothes while she was in the water. In exchange for the return of her clothes, she would become his wife. Surprised, the cowherd willingly followed the ox’s instructions and hid himself in the reeds at the riverbank, waiting for the girls to bathe.

The girls did come as foretold. As they were splashing about and having fun, the cowherd rushed out of the reeds and grabbed the Weaving Maid’s clothing. In panic, the sisters dashed to their clothes, hurriedly put them on, and ran away.

The Weaving Maid, deprived of her clothes, stood on the riverbank and tried to cover herself with her hair as best as possible. The cowherd told her that he would not return her clothes unless she promised to be his wife. After a little hesitation and shyness, she agreed to his request and they married.

The cowherd and the Weaving Maid lived happily together and had two children before the Queen of Heaven discovered the Weaving Maid’s absence. She was so annoyed she had the Weaving Maid brought back to heaven.

Seeing his beloved wife flying back to the sky, the cowherd was terrified and sad. He caught sight of the cowhide hanging on a wall. The magical ox had told him before dying of old age: “Keep the cowhide for emergency use.”

Putting the cowhide on, the cowherd, with his two children, went after his wife.

With the help of the cowhide, the cowherd was able to follow the Weaving Maid into heaven. He was about to reach his wife when the Queen showed up and pulled off her hairpin to draw a line between the two. The line became the Silver River in heaven, which is the Milky Way.

The Weaving Maid went back to the heavenly workshop, going on weaving the clouds. But she was so sad and missed her husband across the Silver River so much that the clouds she weaved seemed sad. Finally, the Queen showed a little mercy, allowing the couple to meet once every year on the Silver River on the double seventh.

Magpies were moved by their true love and many of them gathered and formed a bridge for the couple to meet on the evening of Qixi.

It’s said that it’s hard to find a magpie on Chinese Valentine’s Day in China, because all magpies fly to make the bridge for the Weaving Maid and the cowherd. The one thing to prove that is the feathers on the head of the magpies are much lesser after the Chinese Valentine’s Day. And if it rains heavily on Qixi night, some elderly Chinese will say it is because the Weaving Maid is crying from happiness over meeting her husband on the Milky Way.
To Celebrate and to Pray

The double seventh is the only Chinese festival devoted to love in the Lunar calendar. Actually, in ancient China, Qixi was not only a special day for lovers, but also for girls. As early as the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD), girls began to celebrate Double Seven Festival in China. What was behind their celebration was their desire for the mastery of knitting, cooking, and home making, each of which was a must in order to be a fair lady at that time. As a result, girls would make tables, light candles, and present fruits in their courtyard in the hope of being blessed with these skills from the Weaving Maid. So the festival is also known as the "Begging for Needle Crafts Festival" or "Daughters' Festival." Although later the festival became associated with a love story, these activities have survived.
“Yan” (燕) is an easily recognizable pictographic character. In oracle bone inscriptions, it features the image of a bird with an open mouth, unfolded wings and furcated tail. During the evolution of Chinese characters in the form and structure, “yan” (燕) has been giving us the imagination of spreading wings and extending feather.
Symbolism of Swallows

Some Chinese animals are given certain symbolism and used in a metaphorical way to express human feelings. We are familiar with dragons and fish in the Chinese culture, but the swallow also has a special meaning in Chinese culture.

The swallow is a messenger of spring and happiness in Chinese culture, and is seen as a symbol of good fortune. If swallows nest in the roof of a Chinese family’s house, the hosts will never disturb them, because it’s believed that they will bring luck to the family.

Swallows used to be very numerous in China as the traditional roofs offered ideal nesting places, Beijing was known as the “Capital city of Swallows” (燕京 yàn jīng).

As early as thousands of years ago, people had already known about the rule of migration of swallows.

Since the swallows return in every spring, poets in all ages have been glorifying and complimenting them as the symbol of spring.

Moreover, since the swallows often fly in pair in the sky, those couples who are in love are compared to the swallows perching in pair (燕侣 yàn lǚ).

In Chinese culture, the swallow is a bird symbolic of feminine grace and beauty. 赵飞燕, zhào fēiyàn (literally “flying swallow Zhao”) was an empress of the Han dynasty famed to this day for her slender beauty. 燕 yàn is still frequently used in girls’ names currently in China.

乌衣巷
Black Robe Lane
by Liu Yuxi (Tang Dynasty)

朱雀桥边野草花，
乌衣巷口夕阳斜。
旧时王谢堂前燕，
飞入寻常百姓家。

By the Red Sparrow Bridge, flowers and grasses have gone to seed,

Over Black Robe Lane, the sunset is slanted and weak.

Swallows that in the hall of grand houses used to nest,

Have flown into the homes of common folks there to rest.

* Black Robe Lane, Red Sparrow Bridge: Upscale residential locations in Chang’an (Used to be China’s Capital).
In the poem, the swallows unintentionally witnessed the ups and downs of the world and spoke for the poet his agony over the defeated country and lost homes.
The most important thing I’ve learned is that I am capable of being the outgoing leader.

**Barn Swallow** 家燕

A common migrant and summer visitor to Beijing

**Red-rumped Swallow** 金腰燕

Similar to Barn Swallow. Nests in Hutongs and parks. Eats insects.
Edible Bird’s Nest

Why do Chinese people eat bird’s nest? Is it good for health or other reasons?

It’s not any bird’s nest that Chinese people eat.

Only special bird called “swiftlet” which is often regarded as a kind of swallow, can make the edible nest.

Some reasons that might explain the why.

A. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the bird’s nest is good for health. Especially good for lung, stomach and kidney.

B. Even in western medicine system, the nest is acknowledged nutritious. The “epidermal factor” inside the nest can help skin regrow and remove wrinkles.

C. Most importantly, eating bird’s nest is regarded as a privilege in China. As it’s quite luxury, in ancient times only the emperor and nobles have access to it. So it’s a symbol of social hierarchy.

Some might think this type of edible nest is made of dirt, mud and woods, while it’s actually made by swiftlet's saliva and feather.

Saliva of the bird’s nest is the edible part and people always make fun of those who eat bird’s nest by teasing them eating bird’s saliva.

Although it sounds a little bit gross, the shaped edible product looks like jelly. Combining jelly-shaped bird’s nest with cube sugar, milk, papaya or coconut will make a wonderful taste cuisine.
Crows have been associated with death and ill indication in many cultures. However, this isn’t always the case. The crow is a very complex image in both the eastern and western literature. Either in the mythology, folk stories or literary creations, crows have always got double identities.

Crows represent the light, while also symbolize the darkness. They are the messengers of the god, while also work as the harbinger for the devil. People say crows can bring over good news, while they also predict the misfortune. They characterize the warmth, comfort, affection and filial piety, while also carry the feeling of drifting and depressed loneliness, sometimes, even the sorrow and sadness towards a defeated and declining county.

People have all sorts of opinions about crows and their close cousins, ravens, who are also equally common (and are often mistaken as crows). All these expectations are based on our experience stored in our long-term memory. They are also influenced by specific geographic locations and cultural contexts.

The section below will talk about the double identities of crows and ravens in different cultures across the globe, with an emphasis on China, through assorted literature resources.
Part 1: The Double Identities

When hearing or seeing crows, unintentionally, we provide them with the default value of “bad luck”. However, through the record of the literature works, it is not hard to notice that crows led quite a shining role along the history, symbolizing “auspiciousness”, and in some culture, even the symbol of the supreme god. This type of controversy towards the crows’ identities can be generalized into the following 5 aspects.

1.1 Association with the Sun

Mr. Mao Dun (a 20th-century Chinese novelist, cultural critic), once said, “That the rabbits live on the moon and crows live in sun will always remain a mystery, simply existing there, without the point to be discussed about. “ This "leaving the question open” attitude, however, cannot stop the interest of the later generations to dig the facts out. Mr. Ji Xianlin (a Chinese linguist, historian, and writer) found some evidence in the book of Traveling Notes of the Western Regions in Great Tang Dynasty (大唐西域记), which can trace back the connections between rabbits and the moon. Similarly, if we expand the search into the world literature filed, we will come across a lot of records that crows are paired up either with the sun, or the sun god.

Sorts of images about the crows can be found in a wide variety of Chinese literature works, like Shan Hai Jing (山海经), and Huai Nan Zi (淮南子), where crows are depicted as a three-legged birds with golden wings.

According to Huai Nan Zi, there were originally ten suns, with crows living inside. Each day, one of the suns rose in the sky at a single point of time. They flew across the sky from the Fusang trees (扶桑树) in the east to the Ruo trees (若木) in the west. However, one day all the suns decided to rise all at once, which was devastating to the earth. So the God sent an archer named Hou Yi (后羿) to shoot down nine of them so that only one remained. The crows died therefore, giant-sized feathers falling down. The earth, finally, continued to stay safe.

羿仰射⼗十⽇日, 中其九⽇日, 日日中九乌皆死, 堕其⽻羽翼, 故留其一也。 (Huainanzi, 淮南子.精神训)
“东北有地日之草，西南有春生之草，……三足鸟数下地食此草。羲和欲驭，以手揜乌目，不听下也。食草能不老，他鸟兽食此草，则美闷不能动矣。(洞冥记)

Chu Ci (楚辞)

The Songs of the Chu, is an anthology of Chinese poetry traditionally attributed mainly to Qu Yuan (屈原) (for whom we celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival) and his disciples. Chu Ci, as the book’s name indicates, is derived from the songs of the southern state Chu during the Warring States Period (476 BC - 221 BC).

Alternatively, in Chu Ci (楚辞), Chinese thought of the sun as a glowing chariot driven by 6 dragons across the sky and the Goddess Xihe (羲和) was the charioteer.

In other versions of mythology, crows even replaced the dragons to lead the chariot instead, taking Xihe’s orders. Crows was considered having a magic power according to the record of Dong Ming Ji (汉武洞冥记, an anthology of ghost stories in Dong Han dynasty. It is something like the Journey to the Underworld). It is said, along the Sun’s daily duty route, the North East grows a type of grass (地日之草), which the three-legged crows loved to stop to eat from time to time. The grass can give immortality to crows exclusively, however, when other birds have a taste of it, unlike crows, they get immobilized. To effectively issue her orders and prevent crows from being distracted from their duties, Xihe covered crows’ eyes with her hands.

“东北有地日之草，西南有春生之草，……三足鸟数下地食此草。羲和欲驭，以手揜乌目，不听下也。食草能不老，他鸟兽食此草，则美闷不能动矣。(洞冥记)

Another interesting part is, when looking for traces of the association between crows and the sun in Shan Hai Jing (山海经. 大荒东经), people noticed that The Goddess Xihe was omitted this time and crows were actually becoming the divine guiding birds.

“......上有扶木，柱三百里，其叶如芥，有谷，曰温源谷。汤谷上有扶木，一日方至，一日方出，皆载于鸟。”(山海经. 大荒东经)
It was explained through various ways. Here are a few explanations.

First, back to ancient times, human’s knowledge towards the phenomenon of the sunspot was pretty limited. Second, crows set off in the dawn and return at dusk, which is in align with the timeline of sunrise and sunset.

Another possibility goes to that crows have a strong affection to the sparkling stuff, because pieces of glasses or ceramics can be always found at the bottom layer of their nests.

Though none of above statement is convincing enough, at least the connections between crows and the sun cannot just be ignored.

1.2 Association with the Moon

Unlike the Chinese myth, where crows are frequently associated with the sun, Chinese poetry always brings the moon, the night, and crows’ cry all together. One typical representative work is Night at the Maple Bridge, written by Zhang Ji, a poet from Tang dynasty.

**Fēng Qiáo Yè Bó**
枫桥夜泊

**Zhāng Jì (Táng)**
张继（唐）

**Yuè luò wǔ tí shuāng mǎn tiān,**
月落乌啼霜满天，

**Jiāng féng yú huǒ dùi chóu mián.**
江枫渔火对愁眠。

**Gūsū Chéng wài Hánshān Sì,**
姑苏城外寒山寺，

**Yèbàn zhōngshēng dào kèchuán.**
夜半钟声到客船。
1.3 A Chinese Poem Crash-Course

枫桥(Fēngqiáo): Maple Bridge, is located in Suzhou City, Jiangsu province.

姑苏(Gūsū): another name for Suzhou City.

寒山寺(Hánshān Sì): The Temple of Frost Hill, is located near the Maple Bridge.

月亮 (yuèliang): moon
寺庙 (sìmiào): temple
枫树 (fēngshù): maple
寂寞 (jìmò): loneliness
渔船 (yúchuán): fishing boat
愁闷 (chóumèn): gloomy
钟声 (zhōngshēng): bell ring

月亮渐渐落下去，乌鸦在啼叫，四处弥漫着秋霜的寒意，
江边枫树映衬着点点渔船的灯火，我却因心情愁闷无法入睡。

gușu chên wài hán shān sì lǐ yōu yuǎn de zhōng shēng,

半夜时分隐隐地传到了客船上来。

这首诗写诗人乘船经过苏州，晚上船停在江边，秋天夜里景色清净，更有乌鸦的啼鸣，半夜的钟声，引发了诗人客泊他乡的寂寞心情。

The moon is setting. The crows are crying. The atmosphere is heavy with a chilly autumn frost.

The maple trees and the lights of the fishing boats are reflected in the water. Yet I am unable to sleep because of sorrow.

I vaguely hear the bells are ringing in the Temple of Frost Hill, outside of Suzhou city at midnight.

* This poem describes that the poet’s experience of taking a boat through Suzhou City. The boat is resting at night. The clear view at night, the cry of the crow, and the sound of bells, all make the author feel very lonely and homesick.
乌夜啼
Crow’s Cry at Night

There are many similar Chinese poetry that use crow’s cry (乌啼) as an important element to express the lonely and solitary feelings.

Here are more examples:

“每听乌啼知夜分”
by Wang Changling
王畅龄 《乌栖曲》

“城乌独宿夜空啼”
by Li Bai
李白《庐江主人妇》

“乌啼林外月初上”
by Lu You
陆游《寒夜枕上》

“女墙犹在夜乌啼”
by Liu Changqing
刘长卿 《登余干古县城》

“佛室夜艾乌更啼”
by Qin Guan
秦观 《宿乾明方丈》
Most of the time, people regard crows’ cry as a sign of misfortune. However, if traced all the way back, originally, the cry actually is the sign of auspiciousness. When He Yan (何宴) during the Three Kingdoms (220–280AD) was put into the jail, two crows rested on the roof of his house. He’s daughter therefore got excited, saying that her father would be released very soon (乌有喜声，父必免)。Days later, as expected, He Yan gained back freedom.

However, in the book of Underlying Principles of Crows’ Caw (A Tibetan collection currently owned by the Paris Library), points up that: Crows responded to events with characteristic caw patterns, differs according to the message, the time of the day, and the angle of direction between observers and crows.

For example, the sound of “Loh-loh” means good luck, “Dah-dah” means safe and sound, “Georgeor” signs wealth while “Yeewoo-yeewoo” is the disaster.

“咙咙（之声）表吉祥；嗒嗒（之声）表无恙；卓卓（之声）表财旺；依乌依乌（之声）危难降。”(《以乌鸦的叫声来判断凶吉》)

Besides the varieties of the caw patterns, different areas of China hold different perspectives towards crows. Generally speaking, people from the North see crows as a good luck sign, while the South see the opposite.

“北人以乌声为喜。南人闻乌声则唾而逐之，闻鸟声则唾而逐之，至于弦弩挟弹，击使远去。”(洪迈《容斋三笔》)
3. Messengers for the Divinity v.s for the Devil

Both crows and ravens play the messenger role for the divinity, according to the above mentioned book *Underlying Principles of Crows’ Caw*. Another example can be also found in *Bible*, in the section of *Elijah Fed by Ravens*. There it says,

"Then the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.’" (*Bible*).  

Similarly, in Norse mythology, two ravens, together with two wolves, are said to accompany the God Odin. Since the God of Odin not only in charge of wisdom, war, arts and literature, he also charges the death. Hence, it makes more sense that crows or ravens are considered as the sign of death, or at least some sort of messengers that can communicate between the alive and the dead.

Allan Poe, in his poem *The Raven*, expects that the raven could bring him the news of his beloved; The main character in *The Dark Half*, written by Stephen King, calls crows to take away the gruesome murder’s devilish spirit; The film *The Crow*, starring by Brandon Lee, told about a rock musician who is revived from the dead to revenge his own death as well as the murder of his fiancée. A crow was howling around him whenever he presented himself, giving him the strength and the power.

Aunt Chen from the short story *Medicine*, written by Chinese Author Lu Xun, hoped that the crow can guide her to get the message from her son, who sadly lost the chance to recover and therefore passed away because of a misuse of the Chinese medicine.

“瑜儿，可怜他们坑了你，他们将来总有报应，天都知道；你闭了眼睛就是了。——你如果真在这里，听到我的话，——便教这乌鸦飞上你的坟顶，给我看罢。” (*鲁迅*《药》)
3.1 Messengers That Lost Trust

It seems that we are able to come to the conclusion that crows have double identities here once again. On one hand, they follow the orders from the Lord or other divinities (based on various cultures). On the other, they are connected with the death. However, have you ever wondered how this contradiction could happen?

Literature works, both from the east and west, may explain the why.

As known, a messenger’s duty is to deliver the information, quickly and accurately, between the sender and receiver. Back to the times when the information channels were quite limited, a wrong or twisted message would not only lead to a suspension of the information transmission, it might also cause the misunderstanding between the sender and the receiver. Hence, the efficiency and accuracy, unsurprisingly become the decisive factors to tell if the messenger is qualified enough to put the trust on. Unfortunately, crows somehow ended up being the messengers that could not be trusted.

According to a Tibetan version folk story, crows used to be a sacred bird, serving as a liaison between the Chinese God and the ordinary people. People asked crows to present a type of uncooked pancakes as tributes to the God. They also taught crows how to cook those cakes. But crows only presented the pancakes, without mentioning the cooking skills at all, which made the God quite mad. Later on, when people tried to seek help from the God, crows lied up, saying that God didn’t want to help, which caused crows lose both their position to accompany the Chinese God and their nests. Besides, crows were also punished to fall down to the ground off from trees 9 times each night, and the whole body turned to be very smelly.

In align with, that crows were discarded and disliked because of the lies and betrayal was recorded in the Aesop Fables as well.

The Crow and Mercury

A Crow caught in a snare prayed to Apollo to release him, making a vow to offer some frankincense at his shrine. But when rescued from his danger, it forgot its promise. Shortly afterwards, again caught in a snare, it passed by Apollo and made the same promise to offer frankincense to Mercury. Mercury soon appeared and said to it, “O thou most base fellow? How can I believe thee, who has disowned and wronged thy former patron?”
3.2 The Crow and The Flood

In *Bible*, the raven failed to commit its mission and was considered irresponsible.

“And he (Noah) sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the water was dried up from off the earth.” (*Bible*)

Look at the word “until”, we can tell from this clue that the raven didn’t return to Noah actually, otherwise Noah would not have sent out the dove thereafter, which later on “returned to him with an olive twig” (*Bible*).

However, even though within the same flood themed topics, the roles of crows are regarded differently. Some minorities in South West of China, such as Lisu (傈僳族) believed that when the world is flooded, it is the crows that passed the messages to the humans. Besides that, crows also asked two survivors, a brother and sister, to hide inside a guard to stay safe. After the flood, crows successfully helped the two out from the gourd and brought them together to become a couple, producing more humans.
4. Being Smart v.s Being Foolish

In the fork stories, some animals represent particular characters, for example, the fox is always considered as witty, cunning, greedy, and occasionally, self-defeating. But crows, instead of carrying one certain label, they have a range of characters for being either smart, stupid, or kind of in between.

*The Crow and the Pitcher*, one of the stories from Aesop Fables, emphasizes crows’ virtue of ingenuity, thoughtfulness and persistence.

*The Fox and the Crow*, reversely, presents a crow who trusts flatters and completely becomes a fool.

In the story of *The Crow and the Sheep*, the crow turns to be very cunning, bullying the weak but flattering the strong.

“A sheep reproaches a crow that has perched on its back: ‘If you had treated a dog in this way, you would have had your deserts from his sharp teeth.’ To this, the bird replies, ‘I despise the weak and yield to the strong. I know whom I may bully and whom I must flatter; and I thus prolong my life to a good old age.’” (*The Sheep and The Crow, Aesop Fables*)

These 3 stories, though all from Aesop Fables, they depict crows with different kinds of moralities. This difference, in fact, indicates that people’s perspectives towards crows are not always the same.
5. Kindness, Filial Piety v.s Lonely and Gloomy Symbol

5.1 Filial Birds

In China, there is a proverb says, 羔羊跪乳，乌鸦反哺, which means the baby lambs kneeling down to drink mother’s milk, while children crows feeding in return to their parents.

Through the Chinese legends, crows have a very special virtue that deserves much attention: filial piety, which generally is not easy to find in other literacy works in other countries or other cultures.

According to legends, crows are compassionate birds. They are born in the deep woods. From outside of their high nests, the mother/father crows, holding food in their beaks, place it into the baby crows’ mouths. When the parents’ wings fatigue and can no longer fly, their children’s wings, however, are already fully developed. Flying to and fro, the children crows bring food and feeding in return (反哺) their parents, just as their parents do when they are young. Hence, crows are defined as filial birds (慈乌) and become an emblem of filial piety.

“慈乌：此鸟初生，母哺六十日，长则反哺六十日，可谓慈孝矣。”（《本草纲目·禽部, Compendium of Material Medical》）
5.2 Gloomy Symbol

In either story above, crows are seen as a sign to express a sense of warmth, respect, care and love. But in Chinese classical poems, the appearance of crows is somehow considered sad and gloomy.

We have talked about earlier that crows are associated with the feeling of loneliness in the eyes of the poets, so it is not hard to understand why a crow, a kind of “love” bird, turns out to be so “sad”, carrying no hope for the future.

One typical example is 《天净沙·秋思》 written by Ma Zhiyuan (马致远) from the Yuan Dynasty.

天净沙·秋思
Sunny Sand, Autumn Thoughts

马致远 (元)
Written by Ma Zhiyuan

许渊冲 (译)
Translated by Xu Yuanchong (A professor from Beijing University)

枯藤老树昏鸦
Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows,

小桥流水人家
Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows,

古道西风瘦马
On ancient road in the west wind a lean horse goes.

夕阳西下
Westward declines the sun,

断肠人在天涯
Far, far from home is the heartbroken one.

More examples:

“西风林外有啼鸦，斜阳山下多衰草” (辛弃疾《踏莎行·和赵国兴知录韵》)
“暗柳啼鸦,单衣伫立” (周邦彦《琐窗寒·寒食》)
“两行疏柳，一丝残照，万点鸦栖” (刘基《眼儿媚·秋闺》)
“斜阳外，寒鸦万点，流水绕孤村” (秦观《满庭芳》)

In some other poems, crows, these seemingly most-human birds, end up to set off the sorrow and grief towards a declining and defeated country.

“于今腐草无萤火，终古垂杨有暮鸦” (李商隐《隋宫》)
“披发佯狂走。莽中原，暮鸦啼彻，几枝衰柳。破碎河山谁收拾，零落西风依旧，便惹得离人消瘦。” (李叔同《金缕曲》)
Part 2: The Deep Meaning of Crows’ Double Identities

It is not enough by just pointing out the double identities of crows alone. In fact, there are several other animals, which also experience this type of reputation declination. Like crows, snakes were originally seen as sacred animals, but they later ended up more miserable than crows by being a reason of Adam and Eve’s sin. Rats also have the same situation. It is said, in some Chinese fork stories, rats bit open a chaotic skin-like ball. The fresh air went up to become the sky while the polluted air became the land, which is one of the reasons why rats are placed first in the Chinese zodiac line. However nowadays, rats got stuck quite badly: When a rat runs across the street, everybody cries, "kill it!" (老鼠过街，人人喊打。)

Back to the totem period, people regarded some particular animals either as their ancestors, or the emblems of their clans, giving the sincere worship to.

When the world is moving on, with more mysteries figured out through the lens of science, the divinity of these sacred animals are gradually going down, to some, even goes to the completely opposite side.

To conclude, crows’ identities and images are changing in align with the time and the geographic areas. No matter what attitudes people have towards crows, either looking them up, or down, all is connected not only with crows’ living habits, but also human’s psychological and cultural basis. Crows have crossed the boundaries of reality, and penetrated deep into the cultural and religious myths of various cultures around the world.
Bibliography


About Annie He

Annie He is currently the Chinese Integration specialist at the International School of Beijing (ISB). Annie’s role requires her to facilitate the integration of Chinese cultural and language experiences for roughly 1,800 students from PreK-3 to High School. Meanwhile, Annie is in collaboration with over 220 teachers by taking advantage of authentic learning opportunities that deepen students’ connection to China and its rich culture.

From 2009-2013, Annie was supporting ISB’s Office of Teaching and Learning in the development and assessment of ISB’s Strategic Plan. Annie was also responsible for the management of systems and processes related to curriculum development and delivery across the school.

Before coming to ISB, Annie was a classroom teacher, delivering the IB Primary and Middle Years Program, and a part of the centralized administrative support team at Shekou International School (SIS).

Message from Annie

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