

2 Identifying Civil Rank Badges

Trying to describe the appearance of the birds and animals that served as rank symbols during the Ming and Qing dynasties is like trying to record a moving train with a single, still picture. A basic tenet of this book is that the design of rank badges evolved over time. As a consequence, the appearance of the creatures that denoted rank also changed. Since the evolution of designs belongs to a later portion of the book, at this juncture I will describe, in general terms, the appearance of the rank creatures during the middle and end of the Qing dynasty. These are the most frequent badges you are likely to encounter and so will serve as a convenient starting point. Once you master the basics of identification, the changes you encounter in the appearance of a bird or animal from a different period will be relatively easy to recognize. Some of the descriptions associated with dating, the gender of the wearer, and design details will be unfamiliar to those who are reading about rank badges for the first time. But it is my hope that this book will serve as a useful reference over the years. Although some comments may be obscure on a first read, they will hopefully prove enlightening when you use the book as a reference.

Before proceeding with these descriptions, I need to emphasize a point made in the introduction, which is that there are virtually no principles that are universally applicable. The diversity of designs implemented over time and within the geographic expanse of the Chinese empire makes even simple rules problematic at some point. Let me provide some examples that demonstrate this point.

One simple and direct observation is that civil officials wore birds, and military officials,

animals. While that is generally true, as most “rules” are, there is an important exception. The censors were a select group of generally junior officials who served to investigate the Chinese bureaucracy itself. Through their own bureaucratic hierarchy, they reported directly to the emperor. They were authorized to send memorials directly to the emperor when they needed to impeach an inefficient or corrupt official. Their special emblem was an animal called a *xiezhi*, a mythical animal that reputedly could immediately discern truth from falsehood. When it detected a lie, it gored the liar with its single horn. As such, it was a fitting symbol for the men investigating wrongdoing. But the important point here is that a group of civil officials wore an animal rather than a bird as their rank symbol, undermining the general principle of birds for civil and animals for military officials.

Another convention is that civil and military officials wore square badges and the imperial family wore circular badges. This was true until the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, when the Guangxu emperor was being held under house arrest by the dowager empress Cixi (see appendix K). In the absence of a strong imperial figure to enforce dress codes, civil officials gradually modified the shapes of their badges into circles. The result was a large number of civil officials’ badges in a circular shape from this period.

It is generally true that birds were depicted in a stylized way that conflicted with their actual appearance. In particular, birds with webbed feet were typically shown with clawed feet. However, there are a limited number of examples, which will be pointed out as they are encountered later,

where aquatic birds are rendered with at least one webbed foot. So even when one examines relatively minute details about the rank birds and animals, specific, unvarying rules are nearly impossible to find.

In addition to the influences of time and geography, there is another issue that complicates any effort to elucidate why rank symbols look the way they do. Occasionally, an official modified his symbol so that it might be mistaken for one of a higher rank. This usually involved changing the color of the bird or animal or adding or subtracting a distinguishing characteristic. Later, we will encounter a white goose with a red mark above its bill—an obvious attempt to make the usually brown or yellow goose appear to be a crane. In another example, what would normally have been a two-tailed paradise flycatcher of the ninth rank is shown with five tail feathers, making it resemble a silver pheasant of the fifth rank. Other alterations include modifying the shape of the bird's head or changing the head feathers. While these unauthorized modifications can cause some temporary confusion, a solid grounding in the typical characteristics of each bird will allow the astute observer to identify the subterfuge. See the author's note at the end of the chapter for a further discussion of why a bird's normal characteristics were altered to flout convention.

Notwithstanding the exceptions one finds to nearly every rule, having a basic understanding of the general nature of the appearance of the various rank birds and animals is helpful. When differentiating among the birds, one needs to pay attention to the shape of the head, neck, and tail feathers. Color can sometimes be used to assist in the identification of the birds, but this cue is absent when the design is executed in metallic thread or monochrome brocade, or the color is modified to appear to be that of a higher rank, like the aforementioned white-bodied goose. The size or configuration of the bird's body or wings are not important, nor in most cases are the feet, which are generally shown as clawed.

The civil service ranks were organized into eighteen categories, that is, nine ranks, each

distinguished by an upper- and a lower-level designation. When encountering them in written literature, ranks are often defined by a number and letter. The number refers to the rank, and the letter refers to the level within that rank. A ninth-level official of the upper level is labeled 9a; 4b refers to a fourth rank official of the lower level. Officials of the same rank wore the same badge even though their levels might have differed.

The crane was the symbol of the highest civil rank. It is typically shown as a white bird with a smooth head with a red cap, although in metallic or monochrome badges, the head cap appears only in outline. The neck is smooth. There are usually five spade-shaped tail feathers, frequently black or gray. The tips of the tail feathers normally do not touch.

Figure 2.1 depicts a crane from the Reform Period of 1898. The smooth head with red cap, white body, and separated tail feathers are all typical of this bird. Figure 2.2 depicts a crane with a typical head and neck yet also with a wedge-shaped tail feather variation more commonly seen in mandarin ducks or wild geese. Of note are the clouds with the white center and the gold scrollwork in the background. This combination is normally found in badges from the early Daoguang emperor's reign (1821-50).



Figure 2.1 Crane of a first-rank civil official, Reform Period of 1898, Guangxu Period (1875-1908). Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.2 Crane of a first-rank civil official, Daoguang emperor (1821–50). Embroidered silk. Photo by Derik Lin, provided by Chris Hall.



Figure 2.3 Crane of a first-rank civil official, mid-Daoguang Period (1821–50). Embroidered silk embellished with seed pearls. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Detail of fig. 2.3 showing the seed pearls on the crane's wing.

Figure 2.3 is another example of a crane shown with its normal, white color. The chunky appearance of the background elements is typical of the late Daoguang period. The detail image reveals the seed pearls incorporated into this badge. Although the court dress regulations forbade extravagance in rank badges, occasionally gold-wrapped thread, seed pearls, or thread made of filaments from peacock tail feathers were included.

The badges in figures 2.1 through 2.3 were designed for officials. The crane in figure 2.4 was made for an official's wife. The position of the sun disk indicates the gender of the wearer, a discussion of which appears in the chapter on iconography. For such monochrome badges as in figure 2.4, birds have to be recognizable without a color cue. Clues include the characteristic head shape, smooth neck, and distinctive tail feathers. The diagonal lines indicating deep water at the bottom of the badge date this badge to about 1850.

The golden pheasant represented a second-level official. The distinguishing characteristics are a crested head (pointed in the back), a highly colorful body, and two long sword-shaped tail feathers normally marked with pairs of black bands. Some golden pheasants also have black bands on their necks.



Figure 2.4 Crane of a first rank civil official's wife, Taiping Rebellion Period (1851–64). Monochrome brocade. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.5 Golden pheasant of a second-rank civil official, early Daoguang Period (1821-50). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.6 Golden pheasant of a second-rank civil official, late Daoguang Period (1821-50). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.7 Golden pheasant of a second-rank civil official's wife, Xianfeng/Tongzhi Period (1851-61/1862-74). Woven silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.

The birds in figures 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7 have all of the distinguishing characteristics associated with the golden pheasant. The badge in figure 2.5 shows the same golden scrollwork as in figure 2.2 and was made about the same time. The bird in figure 2.6 is set in water displaying Buddhist symbols, indicating that it was made toward the end of the Daoguang emperor's reign. Figure 2.7 is unusual in that the absence of the rock suggests the bird is in flight. A bird in flight is generally associated with the Reform Period of 1898 (see appendix K). The more ornate bird in figure 2.8 has a properly shaped head and bands on its tail feathers, but is missing neck bands, presumably to avoid detracting from the golden sparkle of its body. This badge was made in the late 1800s, when ranks were sold to support the imperial government (see appendices I, M, N, and O). It was commissioned for a female, possibly the wife of a rich merchant, in which case, she would likely have been more interested in the bird's general appearance than in specific design details. Moreover, it is an example of a metallic thread badge in which color is introduced by the couching loops that held the metallic thread to the background silk.



Figure 2.8 Golden pheasant of the second civil rank, probably for a merchant's wife, Xianfeng/Tongzhi Period (1851-61/1862-74). Gold metallic thread colored by silk couching loops. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.9 Peacock of third-rank civil official, Xianfeng Period (1851–61). Woven silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.10 Peacock of a third-rank civil official, Reform Period of 1898, Guangxu Period (1875–1908). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.11 Peacock of a third-rank civil official's wife, Yongzheng Period (1723–35). Gold metallic thread with color from silk couching thread. Photo provided by David Hugus.

The bird of the third civil level was the peacock. This is one of the easier birds to identify since its tail feathers all contain the distinguishing “eye” associated with the actual bird. The head can be either round or crested with no, one, or two head feathers. Figure 2.9 illustrates the smooth-headed peacock. Figure 2.10 shows the peacock with a smooth head and a single head feather. Figure 2.11 adds a second head feather, and figure 2.12 shows a crested head with a single head feather. But all of the birds show the unmistakable tail feathers with the distinguishing eyes. The badge in figure 2.9 was constructed about 1850. Figure 2.10 shows a bird from the Reform Period of 1898. Figure 2.11 was produced early in the Yongzheng emperor’s reign (1723–35), and figure 2.12 depicts a badge in the process of transformation from a square to circular format, dating it to about 1900. Taken together, these badges underscore the longevity of the tail-feather motif in representations of peacocks.



Figure 2.12 Peacock of a third-rank civil official's wife, probably after 1900, Guangxu Period (1875–1908). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.13 Wild goose of a fourth-rank civil official, Daoguang Period (1821-30). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by Jon Eric Riis.



Figure 2.14 Wild goose of a fourth-rank civil official, Qianlong Period (1736-95). Woven silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.



Figure 2.15 Wild goose of a fourth-rank civil official, Xianfeng Period (1851-61). Embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.

The emblem of the fourth civil rank was the bird variously called the wild goose or the cloud goose. It was normally depicted as either a yellow or a brown bird with a smooth head and neck and a wedge-shaped tail. No space appears between its tail feathers. Other prevalent features include semicircular or commalike markings on its neck and body to denote feathers. Figures 2.13 through 2.16 share these characteristics, even the bird made of gold-covered thread in figure 2.16. The earliest badge in this group is in figure 2.14. It was produced in the mid-1700s during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-95). Figure 2.16 is the latest badge, which, like the bird in figure 2.10, was produced during the Reform Period of 1898. The badge in figure 2.15 was made about 1850, as indicated by the deep water design at the bottom of the badge. These badges exemplify the relative stability of the goose image over most of the Qing dynasty.



Figure 2.16 Wild goose of a fourth-rank civil official, Reform Period of 1898, Guangxu Period (1875-1908). Metallic thread and embroidered silk. Photo provided by David Hugus.