

# The Evolution of the Symbolic Meaning of Pigeon Image from Pre-Qin to Han Dynasty—Take the Pigeon-ended Sticks Unearthed from Tombs as Examples

Yuwei Zhu<sup>1,\*</sup>, Jing Zhang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Archaeology, College of Culture and History, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730000, Gansu, China

<sup>2</sup>No.3 Middle School of Huating, Gansu Province, Huating 744100, Gansu, China

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** From the Pre-Qin to Han Dynasty, the symbolic meaning of pigeon image tended to be fixed from diversity. The evolution process can be confirmed by the various images of the pigeon-ended sticks unearthed from the tombs. The images of the pigeon-ended sticks unearthed in the Pre-Qin period are diverse and the decorations are complex in China, and all kinds of decorations are mostly related to the primitive worship, which indicate that the pigeon images should be more associated with tribes and primitive religions in the Pre-Qin period. However, during the Han Dynasty, the pigeon-ended sticks unearthed in China are simple in appearance, without too many complex decorations, which shows that the symbolic meaning of the pigeon images tend to be single in the Han Dynasty. The pigeon becomes symbolic of identity of the elderly, and respect for the elderly. Based on the pigeon-ended sticks unearthed the tombs in China from the Pre-Qin to Han Dynasty, this paper discusses the different symbolic meanings of pigeon images, and summarizes the evolution of pigeon meaning .

**Keywords:** Pre-Qin to Han Dynasty; the pigeon-ended stick unearthed; the image of pigeon; the symbolic meaning of pigeon

## 1. Introduction

The pigeon is very similar to the dove, with a small head, big tail, and the chest is concave, and it is painted and carved on various utensils after the embellishment. The artificially embellished pigeon is called "image of the pigeon". Since the Pre-Qin Dynasty, people have made all kinds of utensils based on the prototype of the pigeon, among which, the most typical and practical utensil is the pigeon-ended stick. The shape of the pigeon-ended stick is changed significantly during the period from the Pre-Qin to the Han Dynasty, which was closely related to the evolution of the symbolic meaning of the pigeon. The meaning of the pigeon in the Pre-Qin period is diverse, but is mostly related to the worship and belief of the primitive tribes, symbolizing the totem, theocracy and representing religious leaders. In the Han Dynasty, the meaning of the pigeon becomes fixed and single, is a symbol of power and status for the elderly.

Most of the existing research results on the evolution of the symbolic meaning of the pigeon image are demonstrated and analyzed from history and literature perspective. Combined with archaeological documents, LiXiusong's *The Worship of the Sun in Southeast China in Ancient Times*[1]and Wangzheng's *The Birds of Guiding Human Souls*[2]and other achievements deduce the symbolic meanings of various pigeon images appearing in prehistoric civilization. Wang Zeqiang's *The Implication, Function and Evolution of the Image of Pigeon in the History of Chinese Culture*[3] combines with literature, historical documents and demonstrates the evolution process of the implied meaning of pigeon from the Pre-Qin period to the Wei and Jin Dynasties. These achievements are based on the unearthed individual typical pigeon-ended sticks in China as evidence. The results of the evolution of the pigeon images meaning from the Pre-Qin to the Han Dynasty are even less. Based on the cultural relics of pigeon-ended sticks unearthed from tombs in China from the Pre-Qin Dynasty to the Han Dynasty, this paper discusses the evolution process of symbolic meaning of the pigeon .

## 2. Discussion on symbolic Meaning and User Identity of the pigeon in the Pre-Qin Dynasty

According to various cultural relics, it can be found that in the Pre-Qin period the pigeon-ended stick was mostly used in special occasions or people with special identity, and the image of the pigeon represented more significance, most of which were related to primitive worship.

Firstly, the pigeon image is a primitive tribal totem. Li Xiusong has proved that the original meaning of Gao is pigeon in his article *A Study on the Migration of Xuyi*, and the totem of Xuren, descendant of BoYi, son of Gaotao of Shaohao Group, is pigeon.[4] The pigeon-ended sticks unearthed in Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas can be used to prove that pigeon is a tribal totem in ancient Wuyue area, such as, the bronze pigeon-ended stick unearthed in Zhongzhuang village, Lizhu Town, near Shizishan, Potang, Shaoxing (Fig.1,1)[5], the bronze unearthed at the top of Beishan in Dantu, Jiangsu (Fig.1, 2)[6], and the bronze pigeon-ended stick unearthed in Heduli Village, Wukang Town, Deqing, Zhejiang Province (Fig.1, 3)[7]. These sticks are similar in shape and unearthed in similar places. They belong to the same era, and can be determined as the same cultural artifacts. The head of the stick is a standing pigeon. The pigeon carves feather patterns all over its body, and the bottom of the stick is a terracotta figurine. The figurine is decorated with unique cloud patterns, geometric patterns, and cicada wing patterns and so on. The upsetting and round hole of the stick are decorated with complex cloud patterns, and deep-carved flat adder patterns. Various patterns of the overall decoration of the stick are the cultural symbols of primitive religious thought. As the head of the stick, the pigeon is decorated at the top of the stick with raised head and straight face, while the figurine is at the bottom of the stick in a kneeling posture. According to the position and posture of the pigeon and the sitting figurine, it is inferred that the pigeon image has lofty symbolic significance in the ancient Wu and Yue regions. Therefore, the pigeon is likely to be the totem of tribes in ancient Wu and Yue areas.

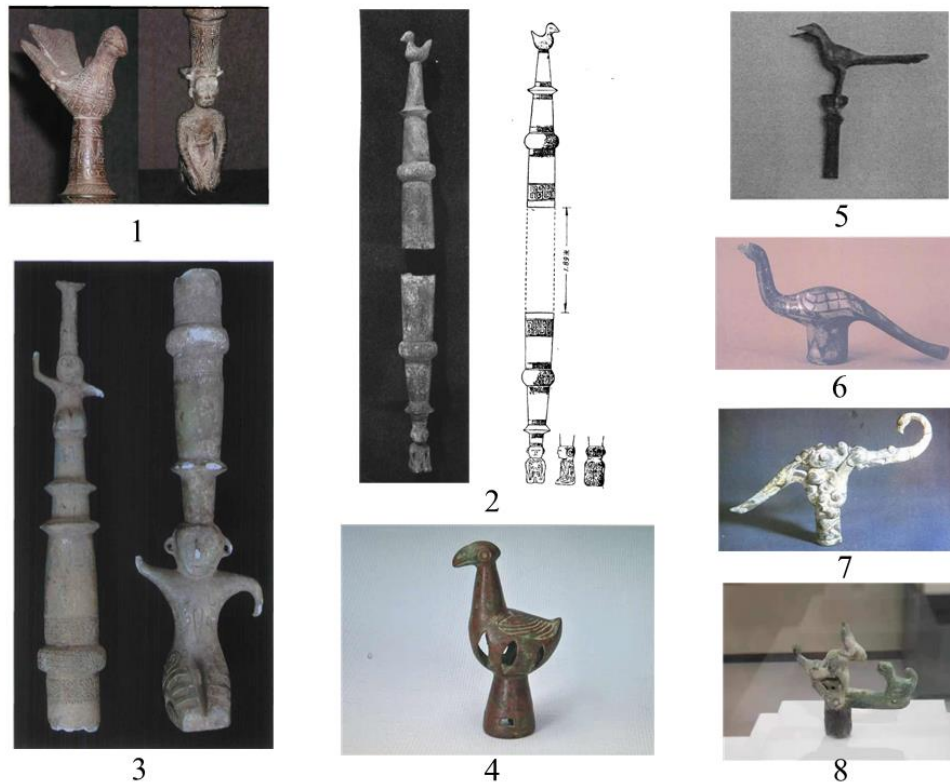
Secondly, the pigeon is a communication medium between human and Gods in primitive tribal religious activities. For example, the bronze pigeon-ended stick head unearthed from Dahua Zhongzhuang cemetery in Huangyuan, Qinghai Province (Fig.1,4)[8]. The pigeon's abdomen is hollow, with eight oval holes carved, and a stone ball is placed inside it to serve as a bell. This stick belongs to the artifacts of non Central Plains cultural area in the Pre-Qin period, may be used in primitive religious occasions. Wangzheng mentioned that the pigeon has the function of soul guiding in the article *Birds of guiding human souls*[9]. The pigeon unearthed in Huangyuan has a stone ball in its belly, which can make a sound. The residents of the primitive tribe communicated with the tribe and the gods, through the sound of oscillation of the pigeon and stone balls, so as to achieve the purpose of sublimation of the soul. It shows that the pigeon is the bridge between the tribe and the gods at this time.

Third, the pigeon represents theocracy and kingship. The bronze stick head of the double pigeons unearthed from Hongtupo of Xiangyun, Yunnan Province (Fig. 1, 5)[10]. The two pigeons stand on the pedestal side by side in a standing posture, with raised head, sharp beak, flat and long tail, slightly upturned, and smooth body without decoration. During this period, the number of bird-sticks is very large in Dianchi area. The pigeon-ended stick is only one of the power sticks used by kings, tribal chiefs, local bureaucrats, witches and so on. In The tombs of the bird-sticks heads unearthed, the types of burial objects are abundant and the tomb grade is high. However, a large number of small tombs are not only small in scale, but also few in unearthed artifacts. There is no phenomenon of stick as burial object. The tomb excavation showed that the users of the pigeon-ended sticks are big shots with a large fortune and high social status, so the pigeon is a symbol of theocracy and kingship.

Furthermore, the pigeon is the symbol of exalted status. The bronze pigeon-ended stick head of the Warring States Period ( Fig. 1, 6 ) [11] is collected in the Palace Museum. The pigeon is cast in bronze, and its wings and abdomen are decorated with gold and silver patches. And, the gold and silver pigeon-ended stick head unearthed in Qufu (called Lu in China history), Shandong Province (Fig.1,7) [12]. The pigeon stick head is a dragon beast with its bow and belly trimmed and its tail lying on the hole on axe (for installing a handle) with the bird head in its mouth. The overall image of the head is more similar to the pigeon, which is cast with complex cloud patterns and feather patterns, and is covered with gold and silver patches. The two pigeon-ended sticks are both artifacts in the Haidai region during the Warring States Period. In the Haidai region, where hierarchy prevails, the pigeon-ended stick with exquisite appearance can not be used by ordinary people, but nobles with higher status. Pigeon may be a symbol of identity in Haidai area during the Warring States Period.

Finally, the pigeon symbolizes love and family harmony. In the Pre-Qin period, people observed the natural characters of the pigeon in their laboring process, that is, loyalty to their partners and the habit of caring for children. So, literary works often praise perfect love and family harmony with the pigeon during this period. *The Book of Songs* cited the pigeon to praise family kinship and love. Bronze

pigeon-ended stick head unearthed in Huangyuan, Qinghai (Fig.1,8)[13], whose appearance is complex, and the hole of the stick is shaped like a pigeon head. A cow is cast on it, and a calf is under the belly of the cow. In front of the cow, a shepherd dog is against the cow, and the cow bows and shrugs its shoulders to protect the calf. The stick shows the love of licking by cow for its calf, which shows that the pigeon and the cow are the typical animals with the idea of kinship observed by people in this period, and it is used as a metaphor for the virtue of parents' hard work in raising children.



1. Bronze pigeon-ended stick unearthed in Zhongzhuang village, Lizhu Town, Shaoxing
2. Bronze pigeon-ended stick unearthed from the top of the north mountain of Dantu, Jiangsu Province;
3. Bronze pigeon-ended stick unearthed from heduli, Longshan Village, Wukang Town, Deqing, Zhejiang Province;
4. Bronze pigeon-ended stick head unearthed from Dahua Zhongzhuang cemetery in Huangyuan, Qinghai Province;
5. The bronze spear head of the Warring States period was collected in the Palace Museum
6. The head of a gold silver pigeon-ended stick was unearthed from the ancient city of Lu state in Qufu, Shandong Province;
8. Bronze pigeon-ended stick head unearthed in Huangyuan, Qinghai

*Figure 1*

On the whole, the shapes of the heads of the pigeon-ended sticks unearthed in the Pre-Qin period are complex and diverse, which shows that the symbolic meaning of the pigeon image is more diversified. The pigeon image is deified because of its user identity and different occasions, and the symbolic meaning is more inclined to theocracy, which has a strong deification significance. In the Pre-Qin Dynasty, the pigeon is not only the embodiment of the tribal totem, but also represents the identity of the tribal chief, wizard and the theocratic. Although pigeon image is different in different cultural regions, its symbolic meaning is the same in this period. In the Pre-Qin period, the meaning of the pigeon is mostly the worship of primitive tribes ancestors to the nature, resulting in pigeon character in shaping and decoration, is full of color of theocracy.

### 3. The Symbolic of Pigeon Meaning and User Identity in Han Dynasty

At the beginning of the Han Dynasty, the rulers govern the country with the traditional culture of filial piety. As a result, the pigeon-ended stick is a symbol of the privileged status for the elderly, and the symbolic meaning of the pigeon image tends to be fixed. The pigeon image which is created in the

Han Dynasty also evolved from the theocratic image of the Pre-Qin period to the real and simple image. According to the condition of pigeon-ended sticks unearthed from the tombs, it can be found that the pigeon-ended stick in the Han Dynasty is generally the result of observing the biological characteristics of pigeon. At present, there are a large number of pigeon-ended sticks unearthed in the Han Dynasty, and the characters of these pigeon-ended sticks are distinct. Even though the users are fixed in the Han Dynasty, the social status of the users are not the same. So we can conclude the more detailed meanings of the pigeon, it is closely related to the user identity in this period.

First of all, the pigeon is hard to parent their children. In the Han Dynasty, the pigeon is used to metaphor the virtue of hard parenting. A wooden pigeon-ended stick head with exquisite appearance is unearthed from the tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Mojuzi, Wuwei, Gansu province(Fig.2,1)[14]. The pigeon is painted all over the body, decorated the details with red and black lines, and the mouth contained round food grains. Another example is the wooden pigeon-ended stick head unearthed from Haiqu Tomb in Rizhao, Shandong Province, which is painted all over the body, with the mouth contained stems fruits(Fig. 2,2)[15]. The kind of pigeon-ended stick focuses on showing the form of feeding, and the habit of raising children. The elderly who used it may have virtues of above, so it is given the stick like this as a reward.

Secondly, the symbolic meaning of the pigeon is continued in the pre-Qin period, and its implication of piety and kindness between father and son are extended. The users of the pigeon-end sticks are awarded mostly because of family harmony. For example, the head of the pigeon-ended stick is collected in the Museum of Henan Province (Figs.2and3). A big pigeon is cast on its head. There are two small pigeons in the chest, the big and the two young pigeons are feeding mouth-to-mouth, which is a metaphor of the kindness of feeding.

Again, the pigeon symbolizes power and status. For example, the head of the pigeon-ended stick unearthed from Mancheng Han tomb in Hebei Province(Fig. 2, 4) [16]and the head of the pigeon-ended stick collected in Dingzhou Cultural Administration, Hebei Province (Fig. 2, 5). These two cultural relics are the same era, with the same cultural features, and their user identities may be similar. The owner of Mancheng tomb in Hebei is Liu Sheng --- Prince of the Han Dynasty[17]. Meanwhile, it can be inferred that the user of the pigeon-ended stick unearthed in Dingzhou, Hebei Province is special. All above indicate , the pigeon is also a symbol of the status and power for the elderly in the Han Dynasty.



1. The head of pigeon-ended stick is unearthed from the Eastern Han Tomb of Mojuizi in Wuwei, Gansu Province;
2. Wooden head of pigeon-ended stick unearthed from Haiqu tomb in Rizhao, Shandong Province;
3. The head of pigeon-ended stick collected in Henan Provincial Museum
4. The head of pigeon-ended stick unearthed from Mancheng Han tomb in Hebei Province;
5. The head of pigeon-ended stick in Dingzhou City, Hebei Province

Figure 2

In conclusion, during the Han Dynasty, the use of the pigeon-ended stick is fixed gradually, the decoration of the pigeon is also simplified correspondingly, from the complex various decorations into simple feathers, the pigeon image no longer mythological meaning, more close to its natural attributes. Pigeon is a symbol of family harmony and parents' hard parenting, which extends to the symbol of the elderly identity. In the Han Dynasty, the sticks cast with the prototype of pigeons are used to reward the elderly for their hard work in raising children and to safeguard the rights of the elderly with a series of policies.

#### 4. Conclusion

Generally, the symbolic meaning of pigeon image is successive. The image of pigeon appeared in the Pre-Qin Dynasty, and in the Han Dynasty, it inherited part of symbolic meanings of the pigeon image. The first meaning is family harmony. With the development of policy of respecting the old in the Han Dynasty, it is evolved the meaning of respecting the aged; In addition, the pigeon image in the Han Dynasty inherits the meaning of noble status of the Pre-Qin. However, the pigeon is fixed as a symbol of the old in the Han Dynasty. Therefore, the pigeon is a symbol of some old people with power and status, which can be said to continue the symbolic meaning of power and status in Pre-Qin Dynasty.

The symbolic meaning of the pigeon image has changed from the Pre-Qin Dynasty to the Han Dynasty, which can be seen from the evolution of the appearance of the pigeon-ended stick in this period unearthed in China. From the complex and deified ornamentation in the Pre-Qin period to the simple ornamentation and close to the true appearance of the pigeon in the Han Dynasty, the change reflects the evolution of the symbolic meaning of the pigeon, which is directly related to the observation of the living habits of pigeon. From the Pre-Qin to the Han Dynasty, the thought of primitive religion and the worship of religious authority began to weaken without primitive tribes lifestyle. At the same time, the change is closely related to the respecting and revering the old. *Book of Han(Han Shu)* records that the people over the age of fifty, who is cultured, can lead others towards kindness, let him be the SanLao, and manage a township. Choose one of three SanLao as a county governor who called SanLao of county chief, office with the county governor and minister, reward wine and meat to them in October. *Book of the later Han* records that in the Mid-Autumn, the county road is the masses of the people, especially the old over seventy, given a pigeon-ended stick, and given a variety of food. Old people over eighty or ninety given more rewards, the nine-feet-long pigeon-ended stick and the stick top is decorated with a pigeon. The policy of respecting the elderly in the Han Dynasty and the emperor-stick-system give pigeon practical significance, make it be a symbol of the identity of the elderly, and abandon the meaning of the religious authority.

From full of primitive social atmosphere to the natural objects, the use of pigeon-ended stick affects the evolution of the pigeon image. The evolution of pigeon-ended sticks unearthed from the tombs of the pre-Qin and Han dynasty, the evolution of the pigeon's symbolic meaning can be inferred. In the Han Dynasty, the custom of pigeon worship is the most popular in terms of scale, content and implementation, which is used to cooperate with the policy of respecting the elderly and protect the rights of the elderly. The Chinese tradition of respecting and protecting the elderly is still succession. The essence of the pigeon-culture still has its realistic significance.

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