



# A Study on the Image of the Shared-Life Bird in Tang Dynasty

Ziyi Wang, Weiran Wang, Shuhua Chen, Yimo Zheng

Hebei University of Science and Technology, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, China

**Abstract:** This paper examines the image of the shared-life bird in the Tang Dynasty, categorizing it into two paradigms: the double-headed bird body (including its subtypes) and the double-headed human body. It analyzes the stylistic characteristics and evolution of each paradigm, exploring changes in body posture, wing structure, human head form, and contextual composition. The study reveals the transformation process from avian form to humanoid form and musical stylization, as well as the relationship between these images and other divine bird motifs.

**Keywords:** shared-life bird, Tang Dynasty, fresco

## 1. Introduction

The shared-life bird, a translation of the Sanskrit “Jivam-jivaka” (also rendered as “life bird”), is a divine creature in Buddhist stories from the Western Regions, typically depicted with two heads and a human face, symbolizing the recognition and sharing of different lives[1]. Originating in India, Nepal, and other places, the Gongming Bird’s artistic depictions have been widely seen in temple architecture, statues, murals, silk paintings, and other works across various regions since the Tang Dynasty, with the spread and prosperity of Buddhism in China[2]. Its image originates from Buddhist scriptures, is deeply rooted in Buddhist art, and has undergone continuous evolution.

## 2. The Paradigm of Bird Body and Double Head

### 2.1 Bird body and two heads

In the Northern Dynasty bird-and-tornado grass embroidery unearthed from the Astana cemetery, the core feature of the bird motif is its large, outstretched wings, which dominate the visual field and emphasize an upward momentum, with an overall tendency toward a realistic expression of power. In contrast, the red-ground bird-and-tornado grass embroidery from the same site, dated to the late sixth century AD, exhibits a more flattened and curvilinear formal language. It features two dragons symmetrically embroidered on either side of a shared bird, with the dragon heads facing the bird heads. The wings and legs of the dragons and birds are outlined with simple curves, and the figures are surrounded by scroll patterns, sequins, and scattered dots.

The top of the embroidery features five inverted mountain peaks, creating a dynamic scene filled with plants, birds, and sacred mountains. In terms of formal language, this embroidery marks a shift towards the dynamic decorative style of the early Tang Dynasty.

### 2.2 Bird body and human head

The bird-bodied figure with two human heads paradigm is based on a bird’s body, replacing its original double bird heads with human ones. Based on the structural logic of “one body with two heads, sharing a single life and being inseparable,” what changes have occurred in the shared-life bird imagery paradigm?

The shared-life bird on the 8th-century statue niche of Baoqing Temple in Xi’an has two side-by-side heads, a puffed chest, and symmetrically M-shaped spread wings. Its round belly is decorated with scrolling grass patterns, and it stands on a lotus pedestal, flanked by a crane-riding celestial being and cloud motifs, conveying a dignified and divine presence[3]. The upright red phoenixes in Tang Dynasty tomb frescoes—from Shi Suoyan’s to Yang Xuanlue’s tomb—all stand frontally with outstretched wings, round bellies, and plump feathers. The body posture, wing design, lotus pedestal, and cloud pattern of the shared-life bird are derived from the positive form of the Vermilion Bird, with local modifications such as double human heads, gu-shaped pillars, and sacrificing immortals, retaining its core formal language.

In the upright, wings-spread paradigm of the shared-life bird, a variant with clasped hands emerged. A late 8th-century wooden lacquer statue in the Wangye Museum, Shenzhen, stands on a square base with a lotus pattern. With hands clasped, it features partially spread M-shaped wings. The human body is the main focus, with wings as a secondary element, scaled down in proportion. The shoulder drapery, inspired by Tang dynasty flying celestial beings, resembles those in the Mogao

Caves, Baoqing Temple, and the Xiangfen Jialing Pingdaga pottery sculptures, all of which wrap around the human form.

Not all statues in the evolutionary sequence of the shared-life bird's hand-offering posture adhere to the Baoqing Temple upright statue paradigm. The 8th-century gilded statue unearthed in 1955 from Huiche Garden Reservoir in Xixia contrasts sharply with the upright style with clasped hands and spread wings.

Particularly distinctive is the depiction of two figures—one joyful, one sorrowful—paired with asymmetrical wings, corroborating the textual narrative of “two heads sharing a body but having different thoughts.” It retains the core motif while showcasing unique dynamics and perspective. The wing structure derives from the “longevity bird” in the Western Wei Mogao Caves, inheriting its S-shaped posture and integrated wings-and-tail style. Paradigmatic innovation is achieved through staggered arrangement, differentiated wings, and facial expression.

The gilded Garuda bird statue unearthed in Xishan County, with its long tail feathers, inspired the stylistic paradigm of the Mogao Caves' Tang Dynasty murals. In Cave 220's Amitabha Sutra variation, the Garuda stands at the center of the Seven Treasure Pool platform, flanked by symmetrically arranged peacocks and cranes. The shared-life bird in Cave 172 of the Mogao Grottoes, also centered on a platform, is surrounded by parrots, white cranes, kalaviṅkas, and peacocks. Its image resembles the jiyue tian in the same cave, suggesting a transformation of a human-shaped jiyue figure playing the pipa.



Figure 1. The shared-life bird in Cave 25 of Yulin

In Cave 25 of the Yulin Grottoes, a Gongming Bird holds a one-stringed, phoenix-headed qin, with a human head on one side and a bird head on the other, possibly reflecting scriptural interpretations. Both Buddhist scriptures and research indicate that the Gongming Bird and kalaviṅka share similar functions, often appearing in pairs to spread Buddhist teachings through their melodious sounds. They look alike, and the Gongming Bird can be seen as a double-headed kalaviṅka.

### 3. Paradigm of human body with two heads

The clay shared-life bird unearthed from a Buddhist site in Khotan, Xinjiang, dates to the 7th century. Its design features significantly enlarged double human heads and a proportionally smaller bird body, integrating human torso traits for an avian-human fusion.

The statue is hermaphroditic: the female face has a high bun, a straight line from forehead to nose, and large eyes; the male face has a high nose and a slight mustache. From the side, the statue's hands are placed around its neck, and the arrangement of its head is very similar to that of co-living birds found elsewhere:

The male figure stands in front, with his head tilted to the left and facing to the right;

The female face is positioned at the back, with the head tilted slightly to the right and facing forward.

This arrangement breaks the symmetry of the bird's body. The male torso is positioned at the back, with legs extending from the base of the wings, and the knee structure is clearly visible, exhibiting human characteristics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Since the Tang Dynasty, the shared-life bird imagery has evolved through the collision and integration of foreign styles with traditional Chinese elements, enriching its formal language and expressive dimensions. Rooted in indigenous traditions of auspicious beasts and mythical birds, craftsmen and artists actively selected, integrated, and reworked foreign elements, gradually transforming them into a localized artistic language. Their referencing involved transformation and reconstruction with local traditions, demonstrating the interactive coexistence of Chinese and foreign art.

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#### **Author Bio**

Ziyi Wang (born Feb 2002), female; Han Chinese; hometown: Baoding, Hebei; educational level: master's degree; title: no title; research direction: art history and theoretical research.

Weiran Wang (born Feb 2001), female; Han Chinese; hometown: Zaozhuang, Shandong; education level: master's degree; title: no title; research direction: art history and theoretical research.

Shuhua Chen (born Oct 2001), female; Han Chinese; hometown: Baoding, Hebei; education level: master's degree; title: no title; research direction: art history and theoretical research.

Yimo Zheng (born Oct 1972), female; Han Chinese; hometown: Shijiazhuang, Hebei; educational level: doctoral candidate; title: professor; research direction: art archaeology.