

# The Meaning of Birds on *Hunping* (Spirit Jars): The Religious Imagination of Second to Fourth Century Jiangnan

Keith Nathaniel KNAPP\*

## Abstract

More than 200 heavily decorated jars with five mouths, which are commonly known as *hunping* and date from the second to the early fourth centuries, have been excavated from tombs in Jiangnan. Remarkably, each of these vessels is unique in appearance. One of their most notable features is that they are adorned with figures of many animals. Of these, the most numerous are birds. This paper endeavours to discover why artisans put so many birds on these vessels. Although many analysts believe the birds are the souls of the departed flying to the heavens, that does not explain why there are so many. This paper contends that the answer lies in local Jiangnan legends and beliefs, in which sparrows stole rice from Heaven and introduced its cultivation to humans. Birds thereby were seen as grain and fertility gods and thus emblems of good fortune for both the dead and the living.

**Keywords:** *hunping* (spirit jars), *wulianguan* (five-linked jars), bird-fields, grain-gods, Mt. Kunlun

## Pomen ptic na posodi *hunping*: religiozna imaginacija v Jiangnanu med 2. in 4. stoletjem

### Izvleček

V grobnicah iz območja Jiangnan je bilo izkopanih več kot 200 intenzivno okrašenih posod – vrčev s petimi odprtlinami iz obdobja med 2. in zgodnjim 4. stoletjem, ki so običajno poimenovani z izrazom *hunping*. Izpostaviti velja dejstvo, da je zunanja oblika vsakega od teh vrčev unikatna. Za vse pa je značilno, da vsebujejo podobe mnogih živali. Pri tem so najštevilnejše podobe ptic. Pričujoči članek se ukvarja z vprašanjem o tem, zakaj so avtorji teh podob na vrčih upodobili toliko ptic. Četudi mnogi analitiki menijo, da so ptice simbol duše, ki po smrti poleti v nebo, pa to še vedno ne odgovori na vprašanje, zakaj jih je tako veliko. Članek izhaja iz predpostavke, da je to morda povezano z lokalnimi legendami iz območja Jiangnan in verovanji, ki govore o tem, da naj bi

\* Keith Nathaniel KNAPP, Professor,  
The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, USA.  
Email address: knappk[at]citadel.edu.



vrabci Nebu ukradli riž in ga podarili ljudem, da so ga ti lahko začeli pridelovati. Zato so bile ptice dojete kot božanstva zrnja in plodnosti, ki prinašajo srečo in blagostanje tako živim kot mrtvim.

**Ključne besede:** *hunping* (posoda duše), *wulianguan* (vrči s petimi odprtini), ptice-polja, božanstva zrnja, gora Kunlun

One of the most captivating and fascinating artefacts found in China has to be what are commonly called *hunping* 魂瓶 (spirit jars). *Hunping* are pottery jars that have five mouths, with four smaller ones surrounding a larger central one. What makes these jars particularly distinctive is that their sides and tops abound with ceramic figurines of animals, people, and architectural structures. Making them even more remarkable is the fact that more than 200 have been excavated, and no two have been found exactly alike.<sup>1</sup> They have no practical use and were made strictly as a grave good (Abe 2002, 60). They were only manufactured for two hundred years, from the later part of the Eastern Han (25–220 CE) until the end of the Western Jin (265–317). Furthermore, one finds them solely in the Jiangnan area of southern China, most particularly in the modern provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu. In addition to their physical distinctiveness, the jars are mysterious because it seems no contemporary text identifies them or explains their function. We only know about them through archaeology. Indeed, since there is no contemporary written description of these vessels, we do not even know their proper name. The multiple terms now used for this type of vessel reflect scholars' assumptions about their use or are descriptive in nature: *wulianguan* 五聯罐 (five-linked jar), *duisuguan* 堆塑罐 (figured-jar), *gucangguan* 穀倉罐 (granary jar), and *hunping* (spirit or soul jar). Japanese scholars usually label them *shiniteiko* 神亭壺 "spirit pavilion jar." Albert Dien contends that, when they first emerged in the Eastern Han, these types of jars were called *ling* 靈 "numinous" or "spiritually" efficacious."<sup>2</sup> For simplicity's sake, I will refer to these jars by their most commonly used name of *hunping*.

## Purpose of *Hunping*

As some of these terms indicate, a majority of scholars believe that these vessels were literally abodes for the spirits of the dead that were entrapped within the tomb. It

1 For a relatively complete listing of extant spirit jars, see Kaneko (2008, 34–42).

2 One vessel with an inscription has an indistinct character that a Chinese archaeologist has identified as *ling*. Another jar's inscription clearly uses the word *ling*, which leads Dien to this conclusion (see Dien 2001, 510, 519–20). This does not seem to be enough evidence, though, that these vessels were called *ling*.

is well-known that pre-modern Chinese believed that microcosms of whole worlds could be found or conjured in small, enclosed places or things.<sup>3</sup> Hence, one can easily believe that the souls of the dead were meant to take up residence in these containers that magically reproduced an ideal world stretching from Heaven to Earth. Kominami Ichirō has argued that the five jars on top of the vessel's base represent the Five Sacred Mountains (*wuyue* 五嶽), with the middle, larger jar being Mt. Kunlun 崑崙山, which is the centre of the world. The jar thus facilitates the *hun*'s 魂 (cloudy soul) ascension to *tian* 天 (Heaven). (Kominami 1993, 229–30) Tao Siyan believes that the jars represent the five islands of immortality that are described in the *Liezi* 列子 (Tao 1993, 26–29). *Hunping* have three levels, with the bottom one, the main body of the jar, corresponding to the earth. Artisans frequently decorated the main body of the jars with images of reptiles, sea creatures, and fish—sometimes their heads are protruding from holes in the sides of the jar (Fig. 1). This leads a number of researchers to believe that the main body of the jar represents the Yellow Springs (*Huangquan* 黃泉), where the *po* 魄 (earthly) soul of the dead would reside.<sup>4</sup> The *hunping*'s middle section corresponds to the human realm that has four pillars that connect it to the Heavens, which is where the birds are flying to (Tong 2003, 32–33). According to Kominami, the human figures on the vessel are conducting a funeral that welcomes the dead spirit to Heaven (Kominami 1989, 179–81). Due to the many images of Buddha that grace the upper third of the jar, other specialists believe that the top section of the vessels represents a Buddhist paradise. Li Gang argues that the central jar represents a stupa, while the four other smaller jars represent the Four Directions (Li 1991, 79–80). As the constructed name *gucangguan* indicates, other scholars believe these jars were in fact granaries that would forever nourish the souls of the departed.<sup>5</sup> Some researchers believe that the animals, humans, and buildings on top of the spirit jars depict manors and activities associated with them (Tong 2004, 137–43; Dien 2001, 522–23). Other analysts think the vessels are connected with the product of unconventional “burials of summoned souls” (*zhaohun zang* 招魂葬), which were rituals conducted to settle the souls of the departed whose bodies could not be

3 For a detailed exploration of this idea, see Stein (1987, 49–113).

4 For example, see Xun and Zhu (2010, 87–88).

5 Dien provides five reasons why it makes sense to view these vessels as granaries meant to feed the dead: 1) The five-linked jars in Guangzhou, which perhaps inspired the *hunping*, had remnants of possible fruit offerings. 2) Carbonised rice grains were found in a Three Kingdoms *hunping* found in Fujian, 3) one Wu period *hunping* from Shaoxing has the words “Flying deer and five sorts” (*fei lu wu zhong* 飛鹿五種) painted on it. The “five sorts” might mean the five types of grain, bags of which were sometimes placed in tombs to feed the dead. 4) A spirit jar from Jiangning, Jiangsu, dated to 280, has under its roof-shaped lid, a model of a lower and upper millstones. 5) There is no other way to explain the large number of birds and rats on the vessels (see Dien 2001, 521–22). Abe notes that another Jiangning tomb, dated to 272 to 274, contained grain (see Abe 2002, 78). It should be noted, though, that there are extremely few examples of spirit jars that contain anything.

recovered (Ho 1961, 32–33; Wu 1986, 287–90).<sup>6</sup> In other words, these jars were used to house the souls of missing northern Chinese whose bodies could not be retrieved. In stark contrast, Stanley Abe does not think the *hunping* were meant to house the *hun*; instead, they were funerary objects that were primarily meant to benefit the living rather than the dead (Abe 2002, 92–93).



Figure 1: Wu state celadon *hunping* excavated in Ningbo. Stored at the Ningbo Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).



Figure 2: Eastern Han “five-linked jar.” Stored at the Ningbo Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).

No matter what their function, one of the most remarkable aspects of these jars is the large number of animals used to decorate each jar. Students of the *hunping* often

6 However, the spirit jars do not appear in the tombs of northern emigres, but that of local magnates. Stan Abe points out that, in an Eastern Jin court debate over these burials, the soul is supposed to be called back to a “spirit seat” (*lingzuo* 靈座) or a *hun*-soul hall (*hunping* 魂堂). He believes these are the names that *hunping* were called (see Abe 2002, 90). We can neither be sure that these references refer to *hunping*, which were no longer produced in the Eastern Jin, nor that this is what southerners in the Eastern Han, Wu, and Western Jin called them.

remark on this fact, but pay only cursory attention to them. The function of the jars and the presence of images of Buddha have attracted much more concern. But why did the makers of these vessels want animals on these jars? And why these particular animals? Did the presence of animals on these vessels change over time? Depictions of animals are much more prominent on Eastern Han and Wu state (220–280) *hunping*, and much less common on Western Jin jars. In this paper, I will briefly discuss the types of animals that appeared on *hunping*, the location of the animals on the jars, and their gradual disappearance. Since birds are the most numerous animals on the jars and are continuously present on them, they will be my primary focus. Even though most scholars believe the birds on spirit jars represent the *hun*-soul of the deceased, it is much more likely that they depict the local Jiangnan belief that birds are responsible for rice farming; hence, their presence is meant to bring good luck to both the living and the dead. In other words, the jars manifest Jiangnan local religious beliefs, in which birds were particularly significant.

### Development and Location of the *Hunping*

Before beginning our discussion on animals, we need to talk about the history of these jars in terms of time, place, and development. Pottery vessels with a central mouth surrounded by four other jars began to appear in the second century CE. Scholars usually label these pitchers as *wulianguan* “five-linked jars.” The earliest ones, which probably appeared during the first hundred years of the Eastern Han, were not decorated (Fig. 2) (see Tong 2004, 55–56; Kominami 1993, 235). Undecorated *wulianguan* continued to be produced into the Wu state period (Fig. 3). By the mid-Eastern Han, however, small sculptures of reptiles, birds, and bears appear on the shoulder of the main pot (Fig. 4). Artisans began adding human figurines at the end of the Eastern Han (Figs. 5 and 6). Kominami notes that the earliest *wulianguan* were gourd-shaped (ibid., 229–30). In the mid-third century, artisans started fashioning these jars in a different way: on top of the main jar they put a horizontal platform, which allowed them to add more figures and even architectural elements (Figs. 7 and 8). Tong Tao points out that, 1) this innovation made it so that the viewer would no longer view the vessel as a whole, but gaze at its distinct sections; 2) since the middle jar mouth was no longer open, each of the jar mouths could be transformed into buildings (Tong 2004, 57). For Tong this is the point where the *wulianguan* becomes a *hunping*. Tong points out that the majority of *wulianguan* and *hunping* were made in the vicinity of present-day Shaoxing, Zhejiang, and were Yue-ware (Yueyao 越窯). A smaller number of these vessels were created near Nanjing and only began appearing in the mid-third century. Their design was heavily influenced by Shaoxing pots.



Figure 3: Wu state “five-linked jar” from the fertilizer factory site in Gaochun County, Jiangsu. Stored at the Zhenjiang Museum (Photo by Author).



Figure 4: Eastern Han “five-linked jar” with animals. Stored at the Shanghai Museum (Photo by Author).

Other important aspects of the *hunping* are their dates and geographical extent. Kikuchi Dai has provided us with the most complete listing of these jars. He notes that there are 46 *hunping* that can be dated, either because they have a figurine of an inscribed stele or because other materials found in the same tomb are dated. The earliest *hunping* that comes from a dated context is from 103 CE, while the latest is from 322. Of these dated spirit jars most are from the Western Jin (27), closely followed by those dating to the Wu state (15). Kikuchi lists a total of 162 undated *hunping*. By far the greatest number have been unearthed in Zhejiang, with Jiangsu having the second most. A small number of the vessels have been found in Anhui, Fujian, and Jiangxi (Kikuchi 2001, 32–48). More specifically, archaeologists have found the majority of the jars either in northeast Zhejiang or southern Jiangsu (Zhao 2016, 64). *Hunping* are found in larger, richer tombs that belonged to members of local magnate families (Dien 2001, 522). No matter how many coffins a tomb may contain, there is nearly always just one *hunping* per tomb (Abe 2002, 91).



*Figure 5: Wu state five-linked jar. Stored at the Nanjing Museum (Photo by Author).*



*Figure 6: Wu state celadon jar unearthed in Wuyi County, Zhejiang. Stored at the Shanghai Museum (Photo by Author).*



*Figure 7: Wu state green ware hunping. Excavated at the Daotushan site in Shaoxing. Stored at the Shaoxing Museum (Photo by Author).*



Figure 8: Wu state green ware *hunping* unearthed at Nanjing's Jiangning Shangfang site. Stored at the Nanjing Six Dynasties Museum (Photo by Author).

### Animals on the *Hunping* and Changes over Time

What animals appear on the *hunping*? The animals can be divided into two large categories: natural and supernatural ones. The supernatural animals include dragons, phoenixes, *qilin* 麒麟, *pushou* 鋪首 (door-knocker beast), *tianlu* 天祿 (heavenly emoluments beasts), the vermilion bird, the single-hearted double bird, etc. There are many types of natural animals on the jars, such as dogs, sheep, bears, rats, flying birds, turtles, monkeys, lions, deer, pigs, chickens, snakes, slugs, crabs, fish, and lizards.<sup>7</sup> The first animals that appeared on the Eastern Han *hunping* were fish, lizards, dogs, silkworms, lions, and bears, which appear to be feeding themselves, although Dien thinks many of these “bears” look more like rats (Fig. 9) (Dien 2001, 514). The Wu period *hunping* are teeming with animals. Below the horizontal platform on the body of the main jar, there are numerous reptiles, fish, and crustaceans, which interestingly do not appear on the *wulianguan*. Oftentimes, they are moving towards or popping out of holes that perforate the pot's main body. Sometimes monkeys appear here as well. The only reptiles ever seen above the horizontal platform are tortoises, which carry stele on their backs.

The animals that appear above the horizontal platform are both wild and domestic. The creatures at the upper reaches of the jars are usually only birds. Auspicious animals appear both below the horizontal platform and above it. By the Western Jin, reptiles and aquatic animals on the walls of the main pot were gradually replaced by auspicious creatures and horse riders. Holes in the side of the main body of the jar become less frequent as well (Fig. 10). Although birds remain numerous on Western

7 For a listing of the animals found on the jars, see Zhou (2000, 100–1).



Jin *hunping*, other animals, with the exception of bears, largely disappear (Fig. 11). As for the bears, they are often transformed into supports for structures (Fig. 12) and displaced by increasing numbers of Buddha statues and architectural elements (Fig. 13). Song Bosong and Yuan Shengwen provide a chart that lists the decorations for 36 *hunping* from the Wu Kingdom and the Western Jin. Wu *hunping* usually only have one or two Buddha statues—a jar dating to 276 and unearthed at Jiangsu’s Jintan Tangwang site is the exception with seven. In contrast, Western Jin *hunping* often have more than four Buddha images—a *hunping* unearthed at Nanjing’s Ganjiagang gaochang site has 20. Similarly, the number of supernatural beasts also increases sharply on Western Jin jars. (Song and Yuan 2004, 57–60) In short, it seems that by the Western Jin real animals, except for birds, had lost most of their importance on the jars. The artisans’ decorations instead show the increasing prominence of Buddhism and supernatural beasts. Perhaps this came with the frequent contact with Luoyang, where Buddhism had already gained a strong foothold.

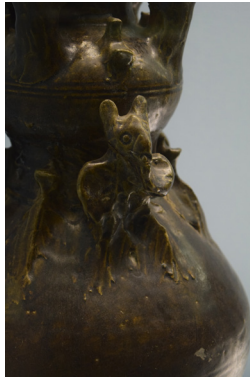


Figure 9: Close-up of Eastern Han “five-linked jar” with animals.  
Stored at the Shanghai Museum (Photo by Author).



Figure 10: A Western Jin spirit jar unearthed in Ningbo, Zhejiang.  
Stored at the Ningbo Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).



*Figure 11: Western Jin green ware hunping dated to 294. Unearthed at in Jurong city at the Stone Lion Commune. Stored at the Nanjing Museum (Photo by Author).*



*Figure 12: Western Jin celadon hunping. Unearth at Ganjiaxiang, Nanjing. Stored at the Nanjing Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).*

## **An Abundance of Birds**

Without doubt the most common spirit jar animals, natural or supernatural, are birds, which are either shown flying up the central top jar, perched on the edge of each of the top five jar mouths peering inside, or sitting on the eaves of buildings looking outwards. Although Dien points out that birds do not appear on the earliest *hunping* (Dien 2001, 514), they soon become a notable presence on nearly all subsequent jars. Indeed, if a jar only has one kind of animal it will be a bird, and many *hunping* have them in an abundance (Fig. 14). Looking at Song and Yuan's analysis of the decorative figures of 36 Wu kingdom and Western Jin spirit jars, birds appear on 25. There are a total of 514 birds on those 25 jars, which means on the average each has 20. One

Wu kingdom jar has 66 and a Western Jin one has 58. Fewer Western Jin jars have birds; they tend to be less numerous than those on their Wu state counterparts (Song and Yuan 2004, 57–60). Only one of the 25 jars has just one bird. Why are there so many birds on these jars? What are they meant to signify?



*Figure 13: Western Jin red hunping unearthed at the Jiangning Suoye site in Nanjing. Stored at the Nanjing Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).*



*Figure 14: Western Jin hunping excavated in Ningbo. Stored at the Ningbo Municipal Museum (Photo by Author).*

Scholars have put forward a number of reasons for the appearance of birds on the jars. Many specialists believe that, since birds are equally at home on the ground and in the skies, they appear on the jars to enable the *hun* spirit to reach the heavens. Kominami, for example, has argued that the birds are the departed's *hun* soul. He

notes that anecdotes from this period indicate that, before it became an ancestor, the soul of the dead sometimes became a bird. To buttress this assertion he relates a tale found in the fifth-century *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (*History of the Later Han*) about Yang Zhen 楊震 (d. 124) who was wrongfully driven to suicide. When the newly installed Emperor reburied Yang with honour, a large bird came before the coffin, mourned extravagantly, and soaked the ground with tears. Once the funeral was completed, it left. Kominami believes this bird was obviously Yang Zhen's *hun* soul. Hence the birds attached to the *hunping* represent the soul of the departed as it attempts to enter the spirit jar's body, which is the abode of the ancestors. This is why the birds are always facing the jar and usually perched on jar mouths. He notes only the latest jars feature birds who are looking outwards (Kominami 1993, 277–78). Zhou Mei believes that people of ancient southeast China had a natural admiration for birds, which are overwhelming benign, have beautiful feathers, sing delightful songs, and like humans get up with the rising sun and rest as it sets. When slash and burn agriculture was in practice, birds were also cherished because they fertilized the land with their droppings, which is why Jiangnan had what was called *niaotian* 鳥田 (bird fields). The many birds on the *hunping* reflect local respect for birds and the belief that their help was needed to ascend to the heavens (Zhou 2000, 101). Zhao Shuyi underscores that, beginning with the Neolithic Hemudi Culture, the Wu-Yue region had long venerated birds and viewed them as spiritual beings. Since the top part of the vessels symbolize the heavenly world while the main jar is the temporary abode of the dead, the birds who fly up to perch on the jar's top are helpers who assist the *hun* to ascend to paradise (Zhao 2016, 64–65). Que Yanjun and Jiang Yuanqiao think that, since Xiwangmu 西王母 (the Mother Goddess of the West) had three blue-green birds that brought her food and served as her messengers, the birds on the *hunping* were meant to not only escort the *hun* to her home on Mt. Kunlun, but also represent both Xiwangmu and her paradise (Que and Jiang 2007, 83–84). Since Li Gang believes that *hunping* were inspired by Buddhist ideas, he maintains that the birds are pigeons, which Persians used to deliver messages over long distances. He also states that, in some Buddhist *jataka* tales, the Buddha becomes a pigeon, and thus the birds are symbolic of Buddhism (Li 1991, 80).

All of these explanations are intriguing and suggestive. But to what degree do they actually explain the presence of the birds? A nagging question is why are there so many birds on the jars? If the birds are the *hun* soul of the departed, why are there more than one? Kominami is correct that early medieval people believed that the *hun* might turn into a bird, as seen in the tale of Yang Zhen's burial. Nevertheless, as that story indicates, it was believed that the *hun* would become one bird. In an early medieval narrative about the filial son Bo Qi 伯奇, his wronged *hun* soul also transforms into a single bird (Knapp 2012, 129–32). In other words,

Kominami's explanation cannot account for why there are multiple birds. Similarly, if birds symbolize messengers that show the departed the way to the heavens, why are they also found decorating other grave goods? A candlestick excavated in 1937 in Shangyu 上虞, Zhejiang, has the same motif of multiple birds flying upwards (Yun 1993, plates #33 & 166). Obviously, the birds are not leading the *hun* soul into the candlestick. Likewise, a Wu kingdom model stove, which is dated to 272 and was unearthed in Nanjing, is decorated with the common *hunping* motifs of pavilions with birds flying up them (Figs. 15 and 16) (Nanjing shi bowuguan 2004, 335–37). Obviously, these decorative motifs are not intrinsic to the *hunping* and probably do not symbolize the Queen Mother of the West or the *hun* entering paradise. As such, what do these bird motifs mean?



Figures 15 and 16: Wu state pottery stove.

Stored at the Nanjing Municipal Museum (After Nanjing shi bowuguan 2004, 335, 337).

## Birds as Jiangnan Emblems of Good Fortune

It might be helpful to look at local traditions about birds in the southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang area. What we find is that numerous regions within Jiangnan have myths about the instrumental role that birds played in the introduction of rice agriculture. As a result, birds are held in high esteem and are frequently the recipients of rituals that express gratitude. In the Jiangnan area, this admiration for birds has a long history; it is already evident in the archaeological remains of both the Hemudu and Liangzhu cultures. (Childs-Johnson 2012, 2–16) In various places in Zhejiang province, scholars have collected different versions of a legend in which sparrows play a key role in introducing rice agriculture. Although the details differ, the broad parameters of the legend remain the same: soon after humans were created, they were starving because of a lack of food. Rice was the food of the gods that could only be found in the Heavens. Aware of the human's dire situation and taking pity on them, sparrows flew up to the Heavens to obtain or steal the rice, which they brought down to the Earth. Rats helped complete the job by distributing the seeds (Chen 2003, 4–10). As a result, the natives of these areas regarded sparrows as grain deities and honoured them with sacrifices of rice. Until the 1950s, some villages would stage a festival in their honour on the nineteenth day of the second month—each family would cook up a dish of rice with vegetables, which was called *baijiafan* 百家飯 (rice of the hundred families), *bainiaofan* 百鳥飯 (rice of the hundred birds), or *maniaofan* 麻鳥飯 (sparrow rice) and would then scatter it on rooftops or fields. The purpose of doing so was to thank the birds for bringing grain into this world (*ibid.*, 14–17). Dien observes that many of the earliest decorated *hunping* have animals that are often identified as bears, but look more like rats. Perhaps these figures are the divine rats of legend who helped the swallows distribute rice seeds. A Wu kingdom *hunping* at the Six Dynasties Museum in Nanjing prominently features a rat (Fig. 17).

Since the residents of Jiangnan viewed sparrows as grain gods, they were also associated with human fertility. Jiangnan people often call swallows *majiangdiao* 麻將鳥 (*majiang* in the Wu dialect means sparrow). *Niao* in this case is pronounced *diao*, which is the same sound used to designate the male reproductive organ. In other words, the birds were called “swallow penises.” In some areas of Zhejiang, there was a ritual in which a childless married couple on the night of the nineteenth day of the second month would first pray before an altar to the *songgushen* 送谷神 (God Who Delivers Grain), who was probably a swallow. The husband would then go out to catch a male sparrow. After cooking it, the couple would again kowtow and pray before the altar. Only then would the husband consume the sparrow (*ibid.*, 18–19). The Tang Dynasty (618–907)

doctor, Chen Zangqi 陳藏器 (681–757), in his *Bencaoshiyi* 本草拾遺 (*Supplement to Materia Medica*), notes that, “If in the second month of winter you eat it [sparrows], it will make the penis rise, which will allow the birth of children” (ibid., 18). Clearly, this proves that sparrows were associated with male fertility as early as the Tang.



Figure 16: Wu state hunping. Excavated from Shangfang, Nanjing. Stored at Nanjing's Six Dynasties Museum (Photo by Author).

But how far do these local Jiangnan beliefs about sparrows bestowing rice to humans go back in time? The connection between birds and rice agriculture in Jiangnan can be pushed even earlier than the Tang Dynasty. Han texts often mention that the Jiangnan area had *niaotian* (bird fields). This term seems to refer to the fact that, in the early period when slash and burn agriculture was prevalent, people relied on birds to distribute seeds and eat pests. The first century CE *Yue jue shu* 越絕書 (*The Book of the Glory of Yue*) tells us that, “The coastal people of Dayue 大越 (the Shaoxing region) are unique in their development of ‘bird fields’... Since he (the Sage king Yu 禹) did not have a way to repay the people for their hard work, he taught the people to have bird fields (*jiaomin wu tian* 教民鳥田)”<sup>8</sup> (Liu and Chen 1994, 10.31.) One could also translate this last passage as “he taught people how to bird the fields”. In other words, Yu taught people how to make use of ground inadvertently prepared for agriculture through the natural activities of birds, or how to actively use birds to aid

8 The translation is from Milburn (2010, 224–25).

in rice-farming.<sup>9</sup> The Eastern Han Dynasty *Wu-Yue chungiu* 吳越春秋 (*The Annals of Wu and Yue*) also informs us that birds were active in preparing fields for agriculture:

[When Yu the Great governed Kuaiji 會稽] phoenixes perched in the trees, *Luan* 鸞 birds nested inside buildings, unicorns paced in the courtyard, and the hundred birds farmed in the marshes ... Heaven praised Yu's virtue and rewarded his achievements, by making the hundred birds return to work the fields on the behalf of people. (Liu and Chen 1994, 6.29)

This long passage underscores the active contribution that birds were thought to have made to Jiangnan agriculture. The author directly says the birds were *dian* 佃 “farming” the fields on people's behalf. In debunking the idea that birds and elephants intentionally helped people engage in rice agriculture, Wang Chong (27–97) who was from Kuaiji (Shaoxing) provides us with a natural explanation for why people of the area thought in this way:

The facts are that Cangwu 蒼梧 was a country where elephants abound, and that in Kuaiji hosts of birds used to alight... The nature of Heaven and Earth finds expression in the doings of birds and beasts. Elephants stamp the ground on their own accord, and so do birds pick out plants. When the earth has been thus pounded, and the weeds are destroyed, it looks like a tilled field, and when the soil has been loosened and the clods have been turned, man can forthwith proceed to plant. (Liu and Chen 1996, 48; Forke 1962, 2: 247)

Here Wang says that birds inadvertently help farmers by eating the remains of old crops. While taking the time to refute this belief in two places of his work, he nevertheless underscores how much the people of Jiangnan associated birds with agriculture.

It is thereby my belief that the motif of multiple birds on the spirit jars has nothing to do with guiding the *hun* to the Heavens. For the residents of Jiangnan, the image of birds flying up and resting on the lips of jars, which might contain grain, reminded them of their belief that birds delivered grains to the Earth by bringing it from the sky. The idea of many birds bringing grain from the sky also indicates agricultural abundance. Since sparrows were associated with fertility, the many

9 In recent years, to limit their use of pesticides, some farmers in Japan, China, Thailand and South Korea have employed ducks in their rice fields to eat weeds, insects, and snails. See Pere\_Chapi 2018 and RighteousLiving40 2013.



birds also conveyed the idea of human fecundity too. In other words, for Jiangnan people, the image of numerous birds was a sign of good fortune—an abundance of both rice and children. This is the reason why we find this motif on other objects as well, such as candlesticks and model stoves.

## Auspicious Inscriptions on Miniature Stele

Looking at the inscriptions found on miniature stele, which decorate a number of spirit jars, reinforces the idea that the primary function of these jars was to bring good luck to the living descendants of the dead. The earliest jar, which dates to 260 CE and was unearthed at Xiaoshan 蕭山, Shaoxing, reads,

永安三年時富且洋[祥]宜公卿子孫壽命長千億萬歲未見英[殃].

In the time of the third year of Yong'an, wealth and happiness, may there be dukes and lords, many sons and grandsons, long life, and may there be no misfortune for a thousand [times] a hundred thousand, and ten-thousand years (Dien 2001, 518–19).

Another inscribed stele on a Western Jin spirit jar reveals similar sentiments,

出始寧用此X女X宜子孫作吏高遷眾無稽

Produced in Shining; use this X woman X, may there [continue to] be sons and grandsons, hold offices which are high, and have promotions that are multitudinous without limit (ibid., 518–20).

Most of the other inscriptions are much shorter than these and convey much the same content. What these inscriptions clearly indicate is that the jars are meant to bring good fortune to living descendants. Obviously, the *hunping* in some way placates the dead; consequently, they will bring blessings to their living descendants (Tao 1993, 28–29). In other words, the jars are meant to bring good luck and therefore the jar's figures, including all of the animals, must all be auspicious signs. Hence the numerous birds flying up to the heavens and snacking on grains could well be a sign of continued wealth, prosperity, and numerous heirs.

## Conclusion

This essay has endeavoured to demonstrate that spirit jars are incredibly rich and captivating artefacts, which reveal to us much about the religious beliefs of second

to fourth century inhabitants of the Jiangnan region. As many scholars have suggested, the spirit jars could well convey how these people conceived of paradise or the afterlife. What has caught my interest are the tremendous number of animals and types of beasts populating these jars. Artisans attached images and figurines of animals on the *hunping*, particularly in the late Eastern Han and the Wu state period. Then, in the Western Jin, the animals largely disappear as decorations, with the exception of birds and bears. This suggests that late Eastern Han and Wu state people could not envision a happy future without a world teeming with animals. Western Jin jars, in contrast, have many more decorations consisting of Buddhas and auspicious animals, which seems to indicate that they envisioned an afterlife that was more fantastic and less pedestrian.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the spirit jars is the large number of birds that artisans placed on them. Although scholars have offered a number of different reasons for their presence, I believe that they are best explained by looking at local beliefs. The Jiangnan area has long had a myth in which sparrows save humanity by stealing rice from Heaven and bring its cultivation to Earth. As a consequence, until the 1950s, many places in Jiangnan celebrated a festival in the second month where they fed rice to sparrows. Although we cannot trace this myth back to early medieval times, we do know that Han texts refer to bird-fields (*niaotian*), which credit the animals with helping farmers grow rice. Due to these beliefs, the large number of birds on spirit jars are probably a local Jiangnan emblem of good luck. Having many birds on grave goods will lead to good harvests and many descendants. Rather than spirit guides, they are tokens of good fortune.

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