

Initial study of Chinese flag culture

by Zhao Xinfeng

Abstract China is a country with the longest history of banner culture, and flags originated in the eleventh century BC in ancient China. The word 'banner' only has one meaning today, while in ancient China, 'banner' had two different meanings and interpretations. There were strict regulations and design requirements for National Flags, the Administrative Region Flag, the Deputy Prime Minister Flag, the Duke Flag, the General Flag, the Governor Flag, the County Governor Flag etc. Furthermore, flags were also widely used in religious and commercial activities. With the development of ritual and the need of identification, streamers appeared and were used in written text or graphics. They were the supplement and further development of banners. The ancient culture of banners has been inherited and developed in today's China.

About 'Flag'

Flag, in oracle, means a pictograph. It looks like a ribbon flying from a tree trunk. The original meaning of the character is: the strikingly coloured ribbon tied on a tree trunk for marking a territory or noticing military. It is the formation of pictograph in Zhuanwen (a calligraphic style). By combining the trunk with the ribbon we get this. When it was used as a single word and was added with the phonetic, we got the word 'flag'.



The ancient Chinese character - "Flag" in oracle

1.1 Regulations and Design Requirements for National Flags

In ancient China, there were strict regulations and design requirements for national flags, especially for the flags of administrative regions, the deputy prime minister flag, the Duke, the general, the governor, the county governor and so on.

Currently, the earliest written records about flags I have seen were from the Rites of Zhou. Rites of Zhou was written by the King of the Zhou Kingdom, who lived in about the eleventh century BC. The level, pattern and usage were clearly stated in this book. We generally can understand the quoted message like this: the flag of the emperor is called 'Dachang' in Chinese, it is painted with sun and moon graphics. The flag Vassal kings (Special Administrative Region Executives) used is called qi in Chinese, it is painted with crossed dragons. A big red flag without decorations is called zhan in Chinese, and it also has a distinct feature: the flagpole is a crank. This kind of flag can be used only by guqing in Chinese (equivalent to the deputy prime minister level). The flag with variegated colours and surrounded by decorative objects is called wu in Chinese, and it is used by those who have a high title such as dafu \ shi in Chinese.



Seal character (2000 BC) a style of Chinese calligraphy, often used on seals



Regular script (2000 BC) style for daily use since Song Dynasty (960-1276 DC)



Earliest record of flags in China

> Dragon, flying in the day, having anything it wants, deciding farming harvest, Governor



The flag created for generals has bears and tigers painted on it, which is used to symbolize the mighty army. The flag that has painted birds is called yu, representing the state flag. The flag that has turtles and snakes painted on it is called zhao in Chinese, created for the county. This kind of flag has long streamers, called liu in Chinese. The flagpole of a leading car is tied with complete, gorgeous feathers, called sui in Chinese. The flagpole decorated with variegated feathers and oxtail is called jing in Chinese, used on a chariot to motivate soldiers to fight.

Through the nine levels and different patterns painted on flags, we can also see the application of the flag in ancient Chinese totem worship. The supreme sun and moon flag is exclusively used for the emperor, highlighting his mighty power. The dragon, flying in the day, having anything it wants, deciding when to collect the harvest, is used by vassal states. The most important thing of a combat is the morale, so there are bears and tigers painted on the flag of generals to showcase their country's military strength.

1.2 The Function of Ancient Chinese Military Flags as Orders

In Guan Zhong's (BC 723 - BC 645) Art of War, it is said that the flag can make the soldiers lift their spirits and make great achievements, and that the flag order and motivation are conducive to victory of troops in war, and that the flag can also scare the enemy to roll up their banner and stop drumming and retreat.

Jia Yi (200 BC-168 BC) mentioned the Chen Sheng and Wu Guang-led peasant uprising in the Qin History Record (the conclusion of the gains and losses of Qin dynasty). He said 'Chop wood as weapons, and rise sticks as flags', which means that they chopped wood down to use as weapons and raised bamboo poles with decorations hanging as a flag, and finally the two of them led the long oppressed peasants together to revolt against the Qin leadership.

Xu Shen (about 58 AD - about 147 AD), a person from the Eastern Han Ru'nan Shaoling (now Henan Luohe City, Shaoling district), compiled the first dictionary of China in 100 AD. Xu Shen's 'Dictionary' explains 'the flag with the bear pattern as well as five pieces of ribbon symbolized reward and punishment. When soldiers saw the flag, they knew it was time to gather the troops'.

In the History of Three Territories was written: 'the emperor Sun Quan had a flag made with a yellow dragon painted on it, and usually the flag was in the middle of the army. During combats, whether soldiers should move forward or backward totally depended on the guidance of the flag'.

Flags thus had a guidance role in the war. In the Chinese Song Dynasty, Cheng Dachang mentioned: 'During the war, we need to produce flags with five different colours. To be used are the blue, red, white, black and yellow flag to correspond with the east, south, west, north and center position. Which colour is waved means which direction the attack will go'.

1.3 The important Role in the Ancient Ritual and Pray Activities

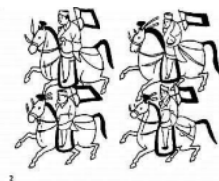
In the book of Rites of Zhou, it is stated that 'those who are worshipping participants should establish flags and those who attend meetings and receive guests must establish flags, too'.

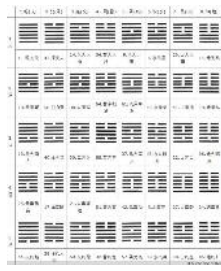
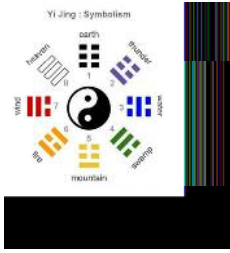


'Chop wood as weapons, and rise sticks as flags'



Han Dynasty, unearthed flag





The yellow flag - 64 hexagrams

In ancient times, before the war started, in order to boost morale and make clear the military rules, the army needed a flag ceremony. In the book called Mo Zi, it said: 'there are eight people who are over eighty and they worship the green flag', which means eight elderly people of eighty are responsible for worshipping the dragon flag. In Chinese Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, the flag ceremony before going to the march also was needed to boost morale. In 'The history of the Ming Dynasty', it also was written that: 'on the frost descent day of the last solar day, soldiers are assembled to hold a ceremony in the military training field to sacrifice the coach banner'.

There is a special veneration of ancient Chinese flags in ancient Chinese. According to records, during Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were three temples in Xi'an City to worship the flag god.

In the well-known 'The Romance of Three Kingdoms' in China, there are descriptions of Kong Ming's use of wind on a variety of flags. Kong Ming used a four-colour and the lunar mansions flag to represent the four corners of the world in the ritual. The yellow flag represents sixty-four hexagrams, which is very typical of Chinese ritual culture. Detailed descriptions of the lunar mansions and hexagrams will be provided in the future.

1.4 The Wide Use of Flags in the Ancient Commercial Activities

In addition to the liquor banner, tea shops, restaurants, pharmacies and silk stores also use particular banners. The role of these flags in ancient times was equivalent to the current brand advertising, on which the name and the goods written usually written, hung above the shop or in front of the house roof to achieve the purpose of attracting customers.

2. Compared with banners, flags have a more outstanding identification function.

The original meaning of the character zhi is: a flag made of silk with certain colours and patterns as a special logo or symbol.

Mo Zi (BC 468 - BC 376), a person of Lu State in late Spring and Autumn Warring State (about 281 BC - 233 BC), the monarch's son, is a famous ancient Chinese philosopher, thinker, political commentator and essayist, later called 'Han Feizi'. He is the representative of the famous ancient Chinese Legalism. In 'Han Feizi', it is said that 'if the people of Song offer liquor, they hang a flag to notice people about it'. It is said that this is the earliest record of using a flag as a sign for a liquor store. Since the Tang Dynasty, the liquor banner has gradually developed into a very common phenomenon in the city, and it was of great variety and colour. Du Mu (AD 803 - about AD 852), a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty, wrote in his poem 'The Spring of Jiangnan': 'there are green trees and gorgeous flowers throughout Jiangnan and there are all kinds of banners flying in the towns and villages, and the people at that time established numerous magnificent temples, with the misty rain adding more mystery feeling to the whole landscape'. As can be seen from the poem, there were liquor banners flying in the towns and villages as early as the Tang Dynasty.

In Zhanguo Period (now Shandong Tengzhou), Mozi is a famous thinker, educator, scientist and military strategist. He was the founder of his own school, and later his followers collected his sayings and compiled and handed down the book Mo Zi. In Mo Zi, the definition of the flag is a banner of 12 metres long and 6 metres wide converted into today's metric calculation.



Writing coach surname flag



In XuShen's 'Dictionary', the explanation of the flag is 'a banner is a kind of flag'. In the first dictionary in easy Chinese the late Eastern Han Fu Qian' wrote that a flag comes with its user's personal identity and symbols.

From the annotations of banners and flags, we can infer that flags originated much earlier than banners, that flags are more formal than banners, and that flags are more widely used than banners. Since banners are subordinate to flags, are part of their development and often occur simultaneously with flags, terms with both meanings emerge.

3. With the development of rituals and the need for identification, fan emerges as the supplement for flag

The explanation of fan is: a rectangular banner hanging straight upon a bamboo pole. fan was mainly used in ceremonial, military command, religious and ritual events.

In ancient times, there were certain patterns and the generals' surnames on the banner. In order to express their official position, administrative officials would set up their banners when they handled official businesses or were on business trips. On the banners appeared their official positions, titles, so that the public could know who they were from a glance at the banner. There is a special Chinese term for major celebrations in which streamers would be used simultaneously among the ceremonial teams, presenting a magnificent scene.

With the development of the society, streamers are also widely used in religious rituals and folklore rituals. The design of a streamer is drooping, which is the distinct difference from a banner. In religious activities, there generally are image streamers and text streamers. The images are generally the image of Buddha.

On the streamer are honorifics or scripture. Not only Buddhism but also Chinese Taoism ceremonies emphasize the usage of streamers.

In folklore activities, blessing words of peace, prosperity and good weather are usually written on the streamers. Different banners can be observed in today's culture of north and south China, for example, the sacrificial rites of Yandi.



Streamer with couplets



A Buddha streamer from a subterranean tomb in Dunhuang, China, now in the Tokyo National Museum



Banner display in Taoist ceremony, Shanghai





Quyang County, Baoding, Hebei

There is still a folk performance of big streamers in today's Quyang County, Baoding, Hebei Han village, and so far it has one thousand years of history.

The activity of shaking big streamers originated in the Tang Dynasty. It is a form of performance to worship the gods, rain and other major events. In Jian'ou, Fujian, the hometown of bamboo in China, there are also the famous unique shaking-skills streamers. The banner pole is very strong, made of two straight bamboos tied together, with a length of about 10 meters, weighing up to 20.5 kg. During the performance, the performer can use hands, feet, elbows, shoulders, head and teeth to shake the streamer, presenting a brilliant scene.



Annual ceremony, Jian'ou, Fujian

In the western part of Beijing's Mentougou Village, there is a streamer festival on the fifteenth day of the first month every year. This event originated in the Ming Dynasty in the village and it has continued for hundreds of years. Each year, there is a grand festival in the village. The villagers give a warm welcome to the streamer teams, presenting a mighty scene throughout all the streets, even if it is snowing.

Through these few historical records, you can see that banner culture is an important part of the five thousand years of Chinese culture, colourful and brilliant in the long history. However, my research on Chinese flag culture is still in a preliminary stage, and I hope, over time, that I will be able to find more historical data and texts to enrich the knowledge of banners and thus I can inherit and develop the culture of Chinese flags, as well as make contributions to the world flag culture development.



Mentougou Village, Spring festival

Acknowledgements

- Lin Dong
- Han Buxin

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