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White Animals in Early-Medieval China: Literature, Dynastic Legitimacy, and the Natural World

ABSTRACT:

The belief that white animals were auspicious symbols that proclaimed dynastic legitimacy became gradually established during the Han dynasty based on a traditional system of prognostics called *ruiying*, namely, “auspicious resonances,” and promulgated in the apocryphal “weft-texts.” This system expanded massively in the following, early-medieval, period, when many kinds of creatures were understood to possess such resonance. This was documented in both the contemporary dynastic histories as well as poetry and prose. The present paper explores white animals in their roles as auspicious validations of the actions of individual emperors (and the dynasty as a whole), placing particular emphasis on the role played by the literati elite in celebrating white animals’ appearances. Furthermore, of all the many weft-texts that mention auspicious resonances, dynastic histories seem to have relied heavily on one, titled *Sunshi ruiying tu* (*Mr. Sun’s Charts of Auspicious Resonances*), to interpret white animals. Finally, the paper argues that the significant preponderance of literature about white rabbits in the early-medieval period was closely related to the importance of this animal as a symbol of the Jin dynasty, and auspicious interpretations of the rule of the Sima family.

KEYWORDS:

white animals, ruiying, weft texts, poetry, historiography

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the representation of white animals as validations of the benign and auspicious nature of imperial rule in early-medieval China, that is roughly 220–589 AD. As in many civilizations around the world, in antiquity the belief developed in China that through interpreting signs (including all kinds of natural phenomena), it was possible to understand the present and to predict the future, perhaps even influencing it in specific ways.¹ This in turn had enormous implications for statecraft, since signs of this type were thought to foretell the rise and fall of dynasties, as well as to indicate the fortunes of

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¹ See, e.g., Amar Annus, ed., *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 2010); Jean MacIntosh Turfa, *Divining the Etruscan World: The Bronzoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012); Kim Beerden, *Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); and Martti Nissinen, *Prophetic Divination: Essays in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

individual monarchs. During the course of the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), the numinous significance of white animals came to be interpreted according to two distinct traditions: *wuxing* 五行 (Five Phases) and *ruiyang* 瑞應 (auspicious resonances).² The former considered white animals (as well as inanimate objects like white stones) to be unlucky signs for the future – they were termed “white omens” (*baisheng baixiang* 白眚白祥).³ Even in circumstances where they were initially interpreted favorably, their true nature as evil omens soon became revealed.⁴ By contrast, *ruiyang* interpretations, popularized through a range of apocryphal “weft-texts” (*weishu* 緯書), regarded white creatures as lucky.⁵

² For studies of the early development of *wuxing* thought; see Sun Guangde 孫廣德, *Xian Qin Liang Han yinyang wuxing shuo de zhengzhi sixiang* 先秦兩漢陰陽五行說的政治思想 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1993); Su Dechang 蘇德昌, *Hanshu wuxing zhi yanjiu* 漢書五行志研究 (Taipei: Taiwan daxue chubun zhongxin, 2013); and Yang Rubin 楊儒賓, *Wuxing yuan lun: Xian Qin sixiang de taichu cunyou lun* 五行原論, 先秦思想的太初存有論 (Xinbei: Lianjing chubun, 2018). The *ruiyang* tradition (the terminology favored in the Han and early-medieval periods) has been much less studied, except for some specific topics; see Li Chenggui 李成珪, “Xuxiang de Taiping: Han diguo zhi ruixiang yu shangji de zaozuo: cong Yinwan jian du Jibu de fenxi shuoqi” 虛像的太平, 漢帝國之瑞祥與上計的造作, 從尹灣簡牘集簿的分析說起, *Guoji jiandu xuehui xuekan* 國際簡牘學會學刊 2002.5, pp. 253–314; and Sun Yinggang 孫英剛, “Ruixiang yi huo yu nie: Han Tang jian de wuse daniao yu zhengzhi xuanbu” 瑞祥抑或羽孽, 漢唐間的五色大鳥與政治宣布, *Shilin* 史林 2012.8, pp. 39–50.

³ *Hanshu* gives a laconic introduction to the subject: “The element Metal has the color white, therefore there are white omens 金色白, 故有白眚白祥”; see Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962; hereafter cited as *HS*) 27B, p. 1377. (In the notes, most citations of traditional Chinese works will give *juan* number without stating “j.”, followed by pages; see preceding citation of *Hanshu*. Some will give only the page of the modern edn.) This is repeated in Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), *zhi* 志 13, p. 3276. Early-imperial texts make it clear that *baisheng baixiang*, and both *baisheng* and *baixiang* individually, denoted some kind of evil omen. Here, we will use the term “white omens” for *baisheng/ baixiang*, following Grégoire Espeset, “Portents in Early Imperial China: Observational Patterns from the ‘Spring and Autumn’ Weft *Profoundly Immersed Herptile* (*Qiantan ba* 潛潭巴),” *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 1.2 (2019), pp. 251–87.

⁴ This understanding of white omens as evil within the *wuxing* tradition continued throughout the medieval period, as when Sima Teng 司馬騰 (d. 307) found a jade horse in a snow-drift in 304, which he presented to the throne as an auspicious validation. Further divination revealed that it was in fact a white omen (*baixiang*), and this was confirmed by Sima Teng’s murder three years later; see Shen Yue 沈約, *Songshu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974; hereafter cited as *SgS*) 31, p. 926.

⁵ For overviews of the history of weft texts, with particular reference to their importance in Han political thought and cultural developments, see Ren Milin 任蜜林, *Handai neixue: Weishu sixiang tonglun* 漢代內學, 緯書思想通論 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe, 2011); and *Handai mijing: Weishu sixiang fenlun* 漢代秘經, 緯書思想分論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015); as well as Li Zhonghua 李中華, *Shenmi wenhua de qishi: Weishu yu Handai wenhua* 神秘文化的啓示, 緯書與漢代文化 (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1993). For English-language scholarship; see Jack L. Dull, “A Historical Introduction to the Apocryphal (*Ch’an-wei*) Texts of the Han Dynasty,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Washington, 1966); Licia Di Giacinto, *The Chenwei Riddle: Time, Stars, and Heroes in the Apocrypha* (Ostasien Verlag, 2013); and Zhao Lu, *In Pursuit of the Great Peace: Han Dynasty Classicism and the Making of Early Medieval Literati Culture* (New York: SUNY P., 2019), pp. 49–78.

Furthermore, *ruiying* texts explained that white animals were called into existence by positive acts or the moral virtues of the monarch; hence, they were not portents or omens, which are signs of the future, but instead they validated things that already had happened – though they may have had implications for subsequent events. Accordingly, white animals interpreted in this way will here be termed “auspicious validations.” This paper will argue that during the early-medieval period, *ruiying* interpretations came to be enormously popular and white animals from an ever-expanding list of species were understood as auspicious validations: it was a time when this mantic tradition enjoyed a remarkable florescence.

As auspicious validations proclaimed dynastic legitimacy, appearances of white animals were carefully documented in treatises incorporated into three early-medieval dynastic histories: the “Furui zhi” 符瑞志 (“Treatise on Tokens and Auspicious Signs”) chapters of the *Songshu* 宋書 (*The Book of the Liu-Song*) by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513); the “Xiangrui zhi” 祥瑞志 (“Treatise on Blessings and Auspicious Signs”) chapter of the *Nan Qishu* 南齊書 (*The Book of the Southern Qi*) by Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489–537); and the “Lingzheng zhi” 靈徵志 (“Treatise on Numinous Proofs”) chapters of the *Weishu* 魏書 (*The Book of the Wei*) by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572).⁶ In addition, there exists a significant corpus of early-medieval literature, even if only in fragments, that documents the importance attached to the appearance of white animals in contemporary thought. For the people of early-medieval China, each manifestation was of great political significance, and these laudatory writings assured readers that they lived in flourishing realms governed by wise monarchs whose manifest virtues had moved the spiritual powers of heaven and earth to send down white animals as auspicious validations.

We begin with a discussion of the two white animals whose appearances were accorded numinous significance already in the Warring States era (475–221 BC) – wolves and pheasants. These two animals both continued to be treated as auspicious validations throughout the early-medieval period. Subsequently, the appearance of multitudinous species of white animals in the treatises on auspicious validations included in early-medieval dynastic histories, as just mentioned, will be considered. Two things can be demonstrated. First is that white animals

⁶ See *SgS* 27–29, pp. 759–878; Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯, *Nan Qishu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) 18, pp. 349–66; and Wei Shou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974; hereafter cited as *WS*) 112A–B, pp. 2893–2970, respectively. The first of *Songshu*’s “Furui zhi” chapters, setting out underlying principles, is translated in Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms, and Six Dynasties* (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institut, 2001).

were at the heart of the majority of auspicious validations recorded during this period; and second, that more and more species were being interpreted in this way, including many creatures who did not appear in earlier writings in the *ruiyi* tradition. The evidence from these treatises can also be compared with surviving literature, both poetry and prose, on the subject of white animals, much of which survives specifically because it provides an extraordinarily rich vocabulary for associating positive values with whiteness. Finally, literary representations of white rabbits will be considered: they came to be granted almost totemic status as representatives of the Jin dynasty (Western Jin 266–316; Eastern Jin 317–420) and its ruling house – the Sima 司馬 family.

WHITE ANIMALS AS AUSPICIOUS VALIDATIONS IN EARLY-IMPERIAL CHINA

The very earliest surviving references to white animals as auspicious validations can be found in writings dating to the Warring States era.⁷ Only a very small number of creatures, most notably wolves and pheasants, appear in these tales, and it is already evident even at this early stage that not all white animals were omens or auspicious validations. Records are preserved in a number of pre-unification and early-imperial writings that king Mu of Zhou 周穆王 (r. 956–918 BC) hunted both white deer and white wolves, yet these animals were not invested with any numinous significance.⁸ King Mu was criticized in transmitted sources as a feckless, idle monarch who wasted his time at frivolous pursuits when he should have been governing the country, but hunting these white animals was not considered by contemporaries as a sign of either good or bad fortune – for himself or the dynasty.⁹ To announce

⁷ For implausible attempts to assert the wider importance of white animals in high antiquity and even into prehistoric times; see Tie Xiaona 鐵曉娜, “Zhongguo gudai zaoqi baise dongwu muti de wenhua sikao” 中國古代早期白色動物母題的文化思考, *Nei Menggu shehui kexue* 內蒙古社會科學 28.3 (2007), pp. 106–10; and Yang Min 楊敏, “Baise dongwu jingling chongbai: Zhongguo gudai baise xiangrui dongwu lun” 白色動物精靈崇拜, 中國古代白色祥瑞動物論, *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文學研究 2003.2, pp. 25–31.

⁸ Shanghai shifan daxue guji zhenglizu 上海師範大學古籍整理組, *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), p. 8 (“Zhouyu shang” 周語上); and Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 4, p. 136. The hunting of white deer and white wolves is also mentioned in the contemporary Zhou-dynasty bronze vessel inscription “Bo Tangfu ding” 伯唐父鼎; see Zhongguo shehui kexue xueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, “Chang’an Zhangjiapo M183 Xi Zhou dongshimu fajue jianbao” 長安張家坡 M183 西周洞室墓發掘簡報, *KG* 1989.6, pp. 524–29; and Liu Yu 劉雨, “Bo Tangfu ding de mingwen yu shidai” 伯唐父鼎的銘文與時代, *KG* 1990.8, pp. 741–42.

⁹ Zhao Fengrong 趙奉蓉, “Qianqian zai wei, zhuiji Wen Wu: Yi Zhou shu zhong de Zhou Muwang xingxiang” 虔虔在位, 追跡文武, 逸周書中的周穆王形象, *Lilun jie* 理論界 2008.8, pp. 129–31.

a white omen or an auspicious validation was an act more complex than simply having a white animal appear, yet such white animals were in fact central to numinous events. Some creatures, including many species of birds, are naturally white (and if sufficiently exotic, like white parrots, might not be recognized as permanently white); some have their coloration change according to the seasons whereby their winter coats or plumage are white;¹⁰ and some are albino or leucistic.¹¹ It is likely that animals in all three categories were interpreted as white omens or auspicious validations during the course of the early-medieval period, along with other creatures whose pelt or feathers were considered abnormally pale.

The earliest known reference to the mantic significance of a white wolf can be found in a text named *Tian Qiuzi* 田隹子, a now-lost writing attributed to Tian Jiu 田鳩 (fl. 356–311), a disciple of Master Mozi 墨子: “When Tang became Son of Heaven, he made his capital city at Bo. There was a deity who led forward a white wolf with a metal belt-buckle in its mouth to enter Tang’s court 湯爲天子, 都于亳. 有神手牽白狼, 口銜金鈎, 而入湯庭.”¹² When this auspicious manifestation was

¹⁰ Marketa Zimova et al., “Function and Basis of Seasonal Coat Colour Moulting in Mammals and Birds,” *Biological Reviews* 93 (2018), pp. 1478–98. Attributing different values to seasonally-changing coats is well-known across Eurasia, where elites have traditionally valued white ermine and ignored the brown stoat, though they are in fact the same creature (*Mustela erminea*); see Morgan Cobb, “Sex, Chastity, and Political Power in Medieval and Early Renaissance Representations of the Ermine,” MA thesis (University of Cincinnati, 2010); and Ruth Y.Y. Hung, *Animal Lives through Five Centuries of Art and Science: Who Knows If I Am Not Subject to Knowledge?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2026), pp. 37–74.

¹¹ Albinism concerns the abnormal coloration of skin, hair, feathers, or scales due to lack of melanin, and has been reported in every kind of vertebrate. True albinism involves a total absence of integumentary or retinal pigmentation, resulting in the characteristic red eyes of affected creatures; see Eulalie Lasseaux et al., “Albinism,” *Clinical Ophthalmic Genetics and Genomics* (2022), pp. 393–402; and C. Gail Summers, “Albinism: Classification, Clinical Characteristics, and Recent Findings,” *Optometry and Vision Science* 86.6 (2009), pp. 659–62. Albinism can be caused by several different genetic conditions as well as environmental factors. Leucism is a form of partial albinism in which color is retained in the eyes; as discussed in Bryanna N. Wargat, Douglas H. Adams, and Maria Laura Habegger, “Leucism in Sharks: A Histological Examination,” *Fish Biology* 103.3 (2023), pp. 731–34; and Myrfyn Owen and Paul Skimmings, “The Occurrence and Performance of Leucistic Barnacle Geese, *Branta leucopsis*,” *Ibis* 134.1 (1992), pp. 22–26. Albinism and leucism have often been treated as interchangeable terms in literature, but increasingly efforts are made to distinguish between the two.

¹² Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢, *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999; hereafter cited as *YWLJ*) 99, p. 1717. For the history of this text, see Zhao Jiancheng 趙建城, “Tian Qiuzi xiaokao” 田隹子小考, *Gudian wenxue zhishi* 古典文學知識 2016.3, pp. 154–60. *Tian Qiuzi* may have been known to 蕭繹 (508–555; r. as emperor Yuan of Liang 梁元帝, 552–555), who recorded a deity bringing in these white wolves carrying *swords* in their mouths (giving *jian* 劍 for *gou* 鈎); see Chen Zhiping 陳志平 and Xiong Qingyuan 熊清元, *Jinlouzi shuzheng jiaozhu* 金樓子疏證校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), p. 86 (“Xingwang” 興王). This kind of numinous appearance of a remarkable beast of strange coloration was to become

mentioned in early-imperial literature, such as the late-Western Han dynasty weft-text “Shangshu zhonghou” 尚書中候 (“Fulfilment of Prophecies from the Venerated Documents”), the deity had disappeared and it was Tang himself who led the animal into his court; while in works such as “Shangshu xuanji qian” 尚書璇璣鈴 (“Key to the Heavenly Pivot in the Venerated Documents”), and *Lunheng* 論衡 (*Doctrines Weighed*), the wolf apparently appeared of its own accord.¹³ The latter version of the story would become the dominant tradition in the early-medieval period, thus stressing that white wolves were called forth by the personal merits of the monarch, particularly founders of new dynasties.¹⁴ Thus, the story of the white wolf’s appearance at the court of King Tang was referenced in the poem “Bailang zan” 白狼贊 (“Encomium on White Wolves”) by Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324).¹⁵ The poet explicitly linked the appearance of these auspicious beasts and the establishment of a new, virtuous regime:

矯矯白狼 How noble and upright are the white wolves
 有道則遊 That roam [the land when the monarch] has the Way!
 應符變質 As resonating signs they change [the color of] their
 appearance,
 乃銜靈鈎 Accordingly, they hold numinous belt buckles in their
 mouths.
 惟德是適 They only appear in accordance with virtue,

common in Han weft-texts; see Grégoire Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty and the Rite of Jade Disc Immersion in Weft Narratives,” *EC* 37 (2014), pp. 393–443.

¹³ See Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞, *Shangshu zhonghou shuzheng* 尚書中候疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), p. 634; Yasui Kōzan 安居香山 and Nakamura Shōhachi 中村璋八, *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 377; and Zhang Zongxiang 張宗祥, *Lunheng jiaozhu* 論衡校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), p. 394 (“Huiguo” 恢國) respectively.

¹⁴ The ca. 318 AD *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (*Master of Embracing Simplicity*) states: “white wolves perceived the rise of the Yin (Shang) dynasty 白狼知殷家之興”; see Wang Ming 王明, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), p. 49 (“Duisu” 對俗). Meanwhile, a quotation from *Sunshi ruiying tu* 孫氏瑞應圖 (*Master Sun’s Chart of Auspicious Resonances*), preserved in *YWLJ* 99, p. 1717, emphasizes the connection between the virtuous monarch (whether the founder of the dynasty or not) and the numinous creature: “The white wolf is seen when the ruler is benevolent and virtuous, enlightened and sagacious 白狼, 王者仁德明哲則見.”

¹⁵ This poem was originally appended to a depiction of white wolves in “Shanhai jing tu zan” 山海經圖贊 (“Encomium on Illustrations to the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*”), a text lost in Tang times. The *Shanhai jing* passage concerning Yushan 孟山 notes that “its beasts include many white wolves and white tigers, its birds include many white pheasants and white wild pheasants 其獸多白狼白虎, 其鳥多白雉白翟,” without suggesting that they are connected in any way with the virtues of the monarch; see Yuan Ke 袁珂, *Shanhai jing jiaozhu* 山海經校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), p. 71 (“Xishan jing” 西山經).

出殷見周 Leaving the Shang dynasty to be seen amongst the Zhou.¹⁶

The understanding that the appearance of white wolves celebrated the founding of a new dynasty under the enlightened rule of a sagacious monarch ensured that such auspicious validations were reported on the many occasions of political change throughout the early-medieval period. Accordingly white wolves manifested themselves to laud the rule of Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪 (emperor Daowu 北魏道武帝, r. 386–409) at the time of the founding of the Northern Wei dynasty; Li Gao 李暠 (king Wuzhao 西涼武昭王, r. 400–417) at the founding of the Western Liang dynasty; and Chen Baxian 陳霸先 (emperor Wu 陳武帝, r. 557–559) at the founding of the Chen dynasty.¹⁷ On occasion, a white wolf might also appear for an emperor who was not a dynastic founder. Thus *Weishu* recorded the appearance of just such an animal in the reign of emperor Wencheng of the Northern Wei 北魏文成帝 (r. 452–465):

In the third month of the third year of the Tai'an reign period (457), a single white wolf was observed in Taiping commandery. Those who discussed this said: "In ancient and modern times there have been many such auspicious correspondences, and thus a white wolf was seen in the time of Tang, which heralded the rise of the Yin (Shang) Way and their beautiful reputation for Great Peace. Now a white wolf has been seen within the borders of the lands where our former emperor was once enfeoffed; this is a sign of endless [blessings]."¹⁸ 太安三年三月, 有白狼一, 見於太平郡。議者曰: "古今瑞應多矣, 然白狼見於成湯之世, 故殷道用興, 太平嘉名也。又先帝本封之國而白狼見焉, 無窮之徵也。"

As with white wolves, accounts of white pheasants being auspicious for the monarch also probably date back to the pre-unification period. The earliest reference to an embassy from the Yuechang 越裳 people to king Cheng of the Zhou dynasty 周成王 (r. 1042/1035–1006 BC) is found in the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年 (*Bamboo Annals*), a text discovered in an ancient tomb traditionally believed to have belonged to king

¹⁶ Nie Enyan 聶恩彥, *Guo Hongnong ji jiaozhu* 郭弘農集校注 (Taiyuan: San-Jin chubanshe, 2019), p. 105.

¹⁷ The first of these wolves is reported in Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛, *Shuijing zhu jiaozheng* 水經注校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007) 14, p. 311; the second (with many other white creatures) appears in Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 (659 AD; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 100, p. 3315; and the third is recorded in "Shen Jiong wei baiguan quanjin Chen Wudi biao" 沈炯爲百官勸進陳武帝表 ("Memorial by Shen Jiong on Behalf of Officials Encouraging Emperor Wu of the Chen Dynasty to Accept the Throne"), preserved in *YWLJ* 14, p. 273.

¹⁸ *WS* 112B, p. 2932.

Xiang of Wei 魏襄王 (d. 296 BC); however, the transmitted text does not mention any gift of numinous birds.¹⁹ The oldest textual sources to record the white pheasants date to the Han dynasty.²⁰ These birds came to form an important element in Zhou dynastic mythology as it developed in the early-imperial era.²¹ Since the Yuechang were supposed to live far beyond the borders of the Zhou realm, their presentation of white pheasants was interpreted as a sign of the virtue and power of the king having spread to remote peoples and effected the transformation of distant regions into loyal subordinates. So powerful was the auspicious discourse surrounding this event that it was replicated a number of times during the Han dynasty: both white and black pheasants were presented to emperor Ping 漢平帝 (r. 1 BC–5 AD); and white pheasants were later presented to emperor Guangwu 漢光武帝 (r. 25–57 AD); and emperor Zhang 漢章帝 (r. 75–88 AD).²² The importance of these birds as validations of dynastic legitimacy would ensure they were also well-documented in contemporary literature, such as “Baizhi shi” 白雉詩 (“Poem on a White Pheasant”) by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 AD) which celebrates the presentation made to emperor Zhang:

啓靈篇兮披瑞圖	[His majesty] opens the numinous texts and unrolls the auspicious diagrams,
獲白雉兮效素鳥	For he has captured a white pheasant and been presented with pale crows. ²³
發皓羽兮奮翹英	They fluff their luminous feathers and fan their glossy tails,
容絜朗兮於淳精	Their appearance is clean and refined, without any flaw.

¹⁹ Wang Guowei 王國維, *Jinben Zhushu jinian shuzheng* 今本竹書紀年疏證 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997) B, p. 83.

²⁰ See Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯, *Shuoyuan jiaozheng* 說苑校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), pp. 457–58 (“Bianwu” 辨物); Xu Weiyou 許維通, *Han Shi waizhuan jishi* 漢詩外傳集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), pp. 180–81 (5.12); Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞, *Shangshu dazhuan shuzheng* 尚書大傳疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), pp. 244–45 (“Jiahe” 嘉禾); and Wang Liqi 王利器, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), p. 222 (“Shifan” 十反).

²¹ For discussions of the different iterations of this legend; see for example He Kegen 何科根, “Yuechang xian zhi ji Yue niao de wenhua chanshi: Jianji xiuzheng *Samaerhan de Jintao de yixie shuofa*” 越裳獻雉及越鳥的文化闡釋, 兼及修正撒馬爾罕的金桃的一些說法, *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文藝理論與批評 1998.5, pp. 124–30; Wang Wenguang 王文光, “Cong Yuechang, Dianyu, Shan kan zhongnan bandao Shantai minzu de lai yuan” 從越裳、滇越、揀看中南半島揀泰民族的來源, *Sixiang zhanxian* 思想戰綫 12.6 (1991), pp. 70–71; and Meng Wentong 蒙交通, *Yueshi congkao* 越史叢考 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 26.

²² *HS* 12, p. 348; *Hou Hanshu* 1B, p. 62; and 3, p. 145, respectively.

²³ According to Wu Shuping 吳樹平, *Dongguan Hanji jiaozhu* 東觀漢記校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008) 2, p. 77, emperor Zhang issued an edict in 86 BC stating: “Recently white crows, divine birds, and sweet dew have repeatedly appeared, descending on the capital city... 乃者白鳥, 神雀, 甘露屢臻, 降自京師.” Ban Gu’s poem presumably refers to these events.

章皇德兮侔周成 They proclaim his majesty's virtue as equal
 to [King] Cheng of Zhou,
 永延長兮膺天慶 Long may he live and receive Heaven's
 blessings!²⁴

The tradition of viewing white animals as a response to an individual ruler's virtues developed within Han dynasty weft-texts, and these writings have much to say about how to understand the appearance of white pheasants. A prognosticatory text, "Chunqiu ganjing fu" 春秋感精符 ("Tokens of Bestirred Essences in the Spring and Autumn Annals") states: "When royal [authority] spreads broadly even to the remotest regions in all four directions, then white pheasants will be seen 王者旁流四表, 則白雉見."²⁵ Alternatively, "Xiaojing yuanshen qi" 孝經援神契 ("Credentials for Assisting the Deities following the Classic of Filial Piety") suggests white pheasants "come when the monarch's sacrifices to the gods and ancestors do not contravene one another, and his food and clothing is moderate 王者祭祀不相踰, 宴食衣服有節, 則至."²⁶ Whether as a sign of royal authority or circumspection, white pheasants carried significant positive connotations, which were widely reported in contemporary writings. Indeed, the first- or third-century AD court report titled *Baihu tong* 白虎通 (*Discussions of the White Tiger Hall*) offers a neat summing-up of Han dynasty understandings of these white animals, stressing that such creatures were essentially bleached by the presence in the world of a truly virtuous king:

As for the reason auspicious validations appear when All-Under-Heaven [enjoys] Great Peace, it is because the monarch has ensured that the succession is maintained in good order and harmonized *yin* and *yang*. When *yin* and *yang* are in harmony, then the myriad beings will keep to their places, lucky pneumas will be abundant, and thus auspicious signs will manifest themselves – they will all arrive in response to virtue... When [the monarch's] virtue reaches

²⁴ *Hou Hanshu* 40B, p. 1373. This piece is also included in Li Shan 李善 et al., *Liuchen zhu Wenxuan* 六臣註文選 (Taipei: Zhongzheng shuju, 1971) 1, p. 16 ("Dongdu fu" 東都賦). An alternative translation of this piece in its entirety can be found in David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature; Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1982), p. 179.

²⁵ *Chunqiu ganjing fu* 春秋感精符, in Zhao Zaihan 趙在翰, comp., *Qiwei* 七緯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994) 27, p. 958. The meaning of this title is discussed in Huang Guozhen 黃國禎, *Dong Zhongshu Chunqiu fanlu yu weishu Chunqiu wei zhi guanxi yanjiu* 董仲舒春秋繁露與緯書春秋緯之關係研究 (Taipei: Hua Mulan chubanshe, 2009), p. 58.

²⁶ The same text also apparently suggested an alternative, quite different interpretation, directed at elite female jealousy: "When the queen is not partial, then white pheasants [will appear] in response 妃房不偏, 故白雉應." This is preserved in a marginal note in *YWL* 99, p. 1713.

to the birds and the beasts, then cock-phoenixes will soar, hen-phoenixes will dance, unicorns will appear, white tigers will arrive, [there will be] foxes with nine tails, white pheasants will descend, white deer will be observed, and white birds will come down [from the skies].²⁷ 天下太平符瑞所以來至者, 以爲王者承統理, 調和陰陽. 陰陽和, 萬物序, 休氣充塞, 故符瑞並臻, 皆應德而至... 德至鳥獸則鳳皇翔, 鸞鳥舞, 麒麟臻, 白虎到, 狐九尾, 白雉降, 白鹿見, 白鳥下.

As with white wolves, auspicious validations featuring white pheasants continued to be widely celebrated throughout the early-medieval period. Thus, the appearance of nineteen white pheasants at locations throughout the empire were reported to the throne at the time of the accession of Cao Pi, emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty 魏文帝曹丕 (r. 220–226).²⁸ Dozens more are recorded in medieval dynastic histories, indicating that such birds remained an important sign of regal authority.²⁹ Both white wolves and white pheasants are unusual only in that their importance as numinous creatures predates the unification of China. During the Han dynasty, they were joined by many other white animals, and this tradition would flourish further in both Chinese and non-Chinese ruling houses during the Period of Disunion.

WHITE CREATURES AS AUSPICIOUS VALIDATIONS IN MEDIEVAL DYNASTIC HISTORIES

From small beginnings in the late-Warring States era, the presence of white animals in literature and the dynastic histories significantly increased during the Han, as more creatures came to be identified as white omens or auspicious validations. While white omens remained relatively rare in the early-medieval period, white animals understood as *ruiying* auspicious validations appear to have exploded in popularity. This contention is based upon two key pieces of evidence. First, only a comparatively small number of white animals appear in Han-era texts as auspicious validations, and early-medieval writers were unable to cite earlier precedents or quote older texts about them. While they might be convinced that white animals had been seen as auspicious at the time of the founding of the Zhou in 1046 BC or even the Shang

²⁷ Chen Li 陳立, *Baihu tong shuzheng* 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), pp. 283–84 (“Fengshan” 封禪).

²⁸ The information that nineteen pheasants in total were reported comes from *Weilue* 魏略 (*Epitome of Wei History*) quoted in *YWLJ* 99, p. 1713. One of these manifestations, however, is reported in the relevant dynastic history; see Chen Shou 陳壽, *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011) 2, p. 59.

²⁹ See *SgS* 29, pp. 863–64; and *WS* 112B, pp. 2964–67.

dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BC), they do not seem to have had access to any written sources prior to the Han. Furthermore, a number of white animals are recorded as auspicious validations in dynastic histories, but without any *ruiying* interpretation attached. This suggests that the Han-era weft-texts did not cover as many creatures as early-medieval writers wished to include in their treatises. Accordingly, it seems that while the synthesis of a *ruiying* type of thought that underpinned reports of white auspicious validations was in fact largely a creation of Han times, this tradition enjoyed a significant further florescence in the courts of the early-medieval period.

The dynastic history *Songshu* devotes three “Furui zhi” chapters to auspicious validations – the first time a dynastic history specifically incorporated a treatise devoted to this topic.³⁰ The chapters provide a very detailed account of changing practices in reporting sightings of numinous animate and inanimate objects from the Han to the Liu-Song (420–479). *Songshu* lists 295 *ruiying* auspicious validations (sometimes single and sometimes clusters) concerning at least 21 different species of creatures.³¹ Losses to the “Furui zhi” in the course of transmission to the present day makes it impossible to gauge just how dominant the white auspicious validations were originally, but in the received text, they significantly outnumber other numinous signs, including appearance of sweet dew (*ganlu* 甘露) (136); entwined trees (108); and auspicious plants (97). Helpfully, the “Furui zhi” treatise also provides interpretative glosses for each kind of numinous white creature, many of which can be directly traced back to Han *ruiying* texts, *Sunshi ruiying tu* 孫氏瑞應圖 (*Mr. Sun’s Charts of Auspicious Resonances*) being of particular importance.³² Of the 21 kinds of white creature mentioned, explanations for how to interpret them are provided for 14, of which

³⁰ The focus on omenology and mantic traditions in this text has long been noted, since of the one hundred chapters of *SgS*, ten are devoted to prognostications and *ruiying* interpretations; see Tiziana Lippiello, “Why Was the Chinese Historian Shen Yue (441–513) So Fond of Auspicious Signs and Prophecies?” *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 3.1 (2022), pp. 1–44.

³¹ *SgS* describes omens involving white mammals (elephants, foxes, bears, tigers, deer, Père David’s deer, wolves, rabbits, and rodents); birds (swallows, crows, sparrows, doves, pheasants, magpies, pigeons, geese, parrots, peacocks, and mynah birds); and fish. Advice on interpretation is presented for all these creatures except rodents, magpies, pigeons, geese, parrots, peacocks, and mynah birds; in addition, the entry for white wolves (which is known to be damaged) is also missing any guide to understanding them.

³² For the vexed textual history of *Ruiying tu* (*Sunshi ruiying tu*), named after its putative author Sun Rouzhi 孫柔之 (dates unknown), see Gong Shixue 龔世學, “Lun Wei Jin Nanbeichao shiqi furui sixiang de zhenghe” 論魏晉南北朝時期符瑞思想的整合, *Lanzhou xuekan* 蘭州學刊 2010.12, pp. 146–50; and Chen Pan 陳槃, *Gu chenwei yantao ji qi shulu jieti* 古識緯研討及其書錄解題 (Taipei: Guoli bianyiguan, 1993), pp. 65–72.

7 are taken from *Sunshi ruiying tu*; in addition, the gloss for rabbits (as signs of the king's veneration of elders) is similar to the wording of this weft-text, but not identical.³³ The advice for interpreting white pheasants was taken from a different weft-text, the previously mentioned "Xiaojing yuanshen qi." This leaves the source of the interpretation given for four kinds of white creature – bears, swallows, sparrows, and fish – completely unknown.

The coverage of auspicious validations in the dynastic history *Nan Qishu* is much less extensive than that in *Songshu*, since it only records signs observed during the course of the dynasty (479–502). Overall, it shows the same pattern as the *Songshu*, with white animals (37 in total: tigers, turtles, fish, sparrows, crows, mice, rabbits, doves, pheasants, and deer), significantly outnumbering any other numinous signs such as sweet dew, entwined trees, and auspicious plants.³⁴ The *Nan Qishu* provides guidance to interpreting only one of these white creatures – tigers – with a short quotation from *Sunshi ruiying tu*.³⁵ In general, *Nan Qishu* is significantly more laconic than *Songshu*, rarely giving more information than the date and geographical location where each auspicious creature was first spotted. In the absence of further evidence, it is impossible to do more than speculate how the *Nan Qishu* authors understood these white animals, but it was likely to have been strongly influenced by Han weft-texts. By contrast, the *Weishu* records 315 auspicious validations observed over the course of the Northern Wei (386–535) and Eastern Wei dynasties (534–550), involving 13 species of white animals including reptiles (turtles); mammals (rodents, foxes, multiple species of deer, wolves, and rabbits); and birds (owls, crows, magpies, swallows, doves, sparrows, and pheasants).³⁶ The weighting of white animals in this dynastic history is also slightly different from both *Songshu* and *Nan Qishu*, with its three most common being sparrows (80), rabbits (59), and pheasants (52). Although only the explanation for the appearance of white rodents is attributed

³³ The interpretation given for the appearance of white rabbits is as follows: "They appear when the king respects the aged 王者敬耆老則見"; see *SgS* 29, p. 837. *Sunshi ruiying tu* says: "When the king shows benevolence to the aged, then white rabbits appear 王者恩加耆老, 則白兔見," as quoted in *YWLJ* 99, 1715. The difference is negligible, but all other quotations from *Sunshi ruiying tu* in *SgS* are verbatim.

³⁴ *Nan Qishu* 18, pp. 349–66.

³⁵ "When the monarch is not violent, white tigers will be benevolent 王者不暴白虎仁"; see *Nan Qishu* 18, pp. 355–56.

³⁶ *WS* 112B, pp. 2927–69. In this text, no interpretation is suggested for owls, magpies, or swallows. This unique reference to a white owl as an auspicious validation is particularly interesting given that otherwise these birds (traditionally said to be unfilial creatures which ate their own parents) were considered extraordinarily unlucky.

directly to *Sunshi ruiying tu*, the interpretation of foxes, deer, Père David's deer, crows, and doves also follow this text. The explanation for the appearance of white rabbits and sparrows is the same as that given in *Songshu*, and white pheasants are again understood in the light of the weft-text "Xiaojing yuanshen qi." This leaves only turtles with an interpretation derived from an unknown source: "This resonates with the king not using public office for private patronage, but respecting elders and being kind to seniors, and not allowing bias or partiality 王者不私人以官，尊耆任舊，無偏黨之應."³⁷ Together, these three dynastic histories suggest that white creatures were extraordinarily significant in early-medieval ideas concerning how blessings were manifested. White auspicious validations vastly outnumber any other colored sign, including red birds, which had a much longer history as numinous creatures stretching deep into antiquity.³⁸

The *Songshu* provides by far the best surviving account of the bureaucratic processes by which white animals reached the court. First, there were auspicious validations that were just "found 得," which are by far the rarest. These are instances in which the emperor personally discovered a white animal when out on a hunt or imperial progress and declared it a lucky sign. *Songshu* reports 6 such instances: on two occasions white unicorns were found by emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BC); one white deer was found by Han emperor Zhang; one white wolf found by king Xuan of Zhou 周宣王 (r. 827/825–782 BC); while a white fish was found by both king Wu of the Zhou and emperor Ming of the Liu-Song 宋明帝 (r. 466–472 AD).³⁹ The other two kinds of auspicious validation mentioned in the *Songshu* treatise, observational 見 and proffered 獻 validations, were much more common. For the former, a white animal was seen in the wild; thus, of the 27 occasions when a white tiger appeared, 26 were merely observed

³⁷ *WS* 112B, p. 2927.

³⁸ The story that red birds (or crows) appeared with texts held in their beaks at the Zhou state altars in the time of the founding king is widely attested to in pre-unification literature; e.g., Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi xiangyu* 墨子閒詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), p. 151 ("Feigong xia" 非攻下); and Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chungiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 682 ("Yingtong" 應同). Also of interest is the text "Zhuhu zhi ji Tang zhi shi" 朱鵠之集湯之室 ("When Red Pigeons Perched on Tang's House"), a looted Warring States-era bamboo document; see Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2012), vol. 3, pp. 166–70. This text has been translated twice into English; see Sarah Allan, "When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House": A Warring States Period Tale of Shamanic Possession and Building Construction Set at the Turn of the Xia and Shang Dynasties," *JRAS* 25.3 (2015), pp. 419–38; and Zhou Boqun, *The Yi Yin Manuscripts and Related Texts* (Beijing: Tsinghua U.P., 2024), pp. 43–68.

³⁹ See *SgS* 28, p. 791, pp. 803, 809; and 29, p. 853, respectively.

from a distance, which might realistically be seen as reflecting the unwillingness of anyone to get close to such a dangerous animal.⁴⁰ Both observational and proffered validations were commonly sponsored; that is, a senior local government official, aristocrat, or member of the imperial house would promote a particular white animal to the central government and monarch as an auspicious validation of the regime.

It seems to have been very difficult for the people who first discovered a white animal to avoid having their moment of glory coopted by members of the elite, but during the early-medieval period, an auspicious validation would nevertheless periodically work its way through layers of bureaucracy without being taken over entirely by someone more powerful. Some people made the very best of such an opportunity to ingratiate themselves with those at the highest echelons of power; hence the *Songshu* records: “In the tenth month of the nineteenth year of the Yuanjia reign-era (442), a white crow hatched in a tree in the house belonging to Liu Yuanxiu of Pengcheng, now resident in Jiyang in Jinling; Yuanxiu made this known 元嘉十九年十月，白鳥產晉陵暨陽僑民彭城劉原秀宅樹，原秀以聞。” The following year, this man capitalized yet further on his good luck: “Liu Yuanxiu of Pengcheng further captured the white crow and presented it 彭城劉原秀又獲白鳥以獻.”⁴¹ Given that Liu Yuanxiu was mentioned nowhere else, it is impossible to know whether he was sufficiently prominent within the regime to retain control of this crow, or whether by wiles or sheer luck, he was able to prevent more senior figures from taking credit for his discovery.

The *Songshu* is also helpful in making it clear that at least some of the white creatures described within its pages must have involved albinos. The laconic accounts given in the other two dynastic histories do not give descriptions of these animals beyond their determinative color. The more detailed accounts found in the “Furui zhi” occasionally include telling details, such as the capture in 441 of a white dove with red eyes by a man named Shang Shibao 商世寶 from Shanyin 山陰 (modern day Shaoxing), for any mention of red eyes can only concern an albino bird.⁴² This is actually a particularly well-documented auspicious validation, for *Songshu* goes on to quote both the memorial

⁴⁰ The exception concerns a white tiger presented to the throne in 61 BC, during the reign of Han emperor Xuan 漢宣帝 (r. 74–48 BC). *Hanshu* 25B, p. 1249, explains that on this occasion the skin, claws, and teeth of the tiger were sent to his majesty, who established a shrine for them.

⁴¹ *SgS* 29, p. 843.

⁴² *SgS* 29, p. 848. This account specifies that the white bird concerned had “both red eyes and legs 眼足並赤.”

to the throne and the “Baijiu song” 白鳩頌 (“Hymn to a White Dove”) composed for the occasion by He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447). The account of a white tiger sighted with its normally colored family in the year 449 is also interesting for the careful distinction it makes between different beasts: “A white tiger was seen halfway up Yang Mountain in southern Langya [commandery], with two [regular] tigers following it; and the governor Wang Sengda (423–458) made this known 白虎見南琅邪半陽山, 二虎隨從, 太守王僧達以聞.”⁴³ Study of the relevant dynastic histories suggests that over time, crucial distinctions emerged within the two main interpretative traditions of *wuxing* white omens and *ruiying* auspicious validations, whereby the former derived their power from a combination of color and location, while the latter were seen as lucky because of their unusual coloration – these were marked as special by their difference from others of their kind. There are, for instance, reports of *wuxing* white omens involving seagulls or egrets perching on the roof of the palace. In such cases, these birds are always white, and the numinous significance of their appearance is derived in part from their color and also from the location in which they chose to place themselves.⁴⁴ By contrast, *ruiying* auspicious validations do seem to have involved creatures that were usually another color, whereby their wonderful, remarkable whiteness made them special signs of heavenly favor.

WHITE ANIMALS IN EARLY-MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A considerable body of literature survives from the early-medieval period about white animals, celebrating their role as auspicious validations. However, surviving poetry and prose often lauds animals who do not commonly appear in dynastic histories, while sometimes hundreds of white creatures are documented in the official histories for which there is little or no associated literature. This discrepancy appears to be the result of the vagaries of text survival from that period. Accordingly,

⁴³ *SgS* 28, p. 809. This is not the only time color variation in a group of animals was commented on. Liu Bing 劉昉 (d. 440) in his “Dunhuang shilu” 敦煌實錄 (“Veritable Records of Dunhuang”) discusses the sighting of a white sparrow in a flock of common brown sparrows, as quoted in Li Fang 李昉 et al., comp., *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960) 922, p. 4094.

⁴⁴ *SgS* 32, p. 944. The wording makes it clear that such birds were omens, and white (associated with Metal) predicted warfare in the future: “Five white seagulls perched on the palace hall. This was another white omen... [The following year, Su] Jun (蘇峻, 294–328) did indeed rise in rebellion, and the palace burned, turning into a wasteland 五鷗鳥集殿庭. 此又白祥也. ... 峻果作亂, 宮室焚毀, 化為汚萊.”

⁴⁵ *SgS* 29, pp. 843–47; *Nan Qishu* 18, p. 357; and *WS* 112B, pp. 2947–53.

an enormous number of white sparrows (*baique* 白雀) are documented in the relevant treatises.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, very little literature on this topic has been transmitted from the early-medieval period, and those poems and prose pieces that do survive are only fragmentary. The prose piece “Wei de lun” 魏德論 (“Disquisition on the Virtue of the Wei”) by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232) informs us that: “At the time when emperor Wu (of the Wei, namely Cao Cao) controlled the government, white sparrows perched on the pagoda trees in the palace grounds 武帝執政日, 白雀集於庭槐”: this is the only line to survive from this section of the work.⁴⁶ What auspicious event this refers to is unknown; however, *Songshu* informs us that at the beginning of the reign of emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty (Cao Cao’s son), nineteen different locales around the empire reported sightings of white sparrows, suggesting that this was an approved auspicious creature heralding Wei rule.⁴⁷ Another court history, titled *Bei Qishu* 北齊書 (*The Book of the Northern Qi Dynasty*) mentions that auspicious validations in the form of white sparrows 白雀之瑞 appeared in response to there being a virtuous government in Linzhang county 臨漳縣 (nowadays located within the suburbs of the city of Handan). This text goes on to say that Fan Xun 樊遜 (d. 565) presented to the throne ten poems on that subject, entitled “Qingde song” 清德頌 (“Hymns to Purity and Virtue”), none of which survive.⁴⁸ The poor preservation of the relevant literature means that the contemporary cultural significance of auspicious validations such as these has been overlooked – they are mentioned only in passing, in conjunction with other numinous animals. This can be seen in the third of Shen Yanzhi’s 沈演之 (397–449) “Baijiu song” 白鳩頌 (“Hymns to a White Dove”; the same title as that given by He Chengtian for his hymns, as mentioned earlier):

禮樂孔秩	The Rites and Music were greatly placed in order,
靈物咸昭	Numinous creatures all shine bright.
白雀集苞	White sparrows perch in the bullrushes,

⁴⁶ Zhao Youwen 趙幼文, *Cao Zhi ji jiaozhu* 曹植集校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1998), p. 216. According to Pi, *Shangshu zhonghou*, p. 672, in the time of Lord Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (r. 659–621 BC), a thunderbolt fell and metamorphosized into a white sparrow that perched on his chariot. This story is later also referenced in Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127–200) commentary on the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Classic of Songs*); see Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 954 (Mao 235: “Wenwang” 文王).

⁴⁷ *SgS* 29, p. 843. As befits the beginning of a new dynasty, during the inaugural year of emperor Wen’s reign people reported seeing white rabbits and white doves. In each case, 19 commanderies or kingdoms reported such sightings, out of the 26 commanderies and 12 kingdoms that made up the empire. In other words, regions comprising half the empire saw the appearance of such auspicious animals.

⁴⁸ Li Baiyao 李百藥, *Bei Qishu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) 45, p. 608.

丹鳳棲郊	Red phoenixes nest in the suburbs
文驪儷跡	Dappled horses move in pairs,
嘉穎擢苗	Fine ears of grain are put forth from shoots. ⁴⁹
灼灼綈羽	Shining white [are the doves'] limpid feathers,
從化馴朝	As it becomes domesticated and obediently lives at court. ⁵⁰

Much the same pattern can be seen with white deer. There are dozens of auspicious validations recorded in dynastic histories, but very little literature survives. There is an extremely short, fragmentary “Bailu song” 白鹿頌 (Hymn to a White Deer) by Xue Zong 薛綜 (d. 243) which is preserved in the early florilegia titled *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (*Record of Primary Knowledge*).⁵¹ There are just two sentences (probably the opening lines) surviving from “Shang bailu biao” 上白鹿表 (“Memorial to the Throne on a White Deer”) by Yin Zhongkan 殷仲堪 (d. 399): “A white deer has been found at Qingshui Mountain in Baling county. White is the proper color, while deer are auspicious and lucky 巴陵縣清水山, 得白鹿一頭。白者正色, 鹿者景福嘉義。”⁵² Another piece, “Song Xiaowudi zai Pengcheng canzuo qinghuo bailu jian” 宋孝武帝在彭城參佐慶獲白鹿牋 (“Address on the Song Emperor Xiaowu’s Presence at Pengcheng When a Subordinate Was Lucky Enough to Capture a White Deer”) is today represented by just a single extant line: “I prostrate myself to offer up this white deer captured at East Mountain in Pengcheng, luminous in appearance and shining like jade, by nature obedient and gentle 伏承獲白鹿於彭城之東山, 皓質玉映, 育性馴和。”⁵³ These quotations all seem

⁴⁹ This line alludes to the wording of *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (*Records Gleaned from Surviving Texts*) by Wang Jia 王嘉 (d. 390): “Yandi first taught people the use of plough and hoe... so sacred fungi put forth their strange colors and numinous sprouts put forth fine ears of grain 炎帝始教民耒耜... 神芝發其異色、靈苗擢其嘉穎”; see Wang Jia 王嘉, *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 5 (“Yandi Shennong” 炎帝神農).

⁵⁰ *SgS* 29, p. 849.

⁵¹ Xu Jian 徐堅, *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004) 29, p. 715. Two couplets are quoted here: “Shining bright is the white deer,/ Obedient and good in character./ Its appearance is indeed luminous and dazzling,/ Like a wild swan, like the frost 皎皎白鹿, 體質馴良。其質皓曜, 如鴻如霜。”

⁵² *YWLJ* 95, p. 1649. This line alludes to a very ancient classification of color, in which green, red, yellow, white, and black were categorized as “proper” (*zheng* 正) and other colors were considered *jian* (variously written as 間 “intermediate”), or 姦 (“wicked”). Ritual texts prescribed wearing “proper colors” for specific garments; see for example Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 895 (“Yuzao” 玉藻); and *Baihutong*, p. 366 (“Sanzheng” 三正).

⁵³ *YWLJ* 95, p. 1649. *SgS* 28, p. 805, records that what appears to be this omen was discovered in the year 446, and that it was presented to the throne by Liu Yiji, king of Hengyang 衡陽王劉義季 (415–447). He should therefore probably be understood as the speaker of this address, authorship of which is unknown.

to have been selected for the refined language they used to describe whiteness, while the remainder of such texts fell into oblivion.

THE SYMBOL OF THE JIN DYNASTY: WHITE RABBITS

Considering the terrible loss of early-medieval literature about numinous white animals, it is striking that so much has survived about rabbits. Weft texts contain various explanations for why rabbits were important auspicious symbols. First, as mentioned above, they were interpreted as manifestations of the ruler's virtues in caring for the elderly. (This was possibly connected to the belief that rabbits were capable of living for anything up to a thousand years, transforming into white rabbits at the age of five hundred).⁵⁴ The appearance of white rabbits at a person's tomb seems to have been understood since at least the time of the Han dynasty as being called forth by the presence of a filial child. Unlike many white omens, therefore, white rabbits could have a nonimperial interpretation, in which the role of the monarch was disregarded. There do not appear to have been many appearances of white rabbits at tombs: Pei Ziye 裴子野 (469–530), whose biography as a filial child is appended to that of his great-grandfather Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451), is an unusual example of such a manifestation.⁵⁵ A much more ambiguous omen of this kind is found in the account of the burial of Liu Zhirong 劉智容 (423–472), who died before her husband, Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成, could become the founding emperor of the Southern Qi dynasty (r. 479–482). White rabbits are said to have appeared before and after the construction of her tomb; however, this is associated with the Xiao family's rise to power by its juxtaposition with the information that she was posthumously appointed as lady of the state of Jingling 竟陵公國夫人 in 478; and then consort of the state of Qi 齊國妃; before finally becoming honored as empress Zhao 昭皇后 in 479.⁵⁶ The lack of reference to filial piety and the strong association of these events with the Xiao family's imperial ambitions suggests that these tomb rabbits should be regarded as presaging the family's rise to power.

Although a great deal of rabbit-related literature survives, many pieces are known to have been lost. According to the *Songshu's* "Furui zhi," in 359 a white rabbit was observed at Poyang, which was then captured and presented to the court by the governor, Wang Qizhi 王耆

⁵⁴ See *Baopuzi*, p. 47 ("Duisu" 對俗). The same transformative qualities are also attributed to deer and tigers in this text.

⁵⁵ Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 33, p. 865.

⁵⁶ *Nan Qishu* 20, pp. 390–91.

之, along with a hymn, which, sadly, does not survive.⁵⁷ Wang Qizhi, the sponsor of this animal, is likely to have been unusually conscious of auspicious validations of this kind, since his father, Wang Yi 王廙 (276–322), had earlier composed a rhapsody on white rabbits.⁵⁸ Two sections of Wang Yi’s rhapsody have been transmitted to the present day: an extensive quotation of the introduction entitled “Preface to the Rhapsody on White Rabbits” (“Baitu fu xu” 白兔賦序) is preserved in the commonplace book *Yiwen leiju*, and the rhapsody itself (here directly following the preface) is given in *Chuxue ji* under the title “A Rhapsody on Rabbits” (“Tu fu” 兔賦):

When the chancellor and king of Langya (Sima Rui 司馬睿, later emperor Yuan of Jin 晉元帝; r. 318–323) first took up office, he guarded the northern regions, and thus they were suffused by benevolent breezes, turning people’s faces and changing their hearts.⁵⁹ In the past when Dan [Duke of] Zhou acted as regent [for king Cheng of Zhou], the Yuechang people presented white pheasants using multiple interpreters: this functions as a precedent and for many centuries it has been the subject of praise. Now our king has rectified and assisted the dynasty, and this has brought forth an omen of white rabbits. This could be described as the same kind of situation, equal to our former sage-kings.⁶⁰ 丞相琅邪王, 始受旄節, 作鎮北方, 仁風所被, 迴面革心. 昔周旦翼成, 越裳重譯而獻白雉, 著在前典, 歷代以爲美談. 今在我王, 匡濟皇維, 而有白兔之應. 可謂重規累矩, 不忝先聖也.

曰皇大晉	The august great Jin dynasty
祖宗重光	Has inherited the glory of the imperial ancestors.
固坤厚以爲基兮	The solidity of Earth forms its foundations,
廓乾維以爲綱	The vastness of Heaven forms its guiding principles.
方將朝服濟江	Soon the court will move across the river,
傳檄萬國	As has been announced to the myriad states. ⁶¹

⁵⁷ This omen is recorded in *SgS* 29, p. 837.

⁵⁸ This event was specifically mentioned in Wang Yi’s “Zhongxing fu” 中興賦 (“Rhapsody on Mid-Dynastic Revival”), which is quoted in full in his official biography; see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 76, p. 2003.

⁵⁹ This is a remarkably flattering way to refer to Sima Rui’s short stint as a general in the north during the War of the Eight Kings in 304. This was the only time that he ventured north, and it ended in ignominious flight.

⁶⁰ *YWLJ* 95, p. 1650.

⁶¹ This rhapsody otherwise shows a strong AABCC pattern of rhyming couplets, so the

反梓宮於舊塋兮 [You] will return the imperial coffins to
their old burial grounds,
奉聖帝乎洛陽 Helping our wise emperor at Luoyang.
建中興之遐祚兮 Creating the endless blessings of a
dynastic revival,
與二儀乎比長 Which we will enjoy for all eternity.
於是古之 Thus ever since antiquity:
有德則納瑞而永安 The virtuous have received auspicious
omens and eternal peace.
無德則不勝而爲災 The wicked have failed and disasters
have occurred.
赤鳥降於周文兮 Red crows descended for [King] Wen of
the Zhou dynasty,
尙稱曰休哉 And Shang [Fu] exclaimed: Marvelous
indeed!⁶²
桑穀生於殷庭兮 Mulberries and grains grew in the
court of the Yin dynasty,⁶³
中宗克己以成仁 Zhongzong controlled himself to achieve
benevolence.⁶⁴
雉登夫鼎耳兮 A crying pheasant climbed onto the lugs
of their bronze ding,⁶⁵
武丁責躬而教純 Wuding criticized himself and his instruc-
tions were purified.⁶⁶

The preface and rhapsody can be dated with some confidence to around 316–317, given the titles accorded by the preface writer to Sima

appearance of a single rhyme here from the *zhi* 職 group suggests textual loss at this point; see Axel Schuessler, *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 2009), p. 108.

⁶² The important role played by Shang Fu 尙父, an honorific applied to Lü Wang 呂望, the founder of the state of Qi (in the Shandong peninsula) and key supporter of the first Zhou monarch; see *Mao Shi zhengyi*, p. 976 (Mao 236: “Daming” 大明); and Wang Pinzhen 王聘珍, *Da Dai Liji jiegou* 大戴禮記解詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), pp. 103–7 (“Wuwang jianzuo” 武王踐阼).

⁶³ The sudden growth of mulberry and grain was an evil omen, and these unlucky plants withered away and died when good government was introduced; see *Shiji* 3, p. 100.

⁶⁴ Zhongzong was the title of King Taiwu of the Shang dynasty 商太戊, whose reign was accounted particularly successful. By claiming he “controlled himself,” the Shang king was invested with a virtue strongly associated with Confucian thinking; see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 123 (12.1: “Yan Yuan” 顏淵).

⁶⁵ According to a story preserved in the *Shangshu* 尙書 (*Classic of Documents*), a good omen of this kind was indeed observed in the reign of King Wuding of the Shang dynasty 商武丁; see Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Shangshu zhengyi* 尙書正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 254 (“Gaozong rong ri” 高宗彤日).

⁶⁶ *Chuxue ji* 29, pp. 716–17.

Rui, the future emperor Yuan of the Jin dynasty, and the reference in the rhapsody text to the dynasty's move south of the Yangtze River. The numinous white rabbits documented in the preface were not apparently recorded elsewhere, perhaps because this auspicious validation was being privately interpreted as presaging the rise to power of Sima Rui, who had commissioned the composition of the rhapsody. Wang Yi was first cousin to Sima Rui (their mothers were sisters) and thus had a vested interest in proclaiming his fitness to rule. The survival of Wang's highly flattering panegyric verse most likely represents premature acclaim for a future emperor, its contents rendered acceptable by his accession to the throne in 318. The rhapsody repeatedly refers to signs associated with mid-dynastic revival (for example, the red crows), suggesting that Sima Rui would himself soon accomplish a similar feat, and places a very favorable gloss upon the regime's forced move to the south following the conquest of large parts of northern China by nomadic peoples in the years immediately prior.

Although Wang Yi's son Qizhi's hymn on the discovery of a white rabbit in the Poyang region has not survived, there are other writings which have been associated with these events by later scholars. When compiling surviving writings for his *Quan Jinwen* 全晉文 (*Complete Prose of the Jin*), Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843) decided that the short quotation preserved in the *Yiwen leiju* from a text entitled “He baitu biao” 賀白兔表 (“Memorial of Congratulations on a White Rabbit”) by Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373) was written to commemorate this occasion in 359. There are, however, reasons to be concerned about this attribution, not least because Huan Wen seems to be writing about a rabbit found in a different geographical location:⁶⁷

Your subject has heard that when perfect virtue permeates the empyrean then auspicious omens are sent down; and when the numinous is in harmony [with the government] then strange creatures are born. Now a white rabbit has been observed in Chungu county, luminous in appearance, pure and pale, a remarkable spectacle of pearly brightness!⁶⁸ 臣聞至德通玄，則禎祥降，靈和所感，則異物生。今白兔見于春穀縣，皓質純素，皦然殊觀！

⁶⁷ Huan Wen's rabbit was found in what is now Anhui province; the rabbit commemorated by Wang Qizhi was found in Jiangxi province.

⁶⁸ *YWL* 95, p. 1651; and Yan Kejun 嚴可均, comp., *Quan Jinwen* 全晉文; in *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985) 118, p. 2135.

This is far from being the only such memorial to survive: similar congratulatory memorials were composed by the future emperor Jianwen of the Liang dynasty 梁簡文帝 (r. 549–551), and by Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581), which only survive in fragmentary form.⁶⁹ Since the quotations that survive were selected purely for their beautiful language in describing the whiteness of these animals' fur, nothing more is known about the occasion of these omens. However, the (possibly fragmentary) poem by Zhang Jun 張浚 (dates unknown) strongly indicates that above and beyond any interest in documenting the remarkable color of these animals' fur, early-medieval writers understood white rabbits as a symbol of the Jin dynasty. His "Baitu song" 白兔頌 ("Hymn to a White Rabbit") reads:

其毛春素	Their fur is pale in spring,
織毫秋黑	A thick pelt that darkens in the autumn.
點綴五采	When touched with the five colors,
漸染粉墨	They can turn either powder [white] or inky [black].
蓋久隱時見	When sighted after long periods in hidden burrows,
應世德也	They correspond to the virtues of the age.
徐疾備體	Now slow, now fast, they are ready for anything,
達消息也	They proclaim the rise and fall [of dynasties].
姿質皓朗	In appearance, they are luminous and bright,
民之則也	These are principles for the people.
被白含文	Their white mantles taken on coloration,
好無極也	Goodness is without limits.
秦失鹿於近郊	The Qin lost their deer in the nearby suburbs, ⁷⁰
晉得兔於遠境	The Jin found their rabbits at the distant borders. ⁷¹

The importance of rabbits as a dynastic totem is not something that is stressed in Jin literature on the *ruiying* auspicious validations. Certainly, rabbits are never explicitly defined in this way. However, it was apparently a widely held belief, and one that is mentioned both in literary works such as "Baitu song" and in contemporary historical accounts. For example, *Jinshu* records a supernatural story about Murong Huang 慕容皝 (297–348; posthumously entitled emperor Wenming of Yan 燕文明帝), who died from injuries sustained while hunting. It is likely that his determination to capture the white rabbit was because

⁶⁹ *YWLJ* 95, p. 1651.

⁷⁰ The locus classicus of this famous expression is *Shiji* 92, p. 2629.

⁷¹ *YWLJ* 95, p. 1651.

of its importance as a symbol of Jin rule – his premature demise meant that it would be his son and heir, Murong Jun 慕容俊 (r. 353–360), who in 353 declared himself the founding emperor of the Yan dynasty:

When [Murong] Huang was about to cross the river, he encountered an old man, dressed in cinnabar robes and riding on a white horse. He raised his hand and waved Huang away, saying: “This is not a place for hunting, your majesty ought to turn back.” He kept this a secret and did not speak about it. When he crossed the river, a great hunt was held on consecutive days. Afterwards he saw a white rabbit, raced after it and shot it, but his horse fell and [Murong Huang] was injured: only then did he speak of what he had seen.⁷² 將濟河，見一父老，服硃衣，乘白馬，舉手麾黜曰：“此非獵所，王其還也。”秘之不言，遂濟河，連日大獲。後見白兔，馳射之，馬倒被傷，乃說所見。

This story may well be entirely fictional, for other accounts indicate that Murong Huang died of disease.⁷³ What is important, however, is the symbolism of the white rabbit. In 353, when Murong Jun declared himself emperor of Yan, he ruled over vast territories north and south of the Yellow River that he had taken from the Jin. His father shot a white rabbit but failed to capture the lands it represented; Murong Jun would make sure that he did not make the same mistake.

CONCLUSION

Today, white animals are everywhere as a result of captive breeding programs that have produced vast numbers of white mice, rabbits, doves and other such creatures. This gives white animals a presence in the modern world that they would not have had in any earlier era: in other words, they seem familiar to us today. Yet in China of this earlier time, their rarity – even when supplemented by white creatures from faraway realms and species with seasonally white coats or plumage – fed into interpretations of white animals as numinous creatures that required study of special mantic texts to decode. Eventually, thanks to the development of the *ruiying* tradition, they were understood as signs of dynastic success and validation of the virtues of the monarch, and thus celebrated in poetry and prose. Although this is a tradition which

⁷² *Jinshu* 109, p. 2826.

⁷³ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956) 98, p. 3084. This text records Murong Huang's instructions to his son and heir while critically ill 疾, though admittedly it does not explain how his condition came about.

demonstrably had its roots in the pre-unification period, it seems that the early-medieval period saw a significant expansion of this form of auspicious validation, with the dynastic histories reporting large numbers of such creatures (more indeed than any other kind of numinous sign), and involving an ever-increasing number of different species. Through the process of discovery, reporting, and proffering of white animals to the court and imperial house, a large number of people, from locals in every corner of the empire up to the emperor himself, appreciated in common the appearance of a white animal as token of divine approval for the regime and its representatives.

To the literati elite of early-medieval China, the color of these creatures was deeply meaningful; this is at least partly explained by their having been trained by weft-texts in the tradition of *ruiyi* interpretation, which saw a number of different species of white animals understood as auspicious signs of good government. By assuring readers that white animals had manifested themselves long ago, at the courts of the sage-kings of antiquity, these writings reinforced the auspicious nature of such sightings, linking the natural world and the political realm, as well as flattering whatever regime was in power with the notion that they represented the greatest virtues and most profound cultural values to the point that they too, as with the ancients, had called forth a response from the natural world.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HS	Ban Gu 班固, <i>Hanshu</i> 漢書
SgS	Shen Yue 沈約, <i>Songshu</i> 宋書
WS	Wei Shou 魏收, <i>Weishu</i> 魏書
YWLJ	Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢, <i>Yiwen leiju</i> 藝文類聚