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## 論不同文化中鳥的象徵意義 — 激發學生學習英語興趣之途徑

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### 摘要

本文係為提供一種引起學生學習英語興趣的方法，藉以激發其想像力，正如大自然中的現象，提供許多令人產生趣味的主題，茲以鳥為例。由於鳥有能力飛翔，古代文明曾視其為天堂與地獄的信使。鳥拍擊其翅膀，可產生雷鳴和風；或伸展其翅膀，可飛翔到天庭，亦是代表太陽與天空眾神最具權威之地。近代飛機的發明主要來自鳥給予的靈感。本文目的係以神話色彩，討論鳥的各種意義。在有關文獻中，前人研究並未嘗試比較東方與西方有關鳥的神話。在本文中，為便於理論分析，特建立一個架構，用以探索鳥的象徵意義，以及人性與鳥性的關係。同時也比較在不同文化和宗教上對鳥的看法，並探討鳥與文學的關係。然後提出有效教學方法，以期增加學生學習興趣。

關鍵字：鳥、神話、象徵、傳奇、文學。

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## ***The Cross-cultural Symbolism of Birds - An Approach to Arousing Students' Interest in Learning English***

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper provides an approach to learning English which may stimulate the imagination of students. For example, the abundant phenomena of Mother Nature provide us with many subjects of great interest, one example of which is birds. Since most birds have the ability to fly, they were often regarded by ancient civilizations as mediators between Heaven and Earth, with their wings representing their power. Birds would beat their wings so as to create thunder and wind, or they would spread them out so that they might soar into the heavens to reach the highest powers of all, the sun and sky gods. The invention of airplanes mainly originated from the inspiration provided by birds. In order to achieve the purpose stated above, this paper considers the various meanings attributed to birds in a mythical context. A brief review of the relevant literature indicates the tendency of prior studies to deal only with the mythology of birds per se, with no attempt having been made to undertake any comparison between Western and Oriental mythology. The author goes on to examine the theoretical considerations, build a framework for analysis, and explore the symbolic meanings of birds, as well as the human characteristics of birds. The author also undertakes comparisons between birds in different cultures and religions, and explores the relationship between birds and literature. While outlining the conclusions drawn, suggestions are also made for an effective approach to arousing students' interest in learning English through the exploration of birds within a mythical context.*

***Keywords:*** *birds, mythology, symbolism, legends, literature*

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## Introduction

This paper sets out to provide an approach to arousing students' interest in learning English through stimulating their imagination. The abundant phenomena of Mother Nature provide us with many subjects of great interest, a good example of which is birds. Since almost all species of birds have the ability to fly, they would often have been regarded by ancient civilizations as mediators between Heaven and Earth, with their wings representing their power. Birds would beat their wings in order to create the thunder and the wind, or they would spread them out so that they might soar into the heavens to reach the highest powers of all, the sun and sky gods. Since birds were also often regarded as resembling gods, ancient civilizations came to hold the idea that birds were either the incarnations of gods, or their messengers, with their unheralded arrivals announcing new situations in advance of their occurrence, thereby providing prophetic guidance.

Birds have been widely used to symbolize the soul or spirit of mankind, as it is released from the body, either in joy or in death, while a bird is also regarded as being a symbol of the absolute freedom of the soul from the body, the ultimate transcendence of the spiritual over the earthly. Birds, in general, came to be widely linked to speed of thought, and with abundant wisdom, in the sense of very broad knowledge. Thus, associations have regularly been made between birds and divinity, immortality, power, wisdom, and royalty.

As a result of their typical behavior, and their well established place in legend, certain birds have come to be regarded as symbolically possessing specific attributes. Larks, for example, are seen as representing dawn, while nightingales symbolize the night, and swallows and cuckoos herald the arrival of spring. In some cultures, however, certain birds are regarded as ill omens, particularly ravens and vultures. The owl is also widely associated

with supernatural powers; indeed, it is often seen as the bird of death.

More usually, however, birds have come to be regarded as auspicious, with the stork being assigned the role of bringing new-born babies to earth, the albatross being regarded as an omen of good luck, given its position as the savior of sailors, while an encounter with magpies is also believed to bring good luck. Since it is evident that birds have played important roles in the creation myths of many cultures, it is suggested that the study of birds in a mythical context should prove to be both meaningful and interesting.

In order to discuss the various meanings attributed to birds in a mythical context, the author adopts the deductive approach to utilize all possible second-hand data as the basis for analysis. The sequence of the analysis is to provide a brief review of the relevant literature, to examine the theoretical considerations, to build a framework for an analysis and explore the symbolic meanings of birds, as well as the human characteristics of birds. Comparisons between birds in different cultures and religions, and exploration of the relationship between birds and literature are also undertaken. While outlining the conclusions drawn from the analysis, suggestions are also made with regards to arousing students' interest in learning English through the study of birds within a mythical context. The final section provides concluding remarks.

### **Review of the Relevant Literature**

Scholarly interest in the examination of mythology, in both Western and Oriental cultures, has already received significant attention; the focus in most studies, however, tends to be the sources and meanings of myths, with very little discussion having been devoted, for example, to the mythology surrounding birds. In particular, within the extant literature there are, as yet, no comparative studies of the mythology of birds among different cultures.

According to Jawaharlal Handoo's "Cultural Attitudes to Birds and Animals in Folklore," the attitudes towards birds and animals in Indian folklore provide examples of the "dialectic of social metaphor".<sup>1</sup> Here the world-making process is related to two cultural constructs, the world of animals which is consciously modeled on human society, and an imaginary world "peopled" with animal actors. This imaginary world, which is essentially confined to the realms of folklore, is easily differentiated from the "real" world simply by inverting the characteristics of its animal inhabitants in relation to their real-world counterparts. Thus, the larger beasts, such as the elephant, that are supposedly powerful and wise, are portrayed as weak and foolish, while the smaller creatures, those that seem to be of little importance, are credited in folklore with wisdom and courage, as can be seen in the special treatment of birds within a mythical context.

In "*Birds and the Hand of Power: a Political Geography of Avian Life in the Gansu Corridor, Ninth to Tenth Centuries*," Lewis Mayo discusses the specific recording of the origin of birds, which are said to have come from *Ganjun Shan*, the Ganjun mountains near Ganzhou, the major center at the heart of the Gansu (甘肅) corridor in China. Within this myth of the precise identification of avian origins, the goshawks marked Zhang Yichao's annexations, from the 840s to the 860s, of territories in the areas to the east of Dunhuang (敦煌). These goshawks were the fruits and pleasures of conquest, and indeed, the subjugation of these creatures was an outcome of the subjection of the corridor itself to the military authority of Zhang Yichao; thus, the necessary condition for the possession of violent birds by political forces was in fact the history of political violence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Willis (1994), *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*, p.38.

<sup>2</sup> See Mayo (2002), "Birds and the Hand of Power: Political Geography of Avian Life in the Gansu Corridor, Ninth to Tenth Centuries," *East Asian History*, 24, 1-66.

In his book, *The Belief in Birds in China: Thoughts on the Universal View of the Evolution of Birds* (中國鳥信仰 — 關於鳥化宇宙觀的思想), Chien-jan Chen (陳勤建) focuses on the sun-raven, a bird which, within the Chinese mythical context, is said to have three legs(三足鳥). Chen, however, has also made no attempt to compare avian mythology across different cultures.

As yet, there are no further references to birds from a comparative approach within a mythological context.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Although humans are often seen as the prime element of Great Nature (or Mother Nature), their acquaintance with her is, nevertheless, very limited; with the evolution of human beings, however, there has been a certain gradual awakening of the acquaintance with Great Nature. Certain occurrences in Nature, which very often have an enormous impact on our lives, cannot be explained or verified through academic intellect, a scientific approach, or the religious precepts of typical Western or Oriental thinking. Clearly, we cannot totally ignore certain proven knowledge that has stood the test of time; however, we can also not ignore certain supernatural and mystical encounters that some people still experience today.

Birds of various forms have consistently appeared in mythology, as symbols of celestial power. Their ability to fly provides them with the power to transcend the realm of the earth, and disappear into the realm of the sky, with their wings being the key to this power. The birds of myth would beat their wings to create thunder and wind, or spread them out to soar into the heavens and reach the highest powers of all, the sun and the sky gods. The origin of all bird mythology would have stemmed from the ancients' acquaintance with birds, creatures which they believed were the embodiment

of, or closely linked to, deities. Thus, the basis for the symbolism of birds would have originated from imagination and would have been largely based on significant experiences. As suggested by Danesi (1993),

“the imagination is an epiphenomenal product of brain functioning which conferred upon the first reflective humans the ability to map mental images onto the beings, objects and events that the senses had captured, and thus to make associations and connections between them” (P.50).

There would, therefore, have been a strong tendency for primitive people to assimilate all of their outer sense experiences into more personal, inner, psychic events. Clearly, however, there would also have been a general lack of understanding, among those who survived by means of hunting or raising flocks and herds, as to why, for example, animals should assume such major roles in religious events, as well as economic and social activities.

The religious significance of animals takes various forms. Those humans who relied on hunting might have shown reverence to animals as a way of attempting to ensure fame, and since they could not explain the experiences that had built up over many centuries, they simply supposed that they were mysteries. Thereafter, with a growing sense of achievement from their experiences, ancient people began to form certain belief. For example, in certain religions, there was a belief that animals were closely associated with gods. The ancient Egyptians, for example, worshipped certain birds which they believed to be divine incarnations.

Another form of the sacred relationship between men and animals is found in “totemism”, which reached its most complex development among the aborigines of Australia. This affiliation is believed to link certain clans to certain animal species, under the belief that both the human group and the

animal species share a common ancestor; it is also believed that human members of the totemic group may ultimately be reincarnated in the form of the totem animal. Among these peoples, the men show reverence to a certain kind of bird as their “elder brother”, and refuse to injure any of the species, while the women have the same reverence for another kind of bird as their “elder sister”.

The origins of animal symbolism are closely linked with both totemism and animal worship.<sup>3</sup> People felt that through worship, the gods could be influenced to help them or save them from difficult or dangerous environments. Over time, the gradual accumulation of human experience gave rise to vivid images, both rational and irrational. It is clear that many myths were created through imagination and experience; thus, no scientific instrument could be used to either validate, or invalidate, these creations.

Vico (1668-1744) regarded the primitive myths of the world to be narrative descriptions of environmental events, while Jung (1968) held myths to be purely psychological, with the appearance of birds used merely as a means of expression. Jung supposed that mythology linked the inner world to the outer world by personifying the impersonal nature of the latter; thus, it was not sufficient for primitive people to simply observe birds, since this external observation must, at the same time, represent a psychic happening. Early people would therefore have tended to symbolize everything that appeared to them, given that Great Nature revealed herself to them in symbols.

There are many ideas and concepts for the expression of imagination,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Frazer, “A ‘totem’ is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relationship .... The connection between a man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totem protects in various ways, by not killing it if it be an animal ....” See Strachey (1950), p.139.

such as myths, legends, folklore, and literature, all of which would naturally stem from the fantasy of people, and indeed, for many centuries, ancient civilizations were simply affirming their belief that all forms of natural phenomena were acted by Mother Natures. Myths and legends provided our early ancestors with a narrative framework for literally “making sense” of natural events and human actions, thereby giving meaning and value to life. This relationship between natural phenomena, myths, legend, folklore and literature has been illustrated by the author, from an evolutionary perspective, in Figure 1.

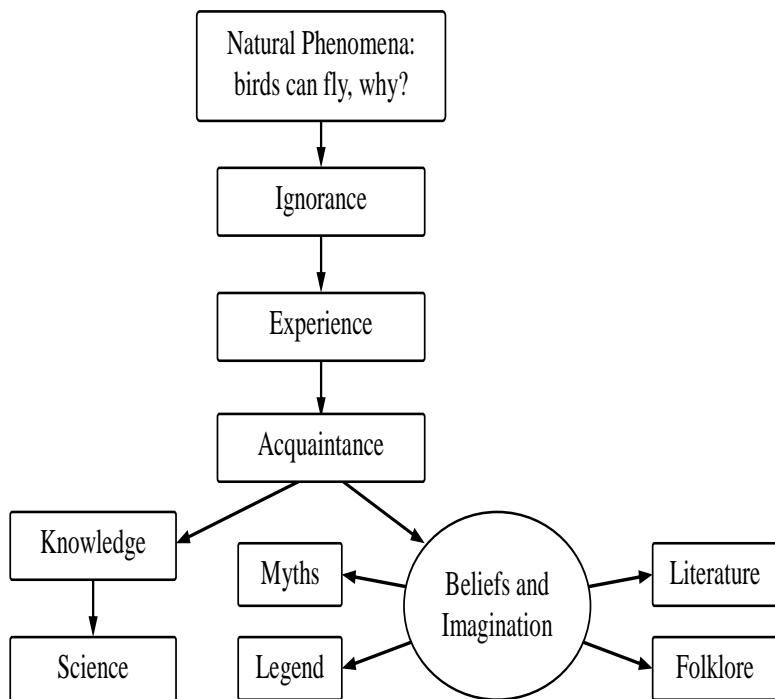


Figure 1 The theoretical relationship between natural phenomena, myths, legend, folklore, and literature<sup>4</sup>

As the figure 1 suggests, acquaintance are formed based upon experience,

<sup>4</sup> This figure 1, which was originally designed by the author, has since been modified several times.

which subsequently interacts with imagination to lay the fountains for myths, legend, folklore, and literature. However, it is evident that these relationships could never be verified through experimentation, or they would then simply become science.

### **The Symbolism of Birds in Mythology**

Since the very beginning of human life on earth, close relationships between people and birds have sprung up, essentially the result of the reverence birds have earned through their ability to fly. With the subsequent evolution of human beings, this acquaintance with birds has gradually developed further, changing from myth to reality. The mythology of birds is rich, as a result of their ability to fly, which enables them to transcend the realm of the earth and disappear into the realm of the sky.

### **Relating Birds to the Sun**

Myths relating birds to the sun emerged in many different lands. In China, for example, the sun was supposed to have once been a cockerel, since this bird was greatly admired, not only as a courageous bird, but also as a beneficent one. Similarly, in Russian legend, the firebird, which was colored red like the sun, was also a type of cockerel. In Mayan folklore, the hummingbird is said to be the sun in disguise, constantly trying to seduce the moon, which is regarded as a beautiful woman (Binney, 2006, p.244).

Many other types of birds have also appeared as solar symbols. For example, the common association with the sun which was frequently bestowed on eagles and hawks was probably due to their ability to soar high into the heavens. The Egyptian sun gods, Horus and Ra, were both hawk-headed. The hawk was worshipped throughout Egypt, with a winged disk representing the power of the sun. In Peru, the great condor was worshipped for centuries as the earthly representation of the sun (Andrews,

1998, p.26).

### **Relating Birds to Clouds and Storms**

With their apparent ability to tap into the power of the sun, birds could also harness other sky powers. In ancient India, the fluffy white cirrus clouds were seen as swans,<sup>5</sup> while the threatening black clouds in Scandinavia were thought to be ravens, and in China, the fabulous peng niao (鵬鳥), which had wings like the clouds of heaven, could attain speeds of up to 3,000 li (里) at every swoop. It is even said that the Chinese thunder god, Lei Kung (雷公), was originally believed to be a bird.

Birds were often seen as wind deities, as were the Garuda bird of India and the thunderbird of North American legend, flapping their wings to create winds and storms. Following the ravages of winter, the appearance of birds each spring led to the belief that these winged creatures were the ones that possessed the power to deliver the wind and rains that accompanied the arrival of spring. In addition to its reverence as a solar symbol, the eagle is often regarded as a storm and thunder symbol, suggesting both light and fertilizing power.<sup>6</sup>

### **Relating Birds to Creation**

Birds constantly appear in the mythology of world creation, with the tales often centering on the theme of the “cosmogonic dive” or diver. In the beginning, when all that existed were the waters, aquatic birds (such as ducks, swans, or geese) would dive to the bottom of the primeval ocean to fetch a particle of soil. Such birds would sometimes dive under the orders of God, and

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Swans which were associated in mythology with the white clouds that formed the chariot of the Norse sun god, Freyr, are deemed to be sacred throughout northern Europe. Indeed, in Britain, all swans are protected by law. See Binney (2006), p.152.

<sup>6</sup> Usually described as a kind of eagle, the Garuda bird had a long beak and brightly colored feathers, predominantly of red, green and blue. See Andrews (1998), p.79.

sometimes through their own initiative, but in some variants, God transformed himself into a bird to make such dives. Earth divers also appear in a number of North American Indian cosmogonic myths. The result of these courageous dives would always be the same; a small particle of soil brought up during the dive miraculously grew until it became the world as it is today. In the Taiwanese legend of the Tzou (鄒族) family, the formation of all heaven and earth was undertaken by a small bird.

### **Relating to Birds as Messengers**

Because birds could traverse heaven and earth, they were often seen as serving as messengers between gods and people, with many cultures entrusting birds with the task of proclaiming omens and revealing the secrets of deities. The parrot is a messenger forming the link between humanity and the spirit world. In view of their talkative nature, parrots were often associated with prophecy, both in India and Central America. The cockerel is a familiar messenger of the underworld in Celtic and Nordic traditions, leading souls, calling the dead to battle, or warning the gods of danger (Tresidder, 1998, p.49).

### **Bringers of ill omen**

In Greek mythology, the raven is portrayed as indiscreetly revealing secrets. It is said that the raven's feathers were originally white but were blackened by Apollo to punish it for divulging secrets. On the other hand, both American and Aboriginal Australian myths explain the crow's black plumage as a mishap, therefore reading no ill-omen into the coloring.

The silent, predatory night flights, eerie cry, and staring eyes of the owl have linked it with the powers of darkness, as well as with occult powers enabling it to see into the future. It was regarded as the bird of death in ancient Egypt, India, and both Central and North America. The owl is also considered

to be a bird lacking in filial piety, while in China, the voice of the owl was “universally heard with dread, being regarded as the harbinger of death in the neighborhood”.<sup>7</sup> The petrel, however, takes center stage when it comes to storms. Their appearance bodes ill to superstitious sailors, often rightly so, given their tendency to follow ships in stormy weather, scavenging for food scraps.<sup>8</sup>

### **Bringers of good omen**

In many cultures, the stork heralds good news. Indeed, in some countries, storks are thought to be responsible for the safe delivery of babies. This may be related to the habits of migratory birds which return with the reawakening of Nature. For the same reason, the stork is regarded as being endowed with the power of causing pregnancy, simply by its glance (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p.941). The habit of the albatross, a large, wandering sea bird, to follow ships on long voyages, gave rise to an old maritime superstition that it was an omen of good luck (Tresidder, 2004, p.75). In Chinese folklore, the coming of swallows and the building of their nests in a new place, whether in a dwelling-house or a store, is hailed as an omen of approaching success, or a prosperous change in the affairs of the owner or occupier of the premises.

### **Relating to Birds as Ancestors**

In some areas, the swan, with its spotless, exquisite appearance, is the heavenly virgin that is to be made pregnant either by earth, or by water – the

<sup>7</sup> This was the emblem of Huang Ti, the Yellow emperor and first blacksmith. As a symbol of yang is superabundance, the owl was believed to cause drought. Children born at the solstice (the day of the Owl) were believed to inherit natural violence and might even become parricides; owls were, thus, always considered to savage, unlucky creatures. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), p.729.

<sup>8</sup> Hovering close to the ocean surface, storm petrels look as though they are ‘walking’ on the waves, so they are often called St. Peter’s birds, because Peter followed the command of Jesus to walk on water. See Binney (2006), p.158.

hunter of the lake – to ultimately give birth to the human race. Hungarian tradition holds that the Magyars were guided by a giant *turul* (a type of falcon, eagle or hawk) into the land where Arpad founded the Hungarian nation; the *turul* is therefore regarded as the mythical ancestor of the Arpads (Eliade, 1995, p.225). In China, the arrival of the swallows at the vernal equinox was marked with fertility rites, undoubtedly related to several legends recounting the miraculous pregnancies of girls who ate swallows' eggs. These include the stories of the Hien Ti and of the ancestress of the Chang family from which Confucius was descended, so that he might justly be called the swallow's son (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p.952).

## **Spiritual Life**

### **The image of the soul**

Ancient sources report the custom of releasing an eagle at the funeral of a ruler. The flight of the eagle, as the body was cremated, symbolized the departure of the ruler's soul as it traveled to dwell among the gods. In Rome, just as the eagle was the soul-bird of the emperor, so was the peacock the soul-bird of the empress and her princesses (Bedermann, 1994, p.108). In China, the figure of a crane, with outspread wings and uplifted foot, is sometimes placed in the centre of a coffin in a funeral procession, conveying the departure of the soul to the "Western Heaven", riding on the crane's back. In many cultures, the cuckoo is seen as the bird of the soul, with the call of the cuckoo in springtime foretelling of riches. The Chinese cuckoo is also called Du-juan (杜鵑), who was, according to legend, a ruler of Sichuan (the Soul of Shu, 四川). It is said that the cuckoo cries until it spits blood which is how the azalea gets its color 蜀魂 (Eberhard, 1990, p.77).

## **Immortality**

The sacred Egyptian bird, Benu, a heron-like bird of considerable, legendary importance, was widely associated with notions of immortality and resurrection. It is said that it appeared only once every 500 years and was revered in Heliopolis as a manifestation of the sun god (Bedermann, 1994, p.164). In China, the phoenix is known as the Feng-huang; in its “feng” aspect it is a male, solar symbol, while as “huang”, it is female and lunar, making it an embodiment of the union of yin and yang. It is regarded as the emperor of birds, bringing peace and prosperity, with its appearance heralding an auspicious emperor or prophet. It is also a Chinese bridal emblem, signifying unity through marriage.<sup>9</sup>

The impressive seasonal reappearances of certain large migrating birds made them symbols of longevity in the orient. The Chinese believed that cranes lived for thousands of years and old people were often given paintings of cranes, tortoises, or pine-trees as presents, all three of which are symbols of longevity.

### **The Human Characteristics of Birds**

We can readily find examples of birds being used to symbolize the basic elements of human nature, including love, happiness, and wisdom. These and others are described in the following sub-sections.

#### **Love**

Certain birds have human characteristics, or perhaps it is humans that exhibit the nature of birds. In the West, the nightingale’s song is linked with pain and suffering, including the anguish and ecstasy of love. In Greek mythology, Philomela was transformed into a nightingale by the gods who

<sup>9</sup> It is quite probable that the mythical Chinese Phoenix is merely the Argus pheasant, or possibly the peacock. In any case, the pheasant is sometimes used in the place of the phoenix, and partakes of all its attributes, being a common emblem of beauty and good fortune. See Williams (1999), p.323.

pitied her. Having been raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, her tongue was cut out so that she could never reveal his incestuous brutality (Werness, 2004, p.295). In Western poetry, music, and ballet, the elegant, iconic beauty of the swan frequently symbolizes lost love or melancholic passion; in the classical myth of Zeus, his transformation into a swan to ravish Leda clearly suggests the passionate rush of love as well as its ebbing (Tresidder, 2004, p.236). Mandarin ducks in China (鴛鴦) live in pairs, mating for life, so they are seen as a natural symbol of marital bliss. The crow also stands for filial piety, or family love, in China. It is said to take care of its parents when disabled, or in their old age, and to disgorge food for their sustenance.

### **Happiness and Joy**

One of the most popular of all birds in Western poetry is the lark, which, in the morning sunshine, symbolizes the human drive for happiness, with its song widely regarded as a song of joy. As the most versatile of songbirds, the wren also appears as an emblem of happiness among Native North American Indians. The Chinese name for the magpie is *hsı ch'iao* (喜鵲), which is essentially a pun on the word for joy. Images of this bird are thus widely used to express happiness. The joy it brings is often marital bliss, an association attributable to one of the best-loved of all Chinese legends, the tale of the cowherd and the spinning damsel. As a result of the forgetfulness of the magpie, the two lovers are able to meet on only one night in the year.<sup>10</sup>

The goose is also a symbol of marital bliss in China, since it takes one partner for life. The oriole is regarded as the bird of joy and of music because of its beautiful song, and in China it takes its place as a symbol of marriage. On the other hand, the “floating oriole” (流鶯) (although the

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<sup>10</sup> On the seventh night of the seventh month, all magpies leave earth and fly to heaven where they form a bridge over the Milky Way, and thus the cowherd can rejoin his wife. See Zhong (2006), p.174.

Chinese word *liu-ying* suggests instead a “wandering oriole”) is seen as a prostitute. Indeed, prostitutes were often singing-girls into the bargain (Eberhard, 1990, p.220).

## **Wisdom**

Many birds are regarded as being extremely clever, with owls and ibises believed to be particularly wise. The association of the owl with knowledge stems largely from the fact that the bird was a companion to Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom, sciences and arts, and Athena Paranoia (the foreseeing). The sacred ibis of ancient Egypt was also revered as an incarnation of the lunar deity, Thoth, the patron god of scribes and the lord of occult knowledge. The gift of foreknowledge was attributed to the ibis in the Old Testament. The ibis is therefore thought to have heralded the flooding of the Nile.<sup>11</sup> In ancient times, the crane also represented wisdom, presumably because of the “contemplative” posture of the bird at rest (Bedermann, 1994, p.79).

## **Vigilance**

Whether they watch and wait in silence or noisily announce the approach of danger, the crane, cockerel, and goose are all renowned for their vigilance. Even when eating food, for instance, they will frequently raise their heads to view their surroundings. According to Aristotle, the crane, while waiting at the waterside for its prey to come within reach, holds on to a stone in its claw in order to keep itself awake. If the bird drops off to sleep, the stone falls into the water with a splash, which wakes it up. This could explain why the crane was adopted as a symbol of vigilance in medieval times, given

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<sup>11</sup> With its pointed beak, the ibis might well symbolize the practical application of the intellect, but however practical it might be, its knowledge would not preclude recourse to esoteric wisdom. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), p.537.

its naturally watchful habits.

The cockerel has been regarded as an alert bird for centuries, no doubt because of its cry announcing the return of light following the darkness. It is, in fact, one of the best-known emblems of vigilance, explaining the superstition that ghosts would flee at a “cocks’ crow” (Tresidder, 2004, p.138). The goose became widely regarded as a symbol of masculinity by Celtic warriors, while in Rome it was linked with the war-god, Mars. It also became a celebrated emblem of vigilance after an incident in 390 BCE when the “honking” of the sacred goose at the temple of Juno alerted defenders of the Capitoline Hill to the ensuing attack by the Gauls (Tresidder, 1998, p.93).

### **Sovereignty**

The eagle, characterized by its keen eyesight, soaring flight, and powerful beak and talons, is regarded by all cultures as the “king of birds”, has constantly been held in the highest esteem, and has been adopted as a symbol of strength by countless rulers and nations throughout the ages. In ancient China, the eagle also conveyed an image of strength and power. Indeed, “ying”, the word for eagle, is synonymous with the word “hero”. The eagle is one of the most ancient and popular emblems of victory, its flight signifying military success in ancient Persia and also in Rome, where, from the time of Rome’s founders, Romulus and Remus, it was carried on standards as the “bird of Jove”. The white-headed “bald eagle”, with outstretched wings, was adopted as the emblem of the United States of America (Tresidder, 1998, p.71).

### **Birds in Religion**

Many religions have close associations with mythology. Myths have served to enrich the mystery of religion, while religion, in turn, has expanded the realm of mythology. Many birds, such as the crane, pelican, dove,

cockerel, and others, are said to have mythically appeared by means of religious power.

The death of a Taoist priest is said to be yu-hua (羽化), the process of turning into a feathered crane (Eberhard, 1990, p.75), while in the Christian era, the migratory flight of a crane announced the coming of spring, making the crane a symbol of renewal, and of the resurrection of Christ. The pelican pecks at its own breast to make itself bleed. In this way it procures the blood on which its chicks will feed. Such sacrifice of its own body and blood, is comparable to the sacrifice of Christ in giving his life to save others, and is what lies behind the symbolism of the pelican (Binney, 2006, p.18).

The Hebrew idea that the eagle could burn its wings in the solar fire, plummets into the ocean, and then emerge with a new pair (Psalm 103:5), became a symbolic motif in Christian baptism (Carroll & Prickett, 1997, p.455). The dove is a symbol of the undefiled simplicity of the soul, particularly when feathered in white, the color of purity, and it represented the Holy Spirit at Christ's baptism. The dove was also the bird that Noah sent out from the Ark to see if the flood had subsided. When it returned with "an olive leaf plucked off" in its beak, he knew that this was so. Therefore, the dove and olive branch have been seen as symbols not only of peace between God and humans, but also between nations (Binney, 2006, p.22).

In Christian tradition, the partridge is symbolic of both temptation and damnation, an incarnation of the devil, while the cockerel is associated with vigilance against the devil's wiles. It is also associated with an incident before the arrest and trial of Jesus, who correctly predicted that Peter would "thrice" deny him before the cockerel had crowed three times. The cockerel is also venerated in Islam, in which it is recognized as being seen by Muhammad in the first Heaven as the giant bird crowing, "there is no god but Allah"

(Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p.209).

### Birds in Literature

Birds are widely used as symbols in Chinese and Western literature, Three examples of such poems have been selected from both Western and Chinese cultures.

#### Western Poems

Birds have been personified in many Western poems. Here, three poems have been selected to demonstrate these metaphors.

*Prothalamion*                    by Edmund Spenser<sup>12</sup>

Two fairer Birds I yet did never see;  
The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew,  
Did never whiter shew;  
Not Jove himselfe, when he a Swan would be,  
For love of Leda, whiter did appeare;  
Yet Leda was (they say) as white as he,  
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare;  
So purely white they were.

This poem describes the purity of swans and tells the story of Leda, describing a pair of young brides as two swans.

*The Eagle*                    by Alfred, Lord Tennyson<sup>13</sup>

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.  
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,

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<sup>12</sup> See Gioia (2005), *100 Great Poets of the English Language*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> See Gioia (2005), *100 Great Poets of the English Language*, p.207.

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

In this poem, the eagle is portrayed as a giant with mighty force and authority.

*To the Cuckoo* by William Wordsworth<sup>14</sup>

Though babbling only to the Vale,

Of sunshine and of flowers,

Thou bringest unto me a tale,

Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!

Even yet thou art to me.

No bird, but an invisible thing,

A voice, a mystery;

This poem clearly personifies the cuckoo.

## Chinese Poems

There are numerous examples of Chinese poems in which birds play an important role in expressing the fancy, feeling, and imagination of the poet. Three examples have once again been selected to demonstrate the importance of birds in such poems.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For further details, see Jones (1987), p.140.

<sup>15</sup> For these three poems in their entirety, see Xu (1998), *300 Tang Poems - A New Translation*, pp. 30, 200, and 352, respectively.

*Dining in Taoist Priest Mei's Mountain Hut*

宴梅道士山房

by Meng Haoran

孟浩然

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Awaking in the woods I fear that the spring wanes and thins;	林臥愁春盡，
Drawing apart the curtains I feast on the lovely scenes.	褰帷見物華。
Unexpectedly comes the fairy messenger Bluebird,	忽逢青鳥使，
Inviting me to Chisongzi's home in the fairy world.	邀入赤松家。
The alchemy furnace is set to make flames which boom;	丹竈初開火，
The buds of the immortal peaches are coming into bloom.	仙桃正發花。
Could they keep one's childish features forever and ever,	童顏若可駐，
Why can't we be drunk with a nectar of holy flavour?	何惜醉流霞！

---

(translated by Wu Juntao 吳鈞陶)

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In this poem, the blue bird is described as a visiting messenger.

*Leave-taking of a Buddhist Monk*

送人

by Liu Changqing

劉長卿

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How can a wild crane like you on a lone cloud borne,	孤雲將野鶴，
Seek among men to make your permanent stay?	豈向人間住。
If you intend to buy a plot on Wozhou Mountain,	莫買沃洲山，
From places known to voguish men keep away!	時人已知處。

---

(translated by Yang Zhouhan 楊周翰)

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The Buddhist monk in this poem is described as a wild crane borne on a lone cloud.

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*The Sad Zither*

錦瑟

by Li Shangyin

李商隱

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Why should the zither sad have fifty strings?	錦瑟無端五十絃，
Each string, each strain evokes but vanished springs:	一絃一柱思華年。
Dim morning dream to be a butterfly;	莊生曉夢迷蝴蝶，
Amorous heart poured out in cuckoo's cry.	望帝春心託杜鵑。
In moonlit pearls see tears in mermaid's eyes;	滄海月明珠有淚，
From sunburnt jade in Blue Field let smoke rise!	藍田日暖玉生煙。
Such feeling cannot be recalled again,	此情可待成追憶，
It seemed long-lost e'en when it was felt then.	只是當時已惘然。

---

(translated by Xu Yuan-zhong 許淵沖)

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As for this poem, in his dim morning dream, Chung Tze has become a butterfly, while in the Shu kingdom, an emperor named Wang, has become a cuckoo at death.

### An Approach to Stimulating Student Interest in Learning English

Since English has become a universal language, appropriate methods for teaching English are of immense importance not only to English teachers themselves, but also to students whose intention is to use English as a communicative tool. In an effort to enrich human life, it is necessary to enhance the interest of students in the learning of English.

Nature has provided us with many objects to arouse our imagination, as many natural objects can stimulate a human's right brain, or right hemisphere, which is characterized by spiritual-oriented, intuitive, creative, imaginative, mythic-pictographic, and natural symbols. The bird is one such example.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> According to Jungian theory "Mind-Brain Complex", refer to Lake-Thome (1997), *Spirits of the Earth: A Guide to Native American Nature Symbols, Stories, and Ceremonies*, p.45.

As an English teacher, the author of this paper has realized the importance of the attitude and passion of students in learning English. The following suggestions can be made:

- (1) Primarily, new words are considered the greatest obstacle in learning English. In order to eliminate the fear of new words, it is important to guide students in the identification of common and engaging objects. The topic of birds concerned with myths provides a good example.
- (2) In order to heighten the interest of students in terms of an understanding of the mythology surrounding birds, one should make use of visual instruction on birds, such as through the use of the book, *Mountain and Aquatic Birds*, which deals with a variety of topics, many of which are covered in this paper.
- (3) Students should be encouraged to visit zoos and museums, where the vivid images of birds could help students to remember their roles in mythology more easily.
- (4) When discussing the relevance of birds to certain mythological beliefs, one should link the myths to interesting stories about birds, such as the eagle, which represents the United States of America.
- (5) Teachers may also ask students to seek out Chinese or Western poems relevant to birds.
- (6) A teacher could discuss the many phrases, idioms, proverbs and terms that are relevant to birds, of which the following are examples.

### **Phrases**

Teachers could ask students to find Chinese phrases referring to birds, such as:

*wuhe zhi zhong* (烏合之眾):

A band of rebels or bandits, were characterized by lack of discipline and

organization.

*que ping zhong xuan* (雀屏中選):

To be selected as someone's son-in-law

(a reference to the founding emperor of the Tang dynasty who won the hand of his queen by hitting the eyes of two peacocks painted on screen doors in an archery contest).

*jiu zhan qiao chao* (鳩佔鵲巢):

This means to enjoy the results of others' work; to usurp that which belongs to others.

*xian yun ye he* (閒雲野鶴):

One is as free as a bird; carefree.

*cheng yu luo yan* (沉魚落雁):

This describes the tender and delicate manner of a woman's beauty.

*ou lu wang ji* (鷗鷺忘機):

This describes one who is in such harmony with nature that the water birds are not frightened away by his presence.

## Idioms

Numerous Western idioms use birds to describe the natural characteristics of humans. Some examples are as follows:

as vain (gaudy) as a peacock

as wise as an owl

as cheerful (gay) as a lark

as watchful as a hawk

as graceful as a swan

## Proverbs

Many Western proverbs are also associated with birds, such as:

*A little bird told me.* (秘密消息的來源)

As birds come to be regarded as carriers of messages, when people want to keep a source secret, or to claim intuition as a source of information, they might say “a little bird told me”.

*Birds of a feather flock together.* (物以類聚)

Humans with similar interests, opinions, or backgrounds are often referred to as “birds of a feather”.

*One swallow does not make a summer.* (一燕不成夏)

We should not assume that the troubles of life are over (that is, suppose that summer has come) simply because one difficulty has been surmounted.

*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.* (一鳥在手勝過二鳥在林)

People in many cultures express the notion that it is better to enjoy what one has than to dream or worry about something that may be impossible to attain.

*To kill two birds with one stone.* (一箭雙鵠)

If we achieve two goals at the same time with a single action, we are said to have “killed two birds with one stone”.

*Killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.* (殺雞取卵)

The act of destroying a good, steady supply of something valuable while trying to make a greedy, temporary gain, is referred to as “killing the goose that lays the golden egg”.

*The early bird catches the worm.* (早起的鳥兒有蟲吃)

This expression explains that only those who are very well prepared will have the opportunity to achieve what they desire.

## **Expressive Terms**

In order to further increase the interest of students, some common

terms could be introduced to them. For example, when criticizing or scolding a person, people often express their feelings or motives by referring to the names of birds. They might angrily criticize someone by using terms such as pigeon (呆頭呆腦), goose (呆頭鵝), duck (怪胎) or crows mouth (烏鴉嘴), or the expressions, “to go cuckoo” (發瘋), “to be cocky” (自大), “to be eagle-eyed” (鷹眼), or “to be a night owl” (貓頭鷹), all of which imply that someone has characteristics similar to those of the birds that are obliquely being referred to.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Since the characteristics of birds have become an integral part of our descriptive language, it may be valuable for students to know more about birds, particularly with regards to unusual traits which may arouse students' interest in learning English. As humans set about establishing the first civilizations, they must have quickly come to recognize which of the birds sharing their world were harmful and dangerous, and which were useful, whether as guards for their homes, as sources of food, or as a means of transferring messages. Whatever their roles play, birds have served to stimulate our imagination, inspiring the inventive nature of the people of the world. The final emphasis in this paper is the important need for English teachers to remind their students of two things. The first is that many birds are our friends. In many cases, they serve to provide companionship and joy to isolated people, providing a distraction from the loneliness of their lives. Secondly, birds can be regarded as our instructors, as they have served to stimulate our aspirations, such as those to invent airplanes for transportation and to create beautiful songs as well. Given their roles as both our friends and our teachers, we should do everything we can to ensure that birds receive our love and protection.

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