

# ***Unearthing Notes to Things Old and New: The Nicknames of Aquatic Species***

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**Abstract:** The nicknames bestowed upon the aquatic species by the communities of the Han and Wei Dynasties frequently pertained to the species' unique attributes. These nicknames embody the populace's mimicry and comprehension of the political hierarchy. This essay explores the nicknames of the aquatic species as depicted in Cui Bo's *Notes to Things Old and New* from the Western Jin Dynasty and how they demonstrate the interplay between officials and civilians during the Han and Jin dynasties. The study reveals a hierarchical relationship between the River Lord (the River God), the Envoy of the River Lord (the Chinese alligator), and the subordinate officials of the River Lord (squid, turtle, and softshell turtle). The hierarchical stature represented by these creatures' nicknames is closely tied to their rarity and total number. This relationship further mirrors the system in which the imperial court in the Han and Wei dynasties collected poems to understand the conditions of the people.

**Keywords:** Notes to Things Old and New, aquatic species, nicknames, Chinese ancient officials

## **1. Introduction**

Cui Bao's *Notes to Things Old and New* (《古今注》, *Gu Jin Zhu*), a literary work from the Western Jin Dynasty, offers elucidations and portrayals of various distinguished objects and phenomena from his era and those preceding it. Within its folds, it ascribes certain epithets to the aquatic species using bureaucratic designations from the Han and Jin epochs, such as the 'Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord' (河伯度事小吏, Hebo Dushi Xiaoli), 'Envoy of the River Lord' (河伯使者, Hebo Shizhe), 'Attendant of the River Lord' (河伯从事, Hebo Congshi), and the 'Black-robed Inspector' (玄衣督邮, Xuanyi Duyou). [1] The ideological and historical substratum mirrored in these appellations generally straddles the Han and Jin periods, with some potentially tracing back to the Zhou Dynasty.

## **2. Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord**

The squid was traditionally ascribed the alias 'Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord'. As highlighted in the 'Fish and Insects' section of the Notes, 'The squid is also known as the Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord.' Xu Jian of the Tang Dynasty in *Notes to First Learning*

(《初学记》, *Chu Xue Ji*), Volume 30, cites Shen Shi's A Report on Southern Yue (《南岳志》, *Nan Yue Zhi*) from the Han Dynasty: 'The squid, alternatively known as the Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord, often floats on the water's surface. Misinterpreting its state as dead, crows carry it away, hence the nickname Squid.' [2]

The evolution of official titles with time and their usage in mythological tales or aliases often sheds light on the epoch when the narrative originated. The designation 'Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord' intimates a period preceding the Western Jin Dynasty.

In the *Rites of Zhou* (《周礼》, *Zhou Li*), the existence of so-called petty officials 'bearing a whip-measure', occasionally tasked with city gate guardianship, is recognized. As quoted from *the Rites of Zhou*, 'Each petty official presides over their respective responsibilities, bearing a whip-measure, and supervising their jurisdiction, administering prohibitions on ingress and egress, and rectifying non-compliance. Offenders are subjected to whip penalties.' [3] Furthermore, the Rites of Zhou asserts: 'Within the market, petty officials, whip-measure in hand, guard the gates. The assembly of market officials organize the stalls, display merchandise, obey the orders from their superiors, and abide by market regulations. The leading market official adjudicates over major disputes and issues, whereas the petty officials and merchants' own representatives mediate minor conflicts and concerns.' [4]

*The Analects of Confucius* (《论语》, *Lun Yu*) also references the 'whip-bearing official': 'The Master said: If any means of escaping poverty presented itself that did not involve doing wrong, I would adopt it, even though my employment were only that of the gentleman who holds the whip. But so long as it is a question of illegitimate means, I shall continue to pursue the quests that I love.' [5] Scholars including Yang Bojun, Li Zehou, and Yu Yingshi concur that the 'who holds the whip' here signifies the minor official charged with overseeing the market gate. Wei Bohe wrote a particular paper addressing this matter, echoing that the 'who holds the whip' corresponds to the 'market superintendent.' [6]

In the 'Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord', the term 'Whip-bearing Petty Official' refers to the minor officials holding the whip-measure 'at the city gate. So how to interpret the connotations of 'whip-measure' in the phrase 'bearing a whip-measure'? Zheng Xuan suggested, 'The measure refers to a staff (笏, *shu*), which is demarcated in feet and inches.' The Tang Dynasty scholar, Jia Gongyan, regarded the 'whip-measure' as a single object. Zheng E posits that the 'whip-measure' can be perceived as a single object with dual functionalities, commenting, 'The early scholars argued that the market should be within a yard, hence a gate was necessitated. Market-goers would enter the gate at a prescribed time, and the market officials would wield the 'whip-measure' to guard it. The market officials would issue commands by raising a flag. At the designated time, the market superintendent would enter the common area, while the petty officials and the representative of the merchants would enter the central area and mediate disputes, should any arise. The phrase "at dawn, sneak in with shoulder tilted".' [4]

The presence of a 'sheath' at the top indicates that this upper part is larger than the hand-held segment. Essentially, this means that 'shu' exhibits a distinctive mallet-like form, as is readily apparent in the shape of the character found in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze scripts.

The squid or cuttlefish, which referred as the 'Whip-bearing Petty Official of the River Lord', aptly mirrors this mallet shape, characterized by a larger top and a more tapered bottom. The form of a squid echoes the shape of a 'shu'. Variations in the 'shu', such as whether the head is pointed or rounded, are also reflected in different species of squid. The spear squid, for instance, within the squid family, mirrors a 'shu' with a 'pointed head', while other squids are akin to a 'shu' with a 'rounded head'.

Consequently, the squid's moniker of 'whip-bearing petty official' could primarily derive from its resemblance to the 'whip-measure' or 'shu', traditionally held by the 'petty officials' at the city gate. The Han Dynasty inherited the market system from the Zhou Dynasty. However, during the Han era,

the ‘whip-measure holder’, ‘measure’, and ‘shu ’were subject to scholarly annotations of the time. This suggests that by the Han Dynasty, the title of ‘whip-bearing petty official ’may not have existed.

### 3. Envoy of the River Lord

The term ‘River Lord ’in this context refers to a universal deity overseeing all aquatic creatures, rather than being limited to the deity of the Yellow River. Consequently, even though the Chinese alligator, as perceived by the people from the east of the Yangtze River, is found in the Yangtze River Basin, it still falls under the dominion of the River Lord, hence its alias: ‘Envoy of the River Lord’. This concept is recorded in Cui Bao’s Notes: ‘The people from the east of the Yangtze River term the green-clothed fish as a maiden, the juvenile fish as the “earth father”, and the Chinese alligator is designated the “Envoy of the River Lord”.’

The title “Envoy” not only conveys the Chinese alligator’s subservience to the River Lord, but it also connects to the intrinsic characteristics of the Chinese alligator. The Chinese alligator is often likened to the Yangtze alligator [7]. The notion that ‘the Chinese alligator resembles a dragon’ [8] has led many scholars to consider the Chinese alligator as a prototypical image of a dragon.

During the Qin and Han dynasties, envoys often undertook duties such as conducting diplomatic missions to adversarial nations and facilitating communication between various regions. Each envoy held a symbol of office, which during the Han Dynasty, came in three primary forms: human, tiger, and dragon. Envoys representing marshland nations carried the ‘dragon staff’ [4]. In 1946, a bronze “royal order” dragon staff was excavated in Huangnikeng in the eastern outskirts of Changsha, Hunan province. This is believed to be the ‘dragon staff ’held by the envoys of marshland nations.

It can be conjectured that the reason why envoys of marshland nations used the ‘dragon staff ’may relate to the Chinese alligator, a creature native to marshland habitats. Regardless of this speculation, it would be completely rational to designate the Chinese alligator, which inhabits rivers and lakes and bears a resemblance to a dragon, as the Envoy of the marshland. Examining the physical bronze dragon staff, it can be observed that the dragon staff itself is reminiscent of a Yangtze alligator. The body of the dragon staff is not as sinuous as the typical dragon shape, but rather flat. This flattened symbol body, combined with the dragon-shaped symbol head, results in the overall appearance of the dragon staff being strikingly similar to the Yangtze alligator.

### 4. Attendant of the River Lord and Black-robed Inspector

The softshell turtle, also known as the ‘Attendant of the River Lord, ’is often paired with the turtle, referred to as the ‘Black-robed Inspector. ’As stated in Cui Bao’s Notes: ‘The turtle is named the Black-robed Inspector, while the softshell turtle is named the Attendant of the River Lord.’Given the physical similarities between turtles and softshell turtles, it seems both are serving the River Lord, thus inviting a collective interpretation.

The term ‘Black-robed ’in ‘Black-robed Inspector ’is typically understood as ‘black clothing. ’As the epithet ‘Black-robed Inspector ’is of folk origin, it fundamentally resists non-intuitive interpretations and should not be mired in culturally specific connotations like ‘the emperor’s black robe ’or ‘black robe nurturing the old. ’Consequently, two characters ‘Black-robed ’in ‘Black-robed Inspector ’simply denote the black colouration of the turtle’s exterior.

In the realm of apparel, the colour black often refers to a hue tinged with red or simply black. In *the Book of Documents* (《尚书》, *Shang Shu*), it is written, ‘In the state of Jing, all people are clothed in black and red satin.’ In the annotations, Zheng Xuan clarifies: ‘Black and red is the result of three dips in dye, another dip in black will yield a black brown, and a further dip will turn it into a deep black. Black and red sits between the two.’ [9] There is no colour more fitting to describe turtles than

‘black.’ ‘Black’ is indeed the most prevalent colour in natural turtles, a fact attested by the reference to the so-called ‘Black Warrior.’

Here, the carriage alludes to a specific form of covered carriage. *The Book of Rites* (《礼记》, *Li Ji*) refers to He Yin’s Hidden Meanings in the Book of Rites, which declares that ‘the covered carriage is elongated, akin to a turtle.’ Sun Ji highlights that the carriages frequently depicted in profile within stone relief sculptures often bear obscure shapes. Yet, the canopy of the No. 2 bronze carriage from the Mausoleum of the First Emperor of Qin bears a striking resemblance to a turtle shell[10]. Furthermore, the parasol bone structure beneath the carriage canopy enhances its likeness to the skeleton of a turtle or softshell turtle.

Nevertheless, post-Warring States period, the turtle’s role in the public imagination shifted from ‘Envoy’ to ‘inspector’, marking a significant demotion in status. his transformation correlates directly with the local monitoring system established for observing and collecting folk character evaluations during the Han Dynasty.

The Inspector, also known as the Subordinate Inspector, was an executive official under the prefecture during the Han and Wei Dynasties. Their role was supervisory, tasked with overseeing the delivery of postal documents, the review of criminal cases, and the verification of illicit activities. As stated in the Book of Han, the prefect sent the city officials to execute inspections, with oversight provided for those non-compliant.

Following the pre-Qin tradition of gathering folk evaluations, the Han Dynasty saw an increased trend in evaluating societal norms through folk sayings and proverbs. Observing these was a vital part of the local supervision system in the Western Han Dynasty and was officially integrated into the local supervision mechanism [11], as exemplified by ‘Upon Emperor He’s ascension to the throne, disguised envoys were dispatched to observe and gather folk sayings in the provinces and counties.’ [12] When the prefect amassed these folk sayings and proverbs, they typically sent their assistant and minor officials in their stead, amongst whom were the Inspectors. As chronicled in The Book of Later Han, During Emperor Ping’s reign, a severe locust plague swept across the land [...] only Mi County remained unaffected. The Inspector reported this. The prefect was initially sceptical, prompting him to personally investigate, after which he was convinced.

The task of local officials in gathering folk sayings and proverbs from the populace is intrinsic to the emperor’s governance principle of ‘employing the virtuous and capable, and observing and listening to all directions’. A multitude of folk songs chronicled in the Book of Han were all collated by officials from amongst the public.

The role of the Inspector is intimately intertwined with the common people, thereby ensuring that any commendable acts by these officers frequently become popular narratives within the local community. For instance, during the Later Han dynasty, the deeds and reputation of the local Inspector, Xu Qing, also known as Xu Zibo, were widely disseminated amongst the populace. Xu was lauded for his heartfelt lament over the societal problems of the era, giving rise to the phrase, ‘Xu Zibo weeps for the world’. Simultaneously, due to his family’s impoverished state and his reliance on an ox cart as his mode of transportation, he was also referred to as ‘Cart Inspector’, signifying that the image of the Inspector traversing in a cart had become deeply embedded within the public consciousness.

The ‘Cart’ in ‘Cart Inspector’ deserves particular attention. As the roles of officials transitioned from being envoys to inspectors, their means of transportation also experienced a decline, shifting from the carriage, a covered vehicle, to the cart, a humbler mode of conveyance.

Contrary to the enclosed carriage, a cart is a type of lightweight, open vehicle, typically used by lower-ranking officials, as attested by the depictions of county-level attendants in the Wu Family Shrine’s stone reliefs. The roof of a cart typically takes the form of a convex, umbrella-shaped covering, supported by rib-like structures at the base, as can be seen in the painted wooden cart

unearthed from Tomb No. 48 at Momiuzi, Wuwei, Gansu province. Compared to the carriage, the cart's covering is more rounded, and its carriage is elevated and open. This gives the cart's appearance a certain divergence from that of the turtle, but this does not preclude the public from referring to turtles as the 'Inspector' rather than 'Envoy'. This is precisely because envoys frequently interact with local dignitaries and have limited contact with the general populace, whereas the Inspector patrols the county, thereby making the moniker 'Inspector' familiar throughout rural regions.

The similarities between turtles and softshell turtles suggest that the practice of designating softshell turtles as the 'Attendant of the River Lord' might also derive from these similarities.

## 5. Conclusions

Indeed, a hierarchical relationship exists between the River Lord, the Envoy of the River Lord, and the subordinate officials of the River Lord. The hierarchical stature represented by these creatures' nicknames is closely tied to their rarity and total number. This relationship further mirrors the real number of officials and the frequency of their encounters with the general populace. Thus, it is rare for people to adopt monikers such as 'Prefect', 'Governor', or 'Prime Minister', while epithets like 'Minor Official', 'Inspector', and 'Attendant' proliferate.

Minor officials stand as the direct implementers of a variety of state policies. When character evaluations and local folk sayings were integrated into the Han Dynasty's surveillance apparatus, minor officials such as 'Inspectors' and 'Attendants' were entrusted with gathering public opinion. Compared to their higher-ranking counterparts, the Han Dynasty populace had a deeper comprehension of and interaction with these minor officials. This fact underpins the historical basis for the tendency of aquatic creature aliases to represent "more officials than administrators."

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