

Research Notes

Emic Conference Papers on the Tai Ji Men Case

*On June 16, 2022, during the annual conference of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, held at Université Laval, Quebec City, Canada, Session 6 was devoted to “Discrimination of Religious and Spiritual Minorities and the Tai Ji Men Case.” On June 23, 2022, during the annual conference of the EUARE, the European Academy of Religion, Session 0295 discussed “New Religious and Spiritual Movements, Discrimination, and Democracy in Taiwan.” Several *dizi* (disciples) of Tai Ji Men were among the speakers, offered their emic perspectives, and debated with the academic scholars who participated in the conferences or served as co-panelists. Their papers are collected in this issue of The Journal of CESNUR.*

“Calling a Stag a Horse”: Words, Subversion, and the Tai Ji Men Case

Lily Chen

Chinese-English translator

lilychen399@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In 207 BCE, a corrupt Chinese Prime Minister called Zhao Gao declared that a stag he presented to the Second Qin Emperor was indeed a horse, and had the courtiers who refused to call the stag a horse executed. The paper analyzes the origin and the meaning of the story, and its importance in Chinese culture. It then argues that the stag-as-horse story functioned as a template and helped Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciples) reconstruct what they perceived as injustice vested on them during their conflict with Taiwan’s authorities.

KEYWORDS: “Calling a Stag a Horse,” Sima Qian, Zhao Gao, Qin Dynasty, Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case.

Introduction

The Records of the Grand Historian is a historical and literary masterpiece about ancient China, written by Sima Qian (145–86 BCE) who finished it around

94 BCE. This monumental compilation includes the *Annals of Qin Shi Huang* (259–210 BCE), the founder of the Qin dynasty and the First Emperor of a unified China. It is in these *Annals* that we find a well-known and thought-provoking narrative titled “Calling a Stag a Horse.”

This story has become proverbial, and part of Chinese mindset throughout the centuries. My paper reconstructs the origins and context of the story and discusses its meaning. It then argues that it functioned as a template for the Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciples) who, confronted with what they perceived as gross injustice vested on them in Taiwan, interpreted their problems as a reenactment of the well-known stag-as-horse story, which also gave to their drama a universal and even cosmic significance.

“Calling a Stag a Horse”: The Story

Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE) was the founder of the Qin dynasty and the First Emperor of a unified China. Following his death in 210 BCE, one of his sons, Ying Huhai or Qin Her Shi (231?–207 BCE), succeeded to the throne as the Second Emperor. According to Sima Qian, Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE), a court eunuch who became his Prime Minister, was deceitful by nature and plotted to usurp the throne. He feared that the other ministers in the court would not support him, so he devised a method to determine who was on his side.

This is how Sima Qian related the incident:

Zhao Gao was contemplating treason but was afraid the other officials would not heed his commands, so he decided to test them first. He brought a deer and presented it to the Second Emperor but called it a horse. The Second Emperor laughed and said, “Is the chancellor perhaps mistaken, calling a deer a horse?” Then the emperor questioned those around him. Some remained silent, while some, hoping to ingratiate themselves with Zhao Gao, said it was a horse, and others said it was a deer. Zhao Gao secretly arranged for all those who said it was a deer to be brought before the law and had them executed instantly. Thereafter the officials were all terrified of Zhao Gao (Sima Qian 1993, 70).

If we believe Sima Qian, we can conclude that the incident took place in 207 BCE. This was one year after Zhao Gao had get rid of his predecessor as Prime Minister, Li Si (280–208 BCE). Zhao falsely accused Li of treason, and had him tortured until he confessed and was executed together with his family.

The stag-as-horse story signals the tyrannical apex of Zhao’s career. Soon thereafter, Zhao compelled Emperor Qin Her Shi to commit suicide and installed in his place Ziyang (?–206 BCE). According to different accounts, he was either Qin Her Shi’s nephew, or his cousin, or another relative—but Zhao believed he would be only a puppet in his hands. However, Ziyang eventually rebelled against Zhao, killed him, and exterminated his family.

By that time, rebels had caused the ruin of the Qin empire. Ziyang ruled only for forty-six days. The Qin dynasty had lasted only fifteen years, making it the shortest in Chinese history. Zhao Gao, who purposefully confounded truth with deception, fooled the emperor, and persecuted honest court officials, is regarded as one of the key reasons for the Qin’s quick demise.

Many Chinese only know one incident of the Qin dynasty history: the one involving the stag that was called a horse. “To point a stag and call it a horse” (*zhi lu wei ma*) has become an idiomatic expression in Chinese. Zhang Longxi, a leading scholar of Chinese cultural studies, who teaches in Hong Kong and at Harvard, explains its meaning as follows:

a set phrase that indicates not so much a mistake in naming but bullying, coercion, and intimidation, a deliberate confusion or willful misinterpretation that knows itself to be wrong but is forced upon others as an authoritative reading on the basis of sheer power and domination. Whoever calls a stag a horse does so knowingly as an exercise of manipulation, a display of unchallengeable power, but the phrase also connotes arrogance and wickedness, and always carries a sense of condemnation (Zhang 2005, 112).

The same scholar reports that some contemporary academics have interpreted the stag-as-horse story as evidencing the arbitrariness of names. In this sense, Zhao Gao would have been an early exponent of modern theories about the “arbitrary nature of linguistic signs” (Zhang 2005, 114).

However, Zhang does not believe that this is the real meaning of the story, or the one Sima Qian wanted to convey. Parenthetically, Zhang notes that in ancient Chinese the names for a stag and a horse were not so arbitrary

Both *lu* (deer, stag) and *ma* (horse), especially in their ancient written forms, are characters with strong pictographic elements that to some extent make these signs and their referents form a less arbitrary relation than that between the English words and their meanings (Zhang 2005, 113).

But this is less important than Sima Qian’s intention in reporting the incident.

“What the story shows, Zhang writes, is emphatically not how naming can be arbitrary, but how such arbitrariness implies the abuse of power” (Zhang 2005, 113). Sima Qian wanted to emphasize that

Zhao Gao having his way at court in front of the emperor was scandalous, but it was so not because no one ever recognized the glaring misnomer, but because of the misnomer’s significant political background. Here the identification of the animal brought before the emperor and the political context for the identification offer a telling example of the important relations between text and the context, interpretation and politics or ideology. Such relations immensely complicate the apparently simple situation of calling a stag a stag and remind us of the presence of crucial extra-textual factors that have a definitive influence on how a particular text, an object, or an event is to be interpreted. This notorious episode is perhaps a particularly strange and unusual case where the control of meaning and interpretation is obviously heavy-handed, openly displayed, bordering on madness and the farcical (Zhang 2005, 112–13).

Western scholars call what happened at the Qin court a “catachresis,” or calling one thing (or animal) with the name of a different thing. A catachresis may be a mistake but in the case of Zhao Gao it was evidence of immorality and abuse. As Zhang also notes,

the differentiation of the names of animals, provide readers [of Sima Qian] the basis to see through and condemn Zhao Gao’s willful misinterpretation and evil scheme, the basis for a sense of right and wrong, for moral judgment and political stance. Without that basis for the literal sense of words, there can be no ground for appropriate moral response and thus effective political action (Zhang 2005, 113).

There is also a deeper meaning of the story. In the Chinese Confucian tradition (although “Confucian” is now a contested term) maintaining the correct names for all things in Heaven and earth is an essential feature both of cosmic order and social stability. Tampering with these names is technically subversive.

There are parallels in Western traditions and literature as well. Willfully changing the names of things is regarded as evil and destructive. So, what Zhao Gao does is evil, and does not go unpunished. Within one year after the stag-as-horse incident, the Qin dynasty collapses, and the seemingly omnipotent Zhao is killed with all his family. By violating the proper order of names, Zhao messed with dark forces he was ultimately unable to control.

One story based on the same principles in the West concerns Humpty Dumpty, a character of popular English nursery rhymes, commonly represented as an anthropomorphic egg. However, today many remember Humpty Dumpty

not because of the nursery rhymes but as a character who plays a role similar to Zhao Gao in the stag-as-horse story in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). This was a novel written by English mathematician and Anglican deacon, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898), better known by his pen name Lewis Carroll, as a sequel to his famous *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice encounters Humpty-Dumpty, and the two have a strange dialogue.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all” (Carroll 1871, 124).

This literary reference proves that questions about the meaning of the words, and language and the abuse of power, are universal. Humpty Dumpty behaves exactly like Zhao Gao. He knows that the words do have a meaning. True, this meaning is conventional but, once adopted, the convention is essential to preserve society. However, Humpty Dumpty, just like Zhao Gao, tries to substitute social harmony and morality with brutal power. He claims that words only have the changing meaning those in power attribute to them. The political question, Humpty Dumpty and Zhao Gao believe, is not what is true or false but who has the power to define what the words “true” and “false” mean.

In an essay he wrote this year 2022, the Italian scholar of Anglo-American political thought and journalist Marco Respinti traced back the arrogant philosophy of Humpty Dumpty to Nominalism, a philosophical current of the 11th and 12th centuries (Respinti 2022). Nominalists insisted that words did not have a “real” meaning, only the meaning those in power attributed to them. In fact, Respinti argued, the connection between Nominalism and modern confusions about truth and falsehood had already been noticed by American intellectual

Richard M. Weaver (1910–1963) in his 1948 book *Ideas Have Consequences* (Weaver 1948).

Respinti was proposing a comparison between the story of Humpty Dumpty and the Tai Ji Men case in Taiwan. He wrote that the story of Humpty Dumpty is

in fact the story of Tai Ji Men. For a quarter of a century, Tai Ji Men suffered the Humpty-Dumpty-like tyranny over words perpetrated by some rogue bureaucrats. Not believing in truth and in the power of words to have truthful meanings, they managed to persecute an entire spiritual movement for crimes that, as courts of law repeatedly said, it had never committed. They were probably motivated both by vulgar personal interest and ideological hate.

This staggering persecution, which caused and cause deep human suffering, was and is committed in a democratic country where, in theory, human rights, liberty, equality and fraternity reign. It was and is committed by some branches of the government of Taiwan; by bureaucrats who, while describing themselves as friends of democracy, liberty, equality, and fraternity, in fact emptied these words of their real meanings.

Here our true tale of Tai Ji Men reveals itself as a paradigmatic and paramount testimony. Either Humpty Dumpty and the bureaucrats that persecute Tai Ji Men are right, and words have only the meaning that powerful “masters” impose, or the opposite is true and words have universal meaning because they express reality and truth.

But if the Humpty-Dumpty-like bureaucrats that persecute Tai Ji Men are right, all becomes possible, even the most spectacular injustice. There would be no ground to conclude that the persecution of Tai Ji Men on false claims, or any other evil, is wrong. We should all accept and praise persecution, as part of the triumph of the relativistic absolutism of self-perceptions that we seem to enjoy (Respinti 2022).

If the Tai Ji Men case is a re-enactment of the philosophy of Humpty Dumpty, as Respinti argued, it is also a remake of Zhao Gao’s stag-as-horse story. I would also argue that the latter incident, which is so much part of Chinese tradition and culture, offered to the *dizi* of Tai Ji Men a template to interpret their own experience.

There is a rich literature on the Tai Ji Men case (see Jacobsen 2020; *Bitter Winter* 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022) and I would not summarize it here. I would however point out the stag-as-horse scheme at work in it through one main example.

At the heart at the tax case of Tai Ji Men are the so-called red envelopes (see Chao et al. 2021). They are part of an ancient Chinese tradition. *Dizi* express their gratitude and appreciation to their *Shifu* (Grand Master) by giving him gifts

included in red envelopes in certain occasions. The content of the red envelopes has always been called “gift,” not only in the Tai Ji Men movement but in countless organizations teaching martial arts and self-cultivation. However, a prosecutor and some bureaucrats decided to call this content of the red envelopes “tuition fee” for an imaginary “cram school,” i.e., a school where students are normally prepared for exams or otherwise imparted a certain learning through short courses.

Here, the linguistic game of Zhao Gao was played twice. First, the expression “red envelopes,” which has a traditional and clear meaning, was subverted and received a different meaning. Second, the word “gifts” was substituted with the different word “tuition fees.”

This was not a mistake. We now know that the prosecutor of the Tai Ji Men case induced a tax collector to lie (see Bovolenta 2021), and the results of a survey were falsified to support this linguistic shift (Chao et al. 2021, 99–103). The aim was to impose arbitrary and ill-founded taxes since a cram school’s tuition fees are taxable while gifts from disciples to master are not.

The prosecutor, who was eventually contradicted by the highest courts in Taiwan, which stated that there was no cram school, no tuition fees and no tax evasion (Chao et al. 2021, 128–29), and the tax bureaucrats who nonetheless maintained the tax bills were playing their Zhao Gao stag-as-horse game. It was also perceived as such by the Tai Ji Men *dizi*.

The comparison with the Zhao Gao incident is important because it shows what was and is at stake in the Tai Ji Men case. Tax bureaucrats receive bonuses on their tax bills and money is one of their motivations. However, ultimately the question is political, and is about human rights. As for Zhao Gao’s calling a stag a horse, calling gifts tuition fees was a test of power. Who defines the meaning of the words is the essential question in the Tai Ji Men case as well.

The bureaucrats do not want to surrender this power. The Tai Ji Men *dizi* perceive the arbitrary redefinition of words as a subversion of democracy and social harmony, and a violation of their human rights.

In the history reported by Sima Qian, Zhao Gao did not correct his mistakes, went from bad to worse, and ultimately caused the dynasty’s and his own ruin. However, this is not typical of the stories told by the Chinese classics. More often,

they leave the possibility that those in power correct their mistakes open. Tzu Kung (520–456 BCE), a disciple of Confucius, reportedly said,

The gentleman's errors are like an eclipse of the sun and moon in that when he errs the whole world sees him doing so and when he reforms the whole world looks up to him (Lau 2002, 19–21).

These cultural precedents also live in the minds and hearts of the Tai Ji Men *dizi*. They hope that gentlemen will appear, and mistakes will be rectified.

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