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From the Sacred Lotus to an Imperial Portent: Revisiting the Institutionalized Detection and Reporting of Auspicious Omens in Tang China

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Abstract: During the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, a new auspicious omen known as the Thousand-Petaled Auspicious Lotus was displayed to court officials. In response, officials drew on Buddhist scriptures rather than classical Confucian texts to legitimize the omen, aligning with Empress Wu's strategic use of Buddhist symbolism to consolidate imperial legitimacy. Rather than relying solely on Buddhist scriptures, ministers also consulted Ruidie to determine whether this omen had any precedent in official records. Within the Tang dynasty's mature system of omen classification, local officials were tasked with examining reported omens and determining their authenticity and status. The question of what documents were used in such verification processes is therefore of great importance. This paper shows that Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, though frequently cited in Tang literature, was not an officially sanctioned reference text. Other similar compilations were also used, but none held formal authority. In contrast, the official Ruidie, compiled by the Ministry of Rites from all reported omens each year, were submitted to the emperor at the New Year's Etiquette for Meeting and sent to the Historiography Institute for archival. These registers were also circulated among central and local officials, serving as authoritative references in identifying, validating, and reporting new omens.

Keywords: Tang China, Auspicious omens, Ruidie, Wu Zetian.

1. Introduction

In the ninth lunar month of 695 CE, Empress Wu Zetian, then in the fifth year of her reign, adopted a new honorific title imbued with Buddhist significance: Divine and Sacred Emperor of the Heavenly Mandate and Golden Wheel. At the same time, she proclaimed a general amnesty across the empire and changed the reign title to Heavenly Strategy Eternal Prosperity. Just one month later, the Turkic Khagan Mochuo—who had troubled the northern frontier for over a year—sent envoys to offer submission to the court, alleviating tensions on the border. Amid this string of auspicious events, Wu Zetian presented to her court officials a remarkable specimen: a thousand-petaled auspicious lotus, which, as the name suggests, was a large lotus flower with densely layered petals. Given the well-known association between the lotus and Buddhism, and Wu Zetian' s deep devotion to both Buddhist teachings and auspicious omens[1], this lotus was clearly not a traditional Chinese portent rooted in yin-yang and the Five Elements theory, or apocryphal cosmological texts. Rather, it represented a Buddhist auspicious sign, embedded within the religious imagery of the time. Recent studies have highlighted how Empress Wu strategically employed Buddhist visual culture to fashion a gendered form of sacred rulership. In particular, Dorothy Wong has shown that Wu' s patronage of Buddhist art visualized her status as a cosmic monarch in female form, thereby circumventing traditional Confucian gender constraints[2].

In response to the auspicious omen presented by the emperor, it was the duty of court officials to submit formal memorials of congratulation. The responsibility of composing such a memorial fell to Cui Rong, who at the time held the position of Assistant Editorial Director. He presented a document titled Memorial of Congratulations from All Officials on the Thousand-Petaled Auspicious Lotus, which has been preserved thanks to its inclusion in the Best Literary Works, an anthology compiled in the early Song dynasty. In his memorial, Cui completely abandoned the traditional rhetorical strategy often employed by Tang literatis when composing writings on auspicious omens — namely, the extensive citation of classical Chinese sources. Instead, after a brief description of the lotus's splendid appearance, he immediately turned to Buddhist references and canonical sutra passages to elucidate its deeper significance:

Though the lands of Śakra and Brahmā are resplendent with a thousand rays of light, and the realms of the Well-Abiding Devas shine with twin radiance, none can compare to what we now witness. According to the Avatamsaka Sūtra, "The Lotus World is the realm where the Buddha Lúshěná attained enlightenment; within each lotus blossom reside a hundred billion worlds." The Sūtra of Immeasurable Purity states, "The Buddha of Immeasurable Purity was born atop a lotus in a pond of seven treasures." Thus, the lotus—emerging unsullied from the mud, free of worldly defilements—embodies purity and flawlessness. It reveals the mind of the Tathāgata and manifests the Dharma of the Tathāgata. The unfolding of the Way is never without cause.

雖復釋梵天王之國，千影離婁，善住天子之地，雙輝燦爛，校之今日，未可同年。臣等謹按《華嚴經》云："蓮花世界是盧舍那佛成道之國，一蓮花有百億國。"《無量清淨經》云："無量清淨佛，七寶池中生蓮花上。"夫蓮花者，出塵離染，清淨無瑕，有以見如來之心，有以察如來之法。道之行也，曾不徒然。 (WYYH, vol. 563).

Beyond this, Cui took care to underscore the exceptional nature of this particular omen. He writes:

We, your unworthy servants, having been graciously favored by the court, have personally reviewed the Ruidie. Such an extraordinary gift, unheard of throughout the ages, a marvel of singular rarity, has appeared but once in dynastic history. We are overwhelmed with joy, dancing with hands and feet alike, far exceeding ordinary emotion, and are filled with boundless jubilation.

臣等濫奉朝恩，親披瑞牒，非常之貺，曠古未聞，殊特之珍，歷代一見，手舞足蹈，倍百常情，無任慶躍之至。(WYYH, vol. 563).

Notably, he stressed that even after consulting the Ruidie (the official compilations of auspicious signs, 瑞牒) he had never encountered anything comparable to the thousand-petaled auspicious lotus. This detail warrants close attention. In medieval China, the association between Buddhism and auspicious omens was by no means uncommon. Wu Zetian herself had previously drawn upon the auspicious signs and prophetic elements found in the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra and the Sūtra of Precious Rain to bolster her political legitimacy[3]. She even interpreted earthquake-induced mountain upheavals as manifestations of Gṛdhrakūṭa Mountain, the sacred site of the Buddha's sermons, thereby sacralizing natural disasters within a Buddhist cosmological framework.

Lotus-related auspicious omens were first recorded systematically in the Furui zhi in the History of Liu Song Dynasty. This treatise records thirteen instances of lotus-related portents during the history of the Song of the Southern Dynasties alone. Given the flourishing development of Buddhism in the Southern Dynasties, it is reasonable to infer that the concentration of lotus omens during this period was closely tied to Buddhist symbolism. As will be further discussed below, the Southern Dynasties also saw the compilation of numerous Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, which could be cross-referenced with official treatises like the Furui zhi and the Xiangrui zhi in standard dynastic histories. It is therefore quite plausible that lotus imagery had already appeared in these pictorial compilations. This raises a key question: why did Cui Rong go out of his way to emphasize that the thousand-petaled auspicious lotus was not found in the Ruidie? What exactly was the function of the Ruidie in the Tang court context? Why would a congratulatory memorial for an auspicious omen need to cite this specific type of document? And how was it connected to the Tang dynasty's highly systematized omen-reporting apparatus?

As this article will demonstrate, the Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, a Wei-Jin era text frequently cited in Tang literature, was not part of the officially sanctioned corpus for omen verification. While similar works could be consulted as supplementary references, they were not regarded as authoritative by the state. In contrast, the actual Ruidie was a formal dossier compiled by the Ministry of Rites, aggregating auspicious signs reported throughout the year. It was submitted to the emperor on New Year's Day and archived in the Historiography Institute. These dossiers were also circulated among central and local officials and served as official reference materials when identifying and reporting new omens.

2. The Omen System of the Tang China

In the political culture of premodern China, auspicious omens and calamitous anomalies were like twin phenomena, they both integral components of the cosmological framework of yin-yang and the Five Elements theory and the doctrine of resonance between Heaven and humanity. Whereas records of calamitous anomalies often reflect the hindsight and moral judgments of later historians, auspicious omens were more typically staged political performances orchestrated by those in power. The appearance of such omens might signify a ruler's moral and cosmic legitimacy, or else foreshadow the ambitions of a would-be usurper. As one scholar aptly observed, "taken as a whole, the system of auspicious signs always served the political interests of the imperial court."[4]. It is precisely for this reason that auspicious omens in imperial China were never treated as spontaneous or disorderly occurrences. Rather, they were subject to a highly codified system, which we may refer to as the omen apparatus. This term denotes the institutional framework that governed how auspicious omens were identified, reported, interpreted, and recorded within the political culture of the Tang dynasty.

Although earlier Chinese dynasties left behind scattered records concerning auspicious omens, it was during the Tang dynasty that the omen apparatus underwent a qualitative transformation in both scope and institutional clarity. This shift is evident in at least two major developments.

First, the Rules of the Ministry of Rites established a four-tiered classification system for auspicious omens, categorizing them as "Great Omens", "Upper Omens", "Middle Omens", and "Lesser Omens". These categories were not arbitrary but were grounded in a comprehensive review of auspicious signs recorded in canonical scriptures, historical texts, and pictorial registers. According to the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty, "whenever an auspicious omen appears, it is the responsibility [of the ministry] to determine its proper name凡祥瑞應見，皆辨其物名(TLD, vol. 4)." Following this statement, the text provides a detailed classification of omen categories and their respective names in the form of a commentary.

As for the specific types of auspicious omens, scholar has proposed certain corrections based on the Japanese Engishiki, though these will not be elaborated upon here [5]. Regarding the categorization and nomenclature of omens in the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty, Huo Cunfu has conducted a detailed textual investigation and concluded that their true source lies in the Rules of the Ministry of Rites, rather than in the Decrees on Ritual Regulations as claimed in Husanxing's Commentary on the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government[6]. It is worth noting that the "Auspicious Omens" section under the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Engishiki closely resembles the corresponding section in the Tang dynasty's Rules of the Ministry of Rites, revealing a clear line of institutional inheritance. Moreover, under each omen category in the Engishiki, supplementary annotations are provided in smaller script. Below, we cite several representative entries under the category of "Great Omens" as examples:

Auspicious Star: Also known as the Virtue Star, it either appears as a crescent or as a large hollow-centered star. Auspicious Cloud: Described as resembling mist yet not mist, resembling cloud yet not cloud—an ethereal, ungraspable phenomenon. Yellow Transcendent Being (a person with obedience to nature): A golden human figure; some sources alternatively describe it as a jade maiden, suggesting a numinous humanoid being. Spirit of the River: A river deity

or spirit with the form of a human head and the body of a fish.

景星（德星也，或如半月，或如大星，而中空）、慶雲（状若煙非煙，若雲非雲）、黄真人（金人也，又曰玉女也）、河精（人頭魚身）(Engishiki, vol. 21).

Wu Haihang has conducted a comprehensive study of the annotation in the “Auspicious Omens” section of the Engishiki. He successfully traced the vast majority of these annotations back to Chinese canonical sources, in some cases finding passages that match the original texts nearly verbatim. He argues that these annotations most likely originated in the Tang dynasty’s Rules of the Ministry of Rites, and that while the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty omitted them during its selective quotation, Japanese compilers chose to preserve them in full[7]. Indeed, extant manuscript fragments confirm that both main text and annotations could coexist in Tang legal documents. One notable example is the surviving scroll of the Regulations on Staff Positions in the Offices of the Crown Prince, dating to the Yonghui era of Emperor Gaozong. In my view, Wu Haihang’s conclusion is fundamentally sound. From this perspective, the Tang dynasty’s major contribution to the institutionalization of auspicious omens lies in its status as the earliest known regime for which extant historical records explicitly enumerate state-recognized categories of auspicious signs. These entries were accompanied by interpretive annotations and, importantly, organized into a four-tiered classification system that reflected their relative significance.

Second, the Tang dynasty codified detailed procedures for handling newly discovered auspicious omens in legal sources such as the Decrees on Ritual Regulations and the Commentary on the Law Codes of the Tang Dynasty :

Decrees on Ritual Regulations: As for all auspicious omens such as qilin, fenghuang, gui, and long, if they conform to the Great Omens described in the pictorial classics, then they shall be reported immediately through a formal memorial. The memorial must state only the name, color, form, and location of the omen; embellishments or fabrications are strictly forbidden. After an official announcement is made in the ancestral temple and the report is distributed, all civil and military officials shall submit congratulatory memorials. All other omens must be reported to the relevant agencies and submitted again on New Year’s Day. For living birds or beasts captured alive, they are to be released into the wilderness. Other objects should be delivered to the Court of Imperial Sacrificial. If the object cannot be captured, or is something like a double-trunked tree, then a pictorial and textual record shall be submitted in lieu of the physical item. Those who falsely fabricate auspicious omens shall be punished with two years of penal servitude. If court historiographers fail to accurately record anomalies and submit false reports, they shall be demoted by three official ranks.

《儀制令》：“諸祥瑞若麟鳳龜龍之類，依圖書大瑞者，即隨表奏。其表惟言瑞物色目及出處，不得苟陳虛飾。告廟頒下後，百官表賀。其諸瑞並申所司，元日以聞。其鳥獸之類，有生獲者，放之山野，餘送太常。若不可獲，及木連理之類，有生即具圖書上進。”詐為瑞應者，徒二年。若災祥之類，史官不實對者，黜官三等（THY, vol28）.

The final sentence of appears to originate from the Laws on Deception and Fraud in the Commentary on the Law Codes of the Tang Dynasty. The original text reads: Anyone who fabricates an auspicious omen shall be sentenced to two years of penal servitude. If, in cases involving disasters or omens, a historiographer fails to report truthfully, the punishment shall be increased by two degrees. 諸詐為瑞應者徒二年，若災祥之類而史官不以實對者加二等。 (TLSY, vol. 25).

The relevant statute addresses not only auspicious omens, but also calamitous anomalies. While the rationale behind punishing the fabrication of auspicious omens is relatively straightforward—namely, to deter false reports intended to curry favor—the provision that imposes penalties on historiographers who “fail to report truthfully” in matters concerning disasters and omens is more thought-provoking. According to the Commentary on the Law Codes of the Tang Dynasty, the explanation is as follows: This refers to cases in which one interprets an inauspicious omen as auspicious, or an auspicious omen as inauspicious. The punishment shall be increased by two degrees, resulting in three years of penal servitude. 謂應凶言吉，應吉言凶，加二等，徒三年 (TLSY, vol. 25). In the context of auspicious omens, this provision likely did not target routine omens that had already been verified and reported by local authorities, but rather those rare celestial phenomena—such as jǐngxīng or qìngyún—that required discovery or confirmation by professional officials within the Astrological Service. This interpretation is supported by the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty, which states under the section Duties of the Grand Astrologer: The Grand Astrologer is charged with observing the celestial patterns and verifying calendrical calculations. Changes in the sun, moon, stars, and constellations, as well as anomalies in wind, clouds, and atmospheric phenomena, are to be interpreted and reported by him and his subordinates. 太史令掌觀察天文，稽定曆數。凡日月星辰之變，風雲氣色之異，率其屬而占候焉。 (TLD, vol. 10) . Further evidence for this interpretation comes from the fact that omens identified and confirmed by the Astrological Service, and those reported by local officials to the Ministry of Rites, were submitted to the Historiography Institute via parallel channels. The Essentials of the Tang Regulations Economic and Political Structures of the Tang Dynasty includes the following entry under Matters to Be Submitted to the Historiography Institute by Various Agencies: Auspicious omens were compiled and submitted quarterly by the Ministry of Rites . Celestial anomalies and auspicious portents were likewise reported quarterly by the Astrological Service, together with their divinatory interpretations and corroborating signs. 祥瑞（禮部每季具錄送）。天文祥異（太史每季並所占候祥驗同報） (THY, vol. 63). However, the corresponding punishment appears to have changed from “three years of penal servitude”, as stipulated in the Tang Code, to ”demotion by three official ranks” as recorded in the Economic and Political Structures of the Tang Dynasty. It remains unclear whether this discrepancy reflects an actual institutional change or simply a textual error in the later record.

When were these new institutional elements of the Tang omen system first established? Based on the appearance of relevant decrees and rules in the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty, their latest possible date of codification must be no later than the Kaiyuan era. Furthermore, related regulations were already in place during the reign of Emperor Taizong. A decree dated the third day of the ninth month in the second

year of the Zhenguan era:

Whenever I see auspicious omens reported from various regions, I feel only deeper shame and trepidation. For the safety or peril of the realm lies in human affairs, and fortune or misfortune depends on the methods of governance. If a ruler behaves tyrannically, even auspicious portents cannot perfect his virtue; and if the administration is upright, ominous signs alone cannot bring about ruin. Thus, such phenomena should not be overly relied upon. Henceforth, as for Great Omens—such as the qilin, fenghuang, gui, and long—they shall be memorialized as in the past. All other omens must be submitted to the appropriate offices. For those Great Omens that require memorialization, only the name, color, and appearance of the omen, along with the location where it manifested, shall be recorded. No embellishment or exaggerated wording shall be permitted.

朕每見諸方表奏符瑞，慚懼增深。且安危在於人事，吉凶係於政術。若時主肆虐，嘉貺未能成其美；如治道休明，庶徵不能致其惡。以此而言，未為可恃。今以後，麟鳳龜龍大瑞之類，依舊表奏。自外諸瑞，宜申所司。其大瑞應奏者，惟錄瑞物色目及出見處所，更不得苟陳虛詞。 (THY, vol. 28).

As Meng Xianshi has pointed out, “the extant version of the Decrees on Ritual Regulations must have been compiled after the second year of the Zhenguan reign, and even its wording likely derives directly from the imperial edicts of Emperor Taizong.”[8]. Not only the Decrees on Ritual Regulations but also the classification scheme of omens—such as “great omens”—attested in the Rules of the Ministry of Rites appears to have already taken shape by this time. Moreover, the version of the Tang Code now preserved in the Commentary on the Law Codes of the Tang Dynasty is generally believed to reflect the Yonghui Code issued in the early reign of Emperor Gaozong, which only introduced minimal changes to the earlier Zhenguan Code. It is therefore reasonable to infer that the article in the Statute on Deception and Fraud concerning auspicious omens had already existed during the Zhenguan period. If we push this logic further, it is likely that some rudimentary regulations had already been in place under the Sui dynasty—well known for its admiration of auspicious portents—though at present, this cannot be confirmed through surviving textual evidence.

Building on existing academic findings as well as our own insights, this section offered a brief overview of the new developments in the auspicious omen system of the Tang dynasty. The following discussion focuses on a key issue raised in the introduction: in the process of discovering and reporting omens, the vast majority of routine auspicious signs were verified and confirmed by local officials. The central government generally did not conduct a second review but instead accepted the submissions as they were. This leads to an important question—what criteria did local officials rely on during their verification process? Did the Tang central authorities issue an official “manual” to guide local-level assessments?

3. The Authoritative Status of Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omens

Using the Illustrated Treatise on Heavenly and Earthly Auspicious Omens preserved at the Sonkeikaku Bunko in Japan as a starting point, Yu Xin has also investigated the institutionalization of auspicious omens during the Tang dynasty. He argues that “the judgment of auspicious omens according to the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens gradually became institutionalized under the framework of the Tang empire’s system of laws, decrees, regulations, and rules.” Among the many extant versions of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, Yu Xin places particular emphasis on the importance of the Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omens. He writes: “Among the various Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, that of the Sun’s should be considered the most authoritative. Later writings that cite the Illustrations generally rely on this version. Although it was not the original among the various compilations, it functioned much like what the Yijing calls ‘zhen xia qi yuan’ —providing the momentum for the study of auspicious omens to continue in perpetual motion.” With regard to the institutional procedures surrounding auspicious omens, Yu emphasizes that in the actual process of verifying such omens, officials were required to consult Ruidie, such as Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omensand other similar texts. Only after confirming that the phenomenon was not fabricated could it be formally memorialized to the throne. During the Empress Wu’s reign, every memorial concerning an auspicious omen submitted by Li Wukui, the Regional Chief of Shazhou, invariably included the phrase: “Respectfully verified in accordance with Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omens10-37).”[9]. Although Yu does use the term “such as” in the phrase “officials were required to consult Ruidie, such as Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omensand other similar texts”, the surrounding context suggests that he views Sun’s Illustrations as the primary state-sanctioned reference text within the auspicious omen system of the Tang dynasty. Moreover, he appears to regard it as a Ruidie in its own right. This raises two important questions that merit closer examination: whether Sun’s Illustrations of Auspicious Omens truly possessed this level of authority, and what the actual nature of a Ruidie was. The present section will first focus on the former issue.

Illustrated manuals of auspicious omens, often bearing titles such as Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, constitute a long-standing textual tradition in ancient China. For example, the Book of the Later Han records: “[The emperor] ruled for thirteen years, the auspicious omens submitted by commanderies and kingdoms that matched the illustrated registers numbered in the hundreds and thousands在位十三年，郡國所上符瑞，合於圖書者數百千所(HHS, vol. 3).” According to Records of Things Past and Present, compiled by Cui Bao, Sun Liang of Eastern Wu “crafted a glass screen on which he engraved an Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, containing altogether 120 types作琉璃屏風，鏤作瑞應圖，凡一百二十種 (GJZ).” Whether the auspicious carvings and inscriptions at the Wu Liang Shrine from the Eastern Han, or the records in dynastic histories (such as History of Liu Song Dynasty, History of Southern Qi, History of Wei), all of these reflect direct applications of such omen illustration manuals. These types of texts became especially popular during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties. A surviving example from this period is the Dunhuang manuscript fragment of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens (P. 2683), which some scholars believe may have been compiled by the renowned Southern Dynasties literatus Gu Yewang[10]. The structure of these texts typically features illustrations of individual omens,

accompanied by short captions that describe their appearance, properties, conditions of manifestation, and references in historical records. These captions often cite other classical sources in order to enhance their credibility. The Dunhuang manuscript of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens also contains citations from Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, which will be discussed in detail below. For reference, one such citation is provided here to illustrate the structure of the text.(Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Azure Dragon pattern and its caption from the Dunhuang manuscript fragment of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens.

Azure Dragon according to Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens: "The Azure Dragon is the essence of water. It ascends and descends riding on clouds and rain, and does not dwell in deep springs. It appears when the ruler embodies benevolence." It also states: "When a worthy man holds office and the unworthy are dismissed, it is seen."

青龍《孫氏瑞應圖》曰：青龍，水之精也。乘雲雨而下上，不處淵泉，王者有仁則出。又曰：君子在位，不肖斥退，則見。

In the Treatise on Classics from the Book of Sui, which summarizes the intellectual development between the Han and Tang dynasties and reflects the actual state of imperial collections during the Zhenguan era, works belonging to the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens genre appear in the following form:

Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, 3 volumes

Illustrations with Verses on Auspicious Omens, 2 volumes (The Liang dynasty once had Notes on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens by Sun Rouzhi and Verses on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens by Sun's family, each in 3 volumes, both now lost.)

Illustrations of Auspicious Signs, 11 volumes

Illustrations of Auspicious Signs, 8 volumes (Compiled by Hou Dan.)

Illustrations of Auspicious Fungus and Flowers, 1 volume

Illustrations of Auspicious Anomalies, 11 volumes

《瑞應圖》三卷

《瑞圖贊》二卷（梁有孫柔之《瑞應圖記》、孫氏《瑞應圖贊》各三卷，亡。）

《祥瑞圖》十一卷

《祥瑞圖》八卷（侯亶撰）

《芝英圖》一卷

《祥異圖》十一卷 (SS, vol. 34)

Regarding the relationship among these texts, Yuhai offers a clear account of their textual development:

At first, a single version of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens was circulated, said to have been compiled by the Duke of Zhou. During the Wei and Jin periods, the Sun and Xiong families combined various versions into a three-part compilation, though the contents were full of contradictions. Gu Yewang removed redundancies and incorporated material from apocryphal illustrations and cosmological texts. His edition began with the Three Dynasties and ended in the Datong era under Emperor Wu of the Liang, comprising a total of 482 entries. Occasional source citations were added in the form of annotations.

初，世傳《瑞應圖》一篇，云周公所制，魏晉間孫氏、熊氏合之為三篇，所載叢舛。野王去其重複，益採圖緯，起三代，止梁武帝大同中，凡四百八十二目，時有援據，以為注釋。(YH, vol. 200).

The historical account noting that the Sun compiling a three-part version during the Wei and Jin periods specifically points to Sun Róuzhī's Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens. This allows us to infer a more precise timeframe for the compilation of this text. In terms of content, all versions of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens—beginning with the purportedly Zhou-era "transmitted version" attributed to the Duke of Zhou—share a genealogical relationship. While they differ in level of detail, their basic structure and underlying purpose remain fundamentally consistent.

In the Treatise on Classics from the Book of Sui, the only entry related to Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens appears under the heading "Illustrations with Verses on Auspicious Omens, 2 volumes," which includes the note: "The Liang dynasty once had Notes on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens by Sun Rouzhi and Verses on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens by Sun's family, each in 3 volumes, both now lost." In terms of format, these two titles—Notes and Verses—were most likely extracted textual fragments from the full Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, which originally combined images and text. In

medieval Chinese usage, the term ji (記) often denoted narrative records, while tuji (圖記) referred to explanatory captions accompanying illustrations. It is possible, then, that Notes on the Illustrations consisted either of historical anecdotes recounting emperors receiving auspicious omens, or of interpretive prose originally attached to the images within the illustrated text. The zan (贊), by contrast, likely consisted of four-character rhymed verse, a form commonly found as poetic captions alongside images in omen texts of this genre. Strictly speaking, the Treatise on Classics does not directly mention the existence—or loss—of Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens itself. It merely records the independent circulation of its Notes and Verses editions during the Liang dynasty, which had disappeared by the time of the Tang. For this reason, the entry is placed under Ruitu zan rather than Illustrations of Auspicious Omens proper. That said, the omission of Sun's Illustrations from the Treatise on Classics suggests that by the time Wei Zheng supervised the cataloging and inventory of court texts during the Zhenguan era, there was no version of the Illustrations explicitly attributed to Sun Rouzhi in the imperial collection.

What is puzzling, however, is that the main body or stand-alone editions of Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens were in fact never lost during the Tang dynasty. In the early Tang, Ouyang Xun, under the commission of Emperor Gaozu, compiled the Classified Excerpts from Ancient Writers, in which Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens is cited nine times. This work was completed and submitted to the throne in the seventh year of the Wude era, and all those involved in its compilation were court officials. Later, in the Literature Records in the Old Book of Tang, which reflects the state of the imperial library during the Kaiyuan reign of Emperor Xuanzong, "Notes on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens by Sun Rouzhi, 2 volumes" is clearly listed (JTS, vol. 47). Numerous other citations of Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens appear throughout official and private writings of the Tang period. Even in recent years, the work has received scholarly attention, as seen in Gong Shixue's Collected and Annotated Edition of Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens[11]. Given this, the omission of Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens from the Treatise on Classics in the Book of Sui can be explained in one of two ways. One possibility is that the version used by Ouyang Xun during the Wude era was a privately owned copy or a newly acquired edition that had entered the court in the early Tang. Since Wei Zheng's bibliographic work during the Zhenguan era focused primarily on checking against the imperial holdings of the Sui dynasty and verifying its official catalogues, Sun's Illustrations may simply have fallen outside his scope. Alternatively, it may have been a straightforward case of clerical oversight.

From the preceding discussion, it becomes clear that the foundational institutions concerning auspicious omens in the Tang dynasty had already taken shape by the Zhenguan era. If, as Yu Xin argues, Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens was indeed the authoritative reference that local officials were required to consult when verifying omens, then its absence from the Treatise on Classics in the Book of Sui, which was itself based on the Zhenguan era imperial collection, becomes difficult to explain. This omission is not merely a bibliographical or philological issue, it could even reflect a political sensitivity embedded in the omission. Conversely, this suggests that Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens was never so tightly bound to the Tang omen system as to be regarded as an indispensable component. That is precisely why we have devoted considerable space to examining the transmission and citation history of the text. As a form of supporting evidence, it is worth noting that Wei Zheng himself authored a text concerning auspicious omens, namely the Inscription on the Sweet Spring of Jiucheng Palace, which was later written in calligraphy by Ouyang Xun and remains a celebrated model of calligraphy to this day. Composed in the sixth year of the Zhenguan era, the inscription quotes from the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, stating: "When the ruler is perfectly harmonious and requires no tribute for food and drink, the sweet spring will emerge; those who drink it will enjoy long life王者純和，飲食不貢獻，則醴泉出，飲之令人壽 (QTW, vol. 141)." Notably, it does not cite Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens. Although this does not prove that Wei Zheng had never seen the Sun version, it at least demonstrates that writings on auspicious omens in the Tang period did not necessarily rely on the Sun's compilation. Various editions of the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens were evidently in circulation and could serve as valid references, as their contents were not fundamentally different from one another.

Yu Xin further claims that during Empress Wu's reign, every memorial on auspicious omens submitted by Li Wukui, explicitly included the phrase: "Respectfully verified in accordance with Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens." However, a thorough examination of the Dunhuang manuscript Gazetteer of the Protectorate of Shazhou reveals that in all of Li Wukui's omen memorials, the text refers only to the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens, without the qualifier "Sun's" [12]. Moreover, beyond the Sun version, Tang dynasty writings on auspicious omens also cite the Xióng's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens. For instance, both Xu Jingzong's "Memorial on the Appearance of a Dragon in Changzhou" and Zhang Quan's "Memorial on the Appearance of the Old Man Star composed on behalf of the Regional Chief Zhang of Dingzhou" explicitly reference the Xióng version. According to the Literature Records in the Old Book of Tang, Xiong Li is credited with a Verses on the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens in 3 volumes, which likely corresponds to this Xióng's Illustrations in the form of a stand-alone poetic edition(JTS, vol. 47). If Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens had indeed been the officially designated reference text within the Tang omen system, it would have been inconceivable for court officials to cite other versions instead.

4. Two Functions of Ruidie

Since Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens did not hold any formal or legally mandated status in the process by which local officials verified and reported auspicious phenomena, how, then, did they determine whether a given anomaly truly qualified as an auspicious omen? While the Rules of the Ministry of Rites listed categories of omens along with their corresponding hierarchical classifications, it may also have included commentaries that described the circumstances and manifestations of such omens. However, in terms of format, this type of administrative rule was unlikely to be visually illustrated, and therefore remained insufficiently intuitive for use by local officials. This raises the question of whether the court ever issued any officially sanctioned illustrated manuals of auspicious omens for local reference. Here, the term Ruidie

mentioned by Yu Xin offers a valuable clue.

According to the Decrees on Ritual Regulations, auspicious omens in the Tang dynasty could be roughly divided into two hierarchical levels. The highest level consisted of Great Omens, which, once discovered, had to be immediately reported to the central government. This initiated a sequence of formal actions: offerings at ancestral temples, the issuing of an imperial edict, and congratulatory memorials from court officials. Information about such events would be disseminated publicly in the form of specific imperial pronouncements. For example, in the second year of the Chuigong era, when Mount Qing emerged in Yongzhou, Cui Rong composed a memorial titled "Memorial of Congratulations from Magistrate Li of Jingzhou on the Appearance of Mount Qing" which states:

We, your ministers, respectfully report: On a certain day, we received the imperial edict issued in a certain month, which reads: "In Xinfeng County, Mount Qing has appeared. In response, grant a special amnesty to the county's prisoners, rename Xinfeng County as Qingshan County, and bestow a three-day public festivity upon the entire realm." All living beings rejoice at this blessing.

臣某等言：某日奉某月詔書："新豐縣有慶山出，曲赦縣囚徒，改新豐為慶山縣，賜天下酺三日。"凡在含生，孰不慶幸。 (QTW, vol. 218).

The fact that Cui Rong's congratulatory memorial begins by quoting an imperial edict indicates that, after the appearance of Mount Qing as a Great Omen, the court responded by issuing a decree to confirm the omen and implement associated rewards. This was then followed by a round of congratulatory memorials from civil and military officials throughout the empire. By contrast, omens of slightly lower rank, which were classified as upper, middle, and lower auspicious omens, were first reported to the Ministry of Rites. During the New Year court assembly, all such omens collected over the past year would be formally presented by state officials. The medium used to record these omens was most likely the Ruidie. This type of Ruidie had already appeared during the political transition in which Yang Jian usurped the Zhou and founded the Sui dynasty:

In the second month of the first year of the Kaihuang reign, on the day jiazi, Chun and others arrived in ceremonial elephant-drawn carriages, accompanied by the emperor's ceremonial weaponry and the related systemy. Bearing official tallies, they led civil and military officials to the gate of the Chancellery and presented the investiture document at the designated station. The assembled officials, both civil and military, stood in formal court dress to the south of the gate, facing north. Gaozu (Yang Jian) wore a yuanyou cap, standing among the officials of his provincial staff. The secretary reported to the inner office, after which the Section of Rites led Gaozu, accompanied by his staff, out through the east wing of the main gate, facing west . . . The Minister of Rites presented, on a formal desk, the documents confirming the Fuming and the Ruidie beneath the eastern steps. The Chancellor, kneeling before the throne, read them aloud. The Director of the Imperial Secretariat then announced a general amnesty by imperial edict and declared the first year of the Kaihuang reign. That same day, orders were issued to the officials to offer the investiture documents at the southern suburban altar.

（開皇元年）二月，甲子，椿等乘象輦，備鹵簿，持節，率百官至門下，奉策入次。百官文武，朝服立於門南，北面。高祖冠遠遊冠，府僚陪列。記室入白，禮曹導高祖，府僚從，出大門東廂西向……禮部尚書以案承符命及祥瑞牒，進東階下。納言跪御前以聞。內史令奉宣詔大赦，改元曰開皇。是日，命有司奉冊祀於南郊。 (SS, vol. 9).

There are also detailed records in the Tang dynasty regarding how Ruidie were presented during the Etiquette for Meeting on New Year's Day:

When officials gathered for the court ceremony, the Vice Minister of Secretariat would bring forth the compiled reports submitted by various prefectures and regional administrations, and wait outside the Right Yanming Gate. At the same time, the Supervising Secretary would bring the ritual desk bearing the omen documents and wait outside the Left Yanming Gate. Both clerks would wear ceremonial attire and present their respective documents. Afterward, the Vice Minister of Secretariat and the Supervising Secretary would return to stand with the attendants. When the foreign envoys first entered, the Ministry of Revenue arranged the tribute offerings from various prefectures in the east and west wings of the Taiji Gate. The Ministry of Rites instructed the envoys of foreign polities to carry portable gifts into the inner hall themselves, while larger or heavier tributes were displayed in front of the main court. As the Senior Noble prepared to enter, the Vice Minister of Secretariat stepped down to lead the memorials to the western stairs, facing east; the Supervising Secretary led the ritual desk bearing the omen documents to the eastern stairs, facing west. When the Senior Noble was about to ascend and offer congratulations, the Secretariat Director and the Vice Director of the Chancellery stepped down and waited at the base of the stairs. As the Senior Noble ascended, the two officials followed in sequence, each presenting the documents under their charge. After the Senior Noble finished his address, the Secretariat Director knelt to present the memorials from various regions, followed by the Vice Director of the Chancellery kneeling to present the auspicious omen reports. After completing their tasks, they withdrew, placed the presented documents on the appropriate tables, and returned to their positions. The Vice Minister of Secretariat and the Supervising Secretary then withdrew their ritual desk to the front of the eastern and western stairs respectively, and exited the court.

初群官將朝，中書侍郎以諸州鎮表別為一案，俟於右延明門外，給事中以祥瑞案俟於左延明門外，俱令史絳公服對舉案。侍郎、給事中俱就侍臣班。於客使初入，戶部以諸州貢物陳於太極門東西廂；禮部以諸蕃貢物量可執者蕃客手執入就內位，其重大者陳於朝堂前。初上公將入門，中書侍郎降，引表案入詣西階下，東面立；給事中降，引祥瑞案入詣東階下，西面立。上公將升賀，中書令、黃門侍郎俱降，各立階下。初上公升階，中書令、黃門侍郎各取所奏之文以次升。上公賀訖，中書令前跪奏諸方表訖，黃門侍郎又進跪奏祥瑞訖，俱降，置所奏之文於案，各還侍位。侍郎與給事中引案退至東西階前，案遂出，侍郎、給事中還侍位。 (TD, vol. 123).

It is thus evident that after the Ruidie were prepared by the Ministry of Rites, the officials actually responsible for presenting them during the Etiquette for Meeting on New Year's Day were those from the Chancellery with ceremonial functions—namely, the Supervising Secretary and the Vice Director of the Chancellery. According to the Six Institutions

of the Tang Dynasty, one of the duties of the Vice Director of the Chancellery was "to report all auspicious omens from across the empire when the emperor hold court on the first day of the year and the Winter Solstice凡元正、冬至天子視朝，則以天下祥瑞奏聞 (TLD, vol. 8,)." In fact, such reporting occurred only during the New Year ceremony, as the Comprehensive Institutions explicitly states, "During the Winter Solstice Etiquette for Meeting, auspicious omens were not presented其冬至受朝則不奏祥瑞 (TD, vol. 123)." The repeated references to "ritual desk bearing the omen documents" in the ceremonial procedure suggest that it likely contained the Ruidie, which documented all the auspicious omens recorded for that year.

Then how did the Ruidie function as a mechanism for consolidating auspicious omens? Several concrete examples can be cited. According to Cui Zhiyuan's Brush Drafts from the Osmanthus Garden, after Yang Xingmin was appointed as Regional Chief of Lúzhou in the third year of the Zhonghe reign, he immediately sent a scroll entitled Illustration of Zhicao to the court. The emperor responded: Having viewed it, I express my admiration, it brought joy beyond measure. Though the wondrous signs from plants and trees are born of Heaven, they are also a response to the Earth's excellence. Such manifestations arise with cause, how could I possibly be worthy of them? You have just assumed office as prefect and already present a Ruidie. May this be Heaven's warning to you; take heed and govern with care覽之嘉歎，喜有餘懷。且草木之祥異也，雖自天成，皆因地秀，物有所應，吾何以堪。行敏始假郡符，已彰瑞牒，天其誡爾，爾宜慎之 (GYBGJ). In other words, the zhīcǎo ultimately became part of the compiled Ruidie. The memorial "A Petition to Celebrate the Amnesty on Behalf of the Duke of Runan, Governor of Huazhou", written by Li Shangyin, was composed in response to the amnesty and change of reign title issued by Emperor Wuzong in the first year of the Huichang era. In it, Li praises the emperor by stating:"As for ganlu and lingzhi, we deemed them too modest to report to the official historians; as for red geese and white qilin, we found them unworthy of inclusion in the Ruidie灵芝甘露，鄙之而不告史官；赤雁白麟，陋之而不编瑞牒 (QTW, vol. 771)." This passage clearly suggests that auspicious signs such as "red geese and white qilin" were ordinarily supposed to be compiled into the Ruidie. It is worth noting that Li juxtaposes "official historians" with the Ruidie, implying a textual parallelism. This suggests that the Ruidie likely served as one of the key reference materials for recording auspicious omens in official histories. Before these omens were formally presented to the emperor during the New Year Etiquette for Meeting, they had probably already been reported quarterly by the Ministry of Rites to the Historiography Institute. On the ninth day of the third month in the thirteenth year of the Zhenyuan reign of Emperor Dezong, the emperor visited the Xingqing Pond at Xingqing Palace. A white cormorant appeared above the pond, followed by a formation of regular cormorants "lined up before and behind, as if guiding the imperial boat羅列前後，如引御舟." On the following day, propitious rain fell. Although the white cormorant was not included among the official categories of auspicious omens listed in the Rules of the Ministry of Rites, the Tang court nevertheless regarded it as an omen. Quan Deyu, then serving as a participant in the drafting of proclamations, submitted on behalf of the Secretariat-Chancellery a memorial titled "A Petition from the Secretariat-Chancellery in Celebration of the White Cormorant at Xingqing Pond." In it, he wrote: "In ancient times, the Zhou dynasty rejoiced over the appearance of a white pheasant, and all lands, near and far, sang its praises. The Han dynasty celebrated the red geese, and offered them in suburban sacrifices. But how could those compare to today's omen, which is born of utmost sincerity? The Ruidie contain no such record—how fortunate are the common people to witness it? I humbly request that this event be entered into the official histories as a sign to future generations昔周致白翟，徒稱遐邇；漢歌赤雁，亦薦郊廟。豈比今日，感於至誠！瑞牒所無，蒸人何幸？伏望宣付史冊，昭示將來 (QDYWJ)." Once again, this demonstrates the perceived importance of entering such omens into the Ruidie, and ultimately, into the dynastic histories.

Beyond its role in compiling and submitting omens to the throne and the Historiography Institute, the Ruidie also served an important institutional function: it provided a standardized point of reference for both central and local officials to verify and classify newly reported omens in the future. For instance, in the early Tianbao reign of Emperor Xuanzong, a zhīcǎo appeared in Beihai Commandery, categorized as a Lesser Omen. Specifically, "six stalks of zhiying sprouted from a beam in the lecture hall of the commandery school, growing upright toward the hall entrance, pure white in color, radiating brilliance across the structure.郡道學講堂中梁，有芝英產見六莖，其本正向堂門，素色純淨，流輝棟宇" In a memorial written by Xiao Yingshi蕭穎士, he noted: "I have consulted many Ruidie while reviewing past records臣遐考曩曆，旁窺瑞牒多矣 (QTW, vol. 322)." This suggests that, when determining the nature of an auspicious anomaly and examining its historical precedents, local officials and literati had access to Ruidie that bore semi-official authority.

The interaction between newly designated omen types and the Ruidie warrants even closer attention. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, during her reign, Empress Wu once presented to her ministers a "Thousand-Petaled Auspicious Lotus." Since it was not among the recognized omen categories listed in the Rules of the Ministry of Rites, Cui Rong described it as "unheard of throughout the ages," implying that this imperially sanctioned omen was not yet recorded in the Ruidie. Nevertheless, after this occasion, the auspicious lotus was formally registered. Later, in the eighteenth year of the Zhenyuan era under Emperor Dezong, the emperor once again presented to his ministers a "depiction of the auspicious lotus in the moat before the Hall of Shenlong Monastery, featuring two pods on one stem神龍寺殿前渠中瑞蓮花圖，其花一莖兩房." In his commemorative memorial, Quan Deyu remarked that Emperor Dezong's "profound virtue elicited this favorable response from Heaven, one that stands out above all entries in the pictorial registers (tudie).玄功嘉应，超冠图牒 (QDYWJ)." The term tudie (图牒) may refer to both the Illustrations of Auspicious Omens and the Ruidie, or more likely, to the latter alone. We favor the second interpretation, since earlier Illustrations of Auspicious Omens—predating Empress Wu—did not include the Sacred lotus, while during her reign, the lotus had already been included in official

Ruidie materials, which likely featured both textual and pictorial elements, making the designation túdié appropriate. Because the lotus was no longer a newly emerging omen by the time of Emperor Dezong, Quan Deyu could no longer describe it as "unheard of throughout the ages", instead, he praised it as one that "stands out above all entries in the pictorial registers."

It is therefore evident that once submitted, the Ruidie not only entered the official dynastic histories, but also circulated among central and local officials. On the one hand, it served as a reference source; on the other, it functioned as a form of political encouragement. After all, the official Ruidie were composed of successive auspicious omens reported by local administrations, likely including the identity of the discovering official, the context of the discovery, the appearance of the omen, and often accompanied by illustrations. As such, these records could be counted as significant political achievements, potentially earning the reporting official imperial commendation or even promotion. As Stephan Kory has shown in his case study of the Baotu augural stone presented to Empress Wu in 688, such omens were not merely symbolic affirmations, but were actively manufactured, disseminated, and ritualized through institutional channels, including formal memorials, state sacrifices, and title-bestowals[13]. This example highlights the Tang state's capacity to transform spontaneous signs into politically expedient instruments of legitimation. According to the Six Institutions of the Tang Dynasty, all county-level administrative leaders were responsible for evaluating the performance of subordinate officials. This included assessments of wrongful litigation, conscription and dispatch of troops, local infrastructure decisions, and particularly, "exceptional omens and portents 符瑞之尤異 (TLD, vol. 30)"—all of which had to be reported to the court. Clearly, leveraging the discovery of auspicious omens as a pathway to political advancement was not a strategy limited to lower-level functionaries. Even mid- and high-ranking officials such as Li Wukui, the Regional Chief of Shazhou, were able to benefit considerably from reporting such omens.

Once they had access to the Ruidie, local officials naturally began to imitate its format and compose additional reports of auspicious signs. Although Tang emperors frequently issued edicts forbidding further omen reports from the provinces, pragmatic local officials were reluctant to give up such opportunities. Compared with tributes offered by Fanzhen(藩鎮）, producing auspicious omens was more economical and politically effective. In reality, emperors—often eager to enhance their prestige—did not sincerely reject these reports. Such prohibitions usually came shortly after their accession to the throne and served more as gestures of humility than firm policy. As a result, reports of auspicious omens were repeatedly banned but never truly stopped. In this context, the Ruidie acted as a medium through which the central court and local officials developed a tacit understanding, engaging in a kind of calculated collusion.

5. Conclusion

This study has reexamined the institutional logic underlying the identification, verification, and circulation of auspicious omens in Tang China, with particular attention to the status of Ruidie and the role of illustrated omen texts. By situating the Thousand-Petaled Auspicious Lotus within the broader administrative and ritual framework of the Tang omen apparatus, it becomes clear that the validation of omens did not rely on any single illustrated compilation, including Sun's Illustrations of Auspicious Omens. Rather, such texts functioned as supplementary references within a plural textual environment, lacking formal legal authority. In contrast, the Ruidie—compiled, submitted, and archived through official channels—served as the only institutionally sanctioned medium for consolidating and standardizing auspicious knowledge. It fulfilled a dual function: not only recording and transmitting recognized omens within the bureaucratic system, but also providing a cumulative and normative reference for future identification and classification. The process by which new omens entered the Ruidie, as seen in the case of the auspicious lotus, further demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of this system. Ultimately, the Tang omen apparatus should be understood not as a static body of symbolic interpretation, but as an evolving institutional mechanism through which political authority, bureaucratic practice, and the management of auspicious knowledge were continuously negotiated and reproduced.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

JTS *Jiutangshu* 舊唐書[Old History of Tang Dynasty]
WYYH *Wenyuanyinghua* 文苑英華[Best Literary Works]
SB *Songshu* 宋書[History of Liu Song Dynasty]
TLD *Tangliudian* 唐六典[Six Institutions of Tang Dynasty]
THY *Tanghuiyao* 唐會要[Economic and Political Structures of Tang Dynasty]
TLSY *Tanglvshuyi* 唐律疏議[Commentary on Law Codes of Tang Dynasty]
HHS *Houhanshu* 後漢書[Book of Later Han]
GJZ *Gujinzhu* 古今註[Annotations from Antiquity to the Present]
SS *Suishu* 隋書[History of Sui Dynasty]
QTW *Quantangwen* 全唐文[Complete Literature Works of Tang Dynasty]
TD *Tongdian* 通典[Comprehensive Institutions]
GYBGJ *Guiyuanbigengji* 桂苑筆耕集[Collected Essays from the Cassia Garden]
QDYWJ *Quandeyuwenji* 權德輿文集[Collected Works of Quan Deyu]

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