

# ***Back to Divination Practice: Cross-Cultural Characteristics of Dunhuang Birdsong Divination Book IOLTibJ747***

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**Abstract:** Divination, as an important component of Chinese philosophy, plays an important role in reflecting the complex historical background in history and folklore. Especially in the Dunhuang region, which has experience in cross-cultural communication, the divination books unearthed from it have high reference value for understanding the complex historical background of Dunhuang at that time. This article selects the Dunhuang Birdsong Divination Book IOLTibJ747 as the research object, and through text analysis and historical analysis, re-examines the living conditions of the Dunhuang people during the Tibetan rule and the influence reflected by cross-cultural experiences. On the one hand, this article believes that IOLTibJ747 has a multilingual nature and integrates folk tales born in various cultural backgrounds, as well as the cross-cultural experience of the Dunhuang region during Tibetan rule in terms of bird species selection. On the other hand, this article believes that IOLTibJ747's emphasis on the spatiotemporal coordinates of divination and the selection of divination themes both point to the historical fact that war was the main topic of people's life in the Dunhuang region during the Tibetan rule. This article has certain reference value for exploring academic approaches to cross-cultural research, international relations research, and social history research through Zi Xue academic literature.

**Keywords:** Dunhuang, Birdsong Divination Book, Cross-culture

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Origin and Development**

Ornithomancy, often known as bird divination, is an age-old tradition that has been documented in several civilizations all over the globe. The practice seems to have a long and complex history in Dunhuang.

Along with other manuscripts like P.T.1045, the manuscript IOLTibJ747 provides insightful information on the evolution of bird divination in this area. These manuscripts, which show a fusion of Chinese, Tibetan, and other Central Asian elements, most likely belong to the Tang period (618–907 AD).

The emphasis on crows in particular, as shown in the passage, shows a relationship to older Chinese beliefs in which crows were seen as emblems of divine intervention[1]. As different behaviors and beliefs were incorporated into regional traditions, the development of these practices in the Dunhuang area probably mirrored the larger cultural interaction along the Silk Road[2].

## 1.2. Cultural Significance

Bird divination seems to have had a variety of functions in everyday life at Dunhuang. On the one hand, it provided a way to foretell both unimportant and important future occurrences. However, it was also included into religious ceremonies, providing a link between human actions and heavenly influence.

The deep relationships between bird divination and regional religious customs are highlighted by the precise descriptions of ceremonies and gifts included in the manuscripts, such as the usage of milk, white mustard seeds, fresh meat, and flowers [3]. These relationships suggest a nuanced worldview in which divination was not only a superstitious belief but also a planned and important societal activity [4].

## 1.3. Connection with Religion and Philosophy

The writings demonstrate a tight connection between Dunhuang's many religious and philosophical traditions and bird divination. A fusion of Buddhist, Taoist, and indigenous belief systems is suggested by the presence of Tibetan inscriptions and the emphasis on certain rites, directions, and spatial characteristics [5].

Furthermore, these works' symbolism and vocabulary reveal an underlying philosophy that uses nature, particularly birds, as a window into the workings of the cosmos. Daoist beliefs in the harmony and interdependence of all things chime with the notion that bird cries and actions might be understood as prophecies or manifestations of divine intent [6].

## 2. Analysis of Manuscript IOL Tib J747

### 2.1. Physical Description

IOL. Tib J747 is the most complete of the 6 Dunhuang Tibetan and Uighur documents. This particular scroll is rare, consisting of 3 pages. The first page includes an introduction followed by two rows of divination tables; the second page consists entirely of a divination table; the third page includes two rows of divination tables and hexagram texts. The contents are divided into three parts: The first part is a poetic introduction in 9 lines and 29 sentences, primarily describing the divine crow Huoyang An Ya [7] as a messenger of the god's will, flying around in all directions and offering something called "Co" to the god, along with an explanation that different crow sounds symbolize different omens [8]. The second part is a divination table with 9 directions and 8 items used to ward off evil. The directions are: East, Southeast, South, Southwest, West, Northwest, North, Northeast, and the Sky. The items to ward off evil are: Milk, Mustard Seed, Pure Water, Fresh Meat, Flowers, Frankincense, Rice, and Sticky Rice. Vertically, there are 10 time periods representing different segments of the day. The cawing of the crow in these time periods and in different directions forms 90 hexagram omens.

The third part consists of 8 lines of more refined prose hexagrams, determining good and bad omens based on the direction and sequence of the crow's cawing and some references to specific places and incense. In IOL. Tib J747, the second part's divination table's time and direction names are identical to those in P.3988, and the hexagram texts in the table are mostly similar. The third part's prose hexagrams are relatively simple, whereas P.3988's are richer and organized according to the Chinese zodiac time system, with different hexagrams for each day. However, an overall analysis of the document shows that IOL. Tib J747's divination method and P.3988's "Uzhàn Lín Jué" likely stem from the same Han Chinese divination tradition, while each retains its own unique ethnic characteristics.

## **2.2. Content Analysis**

### **2.2.1. Poetic Preface**

A lyrical preamble, a prominent element in early Chinese divination writings, opens the book. It establishes a connection between the human and the divine by outlining the cosmological framework within which divination functions. The crow is described in the preface's lyrical introduction as a representative of divine intent and a trustworthy advisor. This implies that the Tang Dynasty did not see divination as superstition but rather as an essential component of their worldview, which was influenced by Daoist and Buddhist ideas [9].

### **2.2.2. Prose Divinations**

The prose portion of IOLTibJ747 provides a sequence of divinations after the lyrical prelude. The cries, movements, and actions of the crow are explained in great detail in connection to certain temporal and geographical situations in these divinations. The document develops a systematic method for bird divination by explaining the meaning of various directions, times of day, and particular noises. According to this systematization, bird divination was not a randomly chosen technique but rather a complex process with agreed-upon meanings [10].

### **2.2.3. Tibetan Inscriptions and Folk Stories**

Tibetan inscriptions and folktales can be found in IOLTibJ747, which emphasizes the multiethnic nature of Tang Dynasty Dunhuang. The folktale and Tibetan letters that were inscribed in the text provide important new perspectives on the time's everyday life, customs, and social dynamics. These inscriptions also highlight how Chinese and Tibetan cultures coexisted and blended at Dunhuang, underscoring the city's significance as a Silk Road cultural crossroads [11].

## **2.3. Linguistic Features**

Unique language characteristics of manuscript IOLTibJ747 indicate its historical setting and cultural significance:

The bilingual nature of the manuscript emphasizes the intercultural interchange that took place at Dunhuang during the Tang Dynasty by including passages in both Chinese and Tibetan. The use of two languages in one text alludes to a syncretic method of divination that combines Tibetan and Chinese traditions [12].

poetry and Prose Forms: IOLTibJ747 makes an intentional attempt to employ a variety of literary styles, as seen by the usage of both poetry and prose forms. The prose provides a clearer explanation of divination techniques, while the poetry prelude adds a lyrical tone in keeping with traditional Chinese aesthetics [13].

Rich symbolism and metaphor are used throughout the work, such as the crow serving as a messenger and certain noises standing in for various omens. The book is given a mystical character by the poetic language, which ties it to more general religious and philosophical ideas [14].

## **2.4. Comparison with Other Manuscripts (P.T.1045, P.T.1048, etc.)**

Similarities in Content: The descriptions of the divination system in manuscripts P.T.1045, P.T.1048 and IOLTibJ747 are quite similar. A lyrical introduction may be found in both P.T.1045 and IOLTibJ747, indicating a shared literary tradition [15].

While the substance of these manuscripts is identical, there are differences in the size and form of them. For instance, P.T.1045 is 32 x 88 cm as opposed to IOLTibJ747, which is 29.5 x 104 cm. These variances might be due to changes in the manuscripts' intended audience or usage [16].

Tibetan elements are present: IOLTibJ747 has Tibetan inscriptions and folktales, which are absent from P.T.1045 and P.T.1048. The fact that IOLTibJ747 is multilingual highlights the complex cultural backdrop of the species, and it may also imply a particular affinity for Tibetan populations or customs in Dunhuang [17].

Language and Syntax: A careful examination of the language and syntax utilized in these texts may show minute variances that indicate shifting linguistic conventions or geographical variations in divination techniques [18].

### **3. Historical Analysis: Divination Practices**

#### **3.1. Facing War**

In ancient Dunhuang, offerings, ceremonies, and rituals played an indispensable role in both divination and societal harmony. The intricate texts from this region, like those found in the book describing divination techniques, emphasize the value of specific gifts corresponding to various compass points—such as milk for the east and fresh meat for the west [19]. These weren't merely symbolic actions; they formed a complex system of rituals that facilitated divination, ensuring social stability and establishing profound spiritual connections [20]. As Dunhuang was a crossroads of civilizations, the rituals reflected a syncretism of multiple cultural traditions, embodying a fusion where local customs were harmonized into a unified system of spiritual expression [21].

War, however, introduced a different dimension to this spiritual and cultural tapestry. While nomads could rely on their mobility to escape conflict, the agricultural community of Dunhuang, influenced by their sedentary lifestyle, often turned to their deep-seated rituals to navigate the threat of war. Manuscript IOLTibJ747 highlights this reliance on the spiritual, revealing practices like the tormo ceremony from the Tibetan tradition, wherein sacrifices were offered to crows to invoke good fortune and repel misfortune. The reasons for such spiritual recourse during wartime are multifaceted. The settlers from the Central Plains carried with them the mindset of an agricultural society. Moreover, during the Tubo rule over Dunhuang, strict regulations were enforced, preventing escape and even influencing divinatory methods. Lastly, Dunhuang's identity as a pivotal transportation hub, built upon the foundation of population movement, meant that even the upheavals of war could not easily sway them from their homeland.

Together, these insights paint a vivid picture of a society where rituals were deeply woven into the fabric of daily life, connecting the spiritual, cultural, and social spheres of ancient Dunhuang.

#### **3.2. Approximate Time and Highlight Direction**

The use of time and space in Manuscript IOLTibJ747 presents a unique juxtaposition against the backdrop of traditional Chinese cultural symbols, particularly in the context of Dunhuang's historical significance as a cultural crossroads. While the intricacies of Chinese symbols often represent time through the 12 Chinese zodiac signs, this manuscript offers a refreshing perspective. Unlike the intricate symbolization of time in Chinese traditions, IOLTibJ747 exhibits meticulous historical accuracy, highlighting time's cyclical nature and its pertinence to human fate. This is done by linking specific omens or events to certain times of the day, demonstrating a more pragmatic comprehension of time, where hours are associated more with tangible events than symbolic representations [22].

Furthermore, potential influences from Tibetan or Central Asian beliefs suggest that the absence of detailed symbolism might result from Dunhuang's exposure to a diverse set of cultural traditions [23]. The relationship between time and directions in the manuscript possibly indicates a connection

to Chinese cosmology, emphasizing a nuanced method of understanding and interpreting the cosmos [24].

However, where the manuscript departs from a focus on time, it deeply delves into spatial features. Dunhuang's strategic position at the Silk Road's intersection is intricately woven into the text, highlighting its multifaceted role as a nexus of commerce, religion, and culture. Rather than tethering rituals like the "Doma ceremony" to time coordinates, they are described in spatial terms, showcasing a belief that challenges to Dunhuang's populace were more tied to direction than to time or season [25]. This emphasis on spatial elements perhaps reflects Dunhuang's identity as a community molded by migratory movements, acknowledging the tangible challenges of a settlement located at a pivotal crossroads. Here, threats weren't just symbolic but were real, intertwined with the dynamics of trade, warfare, and diplomacy.

In addition, the manuscript's instructions, connected to distinct directions, might have served dual purposes: addressing spiritual beliefs while also catering to practical concerns like warfare or trade [26]. Such spatial correlations in IOLTibJ747 could indicate geographical variations in divination techniques, potentially reflecting regional customs or the amalgamation of different cultural influences. The text's profound emphasis on topographical nuances doesn't just suggest a cultural blend but emphasizes Dunhuang's monumental role in trade and the region's development [27].

In conclusion, Manuscript IOLTibJ747 stands as a testament to a sophisticated understanding of time and space, setting itself apart from traditional Chinese conceptions while simultaneously shedding light on the rich cultural mosaic of ancient Dunhuang.

### 3.3. Predominantly War-Related Predictions

The prevalence of war-related prophecies in Manuscript IOLTibJ747 isn't merely an idiosyncratic theme; it provides essential insights into the historical backdrop of Dunhuang, especially during the Tang Dynasty. The text frequently addresses war and armed struggle, signifying a time when both foreign and domestic threats were prevalent. Several examples within the text, particularly within the tabulated sections, illuminate how divination revolved around warfare.

For instance, the mention of obtaining tiger skin as a reward stands out as an allusion to Tibetan tradition, where such a reward was bestowed upon valiant warriors. This connection between a widely recognized symbol of bravery and a specific form of divination highlights the intertwining of cultural values and military objectives. Another revealing aspect is found in the term "coming of thieves" used in the divination tables. Upon closer examination, this term does not simply refer to commonplace theft but alludes to invasion or an imminent attack by enemy forces. The use of this seemingly mundane phrase to symbolize a profound and dire circumstance underscores the acute awareness of military threats and the code-like language used in the divination processes.

This emphasis on combat indicates a society that must learn the art of war in order to survive in a setting of regular military encounters. The narrative reveals how divination evolved from a mere cultural interest to a crucial component of military strategy and decision-making, serving as a spiritual compass in perilous times [28]. Additionally, the war predictions provide a vivid image of the larger social and political milieu, which is characterized by underlying anxieties and concerns, as well as the cultural upheaval it sparked.

A mirror reflecting the intricacies of a time when the echoes of battle resound through its pages, IOLTibJ747 transcends the status of a historical artifact. The literature offers an intimate look into the human experience of ancient Dunhuang by delving into the minutiae of its divination techniques, such as the instances described, and showing the goals, difficulties, and complexity of a long-ago past [29]. It emphasizes the text's place as a contemporary representation of a society's attitude to conflict and its efforts to comprehend and manage it via spiritual means rather than solely as a historical record.



### 3.4. Types of Birds, Their Meanings, and Interpretation of Omens and Symbols

Manuscript IOLTibJ747's symbolism of the crow is noteworthy because it reveals how the ancient Dunhuang people saw birds and offers a unique viewpoint on how to interpret omens and symbols. Both a typical bird and a sage messenger from the supernatural world are depicted as the crow. The many applications of the crow as a way finder and a symbol are congruent with this in-depth justification [30].

Crows are used as symbols in the divination practices of Dunhuang, an uncommon synthesis of components from Tibetan, Central Chinese, and Indian traditions. The Dunhuang crow sculpture might be seen as a continuation of the spiritual notion that ravens have unique locations to visit and are often associated with magical traits in Tibetan beliefs. This correlation between the material and spiritual worlds may represent a more in-depth understanding of the cosmos and a belief in the mystical powers of birds, mimicking Tibetan links between them. The Dunhuang people may have understood it as sage advice since the crow is regarded in Central Chinese culture as a symbol of wisdom and insight. This demonstrates a connection to more fundamental Chinese ideas, where symbolism extends beyond straightforward representation to penetrate ordinary thought. Crows are, nevertheless, often regarded as ancestral spirits in Indian mythology, and their cries are considered to be significant omens or messages. Due to its association with old wisdom, rites, and ceremonies, the crow's symbolic importance at Dunhuang may have been further heightened by this viewpoint. The incorporation of these cultural strands into the symbolism of the crow in Dunhuang not only reflects the region's unique geographic position as a meeting place of various civilizations, but it also serves as an example of how symbols and beliefs can cross boundaries and come together to form a coherent system that resonates with different cultural traditions. The people of Dunhuang were able to weave a complex and sophisticated tapestry that mirrored their own cultural identity by fusing many spiritual threads.

In Dunhuang, different crow cries are utilized as metaphors to express a range of events and situations, including as success or failure, joy or grief [31]. This is an illustration of the profundity of the language, where even the most basic natural elements carry significant spiritual and philosophical overtones. This cultural practice indicates a rigorous approach to understanding omens by going beyond basic superstition and portraying nature as a conduit for heavenly messages [32].

The poem's symbols and their meanings may also relate to cultural inequalities present in Dunhuang's multicultural environment. With the combination of Tibetan, Central Chinese, and Indian influences, these symbols provide a complex tapestry of ideas on the relationship between nature, technology, and cultural identity [33].

The narrative offers a glimpse into a world where magic and regular life coexist. Through the eyes of the crow, the sculpture offers a glimpse into the dynamic and reflecting cultural milieu of ancient Dunhuang. It also shows how the people who lived there developed a complex system of beliefs that were tailored to their unique fusion of cultural traditions.

## 4. Conclusion

Divination, in its essence, served as a vital guide for survival in the lives of ancient people. It held an importance that went beyond mere superstition or ritual; it was a systematic approach to understanding the world, predicting outcomes, and navigating complex life situations. In certain eras, especially in regions ruled by ethnic groups deeply adhering to divination, the value of this practice could be equated to modern-day big data and algorithm systems, such as those found in smartphone apps.

The analogy between divination and contemporary data-driven technologies underscores its role as an intellectual and spiritual tool. It wasn't merely a mystical practice but a methodological way to

approach problems, make decisions, and guide actions. Like the algorithmic predictions we rely on today, divination attempts to predict and interpret the patterns of life, be it in warfare, commerce, or everyday decision-making.

By analyzing the divination text of Manuscript IOLTibJ747 from Dunhuang, we can reconstruct the historical face of the region during Tibetan rule. The richness of the text, with its intricate combination of symbols, cultural nuances, and detailed predictions related to war and spatial orientation, offers a multifaceted insight into the life and beliefs of the people of Dunhuang. It provides not just a glimpse into a bygone era but forms a complementary and harmonious relationship with other historical documents and literary artifacts.

The manuscript thus stands as a testament to the adaptive and inventive human spirit, capable of weaving spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and practical needs into a sophisticated system of understanding and guiding life. It serves as a fascinating reminder of our timeless quest to make sense of the world around us and how methods might change, but the underlying human curiosity and the drive to interpret and respond to our environment remains a constant.

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