

WINE, GODS, AND MORNING DEW

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IN ORACLE BONE inscriptions from the second millennium BC, we find the graph . Modern scholars identify it as *fu* 鬯. They understand it to represent a wine vessel, which had an important role in ancient sacrificial rituals. In these inscriptions, *fu* 鬯 is usually associated with the figure of the king in his role as chief mediator between the human and spirit worlds.

Over time, the graph appeared with different radicals, classifiers that tended to indicate semantic differences. One was the *mian* 宀 radical, representing a roof and used to connote domestic objects and activities. *Fu* 富 seems to have carried the sense of wine vessels stored indoors. Another form of the graph, *fu* 福, took the *shi* 礻 radical, associated with ritual and worship. In early documents, the two

forms were often used in similar contexts, possibly because of their graphic resemblance before the standardisation of script under Qin imperial rule (221–202 BC).

In written records from Zhou times (1046 BC–256 BC), *fu* 鬯 is increasingly associated with social and political status. This is probably because members of the Zhou royal house and its regional aristocracies used wine vessels and jars for sacrifice. In inscriptions from the fourth and third centuries BC, there is a recurring connection between the graphs *fu* 富, ‘wealth’, and *gui* 貴, ‘nobility’. The collocation *fugui* 富貴 survives to the present. In the second century AD, the author of a commentary on the canonical *Classic of Ritual* 禮記 framed his definition of *fu* 富 in terms of hereditary titles and

official salaries; by this time, wine was used as a form of official salary along with rice, silk, meat, and fruit.

As orthographic standards crystallised with the establishment of empire under the Qin, so the meanings assigned to *fu* 福 and *fu* 富 grew stable. *Fu* 福 retained early ritual connotations: it denoted blessings received from the spirit world. Under the influence of Buddhism, this meaning of the graph was adopted to refer to karmic merit generated by pious acts. In Daoism,



The Star of Good Fortune, Wang Dafan, 1936
Source: auction.artron.net

too, it eventually found expression in the figure of the Star of Good Fortune 福星, one of three personified deities — the others were the Stars of Status and Longevity — who emerged in the Daoist pantheon from Ming times (1368–1644).

From at least the third century BC on, meanwhile, political advisors sought to ensure that the peoples of their own states would be more ‘prosperous’, *fu* 富, than those of their rivals. For example, Xunzi 荀子 (or ‘Master Xun’), a leading political thinker of the third century BC, argued in an essay that ‘the true king brings prosperity to the people, and the overlord brings prosperity to men of service’ 王者富民 霸者富士. Similar rhetoric has endured into contemporary times, and has even spread beyond Chinese borders. The leaders of Japan’s Meiji 明治 government (1868–1912) adopted as their guiding slogan ‘bring prosperity to the state and strengthen the military’, *fukoku kyōhei* 富国強兵. And when the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China convened in 2012, it listed national ‘prosperity and strength’ 富強 first in a set of ‘core Socialist values’ 社會主義核心價值觀.

As *fu* 富 increasingly came to signify the accumulation of wealth,

power, and official status, it developed negative connotations as well. Already in the Confucian *Analects* 論語, we find an aphorism on living a frugal life: ‘prosperity and noble status acquired without propriety are to me as elusive as the passing clouds’ 不義而富且貴於我如浮雲. Also, in successive versions of a saying attributed to Laozi 老子, later considered the founding figure of Daoism and an elder contemporary of Confucius, we find an admonition that ‘if noble status and prosperity should lead to arrogance, then one will only have oneself to blame’ 貴富而驕自遺其咎. Similarly, a bronze inscription dated to 330 BC (see image on right), found in the tomb of a ruler, advised: ‘do not be arrogant on account of your prosperity’ 毋富而喬. The loss of moral integrity was already a cause for concern in a political and social environment where power and material gain were prized. Following Confucius, later writers frequently commented on the fleeting nature of prosperity and status. They likened them to flowers that blossomed but quickly faded, or to the morning dew. Prosperity also became associated with the dangers of corruption: one thirteenth-century commentator wrote that *fu* ‘means bribery’ 富賄賂也.



Bronze inscription: ‘Do not be arrogant on account of your prosperity’ 毋富而喬
 Source: Zhang Shouzhong 張守中 ed., *Zhongshan wang Cuo qi wenzi bian* 中山王厝器文字編, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981, p.109

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