



An unexpected bird in *Honkai: Star Rail* and China's war on sparrows

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In April 2023, the gacha game *Honkai: Star Rail* was launched, published by miHoYo/HoYoverse, a Chinese company now very famous for its hit game *Genshin Impact*. The game is a space opera focusing on a group of interstellar adventurers that travels across the universe to eliminate dangerous artifacts known as Stellarons. The player builds their team with a variety of anime-style characters (23 in total as of writing) earned from a brutal¹ gacha mechanic.

So far, *Star Rail* has followed a similar recipe to *Genshin Impact*: the first world is based on Europe and the second one in China. In the Chinese-inspired Xianzhou Luofu, you run across a character called Sushang². There's not much of note about this character per se, except that in her Ultimate she summons a giant chicken. That is already fantastic on its own, but when a character uses their Ultimate, the player can also see their splash art (Fig. 1).

Sushang's splash art immediately caught my eye, because it features birds – more specifically, tree sparrows (Fig. 2). And, as Sushang is a Chinese-inspired character, my first thought was “Well, that's odd.” because modern China has a dark history with tree sparrows.

Actually, let me put that correctly: the Chinese government, and Mao Zedong in particular, has a horrid history with spar-

rows in what is probably the world's most unnecessary ecological tragedy. It is a tragedy so big that it could and should be used exhaustively as a cautionary tale in any environmental arguments made today – and yet, it isn't. Instead, China's war on birds remains largely unknown, which I find rather odd. So, I decided to write a bit about it. I promise that I will come back to games in the end of this article, but first we will take a closer look at the birds and at China's folly.



Figure 1. Sushang's splash art. Source: *Honkai: Star Rail* Wiki (<https://honkai-star-rail.fandom.com/>).

¹ And I play FGO!

² Though you can get her in the regular gacha before that.



Figure 2. Close-up of Fig. 1 showing the tree sparrows.

MEET THE TREE SPARROW

The tree sparrow is a nice little bird recognizable from other sparrow species by the black markings on its “cheeks” (Fig. 3). Males and females look alike in this species, contrary to what is the rule in other species of sparrows (Clement et al., 1993). These birds build their nests in cavities in trees, rocks, and buildings. When establishing their nests, they might choose to do so in close proximity to other sparrows, forming a loose type of colony (Hegyi & Sasvári, 1994; Summers-Smith, 1995). Tree sparrows feed on seeds and grain throughout the year, but will also capture small invertebrates, particularly when they are feeding their young (Summers-Smith, 1995, 2016).



Figure 3. A tree sparrow photographed in Osaka, Japan. This bird species, as many passerines, has the potential to be classified as birbs, borbs, and floofs (cf. Elbein, 2019, 2020). Source: Wikimedia Commons (Laitche, 2015; CC-BY-SA 4.0), image cropped.

The tree sparrow is thought to have originated in Asia, potentially in China, around 5 million years ago (Summers-Smith, 1995;

Päckert et al., 2021). Today, it is a widespread species across Eurasia and some of the Atlantic and Pacific Islands, and it has been introduced to countries like Australia, the Philippines, and the USA (Summers-Smith, 1988, 1995, 2016). Its scientific name is *Passer montanus* but that is misleading, because these birds do not typically live on the mountains. In Europe, it is a rural species preferring more natural habitats, while the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is an urban species. In Asia, it is the other way around: the house sparrow sticks to more natural areas while the tree sparrow is urban.

Both tree sparrows and house sparrows evolved alongside humans to become our commensals (Summers-Smith, 1988, 1995). They have adapted to live in our settlements, villages, and now cities. This was studied in greater depth in house sparrows, in which thicker skulls and a greater capacity to digest starch is linked to a diet based on grains (Ravinet et al., 2018). The grains that people cultivate.

THE FOUR PESTS CAMPAIGN

Only three countries in the entire world were foolish enough to wage war against birds: Australia, China, and the USA. They all lost – miserably so.

Australia lost a war to the emu and the US lost to house sparrows. The former is a rather amusing story, so I recommend you look it up. The latter has a dark undertone, as the attack on house sparrows was filled with racist and xenophobic connotations creating a parallel between the introduced birds and the new waves of immigrants then arriving in the US (Fine & Christoforides, 1991). But we are not interested in those stories here, so let us get back to China, who – as you might have guessed by now – went to war against tree sparrows (麻雀).

The Great Leap Forward was a social and economic campaign established by Chairman Mao Zedong during 1958–1962. One of its first actions was a great leap for-

ward into the abyss: the so-called Four Pests campaign (Fig. 4). The goal of the campaign was to exterminate disease vectors (rats, flies, mosquitoes) and sparrows. The latter was obviously not a disease vector, but was thought to eat too much of the grain produced in China. The actual accusation was that each sparrow ate around 1.8 kg of grain per year (Time, 1958).



Figure 4. Official government propaganda poster “Exterminate the four pests!” (1958). Source: Chinese Posters (<https://chineseposters.net/>).

As one of China's greatest environmental activists, Dai Qing, said “Mao knew nothing about animals. He didn't want to discuss his plan or listen to experts. He just decided that the ‘four pests’ should be killed” (Luard, 2004). Typical. One of his main slogans was “Man can conquer na-

ture” (Shapiro, 2009; Steinfeld, 2015).

Mao's government then bombarded its people with collectivist slogans, pseudo-scientific rhetoric, and propaganda posters (Fig. 5), inciting citizens to take up arms against the pests (Sun, 2017). They encouraged people to band together in task forces or “sanitation teams” and kill each and every single pest they found (Sun, 2017). To deal with the sparrows, people shot or slingshot them, set traps, and climbed on trees (including during the night) to strangle the birds, break their eggs, and destroy their nests. People would also station themselves on roofs and under trees, constantly waving flags, beating drums, and clanging pots and pans to terrorize the sparrows (Fig. 6). The noise and commotion prevented the birds from landing, forcing them to keep flying around and eventually making them die of exhaustion.



Figure 5. Official government propaganda posters. Left: “Everybody comes to beat sparrows” (1956). Center: “Let nobody disturb him” (1956). Right: “Eliminating the last sparrow” (1959). Source: Chinese Posters (<https://chineseposters.net/>).

It is impossible to say how many birds were killed during that time (Fig. 7). In three days, an estimate of 800,000 sparrows were killed in Beijing alone (Han, 1959). Thus, it is expected that several hundreds of millions were killed country-wide (McCarthy, 2010).³

³ When a species is a target of extermination like this, it is common that other species that are similar-looking are also killed by mistake. In this case, it would be the house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and the cinnamon sparrows (or russet sparrows, *Passer cinnamomeus*) which also live in China (Clement et al., 1993) – not to mention other birds of similar size like finches, etc., which were likely also caught in the “crossfire”. However, I could not find any information about that.

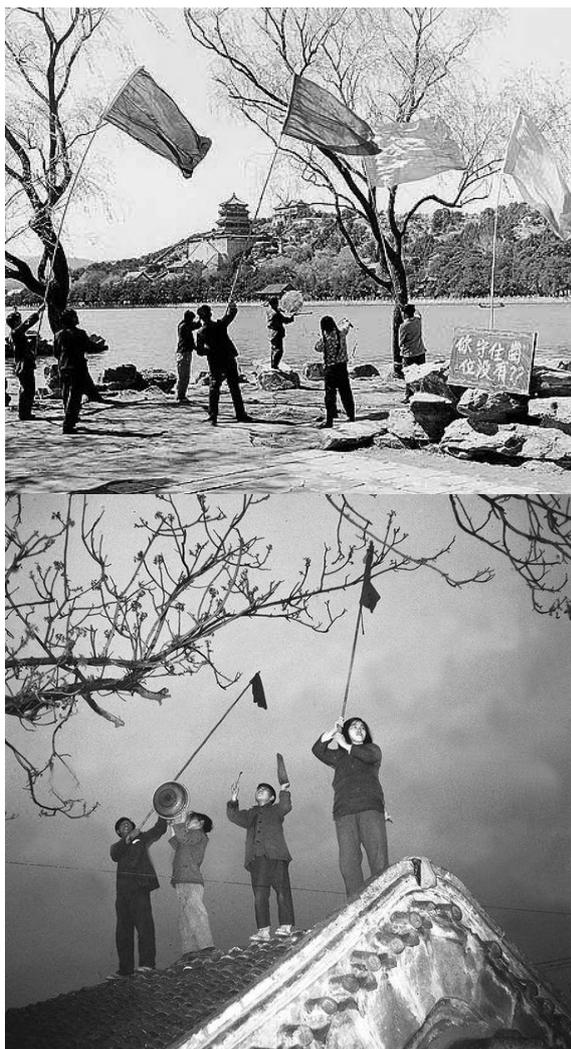


Figure 6. People killing sparrows (and undoubtedly other unrelated birds as well) by exhaustion. Source: Sohu (<https://www.sohu.com/>).

As a result, the tree sparrow was driven almost to extinction in China (Summers-Smith, 1995; Dvorsky, 2012). “But wait a second, didn’t you say that China lost the war against the sparrows?” Well... call it karma, divine punishment, science, or ecology, it does not matter. There was instant retribution.

In the following year, 1959, the number of insects (notably locusts) infesting and destroying the crops exploded. The already problematic agricultural system in China was dealt a major – and fatal – blow (McCarthy, 2010). The failing crops led to the Great Famine, which would kill millions of people.



Figure 7. A cart full of dead sparrows. Source: Sohu (<https://www.sohu.com/>).

SCIENCE & VINDICATION

When the Four Pests campaign was announced, ornithologists (scientists who study birds) in China tried to have a say in the matter. Chief among them was Tsohsin Cheng (1906–1998; often transcribed as Zheng Zuoxin) from the Chinese Academy of Sciences Zoology Research Institute, who realized the government (and many people) were blinded by prejudice against sparrows. He argued – correctly – that serious studies were necessary before such hardline extermination policies were put into practice (Zhang, 2019).

Cheng repeatedly asked the government to reconsider the inclusion of sparrows in the Four Pests campaign, but to no avail (Zhang, 2019). As he (1) was a scientist, and (2) directly opposed Mao’s policies, he was declared a criminal, forced to wear a badge that read “reactionary”, subjected to “re-education” through manual labour (sweeping floors, cleaning toilets, etc.), had his salary reduced to a bare minimum, was arrested for a time, and exposed to public mockery in a literal sense (Nowak, 2002). He was even told by the authorities that “birds are Capitalism’s pets” (Nowak, 2002), which has got to be one of the most ridiculous lines any scientist has ever heard.

Still, Cheng led a team on the first thorough study on tree sparrows in China. By studying stomach content of birds from across China, they showed that while sparrows did eat grain, they also (and mostly)

ate insects, playing a major role in controlling the number of the insects that were actual agricultural pests, like the locusts (Beer, 2019). It became clear then that killing the sparrows led to an explosion in the numbers of insects, who found themselves with virtually no predator and hence free to do as they pleased. That, in turn, was a key factor leading to what is now regarded as the worst famine in History.⁴

With more than enough proof on his side, Cheng continued to advocate through newspaper articles and seminars (Zhang, 2019). Finally, after the near-extinction of the sparrows in China the government capitulated and the sparrows were removed from the Four Pests in 1960, being substituted by bed bugs.⁵ In the years that followed, China even imported sparrows from Russia to boost the populations of the species inside its borders (Townshend, 2015). But then it was already too late: the damage was done and the death toll of the famine, which lasted from 1959 to 1961, was around 36 million people.⁶

The Great Famine is still kind of taboo in China. Elsewhere, the ecological causes of it are (understandably) put in second place after the human loss and suffering of the era. Sometimes, however, the ecological factor is not even considered; for instance, most

purely economic models and assessments about the time do not even seem to know that birds and insects exist (e.g., Li & Yang, 2005; Wang, 2015).

In any event, as I noted before, a self-inflicted ecological catastrophe of this magnitude, with millions dying because of a poor decision of a political leader, should be more often used as an example against all the dangerous environmental policies (or lack thereof) we continue to see. The take-home message is evident, as Steinfeld (2018) put it “ignore science at your peril.” Case in point, China's recent Zero Covid policy and its early-2000's SARS policy have both been considered a failure to learn from the great sparrow debacle and a repetition of the Four Pests mistakes (Luard, 2004; Reddy, 2022).⁷

But there is at least some sort of silver lining for the birds. After the tragedy, people not only did a one-eighty in their stance towards the tree sparrows but also started to have a higher appreciation for bird conservation in general (Obermann, 2021). When China was deciding on a national bird, the tree sparrow was one of the main contenders against the leading red-crowned crane. The sparrow was considered by many to better represent the people, while the crane was perceived as an “elite” bird (Canaves, 2008).⁸ Moreover, tree sparrows are now

⁴While the ecological imbalance was the major immediate cause, there were other factors contributing to the famine such as faked harvest numbers, maintenance of high export quotas, a shortage of workers, and the indifference of the government towards its people's hardships and suffering (Dikötter, 2010).

⁵Despite all the troubles he went through, Cheng is reported to have deeply loved his work and the Chinese bird fauna (Hsu, 1999; Nowak, 2002; Ward & Chen, 2017). He published his landmark work “Distributional List of Chinese Birds” in 1978 (though it's dated 1976) and went on to become the father of modern ornithology in China (Grimm, 1977; Zhang, 2019). Later on, in 1987, he published the monumental “A Synopsis of the Avifauna of China”. Cheng was also responsible for rebuilding the bridges between Chinese ornithologists and the global scientific community after the end of the Cultural Revolution in China (Hsu, 1999; Nowak, 2002).

⁶The estimates of the famine's death toll vary quite a lot. The largest number that officials have admitted to is 20 million, but Yang Jisheng, who studied documents of the period in China proposed the number 36 million (Jisheng, 2012). However, others still consider that to be a quite conservative estimate and have proposed instead around 43 to 46 million (Dikötter, 2010). In comparison, the Covid pandemic has killed around 7 million people according to the World Health Organization (<https://covid19.who.int/>; but again, an underestimate).

⁷China is not alone in that, as the nightmarish Covid policies (or lack thereof) of countries like the USA and Brazil clearly exemplify. Not to mention the ecological and environmental disasters in those countries and in others.

⁸Ironically, China's national bird, the red-crowned crane is also known as Japanese crane (its scientific name is *Grus japonensis*). This fact was pointed out at the time by Chinese authorities who were against the idea (Beijing News, 2008).



Figure 8. 写生珍禽图 [Sketches of Rare Birds], by Huang Quan. The tree sparrows can be seen to the right, showing a natural behaviour: the young bird is asking its parent for food. Source: Wikimedia Commons (public domain).



Figure 9. *Morning Sparrows and Young Peony*, by Keinen Imao, 1891. Keinen specialized in kachō-e and naturalistic details (notice the life-like behaviour of this host of sparrows). Source: Ronin Gallery (<https://www.roninallery.com/>) (public domain).

a protected species in China and it is prohibited by law to kill, eat, or sell them, and killing more than 20 is treated as a criminal offense (Sun, 2017). So modern instances of 'sparrowcide' often make the news in China because they evoke painful reminders of the Four Pests campaign and the Great Famine (Sun, 2017).

SUZUME

It is hard to say why tree sparrows were used in Sushang's splash art in *Star Rail* because there is not much material available out there about things like character creation processes and artistic choices in the game. It might be a natural choice because, as mentioned above, the tree sparrows are now well regarded in China. In fact, they have had a marked presence in Chinese art for centuries before Mao started his crusade against them (Summers-Smith, 1995). That tradition stretches back to at least the Five Dynasties period, when Huang Quan (903–965) developed a more naturalistic style of painting birds and became one of the founders of bird-and-flower painting (huaniaohua, 花鸟画) (Yu, 2023). An example of one of his paintings containing tree sparrows can be seen in Figure 8.

However, HoYoverse's games lean heavily on the anime aesthetic, so the sparrows in Sushang's splash art could have a Japanese influence behind them as well. After all, these birds (スズメ, 'suzume') are much more common in Japanese stuff. As in China, they are also present in art – likely even more prominently so. Bird-and-flower painting arrived a few centuries later in Japan and evolved into its particular style. When the era of ukiyo-e woodblock printing started, bird-and-flower paintings (then known as kachō-e, 花鳥絵) became very widespread and tree sparrows were commonly featured (Fig. 9). Today, they appear everywhere in anime/manga and Japanese games as well (Fig. 10) – now that you know what these birds look like, try and keep an eye out for them.

Like for many other animal species, and

birds in particular, not all is well for tree sparrows. In the past fifty years, there has been a sharp decline in their numbers in Europe, although the species is not considered endangered yet (Field & Anderson, 2004). The same decline might be happening in Asia as well, in large part due to relentless urbanization (e.g., Mikami, 2009; Zhang & Zheng, 2010). Researchers are now calling for better urban planning with greener cities that can support our urban wildlife (Zhang et al., 2008; Schilthuizen, 2018).



Figure 10. Examples of tree sparrows in another gacha game, *Fate/Grand Order*: final ascension artwork of the characters Beni-Enma (illustrated by Harada Takehito) and Sei Shounagon (illustrated by Mika Pikazo). Beni-Enma is based on the Japanese fable "The Tongue-Cut Sparrow". Source: *Fate/Grand Order* Wiki (<https://fategrandorder.fandom.com/>).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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