

## Research on Ancient Chinese Painting: ‘The Star Deity Kui Xing Marks the Top Scholar’ Illustration in the ‘Infant Play’ Images

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### Abstract

The artwork <Infant Play> (婴戏图) housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art is an intriguing piece blending auspicious themes of traditional Chinese culture, particularly those linked to the imperial examination system. The painting depicts children in playful scenes, such as admiring fish and chasing dragonflies, while engaging in symbolic roles associated with success and fortune. Central to the composition is a child wearing a mask of Kui Xing, the god of academic success, who is often depicted in association with the imperial examination and scholars’ aspirations. This painting, attributed to Xia Kui, exhibits distinctive Qing Dynasty characteristics despite the attribution to the Ming era. Stylistic analysis reveals possible inconsistencies, suggesting that this may be a later forgery. The paper explores the themes of Kui Xing worship, his symbolic role in the examinations, and the conflation of Kui Xing and Zhong Kui, highlighting how these figures were often interchangeable in artistic depictions. It argues that ‘Infant Play’ reflects broader cultural aspirations, including academic success, prosperity, and the desire for many children, positioning these works as part of a larger tradition of auspicious imagery in Chinese art.

**Keywords:** Infant Play, Kui Xing, Qing dynasty, forgery, Chinese art, imperial examinations, Zhong Kui, auspicious imagery, academic success, Ming dynasty, cultural symbolism

The Cleveland Museum of Art houses a piece titled ‘Infant Play’(婴戏图), which blends numerous traditional auspicious scenes such as Kui Xing’s Blessing, the Five Sons Passing the Imperial Exams, Abundant Good Fortune, and Bountiful Harvests. In the painting, children dressed in various embroidered long robes are shown admiring fish, watching lanterns, beating drums, and chasing dragonfly, creating a joyful atmosphere. In the upper left corner, there is an inscription attributed to Xia Kui, reading “Written by Xia Kui in the third year of Zhengde, in the seventh month (正德三年七月夏葵写).” However, the painting exhibits clear characteristics of the Qing Dynasty, such as the stone blue colors in the children’s clothing and the different treatment of facial features compared to Ming Dynasty court paintings of infant scenes, where the “three whites” technique is used. Instead, the faces here are covered in thick white mineral pigments and shaded with ochre, which is more reminiscent of the style employed by Qing court painters like Leng Mei. When compared to other works by Xia Kui, such as ‘The waterfront bathing in Orchid Pavilion scroll (<兰亭修禊图卷>)’ and ‘Picture of Visiting Dai Kuixing on a Snowy Night (<雪夜访戴图轴>’, the differences are quite noticeable, suggesting that this piece is likely a forgery.

However, there is still room for discussion regarding this suspected Qing dynasty forgery, particularly regarding the visual focus of the painting, which is the child playing on the table. This child wears a blue-faced, red-haired, and red-nosed demon mask that partially covers his face, dressed in a blue long robe and “longevity (寿)” patterned lotus-colored pants. In his right hand, he holds a raised brush, while his left hand dangles, holding a box adorned with a pattern of copper coins. His right foot is planted firmly, while his left foot is lifted. The child beside him seems to be about to insert a long stick into the box, while the central figure proudly lifts his head,

fully immersed in the role he is playing. It is clear that this child is recreating a popular auspicious image from the Ming and Qing periods known as “Kui Xing Points the Contest” (魁星点斗).

Kui Xing is the god who determines the top scholar in the imperial examinations, and people often worship it in hopes of passing the exams. Its origin lies in the ancient Chinese star system, with Kui (魁) Xing being associated with the star Kui (奎) (They have the same pronunciation in Chinese but are different characters), though the transition from Kui to Kui Xing underwent a shift. In <Notes on the Daily Accumulation of Knowledge (日知录)><sup>1</sup>, Gu Yanwu, a thinker in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties mentions: “The Kui (魁) Xing that people worship today, it is unclear when it began. Kui (奎) was regarded as the house of literature, so a temple was established to honor it. But since it could not resemble Kui (奎), the character was changed to ‘Kui (魁)’, which could not resemble ‘Kui (魁)’, so the character was modified to depict a ghostly figure raising its foot to lift the cauldron.” Gu believed that Kuixing did not originally have the name “Kui (魁)”, and it was created by later generations for the convenience of worship.

Kui Xing is regarded as the deity who governs fame, success, and official rank. Various places have built “Kui Xing Lou” or “Kui Xing Ge” (Kui Xing Towers or Pavilions) in its honor, as mentioned in Song dynasty local records, where it is stated, “The Kui Xing Lou is a magnificent place of learning,” with the main deity enshrined being Kui Xing. Worship of Kui Xing has existed since the Song dynasty, largely due to the prominence of the imperial examination system, which flourished in the Song’s “civil over military” ethos. Scholars revered Kui Xing as a patron deity of academic achievement. For example, in Song poet Zhang Yuangan’s <Gan Huang En • Shou> (<感皇恩 • 寿>), it is written: “绿发照魁星, 平康争看。锦绣肝肠五千卷, mainly means Green light shines on Kui Xing, where peace and prosperity vie for attention. Five thousand volumes of magnificent work in the heart”. Another record from the Song dynasty TongMi <The Miscellaneous Knowledge of KuiXin> (同秘 <癸辛杂识>) mentions that when a scholar passed the imperial exam, the court would present a gilded Kui Xing cup as an honor (“送镀金魁星杯样(盘)一副”)<sup>2</sup>.

As a symbolic figure, Kui Xing is closely associated with the literary tradition, the imperial examinations, and academic success. The Kui star, one of the twenty-eight lunar mansions, is the first star in the Big Dipper and is also referred to as Kui Xing or the head of Kui constellations. Kui Xing governs literary affairs, and when scholars pass the imperial exams and become the top scholar, they are often called “Da Kui Tianxia Shi (大魁天下师)” (Great Kui, the top scholar of the world) or “Yi Ju Duo Kui (一跃夺魁)” (a single leap to seize the Kui). This reflects Kui Xing’s influence over the examination process. Since Kui Xing is believed to impact a scholar’s examination success, it is highly revered by students, who worship and pray to it, hoping for guidance and wisdom to achieve excellence in their studies and the imperial exams.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, large images of the “ao yu” (The golden giant fish with a dragon head and fish body) were engraved on the steps in front of the emperor’s palace. Scholars who passed the imperial examination would stand at the foot of the steps to await the announcement of the exam results, while the top scholar, the “Zhuangyuan,” would stand on the “ao tou” (The giant fish’s head) according to tradition. Therefore, the Zhuangyuan was referred to as “Kui Xing points the contest, occupying the fish’s head.” The phrase “occupying the fish’s head” first appeared in the Yuan dynasty play \*Chen Zhou Tiao Mi\* (陈州棗米), which stated: “At the palace front, the peace proposal was offered, occupying the fish’s head, securing first place.” This phrase means that, after presenting a good governance proposal at the palace, the scholar secured first place in the fierce imperial examination competition.

The trend of worshipping Kuixing among the literati further developed during the Ming dynasty, giving rise to a more concrete image of Kui Xing. He is often depicted as having red hair and a blue face, standing atop the fish’s head, with one foot raised, one hand holding a measuring device (or silver ingot), and the other hand holding a raised brush, symbolizing the act of using the brush to mark the names of those who passed the examination — this is known as “Kui Xing points the contest, occupying the fish’s head.” Regarding his appearance, it is said that before he became a deity, Kui Xing, although he had passed the imperial examination and became a successful scholar, was not chosen as the top scholar (Zhuangyuan) due to his unattractive looks. In frustration, he threw himself into a river and drowned. His unfortunate fate resonated with many scholars, who began to honor him through worship, gradually elevating him to the status of a god who protects academic success. Additionally, Kui Xing’s image may have been influenced by the <The Classic of Mountains and Rivers> (<山海经>), which describes the ghost with human face and animal bodies, a mythical figure with one hand, one foot, a human face, and a fish’s head. This resemblance shows certain similarities with Kui Xing’s portrayal.

In the version of <Infant Play> (婴戏图) housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the image of the fish’s head is omitted. However, when compared to the <The picture album of joy, peaceful and prosperous times> (<升平乐事图册>) in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which is a set of twelve pages depicting scenes of children joyfully playing in a courtyard — such as carrying lanterns, flying kites, playing shuttlecock, riding horses,

archery, and playing with top puppets — the connection becomes clearer. The set is attributed to an anonymous artist but is likely the work of a Qing court painter. In this series, there is an image of a lady holding a string puppet. Through the blue attire and red hair, along with the gesture of pointing, it is clear that this also represents Kui Xing pointing the contest. However, at the feet of the puppet, there is a turtle-headed fish with golden scales and a gourd-shaped tail, similar to the \*ao yu\* image.

Looking at the <A painting depicting Zhong Kui's relocation> in the Yuan Dynasty (元钟进士移居图) also housed in the Taipei National Palace Museum, it is evident that this is another forgery by Gong Kai, likely created by later artists under his name to enhance its commercial value. In this piece, Kui Xing also appears as a symbol of good fortune, located on the pole of a tribute tray held by a spirit-like creature behind Zhong Kui. This figure is again depicted as a ghost with blue attire, red hair, and a red nose, holding a brush in the right hand and a silver ingot with curved ends in the left. The overall pose reflects Kui Xing's canonical gesture, though the specific action of "kicking the cauldron" is not shown, nor is the image of "stepping on the fish's head" present. This suggests that the fish with dragon head and fish body image in Kui Xing depictions is not necessarily required. Kui Xing, as a symbol of good fortune, often appears in the theme of Infant Play paintings.



<A painting depicting Zhong Kui's relocation>  
(Doubtful) Southern Song Dynasty, Gong Kai



<The picture album of joy, peaceful and prosperous times>  
Probably a Qing Dynasty Artwork, Anon

It is worth noting that the author has observed that the image of Kui Xing is often closely associated with the story of Zhong Kui, showing strong similarities. Zhong Kui is a Taoist deity renowned for his prowess in fighting ghosts and exorcising evil spirits. Chinese people often display the statue of Zhong Kui to ward off evil and avert disasters, and the legend of "Zhong Kui catching ghosts" has been passed down from ancient times to the present day. Not only in <A painting depicting Zhong Kui's relocation>, but also in the <The picture album of joy, peaceful and prosperous times>, there is an image of a child dressed as Zhong Kui, wearing a "leopard-headed, round-eyed, iron-faced, and bristled" Zhong Kui mask. The child holds a tablet in one hand, wears official robes, and strikes the posture of Kui Xing pointing the contest, with one foot raised in the kicking gesture, though the child does not hold a brush.

As previously mentioned, the appearance of Kui Xing, described as having "red hair, blue face, jagged tusks, a body covered with muscle knots, with one leg raised, and two fierce eyes," is actually quite similar to the description of Zhong Kui in Shen Kuo (A scientist and politician in the Northern Song Dynasty)'s <Dream Pool Essays> (<梦溪补笔谈>)<sup>3</sup>. In this comprehensive notebook work involving ancient Chinese natural sciences, technological processes, and social historical phenomena, it is recorded that Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty had a nightmare of a figure with "disheveled hair, bristling beard, a terrifying face, wearing a broken black cap, a belt around the waist, leather-wrapped feet, and large boots (蓬发虬髯, 面目恐怖, 头戴破乌纱帽, 腰系角带, 皮革裹足, 脚蹬大朝靴)," which bears a resemblance to the appearance of Zhong Kui.

The original text is: There was a painting of Zhong Kui by Wu Daozi in the imperial palace, which had an inscription by a Tang Dynasty scholar at the beginning of the scroll. The inscription reads: 'During the Kaiyuan era of Emperor Minghuang, the emperor was conducting military drills at Lishan, and after returning to the palace, he was not pleased. He fell ill and had been suffering for over a month. Despite the efforts of shamans and doctors, his condition did not improve. One night, the emperor dreamt of two ghosts, one large and one small. The smaller ghost was dressed in a crimson robe, with one foot shod and the other bare. It was holding a

large bamboo fan, and it had stolen Empress Wu's purple incense pouch and the jade flute from the palace. It was running around the hall in haste. The larger ghost was wearing a hat and a blue robe, with one arm bare and both feet shod. It seized the smaller ghost, gouged out its eyes, and then tore it apart and ate it. The emperor asked the larger ghost, 'Who are you?' The ghost responded, 'I am Zhong Kui, a failed candidate in the military examination.' The emperor then summoned the court painter, Wu Daozi, and instructed him to paint the dream as he had seen it.' (禁中旧有吴道子画钟馗, 其卷首有唐人题记曰: “明皇开元讲武骊山, 幸翠华还宫, 上不怪, 因疟作, 将逾月, 巫医殫伎, 不能致良。忽一夕, 梦二鬼, 一大, 一小。其小者衣绛犊鼻, 屣一足, 跣一足, 悬一屣, 握一大筠纸扇, 窃太真紫香囊及上玉笛, 绕殿而奔。其大者戴帽, 衣蓝裳, 袒一臂, 鞞双足, 乃捉其小者, 剖其目, 然后擘而啖之。上问大者曰: 尔何人也? 奏云: 臣钟馗氏, 即武举不捷之进士也。乃诏画工吴道子, 告之以梦曰: 试为朕如梦图之”)。<sup>4</sup>

In the emperor's dream mentioned above, Zhong Kui appeared as an unsuccessful candidate for the military examination. After failing, he vowed to rid the world of all evil spirits and demons for Emperor Minghuang. Upon waking, Emperor Minghuang, in the fifth year of the Xining era, ordered the court painter Wu Daozi to create a depiction of Zhong Kui catching demons and to have it engraved. On New Year's Eve, the emperor sent the inner court official Liang Kai to distribute the images to the East and West Palaces. Wu Daozi's painting of Zhong Kui became widely circulated, and the “Zhong Kui figure” thus gained lasting fame as a talisman to ward off evil spirits and demons, often hung in the palace for protection.

This demonstrates the striking similarities between the stories of Zhong Kui and Kui Xing as they circulated among the people. In Zhong Kui's tale, during his palace examination, his unattractive appearance prevented him from being awarded the top scholar title. In frustration, he struck his head on the palace steps and died. After his death, he was appointed by the King of Hell as the “Great Marshal of Ghosts” (平鬼大元帅). In Chinese folklore, especially among scholars, Zhong Kui was even often referred to as “Kui Xing.” Beyond his vow to Emperor Xuanzong of Tang to “eliminate all evildoers in the world,” Zhong Kui became a leading figure in exorcism rituals, presiding over ghosts during grand exorcism ceremonies and serving as a protector against evil. Similar to Kui Xing, Zhong Kui was also believed to oversee the examination fortunes of scholars, ensuring that those who worshiped him achieved top ranks in the imperial exams.

The belief in Kui Xing as the deity of academic success began in the Song dynasty, whereas Zhong Kui's role as a patron god of scholars had been recognized from the Tang dynasty through the Song dynasty. Regarding Zhong Kui's birthday, it is recorded in <Notes on the Daily Accumulation of Knowledge> (<日知录>) by Gu Yanwu and in Deng Ming's <Preface to 100 Images of Zhong Kui> (<百馗图说序>) that Zhong Kui was born on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month in the first year of the Kaiyuan reign (713), in Ganjia Town, Dongxiang, Zhouzhi, which is now Ganhe Village in Huxian County. Coincidentally, Kui Xing's birthday is also celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, aligning with the forged inscription in \*Infant Play\* (\*婴戏图\*), which reads “the seventh month of the third year of Zhengde.” This date, the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, is also referred to as “Kui Xing's Birthday” or “Kui Xing's Feast Day.” In the Min-Dong region, scholars revered Kui Xing, second only to Confucius, and there was a tradition of worshiping Kui Xing during the Qixi Festival. Qing dynasty poet Zheng Dashu's <ZhuZhi poem: Qixi> (<竹枝词·七夕>) writes: “Tonight, the Cowherd and Weaver Girl cross the Milky Way; overseas, no magpie bridges form. Butchers worship Kui Xing — what does this mean? When will boiled beans forge their fate? (今宵牛女度佳期, 海外曾无鹊踏枝。屠狗祭魁成底事, 结缘煮豆待何时)”

From their unattractive appearances and professional misfortunes to their similar birthdays, it is evident that the stories of Zhong Kui and Kui Xing became interwoven, confused, and even interchangeable during the dissemination of the Kui Xing image. This overlap in identity might be glimpsed through the lens of \*Infant Play\*, highlighting the frequent conflation of Daoist deities during their spread. Such mix-ups are not uncommon. Kui Xing, as the “Divine Lord Kui,” was one of the Five Deities of Literature (五文昌), alongside Divine Lord Wen Chang (文昌帝君), Divine Lord Zhu Yi (朱衣帝君), Divine Lord Fu You (孚佑帝君, Pure Yang Lu Zu), and Divine Lord Wen Heng (文衡圣帝, Guan Sheng Dijun). These deities collectively received the veneration of scholars and students. However, some believe that Wen Chang and Kui Xing represent the same star, while others argue they are distinct celestial entities. In folk traditions, Wenquxing (the Star of Literary Talent) is often conflated with Wen Chang. In Daoist belief, however, Wen Chang Xing, associated with literary fortune, is overseen by Divine Lord Zitong (梓潼帝君), whereas Kui Xing is depicted as the “ghost-faced” deity kicking the cauldron, known as the “Great Kui Star Lord” (大魁星君).

Additionally, we can compare another version of \*Infant Play\* (\*婴戏图\*) housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which is traditionally attributed to Su Hanchen of the Northern Song dynasty, with the Cleveland Museum of Art version. These two works share a high degree of similarity, and neither includes the depiction of “stepping on the aotou” (踩鳌头). In terms of content, the Taipei version of <Infant Play> also features a child dressed in a red-haired, blue-faced ghost mask representing Kui Xing. The blue on the mask

appears to have faded over time due to preservation issues, but it likely was originally painted with indigo. This version of <Infant Play> also depicts children playing with spinning tops, watching swimming fish, and performing the role of Kui Xing. The inscription in running script by Emperor Qianlong, “The mask frightens the onlooker,” likely refers to this particular depiction of Kui Xing. However, the Taipei version is likely a forgery, and based on stylistic analysis, it can be dated to at least the Yuan dynasty. The use of ink, vermilion, indigo, and stone green in the painting, along with the use of the “three white” technique for the facial features and the refined line work, suggests possible influence from Song-era painting styles.

In summary, the image of “Kui Xing points the names” (魁星点斗) likely originated during the Ming and Qing dynasties, developing alongside the worship of Kui Xing. It frequently appears in scenes depicting “playful children” (峥嵘聚戏婴). These <Infant Play> artworks, with their rich colors and intricate details, were beloved by the public and likely symbolize a wish for academic success. However, it is more probable that these paintings like most paintings of this type, reflect broader themes of wishing for a bountiful harvest and blessings of many children and prosperity.



<Infant Play> (Doubtful) Ming Dynasty XiaKui      <Infant Play> (Doubtful) Northern Song Dynasty Su Hanchen

Furthermore, the image of “The star deity Kui Xing marks the top scholar” (魁星点斗) not only appears as a lucky symbol in <Infant Play> illustrations but also appears extensively in cultural forms such as scholar’s objects, daily items, and calligraphy works from the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, a calligraphic work by Ma Dexuan, a Qing Dynasty governor of Shaanxi and Gansu, displayed at the Stele Forest in Xi’an, uses the phrase “Rectify the mind and cultivate oneself, overcome desires and return to propriety” (正心修身, 克己复礼) to form the human-shaped figure of Kui Xing, while retaining the classic Kui Xing’s gesture<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, there are examples such as the Qing Dynasty bronze statue of Kui Xing in the Zhangye Museum, the gilded copper Kui Xing statue from the Nantong Museum of Folk Art, the Qing Dynasty Kui Xing’s inkstone from Qiyang, and the Qing Dynasty shadow puppet depiction of Kui Xing from the Chengdu Museum. These objects likely symbolize the desire for success in the imperial exams and a smooth career path.

In conclusion, this article argues that the depiction of the “The star deity Kui Xing marks the top scholar” in <Infant Play> works is not fixed. It can be presented in various forms, such as children acting as Kui Xing or using puppet figures to portray the image. The presence of the “aotou” (鳌头) is not essential. However, the general image of a character wearing a red-haired, blue-faced ghost mask, running barefoot, with the right leg standing and the right foot stepping on the “aotou,” while the left leg is bent behind, remains consistent. Furthermore, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the images of Kui Xing and Zhong Kui seem to have been confused with each other, leading to variations such as the “Zhong Kui points the top scholar” form. <Infant Play> artworks featuring the “Kui Xing” image may also reflect the scholar’s aspiration for success in the imperial exams, as encapsulated by the phrase “When spring arrives, ascend to the heights of the imperial exams and ascend to the ladder of success” (春来登高科, 升天得梯阶). At the same time, the theme of lively children and the wish for many children and blessings, typical of \*Infant Play\* works, remains unchanged.

Ultimately, the celebration of Kui Xing’s or Zhong Kui’s birthday in the <Infant Play> works may suggest a desire to ward off disasters and attract blessings, which can be inferred from the original creation time and the scenes depicted. The charming and realistic emotional expressions of the children in the <Infant Play> works, combined with the auspicious meanings of the image, form a rich and meaningful visual symbol.

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