

## **Three Sheep to Explain “Nine in the Third Place”: A Study of the Qianlong Emperor’s “Discourse on the Auspicious Start” and Related Works**

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### **Abstract**

The present study focuses on a group of images and texts produced after the imperial production of “Discourse on the Auspicious Start” of the Lunar New Year in the 37<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1772), in the process discovering cultural significance for them that reach beyond the festive occasion and symbolic references. On the one hand, “Discourse on the Auspicious Start” reflects the Qianlong emperor’s wish to “maintain auspiciousness by demonstrating restraint,” and on the other hand the interpretation of “Qian, nine in the third place” as “Tai, nine in the third place” represents the influence of Han dynasty studies of the *Yijing*. Related to this discourse is Qianlong’s “Discourse on the Auspicious Start from the Imperial Brush of Qing Gaozong and an Imitation of ‘Auspicious Start’ by Ming Xuanzong,” which is based on “Auspicious Start” painted by Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione) in 1746 with Zou Yigui being ordered to add flowers and rocks in the style of “New Year’s Painting” presented in that year, thereby affirming the Qianlong emperor’s approval of Painting Academy’s new style. In addition, a conscious decision was made to differentiate these works on the subject of three sheep in the former imperial household collection from paintings on the winter solstice and dispelling cold in order to conform with the cycle of “Twelve Changing Trigrams” in the *Yijing*. The “Three Yang from the Imperial Brush with Discourse on the Auspicious Start” done in 1785 represents Qianlong’s reinterpretation of Chao Mengfu’s “Sheep and Goat,” with both painting and calligraphy done by the emperor. Fully demonstrating his admiration of Chao Mengfu’s style, Qianlong changed the details to reveal his ambition of even outdoing Chao, turning it into a grand synthesis of imperial New Year productions.

Bringing together a discourse, poetry, and visual arts into a whole, imperial productions of works on three sheep or goats express the Qianlong emperor’s ideas about governance based on the *Yijing*. At the same time, it molds an image of himself as being attentive and introspective, giving such auspicious imagery from the imperial hand a further sense of legitimacy.

**Keywords:** Qianlong emperor, imperial poetry and prose, *Yijing*, Three Yang for an Auspicious Start, paintings of three sheep (goats)

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)