


BOOK REVIEW

In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions

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Animals and Plants in Chinese Religions and Science

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In *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions* and *Animals and Plants in Chinese Religions and Science* Huaiyu Chen makes a significant contribution to our understanding of human–animal interactions in medieval China (sixth–twelfth centuries), by accentuating the roles of Buddhist and Daoist communities and those of the state in shaping animal-related knowledge. Through several case studies, Chen tells a fascinating story of the changing boundaries between the “wild and untamed” and the “civilized” world. Chen convincingly demonstrates that, on the one hand, we cannot fully understand the historical significance of certain animal-related customs and knowledge without taking into consideration the development of Buddhism and Daoism (especially the former) in medieval China, and, on the other hand, the story of Buddhist transformation in/of China is not complete without incorporating discussions of animals, including birds and reptiles.

In the Land of Tigers and Snakes is particularly rich and cohesive. Readers will appreciate the creative and stylistic design of its chapter titles: each consists of a religious/intellectual group as the subject (Buddhists, Daoists, or Confucians), an animal as the object, and a verb that characterizes the human–animal interaction. The focus on tigers and snakes is a careful choice. Tigers and snakes represent two major kinds of animals that humans came into conflict with as population and human settlement expanded from the Han to the Tang periods. And yet the divergence of what these animals came to represent in Chinese society led to tigers and snakes receiving vastly different treatment—at least in rhetoric. Confucians, Buddhists, and Daoists propagandized their moral or spiritual power of taming and even converting tigers. Snakes, on the other hand, were vilified and deserved death.

Chapter 1 uses the case study of Buddhist monk and Vinaya master Dao Xuan's (594–667) *Ritual of Measuring and Handling Light and Heavy Property* (*Liangchu qingzhong yi*) to illustrate the ways in which Buddhist monasteries in medieval China classified animals in the context of monastic property management. Dao Xuan's classification reflects his selective combination of Buddhist and indigenous Chinese traditions, both of which were anthropocentric and placed humans above animals. Chapter 2 traces the political symbolism of tigers and pheasants from ancient to medieval China and compares the different value systems at work in the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist practices of transforming animals morally and spiritually. Tigers represented a ferocious threat to human society and civilization, while pheasants were portrayed as victims of privileged aristocrats' hunting for sport. Confucian political ideology offered alternative approaches that sought to change tigers' behavior and to domesticate pheasants rather than to kill them. Tigers and pheasants also became metaphors for cruel local officials and innocent and/or uncivilized people—all of whom needed Confucian cultivation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the treatment of tigers in medieval Chinese Buddhist narratives, which, like Dao Xuan's classification of animals, reflects a mixture of two traditions—namely, the Chinese tradition that connects humans and animals cosmologically and the Buddhist tradition that teaches compassion for all sentient beings. In these narratives, Buddhist monks and nuns with high spiritual achievement are not intimidated by tigers; some of them even turn tigers into their companions, with the most powerful monks even converting the tigers to Buddhism. Chapter 4 shows how the Daoist treatment of tigers and their narratives developed hand-in-hand with the Buddhists'. Both traditions demarcated the sacred from the profane, separating the tamed (Buddhist or Daoist) cosmic order from the untamed order of nature. Like the Buddhist narratives, these Daoist stories were also shaped by practitioners' encounters with fierce animals in their real lives, as well as by the competition between Buddhist and Daoist communities for patrons.

Chapter 5 examines how medieval Chinese Buddhists justified the killing of snakes. Chen discusses several factors that might have contributed to this development, including the feminization of snakes in both Buddhist and indigenous Chinese traditions, the “auspicious killing” in Mahayana tradition, and the competition between Buddhism and local religions.

The last chapter uses narratives about a different animal, parrots, to illustrate an apologetic discourse that medieval Chinese Buddhists developed to converse with their peer Confucian scholars. An enlightened parrot was described as analogous to a Confucian sage for its extraordinary body and virtue. At the same time, by the doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism, even a parrot who learned to recite the name of the Amitabha Buddha could receive salvation.

The contrasts between how medieval Chinese writers represented tigers and snakes (dangerous animals to be tamed or to be killed, respectively) and tigers and pheasants (threatening and innocent, respectively, but both to be civilized) illustrate vividly how the interactions among multiple agents—religious communities, local communities, political authorities, and animals—shaped human–animal relations in medieval China. *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* is a must-read for anyone interested in Buddhism in China, animal and religion in the medieval world, or Chinese history from the Han to the Tang.

Animals and Plants in Chinese Religions and Science can be seen as a companion volume to *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes*. It expands the discussion to cover the

Buddhist classification of plants, animal divination (zoomancy), zodiac animals, and were-tigers.

Chapter 1 surveys the development of agricultural and botanical science and technology in medieval China, as well as the main textual sources of such developments. Chapter 2 is a case study of the medieval Chinese Buddhist classification of plants in Dao Xuan's aforementioned text, *Ritual of Measuring and Handling Light and Heavy Property*. Like his classification of animals, Dao Xuan's main concern here is the monastery's ownership of those plants and how to handle them appropriately. Dao Xuan's botanical taxonomy reflects a selective mixture of Buddhist and Chinese traditions on one hand and his familiarity with plants in north China on the other. Together with chapter one of *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes*, this chapter reminds us of the importance of the religious, cultural, and geographical contexts under which scientific knowledge is constructed.

Chapter 3 examines the religious and environmental dimensions of "the cult of the pig" in ancient and medieval China, and explores "the technique of predicting weather changes by observing the behavior and health of animals" (*Animals and Plants*, p. 57), especially pigs. Chen argues that this technique was related to pigs' sensitivity to changes in climate, and that over time, images of pigs in popular belief became conflated with deities of rain, floods, and rivers. Chapter 4 is a survey of a wide range of references related to zoomancy—or divination by observing animal behavior—from medieval China, where zoomancy was not an organized profession.

Chapter 5 is a fascinating study of the ways in which the twelve zodiac animals took shape in medieval China through incorporating and transforming elements from Buddhism and indigenous Chinese concepts. Chapter 6 revisits the were-tiger stories of medieval China both in light of their adaptation of Buddhist notions of reincarnation as well as in comparison with such stories in other parts of Asia. Chapter 7 consists of Chen's reviews of six academic monographs related to animals and plants in Chinese and Buddhist traditions.

I would recommend reading *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* first, in order to better understand the contents of *Animals and Plants*. *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes*, in particular, would be an excellent reading for either an undergraduate- or a graduate-level class in religious studies and Asian history.