

3 Noble Creatures

Filial and Righteous Animals in Early Medieval Confucian Thought

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During China's early medieval period (100–600 CE), tales about children who exemplify the virtue of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) became particularly numerous and noteworthy. Prominent men, including emperors, authored collections of these narratives, which were often called *Xiaozi zhuan* 孝子傳 (Accounts of Filial Offspring). With the exception of two related manuscripts preserved in Kyoto, Japan, all of these works have been lost – we only know their contents through quotations found in medieval era encyclopaedias.¹ The exemplars featured in *Xiaozi zhuan* often embody the prescriptive behaviour towards parents set out in the *Ru* 儒 ('Confucian' or 'Classicist') ritual codes, such as the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). The goodness of their actions frequently caused the spirit world to reward them with either auspicious omens or rewards. Although the overwhelming majority of these tales have human protagonists, a few have animal ones.

The existence of filial animals is surprising, though, since Confucian philosophers maintained that humans are the noblest creatures in the universe and the only ones who can realize virtues such as benevolence and righteousness. So, on what basis would anthropocentric Confucian authors attribute human virtue to animals? In what way were these animals virtuous? Was their practice of virtue in any way distinct from their human counterparts? Why was it during the early medieval period that animals started to be particularly credited with moral behaviour? To what extent were the authors anthropomorphizing animal behaviour or just basing their stories on actual observation? This chapter will show that the writers of these Confucian tales thought animals were just as capable of being virtuous as humans. Their narratives depict them as being filial to their animal kin and acting righteously towards human strangers. To them, the difference between animals and humans is that people recognize and institutionalize the hierarchical relationship between father and son, whereas

¹ For a discussion of this literary genre, see Knapp (2005).

animals do not. Hence, humans and animals are dissimilar in degree rather than kind. This recognition that animals were morally similar to humans might stem from the influence of Buddhism. However, I will argue that it is much more likely related to the contemporary notion found in the prefaces of *Xiaozi zhuan* – that filial piety is part of Heaven’s endowment that all creatures share.

Early Confucian Views on the Difference between Humans and Animals

The early medieval realization that filial piety was part of the heavenly endowment of each living creature had to overcome the longstanding Confucian belief that humans were far superior to animals. Many Confucian philosophers considered humans more important than any other creature because they could practise virtue. The Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子 (313–238 BCE) distinguishes between people and animals in the following manner:

Fire and water possess vital breath (*qi* 氣) but have no life (*sheng* 生). Plants and trees possess life, but lack awareness (*zhi* 知). Birds and beasts have awareness, but lack a sense of morality and justice (*you yi* 有義). Humans possess vital breath, life, and awareness, and add to them a sense of morality and justice. It is for this reason that they are the noblest beings in the world. In physical power they are not as good as an ox, in swiftness they do not equal the horse; yet the ox and horse can be put to their use. Why is that? I say it is because humans alone can form societies and animals cannot. Why can man form a society? I say it is due to the division (*fen* 分) of society into classes. How can social divisions be translated into behaviour? I say it is because of humans’ sense of morality and justice. Thus, if their sense of morality and justice is used to divide society into classes, concord will result.²

For Xunzi the distinguishing characteristic of humans is that they can be virtuous, which enables them to form societies. Virtue allows social divisions to exist because inferiors can recognize their superiors’ excellence and superiors will treat inferiors fairly. In other words, virtue permits hierarchy. Although animals are similar to humans in that they have vital energy and awareness, they can never come together and act as one because they lack virtue, which condemns them to a life of strife and human control.

The Confucian philosopher and statesman Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179–104 BCE) also believed that humans were superior to all other animals because of their ability to acquire virtue. He articulated two reasons for human superiority. First, like Xunzi, he thought that human excellence rested in its ability to maintain hierarchical, social relations. A memorial in his biography states:

² *Xunzi zhuzi suoyin*, 39 (‘Wang zhi’ 王制); trans. Knoblock (1994), vol. 2, 103–4. This passage is cited in Needham (1969), 22–3.

People receive their mandate from Heaven; as a result, they are superior and different from all other creatures. Entering the home, man has the intimacy found between father and son, and elder and younger brother; upon leaving home, he has the friendship between superior and inferior, and lord and retainer. Upon encountering each other at a meeting, they display the order appropriate for elders and youngsters. Clearly they have patterns that they follow to greet each other; happily, they have kindnesses with which to love each other. Because of this, people are the most noble.³

This passage clearly indicates that the ability of humans to interact peacefully with each other – despite their difference in status – is what sets them apart from other creatures. Animals might recognize a parent or sibling, but they cannot understand status distinctions. They live in the rough and tumble world of equality and strife. Second, Dong emphasizes that humans are also superior because they are an embodiment of Heaven and Earth:

Of the things produced by the refined essence (*jing* 精) of Heaven and Earth, none are more worthy than people. People receive their mandate from Heaven; as a result, they are superior and unique. Other creatures suffer from defects and thereby cannot become humane and righteous (*ren yi* 仁義); only man is able to become humane and righteous. Since other creatures suffer from defects they cannot be equal to Heaven and Earth; only man can be an equal to Heaven and Earth. People have 360 joints; that matches the number of Heaven. His body, bones, and flesh match the thickness of the Earth. Above he has ears and eyes that can hear and see, which are signs of the sun and moon. His body has orifices and veins, which are signs of the rivers and valleys. The heart-mind experiences grief, happiness, joy, and anger, which resembles the *qi* 氣 of the spirits. If you look at a person's entire body, there is nothing loftier, thus it is of the same kind as Heaven and Earth. Other creatures are only able to indirectly live through obtaining the *yinyang* 陰陽 of Heaven. However, people clearly have its [Heaven and Earth's] patterns of order (*wen li* 文理).⁴

In other words, because people embody the patterns of Heaven and Earth, they are superior to all other things. No matter what other creatures do, due to their inborn deficiencies they can never perfect themselves – they can be neither humane nor righteous. This view of man's place in the world is what Derk Bodde has described as a 'semireceptive approach' towards nature, in which the human world is seen as a microcosm of the natural world, but one in which the focus is clearly on the importance of humans.⁵ Due to human superiority, animals and all the other ten thousand things are merely meant to supply man with his needs. Dong Zhongshu states that, '[Heaven and Earth] produce the five grains to feed them [people]; it provides silk and hemp to clothe them; it uses the six domestic animals to nurture them, it allows men to tame cows, ride

³ *Hanshu*, 56.1516; Bodde (1991), 316.

⁴ *Chunqiu fanlu yi zheng*, 13: 56.354 ('Ren fu Tianshu' 人副天數); translation modified from Fung (1983), 30.

⁵ Bodde (1991), 321–2.

horses, ensnare panthers, and capture tigers. People are worthier than other things because man has obtained the efficacy of Heaven.⁶ In another place he states, 'Heaven and Earth give birth to the ten thousand things to nurture people. Therefore, those things that are edible are used to nourish the body; those that are majestic are used as clothing.'⁷ Animals and all other things merely exist to benefit people.

In the early medieval period, some Confucian thinkers continued to espouse this same view of man's superiority to animals. In attacking the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, the astronomer and official He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447 CE) argued against the idea that humans and animals were equal living beings (*zhongsheng* 眾生). Like Dong Zhongshu, he contended that people are superior because not only do they embody the traits of Heaven and Earth but, without people, the cosmos would be diminished.

Heaven uses *yin* and *yang* to be differentiated; Earth uses soft and hard to be employed. People stand by means of humanity and righteousness. Without Heaven and Earth people would never be born; without people Heaven and Earth would never be efficacious. The Three Powers (Heaven, Earth, and people) share the same form and need each other to grow. Therefore, [humans] receive pure and harmonious *qi* and their knowledge is particularly developed. Their feelings can sum up the past and present and their wisdom can cover the ten thousand things.⁸

In other words, he maintained that people have a privileged spot in the cosmos, which is on a par with Heaven and Earth. Without humans the cosmos would be incomplete. Sharing in the nature of Heaven and Earth is what makes people both smarter and morally better than other creatures. When his Buddhist opponent presses him to admit that only sages fit that description, he admits that, whereas sages are different from ordinary people because of their virtue and intelligence, ordinary people are still different from animals.⁹

Crows and Reciprocity

Despite these theoretical suppositions, upon turning to Confucian filial piety stories created during the Eastern Han (25–220 CE) and Six Dynasties (220–589 CE) periods, we discover several depictions of animals fulfilling the role of moral exemplars. The *Xiaozhi zhuan* depict crows and monkeys exemplifying filiality and tigers and cranes acknowledging righteousness. Gan Bao's 干寶 (fl. 317–350 CE) *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (Records of Searching for Spirits), a collection of *zhiguai* 志怪 'anomaly accounts', which relates many

⁶ *Hanshu*, 56.1516. ⁷ *Chunqiu fanlu yi zheng*, 6: 14.151 ('Fu zhi xiang' 服制像).

⁸ *Hongming ji* 弘明集, *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集, 4.22c.

⁹ *Hongming ji*, *Guang Hongming ji*, 4.25b; see also Gao Xinman (2013), 107–19; and Campamy (1996), 391–2.

of the narratives found in the *Xiaozhi zhuan*, credits an even wider array of animals with virtuous behaviour, such as dogs, turtles, ants and even snakes. To obtain a sense of the scope and depth to which authors of these tales viewed animals as capable of acting morally, let us begin by discussing the three types of animals to which virtuous acts are most frequently attributed: crows, monkeys and dogs.

One of the most important filial acts attributed to animals was *fanbu* 反哺 ‘feeding in return’ or, literally, ‘returning regurgitation’, which is commonly associated with birds. The following account about crows illustrates this concept:

Crows are compassionate birds. They are born in the deep woods. From outside their high nests, holding food in their beaks, the parents place it into their chicks’ mouths. Without waiting for the chicks to cry, the parents on their own accord present them with food. When the parents’ wings fatigue and they can no longer fly, their children’s wings are already fully developed. Flying to and fro, the children bring food and return regurgitation (*fanbu*) for their mother. Since birds are like this, how much more should humans be! Crows bring food in their beaks to feed their young, and adult children bring food in their beaks to feed their mother. These birds are all filial (*xiao*).¹⁰

Obviously, ‘returning regurgitation’ means that offspring, without being prompted, provide food for their elderly and decrepit parents, just as their parents fed them when they were helpless and dependent hatchlings. In short, crows understand the principle of reciprocity that forms the basis of the parent–child relationship. Other types of birds were also thought to engage in the same type of filial behaviour. The late third-century BCE *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (Mr. Lü’s Springs and Autumns) describes mountain finches in the following manner: they ‘reside together in the same nest, offspring and mothers feed each other; and they live harmoniously and delight in each other’s company’.¹¹

Even though others birds were also credited with ‘feeding in return’, crows were most commonly associated with filial piety. The *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters), a Han period lexicon, simply defines crows as filial birds.¹² Confucian apocrypha explain crows’ filiality as a result of their possession of outstanding *qi* (vital energy). For example, one apocryphon states: ‘The planet Mars is a crow, which is a filial bird. How do we know a crow is a filial bird? This is because it has the essence of *yang*, which is the will of Heaven. A crow resides in the middle of the sun. It follows Heaven;

¹⁰ *Kōshiden chūkai* 孝子傳注解, 330.

¹¹ Quoted in *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, 92.1594. Cai Yong’s 蔡邕 (132–192 CE) ‘Qin cao’ 琴操 (Zither Tunes) also credits turtledoves with ‘feeding in return’. See *Yiwen leiju*, 92.1599; Watters (1867), 234–7.

¹² *Shuowen jiezi*, 4A.56a.

by this means it manifests filial piety.¹³ Crows are filial because they embody the vital energy of *yang* (*yang qi* 陽氣), the metaphysical principle associated with light, growth, masculinity, etc., which is itself a manifestation of Heaven. The writer Cheng Gongsui 成公綏 (230–273 CE) explains that crows are viewed as filial because they ‘return regurgitation’ and recognize the principle of *yang* 養 ‘caring for one’s parents’.¹⁴

During the Eastern Han period, crows became exemplars of filiality, to the point where accounts of them were incorporated into *Xiaozi zhuan*. Even though there were many filial piety stories to choose from, the fame of the filial crow was such that it was depicted pictorially at both the second-century Wu Liang Shrine 武梁祠 (Shandong) and the tomb at Helinge’er 和林格爾 (Inner Mongolia).¹⁵ In Yinwan 尹灣 (Jiangsu) tomb no. 6, which was probably sealed in around 10 BCE, archaeologists found eighteen wooden strips making up a work called ‘*Shenwu fu*’ 神鳥賦 (Rhapsody on the Spirit Crows). Based on its contents, Roel Sterckx concludes that the idea that crows were filial and righteous was already widespread in the Western Han.¹⁶ One stanza from the poem reads:

Among all animals that can fly,
The crow is the most dignified.
By nature it is fond of humaneness (*ren* 仁).
It returns regurgitation (*fanbu*) to its parents.
It practises righteousness in a perfect manner,
And very much realizes the way of humans.¹⁷

In this stanza, crows embody both humanity and righteousness. Indeed, the author unequivocally emphasizes that they are able to attain human perfection. Despite never actually calling the bird ‘filial’, the author makes it clear that crows fulfilled *gongyang* 供養 ‘reverent caring’, which early medieval Confucians considered the most fundamental duty a person could do for their parents.¹⁸

‘Returning regurgitation’ was so impressive that the early medieval Chinese thought that humans should learn from this animal behaviour. In fact, a filial piety tale was created in which a human protagonist literally imitates the crow’s behaviour. Xing Qu’s 邢渠 father was so old and toothless that he could not chew food, so Xing always masticated (*bu* 哺) food for him. After doing this for

¹³ *Yiwen leiju*, 92.1591. Similarly, the *Chunqiu yundoushu* 春秋運斗樞 states: ‘Feathers and flying belong to the *yang* principle. The *qi* of the *yang* principle is benevolence (*ren*). Hence crows feed in return.’ See *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, 920.1b.

¹⁴ *Yiwen leiju*, 92.1593. ¹⁵ Kuroda (2007), 289–92. ¹⁶ Sterckx (2002), 27, 251n.63.

¹⁷ My translation; I have consulted Van Ess (2003), 612. For the Chinese text of this prose-poem, see Qiu Xigui (1997), 52.

¹⁸ On the meaning and importance of this concept, see Knapp (2005), 113–36.

some time, his father miraculously grew a new set of choppers.¹⁹ The key word in this passage, *bu* ‘to masticate’ or ‘regurgitate’, is extended here to mean ‘to feed’. It links Xing’s actions with those of crows by suggesting that Xing regurgitated food for his father, just as a crow would. The popularity of the notion of bird-like ‘returning regurgitation’ is shown by the frequency with which the Xing Qu tale is illustrated in Eastern Han art.²⁰ Zhao Gou 趙狗 is another story with this exact motif. On a pictorial stone from Dawenkou 大汶口, Zhao Gou is shown feeding his toothless father – their mouths are almost touching. To the right of these figures, two birds are passing food to each other; their beaks are almost touching.²¹ In this case, the artisan graphically underscores the parallel between filial crows and sons.

Where did the Chinese get the idea that crows feed in this way? The passage quoted above is more of a general description of crows than a story about any particular bird, and it seems to be based on personal observations. Modern science indicates that these observations were not far off the mark. Biologists consider crows and ravens to be the most intelligent of birds. They can remember human faces, can effectively transfer information to each other and over generations, and one kind in New Caledonia can even make tools. Although crow offspring do not feed their elderly parents, it is true that juvenile offspring will continue to reside with their parents after maturing, in a few cases for up to five years. They also help their parents build the nest, defend territory and feed nestlings. Moreover, while living in a large communal roost, crows may fly as far as 80 miles to forage for food, but still commute home in the evening to be with their ‘family’.²² Therefore, describing crows as filial is not whimsical.

Monkeys and Compassion

Besides crows, the other animals that appear as heroes in *Xiaozhi zhuan* are simians: the macaque (*hou* 猴) and the gibbon (*yuan* 猿). Filial piety narratives that feature these primates emphasize their compassion for their kin. The fifth-century *Zhou Jingshi Xiaozhi zhuan* 周景式孝子傳 (Zhou Jingshi’s Accounts of Filial Offspring) relates the following tale:

I once went to Sui’an 綏安 County. Along the way, I encountered and chased a macaque mother carrying a child. She dived under the water. Even though the water was deep it was clear. I used my halberd to stab her. From her ribs downwards everything was cut off, but her spine was still intact. She kept searching for her child, which was [now] in the boat. Only after following alongside the boat and using her hand to pat her child, did she die.²³

¹⁹ *Taiping yulan*, 411.6a; and *Kōshiden chūkai*, 47–8. ²⁰ Knapp (2005), 129–30.

²¹ For this image, see Jiang (2000), 176–7.

²² Gilbert (1992); Heinrich (2000); Marzluff, Angell and Ehrlich (2005), 15–95.

²³ *Taiping yulan*, 920.4b.

This moving account is unique, since it is written in the first person. Although it is about a mother's concern for her child, rather than the other way around, Zhou Jingshi (fifth century) still viewed it as appropriate to include in his *Xiaozhi zhuan*. Despite suffering terribly from her wounds, the mother macaque only thought about comforting her offspring.

The following tale again emphasizes a mother's grief at her offspring's misfortune. A man went to the mountains and captured a baby gibbon, whose mother followed the hunter to his home. The hunter tied the baby to a tree in his courtyard, so that the mother gibbon could see it. Upon reaching the house, she slapped her cheeks, as if using her grief to beg for her infant's release. Instead, the hunter struck the baby dead. The mother gibbon moaned sorrowfully, threw herself down (off the roof) and died. The hunter opened her insides and found that every inch of her intestine had burst apart. Within six months, the hunter's entire family had died from a disease, extinguishing his lineage.²⁴ In this tale, although she cannot speak, the mother gibbon clearly begs for her infant's life. Upon witnessing its murder, she commits suicide. In short, like many human filial exemplars, she dies from her grief.²⁵ In what is possibly a variant of this tale, an officer obtained a baby macaque and tried to sail away. The mother macaque grievously wailed and chased the boat along the riverbank for more than a hundred *li* 里, whereupon she finally successfully leapt aboard, dying in the attempt. When the soldier cut open her insides, every inch of her intestine had burst apart from intense grief. When Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373 CE) heard about this, he became angry and had the officer demoted.²⁶ Here again, after doing everything possible to stay with her child, the macaque mother appears literally to die of heartache. Even the strongman Huan Wen regarded his officer's action of splitting a mother from her child as being so cruel as to warrant demotion.

Just as simian mothers were portrayed as showing love and compassion for their offspring, juvenile monkeys reciprocated this care and sympathy. A well-known example of this is conveyed through the story of General Deng Zhi 鄧芝 (d. 121 CE). Spotting a gibbon holding its offspring in a tree, he raised his crossbow and shot the mother gibbon. Rather than fleeing, the young gibbon pulled out the arrow and stuffed leaves into its mother's wound. When he saw this, Deng sighed and threw his crossbow into the river. He seemed to realize that, since gibbons also have strong kin feelings, he had just murdered the child's mother. Interestingly, this is a case where an ape morally transforms a man's behaviour. In a variant of this tale, Deng states, 'Alas, I have violated the nature of

²⁴ *Soushen ji*, no. 460. ²⁵ Knapp (2005), 146.

²⁶ *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, 28.864 ('Chu mian' 黜免); trans. Van Gulik (1967), 49.

things; I will soon die.'²⁷ In other words, since he has transgressed against the way things should be, he expects to receive supernatural punishment.

All of these stories vividly illustrate that, for the writers, simian mothers and children share the same intimate attachment to each other as human mothers and their children. They depict macaque and gibbon mothers so emotionally attached to their offspring that they die of grief when tragically separated from them, and an infant gibbon who will not abandon its injured mother, whatever the cost. The famous Sinologist and gibbon owner R.H. van Gulik notes that this was such common knowledge that the traditional method of capturing gibbons alive was to shoot a mother gibbon with a bow and arrow or a poisoned dart. When the gibbon fell to the ground, the infant gibbon would still be clinging to her.²⁸ In all of these narratives, the authors disapprove of harming the familial bond between a monkey mother and child. Deng Zhi realizes that he has violated natural law by killing the infant gibbon's beloved mother. In another tale, the official's patron, Huan Wen, rejects him because of his cruel treatment of the mother macaque. As for the hunter who cruelly tied the baby gibbon to a tree and killed it to torture its mother, the spirit world annihilated him and his family within six months. Through these narrative devices, the authors affirm that monkeys do indeed manifest filial piety and that this value is sacred, no matter which species displays it.

Was it just human fancy that macaques and gibbons had familial feelings for each other? Were the authors merely imputing human feelings to these simians? The answer is definitely no. These tales almost certainly stemmed from direct observation of monkey behaviour. Our first monkey tale is written in the first person, which makes it appear to be based on the author's actual experience. It is also clear that a number of early medieval, upper-class men kept gibbons as pets. The Confucian philosopher Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278 CE) wrote a 'Yuanhou fu' 猿猴賦 (Prose-poem on Gibbons and Macaques) in which he describes his pet monkeys.²⁹ The fifth-century *Zhou Suoshi Xiaozhi zhuan* 周索氏孝子傳 (Zhou Suoshi's Accounts of Filial Children) describes gibbons thus: 'They have long arms that are sometimes yellow, sometimes black. They reject nests and excel at the following [things]. They can spin in the air. They are fond of singing. If the female is captured by a human, ultimately [the child?] cannot exist on its own.'³⁰ Here, rather than narrate a specific tale about gibbons, the author chose to provide a general description of these animals. Van Gulik notes that gibbons live high up in the trees but do not make nests or platforms, they

²⁷ *Sanguo zhi* 三國志, 45.1072. This tale appears in the commentary by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372?–451 CE), which attributes it to the fourth-century local history *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志 (Records of the States South of Mount Hua).

²⁸ Van Gulik (1967), 48–9. ²⁹ Van Gulik (1967), 47–8.

³⁰ *Chuxue ji* 初學記, 29.720; *Taiping yulan*, 910.2a.

live in close-knit families, and come to the aid of threatened close kin. Females only have one baby at a time and nurse it for two years. During that time, the baby always stays close to its mother. Young gibbons stay with their families for six to seven years. Adult gibbons make long whooping calls in the mornings, at dusk and sometimes at noon.³¹ It seems that the description of gibbons in the *Zhou Suoshi Xiaozhi zhuan* is fairly accurate.

Dogs and Devotion

Unlike crows or monkeys, no surviving fragments from *Xiaozhi zhuan* include tales with canine exemplars. Nevertheless, I am including tales about virtuous dogs because there is a possibility that these stories did appear in *Xiaozhi zhuan*. Some *Xiaozhi zhuan* were quite lengthy – the longest was thirty fascicles long³² – but medieval encyclopaedias only preserve a limited number of quotations from these works. For example, even though the fifth-century *Zheng Ji Xiaozhi zhuan* 鄭緝孝子傳 (Zheng Ji's Accounts of Filial Offspring) was ten fascicles long, only a single fragment of one account remains. Since many of the same filial exemplar tales exist in both *Xiaozhi zhuan* and *zhiguai* works, it seems reasonable to assume that at least a few *Xiaozhi zhuan* would also contain tales of dogs manifesting extreme devotion for their owners.

Just like filial humans who would endanger their lives to protect their parents, early medieval *zhiguai* authors frequently credited dogs with risking their own lives to protect their masters. For instance, Li Xinchun 李信純 had a dog named Black Dragon (Heilong 黑龍) which he loved dearly. One day Li got drunk and, on his way home, fell asleep in a field. Just then, the Prefect was hunting in the area and ordered that a fire be set to smoke the wildlife from the high grass out into the open. Unable to awaken his master, Black Dragon immersed himself in a nearby brook several times and shook off the water all around his master. Since the dog had moistened the ground around him, Li was able to escape from harm. However, the dog died of exhaustion by his side.³³ In another tale in which a man is saved by his canine companion, a dog named True Tail (Diwei 的尾) fought off a huge snake that had almost crushed his master to death. While his master lay unconscious on the ground, the dog eventually drew the attention of a passer-by through his grief-stricken behaviour. After his master was taken home, True Tail refused any food until his master regained consciousness and began to eat.³⁴ True Tail's refusal to eat until his master does so replicates the actions of filial sons who refuse to eat

³¹ Van Gulik (1967), 5–9. ³² Knapp (2005), 62–3.

³³ *Soushen ji*, no. 457. See the similar tale of Yang Sheng 楊生, in which the dog lives. See Wang Guoliang (1978), 110–11; *Yiwen leiju*, 94.1638.

³⁴ *Taiping yulan*, 905.7a; *Yiwen leiju*, 94.1638.

until their sick parents do.³⁵ The modern scholar Fu Kaijing notes that it was precisely during the early medieval period that dogs were credited with noble humanlike actions that manifested Confucian morality.³⁶ Why were these dogs willing to sacrifice themselves for their masters? It would be easy to think that the authors of these tales are depicting the dogs as embodying the value of *zhong* 忠 ('loyalty') rather than filiality. Obviously, human masters and their dogs are not kin. However, a dog's relationship to its owner is like that of a servant to his master: as a household member. As China's early law codes attest, if a servant testified against or harmed their master, they would be guilty of *bu xiao* 不孝 'unfiliality'.³⁷ Hence, acts of devotion that servants display towards their master are manifestations of filiality. For example, the authors of *Xiaozhi zhuan* praised the slave Li Shan 李善, who protected and raised his orphaned infant master, as an exemplar of filiality, not loyalty.³⁸ Indeed, *zhong* was only applicable to voluntary rather than involuntary relationships. Much like a slave or servant, a dog was its master's possession and therefore in an involuntary relationship.

A dog owes filial loyalty to its master based on the love and care that the master has bestowed upon it. Often these narratives underscore the care the master has shown his canine servant. Li Xinchun 'loved [Black Dragon] very much. No matter what his master was doing, [the dog] followed him. Whenever the master ate or drank something, the dog would get a share.' Likewise, 'Yang Sheng 楊生 raised a dog. He loved it exceedingly and cherished it. No matter what [Yang] was doing, they were always together.'³⁹ The idea that dogs understood the obligation of reciprocity is made explicit in the tale of Zhang Ran 張然. When his wife's slave paramour threatened to kill Zhang with a bow and arrow, Zhang looked at his dog, Crow Dragon (Wulong 烏龍), and said, 'I have looked after you for many years, can you save me now?' Zhang expected his dog's help because of the care lavished on him. Crow Dragon did not disappoint. He attacked the slave, giving Zhang the opportunity to stab the lover with a knife.⁴⁰ Thus, even though dogs were not related to their masters, the devotion they showed towards them was filial in nature because it was based on the genuine affection that dogs felt for their masters who had raised them. Masters, in turn, sometimes treated their dogs like members of the family. After the dog True Tail saved his master, Hua Long 華隆 'cherished and loved him even more, in the same manner he would love a relative.'⁴¹ When a passer-by threatens to leave Yang Sheng in a well which he has fallen into unless Yang gives up his loyal dog, Yang states, 'This dog has saved my life once, I cannot give him to you, but as for

³⁵ For example, when his mother was ill and would not eat, Ru Yu 汝郁 also refused to eat. See *Wu xiao zhuan* 五孝傳, 320–1.

³⁶ Fu Kaijing (2012), 251. ³⁷ Jia Liying (2010), 70–89. ³⁸ Knapp (2012), 124–5.

³⁹ Wang Guoliang (1978), 110. ⁴⁰ Wang Guoliang (1978), 109.

⁴¹ *Taiping guangji*, 437.920.

everything else I have there is nothing that I cherish.’⁴² In other words, the only thing Yang Sheng holds dear is his dog.

As for whether these events actually happened, it is difficult to say. All the dog tales discussed here come from *zhiguai* texts. Works of this genre contain tales that feature the unusual, fantastic and supernatural. Although the contents of the dog stories are all unusual, these events all seem plausible. Dogs and humans have had a special relationship for over ten thousand years. Dogs excel at reading human emotions and responding to them. Accounts of the steadfast devotion of dogs and their willingness to risk life and limb to save their masters abound.⁴³

The Difference between Moral Humans and Animals

What becomes apparent from the stories about crows, monkeys and dogs is that animals can be filial and righteous, even to the extent that they can serve as exemplars to humans. Nevertheless, animal filiality differs from its human counterpart in two important respects. First, animal filiality is always directed towards the mother. Why are fathers absent? This is a key difference because it indicates one way in which early Confucians believed people were distinct from animals. A passage from the first-century CE *Baihutong* 白虎通 (Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall) suggests that, in a state of nature, humans lived like animals: they were not completely clothed, ate all parts of a creature, did not store food and – most importantly – knew only their mother, not their father. Fu Xi 伏羲, the mythical cultural hero, remedied this chaos, when he established the husband–wife relationship and also the way of humans.⁴⁴ But what is the way of humans? Lu Jia’s 陸賈 (c. 228–c. 140 BCE) *Xinyu* 新語 (New Discourse) explains that the way of humans means teaching people ‘to know the intimacy of father and son, the righteousness shared between lord and retainer, the way of husband and wife, and the order that obtains between seniors and juniors’.⁴⁵ Thus, it is the knowledge of social relationships that structures human society and distinguishes people from animals. Hence, Mencius said, ‘To have neither a father nor a lord is to be the same as a bird or beast.’⁴⁶ The libertine poet Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263 CE)

⁴² Wang Guoliang (1978), 110.

⁴³ For a brief introduction to recent research on the emotional lives of dogs and their relationship to humans, see Bekoff (2013), 69–106.

⁴⁴ *Baihutong zhuzi suoyin* 白虎通逐字索引, 2, p. 6.

⁴⁵ *Xinyu zhuzi suoyin* 新語逐字索引, 1, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Mencius* 3B.9. No wonder then that Mencius thought the primary purpose of elementary education was to teach people about human relationships and that lacking this kind of education would mean people were no better than animals (*Mencius* 3A.3 and 3A.4). Derk Bodde has pointed out that it was not until the Tang that Chinese thinkers noted the similarities between human and animal social organizations. See Bodde (1991), 311.

made this same point when he startled the court by saying that he could understand how a man might kill his father, but he could never identify with someone who killed his mother. When pressed for an explanation, he stated, 'Animals know their mother but not their father. A man who kills his father is in the same class as the animals, but a man who kills his mother is inferior to even an animal.'⁴⁷

When Confucian writers expounded on human relationships (*renlun* 人倫), they focused on the tie of father-child (*fuzi* 父子), instead of the mother-child (*muzi* 母子) bond. The only social group that animals could form – in their view – was the equalitarian one of the uterine family, which is centred on the mother. Since animals did not know their fathers, they could not form groups based on more abstract and unequal ties, such as lineages, communities or states, which depend on networks of male superiors and inferiors. Acknowledging the father-child tie, which allows people to form larger social units, is one aspect of social behaviour that makes people human.

An Eastern Han court case illustrates this point well. Three men all took the same woman as their wife. They produced four children. Later, the men wanted to split up the wealth of their common household and divide the sons. Being unable to agree how to do this, they appealed to the county magistrate, who was not able to act judiciously. When it was brought to the attention of Fan Yanshou 范延壽, the Chamberlain for Law Enforcement, he petitioned the throne, saying, '[These men] have betrayed and violated proper human relationships and have put themselves on the level of birds and beasts.' In another version of this account, his memorial reads, 'This is not the behaviour of humankind. This is acting like birds and animals that follow their mother, but not their father. Please execute these three males and give the children to the mother.'⁴⁸ Because all three of these men had willingly produced offspring in a manner that rendered paternal lines impossible to identify, they were accused of animal-like behaviour and thus deserved death.

The second difference is that animal filiality puts a much greater stress on reciprocity. Stories about birds feeding each other obviously emphasize this principle. Other filial animal tales indirectly reiterate this point by making the tale's exemplar a mother rather than an offspring. As we have already seen, stories about monkeys displaying profound grief at the capture or murder of their kin can feature either a mother or her child. Of course, one could argue that a mother pining for her captured offspring exemplifies the virtue of *ci* 慈 'parental kindness', rather than filiality. Nevertheless, since such narratives were included in *Xiaozi zhuan*, there is no doubt that the authors viewed such

⁴⁷ Holzman (1976), 76.

⁴⁸ Yue Qingping (1997), 36. The first statement is in the *Xie Cheng Hou Hanshu* 謝承後漢書 as quoted in *Taiping yulan*, 231.4a. The second is in the *Soushen ji*, no. 131.

parental concern as a manifestation of filiality or saw parental kindness (*ci*) and filial piety (*xiao*) as complementary virtues. Children should show filial piety, which would produce kindness in parents; likewise, parents should be kind, which would induce filiality in their offspring. Interestingly, human filial piety tales rarely concern parental kindness; instead, they largely concentrate on the devotion of sons and daughters. Hence, tales about animal exemplars stress the reciprocal basis of filiality, while those about human exemplars stress its hierarchical aspects.⁴⁹

This equalitarian stress on reciprocity likewise manifests itself in the numerous tales in which animals repay human acts of kindness.⁵⁰ In these narratives, a virtuous human aids an animal in distress. Acknowledging the debt owed to the human, the animal rewards him with either meat or precious goods. A hermit and filial son named Guo Wen 郭文 (or Guo Wenju 郭文舉) was once approached by a fierce tiger which opened its mouth at him. Guo saw that he had a bone stuck in his throat and pulled it out. The next morning the beast left a deer in front of his hut. Stressing the reciprocity that could exist between man and beast, when Guo was later asked why fierce animals do not attack him, he replied, 'If people do not harm the heart-minds of beasts, then beasts will not harm people.'⁵¹ In another tale about the filial son Guai Shen 噲參, a black crane was shot by an arrow and sought Guai's help. He nursed the bird and healed its wound. One night, after the bird regained its health and flew away, it returned with its mate: each one holding a pearl in its beak to repay Guai.⁵² An account about the filial son Zhang Yuan 張元 even provides a rationale for why he helps an animal in danger. When he was a child, Zhang found an abandoned puppy and cared for it, which incurred his uncle's wrath. Zhang explained his actions by saying:

'Everything that lives esteems its life. Heaven gives life and takes it away, this is the principle of nature. Now if a person abandons this puppy and it dies, this is not the way of nature. If I see this happening and do nothing, then I do not have a benevolent heart (*renxin* 仁心). That is the reason why I am caring for it.' This speech moved his uncle, he thereupon approved [Zhang's action]. Not long afterwards, the dog's mother came, carrying a dead rabbit in her mouth. She put it in front of Zhang and then left.⁵³

Zhang adopts the pup and cares for it because another human has done it harm. Because Zhang has saved her offspring from starvation, the dog's mother

⁴⁹ On the hierarchical nature of filiality among humans, see Knapp (2005), chapter 5.

⁵⁰ I use the word 'equalitarian' because these tales involve social interactions between strangers who are, theoretically, equals. Unlike the tales of devoted canines, humans and animals in these tales have no prior relationship to each other. The human chooses to do the animal a good turn and the animal reciprocates in kind.

⁵¹ *Jin shu* 晉書, 94.2440–1; *Tai ping yulan*, 892.1b.

⁵² *Sou shen ji*, no. 451; for a translation, see DeWoskin and Crump (1996), 238.

⁵³ *Zhou shu* 周書, 46.832–3.

repays him with a gift of meat. This story thus shows the mother dog's ability to repay a stranger's kindness and her love for her child. In other words, she was capable of being both parentally kind/filial to her family members and righteous towards strangers. The many stories of this type indicate that animals were capable of recognizing and repaying acts done on their behalf.

So, why then did some early medieval Confucians view animals as capable of being virtuous? The first possible explanation is that, since the late Warring States period, some Confucians began to see animals and humans as belonging to the same category of being. Sterckx has pointed out that early Chinese believed that, since both animals and humans had *qi* and blood, they all were creatures that possessed intelligence, awareness, emotions, desires and even filial yearnings.⁵⁴ The *Liji* states:

In general all creatures that live between heaven and earth and have 'blood and *qi*' are certain to possess awareness (*zhi*). Among those having awareness, there is none which does not love its kind (*lei* 類). Consider the case of large birds and beasts: when they lose a mate or are separated from their group, then even after a month or a season has passed, they are certain to circle around their old home and fly about there. They are crying and calling, moving to and fro, gazing about uncertainly and hesitantly, before they are able to leave the place. Even small birds like swallows and sparrows chatter and cry for a while before they are able to leave.⁵⁵

Already in the early Western Han, some Confucian thinkers believed that, like humans, animals were also conscious beings who felt a deep affinity for and emotional attachment to members of their own group. The quotation above notes that in particular large birds and mammals have memory and suffer from the sorrows of parting. A passage in the *Liezi* 列子 (Master Lie) amplifies the notion that humans and animals are similar in nature:

There are ways in which the intelligence of beasts and birds is by nature similar to man's. They wish as much as we do to preserve their lives, and do not have to borrow from man's wisdom to do so. Buck and doe mate together; mother and child keep close together; they shun the plains and seek inaccessible places, avoid cold and seek out warmth; they live in herds and travel in formations with young ones on the inside and the fully grown on the outside; they lead each other to water and call out to each other when they find food. In the most ancient times, men and animals walked side by side.⁵⁶

The author of this passage views animals as nearly equal to humans. They have the same concerns: to preserve their lives, avoid danger, seek warmth and protect their young. Since animals have similar concerns, intelligence and emotions to people, then it stands to reason that they should also be capable of moral acts. Their concern for kin already indicates their possession of a basic

⁵⁴ Sterckx (2002), 73–6.

⁵⁵ *Liji jijie*, 55.1373 ('San nian wen' 三年問); trans. Sterckx (2002), 75.

⁵⁶ *Liezi zhuzi suoyin* 列子逐字索引, 2.15 ('Huangdi' 黃帝); trans. Graham (1990), 54–5.

form of filiality. One of the earliest Confucian apocrypha tells us that, before the primordial *qi* (*yuanqi* 元氣) divided and formed the universe, filial piety resided within it.⁵⁷ This implies that the ten thousand things, i.e. every being in the universe, should have received a measure of this virtue.

The authors of collections of *Xiaozi zhuan* were convinced that filial piety was part of each person's natural endowment. In the introduction to the chapter on the filial and righteous in the *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (History of the Southern Qi), the historian Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489–537 CE) tells us that

The master [Confucius] said, 'The way of father and offspring is based on heavenly endowment, as is the duty of lord and retainer'. The filiality and righteousness that people partake of is the same as that produced by Heaven. Whether it is thick or thin depends on one's heart; it is not something achieved by study.⁵⁸

As the passage implies, the amount of filiality and loyalty one possesses depends on the cultivation of that which inherently resides within – it is not a quality that is externally acquired. Knowledge and acceptance of the father–son and lord–retainer relationships are already part of our natural endowment. Since humans and animals are both components of the ten thousand things, if filial piety is natural to humans rather than learned behaviour, then it should also be inherent in animals. In the preface to the sixth-century CE *Yōmei bunko Xiaozi zhuan* 陽明文庫孝子傳 (The Yōmei Library Accounts of Filial Offspring), one of the two complete *Xiaozi zhuan* preserved in Kyoto, the compiler tells us that:

Mothers and fathers love their children because it is natural and within their heavenly nature. As their children come and go, they feel lonely and depressed; their anxious heart feels as though it has been chopped up . . . As for the kindness one's parents have shown you, how could anyone but you pay it back? In regard to filial care, how could anyone substitute for you? Crows understand the need to return regurgitation (*fanbu*); a goose recognizes that it needs to bring food [for its parents]. If birds and beasts can do this, how much more should humans!⁵⁹

Whether you are a human or an animal, loving one's children and being loved by them is an integral part of one's nature. It is precisely for this reason that animals, such as crows and geese, can serve as exemplars.

Perhaps it is because of their inborn latent virtue that animals could become moral by the power of perfect goodness. As Sterckx has amply documented, creatures were just as subject to the transformative power of exemplary virtue as people.⁶⁰ In filial piety tales, animals become tame or exhibit filial behaviour

⁵⁷ *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成, vol. 2, 971.

⁵⁸ *Nan Qi shu*, 55.955. The filial son Yu Chun 庾純 expressed a similar sentiment, exclaiming, 'I have heard that the relationship between father and child stems from the heavenly endowment and that their love comes from the self-so (*ziran* 自然).' See *Jin shu*, 50.1400.

⁵⁹ *Kōshiden chūkai*, 17–18. ⁶⁰ Sterckx (2002), 137–53.

themselves after exposure to filiality in its perfect form. Upon the death of his father, Wu Xi 伍襲 resided in a hut at his father's graveside. Every time he wailed, a deer would squat near the tumulus and issue mournful cries.⁶¹ In this case, the deer was stirred by Wu Xi's sincere grief to mimic his behaviour. Animals could also be moved by a son's perfect sincerity to help a human fulfil a filial task. For example, after his mother's death, Li Tao 李陶 lived by the side of her grave. He wanted to build her tumulus himself and refused help from his neighbours. A murder of crows carried dirt in their beaks and helped him complete the tumulus.⁶² Exemplary filiality could even influence ferocious animals. The filial son Wei Jun 韋俊 was travelling with his father. One night a group of tigers surrounded the inn in which they were staying. Wei Jun courageously blocked the inn's entrance to prevent them from entering. When they saw him, the tigers immediately lowered their ears and dropped to their knees. They cowered and would not move. Wei kneeled and said, 'If you are hungry you can eat me, but please don't frighten my elderly parent.' The tigers shrank back and retreated.⁶³ Since Chinese correlative thinking assumes that similar kinds of things affect each other, the tigers could only react as they did to Wei Jun if they had an inherent capacity and respect for this virtue themselves.⁶⁴

Another possible explanation for this belief that virtue was part of the endowment of all living creatures is the influence of Buddhism, particularly the notion of Buddha nature (*foxing* 佛性). In Buddhism all creatures are sentient beings that are caught in the endless cycle of life, death and rebirth and subject to the laws of *karma*. Just as through the accumulation of good *karma* animals can be reborn as humans, through bad deeds humans can be reborn as animals. Thus, Buddhists viewed animals as capable of thought and engaging in moral behaviour. Animals appear frequently in popular *Jātaka* tales as previous incarnations of the Buddha. Indeed, there is always the possibility that a given animal is an incarnation of a former relative.⁶⁵ By the early fifth century, due to Daosheng's 道生 (c. 360–434 CE) translation of the *Nirvāna sūtra*, the notion of Buddha nature had already become a topic of debate among southern literati. Daosheng maintained that, since all sentient beings have Buddha nature, they all have the potential to reach Buddhahood.⁶⁶ In other words, Buddhahood resides within each sentient being. Robert Campney reminds us that, in reading *zhiguai* tales of animals that react to either human kindness or malice, we should always keep in mind that contemporary debates about Buddha nature and *karma* probably informed them.⁶⁷ Pu Chengzhong, on the other hand, notes that tales of animals who repay human kindness existed

⁶¹ *Taiping yulan*, 906.7b. ⁶² *Yiwen leiju*, 92.1592. ⁶³ *Taiping yulan*, 411.7a–b.

⁶⁴ On correlative thinking in filial piety tales, see Knapp (2005), chapter 4.

⁶⁵ For Buddhist views of animals, see McDermott (1989) and Harris (2006).

⁶⁶ Kim (1990), 35–6. ⁶⁷ Campney (1996), 389–93.

long before Buddhist equivalents were translated into Chinese.⁶⁸ In other words, stories of animals that repay kindness were not necessarily inspired by Buddhism.

An important reason why Confucian authors were viewing animals as moral exemplars was their somewhat keener awareness of the natural world. The early medieval period witnessed a number of scientific advances in astronomy, mathematics, calendrics, cosmology, medicine and agriculture. Many of the men who made these discoveries were famous Confucian scholars.⁶⁹ These advances, no doubt, were based on an enhanced understanding of the natural world. Moreover, educated men often travelled, whether for their studies, carrying out official duties or serving in military campaigns. They also spent a lot of time in their urban gardens and country estates.⁷⁰ John Major suggests that the ruling urban classes during the Han probably had a good knowledge of both domestic and wild animals through time spent on their estates, travelling by horse and cart through the countryside and hunting.⁷¹ This was equally true – if not more so – of the early medieval elite who lived in a tumultuous age that frequently witnessed regime change and dislocation. As previously mentioned, *Xiaozhi zhuan*'s observations about filial animals are often a description of an entire species' behaviour, rather than a narrative about a particular creature. Moreover, one of the tales about a gibbon is told in the first person. Importantly, unlike many filial piety stories concerning humans, tales about filial and righteous animals do not include miracles such as an old man growing new teeth, or bamboo shoots sprouting in the middle of winter. Animals in these tales do not assume human form, speak to humans or wear human clothing.

The idea that these accounts might have stemmed from direct observation is supported by some modern scientists' belief that animals also have a sense of morality. Some biologists maintain that a wide array of animals have emotions and moral awareness. They believe that moral behaviour has evolved as a means for animals to co-operate with others to maximize security and food attainment. As a consequence, many animals live in complex social structures that are regulated by rules and held together with trust and compassion. Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce note that:

Mammals living in tight social groups appear to live according to codes of conduct, including prohibitions against certain kinds of behaviour and expectations for other kinds of behaviour. They live by a set of rules that fosters relatively harmonious and peaceful coexistence. They are naturally cooperative, will offer aid to their fellows, sometimes in return for like aid, sometimes with no expectation of immediate reward. They build relationships of trust. What's more, they appear to feel for other members of

⁶⁸ Pu (2014), 176–7. ⁶⁹ Zhang Qizhi (1996), 285–326. ⁷⁰ Lewis (2009), 94–102.

⁷¹ Major (2008), 150.

their communities, especially relatives, but also neighbours and even strangers – often showing signs of what looks very much like compassion and empathy.⁷²

In other words, mammals living in small groups display many of the behaviours that closely resemble human methods for maintaining social solidarity. Frans de Waal emphasizes that a number of animals have a sense of empathy, reciprocity, fairness and even self-recognition.⁷³ Bekoff and Pierce believe the animals that most clearly manifest moral behaviour are primates (humans, apes and some types of monkeys), social carnivores (wolves, coyotes, dogs), cetaceans (dolphins and whales), elephants, and even some rodents.⁷⁴ Bernd Heinrich has observed ravens' enforcement of moral standards and keen recognition and punishment of violators.⁷⁵ It is pertinent to acknowledge that, in the filial piety stories, the animals which are particularly identified as virtuous – monkeys, dogs and crows – are those that biologists view as among those who most clearly follow moral codes. Aided by this scientific knowledge, it may well be that the early medieval emphasis on animal exemplars stemmed from close observation of animal conduct, rather than anthropomorphizing convenient subjects.

Conclusion

Although some Confucian theorists since the Warring States have asserted that what makes people exceptional is their ability to act virtuously, this chapter has shown that the authors of *Xiaozi zhuan* genuinely believed that animals were capable of possessing virtue, which was a sentiment rooted in a contemporary philosophical belief that filial piety was inherent in every living being's natural endowment from Heaven. So much so, in fact, that they used filial animals as exemplars for people. Animals were believed to be capable of exactly the same virtuous acts as their human counterparts: they could repay the kindness of strangers, and materially support, steadfastly protect and grievously mourn their parents or offspring. Hence, even though some Confucian theoreticians wanted to give humans a privileged place among the ten thousand things, the moral distance between humans and animals was too close for the authors of filial piety tales to heed this distinction consistently. As Company has astutely outlined, the authors of anomaly accounts viewed humans and animals as belonging to the same moral community.⁷⁶ The same could also be said of the writers of filial piety accounts.

Even though animals could be filial and righteous, their virtuous behaviour was still distinct from, and less exalted than, that of people. Most importantly, only people recognize the father–child relationship, whereas animals do not.

⁷² Bekoff and Pierce (2009), 5. ⁷³ de Waal (2009). ⁷⁴ Bekoff and Pierce (2009), 9.

⁷⁵ Heinrich (2000), 269–79. ⁷⁶ Company (1996), 384.

What this means is that people are cognizant of much more abstract relations, whereas animals only recognize concrete and intimate connections that provide food and protection. A dog might die for its master, but not for its country. Since animals only recognize the most fundamental social relationships, tales about them tend to emphasize the most basic aspects of filiality. As a result, animal tales stress reciprocity more frequently than narratives about filial people.

Why did early medieval Confucian authors think that animals could also be virtuous? A simple answer might be the influence of Buddhism, since Buddhists believed that all sentient beings were subject to the laws of death and rebirth, as well as *karma*. However, stories about filial animals pre-date the time when Buddhism began to have a substantial impact on Chinese society. The authors of *Xiaozhi zhuan* instead subscribed to the idea that virtue was inherent within the cosmos and within every creature, as part of its heavenly endowment. Thus, animals could be capable of virtuous acts, just like humans. Early medieval Confucian authors came to this conclusion because they were keen observers of nature. They noticed that specific animals manifested certain types of virtuous behaviour. This is why their accounts of animals as filial exemplars are descriptive of their general behaviour and lack any supernatural elements. In other words, although early Confucian authors anthropomorphized animals to some degree, they also recognized that many animals have a sense of morality within their social groupings.