
**Roel Sterckx**

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This volume brings together nine essays that originated in a workshop held at the University of Munich in 2008. All papers deal with aspects of the cultural history of a particular animal species across a wide source base ranging from antiquity through to the Qing period. The focus, its editor notes in the introduction, is not so much on human-animal relationships but the animal “of itself” (an sich). The result is a series of essays rich in detail, annotation and description, illustrated with sixteen plates.

Thomas Kaiser (‘Unsterblich problematisch: *Grus japonensis*’) examines the morphology, taxonomy, and ecology of the bird referred to today as the *dandinghe* 丹頂鶴, also known as the Manchurian, Japanese or red-crowned crane, and one among four other crane species present in China. His survey reviews a number of names for the crane that appear in historical sources and that, each in their own way, associate the crane with the themes of longevity and immortality. Chronology does not lie at the heart of the analysis. The essay moves from the eleventh century reconstructed *Xianghejing* 相鸖經 (“Classic on the Physiognomy of the Crane”), to (W. Han) *Huainanzi* 淮南子, to the Shang tomb of Lady Fuhao 婦好, the famous Mawangdui 馬王堆 banner, to examples of fifteenth and nineteenth century paintings figuring cranes. Yet, throughout Kaiser shows that proving correspondence between *Grus japonensis* and names of crane-type avians in texts or their representations in art remains highly problematic. Indeed the identification of biological species with nomenclature and the absence of neat correspondences between biological creatures and the animal lexicon run as a red thread through all essays in this volume. Mathias Röder (‘Vom kopfüber Hängenden oder *daoguaniao*’) examines textual references to a bird of the parrot family referred to as the *daoguaniao* 倒掛鳥 “hanging bird”. He traces the earliest references to hanging birds to Song times, reviews possible variant terms, and discusses its curiously attributed habit of “collecting fragrance” (*shou xiang* 收香). At the core of the analysis again
are reservations as to the exact referent species that hides behind the multiple variants referring to hanging birds across multiple sources: poetry, local gazetteers, etc. Roderick Ptak (Weiße Papageien in frühen chinesischen Quellen bis zur Tang-Zeit) surveys candidate species that might correspond to the terms baiyingwu 白鸚鵡 (the survey stretches beyond Tang sources). Ptak suggests that the term most frequently refers to the cockatoo, a species imported from Southeast Asia, possibly as early as Han and therefore quintessentially “exotic.” We are treated to a list of references to parrots and related talking birds that appear as part of tribute missions up to the Yuan and some literary anecdotes in conclusion. In a second piece (‘Notizen zum Mungo, Herpestes javanicus’) Professor Ptak collates references to the menggui 蒙貴 / mengsong 蒙頌 (mongoose) and its cognates by way of annotating an eighteenth century description of the animal in the Aomen jilüe 澳門記略. An encyclopaedic survey of references follows starting with the Shijing 詩經. In conclusion, the author reiterates that mongoose-type creatures were known in Macao long before the description in Aomen jilüe, but, again, he insists that it is doubtful whether its compilers knew what it looked like or had ever seen one; the creature belonged as much as anything to a textual world of mirabilia. References to the cat (mao 猫) are reviewed in an essay by Shing Müller (Über die mao-Katzen im alten China), who concludes and confirms, independently from a previous study by Timothy Barrett, that, as domesticated pets, cats appear late in the Chinese record. By the sixth century CE cats were still documented mostly as catchers of vermin or demonic entities. Barring some exceptions, it is not until the ninth century CE and into Song times that they appear, in texts and visual culture, as members of the domestic sphere, albeit that the domestic cat never took centre stage as a theme in texts and art. Müller’s piece, very usefully, not only traces evidence in texts but also makes reference to zoo-archaeological reports. Chiara Bocci writes about the leopard (‘Il leopardo nell’antica Cina fra danze sciamaniche e stendardi’).


2 To the cat bone finds reported at sites in Fujian (p.60) can be added bones reported at a Neolithic site at Quanhucun 泉护村 (Shaanxi). See Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, “Mao, shu yu renlei de dingju shenghuo—cong Quanhucun yizhi chutu de mao gu tanqi” 猫，鼠与人类的定居生活—从泉护村遗址出土的猫骨谈起, Kaogu yu wenwu 考古与文物 1 (2010), 22-25.
After reviewing the precarious condition of the main three surviving leopard species with a habitat in China (Amur leopard, north Chinese leopard and snow leopard), she discusses the very few transmitted entries on bao 豹 and cheng 程 working back from Bencao gangmu 本草綱目. The appearance of leopards (and tiger-like creatures) in the Nine Songs (jiu ge 九歌) then lead to symbolism and theories of shamanism, which make up the body of the paper. Bocci links snippets of information about the leopard to shamanic practices documented in Altaic cultures and elsewhere. A reference in Taiping yulan 太平御覽 (983 CE) to the leopard’s habit of turning its head towards a mountain upon death (shou shan 首山), Bocci speculates, could connect the motif of the head and mountains to the world of the spirits, and explain images of leopards as transitory conduits or guardians of the spirit world. Mention is also made of the use of the apotropaic leopard-skin cushion (bao zhen 豹枕), the link of the pelt to imagery of transformation, and references to leopard-tailed spirit beings. Bocci’s piece is rich in cross-cultural references and theories that straddle different times and places. But her study also shows how hard it is to go beyond conjecture and speculation when texts remain largely silent on sightings and descriptions of an animal. In an essay on the hedgehog (‘Auf den Spuren des ‘Königs der Tiger’: Erwähnungen von Igeln in alten chinesischen Texten [Han bis Ming]’) Marc Nürnberger also goes beyond the issue of nomenclature. He discusses hedgehog lore and imagery, the use of the hedgehog and its spiny hairs in medicine, its function as a repeller of insects, and its appearance in dreams and omenology. Nürnberger makes the wise comment that, in examining an animal species, one should not limit one’s reach to simple keyword searches and be led by terminology only. Raimund Kolb writes about the zifang 蝧妨 (Oriental armyworm) and delves into the history of combating the plagues they cause (‘Das vormoderne Wissen von den zifang und die Bekämpfung ihrer Plagen’). A brief introduction to the modern biology of the so-called nianchong 黏蟲 is followed by an excursus into the history of nomenclature, and observations of their behaviour in historical sources. Kolb offers a spot-on critique of the methods used by many historians to arrive at historical statistics of insect plagues: numbers are mostly based on official histories that are sanctioned by the court, and many scholars simply overlook the fact that the reporting of plagues and the concealment of natural disasters were highly politicised events, as they were often seen to occur in response to practical and moral failures by local officials. Amidst the impressive detail displayed throughout the essays in this volume, Professor Kolb puts up a very important caveat as to how we are to elicit information from our sources: a cultural history of animals in China should not be dominated either by an exclusive focus on nomenclature or by unverifiable statistics.
culled from official sources. Martin Moser (‘Der chinesische Flußdelfin baiji in alter Literatur’) deals with the river dolphin, now functionally extinct, but known as baiji 白鱀 (Lipotes vexillifer) from Song times at least.\footnote{See also Samuel T. Turvey, Witness to Extinction: How We Failed to Save the Yangtze River Dolphin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.} First described at some length in Guo Pu’s 郭璞 (276-324 CE) commentary to the *Erya* 緫雅, the paper zooms in on a description of the creature in the poetry of Kong Wuzhong 孔武仲 (1041-1097), and the section dealing with dolphins in Li Shizhen’s 李時珍 (1518-1593) *Bencao gangmu*. Sources from the Ming onward indicate the term *haitun* 海豚 may also have applied to the Yangzi river dolphin, though not exclusively. The paper concludes with a metamorphosis story in *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異, and with an acknowledgement, echoing a sentiment emphasized by most contributors, that it is impossible to establish with certainty what species or subspecies is referred to in descriptions of dolphin-like creatures.

What unites these essays is the thoroughness of detail displayed in the collation of textual references to this particular set of animals. The majority of contributors focus on the occurrence of varying animal terminology and its annotation. The central concern here is, firstly, with reconstructing a semantic field of nomenclature (“das gesamte Begriffsfeld”, p. 29) across different sources and, secondly, the questions of whether and how these terms can refer to a particular biologically identifiable or attested species. This is, of itself, extremely valuable work, and, in the age of digital texts, this type of analysis will no doubt continue, leading to more comprehensive surveys of animal nomenclature based on entries in encyclopaedia, gazetteers, *leishu*, etc. What this volume drives home again and again is confirmation that the modalities in which traditional Chinese animal nomenclature denote species are extremely complex: names change and adapt; names cover more than one or whole series of species; names vary regionally; existing or familiar names are applied to non-familiar or exogenous species in different times, etc., etc. In addition terminological variants can arise depending on whether or not an author or observer shares a personal history with a species’ habitat, or whether reports are witness accounts that follow direct observation or simply a rehash of earlier textual records. The authors have done an excellent job in reminding us that animal nomenclature hinge on multiple referents, including biology and chronology, regional specificity and shared abstractions.

But these studies also illustrate that, in our attempt to write cultural histories of animals in China, there are limits to what lexicographical description can tell us about animals or the lived experience of animals in the past. By focusing on annotating (“rectifying”) species terminology in
texts there is a risk that modern scholars perpetuate the type of knowledge organisation handed down to us by those who wrote or commissioned the dictionaries, encyclopaedia and compendia on which we draw. At the other extreme, the selective use or oversight of certain texts together with erroneous readings can replicate through layers of commentary until an animal name is accepted as the uncontested referent to a particular species. Another issue is whether the interrogation of texts is a sufficient source and, more importantly, whether it is possible at all to study animals “an sich”, since many of the creatures referred to in texts are, partly at least, human constructs, textual representations, or act as images and metaphors adduced to serve an anthropocentric or anthropomorphic agenda. I doubt that it is possible to separate material found in literary texts from so-called zoologically relevant texts (“zoologisch relevante Kompendien”, p. 41), as some papers in this volume intimate. Who makes the distinction between these “genres” and on what grounds? Some of the contributors question this assumption of their own accord or implicitly invalidate it. Raimund Kolb for instance speaks of a “nomenklatorische Wirrwarr (messiness)” in pre-modern zoology in China, but he also notes that the arrival of modern zoology and entomology did not necessarily bring taxonomic clarity. In quoting a Song poem about the river dolphin, Martin Moser shows that poetry can be more zoologically revealing than “natural history” (p. 171).

It may be tempting, perhaps even comforting, for the sinologist to side with etymology, lexicography, or the study of nomenclature when writing about animals. Yet, as much as good philology should be a non-negotiable tool in the writing of a cultural history of animals, it will probably take some time and more training for sinologists to take stock of the findings in zoo-archaeology and natural science with equal confidence. I also expect that our readings of animals in the Chinese past will increasingly benefit from insights in the social sciences, psychology, and ethology. Recent years have seen a surge of work in the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies. For the Chinese case to be part of this field and for its sources to be made accessible to non-sinologists, it will prove necessary for us not only to push our analysis beyond philology and the identification of nomenclature, but also to bring the human-animal relationship more to the


5 For an excellent introduction to this field and bibliographical surveys, see Margo DeMello, Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
centre of our analysis. After all, the essays brought together in this volume show that historical zoology and taxonomy are a human science much in the same way as “touring the cages of a zoo is to understand the society that erected them.”

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