

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

Animals That Transcend
Cultures, Boundaries and Species
A Panel from Buddhist Beasts
Reflections on Animals in East Asian Cultures Conference

Maggie Mitchell

University of British Columbia

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

Animals That Transcend
Cultures, Boundaries and Species
A Panel from Buddhist Beasts
Reflections on Animals in East Asian Cultures Conference

Maggie Mitchell
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

From April 20-22, the UBC Buddhist Studies Forum hosted an international conference titled “Buddhist Beasts: Reflections on Animals in East Asian Cultures.” The conference was sponsored primarily by the Glorisan Charitable Foundation, Tzu-Chi Canada, and the From the Ground Up Project. Twenty presenters on six panels shared their work on the role of animals in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultures across Asia.

On April 22, the sixth and final panel of the conference featured five scholars addressing “Animals That Transcend Cultures, Boundaries and Species.” Timothy Barrett (SOAS, University of London), Ann Heirman (Ghent University), Robert Sharf (University of California, Berkeley), Kaiqi Hua (UBC), and Lina Verchery (Harvard University) shared their research, with Ben Brose (University of Michigan) offering comments.

The panel began with Timothy Barrett presenting “Animals across Boundaries: Buddhist and Other Animals in Trans-cultural Encounters.” In this paper, Barrett is interested in the role of apes and monkeys across cultures. His focus is a thirteenth-century account recording a conversation between a French Franciscan and the Mongol Khan Möngke, in which the friar asks the Khan about the purple hue of his robes, and the Franciscan learns that the dye comes from the blood of a human-like creature. Barrett points to the presence of other cross-cultural accounts of apes to argue that the earliest record of a European and Chinese conversation should be studied more closely. As examples, he cites story of the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* retellings and cults of the martial arts expert White Ape, among other legends of exceptional apes. Barrett argues that in cross-cultural dialogues, animals, and especially apes, introduce an element of ambiguity. As humanoid creatures, apes have otherworldly potential, and in cross-cultural records of animals, European observers feel as if they are entering another world themselves.

Ann Hierman’s presentation, “How to deal with dangerous and annoying animals: vinaya perspective,” looks to rules for monastic life to understand how Chinese *vinaya* masters would react to dangerous animals in light of rules of non-killing. In particular, Hierman is interested in the rules that allow self-defense, capturing and removing, and protecting animals that present a challenge to monastic life. Through her exploration, she finds that insects feature more prominently in the *vinaya*, which presents rules for removing and avoiding killing insects through whisks and water filters. Releasing captured animals is a more challenging problem, as monks cannot steal, but can capture and release dangerous animals themselves with care. Additionally, there are precautions for avoiding animals throughout the *vinaya*. Monasteries should be built out of animals’ way, and monastics should be careful not to attract insects and animals into their living quarters. Generally, Hierman finds

that the *vinaya* directs monastics to avoid dangerous animals, remove them from monasteries when possible, and release animals only when it does not involve stealing the animal from its owner. Hierman is interested in the implications of the *vinaya* for domestic animals versus nondomestic animals: monastics can intervene in the suffering and lives of insects more than the lives of animals that have closer relationships with humans.

Robert Sharf's presentation, "What Do Nanquan and Schrödinger Have Against Cats?" brings Buddhist philosophy into conversation with quantum physics. Sharf attempts to close a gap in the existing literature on Buddhism and quantum physics, which adequately address the physics, but does not treat Buddhist philosophy in detail. He attributes this gap to popular misunderstanding of Buddhist philosophy, and wants to compare quantum physics and Buddhist concepts in a balanced way. He presents two instances where cats are killed to demonstrate a relationship between mind and reality. Sharf introduced the basics of a debate between physicists Einstein and Schrodinger. The familiar paradox of Schrödinger's cat came from this debate, in which a cat in a box is both alive and dead until it is observed. In a similar way, a Buddhist master Nanquan (c. 749-845) resolves a quarrel between two monks by asking that one of the monks speak the truth, or he would kill the cat. Since neither was able, Nanquan cuts the cat in half. This act of killing becomes a teaching moment about the nature of truth. These two cats, according to Sharf, are the subjects of teaching moments that overcome dualism.

Kaiqi Hua's "Cats and Buddhist Book Culture" looks to the intersection of Buddhism, commercial printing, and Chinese culture in the Song and Yuan dynasties. He presented the audience with an image of a Yuan-era "cat contract," found in a divination book, which stipulated a cat's duties as a hired animal. With the rise of commercial printing, cats became valuable monastic companions by protecting monasteries' book

collections from rats and pests. However, this relationship was complicated by cats' violent tendencies, going against non-violent Buddhist ideals. With an emphasis on the growing market of commercial printing, Hua's work shows how cats were both demonic and violent creatures whose natures do not align with Buddhist teachings, while also being valuable assets to monastery book collections and becoming a part of monastics' daily lives. Printed contracts between cats and their book-owning employers show just one role of cats in China from the tenth to thirteenth century.

Lina Verchery's work, "What Do Buddhists See When They Look at Animals?: Olfaction and the Transspecies Imagination in Modern Chinese Buddhism," draws from her ethnographic work with the Buddhist group Fajie Fojiao Zonghui. Verchery argues that scent blurs boundaries between human and animal, and shares the story of a Fajie member converting to vegetarianism after smelling the flesh of his recently deceased child. In the same ways that scent mediates human and nonhuman worlds through incense and burnt offerings, scent also mediates the difference between human and nonhuman animals. Broadly, Verchery explores the role of scent in Buddhist stories as an immaterial and otherworldly sense, with unusual scents accompanying miraculous events, and the strong scent of forbidden foods contributing to arguments of vegetarianism. More narrowly, Verchery is interested in how Fajie members negotiate their ethical relationships with animals. Verchery looks at the role of vegetarianism as a central commitment of Fajie, which is not solely related to improving one's karma, but also to human similarity to nonanimals.

Ben Brose's comments highlighted the diversity of the papers in the panel. Each paper addressed issues related to animals and Buddhism, in both a cross-cultural and cross species sense. Much like the rest of the Buddhist Beasts conference, this panel sparked discussion of the way

that humans discuss and interact with animals to promote their own humanity; in many of these presentations, the way one treats animals says more about humans than the unique characteristics of animals from different species.