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

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HUAIYU CHEN, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions*. New York City: Columbia University Press, 2023. X, 271 pp. CAN \$46.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-231-20261-9.

Huaiyu Chen's *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* provides a comprehensive look at how animals were culturally understood, religiously categorized, and materially engaged with in medieval Chinese contexts. Over the course of six chapters, Chen parses how Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucian elites navigated relationships with tigers, snakes, pheasants, and parrots. By analyzing a wealth of textual materials, Chen shows how these animals mediated the social realities of medieval Chinese religion in heretofore unexplored ways. To best understand *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* and evaluate the success of Chen's exploration, this review will consist of a summary of the book's goals and chapters and a subsequent evaluation of this book project.

First, it is worth stating what this book is *not*. As Chen notes in the introduction, "scholars who have discussed animals in Chinese Buddhism or Buddhism in general have tended to focus on animals from the perspective of nonviolent Buddhist thought and practice" (6). Chen's work does not seek to add to this body of literature and largely eschews the questions of ethics and vegetarianism that dominate the animal turn in Buddhist Studies. Instead, Chen focuses on "how the power relations between animals and humans shaped the cultural, political, religious, and social order in medieval China from the sixth to the twelfth century" (6). To best uncover how these power relations functioned, Chen shifts our focus away from the elite or ideal preoccupation with Mahayana sutras and other canonical texts and towards edicts, biographies, poems, and other records that give insight into the lived religious realities of the medieval Chinese

everyman. His approach contrasts (and therefore compliments) other recent work in the field of Chinese Buddhism and animals such as Pu Chengzhong's *Ethical Treatment of Animals in Early Chinese Buddhism* or Ampere Tseng's "Five Influential Factors for Chinese Buddhists' Vegetarianism" which work in this more scholarly, idealized form of religion.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore better conceived as a work of historical scholarship than a work of reconstructive ethics as some might expect from a book on medieval Chinese encounters with animals.

### Chapter Summaries

The book has six chapters each dealing with a different animal and/or religious tradition. Chapter one is titled "Buddhists Categorizing Animals: Medieval Chinese Classification Systems" and conducts a close reading of the writings of Daoxuan (596–667), a medieval Chinese Buddhist master. In Daoxuan's writing, we find a threefold taxonomy of nonhuman animals according to their place in the human social sphere. Animals are understood as either domesticated (ex. donkey, camel), wild (ex. rabbit, tiger), or prohibited by the Vinaya (i.e. dogs, cats). Important for Daoxuan is not only the economic relationships that delimit one category from another (i.e. donkeys can be used for carrying goods, rabbits cannot), but also the *religious* relationships that humans and animals can have. For example, a monastery may accept a donation of a donkey but not of a fox because only the former is economically useful to the monastic institution. The latter would therefore have to be released not out of compassion but because of "the austere life in the monastery would prevent its members from keeping animals whose needs surpassed what the [monastic]

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<sup>1</sup> See: Pu Chengzhong, *Ethical Treatment of Animals in Early Chinese Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Ampere A. Tseng, "Five Influential Factors for Chinese Buddhists' Vegetarianism," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, Ecology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 143–162.

community could provide” (26). Likewise, there were animals like dogs that we might understand to be domesticated but which Daoxuan classified as “prohibited” because of their tendency to disturb the monastic community as they went about their practices of ritual cultivation, meditation, and so forth. Thus, despite nonhuman animals falling under the purview of Buddhist ideals of compassion, there were stark differences between

Chapter two is titled “Confucians Civilizing Unruly Beasts: Tigers and Pheasants” and looks at how the problems caused by nonhuman animals were given religious and political significance by the Confucian literati. Confucian rites and the development of virtue by rulers was seen as a civilizing force on wild animals like tigers, pheasants, and locusts, and the behaviour of these wild animals were likewise a reflection of the virtue of the political rulers. The most succinct example of this can be found in Chen’s analysis of *Record of the Han Dynasty from the Eastern Pavilion* and the *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (44), but Chen engages with a variety of passages from the extant records of the Confucian literati to skillfully show how the behaviour of nonhuman animals reflected on the virtue of local rulers and were thus inscribed with a great deal of religio-political significance.

Chapters three and four look at how Buddhists and Daoists navigated the problems presented by tigers. Together, they paint an interesting picture of how tigers and the taming of tigers held immense cultural, religious, and political capital that both Buddhists and Daoists exploited for popular and institutional patronage. Chapter three first unpacks how the importance placed on the lion in Indian Buddhist traditions slowly shifted towards the tiger in Chinese traditions and how Chinese Buddhists were inspired by certain Jataka tales involving tigers—like that of the Prince Mahāsattva, who fed his live body to starving tiger cubs—to engage with these animals in similar ways. But self-sacrifice was not the only

method for placating the violence of wild tigers. Chen writes that bestowing precepts, reciting scripture, and transforming the physical environment through meditation also effected this change (87). In doing so, Buddhists would be able to show their dominance over nature and demonstrate their “extraordinary [religious] ability and success” through their taming of tigers (98).

However, Buddhists were not the only religious practitioners to demonstrate their religion’s superiority through the taming of tigers. Just like Buddhists, Daoists in medieval China held that “taming is a display of human dominance, either through ethical or ritual power” (109). Like the Buddhists, tigers and their “taming” (either by bringing them under the dominion of Daoist practitioners or by killing) were a significant site of religious capital that could be used to gain patronage from both the state and the members of the local community. But unlike Buddhists, Daoists also used tigers to *kill* their competitors. Chen demonstrates how “medieval Daoism not only justified killing tigers, but it also justified mobilizing tigers to kill Buddhist monks, thereby portraying the tiger as a weapon for protecting Daoist property from non-Daoist political and religious powers” (117).

Chapter five builds from the previous two and looks at how the discourse around snakes in medieval Buddhism mirrored that around tigers. Chen notes how “medieval Buddhist hagiographies often included snakes and tigers together as two eminent threats” and surveys these hagiographies to locate the role of snakes in the lives of medieval Chinese Buddhists (125). He notes how the tradition of killing snakes has a long history in ancient China and that Chinese Buddhists felt a tension between the normative call to nonviolence in Buddhist contexts and this tradition of killing snakes. In terms of Buddhist legalese, Chen writes that “killing snakes by accident and having the intention to kill snakes are both counted as offenses in the Vinaya”, and “in the Chinese translation of the

Four-Part Vinaya, the Buddha taught those monks who did not detach from desires that they could use canisters to contain the snakes and tie the snakes up by ropes and then release them without harming them” (131; 135). This led to certain Buddhists like Huifu ordaining snakes and giving them precepts as a means to pacify them and protect monasteries against their threat (135). However, Chen notes how the tantric tradition that existed in medieval China had *justifications* for killing snakes and introduced rituals for doing so (127). Chen therefore demonstrates a bifurcation between the *ideals* of the tradition and the *realities* of its lived practice when it comes to dealing with the threat of nonhuman animals.

Finally, chapter six, titled “Buddhists Enlightening Virtuous Birds: The Parrot as a Religious Agent,” looks at how the parrot was uniquely positioned in Buddhist and broader Chinese traditions “because it was thought to be a virtuous bird” (151). To do so, Chen conducts another close reading, this time of an essay by Wei Gao (745–805) titled “Record of the Stupa for a Parrot’s Relics in the Xichuan Area,” to “reveal the author’s intellectual and religious world by analyzing the interconnected historical allusions (*gudian* 古典) and contemporary allusions (*jindian* 今典) as well as the Buddhist concepts and practices” (152). Overall, this chapter is successful in its pursuit. Chen shows how canonical Buddhist concepts inform Wei Gao’s relationship with his parrot, but also shows how sociocultural understandings of parrots shape Wei Gao’s interpretations away from mainstream Buddhism’s denigration of the animal realm. As Chen writes, “[Wei Gao’s] parrot received salvation from the Amitābha Buddha for being reborn in the Pure Land, and this salvation was verified by the relics remaining after its cremation” (159). This complicates the Buddhist soteriological understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be an animal and skillfully shows the complexities of lived medieval Chinese religion.

### The Success of *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes*

The above summaries give a thematic picture of *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes*, but they do not necessarily do justice to the wealth of stories that Chen packs into these six chapters. The real strength of this book is in Chen's depth of research and expert presentation of a great variety of narratives that have largely been ignored by sinologists and animal studies researchers alike. As he notes in his introduction, Chen wrote a similar book about the cultural, political, and religious capital of animals in medieval China in Chinese, and this work was an answer to his colleagues of his who suggested that he write a similar work in English (3). I very much agree with Chen's colleagues that this book was a worthwhile endeavor and is a welcome addition to the English language scholarship on animals in Chinese religious traditions.

In several ways, this work reminds me of Johan Elverskog's *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia*.<sup>2</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Elverskog's book "refutes the Eco-Buddhist claim that the Buddhist tradition has historically been a positive force for environmental well-being."<sup>3</sup> Chen does a similar thing: he shows the complexities of the lived realities of medieval Buddhist treatment of nonhuman animals and thus functionally dispels the popular notion that Buddhism is an *inherently* animal-friendly religion. Further, Elverskog's work has informed other scholars' work on Buddhist environmental history<sup>4</sup> and has shifted the philosophical discourse on eco-Buddhism from one that is purely

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<sup>2</sup> Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Colin H. Simonds, "Book Review: *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia* by Johan Elverskog," *Pacific World* 4, no. 2 (2021), 113.

<sup>4</sup> See: Julia Shaw, "Buddhism and the 'Natural' Environment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Practice* (ed. Kevin Trainor and Paula Arai. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).



apologetic to one that is critically self-reflective and constructive.<sup>5</sup> Chen begins his conclusion with a similar hope to “inspire readers and writers to move forward with their own contributions,” rather than “offering further implications of [his] current research” himself (178). I suspect that Chen’s book will indeed inspire more critical appraisals of the Buddhist view of nonhuman animals, but this hesitation to unpack the implications of this research himself points to the weaker aspect of this book.

Where *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* leaves something to be desired is in its cohesiveness. Outside of a temporal and thematic link, the chapters read more as a collection of papers than pieces of a singular argument. The chapters rarely reference or build upon one another, and neither the introduction nor epigraph give a particularly satisfactory of what the six main chapters are meant to build towards. The most likely reason that this is the case is that most of the chapters *are* actually adapted from previous papers.<sup>6</sup> The author does trace a thin thematic throughline from chapter to chapter, but the shift from one religious tradition and one animal to the next feels sporadic as one works through the book.

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<sup>5</sup> See: William Edelglass, “Buddhism and the Environment” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Nan Kathy Lin, “Buddhist Environmentalism as Seen through Religious Change,” *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022); Colin H. Simonds, “This Precious Human Life: Human Exceptionalism and Altruism in Tibetan Buddhism,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 25 (2021); Colin H. Simonds, “The Trouble of Rocks and Waters: On the (Im)Possibility of a Buddhist Environmental Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 45, no. 3 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Huaiyu Chen, “A Buddhist Classification of Plants and Animals in Early Tang China,” *Journal of Asian History* 43, no. 1 (2009); Huaiyu Chen, “Transforming Beasts and Engaging with Local Communities: Tiger Violence in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2018); Huaiyu Chen, “The Road to Redemption: Killing Snakes in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Religions* 10, no. 4 (2019); Huaiyu Chen, “The Other as the Transformed Alliance: Living with the Tiger in Medieval Chinese Daoism,” *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* 45, (2021).

Similarly, the choice to reflect upon “the connections between the past and present, as well as future, and between religions and science and technology in a contemporary context” (178) in the epigraph seems like a missed opportunity. I think Chen is absolutely correct when he suggests that thinking alongside his sources could inspire positive ecological change today (181), but this book isn’t about contemporary ecological problems—it’s about medieval Chinese relationships with animals. I expect that other scholars will fruitfully engage with this text to creatively think through these contemporary issues from a Buddhist perspective, and the conclusion might help them do that. However, as a monograph, it would have been nice to hear the author provide a more general analysis of what these chapters on tigers, snakes, and parrots in the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian imaginary can tell us about a broader understanding of animals in medieval Chinese religion. This book shows that Chen is the clear preeminent expert on the subject, and hearing his concluding thoughts about the significance of his research for our understanding of human-nonhuman animal relationships in medieval China would have ended the book on a much stronger note.

## **Conclusion**

That said, this critique should not take away from the excellent scholarship that Chen puts forward in this book. There is a great deal of exceptional research that went into each chapter, and together they do indeed paint a compelling picture of animals in medieval Chinese religions. It is a welcome addition to the small but growing body of literature on animals in Asian religions and highlights the understudied lived realities of how animals presented to everyday practitioners of medieval Chinese religions. I therefore recommend this book to any graduate student or professional academic working in the fields of Buddhism and animals, medieval sinology, religious ecology, or animals and religion more broadly. I

believe that, as Chen hopes, many others will be inspired by the scholarship to do their own historical and contemporary work on animals in Buddhism and other Chinese religious traditions.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

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