

## Knowing Animals in China's History

### An Introduction

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In the year 1864 William Alexander Parson Martin (1827–1916), English teacher and professor of international law at the Beijing School of Combined Learning (*Tongwen guan* 同文館) proposed that, etymologically, it would be more correct to use the (by then) customary terms for animals (*dongwu* 動物) and plants (*zhiwu* 植物) to refer to two types of property, namely, goods and objects that are movable and non-movable.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, animals by then went by many terms. Whereas classical literature had used morphological groupings such as ‘birds-beasts-insects-fish’ (*niao-shou-chong-yu* 鳥獸蟲魚), contemporaries of Martin also addressed animals as the ‘hundred beasts’ (*bai chong* 百蟲 or *bai shou* 百獸). For one short-lived moment, lexical debates laid bare the ambiguous role of ‘animals’ in human knowledge debates.

Animals hold a vulnerable place in historical human practices and thought, not only in terms of name or meaning. As research in the field of animal studies since 1990 has shown, historically, individuals, societies and cultures debated what an animal was and where it belonged, how animals should be interpreted, explored, used or owned – as a spiritual, intellectual, economic or physical resource, human enemy, companion or prey. This research has also shown that only rarely, though, can animals be entirely ignored, as they impacted ecologies, economies and states as much as individual and social practices and knowledge ideals. Sinologists and historians of China have shown the central importance that Chinese actors placed on animals as a window onto human society and natural change. Such research addresses a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from the symbolical and philosophical to the practical. Literature, material culture and art studies have drawn attention to animal iconography, studying accounts of foxes which transformed into female beauties to cheat on lonesome scholars and analysing the role of dragons and phoenixes as symbols of the sky on bronze vessels. Historians of economy, society, technology and science have unfolded the complex

<sup>1</sup> Used in 1864 in *Wanguo gongfa* 萬國功法 (*juan* 2, f. 17r). Quoted in Masini (1993), 48. See also his appendix.

entanglements of humans and animals in agriculture and the use of horses and cattle in military affairs, and have studied pests such as locust plagues, which threatened their crops.

This book aims to open a door into the rich field of animals and knowing in China, offering a selection of essays over the *longue durée*. Environmental historians in particular have turned our attention back to expanded chronologies of natural change, thus showing that something new can be told about human history through animals. These studies have usefully contributed to a globally diverse view of the cultural and historical dynamics that made animals be perceived as wild or cultures as civilized. We now know, for instance, that Ming literati considered reindeer and hunted wildlife to be the quintessential ‘wild’ (ye 野), avoided forests and did not hunt game, whereas Manchu elites celebrated their homelands’ wilderness and lush vegetation for ‘nurturing civilization like the emperor himself’ and strove to keep some hunting territories devoid of human influence to ‘purify’ a Mongol steppe.<sup>2</sup> Within Chinese history, nuanced accounts of environmental change illuminated the diverse regional practices of animal care (from full domestication to various forms of animal taming and cross-breeding) and lifestyles (from seasonally mobile cultivators to sedentary hunter-gatherers), and thus usefully expanded simple dichotomies that, emerging from dynastic historiography, depicted a civilized society of settled farmers and literati-officials surrounded by nomadic and belligerent hunter-gatherer tribes.<sup>3</sup>

Stories of receding elephants and forests, the increasing impact of horses, water buffaloes and farming, clearly indicate the tensions between, on the one hand, natural continuities and changes and, on the other hand, the power of humans who approached and constructed animals through language, idiom and genre, material representations and bureaucratic means.<sup>4</sup> Geology, topography, bones and the remains of other material culture often focus on ways to vocalize the animal’s role: how it resisted or refused human desires or adapted and affected nature beyond human intentions and means. The comparison to texts provides glimpses into how historiographical tradition tended to obliterate the social and cultural realities of human–animal relations. While animals thus emerge as powerful agents in human life, much less is known about their role in human knowledge practices, in particular how such an animal’s role may have persisted or changed over the long term in relation to natural change.

We suggest that, with its rich array of both material culture and written sources, the region that we now call China lends itself in particular ways to a diachronic view of the co-existence and co-construction of human and animal

<sup>2</sup> Schlesinger (2017), 3.    <sup>3</sup> Allsen (2006), 4–7; Harris (2008), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Elvin (2004), 308. See also Bello (2016), 3.

worlds, in both spiritual and physical terms. It is also a region in which actors themselves adopted the diachronic perspective regularly to frame and shape what knowledge or knowledge practices were.<sup>5</sup> The relations between past and present, lived and literary reality and imagination, were central for the processing and evaluation of information, knowledge and know-how. With this agenda in mind, the *longue durée* does not simply address a calendrical notion or an observer's perspective on history as a continuous process. Rather it takes seriously the idea that, in Chinese history, scholars and elites collated and drew connections between things, concepts and notions based on a historical context – framing them sometimes in terms of chronologies, but, more often than not, without any Braudelian implication vis-à-vis the continuities and breaks that the modern history of science has come to avoid almost entirely.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond anthropocentric approaches, studies that span centuries or even millennia have indeed become unusual and are also quite rarely seen in research on animals and knowledge change.<sup>7</sup> Research on the European ancient, medieval or early modern period habitually either explores spatial and physical distinctions, or examines an animal's role as an exotic or utilitarian entity, a discovered or familiar creature in human life.<sup>8</sup> Analyses of changing approaches to knowledge about animals – or knowledge gained through them – mainly focus on European imperialism and the creation of grand collections: curiosity cabinets and then natural history museums. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when evolutionary biology emerged and agricultural mass production initiated mass globalization, dominate this field of research.<sup>9</sup>

Historians of China have thus far followed two approaches – either to study an animal across varied sources and times,<sup>10</sup> or to focus on specific dynasties (mostly the Song and Qing) alongside historians of the West who choose a nation-state or another concrete political entity as a framework

<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding global history, most animal histories indeed choose a regional framing. Few and Tortorici (2014), 1–30, highlight the absence of animals in studies on Latin America, in particular for periods beyond the grasp of written accounts.

<sup>6</sup> Environmental historians focus on Braudel's notion of structures (1977, 55) mostly in terms of geographical and climatic conditions. See e.g. Koselleck (2000), 96.

<sup>7</sup> See Holmes (2003), 465.

<sup>8</sup> Studies of the 1990s in particular emphasize the symbolic and representational function of animals, e.g. Cohen (2003). For an overview of the literature see DeMello (2012). See also Pluskowski (2007).

<sup>9</sup> This is true not only for Europe. See Chakrabarti (2010); Hoage and Deiss (1996). Nearing modern times, the time periods under discussion shorten. Grote (2015), 6, exemplifies by way of Hansjörg Rheinberger and Staffan Müller-Wille's study (2009) that one century can be considered *longue durée*.

<sup>10</sup> Such studies are in the minority and all rather recent. See, for instance, Hou Yongjian, Cao Zhihong et al. (2014). For a recent study with a *longue durée* view on China see Silbergeld and Wang (2016).

(usually England or Great Britain). Both approaches invite discussions on the role that political history plays in the analysis of knowledge dynamics. Exposing the intended and unintended causal relationships between natural and socio-political change, there is a need to understand what makes animal approaches to nature knowledge (or knowledge of nature through animals) relate to any particular dynasty and, ultimately, to being ‘Chinese’. This raises questions such as what effect a dynasty or a social group’s perception of animals – including their social, political, material, temporal and geographic presence – had on ‘knowing nature’; how we should understand tensions between historical China’s literary and physical animal worlds; and how they affected the animals’ role in scientific and technological change.

In the rapidly growing field of human–animal studies, the chapters in this volume tackle the various contexts and value systems that defined animals’ roles in society, state and thought. Authors analyse why and how elites and commoners, herdsman and farmers, poets and literati have all sought to give different meanings to the realization that animals occupy human space, while humans intrude on animal space and habitats. Arranged in a rough chronological order, the contributions describe the histories of individual species (e.g. cats, bees, horses), discuss animals in literary genres (such as treatises on farming, ‘treatises and lists’, i.e. *pulu* 譜錄, or morality books) and explore language, institutions and ideals. *Longue durée* explorations of particular species are combined with studies on specific periods (pre-imperial, Song, Qing). This arrangement aims to highlight the different regimes of attention – historical ideals and methodological choices – that shaped (and are still shaping) historical human–animal relations and thus also the historical view of animals and animal knowledge: what actors considered could be known about animals, as well as the knowledge they could impart. Opening up to such concerns reveals two important themes in the study of historical human–animal relations and knowledge dynamics: (1) how social and political practices influenced knowledge about and through animals, and (2) the role of both morality and physicality in this knowledge.

### **Knowing ‘Chinese’ Animals: Creatures of Society and State**

In one of the early Western studies of Chinese approaches to nature conservation, Edward H. Schafer noted in 1969 that ‘the study of the history of man’s knowledge of plants and animals is all the more necessary in that it has been neglected in favour of the study of the development of tools’. Schafer revealed how ‘men of the T’ang’ expertly handled animals and learnt about them. While he considered an inquiry into these types of engagement as informative, Schafer also noted that ‘scientific’ aims (which he used to address approaches

for understanding living creatures' habitats) or efforts 'to gain other sorts of knowledge as a motivation for conservation measures did not, it seems, exist for the men of the T'ang'.<sup>11</sup>

From a quantitative view, it could well be argued that not much has changed. Fifty years on from Schafer's account, there are still very few studies on China's historical animal knowledge. Research on the pre-dynastic and dynastic eras regularly focuses on animals as spiritual beings and sources of nutrition.<sup>12</sup> Historians of science in China have mainly looked at the role that animals have played in the making of modern science. What has substantially altered, though, is the qualitative view of what constitutes the nature of knowledge and animals. Studies from the 1990s, when the anthropological method gained ground, began to emphasize the different nature of Chinese approaches to animals. Others have touched upon some of Schafer's themes, such as the protection of animals, their role in humanitarian efforts and religion, as well as their impact on environmental change, thereby showing when and how classifications and understandings of animals, their uses and abuses, started making an impact and caused scientific and technological change.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, such research has suggested that Chinese scholars, farmers and elites considered animals as significant tools to 'think with' (*bons à penser*), *pace* Lévi-Strauss.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, research on China's cosmology and philosophy has intervened by illustrating these 'ways of thinking'. John Major explains that the cosmology of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Master Huainan), for instance, greatly values an animal's existence (among others, the behaviour and attributes of many carnivores such as foxes or racoons, or insects such as silkworms or cicada) showing that, in fact, animals set Chinese scholars thinking in significantly new ways about time, space, life and death. The diversity of animals in that classic verifies the principle of differentiating between *yin* and *yang*, alongside the Five Phases theory. According to this view, animal gestation discloses numerological principles, and seasonal animal behaviour provides the structural grid for daily life.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while animals were rarely explained or analysed on an individual basis in early thought, an inquiry into intellectual discourses, as well as the practices of daily life, shows that knowing animals was an integral part of the larger picture of understanding the 'why' and the 'how' in life generally.

Early Chinese cosmological writing indicates the historical peculiarity of the modern dichotomous view about human and non-human animals. Thinkers commenting on such early texts during the Han, Tang, Song and Ming eras,

<sup>11</sup> Schafer (1963).

<sup>12</sup> Chen Huaiyu (2009). See also Fan Fa-ti (2004), 14, and Zhang Qiong (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Handlin Smith (1999). <sup>14</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1962), 127–8.

<sup>15</sup> Major (1993), 177, 217–56. See also Major (2008).

time and time again, concluded that the same fundamental principles governed all ‘things’ – which included animals, the heavens and people.<sup>16</sup> This meant that all these principles were also potentially present in all things, and that differences between people and animals therefore could only be a matter of the degree to which such principles became apparent or were brought into effect. Such an approach manifested itself, for instance, in the notion of language as a continuum of all beings, in which animals, like humans, had the capacity to speak – in their own way. Humans differed from animals because people used language ‘as a way to establish distinctions’.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, animals were substantial to human language and consequently its ways of knowing too – the foot tracks of birds and beasts, after all, inspired the mythological official Cangjie 倉頡 to develop writing.

Care needs to be taken, hence, when comparing China’s historical approaches to the human–animal divide against Western traditions or modern approaches. Whenever Chinese actors compared human and animal traits and found the same principle working in both, they aimed to assess the principle’s relevance and manifestation. This approach differs substantially from a modern anthropomorphizing view that attributes uniquely human traits, emotions and intentions to animals.<sup>18</sup> Although such instances of anthropomorphizing can be found in Chinese historical accounts, they cannot be considered the norm. In fact, we can find the interest in identifying similar principles in humans and animals (rather than the use of humans as a yardstick) running through society, state and intellectual life, with variations depending on the divergent moral and natural qualities that the fragmenting statecraft schools (‘-isms’ of Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist tint) or individual doctrines over the course of time assigned to animals as a group or their specific representatives.

Political actors, despite much disagreement over cosmological ideals, show a propensity to discuss animal–human relationships in terms of knowledge and understanding. As exemplars of a higher order, animals could thus not be ignored. In particular, scholars in state service, the so-called *Ru* 儒, made sure to clarify, from the Song period onwards, that agency lay mainly on the human side: animals could productively instruct humans, if humans understood animals.<sup>19</sup> For the Mongolian rulers of the Yuan, animals equally provided

<sup>16</sup> For reflections on Asia in particular, see part IV in Waldau and Patton (2006). See also Sterckx (2002), 4.

<sup>17</sup> See also Behr (2010), 575–6.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, human–animal studies also identify a substantial break between the pre- and post-Enlightenment phases in European cultures. Anthropomorphizing turned into an accepted way to connect to animals. Of course, older forms such as fairy tales etc. continued. See Daston and Mitman (2005). Giorgio Agamben (2003), 33–8, named this growing gap in his philosophical approach the ‘Anthropological Machine’.

<sup>19</sup> Zhao Xinggen (2013), 46.

a link to the cosmos and higher understanding, although it must be noted that this dynasty otherwise can also be singled out for its particularly strong utilitarian linkages to animals such as horses, cattle, donkeys, sheep and goats. Allsen also points out that, for Mongols, animals provided a cosmological link and thus animal caretakers could also be diviners and advisors to the court. A human's understanding of animals and his or her relationship to animals 'demonstrated influence over both natural and spiritual realms, skills not thought evenly distributed among humans'.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing animals and knowing about animals thus impacted upon notions of human talent, expertise, and finally also the professions. Veterinary carers, breeders or doctors who caught horses, reared cattle, trained dogs, bred, domesticated, hunted or slaughtered any kind of non-human creature, were the everyday experts who *knew* their animals. In contrast, according to the Chinese cosmological view, the highest form of knowledge occurred when an animal made a person think about universal principles. Such was the capacity of the sages of the past and wise scholars and philosophers. Sometimes, knowing *with* an animal and knowing *how to* handle animals went hand-in-hand. This was apparent in experts such as diviners, who were able to predict omens using tortoise shells, snakes and birds; military strategists who developed defence and battle plans and led cattle and horses into warfare; and ritual masters who produced sacrificial and human feasts – not only preparing the meat but also rendering livestock 'edible' for the assigned spiritual and physical aim.

Connotations could certainly also change substantially among different communities to acquire shifting importance throughout time. For diviners, the nature and purpose of knowing animals was to manage the present, as much as predicting the future.<sup>21</sup> They also emphasized the legitimacy of rule (in terms of capability). For *Ru*-scholars during the Song, an ordered, healthy animal world per se came to signify appropriate political rule, whereas extraordinary occurrences – such as fish jumping onto dry riverbanks or green snakes being sighted near the imperial throne – represented bad rulership. On a symbolical level, animal imagery, analogies and metaphors offered an opportunity to take a political stance, presenting direct and indirect criticism of individuals, social or ethnic groups, rulers and regimes or social ordering.

<sup>20</sup> Allsen (2006), 145. This is not necessarily unique to Chinese culture or history, it is also attributed to Native Americans. According to Ross (2011), 47, a sense for animals, i.e. expertise of care taking, is also occasionally referred to as a 'natural' skill or at least one less infected by civilization. Liu Shuhong (2013), 69, has recently noted that Ming politicians up until the 1550s still strongly promoted animal husbandry in parallel to agriculture (*yi nong yi mu* 亦農亦牧).

<sup>21</sup> Raphals (2013), 143, 173.



The cosmological interest also explains that what we might consider continuity (in the sense of unchanging structures) was in fact for Chinese actors what Reinhart Koselleck identifies as ‘structures of repetition’ (*Wiederholungsstrukturen*) that human beings ‘consciously adopt, ritualize, culturally enrich and level to a degree of consistency that helps to stabilize a certain society’.<sup>22</sup> Such repetition is different from stagnancy as it allows variations – in fact, it even embraces such repetition as a way to establish a universality that can exist in diverse local and temporal contexts. Looking at knowledge making as a process of repeated actions – rather than one of structural ruptures – also gives valence to the historical experience of change as a gradual development in which the familiar way of, for instance, cooking food informs chemical analysis or modern genetics helps recreate ancient pure blood horse types.

What then does putting the animal in the focus of a *longue durée* view on practices and concepts contribute? Similar to the world of objects and technologies in which David Edgerton has pinpointed the different life cycles of things and ideas, the temporality of animals is, in contrast to the technical things that Edgerton describes, equipped with both physical and behavioural continuities that humans perceive to be beyond the grasp of human wills and minds. Living with animals and knowing them defies any *easy* dichotomies of everyday, familiar practices (such as choosing companion dogs) and scientific means (such as genetic testing and breeding). This volume then presents an explorative grid, offering various lines of inquiry such as that of specific animal species, or human professions, or approaches to human–animal encounters and human knowing of and with animals.

### **This Volume**

Organized chronologically, the chapters brought together here reflect different approaches to the role of the *longue durée* in studying practices and knowledge change. The first two chapters focus on ascertaining what can be grasped about knowledge and expertise from material culture, oracle bones and texts from China’s early period, from Shang period excavation sites (c. 1300–1150 BCE) to the dynastic reign of the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). Burial places are an important area for investigating how practices and cosmological views were related. Adam Schwartz’s contribution suggests a need to rethink significantly the landscape of expertise, in response to advances in archaeological excavation processes. A ritual culture hinging on animal sacrifices, he reminds us, required careful planning and preparation that yet again necessitated an intimate understanding of the animal’s

<sup>22</sup> Koselleck (2000), 12, 20.



reproduction cycles. In Huayuan zhuang 花園莊 (located in modern Anyang), nobles undertook a 'private' form of divination practice – mostly related to ancestral worship – with regular sacrifices that required large numbers of animals be reared in captivity. Hence, princely and lower elite households had to watch carefully the economy of animals and regulate it by establishing a hierarchy of use in which boar could replace cattle but cattle never replaced sheep. Schwartz's study also shows that, while the value of wild animals depended on their gender and rarity – with exotic animals such as antelopes being more highly prized than others – penned sheep, cattle and pigs were evaluated on the basis of their successful breeding. Diviners prophesized by colour and honed their skills by consistently applying a numerological logic in patterns of ten odd or uneven numbers to predict personal and communal affairs.

This sacrificial animal economy operated within what one could call a professionalization of ritual procedure that, as Roel Sterckx explores, became part of a civilizing narrative which allowed humans to 'distance' themselves enough from the creatures to be able to consume them, physically and spiritually. Whether or not this practice now indicates a historical turning point in which a continuum perspective was transformed into a categorical difference between humans and animals may be subject to debate. In this particular moment actors clearly considered animals not per se as edible. Instead animals had to be *translated* into consumable items, for both spiritual and nutritional purposes. Archaeological excavations and textual sources document a special set of techniques that was applied to transform an animal from a domestic being into a suitable 'victim' for ritual sacrifice. This process included selection, de-animalization, de-animation and, finally, its reconstitution as an edible and spiritual tool. In pre-dynastic and early imperial times, the state established methods that allowed it to single out the provision of sacrificial animals in two ways: (1) by externalized control over procedures; institutionalizing a pastoral economy 'with ritual obligations', assigning specialized staff, codifying the herding of livestock by way of accountancy processes, management ethos or legal practice and managing the kill, and (2) by internalized standards of classification frameworks based on physical or moral markers or on timing regulations.

By the dynastic period, intellectual styles and schools had evolved, but we can also see some continuity in the style of debate. For Keith Knapp, the answer to Rodney Taylor's question about how animals were valued in Confucian thought – were they an exemplification of diverse life forms rather than something fixed in relation to humans, or was there a unified view of life? – lies in the role of all things to exemplify and express moral causes. Knapp shows how Confucians sanctioned patriarchal society and the validity of basic moral principles by arguing that human and animal approaches to filial piety

differed only by degree. Anecdotal evidence and philosophical texts verified animals' capacity for filial piety, demonstrating: (1) the reciprocity of caring, parent–child, child–parent relationships, (2) compassion, and (3) devotion and loyalty. He also explains the belief that animals acted on innate moral principles, whereas humans were obliged to master or take an adversarial stance to their intuitions. In this world in which all bodies, human or animal, were governed by universal principles, for Confucians civilization (as cultivation) rested on a human individual's mastery of their innate capacities. Humans then were different to animals only in their capacity to abstract moral concepts and behaviour beyond food and protection.

That such human–animal comparisons did not aim to attribute merely human characteristics to animals is also evident in Barrett and Strange's suggestion that basic virtues (and an answer to how fundamental these are to society) can be found in all creatures. Adopting the *longue durée* view of the Chinese cultural and geographical sphere, Barrett and Strange insist that animal portrayals seem indeed to have refused to acknowledge any arbitrary distinction between physical and behavioural characteristics. Social and intellectual approaches to cats evolved considerably. According to textual sources, cats were not domesticated until quite late, around the second century, swayed by the influx of Buddhist cultures (which were, themselves, possibly influenced by Egyptian traditions/practices?). Throughout the centuries we can see clear tendencies. Cats feature prominently in Buddhist monastic contexts and in magic accounts of the Sui to the Five Dynasties up until about the tenth century. They become more visible in political accounts and moral considerations from the eighth and ninth centuries. Cats are used in discourses metaphorically and are not real creatures in Chan Buddhist philosophical debates. Song era (960–1279) literature had cats changed from animated spirits that influence human behaviour to creatures that were governed by the same principles as humans. While cats (and their component parts) were used in multiple ways, it was only at this time that cats turned into a commodity that could be traded as companion animals for human pleasure.

Similarly, the diachronic view that Pattinson adopts with respect to bees emphasizes the ideological impact of attention and knowledge regimes. The perception of bees changes from a negative to a positive model organism in line with the growing interest in, and use of, bee products by the Song. With a shift in moral evaluation, bees also turned from an animal that humans studied for utilitarian purposes into a social model-organism (or a more allegorical entity), until finally becoming an object of knowledge that Song scholars attempted to grasp through a sophisticated taxonomy. It is important to know in this context that, whereas honey seems to have been part of the early Asian diet, Chinese farmers, like many other cultures up until the nineteenth century, did not domesticate bees. The political nature that specific animals were