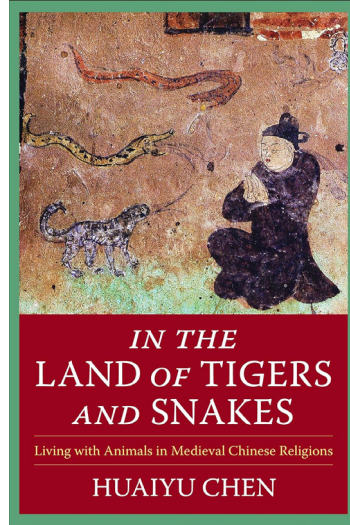


# Book Review

Chen, Huaiyu. *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions*. Pp. 288. Hardcover, USD \$140.00; Paperback USD \$35.00



Huaiyu Chen's monograph, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions*, represents a pioneering approach to medieval China. It seamlessly integrates the fields of religious studies and animal studies, offering a unique perspective on how Buddhism adapted to Chinese depictions of animals and modified them. Chen delves into how Sinicised Buddhism incorporated animals, encompassing both predators, herbivores, and birds, as integral elements of Chinese Buddhist monastery life and textual representations. Furthermore, the book sheds light on Buddhism's competition with Daoism within the diverse landscape of religious beliefs in ancient China. The text unfolds as a captivating cultural history, exploring how ancient Chinese perceptions of animals were influenced by religious faith. This distinct characteristic of the book allows the author to confidently assert that it will appeal not only to scholars of Chinese Buddhism but also to those in the fields of animal studies, Asian studies, and environmental studies. In terms of methodology, the book is undeniably multidisciplinary. Chen explicitly acknowledges that he has harnessed a range of approaches encompassing history, religious studies, literary analysis,

and anthropology. Moreover, I feel that, as demonstrated within, the book serves as a valuable work in comparative religion and the sociology of religion by extending its focus beyond Buddhism to examine the Daoist perspective and practice on animals within a seeming ‘market of religions’.<sup>1</sup>

To tackle the main research question about how animals were defined in Chinese religious traditions, Chen adeptly recognises the intricacies inherent in the historical study of Chinese religions, whether they pertain to Buddhism or Daoism. This complexity arises from the existence of two distinct realms: one in the realm of lived experiences, and the other within the realm of textual tradition. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that what is conveyed in the written texts may not always accurately reflect reality, as the written accounts can often be influenced by apologetic rhetoric and ‘ethical principles’ that could be distinct from ‘practical activities’ (8) and ‘daily experiences’ (10). Another issue that Chen keeps in mind is the conflict and reconciliation between the ‘very rich animal culture’ of pre-Buddhist Chinese and the Buddhist ‘idea of the animal realm’ that ‘challenge[s] the Chinese concept’ (5). However, as we delve into the book’s chapters, we will discover that the narrative surrounding animals in the Chinese Buddhist tradition underwent a transformation to become distinctly ‘Chinese’. This transformation is evident in the prevalent utilisation of the tiger image and the widespread presence of accounts detailing Buddhist monks’ encounters with tigers. These stories are often found within the quintessentially Chinese writings of prominent monks’ biographies. The author also gives due consideration to the political dimension of animals’ presence in ancient Chinese society, carefully examining the involvement of both the state and local communities in mitigating the threats posed by tigers and snakes. This exploration highlights the dominant influence wielded by the state during these interventions.

Each chapter of the book is organised around a theme and can be read as an individual study. Chapter One, titled ‘Buddhists Categorizing Animals: Medieval Chinese Classification Systems’, focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> Yang, *Religion in China*, 85–122.

Tang dynasty Buddhist monk Daoxuan's 道宣 (596–667) classification of animals. Through this specific case, the author demonstrates the intricate interplay between traditional Chinese zoological knowledge, Buddhist doctrines, and practical necessities. This interweaving of elements culminated in the development of a distinctive medieval Chinese Buddhist typology of animals. As described in the chapter, Daoxuan's classification of animals blends religious and secular considerations. While some animals were unequivocally prohibited by the monastic code or Vinaya, others were categorised into two groups: domestic animals and wild animals, based on their 'economic purposes' (15). Notably, Daoxuan did not strictly adhere to Vinaya but drew from his own life experiences in northern China to inform his classification, emphasising the relationship between various animals and human society. In terms of the human-animal relations, Daoxuan intriguingly lists slaves and servants along with animals, and Chen interprets this practice as a result of considering the 'economic status' (21) of the objects of classification. Chen shows that while Daoxuan rejects the use of whips and sticks to force and torture domestic animals, as well as cages and pens to confine them and bows and arrows to hunt them, some animals legally belonged to monasteries and were used by the monks as vehicles to 'transport members of the monastic community' (25). In this chapter, the author effectively challenges the reader's preconceived notions regarding the Buddhist compassionate stance toward animals and demonstrates a spirit of fact-based Buddhist empiricism in medieval China. Medieval Chinese Buddhist monks were more than just compassionate. They built a new knowledge system by assessing and classifying animals and labelling certain animals as morally 'evil' (34), some as practically useful, and others as economically unaffordable in terms of the cost associated with their upkeep. However, the monks' pragmatic considerations were still tempered by the Buddhist compassion evident in their steadfast commitment to refrain from killing, enslaving, or abusing animals.

What distinguishes the book, in my view, and leans it more towards a study of comparative religion in history rather than solely Buddhist history, is the author's transition to explore the Confucian perspective on animals in medieval China in Chapter Two, 'Confu-

cians Civilizing Unruly Beasts: Tigers and Pheasants'. The question of whether Confucianism qualifies as a religion and should be regarded as such is indeed a subject of debate extending beyond the scope of this present review. However, functioning as a philosophy with numerous religious characteristics and serving as a predominant imperial ideology, Confucianism displayed no lesser degree of interest in animals compared to Buddhism in both Indian and Chinese traditions. In Chapter Two, the author opts to focus on wild animals and their treatment as a primary lens to exemplify a Confucian-Legalist perspective towards wild and menacing creatures. Differing from Chapter One, Chapter Two is not about monastery life and Buddhist doctrines but rather real life in imperial China where local officials were tasked with 'trapping, capturing and killing' (41) tigers that were regarded as a major threat to community security. The author points out that local officials' violent or non-violent approaches to tigers and pheasants only 'concerned political virtues' (45). The author posits that, for local officials steeped in Confucian ideology, the capacity to civilise people under their jurisdiction and the skill to pacify untamed animals both epitomised virtuous governance. This chapter also offers a broader context to illustrate how Chinese imperial officials executed their administrative responsibilities at the grassroots level. In contrast to Chapter One, the examination of the Confucian-Legalist treatment of animals in this chapter provides a valuable reference point for understanding the Buddhist approach. While the Buddhist approach combines doctrinal adherence with pragmatic calculation, the Confucian-Legalist approach fuses moral concern with political necessities. Together, these two chapters can still be regarded as a demonstration of comparative religious studies.

Chapter Three of the book, entitled 'Buddhists Taming Felines: The Companionship of the Tiger', introduces a different perspective on the exploration of the interaction between Buddhist monks and wild animals, with a specific focus on tigers. In contrast to the first two chapters, which offer a realistic depiction of how animals were treated and perceived in actual monastery and community settings, this chapter delves into semi-fictitious narratives that recount how eminent monks supposedly 'tamed' tigers. In this context, the author highlights a noteworthy adaptation of Buddhism in medieval China

which involved the substitution of the lion imagery, more prevalent in South Asia and its Buddhist literature, with the tiger, a creature that Chinese readers were more accustomed to. On one hand, the 'tiger violence' (64) and the encounters between Buddhists and ordinary villagers with these formidable creatures were a reality. On the other hand, Buddhist hagiographical texts in China began to romanticise the monks' experiences with tigers, transforming them into legends depicting how a tiger could be transformed into a docile animal or even a devout Buddhist follower.

The author places the tiger-encounter stories within Chinese hagiography into context by introducing the intricate traditional Chinese perception of the tiger as the 'king of the animal realm' (66) and by referencing the cruelty of the ruling class. However, the author also suggests that this association differs from the Indian *Jātaka* stories, where the lion was linked to the Buddha himself and was considered one of the Buddha's manifestations in his past lives. Clearly, in the Chinese narratives, the use of tiger imagery served not to symbolise the Buddha but rather to emphasise the monks' magical transformative abilities, which were acquired through their cultivation of merits. By the fifth century, the capability to tame tigers had become recognised as 'one of the most important credentials of an eminent monk'. (87) The author also notes that the Buddha's taming wild animals appears in early *Jātaka* stories and thus he aptly conceptualises this Sinicising process as a 'hybrid tradition'.

I would like to point out that the author seems to lack a more explicit analysis of the tiger-taming stories as primarily counterintuitive miracles used 'as an expression of monastic ideas', as John Kieschnick comments.<sup>2</sup> The reader today may question the purpose behind constructing this trope if it seems implausible in real life for a monk to singlehandedly tame and even religiously transform a tiger, and ask how medieval Chinese audiences, elite as well lower class people, reacted to these miracles. If the recurring theme was created for the purpose of 'popular preaching',<sup>3</sup> did it achieve its intended success?

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<sup>2</sup> Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, 109.

Did anyone ever try to authenticate these stories? More importantly, the composition of biographies for eminent monks itself represents a distinct Chinese historiographical style and literary genre. In other words, the act of narrativising tiger taming and transformation and its reception warrant more meticulous study. It is worth noting that the act of taming an animal differs from converting an animal into a Buddhist, with the latter potentially connected to the Chinese belief that all sentient beings inherently possess the 'Buddha nature', a concept that captured Chinese attention in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>4</sup> It is only through a consensus on this fundamental assumption that the tiger conversion miracles could find theoretical justification.

While I consider the book to be a remarkable study of comparative religion within a historical framework, its Chapter Four, 'Daoists Transforming Ferocious Tigers: Practical Techniques and Rhetorical Strategies' exemplifies this feature. Huaiyu Chen also makes it clear at the end of the chapter that 'teaching and transforming untamed animals seemed to be a shared strategy for all three organized teachings', (124) i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In this chapter, the author gives prominence to the Daoist treatment of animals, placing it at the core, and then proceeds to compare the approaches of the three teachings regarding animals. This approach hints at a form of 'market' competition, a word that I previously suggested and also one used by the author, in which Daoism seeks to demonstrate that their 'eminent priests' also possessed the power to subdue wild animals so that they could 'claim Daoist superiority over Buddhism'. (111) According to the author, Daoism exhibited similarities with Confucianism in terms of a non-vegetarian diet and the practice of animal-killing for ritual purposes. However, it was more aligned with Buddhism than Confucianism in its fervour for religiously transforming animals. Unlike Buddhist monks, who directly encountered or deterred animals, or through 'direct engagement' (113) in the author's words, Daoists relied on the supernatural power of invoking 'deities and demons to fight with the beasts' (120) along with their

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<sup>3</sup> Buswell, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> Ikeda, *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, 63–64.

unique techniques, including the writing of talismans before venturing into the forest.

In Chapter Five, 'Buddhist Killing Reptiles: Snakes in Religious Competition' and Chapter Six, 'Buddhists Enlightening Virtuous Birds: The Parrot as a Religious Agent', which I examine together, the author continues to examine how Buddhists treated less ferocious snakes and parrots. He suggests that the Buddhist attitude towards the snake was overall less than positive. In Buddhist literary works, one monk kills a snake, but according to the Vinaya, killing snakes either intentionally or accidentally would be 'counted as offences' (131). Despite the Buddhist non-killing principle, the snake is not generally welcomed even in the Buddhist context, and being transformed into a snake in one's next life would be a punishment. Huaiyu Chen also illustrates that the snake was linked to women in a derogatory manner because both were considered seductive and corrupting. This popular mindset is evident in late imperial Chinese legend 'Baishe zhuan' 白蛇傳 [Legend of the White Snake], where it is a Buddhist monk who rescues a man from the deception of a snake assuming the guise of a young lady. Medieval Buddhist narratives, according to Chen, suggested a similar way of dealing with a snake: controlling it with a monk's 'psychic power' (133). In contrast, the parrot held a distinct place in medieval Chinese Buddhist and Buddhist-related texts, where it symbolised beauty, moral virtue, and intelligence. This favourable association with the parrot stemmed from its presence in the *Jātaka* stories, where it featured as one of the Buddha's previous incarnations (172). Chen's study unveils a complex world wherein people's attitudes toward animals are shaped by various factors that lie beneath the surface of the uniform non-killing precept.

However, if I may offer a few suggestions: first, while the title hints at a focus on 'Medieval Chinese religions', the content primarily revolves around Buddhism. Additionally, it does not address the question of whether Confucianism, discussed in Chapter Two, should be considered as a 'religion' or merely a 'teaching' in a broader context. Second, the book appears to be heavily reliant on miracle stories written for apologetic purposes, which lean more toward rhetoric and imagination than reality. Consequently, the phrase 'Living

with Animals' in the subtitle may be somewhat misleading as it implies a focus on genuine real-life experiences, such as how individuals captured a tiger, rather than acknowledging that most of these miracle stories represent a literary genre or discursive strategy. Third, considering the author's aim to distinguish the book from a standard history of Chinese Buddhism, the concise epilogue falls short of delivering a compelling conclusion that effectively ties together the entirety of the book and demonstrates to the reader the destination of this comparative, interdisciplinary study. Ultimately, the supernatural animal taming and conversion stories, crafted to convince the audience of the religion's potency, might be insufficient in enabling the reader to grasp the authentic life experiences.

Overall, a few flaws will not undermine the value of Huaiyu Chen's book, which has paved the way for future comprehensive studies of medieval Chinese religious and political culture. It constitutes a significant contribution to the field of animal studies within a historical context and marks a new direction of medieval Chinese intellectual history by correcting the past neglect of animals and human-nonhuman interactions. Furthermore, it serves as a distinctive work in the realm of comparative religion, particularly notable for its comparison of three major Chinese-established and organised teachings while drawing connections to the ancient Indian tradition and Western culture, demonstrating how ancient Chinese adopted and adapted a foreign religious culture. The author successfully harnesses a substantial volume of primary sources, encompassing Buddhist and Daoist canons, Dunhuang manuscripts, along with multiple medieval Chinese tales, miscellaneous notes, and official histories. By granting animals and the attitude toward them a central place in his book, Chen also successfully explores how Indian cultural traditions and Buddhism intersected with established medieval Chinese cultural assumptions and norms of governance.

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