

Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature: Tales and Commentary. Translated and introduced by Wilt L. Idema. Foreword by Haiyan Lee. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. Pp. xvii + 254. \$95.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

To the many gifts that he had given us, Wilt Idema added another: *Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature* joins his long list of expert translations. In this instance the focus is upon animals. Idema explores a body of late imperial lore on the war between the mice and their feline predators. As such his book is a significant contribution to the fields of Chinese literature and animal studies alike.

The texts translated in *Mouse vs. Cat* belong for the most part to the late imperial genres of performance literature. The story of the battle between the mice their feline foes was a favourite topic of Qing-period storytellers, whose oral narratives commonly combined verse and prose (hence referred to in the scholarly literature as *prosimetric* or, after the corresponding French genre, as *chantefables*). These prosimetric ballads crossed the boundaries of religious scripture and entertainment literature. Often bearing the title of *baojuan* 寶卷 (“precious scroll”), some were pious hagiographies, whereas others were self-declared pieces of nonsense. This vast body of oral literature is only beginning to receive its scholarly due. Indeed, Wilt Idema played a major role in bringing it to the attention of Western Sinologists. In addition to his *Mouse vs. Cat*, the prolific scholar translated other late imperial ballads on topics ranging from the Bodhisattva Guanyin to the “Court Case of the Bedbug against the Mosquito.”¹

There is a reason for rodents and felines being celebrated in oral narratives rather than in classical literature. Wilt Idema explains that the primacy of truth in Chinese poetics precluded the absurdity of talking animals. Beginning in the first centuries B.C.E., Chinese authors considered veracity the hallmark of literature. Even though it did exist, fantasy was rarely canonized. The evident impossibility of animals expressing themselves in speech was shunned by the sanctioned literature of the Chinese elite. The Chinese classical tradition featured no animal fabulist such as the Greek Aesop (c. 620–564 B.C.E.) or the French Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695). It is for this reason that the adventures of rodent generals and feline soldiers were relegated to performance literature. “For a more hospitable home for talking animals in China,” Idema observes, “we have to turn to entertainment literature and popular ballads, genres beyond the legislating power of traditional poetics” (p. 11).

¹ See *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety: Two Precious Scroll Narratives of Guanyin and Her Acolytes*, translated and with an introduction by Wilt L. Idema (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008); Wilt L. Idema, *Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2019); and *The Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven and Other Precious Scrolls from Western Gansu*, translated and introduced by Wilt L. Idema (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015).

The focus of *Mouse vs. Cat* is the late imperial legend of the court case of the mouse against the cat. Following his defeat at the hands of his feline foe, the mouse seeks redress at the underworld court of King Yama. He prefers charges against the cat, accusing him of the systematic murder of the rodent race. Qing-period storytellers delighted in elaborating the speeches made by the mousy plaintiff and the feline defendant. However, Idema is not satisfied with the translation of these late imperial ballads alone. He provides in his opening chapters an overview of mice and cats in the literature of earlier periods. *Mouse vs. Cat* examines the Chinese portrayal of rodents and felines from the first millennium B.C.E. all the way to the twentieth century.

The first chapter offers a comprehensive survey of mice and cats in Chinese literature, beginning in the Zhou-period *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經). Among the topics discussed is the role of the plundering rat as a metaphor for the rapacious official. The avaricious minister who is exploiting the people is compared to the rodents that rob them of their crops. As for the cat, the chapter examines the evidence of its domestication, from the captured wild cats that were used to hunt mice to the pampered ones that were kept as pets. Particular attention is given to the role of the Buddhist clergy in the history of the Chinese cat. It turns out that medieval Buddhist monks were among the first to rear the predator of mice. The felines guarded the monks' material food and spiritual nutrition alike. They protected both pantries and libraries from the menace of the gnawing rodents. The significance of the clergy in the history of the Chinese cat is mirrored in the legend of its being introduced to China by the renowned monk, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). The unfounded tale has the famed pilgrim bring to his native China its first domesticated cat from India.

One notorious cat that is missing from Idema's account is the subject of a harrowing episode in the sixteenth-century *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅). This is the pampered feline trained by the vicious Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 to kill the newborn baby of her rival. It is a long-haired cat of the breed known as “lion cat” (*shizi mao* 獅子貓). Pure white, except for a streak of black fur on its forehead, the feline predator is named “Coal in the Snow” by its cruel mistress. When another woman in the polygamous household gives birth to a child, the venomous Pan Jinlian sets the carnivorous feline upon it. The cat accomplishes its murderous mission, only to have its own brains smashed to pieces by the master of the house, the lecherous Ximen Qing 西門慶.²

² See *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 (Hong Kong: Mengmei guan, 1993), chap. 59, pp. 754–56; and David Tod Roy's translation, *The Plum in the Golden Vase, or Chin P'ing Mei* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), vol. 3, pp. 467–71.

The second chapter is dedicated to two Ming-period story cycles: The protagonist of the first is a female monster identified as the Golden-Nosed White-Furred Old Mouse Demon. In the sixteenth-century novel, *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記), the mousy creature assumes the form of a bewitching young woman. Kidnapping the virtuous monk Xuanzang, she attempts to seduce him, in order to rob him of his vital essence. The novel identifies the female fiend as the adopted daughter of Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King of the North, enabling Idema to trace her origins all the way to ancient India. The Indian Vaiśravaṇa was a god of wealth, and his emblem of riches was the mongoose. In China the mongoose was conceived of as a rodent, and Vaiśravaṇa's animal attendant was transformed from a mongoose into a “gem-spitting mouse” (*tubao shu* 吐寶鼠). Thus, the female mouse attacking Xuanzang in the sixteenth-century novel is a descendant of Vaiśravaṇa's “gem-spitting mouse,” itself a Chinese transformation of the god's Indian attendant: the mongoose.³ The second story cycle is that of the five rats who wreak havoc on the Eastern capital, Kaifeng 開封. Capable of assuming at will any human shape, they seduce wives, whose husbands' likeness they impersonate. It is the famed Judge Bao 包公 who, in most versions of the legend, subdues the rodent tricksters, enlisting for the purpose the services of the Buddha's white cat.

The third chapter opens with the folk tradition of the mouse's wedding. In many parts of China, it was the custom to celebrate the marriage of the tiny creature around New Year (the exact date varied among different localities). Children were told that if they go to bed early and close their eyes tight, they might hear the faint wedding music. Sometimes a small gift of food was placed by the rodents' hole, perhaps a remnant of a ritual of exorcism, intended to drive them away. The oral stories that grew around this ritual tradition sometimes took aim at the father of the bride. It was said that no groom other than the cat was good enough for the presumptuous mouse, his snobbery resulting in his daughter being promptly devoured on her wedding night. Whereas it was rarely celebrated in written narratives, the wedding of the mouse was a favourite topic of visual art. New Year prints depicted the wedding procession, including mice in the diverse roles of bride (in her sedan chair) and groom (commonly mounted on horseback), as well as pipers, drummers, and porters (carrying the bride's trousseau). Idema provides a written description of these enchanting works of art. It is

³ On Vaiśravaṇa's gem-spitting mouse and its origins of mongoose, see Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), pp. 155–65.

a pity that none of the prints themselves is reproduced in his book (especially as they are readily available).⁴

The wedding functions as a prequel to the mouse's court case. In some versions of the legend, the rodent sues his feline foe after the latter preyed on his wedding party, devouring each and every invited guest. Idema arrives at this fascinating court case—the core of his investigation—in the third and fourth chapters. He translates in full two early nineteenth-century ballads on the mouse's legal trials: "A Tale without Shape or Shadow" (*Wuwying zhuan* 無影傳) and "The Scroll of the Accusation of the Mouse against the Cat" (*Laoshu gao limao juan* 老鼠告狸貓卷). The former tells the entire sad story: Beginning with the preparation for the mouse's wedding ceremony, going through the unprovoked attack by the cats, the formal declaration of war by the mice (who, unlike their underhanded foes, make their bellicose intentions known in advance), the defeat of the courageous rodents, and the ensuing court case in front of the judges of the netherworld. The latter ballad is remarkable for its outcome: Whereas in all other versions of the legend, King Yama rules in favour of the cats (having been convinced of the necessity to purge the granaries of the menacing rodents), in this one he instructs cat and mouse to return to earth and live harmoniously with each other.

The mouse is not the only animal to vent its grievances at court. Idema notes that the motif is a favourite one with both Chinese and European authors, perhaps because "the use of the formal language of the court by unlikely litigants [is] experienced as humorous" (p. 90). Discovered at the Dunhuang treasure trove of manuscripts, the *Rhapsody of the Swallow* (*Yanzi fu* 燕子賦) has its avian protagonist sue the sparrow for invading its nest. The judge in this medieval case of swallow vs sparrow is their king, the phoenix. However, in later works of literature, it is commonly King Yama. Beginning in the Song period and all through the Qing, animals usually lay their claims in front of the judges of the netherworld. In another volume of his (*Insects in Chinese Literature*), Idema translates the nineteenth-century "Louse Cries out His Grievances" (*Shizi hanyuan* 蚰子喊冤). The ballad has the tiny insect bring charges against a flea at the underworld court.⁵ Some animals sue humans rather than their own species. The most common one is the slaughtered ox, who brings charges against

⁴ See, for example, the New Year prints of the wedding of the mouse that are reproduced in Po Sung-nien and David Johnson, *Domesticated Deities and Auspicious Emblems: The Iconography of Everyday Life in Village China; Popular Prints and Papercuts from the Collection of Po Sung-nien* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), pp. 181–89.

⁵ Idema, *Insects in Chinese Literature*, pp. 243–84.

its erstwhile owner. Beginning with Yao Shouzhong's 姚守中 thirteenth-century *Complaint of the Ox* (*Niu suyuan* 牛訴冤), the bovine draft animal makes frequent appearances at the underworld court. In religious scriptures and entertainment literature alike, the ox accuses its master of ingratitude. Ignoring the bovine's loyal years of service, the peasant sends it to the butcher once it is too old to pull the plough. Vincent Goossaert has shown that the literature of the ox's complaint played a role in the emergence of the Chinese beef taboo. Late imperial peasants refrained from eating beef, among other reasons because they feared the charges brought against them by the slaughtered beast of burden.⁶

The fifth chapter summarizes the metaphorical usage of rodents and felines in modern Chinese rhetoric. Idema does not fail to mention Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum that "it does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice," even as he surveys sophisticated works of literature such as Lao She's 老舍 (1899–1966) *Cat County* (*Maocheng ji* 貓城記). We learn that the lazy, rapacious, or power-hungry cat stands in twentieth-century allegorical writings for foreign imperialist powers no less than the evils of Chinese society itself. Finally, the epilogue offers a bird's eye view of the war between mouse and cat in other literatures, ranging from ancient Egypt to Edo-period Japan. Idema notes that while the theme of the mouse vs cat is widely encountered across the Eurasian continent, each culture treated it differently. There is no evidence, for example, that the Middle Eastern stories of the war between mice and cats influenced the Chinese ones.

An inspired foreword by Haiyan Lee augments the beauty of Idema's volume. Lee argues convincingly that, in the tales of its court case, the mouse is more than a mere prop for humans. It has a voice of its own, fighting for justice as a hunted animal. "A cautious mode of anthropomorphism," she writes, "the kind that keeps the three-dimensional animals in the picture instead of allowing us to see right past them, prods us to ask: Is what is natural necessarily just? What separates predation from murder? If a mouse could think and feel, where could it turn to seek redress? Such are the profound ethical and philosophical questions animating these lively tales" (p. xii).

Indeed, the tiny creatures studied by Idema voice the fundamental question of theodicy. If god is good and all powerful, why did he create a world in which the strong preys upon the weak? Why is survival depended upon the slaughter of others? And why is he, the mouse, required to make a living as a thief? The rodent accuses heaven itself of forcing him to subsist by stealing, even though he is an exemplary practitioner of Confucian filial piety:

⁶ See Vincent Goossaert, *L'interdit du boeuf en Chine: Agriculture, éthique et sacrifice* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 2005).

I really hate Earth / and I really hate Heaven,
King Yama has done his job in an unfair fashion!
He may have granted me life, but I have no food,
So I steal some at night and all people despise me.

If I have no food / that still is not a big problem,
But my parents and children are yelling and screaming.
My white-haired old mother has tears in her eyes,
And my father, who's eighty, is crying without end! (p. 120)

The “animal turn” is engulfing Chinese studies. A growing number of historians, anthropologists, and literary critics are becoming increasingly interested in the role of animals—real and imaginary—in Chinese history and culture.⁷ *Mouse vs. Cat* is a superb contribution to this growing scholarly trend. Wilt Idema’s outstanding scholarship benefits not only his regular readership of literary scholars but also those of us concerned with the Chinese interaction with, and perception of, non-human animals.

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⁷ It would be impossible to cover here the numerous recent studies on animals in Chinese history, religion, and culture; see, among others, the essays included in *Animals through Chinese History: Earliest Times to 1911*, ed. Roel Sterckx, Martina Siebert, and Dagmar Schäfer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and those included in *Animals and Human Society in Asia: Historical, Cultural and Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Rotem Kowner et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); see also Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Goossaert, *L'interdit du boeuf*; and Chen Huaiyu 陳懷宇, *Dongwu yu zhonggu zhengzhi zongjiao zhixu* 動物與中古政治宗教秩序 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012).