Huaiyu Chen’s In the Land of Tigers and Snakes is a wide-ranging study of the intersections between politics, religions, and nonhuman animals in medieval China. This ambitious volume also seeks to fill a gap in scholarly discussions of religion and nonhuman nature: as Chen argues, “questions concerning the extent to which religions are responsible for the ecological, environmental, and species crisis in traditional and modern society” have thus far paid insufficient attention to Chinese religions (p. 7). Tigers and Snakes opens with a chapter on medieval approaches to classifying animals, focusing on northern China and particularly the Buddhist monk Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), while also touching on Christian, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean taxonomies. This chapter sets out an argument to which Chen returns later in the book: that Chinese writers adapted earlier Buddhist depictions of nonhuman animals to reflect local fauna. Thus Daoxuan omitted references to rhinoceroses and elephants, while tigers supplanted lions as signs of power and authority in Chinese Buddhist texts, as discussed further in chapter 3. Chapter 2 uses inscriptions from the tombstones of medieval government officials to uncover the meanings of animals in Confucian political discourse. References to subduing tigers, for instance, link reductions in actual tiger violence to controlling metaphorical “tigers,” namely powerful local clan leaders. Similarly, claims about officials domesticating pheasants also represent the education of marginal social groups in the Confucian value system.

Chapters 3 and 4 address interactions between tigers and monks in Buddhist and Daoist narratives, respectively. These chapters explore various hagiographical accounts of tiger taming, as well as Daoist narratives in which tigers are deployed to kill Buddhist monks and protect Daoist property. Chen also draws comparisons between Buddhist accounts and European hagiographies that show saints interacting with animals. Chapter 5 presents a transhistorical reading of another threatening wild creature—snakes—from early Buddhist texts to Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, including the often-fraught relationships between
doctrines and daily life. This chapter considers a wide spectrum of practices, from nonviolent methods of handling dangerous snakes—for instance, “Buddhist monks could ordain the snake and convert it to Buddhism” (p. 135)—to Esoteric Buddhist methods of ritualized snake killing. Chen also addresses the use of snakes as a metaphor for seductive women, which he links to the feminized snake in pre-Buddhist yin-yang theory. Chinese Buddhist confession rituals thus “attempted to save both women and snakes victimized by Chinese misogyny and Buddhist ophidiophobia” (p. 149). Finally, chapter 6 is a delightful study of parrots, from early Buddhist Jātaka narratives, in which parrots frequently appear as previous incarnations of the Buddha, to medieval Chinese Buddhist texts, which often compare parrots to sages—in terms of physiology as well as intelligence. Chen focuses on the lay Buddhist writer Wei Gao 韋皋 (745–805), whose “Record of the Stupa for a Parrot’s Relics in the Xichuan Area” claimed that parrots could attain enlightenment, based in part on their capacity to chant the Amitābha Buddha’s name.

In the last year, reviewers such as Chengzhong Pu (Studies in Chinese Religions), Hsiao-wen Cheng (Journal of Chinese History), and Zhengjin He (Religion) have clearly articulated Chen’s contributions to studies of Chinese religions. Not being a scholar of premodern China, I instead approached Tigers and Snakes as a resource for comparative work in medieval animal studies. I read Chen’s accounts of human-animal relations with the enthusiasm of a student learning about a fascinating new topic; in fact, I imagine that this book would appeal to graduate students, with its thought-provoking arguments and affordable paperback pricing. Chen provides accessible readings of a variety of texts, images, and objects, from the aforementioned tombstone inscriptions to mural paintings, making Tigers and Snakes very useful for scholars with little or no background in Chinese history. He also highlights connections between these materials and present-day religious views of nonhuman animals, including an epilogue focusing on biotechnology and globalization.

Chen’s references to non-Buddhist religious cultures are clearly an effort to bridge disciplinary boundaries and offer readers like me entry points into his corpus. However, I wondered at times whether these comparisons were necessary, as the resulting generalizations may undercut Chen’s fine-grained analyses of Chinese sources. For instance, his treatments of Western medieval sources are understandably less comprehensive than what one would expect of a specialist in this area. Joyce Salisbury’s The Beast Within is justly cited (pp. 17–18), but her thesis about a shift in attitudes toward animals in the later Middle Ages is presented as uncontroversial, even though other scholars have disputed it.[1] Other major voices in medieval European animal studies, such as Susan Crane and Karl Steel, are not cited at all, while historical sources focusing on a narrow geographic area (e.g., Auli Tourunen’s zooarchaeological PhD thesis on Turku) are treated as applicable across Europe. Issues like these are difficult to avoid in comparative work, and even these gaps were useful in prompting me to reconsider my own assumptions and training; I could not help thinking that my home discipline is far more attuned to local variations in western Europe than in eastern Asia. Yet Chen’s explanations of Chinese sources and practices are certainly comprehensible enough to have stood on their own.

By publishing this monograph in English, Chen has provided scholars not proficient in Chinese with an entry point to his field of expertise. However, a few editorial issues bear mentioning. The introduction clearly and efficiently sets out Chen’s key arguments, but certain chapters are more loosely organized; the first chapter in particular might have benefited from additional signposting. Writers such as Daoxuan are occasionally introduced without much information about their social contexts or importance, while concepts such as “correlative Confucianism” (pp.
46–48) may be invoked a few times before they are fully explained. This material is likely basic for scholars in Chen’s field, but nonspecialists may experience some initial confusion. Copyediting errors and circuitous phrasing also impede legibility in some places. Although a few such errors are to be expected, the text may have benefited from an additional round of edits, and perhaps an additional reader beyond the field.

In addition to its importance for the history of Chinese religions, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes* is a valuable text for both comparative medieval studies and animal studies. Chen has compiled an impressive array of historical sources, while also making a commendable effort to communicate with scholars beyond his field of study. To be sure, the questions underlying *Tigers and Snakes* exceed the purview of any single monograph—a fact underscored by Chen’s recent publication of a related book, *Animals and Plants in Chinese Religions and Science* (2023)—but this is a symptom of its expansive, interdisciplinary methods rather than a fatal flaw. Having come away from this book with new ideas related to my own research, I expect it to provide a strong foundation for future work across field divides and linguistic traditions.

Note


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