

# SULLA VIA DEL CATAI

Rivista semestrale sulle relazioni  
culturali tra Europa e Cina



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## **Animalia**

**Ideas, images and descriptions of “real and unreal”  
animals between China and the West.**

*Edited by Victoria Almonte and Paolo De Troia*

Il Centro Studi intitolato a Martino Martini (1614-1661), missionario gesuita trentino che visse e operò in Cina nel XVII secolo, autore di importanti opere in campo storico, geografico e filologico, ha sede a Trento, dove svolge attività di ricerca, studio e documentazione sulla civiltà cinese e sulle relazioni culturali fra Europa e Cina. Pubblica in edizione critica l'Opera Omnia di Martino Martini, la collana storico-scientifica "Orsa Minore", la rivista semestrale *Sulla via del Catai*, organo ufficiale del Centro Studi Martino Martini, e la collana "Miscellanea" di testi biografici, letterari e teatrali. Promuove e organizza convegni, workshop, seminari, mostre e attività divulgative su temi di carattere storico, geografico, economico, artistico, filosofico e linguistico. Opera in stretta connessione con l'Università degli Studi di Trento e intrattiene relazioni e scambi con istituti culturali e accademici italiani, europei e cinesi.

## SULLA VIA DEL CATAI

Rivista semestrale sulle relazioni culturali tra Europa e Cina

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On the cover: Kim Hongdo, Tiger under a pine tree (detail), Joseon dynasty, 18th century, ink and light color on silk, Seoul, National Museum of Korea



Yun Shouping, Squirrel climbing a tree branch, early Qing dynasty, 1633-1690, ink and color on silk, Private collection



Panel with a phoenix and birds in a rock garden, Ming dynasty, late 16th-early 17th century, silk and metallic thread tapestry (*kesi*), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

<b>ANIMALIA</b>	
<b>IDEAS, IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF “REAL AND UNREAL” ANIMALS BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST.</b>	7
Victoria Almonte - <i>University of Tuscia, Viterbo</i>	
Paolo De Troia - <i>“Sapienza” University of Rome</i>	
<b>CORAL (SHANHU) AND CORAL ISLANDS (SHANHUZHOU) IN ANCIENT CHINESE TEXTS (HAN TO SONG PERIODS)</b>	11
Roderich Ptak - <i>Institute of Sinology, Department of Asian Studies, LMU Munich</i>	
<b>THE PERCEPTION OF EXOTIC FEATURES IN SOME ANIMALS, MENTIONED BY ZHOU QUFEI IN THE LINGWAI DAIDA (1178)</b>	33
Victoria Almonte - <i>University of Tuscia, Viterbo</i>	
<b>THE SCENT OF A TUSKED DEER: EUROPEAN DESCRIPTIONS OF MUSK DEER IN THE AGE OF DISCOVERY</b>	65
Michele Castelnovi - <i>Martino Martini Centre for Sino-European Cultural Relations</i>	
<b>SEARCHING FOR SIRENES IN THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES: FANTASTIC TAXONOMIES OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC FISH IN CHINESE AND JESUIT TEXTS</b>	87
Arianna Magnani - <i>University of Enna Kore</i>	
<b>A UNICORN (QILIN 麒麟) FOR A LAMB. REPLACING SYMBOLS IN MARTINO MARTINI’S SINICAE HISTORIAE</b>	107
Luisa M. Paternicò - <i>University of Naples “L’Orientale”</i>	
<b>REAL AND UNREAL ANIMALS IN JESUIT GEOGRAPHICAL WORKS IN CHINA: A RESEARCH NOTE</b>	123
Paolo De Troia - <i>“Sapienza” University of Rome</i>	

ANIMALIA  
IDEAS, IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF “REAL AND UNREAL” ANIMALS  
BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST.

Victoria Almonte - *University of Tuscia, Viterbo*  
Paolo De Troia - "*Sapienza*" *University of Rome*



Panel with dragon, Qing dynasty, 18th century, gold thread-embroidered silk,  
Private collection

Since the dawn of time men and women have inhabited the plains, hills and mountains of this planet, exploring every possible place in search of food and shelter from danger and the weather. Humankind has always shared its space and time with animals which over the millennia have gone from being the predator to the prey before becoming a source of food, heat, inspiration, protection and help with heavy work. This human-animal relationship has accompanied human civilization over the centuries, adapting to places, cultures and populations and it has been the object of various kinds of studies.

The present volume aims to explore the role of animals as a factor in the history of the cultural exchange between China and various Western territories. Over time, animals have played a relevant role both as an economic resource or means of transport and, in many civilizations, as a spiritual and mythological entity. Along the path of the relationship between China and the West, the central function that animals have played cannot be underestimated: as in Western countries, in ancient Chinese sources we find references of animals, for instance, as precious gifts offered to allies, or as tribute given to the Chinese empire as a sign of submission, or even described as vague entities able to influence diplomatic missions through foreign territories and so on. We find archaeological remains and old depictions of animals, all of which testifies the importance of animals from many points of view in ancient China since pre-historical times.

This monographic volume offers a rich perspective on one aspect of this topic, that relates to the idea of “exotic” or strange animals. Many papers deal with animals that stand out as the strangest and the most exotic, due to their unconventional and distinctive characteristics. The authors, describing their physical and moral traits, their symbolic

meaning and their association with other real or mythological animals, analyse various Chinese sources in order to highlight that animal descriptions are one key-point in the process of cultural exchange. Following the suggestion of Schäfer, Siebert and Sterckx in their *Animals Through Chinese History*, edited in 2019, the authors of this volume believe that something new can be told about human history through animals.

The present volume collects six papers, four of which were presented during the international workshop held in Tuscia University in Viterbo on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020: “The Exchange of goods and knowledge in China’s Cultural History” organized by Victoria Almonte and Paolo De Troia. The workshop was focused on the history of the cultural relationship between China and Western countries and to what extent animals were present in those exchanges. Two of the contributors of this volume, Luisa Paternicò and Michele Castelnovi, did not take part in the workshop, but their papers fit with our volume regarding “exotic” and mysterious animals in China.

With its rich array of both material culture and written sources, this volume opens a door onto a field of research that has not yet been extensively investigated. All the papers show that through the analysis of the history of animals, their descriptions in Chinese sources, their taxonomy, etc., it is possible to provide new perspectives in the understanding of human history. We believe that through an exhaustive study of the protagonists and of the contacts between the region that we now call China and the Western territories, one could better define the evolution of historical knowledge on animals.

This book, therefore, consists of some valuable research contributions in different fields, useful to sinologists -(as most of the articles deal with Chinese sources) and scholars who deal with animal history, interested in

learning more about how a particular animal knowledge was transmitted from the West to the East or vice versa and how it was received and treated in Chinese texts- historians, anthropologists and geographers studying the relations between different peoples and civilizations.

The purpose of this book is twofold. On the one hand, it provides a new perspective by partially filling a gap in knowledge of the Western view, often more inclined to the study of animals as means of subsistence and nutrition as well as indulging in speculation of symbolical and philosophical motives, (such as foxes transformed into female beauties). All the articles, indeed, draw attention to the central role that animals have assumed as vehicles of knowledge of the contact between different civilizations. In this sense, some of the authors have highlighted the prominence that Chinese sources placed on animals as a window onto human society. On the other hand, this volume aims to demonstrate that a deeper and more systematic knowledge of animals (and also their circulation) in the framework of intercultural relations inevitably leads to a greater understanding of why and how human beings evolved.

The present volume is composed of six articles written in English. It has a multisectoral and multidimensional exploratory grid, offering different directions of analysis. Arranged in a rough chronological order, the contributions describe the histories of individual species (e.g., corals, gibbon, *rokeb*, tusked deer, *renyu*, *qilin*), discuss animals and their description in literary genres (such as geographical works, treatises on zoology, Jesuit works) and explore the connections between different civilizations throughout the centuries. Explorations of particular species are combined with studies on specific periods (pre-imperial, Song, Ming).

Roderich Ptak's contribution deals with several references to corals in early Chinese works, involving colour, classification, circu-

lation, distribution, and symbolism of this fascinating and mysterious creature. The second article, written by Victoria Almon-te, conducts a comparative study on two animals, gibbon and *rokeb* as described in Zhou's geographical work (1178). It shows that various passages mentioning animals in Zhou's work are permeated with an aura of mystery and myth and reflect the author's taste for exoticism. The third contribution reflects on the circulation of the tusked deer and its scent; the author, Michele Castelnovi, reveals that Western sources were often contradictory: the tusked deer has been treated as one of the strangest creatures, travelling as a precious gift from China towards Europe. The last three essays deal with how Jesuit missionaries in China contributed to modifying the Chinese taxonomy of some fantastic, chimeric, and exotic animals, mixing local and foreign characteristics. Arianna Magnani focuses on sirens and how the cultural exchange between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries modified the Chinese fantastic classification of anthropomorphic fish. Luisa Paternicò offers a new perspective about the study of *qilin*. This chimeric animal was described in Martino Martini's work (1658) as instrumental in replacing the "Lamb", one of the traditional Western metaphors for Christ. It becomes the core of the accommodation process of the traditional Confucian thought with the Christian message. The last contribution, written by Paolo De Troia, focuses on textual descriptions of animals mirrored in the Jesuit Aleni's geographical work (1623). The four categories highlighted by the author reveal that elements of the strange and the exotic had a powerful attraction in the process of translation and accommodation of Western culture.

This volume first provides a glimpse of the connection between human history and animals; secondly, it intends to explore the development in the human-animal relationship through the history of the exchange

between China and the Western world. Although this book, due to the breadth of its subject matter, does not give an exhaustive treatment of this complicated history, it nevertheless provides an essential piece of the historical mosaic of China's contacts

with the outside world, that certainly needs to be investigated further. The authors hope that more and more scholars will approach this subject and provide new insight into the prominent role that animals had in human history.



Rank badge with Qilin, Ming dynasty, 16th-early 17th century, silk embroidery on silk gauze, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Carved figure of a Guanyin with deer, Qing dynasty, late 19th century, red coral,  
Private collection

**Abstract:** Il presente articolo si occupa di analizzare le descrizioni del corallo (in cinese *shanhu* 珊瑚) estrapolate da numerose fonti antiche cinesi. Alcuni degli aspetti di maggiore rilievo sono il colore, la tassonomia e il simbolismo che questi invertebrati marini hanno assunto nel corso dei secoli. Un ulteriore punto degno di analisi è il termine *shanhu* 珊瑚洲, letteralmente “isola corallo”. Le domande che l'autore si pone in questo contributo riguardano l'origine di tale parola e come essa sia collegata al cosiddetto *Zhanghai* 漲海 e al toponimo *Da Qin* 大秦. L'autore ha considerato anche il nome che appare nella famosa iscrizione nestoriana del periodo Tang e i legami con l'area geografica del Guangdong e le opere compilate dai Gesuiti.

#### Basic Terms, Issues and Species

In both traditional and modern Chinese texts, the term for corals usually is *shanhu* 珊瑚. One of the earliest references to *shanhu* appears in a work attributed to Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (c. 179–117 BC), quoted in *Shi ji* 史記. Many scholars have cited this text, which is so famous indeed that we do not need to comment on it here. Early poems and prose texts, usually surviving in fragmentary form, especially in *leishu* 類書 of later periods, also mention *shanhu*. It would be a rewarding task to analyse these references in detail, one by one, because they raise diverse questions. One example showing where the problems are, is a recent study of the entries on *shanhu* in Ren Fang's 任昉 (460–508) *Shuyi ji* 述異記.<sup>1</sup>

Besides textual references to *shanhu*, one can find various objects made of coral in Chinese collections and museums. However, nearly all of these objects date from very late periods. Apparently, archaeologists have not unearthed too many items produced in Zhou and Han times. Even objects datable to the Tang 唐 (618–907), Song 宋 (960–1279), Yuan 元 (1279–1368) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) periods seem to be rare. Regarding paintings and book illustrations,

again there is very little from the pre-Qing era. Chinese scholars were interested in beautiful flowers and trees, exotic birds and insects, fish and other marine creatures, precious stones, and jewels, but for unknown reasons, early scrolls and prints rarely show corals.<sup>2</sup>

Another issue is the terminology “surrounding” the binom *shanhu*. Besides this expression, traditional Chinese texts mention “coral islands”, usually *shanhu* 珊瑚洲. Further terms standing for reefs and submerged “rocks” in areas known for their corals include such combinations as *lugu* 鹵股, *luogu* 羅股, *laogu* 老古 (礁古 etc.) and *gulao* 古老. Especially the last term may derive from Malay (*batu*) *karang* (etc.), meaning “reef” or “coral reef”. Other terms one may wish to consider in such contexts are *cishi* 磁石 (literally “magnetic rocks”) and *qitou* 崎頭. These are just some examples. Detailed research will be necessary to trace the history of these and similar expressions, what they really meant and when they first began to appear in traditional accounts, for example, in old navigational texts. A further and very important binom is *langgan* 琅玕. Among the many “received texts” of ancient times, the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 could be the earliest account to record that substance. Originally, *langgan* seems to denote a greenish stone; later on, particularly in *bencao* 本草 works, scholars also used it for corals.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that at some point in time both *langgan* and *shanhu* started to coexist as generic expressions for coral, raises an important question: When was it that Chinese sailors and / or scholars introduced different terms for specific types of corals? Colour attributes are important as well. In all likelihood early references to *shanhu* are to the red variety and especially to corals imported via the landroute from the “Far West”, i.e., the Mediterranean world and / or West Asia. In these regions the production of corals has a long and well-documented history. Howev-