

Animals Through Chinese History

Earliest Times to 1911

Edited by Roel Sterckx,
Martina Siebert and Dagmar Schäfer



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This volume opens a door into the rich history of animals in China. As environmental historians turn their attention to expanded chronologies of natural change, something new can be said about human history through animals and about the globally diverse cultural and historical dynamics that have led to perceptions of animals as wild or cultures as civilized. This innovative collection of essays spanning Chinese history reveals how relations between past and present, lived and literary reality, have been central to how information about animals and the natural world has been processed and evaluated in China. Drawing on an extensive array of primary sources, ranging from ritual texts to poetry to veterinary science, this volume explores developments in the human–animal relationship through Chinese history and the ways in which the Chinese have thought about the world with and through animals. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core at doi.org/10.1017/9781108551571.

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4 Walking by Itself

The Singular History of the Chinese Cat

Timothy H. Barrett and Mark Strange

In today's urbanized world, the domestic animals most familiar to the majority of us tend to be those small enough to share a living space with human beings. They may range in size from fairly large dogs through various smaller mammals down to tropical fish, and even smaller pets. The cat, towards the top end of this spectrum, vies with the dog as one of the most interactive animals and, hence, one of the most popular to be found in ordinary homes.¹ Yet, unlike the dog, which has lived with humans for thousands of years, the cat – even if associated with people for almost as long – has only been brought inside the house in historical times, and is well known for still retaining a measure of aloofness, as our chapter title suggests. We have the sources to hand to trace cat histories in several ancient and modern societies and, though a detailed sequential history for China has yet to be written, the provisional narrative outlined here should be sufficient to suggest that cat histories have not all unfolded in the same way or at the same pace.²

Early Cats

Since this narrative is primarily built on textual sources, the focus is on the type of cat most likely to be encountered in such sources, that is, the domestic cat that is born and lives in the company of humans, sharing the same space and producing its young in that space. Yet cats are not necessarily domestic cats: they may become feral, falling out of company with humans; or they may

¹ On size as a factor in the success of cats and dogs, see Serpell (1996), 127, though many other factors are admittedly important.

² This narrative draws frequently on two essays on cats written in the context of the study of religion: Barrett (1998) looks at the persistent association of the cat with Buddhism in China; Barrett (2010) considers the transfer of Buddhist monastic cat culture from China to Japan. The reader should be warned that the use of these materials may foreground somewhat the treatment of cats given here in relation to religion.

maintain or be maintained at a certain distance, even if their proximity is recognized as beneficial for rodent (and in some places snake and scorpion) control and is tolerated or even encouraged, as with farm or village cats. So it is difficult to tell from archaeological sources whether incidents of collaboration that have bequeathed cat remains to us in human settlements actually bear witness to continued cohabitation. Although archaeologists are quite certain that a cat from 6000 BCE discovered on the island of Cyprus can only have reached there with human assistance, not until consistent depictions of Egyptian domestic scenes from 1950 BCE showing cats under chairs can we be sure that true domestication in its etymological sense had taken place.³

Similar considerations apply in China. The analysis of cat bones from the middle or late Yangshao period (4000–3000 BCE) may show commensalism: their diet seems to have been affected by a link with humans. But this probably did not amount to domestication, even if a certain relationship of mutuality may have emerged by this point.⁴

Even the earliest textual sources on cats in China are complicated by linguistic factors. A *mao* 貓 may signify a domestic cat nowadays, but since in the rare occurrences of this word in the Chinese Classics it is an animal that is paired with a tiger, the possibility is that some form of wild cat or even larger feline is indicated. As a killer of rodents, sometimes in association with humans, an animal named a *li* 狸 appears more frequently, but there is no sign that this creature had any regular and continuing status as a pet. Though it may signify some variety (or varieties) of small feline, in some instances the term seems to refer to the raccoon dog, the Chinese equivalent of the Japanese *tanuki*.⁵ The domestic cat of later times inherited both these names, with the result that not all scholars of late imperial China were able to resist the temptation of reading the Chinese Classics as though cats were part of ancient Chinese family life. But one strong indication that cats were not breeding in domestic spaces is provided by the complete absence of any data on the feline gestation period in texts up to the Six Dynasties, which are generally well informed on this matter in relation to dogs, pigs, gibbons, deer, oxen, horses and so forth; only for tigers is inaccurate information given.⁶

³ See Engels (1999), 49 for the Cyprus cat, and for the Egypt examples, 21–2.

⁴ Increasing scientific evidence suggests that the rat catchers of early China – and no doubt sporadically of later China too, especially when kittens caught in the wild could be raised for this purpose – were Chinese varieties of the Bengal cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*). But it has been found that any genetic admixture from such sources produces an animal ultimately unsuitable for family life, leaving them on the fringes of cat history. As a result, the ancestor of the modern domestic cat in China is the wildcat (*Felis silvestris*). See, for example, Bradshaw (2013), 267–8. On commensalism, rather than true domestication, see Bar-Oz, Weissbrod and Tsahar (2014); Hu and Marshall (2014).

⁵ These problems are outlined in Barrett (1998), 16–17, 25–6. See also Müller (2009), 53–9, which provides copious additional references on this question.

⁶ Guo Fu, Joseph Needham and Cheng Qingtai (1999), 198.

It is perhaps significant, therefore, that the earliest reference in the Chinese language to the domestic cat, explicitly as a *jiamao* 家猫 ‘family cat’, is in fact in a South Asian work, a Buddhist text rendered into Chinese in the mid-second century CE by the earliest known translator of such materials, An Shigao 安世高 (fl. c. 140–180 CE).⁷ The use of the epithet is interesting: was it perhaps the case that a ‘family cat’ was a novelty in China at the time, and that most cats were not tame? There were certainly non-family cats – varieties of wild cat – in India, and they occur in Buddhist stories of the Aesopian sort.⁸ Within a century after An Shigao, we find scattered references to domestication in non-Buddhist texts, though there is little sign of a larger trend.⁹ And, from the start of the fifth century on, the Chinese were presented with at least one Indian source depicting the cat as a house-dweller, or at least as having access to houses, in a tale revealing how a kitten learns which human foods are tasty to cats.¹⁰

The rise of the domestic cat in India is hard to trace, but the consensus is that it must have been the result of trade with Egypt, which was in full flow by Roman times. Egyptian ship’s cats – a special case of the indoor cat – have been depicted in art since over a millennium BCE. The mummified remains of more than one rather robust cat have been found at a Roman Red Sea port trading with India, even if these particular individuals may have guarded port granaries rather than travelled themselves.¹¹ A further voyage from India to China in Han times is not impossible, following the same route that some Buddhist pioneers themselves took, and this would explain the strong association between domestic cats and Buddhism that was sustained in the Chinese imagination in later times.

The trajectory of cat history in Western Europe starts, if not with worship in the Egyptian fashion, then at least with respect. With the rise in the strength of Christianity, however, the association of the cat with older religions resulted in an eventual shift to outright persecution in medieval times. There was a return to acceptance in the early modern period, precisely when the arrival of the Norwegian rat meant that the cat had to retire from its former occupation in favour of new breeds of dogs that were trained to attack this more formidable enemy.¹²

The trajectory in China has been different. In many respects, it is a tale of much smoother progress towards greater and greater appreciation. Certainly outright

⁷ Vetter (2012), 190, citing T. no. 607, a work firmly attributed to An.

⁸ Cowell (1995), 168–9, no. 383; Chinese version discussed in Imamura (1986), 90–6.

⁹ For example, a reference in the third-century CE dictionary, *Guang ya* 廣雅, to the capture and domestication of a ‘jade-faced *li*’ for the purposes of rodent control (though some explicitly rejected identification of this animal as a *mao*), ap. *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目, 51.44.

¹⁰ Imamura (1986), 97–8. Translation in Barrett (1998), 18.

¹¹ Engels (1999), 46; Hamilton-Dyer (2013). ¹² Delort (1984), 442.

persecution never occurred, though it is fair to say that in the late sixth, seventh and early eighth centuries a degree of suspicion fell upon the cat, possibly because it was at that point still a newcomer inside human dwellings.¹³ Unlike the dog, which does not hunt by stealth, the cat has a way of appearing and disappearing that can be disconcerting, making it uncanny as much as sacred. Whatever the cause, the cat was for a while associated in China with a specific form of black magic. This was mentioned a number of times in medical works, in Buddhist treatises composed in China, and indeed in one celebrated account in the official histories of the Sui dynasty, which had already attracted the attention of J.J.M. De Groot (1854–1921).¹⁴ As so often in the instances of black magic that find their way into official history, the case involved females related to the emperor through marriage. But it may also be significant that the woman actually depicted as summoning the cat by tapping on its food bowl and calling to it, using a colloquial term still current in north China over a millennium later, was a maidservant.¹⁵ This will not be the last we hear of maidservants and cats. A form of possession seems to have been envisaged in this black magic, which in the medieval Chinese view fell within the competence of the medical profession. So it is no surprise to find remedies against cat demons prescribed in medical works of the period – indeed, to be on the safe side these remedies are sometimes included in much later works, even after suspicion about the role of cats in black magic had eventually died down.¹⁶ Needless to say, the supposed practice of employing demon cats was strictly forbidden under the seventh-century Tang code on pain of death.¹⁷

Cats and Buddhism

Even Buddhist precepts of roughly the same period felt obliged to mention that cat demon magic was forbidden to Buddhists.¹⁸ Buddhist sources, evidently composed in China, also propose incantations suitable for warding off cat demons.¹⁹ But Buddhist texts go even further: regulations for monks in the seventh century and for lay people from at least a century earlier both forbid the keeping of any cats.²⁰ The concern in these regulations seems to have been

¹³ One of the medical works that describes this phenomenon (see below) is the *Zhouhou beiji fang* 肘後備急方 (Emergency Recipes Kept Up One's Sleeve), the origins of which are said to go back to the fourth century CE, but since it is agreed that it contains later material, the timespan given probably cannot be extended too far backwards.

¹⁴ *Suishu*, 79.1790–1; *Beishi*, 61.2172–3; De Groot (1967), 610–2. Doran (2015) sheds further light on the cat demon beliefs of this period.

¹⁵ *Rizhi lu jishi*, 32.26a. ¹⁶ E.g. *Qianjin yifang*, 20.232b. ¹⁷ *Tang lü shuyi*, 18.337.

¹⁸ *Fanwang jing pusa jieben shu*, 6.648a27.

¹⁹ These materials are discussed by Mollier (2008), 85 (mentioning the cat demon explicitly), 94, 199; cf. 95 for secular medicine. Mollier's second reference, *Qi fo ba pusa suoshuo da tuoluoni shen zhou jing* 七佛八菩薩所說大陀羅尼神咒經, T.21 no.1332, 4.560c26, may take the cat demon back to fourth-century China, if the date given holds good for all the contents of this text.

²⁰ See Barrett (2010), 124n.99.

cats' propensity for violence, a concern that also affected the keeping of monastery dogs. Yet feline violence was also recognized as economically beneficial when directed towards rodents that might otherwise spoil large quantities of grain. As a result, in the early twentieth century at least, it was conveniently assumed that the mere presence of cats would discourage rats from entering monastic granaries, with any killing supposedly taking place beyond monastic premises.²¹ We do not know how Buddhists in earlier periods squared their consciences in this matter – perhaps cats were deemed to be independent operators, so their killing was not the monastery's responsibility.

The occasional remark by a Buddhist monk from the seventh century suggests that cats were perfectly familiar to monastics: Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664 CE) describes an ash-smeared ascetic who opposes him in debate in India as looking like a cat that has sat too close to the fireplace.²² But it is possible that this reflects the famous pilgrim's knowledge of non-Chinese domestic arrangements, for in 636 an envoy from the state of Gaochang 高昌, through which Xuanzang passed in 629 on his way west, declared that cats are happiest indoors, establishing the presence of the domestic cat beyond the contemporaneous limits of Chinese territory.²³ So we later find cats identified as foreign creatures, their origins in China closely connected with Xuanzang:

It seems that [cats] are not a genus native to the Central States. They emerged from the state of Tianzhu [i.e. India] in the west and were not born from the vital forces of the Central States. ... Adherents of Śākyamuni [raised cats] because mice were nibbling through and destroying Buddhist *sūtras*. When Xuanzang of the Tang went to the Western Regions to collect *sūtras*, he brought back cats and raised them. These were the animals from which the genus [in the Central States] descended.²⁴

Cats were used to safeguard more than just monastic storehouses, however. For many Tang scholars, cats had a 'duty' (*zhi* 職) to catch mice and they were often used to protect supplies of grain.²⁵ The poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831

²¹ Prip-Møller (1967), 128. ²² Beale (1911), 162.

²³ *Tongdian*, 191.5205; *Tang hui yao*, 95.1701; see also Imamura (1986), 192–3. In the fifteenth century, Ma Huan 馬歡 (1380–1460), who accompanied Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433) on three of his famous sea voyages, included cats among the apparently domesticated animals that he found in Cochín, Dhofar, Aden, Bengal and Mecca. See Mills (1970), 137, 153, 157, 162, 176.

²⁴ *Qunshu kaosuo gujin shiwen yuxie*, 24.33b; cf. *Mao sheng*, 5.1a. The ultimate source of this excerpt is not known, though Isobe Akira tentatively dates it to the late Tang based on its place in the development of the story of Xuanzang's pilgrimage. See Isobe (1983), 215. But Isobe also notes the scepticism expressed by the Chosŏn official I Su-kwang 李睟光 (1563–1628) over Xuanzang's role in transposing cats to China; see *ibid.*, 232n.30.

²⁵ *Wenyuan yinghua*, 369.2a (by Chen An 陳黯), 372.5a (by Niu Sengru 牛僧孺), 770.3b–4a (by Cui Youfu 崔祐甫). Cui Youfu's essay also appears in *Jiu Tangshu*, 119.3438 and *Tang hui yao*, 44.793. As we will see in what follows, representations of cats grew less emphatically utilitarian during Song times; the reference to a cat's 'duty' by Hong Shi 洪適 (1117–84) was a relative rarity. See *Panzhou wenji*, 29.6b.

CE), for example, presented in one of his poems a martial image of cats at war with mice for control of granaries, though this also served as a sign of decline at that time, when official residences were too poorly built to withstand rodent infestations. Written at a time of general nostalgia for a declining imperial order after the great uprisings of 755 onward, the political comment implied by Yuan's observation is clear.²⁶ Other scholars were even more explicit: when cats failed in their basic duty or, even more extremely, ran counter to it by eating alongside mice, it was taken as an inauspicious omen and a reflection of a broader inversion of moral and natural order.²⁷

Cats were also valued for other practical purposes at this time. We have already seen their connection to the medical practices that sought to ward off cat demons. More broadly, various species of cats were killed for their meat, head, bones, fat, liver, fur, urine, faeces, brains and penises, which were used for a wide range of medical purposes.²⁸ Cat meat was eaten – it was described as having a sweet flavour – though it is not clear how widespread this was.²⁹ Fur from wild cats (but apparently not domesticated species) was used to manufacture writing brushes.³⁰ Methods developed for telling the time from the size of a cat's pupils, which dilated and contracted as the sun ran its course.³¹ Cats were given a role in divining the future, too.³² In the early eighth century, for example, the low-ranking scholar-official Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (c. 658–c. 730 CE) preserved this anecdote in his *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載 (Record of the Court and Beyond):

²⁶ *Quan Tang shi*, 408.4536. This rhetoric was not restricted to the late Tang: in 1079, for example, Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 also drew on martial imagery in a poem thanking a contemporary for the gift of a cat. See *Shangu waiji shi zhu* 山谷外集詩注, in *Huang Tingjian shi jizhu*, vol. 3, 7.976. But the martial metaphor does not seem to have been taken up in any extensive way by later poets and its scattered use in medieval times contrasts with the recurring, developed image of a war between cats and mice both in later Chinese popular literature, as well as in a range of European, Middle Eastern, Indian and Tibetan texts and images. We are grateful to Wilt Idema for drawing this contrast to our attention.

²⁷ See, for example, an occurrence in 742, *Xin Tangshu*, 34.882; Cui Youfu's protest to Emperor Daizong in 778: *Jiu Tangshu*, 11.314, 37.1370, 119.3438 (cf. *Tang hui yao*, 44.793, and *Wenyuan yinghua*, 770.3b–4a); and the imagery of 'Dulu ge' 獨漉歌 ('The Song of Dulu') by Wang Jian 王建 (767–830 CE), *Quan Tang shi*, 22.287 and 298.3384, which drew the notice of Qian Zhongshu (1979), vol. 2, 601–2.

²⁸ A convenient sample of references to the medical uses of cats appears in *Mao sheng*, 5.3b–5a. Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–93) offers a more systematic outline in *Bencao gangmu*, 51.42–4 (domesticated cats) and 44–6 (wild cats).

²⁹ *Chaoye qianzai*, 6.4b; *Youyang zazu*, *xuji* 續集, 1.202.

³⁰ *Beihu lu*, 9a. For the suggestion that this was not a domesticated animal, see the use of the epithet wild (*ye* 野) by the Ming scholar Huang Yizheng 黃一正 (fl. c. 1591) to refer to the species whose fur was used for writing brushes. Though the entry appears under a section on *mao* 貓, which are collectively identified as domestic animals, Huang set this particular species in comparison with (and therefore implied distinction from) family cats (*jiamao*) and claimed that they were hard to tame. See *Shiwu ganzhi* 事務紺珠, 28.13b.

³¹ *Youyang zazu*, *xuji*, 8.277; cf. *Pi ya* 埤雅, 4.10a. ³² *Youyang zazu*, *xuji*, 8.277.

When Xue Jichang 薛季昶 [d.706] was serving as senior aide in Jingzhou 荊州, he dreamt that a cat was lying on the threshold of the hall, its head facing towards the outside. He asked a diviner, Zhang You 張猷, about it. Zhang You said: 'The cat represents the claws and fangs [of military force]. It is lying at the threshold of the hall: there will be business in the outermost regions. You are sure to take up an important post in the military.' Just as predicted, Xue was appointed Commander-in-chief of Guizhou 桂州 and Commissioner for Suppressing Rebellion in Lingnan 嶺南.³³

The corollary to this portentous symbolism was the use of cats in allegorical comment. Madeline K. Spring has shown how several of the essays on cats written during this period were allegorical in nature.³⁴ Allegory was possible because of the basic idea that, as Feng Shan 馮山 (1031–94) would later put it in the eleventh century, 'cats approximate humans in their natures' and are different from other domesticated animals such as dogs or horses.³⁵ But it is hard as a result of such perceived parallels to assess the status of these essays as historical evidence; they often reflect more on other concerns of the time than on the cats about which they were purportedly written.

The first allegorical use of cats was a political one. In the mid-seventh century, for example, the Empress Wu (Wu Zetian 武則天) was said to have been cursed by a defeated rival, who threatened to reincarnate herself as a cat and chase the Empress in a future life like a mouse. In response, the Empress blurred the lines between allegory and policy by banning all cats from her palace.³⁶ It may be that a fear of demon cats was involved here, but this is not explicit. In any case, the ban did not long outlive the Empress Wu's own reign: there is already mention of a cat in a humorous palace lyric written within half a decade of her death.³⁷ Unfortunately, it is not clear whether palace cats at this time were pets, or simply confederates in the business of rodent control.

The late eighth and ninth centuries in China are seen as ushering in new social developments, in the wake of a slackening of the grip of central government from the mid-eighth century on. The suspicion sometimes directed at the cat in earlier times had faded. But writings discussing the extent to which cats might be considered truly domesticated contributed to a wider discourse on social change and unrest. So in 778, in response to discussion of an anomaly in which a cat was found suckling mice, Cui Youfu 崔祐甫 (721–780 CE) used an image in which cats-as-officials were exhorted to dedicate themselves to catching mice, which in turn represented restive forces in society and a general threat to the common good. Abandoning this control – Cui uses the

³³ *Chaoye qianzai*, 3.2a. ³⁴ Spring (1993), 49–65. ³⁵ *Yongle dadian*, vol. 9, 19866.22b.

³⁶ *Taiping yulan*, 912.6a (citing *Jiu Tangshu*, though this episode no longer appears in the extant versions of that text); *Zizhi tongjian*, 200.6294. The thirteenth-century scholar Luo Dajing 羅大經 (1196–1252) attributed to this episode the later coining of a new term for cats, 'Consorts to the Son of Heaven' (*tianzi fei* 天子妃). See *Helin yulu* 4.196 ('Yi' 乙). See also Imamura (1986), 35–6.

³⁷ Jia (1999), 233, translating Cui Riyong 崔日用 (673–731 CE).

recurring term ‘duty’ here – would mean being diverted from one’s innate purpose.³⁸ Similarly, in an account explicitly recognized by tenth-century readers as allegorical, Shu Yuanyu 舒元興 (d. 835 CE) noted the importance to political order of understanding how to employ men of moral quality (*junzi* 君子), to put right any pernicious corruption – just as Shu had used a *li* to control a rodent infestation in his home.³⁹ This image of the political value of encouraging predatory, cat-like behaviour among officials often came with a warning. In the ninth century, for example, the eminent statesman Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 (780–848 CE) recognized the potential value of cats in keeping control of ‘those that rebel’. But he also noted that cats are naturally slothful and, once they grew lax in their mice-catching duties, they risked causing greater harm than good.⁴⁰ For Niu, this suggested parallels with disorderly rulers and ministers of the past and so he ended his memorial by urging caution when ‘inviting in’ the allegorical cat to suppress those who might do harm to the state – a pointed warning at a time of heightened factionalism at court.⁴¹ A similar note of caution echoed through the political allegories on cats that scholars frequently used to address the theme of the domestication, or ‘sinification’, of ‘bestial’ barbarians in the late ninth century, at a time when the power of the Shatuo 沙陀 Turks was on the rise.⁴²

The eighth and ninth centuries were also a period of considerable discussion about human nature, and cats also appear as figures in moral allegory, to represent such values as courage and filial affection.⁴³ Above all, cats were used to explore the quality of kindness (*ren* 仁). On the one hand, in 778 Cui Youfu suggested that cats had the capacity for kindness, which was most evident when they refused to eat mice.⁴⁴ On the other hand, as early as the turn of the eighth century, we hear the opposing argument that ‘cats are unkind beasts’. The pre-eminent statements of this view appeared later in the century. In an essay on cats suckling one another’s kittens – an image that subsequently became common in explorations of feline nature – the famous prose stylist

³⁸ *Jiu Tangshu*, 119.3438; *Tang hui yao*, 44.793; *Wenyuan yinghua* 770.3b–4a.

³⁹ *Wenyuan yinghua* 373.5a–6b; Spring (1993), 58–9.

⁴⁰ For a similar implication, see *Jiu Tangshu*, 82.2767.

⁴¹ *Wenyuan yinghua* 372.5a–6a; Spring (1993), 59–61.

⁴² See, for example: Lai Hu 來鵠 (fl. c. 861–874 CE) in *Tang wen cui*, 47.5b, and Spring (1993), 61–3; Chen An (fl. late ninth century) in *Wenyuan yinghua* 369.1b–2b and Spring (1993), 53–6; Yang Kui (fl. c. 900 CE) in *Wenyuan yinghua* 372.10a–b and Spring (1993), 56–8.

⁴³ Shu Yuanyu 舒元興 (d. 835 CE) suggested that the *li* ‘comes close to being true and courageous’, and is of potential benefit to humans, though it remains a wild animal, *Wenyuan yinghua*, 373.5a–6b. Elsewhere, in a tale most likely set in the seventh century, another wild *li* comes to seek food, ‘completely tame and fearless’, from a son in mourning at his father’s graveside. This act was interpreted at the time as an expression of filial sentiment, cf. *Tangshu*, ap. *Taiping yulan*, 912.4172. In 1093, Fan Zuyi 范祖禹 (1041–98) reported a similar episode. See *Fan Taishi ji*, 25.14a (cf. *Song hui yao jigao*, 61.4a [‘Li’ 禮]).

⁴⁴ *Jiu Tangshu*, 119.3438; *Tang hui yao*, 44.793; *Wenyuan yinghua* 770.3b–4a.

Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824 CE) offered circumstantial but unambiguous evidence of kittens born in a Chinese household, but his main point was a discussion of nature and nurture. He claimed emphatically that cats ‘do not tend by nature towards kindness or propriety’, but that they might respond to, and be shaped by, their owners’ conduct. This is precisely what had happened with a cat owned by Han Yu’s high-ranking patron, Ma Sui 馬燧 (726–795 CE), which had taken into her own bed and suckled the kittens of a dead companion. For Han Yu, this demonstrated Ma Sui’s exemplary moral power. As Han Yu’s intellectual influence grew from the eleventh century on, this essay became a standard point of reference for later writers who took cats as a focus for moral comment and, at the very least, made the discussion of cats an acceptable literary topic for later authors. Given the ulterior purposes of these allegories, they cannot be accepted as unvarnished depictions of zoological fact. Yet they do hint at a growing domestication of cats: presumably such allegories would have fallen flat if people of the time were not reasonably familiar with general feline behaviour.

There are other indications in late Tang sources that cats had joined dogs as common domestic animals. It is recorded in a tale of karmic retribution from the ninth century, for example, that a street person living in the capital of Chang’an had done away with 460 cats and dogs. Whatever the historicity of the tale itself, for this number to be plausible domestic cats and dogs must have been fairly commonly encountered in the urban environment.⁴⁵ By this time, too, Buddhist monastic communities may well have relented in their opposition to keeping useful small carnivores on their establishments. A work of the mid-eighth century reveals that it had already been discovered that a vegetarian diet causes developmental problems in kittens and puppies, so monastics of the age would have known that attempting to convert such animals to their own lifestyle was not an option.⁴⁶ As for their lay followers, at least one hermit from the ninth century at the latest – and possibly two centuries earlier – the Buddhist recluse Hanshan 寒山, records in one of his poems that he kept a tabby cat to ward off rats.⁴⁷

Hanshan’s verses were soon taken up by monks of the Chan tradition and may have contributed to the abundance of references to cats that appeared in the sayings of the great masters of that tradition. But we should bear in mind that the versions of these sayings that are best known to us date not to the lifetimes of these masters in the late eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, but rather to later compilations of the Song period. Though these sayings, with their strong oral flavour, represent themselves as based on reportage, we should be aware of the possible literary reshaping of older tales by creative editors. The prime example of this may be

⁴⁵ *Yuyang zazu, xuji* 1.202; Reed (2001), 115–16. ⁴⁶ Barrett (2010), 109, and 122n.11.

⁴⁷ Barrett (2010), 110–11.

found in a story that has been seen as one of the most famous of the age in Chan circles.⁴⁸ In this, the great Tang master Nanquan Puyuan 南泉普願 (748–835 CE) is said to have seized a kitten over which two groups of monks were squabbling and challenged them to save its life. On getting no response he cut it in half. Only when his best student Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897 CE) returned and, in response to being told the story, put his sandals on his head and walked out, did Nanquan declare that this action would have saved the cat. Were any cats harmed in the making of this celebrated case? We hear of sayings involving cats in the earliest accounts of Nanquan, but nothing at all of this rather memorable incident.⁴⁹ There are more frequently mentioned accounts of masters bisecting earthworms and snakes, though even these alleged actions may have more to do with dramatizing the Buddhist doctrine of non-duality than with preserving any morsel of monastic reportage.⁵⁰

Though the kitten in the story above appears as a pet and a possession, cats were generally tolerated only as independent operators on the fringes of monastic life, for the reasons given above. Even so, Nanquan's actions were clearly antinomian by any standard, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, suggesting that dogs and cats appeared in the cut and thrust of Chan philosophical debate simply as representatives of animate reality, rather than real creatures.⁵¹ In the Southern Song we even find Buddhist masters who inveighed against the keeping of pets as not conducive to enlightenment.⁵² And some poems about cats by Song monastics explicitly cast them solely in the role of vermin exterminators.⁵³ But others explicitly reject this as the only possible reason for keeping cats: we are told that even a monk too poor to attract rats might enjoy seeing a cat at play.⁵⁴ Were monks in such cases taking their cue from secular values? For all the moralizing about cats' duty to defend humans from the nuisance of mice that may be found in late Tang texts, it is evident from one poem from around the end of the Tang dynasty that cats were by that point considered fun to play with, at least (one may infer) for children.⁵⁵

Cats and Song Ethical Debates

Sources from Song times reveal more of ordinary domestic circumstances and here we find recurring references to cats being kept and fed within the home. In the eleventh century, for example, Feng Shan noted that 'cats and dogs are

⁴⁸ On the popularity of this story, and a brief synopsis, see Heine (2014), 23–5.

⁴⁹ Barrett (1998), 15. ⁵⁰ Barrett (2010), 109–10.

⁵¹ For another example where cats intrude into what was originally a purely canine conundrum, see Heine (2014), 116–17.

⁵² Barrett (2010), 111. ⁵³ Heine (2014), 104, and 227n.50, citing Miriam Levering.

⁵⁴ Barrett (2010), 112.

⁵⁵ Imamura (1986), 134, citing a poem by Lu Deyan 路德延, a *jinshi* of 898.

creatures that many people raise and nurture'.⁵⁶ One might picture cats lounging around in kitchens and ingratiating themselves with maidservants who tended to inhabit the same space, for as early as the ninth century a well-known wit had quipped that 'maidservants are like cats – they always keep to the warmest parts of the house'.⁵⁷ Such an environment for the cat would perhaps have been similar to that observed by a Swedish visitor to Japan in 1776, Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828), who remarked on the prevalence of cats – not in the country in general, but in the world of women.⁵⁸

Yet Song sources reveal that the cat also provided companionship for men, including the very highest in the land. As in Tang times, they were taken to serve a range of practical purposes. Various parts of their bodies continued to be used in medicine. They provided a source of food and, at least by the thirteenth century, there is evidence of a specialist trade in cat meat, including domestic cats, though at least some of this relied on stealing cats from local homes to sustain their business.⁵⁹ Variations in the size of a cat's pupils continued to be associated with diurnal rhythms by such leading statesmen and scholars of the time as Wu Yu 吳育 (1004–58) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101).⁶⁰ Cats were still invested with a portentous symbolism, in support of divination.⁶¹ And, of course, they were kept to catch mice, to protect not only food in storage but also the books and studios of eminent scholars, as they had purportedly done for Xuanzang in the seventh century, though some complained that their cats made a mess of their papers.⁶² In one highly regarded verse of 1079, shot through with comic undertones, Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) sought out a cat simply to ensure a good night's sleep as mice ran riot in his house at night.⁶³ But in this strongly utilitarian view, a cat's apparent failure to catch mice could also become a source of concern for its owner.⁶⁴

Song scholars' utilitarian view of cats made itself felt, too, in their allegorical accounts of feline behaviour. Their 'duty' to catch mice suggested a familiar parallel with officials' need to remain alert to pernicious influences in the imperial bureaucracy. In the late eleventh century, Su Shi therefore wrote

⁵⁶ *Yongle dadian*, vol. 9, 19866.22b. ⁵⁷ Barrett (1998), 20. See also Davis (2001), 91.

⁵⁸ Delort (1984), 74. ⁵⁹ *Ting shi*, 12.6b–7b.

⁶⁰ *Mengxi bitan jiaozheng*, vol. 1, 17.541; *Wu lei xiang gan zhi*, 10b. For a twelfth-century note about a similar association, see *Erya yi*, 21.225.

⁶¹ *Songchao shishi leiyan*, 68.905; *Wudeng huiyuan*, 20.418a21.

⁶² On food protection, see *Chashan ji*, 8.18b. On the protection of books and studios, see *Mei Yaochen ji biannian jiaozhu*, 26.874, trans. Watson (1984), 342–3; *Liangxi ji*, 157.9a; *Lu You ji*, 15.429; *Qiu xiao xiansheng Fubu ji*, 3.17a. On a complaint against a careless cat, see *Wenguo Wenzheng Sima gong wenji*, 67.10a.

⁶³ *Shangu waiji shi zhu*, 7.975. See also the responses to Huang's poem in *Houshan shihua*, 10a; *Chashan ji*, 8.18b and *Lao xue an biji*, 8.107.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Zhizhai xiansheng wenji*, 42.2b or, also in the twelfth century, an inscription for a cat painting by Ye Shaoweng 葉紹翁 (*jinshi* 1115), in which the cat is depicted neglecting its mice-catching duties. See *Suiyin manlu* 3.30.

a letter to Emperor Shenzong (1048–85) in which he stressed the importance of those in power paying attention to remonstrance and, as a corollary, of ‘nipping treacherous ministers in the bud’. ‘One raises cats to rid oneself of mice,’ he went on. ‘One should not raise a cat which does not catch mice simply because it happens that there are no mice around.’ Though Su praised the current emperor’s governance, the implication of this image was that a threat of treachery would always exist, so there was a constant need to maintain a cat-like vigilance.⁶⁵ Early in the following century, Li Gang 李綱 (1083–1140) similarly identified the need for a ruler to employ capable ministers to keep sedition in check, a function ‘no different from a cat keeping mice under control’.⁶⁶ Also in the twelfth century, Hong Shi 洪適 (1117–84) echoed the likes of Niu Sengru three hundred years earlier when he noted the danger that might result should a cat grow lax in its mice-catching duties; like Niu, he drew an explicit political parallel. But Hong Shi differed from Niu when, instead of urging caution about ‘inviting in’ a cat, he urged a more pragmatic approach in which one should replace cats (or officials) that failed as vermin exterminators.⁶⁷

When Song discussions turned to cats’ moral nature, and particularly their capacity for kindness, Han Yu emerged as a central influence. In 1142, for example, Sun Di 孫覿 (1081–1169) observed a female cat that was no good at catching mice but, ‘in its filial feeling and maternal love, was of a type with humans’, and even surpassed some humans in its moral qualities. Like Han Yu, Sun focused on the cat’s habit of suckling other cats’ kittens and allowing other cats to eat first, which Sun identified as unusual behaviour among cats and rare even among humans. With direct reference to Han Yu’s essay – there was also an allusion to Han Yu in his title – Sun attributed the cat’s honourable behaviour to the influence of the household in which she lived. He went on to suggest that such moral transformation might also bring peace and tranquillity to the common people at large.⁶⁸ Other scholars in the twelfth century subscribed to the same idea that cats’ moral qualities were shaped by the environment in which they lived.⁶⁹

As far back as the eleventh century, however, there was some scepticism about this belief. Feng Shan, for example, urged against attributing extraordinary qualities to cats that suckled others’ kittens. As we have seen, Feng argued that ‘cats approximate humans in their natures’. Though he did not go so far as to extend this to claim that they are just as capable as humans of acts of

⁶⁵ *Song shi*, 338.10807–8. ⁶⁶ *Liangxi ji*, 157.8b–10a.

⁶⁷ *Panzhou wenji*, 29.6a–7b. But see also Lin Jizhong 林季仲 (b. 1088) who, writing in early 1138 after the Song court had been forced south by Jurchen invasion, echoed earlier associations between wild cats and barbarian predation made by ninth-century scholars such as Niu Sengru. See *Jiyan yilai xintian yaolu*, 118.2202.

⁶⁸ *Hongqing jushi wenji*, 21.19b. ⁶⁹ See, for example, *Jianghu changweng ji*, 29.7a–b.

goodness, he still stressed that such behaviour was simply ‘in the ordinary nature of things’. It neither ‘merited treatment as something unusual’ nor suggested itself as a product of external influence. Feng therefore berated others for identifying in this feline behaviour any auspicious omen or indication of the moral worth of a cat’s owner.⁷⁰

In November 1084, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86) offered an even more direct riposte to Han Yu. He wrote a ‘biography’ of two of his family cats, in which he argued that kindness and righteousness were qualities that Heaven bestowed on ‘all things with an innate nature and consciousness’. Sima demonstrated this sententious principle with particular reference to his own cat, Shu 廬, a creature that was clearly domesticated. In a well-worn image, Shu was seen allowing other cats to eat before her and suckling others’ kittens as if they were her own. She did not even protest when she was mistakenly punished by members of her household after another cat had eaten her kittens (though, to absolve her of any suspicion of a lack of maternal responsibility, we are also told that she fought a dog, almost to the death, to protect her kittens). At this point in his essay, Sima Guang refuted Han Yu’s claim that a cat’s nature – its innate lack of kindness – is susceptible to being shaped and re-formed under the influence of its owner’s moral power. Han’s claim had been intended to flatter his patron, Sima suggested. In opposition to Han, he cited a second-century BCE authority to argue that all creatures have both good and wicked individuals among their genera. Sima Guang stated that there was no moral hierarchy between animals and humans, as Han’s essay had implied, and even suggested that his own cat’s behaviour would put some humans to shame. Nature here is allowed to triumph over nurture.⁷¹

Against these broadly practical uses and views of cats, inherited with few changes from the late Tang, a new significance had also been invested in them by the Song. We find a number of letters and poems of thanks sent between scholars in response to gifts of cats, suggesting the cat’s growing role as a cultural commodity.⁷² But the biggest shift was the rise of cat painting at that time. Evidence for cat painting may be traced back tentatively to the Eastern Jin and more firmly to the mid-Tang. In the tenth century, however, specialist cat painters emerged and surviving examples going back to the Song clearly depict cats in

⁷⁰ *Yongle dadian*, vol. 9, 19866.22b.

⁷¹ *Wenguo Wenzheng Sima gong wenji*, 67.9a–10a. This was also a view propounded by Sima Guang’s contemporary Lu Dian 陸佃 (1042–1102) in his discussion of other feline behaviour. See *Pi ya*, 4.10a.

⁷² For a sample of occasional compositions from throughout the Song dynasty, written either to request or to offer thanks for the gift of a cat, see *Shangu waiji shi zhu*, 7.975–6; *Chashan ji*, 8.18b; Li Huang 李璣 in *Mozhuang manlu*, 7.211; *Lu You ji*, 15.429; *Qixiao xiansheng Fubu ji*, 3.17a.

domestic situations, for example with children.⁷³ The tenth century also seems to have seen the appearance of dedicated cat fanciers, who began to evolve a specialist vocabulary for describing the different colour patterns of feline fur coats that they were able to produce by careful breeding.⁷⁴ By the eleventh century, other physical feline characteristics also contributed to a whole connoisseurship that had come to surround cats, as so much else. Of particular interest is the recording of long-haired cats, known as lion cats (*shimao* 獅貓), as a fancy variety explicitly bred for their aesthetic appeal, rather than for catching rats. As a result, a trade in cats (among other pets) seems to have been lively at the time.⁷⁵ One way to construe these developments would be to see them as marking the commodification of cats, as they became not just adjuncts to the protection of grain in storage or books, but also symbols of conspicuous consumption.

Cat Connoisseurship

Though the Mongol conquest of China in the course of the thirteenth century undoubtedly had profound consequences, the course of cat appreciation seems to have run on regardless, since it is to the period of Mongol domination that we must assign the first funerary commemoration of a cat to have made an impact on Chinese literature. The piece was written by Wuqiu Yan 吾邱衍 (1272–1311) for his cat, which ‘he loved like a human being’. Although the text of the commemoration does not seem to have survived by itself, it evidently impressed another contemporary writer, Ren Shilin 任士林 (1253–1309), enough to write a further comment of his own, from which we now know the degree of Wuqiu’s affection.⁷⁶ To the fourteenth century belongs another first, the earliest surviving monograph on the Chinese cat, though in fact this short composition, the *Namao jing* 納貓經 (Classic of Cat Acquisition), is more of a practical manual on how to settle a new cat in your home – ‘like a new bride’ – by a writer of horticultural and other handbooks, Yu Zongben 俞宗本 (late fourteenth century). His advice is reproduced in late Ming encyclopaedias, and also in Edo period Japan.⁷⁷

⁷³ For reference to an Eastern Jin cat painting, attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 344–406 CE), see *Zhi yue lu*, 1.405c24–406a07. For later cat paintings, see Müller (2009), 72–3; Cahill (1980), 74, 126, 161–2, 174, 231.

⁷⁴ Imamura (1986), 250–60. But Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202) describes a case in Lin’an, modern Hangzhou, in which a cat’s fur was dyed to increase its market value, *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志, ‘Yijian sanzhi ji’ 夷堅三志己, 9.1372 (we are grateful to Wilt Idema for this reference). And Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–98) refers to the practice among ethnically Hui women of dyeing the fur of cats and dogs, though for amusement rather than for financial gain, *Guixin zashi* 癸辛雜識, *xuji* 續集, A.135.

⁷⁵ Müller (2009), 72; Imamura (1986), 16–20. Long-haired breeds do not seem to have reached Europe prior to the Renaissance.

⁷⁶ *Songxiang ji*, 7.10b–11a (‘Ti Wu Zixing mao yi wen hou’ 題吾子行貓瘞文後). This corrects a couple of errors in Barrett (1998), 32n.42.

⁷⁷ Imamura (1986), 222–6.

This manual is very much in the tradition of Ming publishing seen as the diffusion of useful knowledge. It is rather different from three other monographs on the cat produced in Qing times, which offer encyclopaedic compilations of classified quotations: Wang Chutong's 王初桐 *Mao sheng* 貓乘 (The Cat's Progress), completed in 1798; *Xianchan xiaolu* 銜蟬小錄 (preface 1799) by Sun Sunyi 孫蓀意; and the nineteenth-century *Mao yuan* 貓苑 (The Garden of Cats) by Huang Han 黃漢 (preface 1853).⁷⁸ The tendency to gather accumulated materials relating to cat culture can already be seen in the sixteenth century, when the Ming writer Tian Rucheng 田汝成 collected and discussed three cat-related poems dating from the Song and one from earlier in his own dynasty, in a retrospective account of the culture of the Southern Song capital.⁷⁹ Examining the wealth of materials provided by the three Qing works demonstrates both the ease with which it would be possible to assemble a substantial modern monograph on cats in China covering aspects not treated here, such as folk beliefs about cats, and also the apparently firm establishment of the domestic cat as not just a utilitarian aid to pest control, but rather a companion in a multitude of Chinese homes. This impression is further reinforced by European visitors' swift recognition of the place held by the Chinese cat. The first British drawing of a Chinese cat, for instance, dates to the Macartney mission of 1793.⁸⁰

But to assume that the cat's position had become unassailable by the mid-nineteenth century would be to underestimate the strength of those forces in China conducive to change by that point. It was perhaps unfortunate that the domestic cat mixed in ordinary homes with animals that were not considered domestic in the same sense in the West. 'Clean the dirt in your homes! Keep the cats and dogs and chickens and pigs outside, where they belong!', said the Christian pastor Li Yu-ni from the Methodist Episcopal Mission, Fuzhou, in 1875.⁸¹ How many Chinese Christians did this in the name of hygiene is unclear, but it does show that the status of the cat as an indoor animal was still up for reconsideration in late imperial times, even after the thousand or more years of history outlined above. The twentieth century in China, of course, was to see actual pet purges even well after the Cultural Revolution, though cats appear to have fared better than dogs and are under no obvious threat in the twenty-first century, an era in which the internet – in Chinese and other languages – seems set to swamp us with a surfeit of feline imagery.⁸² But here, too, even if the modern history of the Chinese cat remains entirely unwritten, we cannot assume that the Western story of the cat is the only one.

⁷⁸ For Sun Sunyi's work, see Hu (1985), 464; and Yang (2017), 65–7. For *Mao yuan*, see Pasquet (1993). Both *Mao sheng* and *Mao yuan* are currently available in online versions.

⁷⁹ *Xihu youlan yuzhi*, 24.440.

⁸⁰ Legoux (1980), 27 – a sketch by William Alexander (1767–1816). ⁸¹ Austin (2007), 260.

⁸² Serpell (1996), 45.