2020

Review: Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature: Tales and Commentary

Jessica Moyer
Smith College, jmoyer@smith.edu

Recommended Citation

Brief Reviews

Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature: Tales and Commentary. Translated and introduced by WILT L. IDEMA. Seattle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2019. Pp. xvii + 254. $30.

The delightfully eclectic *Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature* centers on the legend of the underworld court case of the cat and the mouse. The book contains four translations of different versions of the legend and stories related to it, ranging from four to twenty-two pages in length and dating from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries: *The Execution of the Five Rats*, from the novel *One Hundred Court Cases*; the *Mutual Accusations of the Cat and the Mouse*, a brief prose parody of the case file genre; the *Scroll of the Accusation of the Mouse against the Cat,* appended to a *baojuan* or precious scroll manuscript; and the prosimetric narrative *A Tale without Shape or Shadow*. The last is a particularly valuable contribution to scholars, since the original text is only preserved in a variety of manuscript editions. Around the central theme of the cat–mouse conflict is arrayed a broad selection of heterogeneous material relating to cats and mice in Chinese culture. The book is sprinkled with translations of poems, ranging from the Odes' "Big Rat" to light-hearted verse by late imperial scholars in praise of their pet cats. There are also summaries of and translated excerpts from both scholarly treatises and popular narratives about cats and mice. Idema's analysis weaves this varied body of material together and explains the connections and divergences within it. The book ends with a chapter examining transformations of cat and mouse themes in literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—both recent adaptations of the folktales discussed in previous chapters and modern novels featuring cats and mice. The introduction and epilogue frame the *Mouse vs. Cat* legend specifically, and Chinese literature on animals generally, in the context of analogous texts and genres in world literature, from the Hellenistic *Batrachomyomachia* to the Persian *Conference of Birds* and the South Asian *Panchatantra*.

Mouse vs. Cat presents the stories it contains as examples of anthropomorphism in literature, in which humans use animals to think about ourselves. Here, the mouse's underworld accusation of the cat invites hearers and readers to consider the nature of interspecies conflict and of justice itself (a point underscored by Haiyan Lee's eloquent foreword to the book). The moment is timely for a re-examination of what might seem like a minor legend: the question of how justice is defined vis-à-vis our relationship to the non-human world is ever more pressing. *Mouse vs. Cat* itself does not provide a sustained argument in response to this question, but rather a series of observations and analyses showcasing the multiple perspectives of its rich variety of sources. Scholars of animal studies, ecocriticism, and posthuman criticism will find valuable food for thought in the texts translated here.

From a pedagogical perspective, the book bears some resemblance to the extremely useful volumes translated by Idema and published by Hackett, such as *The White Snake and Her Son* (2009) and *The Butterfly Lovers* (2010), that contain multiple versions of individual folk legends. But *Mouse vs. Cat* collects a wider variety of more distantly related materials, many of which are summarized rather than translated. On one hand, this approach allows the reader to trace the development of motifs and episodes in mouse and cat folklore and to recognize them when they are referred to in passing in the fully-translated versions of the tale. It offers a marvelous window into the evolving ecosystem of Chinese folklore. However, precisely because of the complexity of the web of connections developed throughout the book, using excerpts in the undergraduate classroom would require careful framing.

The accuracy of the translations in this volume is characteristically high, and Idema's approach to translation accounts for nearly every word of the original text. The provenance of each translated text is briefly described in the main text of the book. This is valuable not only to specialists who may wish to consult the original texts, but to provide neophytes with glimpses of how oral literature entered and circulated within the written tradition. Both the language and format are highly readable: the style is simple and straightforward, in keeping with that of the source material, and explanatory notes to the translations are given in the form of endnotes. This may frustrate those who prefer glancing down at footnotes to flipping back and forth to the endnotes, but it provides an uninterrupted narrative flow for non-specialists or those reading for pleasure, while keeping detailed information available to those who desire it. Indeed, the winsome erudition of the translations and analysis makes pleasure reading a genuine possibility. The discussion of animal literature in other world traditions is brief, more overview than analysis, but the notes provided are sufficient to guide curious readers into greater depth.

Mouse vs. Cat is simultaneously an entertaining exploration of a long-held personal interest and a well-timed case study of what it means for humans to think with animals in literature.

JESSICA MOYER
SMITH COLLEGE