Book Review: *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China*

Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China, by Liz P. Y. Chee. Duke University Press, 2021, + 288 pages.

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Two major global health crises of the 21st century, the SARS and the Covid-19 pandemics, are both said to have stemmed from the consumption of animals in China, a practice often linked to traditional Chinese beliefs in the medical efficacies of animals. However, by examining the rise of medicinal animals in the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1949 to the 1990s, Liz Chee dispels such perceptions with an alternative argument: Modern China's obsession with medicinal animals was grounded, above all, in the PRC's development of animal-based medicines to serve its economic and political agendas—a process Chee calls "faunal medicalization."

Mao's Bestiary charts the expansion of faunal medicalization in China across five chapters in chronological order. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the origins of the PRC's interest in animal-based medicines to the new state-owned pharmaceutical industry and Soviet tissue therapy research. Chapter 3 focuses on the Great Leap Forward (1958–61), during which the quest for animal traits conducive to healing human diseases led to mass farming of animals for their purported medical properties, such as deer antlers and gecko tails (claimed as cures for impotency and tuberculosis, respectively). By the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), as chapter 4 explains, the state encouraged grassroots innovation via folk remedies, exemplified by chicken blood therapy, for which patients are said to experience medical miracles upon the injection of chicken blood. The final chapter turns to post-Mao reforms until the 1990s, when faunal medicalization prioritized the cultivation of

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"economic animals" to highlight the commercial significance of animal-based medicines in the new market economy.

Mao's Bestiary offers a compelling analysis of the embeddedness of political economy in modern China's pursuit of animal medicines. During the Great Leap Forward, faunal medicalization was driven by the expansion of resources under Mao's command economy. Thereafter, virtually all animals could be marketed as food cures that maintained one's health (think ant wine and bear bile toothpaste, for instance). Moreover, international influences, such as British pharmaceutical competition, North Korean bear farming techniques, and Southeast Asian consumer demands, became part and parcel of the ever-expanding importance of medicinal animal products amid the meteoric rise of China's economy.

Crucially, Chee shows that the discourse of knowledge production is key to understanding faunal medicalization in modern China. Slogans, such as to "scientize" and "revolutionize," became politicized in their service to the communist state's agenda to legitimate the use of medicinal animals. During the Cultural Revolution, folk remedies were promoted as "scientific" to counter the idea that non-professionals could not create knowledge. Whereas folk remedies like chicken blood therapy constituted the discourse on "mining the experience of the people" (p. 162), Western medicines were declared "counterrevolutionary" (p. 129). By the post-Mao era, the language of protection paradoxically came to support an argument for "conserving" wild animals by farming their bodies (p. 144). In other words, the rhetoric of protection—of improving human health—became synonymous with the legitimation of exploitation.

Historians may find Chee's sources fragmented and lacking in diversity at times, given that she relies much of her evidence on ideologically charged pharmaceutical publications from the period. But such is the predicament faced by anyone who studies animals in the sea of anthropocentric materials we call modern Chinese history, and Chee rightly acknowledges such limitations. Instead, one should view *Mao's Bestiary* as a step toward confronting the archival restraints of studying animals in China and welcome Chee's focus on medicinal animals as a refreshing lens to understanding the pivotal events of 20th-century China. Moreover, *Mao's Bestiary* encourages us to think empathetically about human-animal relations in geographies where animals are rarely protagonists in texts, and about what animal agency means when it is not predefined by those who write about them. It is here that Chee's reflection while visiting a bear farm offers inspiration for those who hope to shed light on the plight faced by animals in China and beyond (pp. 20–25).

Mao's Bestiary is a fascinating and richly documented book that invites urgent conversations about animals in China. This book will benefit not only historians of animals, science, and medicine but also anyone concerned with animal welfare and global health in an age when the fate of humans and animals has become more entangled than ever before. ■