

Call for Papers

Rethinking the People's Republic of China (1949 to the Present Time) through human-animal relations

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Emerging in the 1980s alongside what has been labeled the “animal turn” (Singer 1975; Ritvo 2007), animal history has since become an ever-growing field within the broader scope of animal studies and the study of human-animal relations. By recognizing the historicity of animals as actors in their own right who have also shaped human history, animal history forms part of a greater intellectual and scientific endeavor to shed light on underrepresented groups within human

societies and to reexamine the relationships between humans and the natural world in which they are embedded. It also constitutes a challenge to anthropocentrism, whose pervasiveness in academic writings and society at large, according to researchers on animal history, prevents us from taking into consideration the subjectivity of animals (Roscher, Krebber, and Mizelle 2021: 12).

Erica Fudge was among the first scholars to delve into the different approaches undertaken to study human-animal relations and animal lives in the field of humanities at large. She delineated three patterns (or “positions”) of animal history writings by distinguishing the degree of autonomy and centrality allowed to animals studied through the lens of human-animal relations in a selection of works. While the “intellectual history” perspective focuses on debates stirred up by evolving conceptions of animals in given times and spaces, the “humane history” approach usually seeks to unveil certain aspects of human society ignored by existing social history works. In this framework, the study of animals becomes a tool for gaining new knowledge about humans themselves. Lastly, in the “holistic” conception developed in a handful of works, the autonomy of animals, such as pets in nineteenth-century Paris (Kete: 1994), is manifested in the way they make human actors wonder about the very definition of humanity, blurring the lines between humans and non-humans (Fudge: 2002: 6-10).

With still relatively few works engaging with animal-related issues, Chinese studies appear to be quite removed from these debates. Contemporary China, considered from the foundation of the PRC in 1949 to nowadays, seems to be even more evasive from them and is rarely analyzed through animal lenses.

Acknowledging the multifaceted evolutions that took place in the PRC since 1949, this special issue of *China Perspectives* proposes to look at these transformations through human-animal relations — not only in the hope of suggesting alternative explanations of known facts, but also to unveil new patterns of evolutions in social groups and political phenomena. By doing so, a wide set of new social practices, urban fashions, and redefinitions of subjectivity and social interactions that burgeoned after Mao’s era can be scrutinized. In this context, animals and their evolving places and roles in Chinese society can function as keys to understanding the transformations that have occurred. In this regard, the PRC period appears to be a fruitful field to perform animal-related studies through a variety of approaches that reflect the diversity of existing methodological frameworks in animal studies.

Although animals and their symbolic representations in literary and historical sources have been deemed worthy of interest since earlier decades (Van Gulik 1967), it was not until the 2000s that what Huaiyu Chen labeled the “Asian turn” (*Yazhou zhuanxiang* 亞洲轉向) (Chen 2023: 155) took place in the field of animal history. Postcolonial studies informed a great number of the works focused on human (colonizers and colonized) and human-nonhuman interactions under British rule (Saha 2021), where questions such as hunting (Hughes 2013) and animal protection (Samiparna 2021) stand out as relevant lenses to shed new light on the history of British colonial rule in the subcontinent.

In the case of China, environmental history has served as a major gateway to document and retrace some animals’ lives – and their plight. Mark Elvin’s history of the “retreat of the elephants” (Elvin 2004) in the course of Chinese history integrated an animal perspective within the broader framework of one of the first environmental histories of China. It was also the case in other local monographs where animals, hunting techniques, and ecosystems were central to the investigation (Coggins 2002). From a broader scope, the links between animals and medicine during Mao’s era (Chee 2021), epidemics (Poon 2014), and health management, especially in modern urban environments (Chan 2015), as well as the often-connected topic of animal welfare (Poon 2015; Li 2021; Cao 2015; Barber 2015; Barber and Hathaway: 2021), have also clustered scholarly attention over the last decade. Environmental history tends to remain an overarching framework in which animal lives are embedded and acknowledged, as in Judith Shapiro’s *Mao’s War Against Nature* (2001).

Another prism favored by scholars for examining animals in past and present Chinese societies is religion. Religious studies constitute a major framework for animal history in China, ever since Roel Sterckx’s major contributions to understanding the ritual functions of pre-imperial China’s animals endowed with cosmic potential (Sterckx 2002). Other groundbreaking works have chosen to focus on specific animals to retrace the social and political significance of religious taboos over the course of time (Goossaert 2005), while some scholars have engaged with the different strategic representations of animals elaborated by the main Chinese religions, focusing on their symbolic meanings (Chen 2023 [2]).

Lastly, knowledge production is another central issue in a significant number of animal-related works. This is exemplified in the first collective work devoted to animals in China, where the “historical view of animals and animal knowledge”

(Schäfer, Siebert, and Sterckx 2019: 4) is a primary focus of the authors. The editors' emphasis on "longue durée" approaches to species and "regimes of attention" to animals, offering a highly stimulating perspective, reflects a desire to see more histories of animal knowledge. Beyond the existence of these few favored analytical prisms, other coexisting writing patterns also inform the existing works on animals in China. Some of them choose to focus on specific species across different times—for instance, the tiger, whose political functions are of primary importance in understanding the interplay of different powers in many Asian societies over time, especially in the context of colonialism (Boomgaard 2001; Seeley and Skabelund, 2015, 2020). Another approach deals with animals during a designated dynasty, "mostly the Song and Qing," as observed (Schäfer, Siebert, and Sterckx: 2019 3).

This overview of the main trends in animal-related writings within the field of Chinese studies highlights numerous gaps that this special issue seeks to address, beginning with the chronological scope. Indeed, while the PRC period has also been studied in recent works, some of them dealing with political and diplomatic history, such as in Songster's *Panda Nation* (2018), or agricultural and political history with the development of carp breeding during Mao's era (Jiang 2017), a more comprehensive, animal-based approach to this period is needed, as it could provide new perspectives on many dimensions (social, political, economic, cultural etc.) of the PRC.

Scrutinizing animals' lives and the dynamics of human-animal relations provides an opportunity to reexamine the traditional chronology of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by uncovering continuities with the Republican era and highlighting nuances within its distinct periods. Beginning with the foundation of the PRC and the Maoist era (1949–1976), progressing to the Reform period characterized by Deng Xiaoping's transformative leadership (1979–1992), and transitioning into two decades of collective leadership within the CCP (1992–2012), marked by increasing economic and cultural liberalization, the current regime has now retreated from a fair number of these liberalizing trends. Where do animals fit into this historical narrative? How can an analysis of their roles, uses, and status contribute to rethinking existing paradigms for understanding the trajectory of the PRC until nowadays?

Animals, and the ways they are—forcedly—integrated by various authorities into state-building narratives at different moments of the PRC, are thus crucial to rethinking the continuities and disruptions shaping the CCP's rule over the country.

They also reveal policy shifts influenced by events linking humans and animals, such as zoonoses (Keck 2020). From the 1980s onwards, the emergence of new legislations seeking to offer minimal yet growing protection to animals and the rise of new social activists voicing their concerns in the public arena about the treatment of animals also reflect paradigm shifts that underscore the existence of publics and public debates in contemporary China.

Encouraging the use of multidisciplinary analytical frameworks, this call for papers seeks to reflect on various aspects and dimensions of how animals were and are used, thought of, and how they were and are forced to or managed to avoid interacting with humans from distinctive social backgrounds. This special issue welcomes approaches that mobilize a wide array of disciplines, including animal sciences, and that draw on various methodological frameworks. Beyond works that examine thoughts, representations, and practices regarding animals, we also encourage the submission of innovative explorations of human-animal relations against the grain that challenge anthropocentric views and elect to center on animal agency. Such explorations could provide fruitful examinations of the agency of animals and its impact on humans and human societies, as well as on the production of artifacts and symbols within these societies. As a result, articles that deal with animal lives and biographies throughout the PRC period, aiming to produce accounts of how human lives are shaped and transformed through animal agency, could provide creative narratives that illuminate the reality of non-human lives under the PRC.

Among other options, we suggest the following—though not necessarily mutually exclusive—approaches:

- State-building, ideology dissemination, propaganda, mass mobilization and animal appropriation;
- Impacts of economic growth and economic reforms on non-humans;
- Animals and evolving social practices (e.g., pet-keeping);
- Human-animal relations in a globalized economic and cultural context: health issues (e.g., epidemics, zoonoses), animal factories, breeding, meat production, slaughterhouses, and consumption issues;
- Ecosystems' mutations
- Rural/urban divisions and assigned functions to species (e.g., working animals, entertainment animals);
- Animal and knowledge production and practices: science societies, museums, scientific institutions, experimental laboratories;

- Zoos, other sites of animal-related shows, and the integration of animals in a broader consumer culture including entertainment and tourism;
- Animals as cultural artifacts and representations in the arts and the development of the media industry;
- Social activism, such as protection societies and the public sphere;
- Vegetarianism and religious practices.

Submission Guidelines

We invite interested authors to submit an **abstract of 300-500 words**, along with the paper's title and the contributor's biography (all in English), by **May 30th, 2025**. **Full papers** will be due by **November 30th, 2025**.

If you are interested in contributing to this special feature of *China Perspectives*, abstracts and queries should be sent to Joachim Boittout at joachim.boittout@u-paris.fr.

All submitted papers will undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. Research articles (written in English) should be 9,000 words long, and follow the format of articles guidelines available here: <https://www.cefc.com.hk/china-perspectives/submissions/style-guide/>.

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