

Wilt L. Idema. *Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology*. Cambria Sinophone World Series. Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2019. xii, 354 pp. Hardcover, \$119.99, ISBN 978-1-60497-954-1.

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Animal studies has been flourishing across the boundaries of many humanities disciplines in the past decade. Interestingly, another important book on animals in Chinese history appeared in 2019, which is *Animals through Chinese History. Earliest Times to 1911*, edited by Roel Sterckx, Martina Siebert, and Dagmar

Schäfer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Vertebrate animals, particularly those that closely interact with humans, attract more attention than other animals. Wilt L. Idema's new book *Insects in Chinese Literature* is the first comprehensive volume on the images of various insects in Chinese literature through the ages, with a focus on the premodern period. Although the subject on animals in Chinese literature has appeared in both Asian- and Western-language scholarship, very few books and articles have been devoted to insects or mostly invertebrates. In this sense, Idema's new book occupies a unique position of adding a welcoming reference to our understanding of animals in Chinese literature and even Asian literature in general. Furthermore, for the first time, through lucid and concise translations, this book makes many obscure Chinese popular literary texts accessible to the English-speaking world.

Idema starts his book by noting modern writer Lu Xun's famous essay on the insects in the *Hundred-Plant Garden* at his parents' home. He traced it back to Lu's connection with a Dutch novel *De kleine Johannes* perhaps via its German version during Lu's study of medicine in Japan in the early twentieth century. He then categorizes Chinese literature before the Literary Revolution in 1917 and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 into three traditions based on the practical means and purposes in the daily life of readers: texts for study and recitation, texts for entertaining reading, and texts for performance and listening. The first category refers to the tradition of *belles lettres*, the second category refers mostly to classical and narrative literature, and the third one refers to popular literature. Idema's book divides the majority of texts he studied and translated into two big groups: *belles lettres* texts (nine chapters for part 1) and popular literature (four chapters for part 2). In contrast, the narrative literature section has only one chapter in between.

Part 1 focuses on insects as individuals and groups in a broad—not strictly scientific—sense, such as the silkworm, cicada, mayfly, click beetle, firefly, moth, mantis, spider, ant, bee, butterfly, cricket, grasshopper, locust, fly, mosquito, scorpion, louse, flea, and bedbug. Given the myriad species on our planet, these insects represent only a small portion in nature. Yet, in terms of their representations in Chinese literature and especially in contemporary scholarship, Idema's book already offers a comprehensive account of many insects. This group of insects seems to be closely connected to human life than many other insects, which is why they frequently appeared in premodern Chinese authors' writings. The first nine chapters of part 1 compiled and translated numerous excerpts from the tradition of *belles lettres*, including various genres such as poems (*shi*), rhapsodies (*fu*), lyrics (*ci*), arias (*qu*), and essays (*wen*), chronologically arranged from the earliest sources to the most present. Each chapter has a short and concise introduction explaining literary and cultural backgrounds about the selected literary texts, and its main section is the translations of excerpts. These brief introductions might not be adequate

from the perspective of cultural history, but they serve as excellent guides for reading translations. For instance, chapter 1 deals with the silkworm, perhaps the most important worm for sericulture in Chinese history. Idema introduced how it was represented in some classical accounts such as the *Book of Poems* and the *Book of Xunzi*, as well as in medieval poems, but omitted many studies on cultural history. For instance, Stuart Young noted how medieval Chinese Buddhism treated silkworms. Idema did not rely on Angela Sheng's solid research on the silk as currency on the Silk Road. Instead, he briefly cited the popular book on the Silk Road by Valerie Hansen. Chapter 5 touches on the bee, which should be read together with David Pattinson's chapter on honeybee in *Animals through Chinese History*. While chapter 6 introduced the locust in Chinese literature, it should remind that many Chinese and Japanese scholars, including myself, also discuss the implications of the "locust disaster" and the locust-eliminating movements in the history of Chinese agriculture. In general, readers might also be interested in reading Ann Heirman's article "How to Deal with Dangerous and Annoying Animals: A Vinaya Perspective" (*Religions* 2019, 10, 113) together with Idema's book.

Nevertheless, I should highlight two strengths in part 1. Idema's mastery of contemporary Chinese scholarship is manifested by his often picking up the most reliable critical editions of these Chinese texts. His erudition acquired from his experience of reading Chinese literature for several decades by annotating numerous historical and literary allusions along with his elegant translations is equally, if not more, impressive. Although he did not give sources or citations for most allusions, non-sinologist readers would be able to rapidly learn about or at least be aware of these stories in the vast literary and cultural traditions of China in more than two millennia.

In contrast to some excerpts in part 1, such as poems by famous writers that have been known to readers or even already have English translations, part 2 includes mostly local popular literary texts that are often known to readers by their collectors, compilers, or performers rather than original authors. Chapters 11–14 are organized with eventful themes, including weddings, funerals, battles and wars, and disputes and court cases. In these events, insects appeared as anthropomorphized figures acting in dramatic roles who could talk and behave. For example, chapter 11 translated three texts, including *The Precious Scroll on the Marriage of the Mantis*, *The Dragonfly's Abduction of the Bride*, and *The Dung Beetle Abducts His Bride*, with a brief introduction. Since these texts mentioned Bodhisattva and King Yama, they might be connected with the Buddhist thoughts of reincarnations and merit-making if their Buddhist context could be further explored. Chapter 12 translated two texts focusing on the funerals, such as *The Hundred-Day Insects* and *The War of Insects*. Chapter 13 continues to translate one more ballad titled *The War of Insects* from Yangzhou and a very lengthy Minnanese ballad from Taiwan titled *The Song of the War of*

*the Fly against the Mosquito*. The last chapter translated three texts focusing on court disputes with extensive conversations, including *The Southern Window Dream*, *The Louse Cries Out His Grievances*, and *The White Louse Voices His Grievances*.

In the conclusion section, Idema compared the insects in Chinese and Western literature. He noted that the silkworm seemed to be absent in premodern Western literature. However, the cicada played an important role in both Chinese and Western literature. Compared to Chinese literature, in classical Western literature, social insects such as bees and ants seem to be the most important insects, and they continued to dominate the Western literary tradition till the modern period. Furthermore, Idema suggested that noxious insects and body parasites seem to be more common in Western literature than in Chinese literature. Yet in Chinese literature, spider appeared as the most erotic insect. It might be interesting to consider the roles of these different insects in the social life and natural environment in the historical West and China. Another issue might be the difference between insects in North and South China because of different climate and natural environment. After all, the daily experience and ancient knowledge of these insects seem crucial for the literary authors to compose their works.

Overall, this is a fascinating and reader-friendly anthology. Occasionally, there are minor problems, including incorrect translations and untranslated titles. Let me raise several examples from the first and last chapters. In chapter 1, in the translation of the *Origin of the Silkworm* by Gan Bao, the opening line in the third paragraph, 為畜生有非常之情,故厚加芻養, was translated as “The father was exceptionally fond of the animal and provided it amply with food” (p. 29), which seems to be a misunderstanding of the original sentence. It could be translated as “For this animal has extraordinary emotions (toward humans), her father provided it amply with food.” In the same text, in the second last line of the last paragraph, the Chinese character *sang* 喪 was translated as “to bury” (p. 30), which should be “to lose.” And in chapter 14, *The Drunken Man’s Talk* (*Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄) could be changed to *The Record of a Drunken Elder’s Talk* (p. 225). A folk-performing art *Liulin Sanxianshu* 柳林三弦書 remains untranslated (p. 229). It could be translated as *The Three-String Book from the Willow Forest*. They could be easily fixed. Of course, most translations are as much reliable and elegant as they are expected. I believe that readers will enjoy reading this book tremendously.

Huaiyu Chen

*Huaiyu Chen is an associate professor of religious studies at Arizona State University, specializing in Chinese religions and history.*