

WILT L. IDEMA:

Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology.

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Insects in Chinese Literature: A Study and Anthology comprises a collection of translated tales, poems and performance texts on insects in a wide variety of traditional Chinese literature. The book is divided into two main parts and an intermezzo. Part I discusses insects in so-called *belles lettres*, poetry and essays written in standard classical language that were popular throughout the two millennia of imperial China. These texts highlight social morality, and avoid any semblance of fantasy or inauthenticity. Rather, they concentrate specifically on vices and virtues, with the aim of teaching the reader a moral lesson. Part II focuses on popular literature, including epics, ballads, verse narratives and prosimetric texts. These works were usually written in local dialects and performed in settings ranging from ritual ceremonies to commercial activities. They comprised a genre that attracted an ever-larger audience in the final centuries of imperial China. Between the two main parts, a brief but entertaining intermezzo discusses insects in narrative literature. Such works, which were composed during the first and second millennia, were written in both classical and vernacular Chinese, with the content frequently based on sagas, legends, or even gossip. Each chapter is prefaced with a short introduction that serves as a useful guideline and framework for the reader. These also function as effective teasers that inspire curiosity as to what might follow.

Insects have only ever been a minor topic in China's various literary traditions. Yet, all of the harmony, conflict and debate of human life is often reflected in tales and fables that are ostensibly set in the insect world. In the section on *belles lettres*, each individual insect is granted its own chapter, starting with that quintessentially Chinese creature, the silkworm. Here, as in every other chapter, parallels between the ups and downs of human and insect existence are apparent. Later, the cyclical nature of life is a central theme of the chapter on cicadas. "Lessons learned from insects" (pp. 49–56) presents a touching account of the brief but blissful life of the mayfly as well as a more harrowing exploration of a moth being drawn inexorably towards a flame. The poet Chenggong Sui (231–273) beautifully frames the human foibles of pride and arrogance in his description of a mantis folding its wings and rearing up like an eagle, only to be consumed by a hungry sparrow. Wilt Idema's elegant translations bring all of these scenes and many others vividly to life. The reader shares the anxiety of flies and mosquitoes caught in the transparent curtain of a spider's web, admires conscientious ants as they selflessly undertake their daily tasks, and delights in a butterfly's joyful life. It is impossible to miss the critique of human inequality in the story of worker bees that are unable to profit from their own labours, and social injustice is similarly highlighted in the fable of a swarm of locusts that decimates whole fields, just as corrupt officials do. Meanwhile, tales of slanderous flies, wicked mosquitoes, annoying lice, bloodsucking bedbugs and backbiting scorpions turn the spotlight on some of humanity's all-too-prevalent characteristics. Such traits are pointedly emphasized in Idema's graceful translations of traditional poetry, and he also provides helpful annotations when necessary.

The second part of the book explores the popular literature of late imperial China. In this part, insects are not presented as individual characters; rather, they play roles in performances and debates, and feature at weddings, funerals, battles and wars, disputes and court cases. A number of fascinating stories are presented, such as

the *Precious Scroll on the Marriage of the Mantis*, which was written in the Wu dialect and possibly performed as light entertainment (pp. 164–5), and the entertaining but unnerving *The Mantis Abducts His Bride* (pp. 168–81). Several other tales were written as songs, such as *The War of the Insects*, from Yangzhou, in which a bee urges its fellow insects to wage war against spiders (pp. 202–5). In a few performance texts, insects converse with one another, such as when a mosquito and a fly squabble over a rotten peach and end up entangled in a spider's web. Once again, the parallels with the frustrations and ironies of our own daily struggles and futile disputes are clear.

The volume concludes with a brief comparison of Chinese and Western literature. Insects have rarely played a prominent role in either, notwithstanding a handful of texts, such as Frederik van Eeden's nineteenth-century novel *De Kleine Johannes* (*Little Johannes*), which explores a young boy's interactions with a range of tiny creatures. Idema explains that the famous Chinese author Lu Xun (1881–1936) translated van Eeden's text, and rightly cites this as evidence of transcultural fascination in the lives of insects and the mirror they can hold up to human existence. However, context dictates that the reflections in that mirror are infinitely variable, as this absorbing anthology demonstrates.

Overall, Idema explores Chinese culture from a beguiling new angle. Vices and virtues, successes and failures are presented in a series of moving, reflective, educational and/or hilarious stories, all translated into exquisite English. Some readers may simply enjoy the entertaining fables at face value, while others may wish to delve deeper into the rich history of Chinese literature, guided by Idema's brief but incisive annotations. Either way, it is a work that will reward frequent and regular visitation. These stories were not written to be consumed in a single sitting. Instead, they should be read as the original authors intended – to stimulate moments of self-reflection as well as more thoughtful contemplation of insects themselves.

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RODERICH PTAK:

China und Asiens maritime Achse im Mittelalter: Konzepte, Wahrnehmungen, offene Fragen.

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This small booklet represents the outcome of a lecture the author gave at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften to an audience who probably were not experts in the field of maritime exchange during the medieval period. The lecture covered a broad spectrum of topics: it ranged from the years 1000 to 1500 with an emphasis on the fifteenth century, and covered the Indian Ocean from the Japanese shores to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The author readily admits that it would be impudent to try to cover even the major incidents in a small booklet as presented, especially as many basic problems are not yet resolved. Philippe Beaujard's monumental recent work on the history of the Indian Ocean