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Animals and Human Society in Asia: An Overview and Premises

Rotem Kowner, Guy Bar-Oz, Michal Biran,
Meir Shahar and Gideon Shelach-Lavi

The humanities and the social sciences have become increasingly aware of the significance of the interactions between animals and humans in the course of the past few decades. Anthropologists in particular have referred to this growing interest in the human–animal relationship as the “animal turn,” the “trans-species turn,” or the “post-human turn.”¹ This new perspective is transforming our understanding of animals’

¹E.g. Cerulo (2009), Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), Kohn (2013), Paleček and Risjord (2013), and Whitehead (2009).

R. Kowner (✉)
Department of Asian Studies,
The University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel
e-mail: kowner@research.haifa.ac.il

G. Bar-Oz
Zinman Institute of Archaeology,
The University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel
e-mail: guybar@research.haifa.ac.il

effect on the development of human society and culture as well as challenging our rigid hierarchy that places humans as rulers and the rest of the natural world as subordinates. While the “animal turn” itself began with a Western-centered bias, it has recently become evident in Asian Studies too, with monographs and articles published on this subject from an Asian perspective.²

Asia, it must be understood, is not just another region, or even a continent in this respect. This largest continent, in terms of surface, currently contains, and has formerly contained, around 60% or more of humankind, and was the source of paramount developments in human culture. Indeed, civilizations have flourished and perished in this region, including early farming communities and chiefdoms, early city-states empires, and national states. It is also notable for the emergence of close contacts between animals and human society that went far beyond hunting, fishing, and gathering. It was in Asia, for example, that humans began domesticating, rearing, and breeding animals, as well as developing numerous methods that utilized both animals and animal products in the service of humanity. Pastoral nomadism, for example, a mode of production which depends on animals, has played a major role in the premodern history of East, Central, and Western Asia.

²See Russell (2011).

M. Biran
Institute of Asian and African Studies,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
e-mail: biranm@mail.huji.ac.il

M. Shahaar
Department of East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel
e-mail: mshahaar@tauex.tau.ac.il

G. Shelach-Lavi
Department of Asian Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
Jerusalem, Israel
e-mail: gideon.shelach@mail.huji.ac.il

At the same time, however, and unlike Europe, Asia remains a continent where many wild animals, and large mammals in particular, may still be found in their natural habitats even if their conservation status is often referred to as “threatened,” “endangered,” or “on the verge of extinction.” The low extinction rate in Asia can also be explained by the long period of interaction between humans and animals, which allowed the development of an equilibrium between predator and prey. Furthermore, the size of the continent and the diversity of its geographic habitats facilitated the spread of several human species and numerous animal taxa over the last one and a half million years, as is evident from the zooarcheological record. This lengthy exposure must have resulted in animal–human co-evolution, borne out by the low extinction rate.³

The importance of Asia in this respect notwithstanding, the development of research on the interaction between humans and animals in this continent is still in its infancy. At present, it is focused on single case studies or, at most, on specific regions in specific periods or on specific interactions.⁴ Incredibly, no book has hitherto attempted to offer a comprehensive overview that would not only address the various regions within Asia but also the different aspects, as well as the possible uniqueness, of human–animal interactions in the entire region and their consequences throughout various eras from prehistory to the present day.

The interdisciplinary and interregional approach adopted by this volume reflects our aspiration toward filling in this scholarly lacuna. By gathering scholars working in disciplines as diverse as archeology, history, anthropology, art, religion, literature, and cultural studies, we sought to provide a multifaceted picture of the representations of, as well as the roles of and the attitudes toward animals in various Eastern, Central, Southern, and Western Asian habitats. For this end, the twelve thematically arranged chapters offered below examine the diverse roles that wild animals, livestock, and fish, real or metaphorical, have played

³Tchernov (1984) and Bar-Oz and Weissbrod (2017).

⁴E.g. Sterckx (2002), Goossaert (2005a), Allsen (2006), Shehada (2012), and Sterckx et al. (2019).

in Asian history, society, and culture. Encompassing a period that begins in distant prehistorical times and passes through the ancient world, and Mongol Eurasia (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) on its way to the present, it examines a variety of topics ranging from the hunting and domestication of animals, through dietary practices and sacrifice, hunting and war animals, to the representation of animals in literature and art. It thus not only provides a crucial perspective on human interactions with the environment, but also makes multiple contributions to multiple fields, such as Animal Studies, Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, and even World History, as well as many other related fields. In other words, this book offers a unique perspective.

Accordingly, the book's twelve thematic chapters seek to elaborate upon and validate the following premises:

1. Due to its intensive and relatively advanced human settlement since prehistorical times and to the wide variety of animals available, Asia had been the cradle of animal domestication and consequently of the use of these animals for food and for military purposes.
2. Due to its extreme diversity of ecosystems, human cultures, and animals (and domesticated animals in particular), Asia offers an ideal laboratory for examining their interaction with regard to human–animal relations.
3. There have been mutual influences and often also close ties between the various areas of the Asian continent with respect to the use of animals and the attitudes toward them.
4. The use of animals for food and for other various utilitarian purposes remains a major concern in Asia in modern times and even today.
5. As the cradle of the world's major religions, Asia has been a major site for the emergence of moral teachings and ethical guidance on the treatment of animals and on attitudes toward them. Their legacy still affects the lives of billions of humans to this very day.

In what follows, we discuss the volume's four main sections and elaborate on the way each of the twelve thematic chapters attempts to broaden our understanding of the main issues we address.