

A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*. Edited and translated and with commentary by Richard E. Strassberg. 2002. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. Pp. 314 plus illustrations, notes, bibliography, glossary. \$75.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0-520218-442

Sometime between the fourth and first centuries B.C.E., as ancient China emerged from the Warring States period to become a single unified empire, unknown scribes—possibly related to a shaman tradition, or possibly influenced by the new emphasis on text-based knowledge—put into writing descriptions of hundreds of beings believed to inhabit the unknown territories bordering the “Central Kingdom.” Richard Strassberg’s translation and commentary on that compilation, known as the *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, along with his introduction to the history of the text and its illustrations, is a window into the worldview and beliefs of ancient China.

Those who are hoping that this translation of the *Guideways* might provide information about or insights into ancient China’s pharmacological or botanical knowledge will be disappointed. To be sure, the version of the text Strassberg relies upon, compiled at the turn of the fourth century B.C.E., records some 500 creatures, 130 pharmaceuticals, 435 plants, and numerous mountains and rivers, and various metals and minerals. From that total, though, Strassberg selected 345 “strange creatures,” mostly fantastic or mythological beings ranging from birds with human faces, to nine-tailed foxes, gods and goddesses, and many-headed and fork-tongued people believed to inhabit far-away regions. Strassberg’s interest in the text is more about what it says about the worldview of the ancient Chinese than what we would call their “natural” world.

The universe (*tian xia*, or “All Under Heaven”), according to the *Guideways*, was ordered spatially, radiating out from a civilized Central Kingdom ruled by Chinese, to regions inhabited by barbarian peoples, and to “the wilds,” all of which was surrounded by mountains and the four seas. Inhabiting these parts of the world were the Supreme God Di, other gods, culture heroes (such as those who invented agriculture and irrigation), shamans (who knew how to extract useful essences from nature), corpses, and strange creatures of all kinds. Beyond the four seas lay lands inhabited by all manner of even-more fantastic beings as well as various gods. Navigating in this world was precarious, for the mountains were the home of gods and strange creatures. The *Guideways* purported to be a description of those remote mountains and a guide for getting through them safely by avoiding the harmful creatures and knowing the proper sacrifices to the resident gods. Strassberg is most interested in the descriptions of those “strange creatures.”

A typical entry begins with some geography, a description of the mountain, and a comment on the creatures found there. For example, entry 75 reads as follows: “Huan. One hundred *li* traveling by water further west stands Wing-View Mountain, which lacks plants and trees but contains much metal and jade. There is a beast dwelling here whose form resembles a wildcat with one eye and three tails. It is called the Huan, and it is capable of uttering all kinds of sounds. This creature can repel evil forces. If a piece is worn against the skin, it will cure

jaundice." The selections of the *Guideways* that Strassberg translates and comments upon are accompanied by illustrations of the creatures in their mountainous settings.

Virtually all of these creatures were efficacious if consumed or worn as amulets: eating a particular fish will prevent swellings; a turtle talisman can prevent deafness; eating a beast that resembles a wildcat with a mane can prevent jealousy. Seeing other beasts or birds constituted omens of famine, rebellion, etc. Some of the creatures appear to have been real (e.g., entries 22, 27, 42, 135, 194), and some mountains and rivers also have been identified. Adding further to the apparent reliability of the *Guideways*, known animals (e.g., tigers, entry 155) sometimes make an appearance. Camels (entry 95) are also described and drawn quite imaginatively, indicating the semi-mythical nature of the animal to ancient Chinese.

Rather than parsing the question of the geographic or natural reliability of the *Guideways*, Strassberg thinks that the significance of the *Guideways* resides in what it can tell us about ancient Chinese beliefs, or what interrogation of the text and its illustrations reveal about changing Chinese attitudes toward knowledge. For, unlike medieval European bestiaries, Strassberg claims that literate ancient Chinese and folk of the early modern period believed that these creatures and places were real, not allegorical. His 79-page introduction is a very useful and interesting exploration of the historical circumstances under which the text was produced, of the various commentators and compilers of different editions and the social and intellectual worlds that influenced successive generations' readings of the text, of the history of the illustrations, and of the *Guideway's* taxonomy and organization of the world.

By reading the *Guideways* and contemplating the illustrations, Strassberg hopes that the "reader can observe a worldview expressed mythologically in which human beings dwell alongside a host of extrahuman powers who are to be treated with knowledge and respect to avoid calamity" (pp. 78-79). He also hopes that we moderns will be able to connect with ancient Chinese by "deriv[ing] fascination and significance" from these strange creatures (p. 79). Certainly, reading through the translated text does cause one to wonder. Does eating the red Ru-fish (entry 15), for instance, prevent scabies? As a fantastic creature, of course, the Chinese could not have eaten it. But did the belief that a certain fish would cure scabies spur a search for a substitute among the fish that the Chinese did have? Or was the relationship between text and China's natural pharmacopoeia vice versa?

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