Editor's Introduction

With the present issue *Asian Folklore Studies* (formerly *Folklore Studies*) completes sixty-five years of publication. For a human being it would be the time for retirement or, for those with a more forward-oriented attitude, the time to start a second career. In either case the idea of change is included, and change is often an occasion to reflect on the past and to formulate new hopes and perspectives for the future. This issue marks a change for the journal, but it is not so much my intention to propose new perspectives as to consider for a few moments what the journal has been doing so far.

Throughout our lifetimes we share a considerable amount of time and space with animals: wild animals, livestock, and pets. Some animals become our friends and partners to such an extent that we truly grieve when we lose them; on the other hand, we value some mainly as a source of food for our pleasure, yet despise others as nuisances or even pests.

Although in some respects animals belong to our natural environment as much as plants and stones, our relations with animals are conspicuously different from those we might have with plants or stones, even if the latter might be precious to us. Although plants are living beings as well, their expressions of life are markedly different from those of animals, a difference encapsulated in a term that is used for animals and humans alike, namely "sentient beings." Because of this kind of commonality between the two species, humans are sometimes reluctant to kill animals; they may even go to great lengths to avoid killing even the smallest insect. We may also impose upon animals our feelings and assumptions, sometimes to such an extent that an animal is shaped in an

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image we like or is drilled to learn quasi human behavior: a dog might be made to wear a rain coat and hat to look like a fashionable woman or man, or a monkey is made to assume a subservient posture. We project feelings or images we harbor about the society we live in onto animals so that they may become the surrogate bearers of our hopes, the butt of our frustrations, the object of our sarcasm, and at times even the most appropriate mediator with an "other," such as a deity or a spirit, of a dimension entirely different from the this-worldly one shared by animals and humans.

The present issue was conceived with the intention in mind to mark the completion of the sixty-fifth volume to include a topic that was not exactly outlandish and yet somewhat unusual in comparison with previous issues. The topic that presented itself clearly to me was "Folklore of Animals," which probably, I believe, came about partly due to the reminiscences that came to mind as I considered the beginnings of the journal sixty-five years ago in a beautiful and intriguing environment in Beijing, and my own beginnings as fieldworker in rural Japan some thirty or so years ago.

The journal began as the official publication of the ethnological museum attached to what was Fu Jen University in Beijing at that time. The museum and the journal found a home in the elaborate and fanciful buildings of the former Palace of Prince Gong. Today the Palace and its gardens are a tourist attraction of Beijing. When I had the opportunity to visit the Palace a few years ago for the first time, I was quite moved by the thought that I was standing on the very spot where the journal that I was entrusted with had begun. But then I was struck by the ubiquity of images of bats; there was even a man-made grotto shaped in the form of a bat. I was puzzled because I could not imagine why this animal, which I felt to be somewhat eerie, should be featured so prominently in this Palace. It did not take long before I learned that the bat is an auspicious animal in China and that at least part of this thinking is linked to the characters used for the animal's name *bian fu* 蝙蝠, because the second one includes a sign that represents "luck," "good fortune." If I venture to offer a literal translation of these characters it would mean something like "insect of good fortune." It is no wonder, then, that images of this animal are so conspicuous within the Palace grounds.

The second experience that came to mind is of a truly uncanny kind. It happened on the very first day of my extended fieldwork in a mountain village of northern Japan. I had spent the morning talking with the senior (male) figure of the house, who was more than eighty years old. When noon arrived I was invited by the family to stay and have lunch with them. I then met the old wife of the man. As I was still unfamiliar with the villagers' dialect, especially that of elderly people, I attributed the fact that the old woman did not address a single word to me during the meal to my linguistic handicap. However, it was

only later in that day that I recalled she did not talk with anyone at table, and that I found her eating habits to be slightly disgusting. The reason for this afterthought was a remark by a member of the family with whom I was living. I was asked upon my return whether I had met the old woman in the house I visited. When I answered in the affirmative, I was asked whether I had noticed any kind of unusual behavior about her. I then recalled my somewhat uneasy feelings during lunch. When I mentioned this to my hosts I was told that the old woman was rumored to be possessed by a fox spirit. I was quite shocked because I had stumbled unwittingly onto a tricky social problem. Possession by a fox, *kitsune tsuki* 狐憑き, is a serious issue because it is the cause of social ostracism for those who are rumored to be possessed.

The memory of these experiences has been lingering in my mind for many years. By itself this kind of memory may be of no major significance; yet, I believe it bore some fruit in making me think about a meaning of animals that goes far beyond their material or sentimental value. As I formulated the topic I gave it only a vague shape so as not to impose an unnecessarily narrow frame upon it. It seems to me that the answers to my appeal for contributions allow at least a glance at the wide spectrum of meanings we attribute to animals. The articles in this issue on the topic do not amount to a comprehensive or even representative picture of folk representations of animals, and yet they provide an impression of the variety of images humans of various cultures harbor about animals. They show how animals and the typical behavior associated with them are used to think about a society and its ancestors, about the workings of the world, about the origins of evil in this world; they also show that concern over the fair treatment of animals is by no means a contemporary achievement.

The remaining contributions are not related to animals, but they address a topic of fundamental importance for any kind of research in the social sciences, that is, in sciences whose very existence depends upon communication among people. This is the problem of whether the responsible transmission of cultural values is indeed possible, and whether an outsider, such as a researcher alien to the culture being studied, is able to honestly understand what should be communicated.

It would be an overstatement to say that this issue covers the topics most significant in modern folklore studies. However, it is an example of what the intention and aim of publishing *Asian Folklore Studies* has been in the past and, hopefully, will continue to be in the future: to cover folk traditions in such a way as to testify to their topical richness and cultural variations. That this has been possible in the past is due to the enthusiasm and dedicated support of a long line of contributors from Asia and many other cultures. For me personally, contact with the journal's authors has always been a source of enlightenment and satisfaction, for which I am most grateful. With the publication of this issue my

responsibility as editor comes to an end. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those who have cooperated over so many years for their support and trust, and to ask for their continued support of the journal in the years to come.

Ad multos annos!

Peter Knecht