

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
*Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated
Translation and Study of the Daoist
Horse Taming Pictures*

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Columbia University Press, 2017

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Volume 22, Issue 1

Fall 2018

<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

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Both sweeping in its purview and deeply probing in its analysis, *Taming the Wild Horse* takes the reader on a historical, spiritual, and symbolic journey to rediscover the meaning of a series of illustrated poems created by a medieval Chinese monk. Associate Professor of Chinese religions at the University of San Diego Louis Komjathy has written an intriguing and intricate work of scholarship that will fascinate readers across a variety of disciplines. The Daoist Horse Taming Pictures were created to serve as a map of spiritual development similar to, and inspired by, the more well-known Ox Herding Pictures of Chan Buddhist origin. Komjathy offers his own translation and interpretation of each poem and accompanying picture, but the meticulously researched introductory sections place the pictures like gems in a delicate setting. From the background and Daoist lineage of their creator, Gao Daokuan, to the cultural significance of the horse in thirteenth century China, to the immediacy of communion with horses in the present day, Komjathy's painstaking research and crafted prose draw readers in, inviting us to explore the pictures and their meaning for ourselves.

Komjathy divides this work into three sections: a two-part introduction, followed by the pictures, verses, and commentary translations, followed by a section of exegesis. The first part of the introduction presents a detailed history of the Daoist "Complete Perfection" order of monks to which Gao Daokuan belonged. The second part, and the section I will focus on in this review, offers a rich investigation of the symbolism of the horse in the illustrations themselves, in the Daoist spiritual path, in Chinese culture, and in the human experience.

Gao Daokuan (1195-1277) may have chosen the horse as opposed to the ox of Buddhism because the horse represents a

more energetic, perhaps even sexual, “animating force” which can be harnessed for the good of society (40-41). In Daoism in particular, the horse represented the headstrong and spirited will of the undisciplined individual, as the monkey represented the grasping and frenetic mind. But such unruliness is not the innate nature of the horse or the human; the taming process, as Komjathy describes it, is a method of returning the horse of the mind to its original, ‘unconditioned’ state of stillness and completeness in communion with the Dao. Here Komjathy provides a passage from Chuang-tzu that offers an important interpretive key: “Horses’ hooves are made for treading frost and snow, their coats for keeping out wind and cold. To chew grass, drink from streams, lift up their feet and gallop, this is the true nature (*zhenxing*) of horses. Though they might possess great terraces and fine halls, they would have no use for them” (30-31). Chuang-tzu clarifies how innate nature is unified, clear and harmonious, while the ‘conditioned’ mind becomes fractured and disoriented. “Thus,” he tells us, “horses learn how to commit the worst kinds of mischief.” The Horse Taming Pictures draw heavily on this idea that taming is a matter of deconditioning and returning to an innate stillness, and this notion also affords Komjathy a jumping-off point for regarding horses as simply horses beyond their symbolic or actual roles in human life.

Only the first ten of the twelve Horse Taming Pictures depict a horse, leaving Komjathy room to interpret the horse’s absence as well as its presence. The poem accompanying the final horse-centric illustration tells us that the horse has died (77), but Komjathy reads more deeply. The Daoist path, he argues, leads the contemplative beyond the realm of objects and distinctions to merge with the One—the Dao. As such, it is necessary for the horse of conditioned thought to disappear into

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unified stillness. The Dao is beyond distinctions such as human and animal, Komjathy argues, and in order to reach such an advanced insight, the contemplative must recognize “shared animality” with the horse and with animals in nature. Ultimately, the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures serve not only to encourage the contemplative to find and master the horse of the mind, but to identify with and “see through” horses, to develop empathy with the horse as a fellow creature.

Though Komjathy has not written a book strictly about animal ethics, he does take some time to speculate about what the Horse Taming Pictures might tell us concerning how to treat and understand animals. Though as Komjathy notes, while Gao Daokuan would likely have had plenty of exposure to horses in medieval China, the contemporary human has much less direct experience with the animals. Komjathy therefore seeks out both horses and horse trainers to compare the training methods of the Pictures to the reality of horse training on the ground and to experience the vitality of the horse in the world. He also notes that the application of the ‘switch’ to the horse in the first Picture might be disturbing, but he associates this with the so-called ‘wake up stick’ of Chan and Zen Buddhist practice. In the final paragraph of the second introductory sentence, Komjathy argues for the Horse Taming Pictures serving as a call to treat animals as separate beings in the world. “...the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures reveal a world inhabited by horses...They have their own lives. They inhabit a landscape of mutual participation in the wild. They deserve a place in the world where they may flourish, where they may simply exist” (53). It is this final section, where Komjathy moves beyond the meaning of the horses to humans, that at last brings the book around into the modern day. Ethicists might wish for more in this regard, perhaps some deeper criticism of the use of horses

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in the ancient and modern worlds, but that is a critique of a different book. It is difficult to fault such an ambitious work for not including even more. Komjathy deftly weaves depth of scholarship with breadth of interpretation and brings both to bear, though somewhat lightly, on contemporary issues. Thus, in addition to its importance as a work of religious and historical scholarship, *Taming the Wild Horse* proves a model of the emerging cross-disciplinary field of animal studies.