

書 評

Wolfram Eberhard: *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). Translated from the German by G.L. Campbell; 1st German edition published by Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1983.

This is a book superbly illustrated with Chinese paintings and art work as diverse as New Year prints and classical landscape paintings. This diversity is also reflected in the explanations of the symbols given in the text. The author draws from sources including folklore, regional practices, classical and popular literature as well as newspaper reports. The explanations are simple enough for any layman to understand, and as far as possible, the author tries to include relevant anecdotes to illustrate the exact application of the symbols under discussion. All these qualities, no doubt, contribute to making this an accessible and appealing, as well as informative, dictionary. However, though Professor Eberhard makes extensive use of literary anecdotes, it seems that he has had some difficulties in recalling the details of the relevant examples quoted in his explications. The following is one such instance.

Under the section "Peach" the author relates the episode from *Hsi yu chi* 西遊記 in which Monkey ate the peaches of immortality as follows:

the monkey Sun broke into the palace garden just before the wonderful fruit ripened, and, to the horror of the assembled guests, plucked and ate the lot. Not surprisingly, he became an Immortal.

The true story is somewhat different. Monkey was, after much ado, made "Great Sage, Equal of Heaven" and put in charge of the peach garden, and he devoured the ripened peaches at his leisure when he was alone in the garden. The immediate effect of this episode was that he got caught in the palm of the Buddha, and as a result had to accompany Tripitaka on his pilgrimage. Monkey was already an Immortal before he ate the peaches, but if he hadn't eaten them, perhaps there would have been no *Hsi yu chi*.

As Professor Eberhard says in the Introduction, sinologists of an earlier generation often missed out on the sexual connotation of certain Chinese words and symbols, whether deliberately or not, and it is his avowed purpose to point out such innuendos. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find that among the detailed explications of the symbolic qualities of the peach the very obvious homosexual connotation carried in the expression "分桃" is missing. This may, of course, just be an over-sight, but it is one which we hope to see amended.

Similarly, it seems that some explications of the symbols merit a little more elucidation. Take the following as an example: "Symbolically the dog was associated with the West. For this reason, in those parts of China where dog-flesh was eaten, it was permissible to do so in autumn and winter, but not in summer." (p.81) Presumably the link between the West and autumn is that both are governed by the element "metal", in which case winter should play no part in dog-eating. However, dog-eating is in fact most popular in winter.

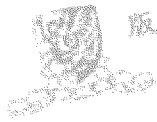


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There is, I am sure, no need to remind sinologists that China is a vast country steeped in history and rich in regional customs. As a result, under the surface of homogeneity there are frequently undercurrents of diversity. One may thus be wise to shy away from sweeping statements just because for every "truth", it seems inevitable that there is at least one counter-example lurking around the corner. Professor Eberhard says that "the word *lan* occurs in women's names only" (p. 219). I am immediately reminded of the boy Chia Lan 賈蘭 in *Hung lou mêng* 紅樓夢.

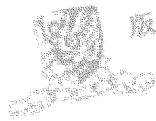
Despite its minor flaws, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* testifies to the admirable effort of its author. Scholars may at times find the explanations too general, and may wish that the author had cited sources for texts as well as illustrations, but for general readers this is a very attractive book.



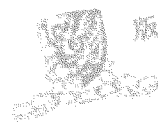
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