

## Article

# Neighbours in the City: “Four Animal Spirits” in Beijing from the 19th Century to the Present

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**Abstract:** In northern China, four animals—the fox, weasel, hedgehog, and snake—are commonly believed to have the magical power of immortality, and they are referred to as the Four Animal Spirits (四大门, sidamen). Researchers have regarded these spirits as part of a form of shamanism, but what I learned from my fieldwork in Beijing suggests a different understanding. From the 19th century to the present day, many inhabitants of Beijing have consistently believed that the Four Animal Spirits have their own personalities, intentionalities, and social organisation. They can change their status through self-cultivation, and they share the city with humans, who are their neighbours. As humans can understand animals, these animals can understand humans and respond rationally to changes happening in the world. These beliefs are not unique to Beijing’s residents; indeed, similar ideas can be found in classical Chinese literature before the Han Dynasty (202–220 BCE); moreover, these beliefs differ significantly from the widely accepted theory of shamanism. Knowing about the Four Animal Spirits does not constitute a window into or a way of organising human societies; the Four Animal Spirits do not represent a cultural structure or deep unconsciousness. They provide knowledge about the relationship between humans and animals and entice people to learn about these animals, live with them, and, ultimately, construct a world in which humans and animals can coexist.

**Keywords:** Animal Spirit; Beijing city; other-than-human personhood; cult of animals



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## 1. What Are the “Four Animal Spirits” Present in Beijing?

Are cities only inhabited by humans?

Although this question has not been answered directly, many urban studies in the humanities and social sciences have clearly been based on the assumption of an affirmative answer. In contrast to the less densely populated countryside, cities concentrate more people and artefacts, which indicates the isolation of human civilisation from nature (Childe 1936). Animals seem to be less significant in cities. However, it is the relationship between humans and animals that deeply influences the fate of humanity itself. A previous generation of anthropologists already pointed out that animals could be the necessary link in the formation of social connections around which humans live their daily lives (Evans-Prichard 1940), or they could be the symbols through which societies are expressed (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 143; 1968). However, scholars who have advocated for the phenomenological and ontological turns in anthropology have been convinced that animal life, like human life, is not predetermined but is instead a particularly dynamic process. Moreover, both realms, while differently positioned, are always unfolding in relation to each other. Animals, like other beings, are necessary for human societies to acquire skills and survive (Ingold 2000).

Scholars of ontological turns have mainly focused on the northern region and the Amazon jungles, with a focus on hunting and domestication (Anderson 2017). Most studies on the relations between humans and animals in China focused on the historical documentation, but few of them have taken an anthropological angle to better understand practices and corresponding ideologies in specific contexts. Thus, Li Wei-tsu’s (李慰祖,

1918–2010) Master’s thesis on the role of the “Four Sacred Animals” in Beijing and its suburbs remains quite unique (Li 1948; Li and Zhou [1941] 2011).

Beijing’s residents refer to *Sidamen* (四大门) to describe four specific types of animals in the city: the fox, hedgehog, weasel and snake. Li Wei-tsu translated this term as the “Four Sacred Animals”, based on the Durkheim’s sacred-profane dichotomy. However, Kang (2005) translated the term as the “Four Animal Spirits”, which is the translation adopted in this article, for as we will see, those magical animals are not so sacred. The fox is called *Hu* (胡, a human’s family name) or *Hong* (红, red, indicating its colour); the hedgehog is called *Huang* (黄, yellow as its colour, also a popular family name), the weasel *Bai* (白, white as its colour, also a family name), the snake *Liu* (柳, willow, and family name of a Daoist deity) or *Chang* (常, only as family name, but pronounced close to “long” in Mandarin). Sometimes, the rat or the hare (both called *Hui*, 灰, grey as its colour) are added to the list. In those cases, the animals are called the “Five Animal Spirits”; however, this is relatively uncommon.

After conducting fieldwork in the western suburbs of Beijing at the beginning of the 1930s, Li Wei-tsu learned that people believed that these animals could become immortal through self-cultivation. Those animals that were only active within a certain family were called “household immortals” (家仙), while those with a higher level of spiritual power had to build an altar and would be called “altar immortals” (坛仙). To build an altar, animal spirits must “force” people to serve them, to which end they possess people, who in turn are called “incense heads” (香头), i.e., these people become spiritual mediums and guide other people to burn incense. Animal spirits can heal, prophesise, and even resolve community conflicts through the mouths of the mediums. The mediums are viewed as members of a sect and are given the same name of *Sidamen* as the animal spirits. Moreover, a series of institutions support this relation, such as the master-apprentice system. There are also rules to follow for building an altar, such as obligatory pilgrimages. In conclusion, Li indicated that this local religion constitutes a kind of shamanism. Enlightened by Durkheim’s theory, he believed that animal spirits are only a reflection of society, which is first and foremost a concept. Based on this concept, a religious system has been created, whose fundamental function has been to maintain the social order (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011).

Since Li’s thesis, many scholars have continued to study the Four Animal Spirits (Yang 2004; Zhou 2007; Gao 2013; Li and Ding 2014; Wang 2018), but these studies have all been based on documentary sources rather than on fieldwork. In line with Li’s conclusions, these studies have all regarded the Four Animal Spirits as imagined deities emanating from a local religion; they are viewed as spiritual, symbolic and representational beings merging out of people’s minds. This approach is inconsistent with what I have learned from my own fieldwork in Beijing.

This article is primarily based on fieldwork, which I supplemented by consulting newspapers, folktale records and private diaries from the 19th century to the present day; moreover, I focus mostly on the centre of Beijing, with only scant reference to the suburbs located outside the city wall. I have lived and worked in Beijing for a long time, and I conducted fieldwork there. A family of weasels lives outside my house. These weasels maintain a dual relationship with my cats, at times friends and at times foes. Most residents in Beijing inner city are in the same situation. My neighbours, friends, and interviewees talked about the Four Animal Spirits as real, flesh-and-blood, and specific animals that can interact directly with humans, rather than as fantastic beings or religious symbols. These animals are called spirits, not because they are all immortal, but because they have a greater chance of becoming immortal than human beings. In fact, Li Wei-tsu himself clearly stated that “the four kinds of animals will be spiritually enlightened when they get old enough (i.e., when they reach their respective average life expectancy)” (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, p. 9). Based on these experiences and studies, this article argues that the Four Animal Spirits provide a body of knowledge about animals, and this knowledge focuses on the human–animal relationship: how animals live, how humans live with them, and

how a world in which humans and animals coexist can be created. If we compare this concept with Western knowledge, the Four Animal Spirits are closer to zoology and ecological ethics than to religion.

## 2. The Changing Status of the Four Animal Spirits

The concept of change is central in our understanding of the Four Animal Spirits. In the dialect used in Beijing, a Rhotic accent must be added at the end of the word used to describe the Four Animal Spirits; this accent indicates closeness, ordinariness, and slight defiance. The saying that “people are in the light, but animal spirits are in the dark. Animal spirits can always see people, but people cannot always see the spirits” is not merely the fruit of imagination, as these species are indeed all small burrowing creatures. As they grow, these animals gradually acquire the ability to deal with humans, and some of them become immortal through self-cultivation. The spirits with the strongest spiritual powers, who are also in the last stage of their life course as animals, are often called “old grandfathers” (老爷子 *Laoyezhi*), “great spiritual lords” (大仙爷 *Da Xianye*).

When the Four Animal Spirits are young they are ordinary creatures, and when they grow old, they can become powerful deities. This continuously changing status is quite difficult to define for scholars who adhere to a Western naturalist ontology<sup>1</sup>. Li Wei-tsu first divided these animals into two categories, the sacred and the profane, and in turn divided the sacred animals into two types: household immortals and altar immortals. However, these categories did not emerge out of my interviewees. There is no distinction between sacred and profane animals; instead, only specific animals go through different life stages. As two of my interviewees clearly stated,

They are just animals that live in your house, not gods. When they get older, they naturally have this ability, which we call “spiritual expertise” (道行 *Daohang*). A weasel that was just born a few years ago cannot reach this ability; it does not have that kind of expertise.<sup>2</sup>

The “great spiritual lord” is not the same as the Buddha or the gods; it is a fox spirit, not a real Buddha or god, just a fox that has become spiritual after a long life. It is similar to the story of the White Snake (白蛇传). The white snake took a thousand years to take human form and became the White Lady, and only after her son sacrificed the Leifeng pagoda (雷峰塔) did she become immortal. However, she remained a snake and did not become a god.<sup>3</sup>

Ji Yun (纪昀, 1724–1805), a famous literato in Beijing and senior official in the late 18th century, stated, “In general, things can change in form over time. Fox spirits can go through windows, but their original forms cannot be contained within the windowpane” (Ji 2018, p. 39). This statement expresses the idea that my interviewees also expressed: while animals are different from human beings (only humans can become gods, and animals can only become spirits), there is no distinction between sacred and profane animals, since all of them are born as ordinary babies; the only difference is the life stage that the animal is in.

Generally, the idealised life of one of the Four Animal Spirits follows the following trajectory: (1) a young animal that can neither speak nor change. (2) Through self-cultivation, it acquires the ability to communicate with people. (3) It acquires the ability to possess people. (4) It becomes anthropomorphous and obtains great spiritual power. (5) It attains immortality and leaves the mundane world. The animal spirits that Li Wei-tsu studied were in the third and fourth stages. In particular, the animal spirits at stage 4, who can take human form and live as humans do, are common protagonists in mystery novels and have been the subject of Kang Xiaofei’s research (Kang 2005). Young animals in the first two stages, who are numerous and most familiar to people, have attracted little attention from scholars. However, this paper focuses on them.

As the animals slowly grow and eventually become immortal, their bodies, abilities, and spiritualities continue to change but never detach from their essence as animals. While

a human can become a god or a great sage, an animal can only develop to become a spirit: “comparatively speaking, a god is far more valuable than a spirit” (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, pp. 65–66). However, as they move through the levels, animal spirits are increasingly associated with humans, deities, and other demons or immortals. When an animal spirit reaches the 4th stage, it gains the same magical power than the gods and can enter the “altar immortals” system with them. This is similar to human society in Beijing during the Qing Dynasty, in which all ethnic groups, whether Han or Manchu, could become state servants and officials by studying and passing state examinations. In the spiritual world, the bureaucracy is replaced with the altar, which is open to all species.

In his thesis, Li Wei-tsu mentioned several times that the villagers repeatedly told him that the principle was the same for humans and deities (人神一理). This statement is key to understand the spiritual world. We have explained that the Four Animal Spirits, like humans, can grow and acquire additional capacities through self-cultivation (learning). In the next part of this paper, we will see that spirits also have their own personalities, families, and social relationships. Like humans, they are able to perceive the environment and can respond to its changes intellectually, rationally, and morally. In other words, they have an “other-than-human-personhood”.

### 3. The Other-Than-Human-Personhood of the Four Animal Spirits

The anthropological concept of “other-than-human-personhood”, proposed by A. Irving Hallowell in 1960, describes beings who have self-consciousness. They are neither human nor divine, but they have agency and morality. Invoked by de Castro, Tim Ingold and other scholars, this concept has been quite inspirational in understanding the relationship between humans and other beings (Anderson 2017, pp. 134–35). In Beijing, each animal spirit is considered to have its own personality, temperament, and preferences, which depend on that animal’s social relations. In a word, animals are not mere products of genetics. Indeed, in addition to relations with other animals, they also have relations with humans. It is in the human–animal relation that people can observe animals and understand their personalities. Therefore, the relationship between humans and animals is always placed at the centre of knowledge of the Four Animal Spirits, and this is where the concept differs most from modern zoology.

#### (1) Personalities of individual animals

Li Wei-tsu has raised the issue of animal’s personality by saying, “Animal Spirits are just like mortal people, some are generous, and some are narrow-minded” (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, p. 26). For example, the Yellow Lord (黄爷) in the Meng family, who was subdued by Medium Li and his master Great Spiritual Lord, was a two-foot-long female weasel with a lustful nature, so the Great Spiritual Lord had to detain her in East Hill to force her to concentrate on her own development (ibid. p. 20). A fox spirit in Xiang Huangqi village claimed that he was from Shanxi and came to meet a daughter of a certain family because in a previous life they were a couple. The spirit also made it its duty to take the guests out for meals; if the family needed money, it pawned clothes on their behalf (ibid. p. 21). One of Li Wei-tsu’s main informants was Medium Wang; her master was a crippled fox known as “Crippled Old Lord”, whose real name was Hu Yanqing (胡延庆); moreover, because of the word “Qing” in his name, he particularly hated chimes (*Qing* in Mandarin) (ibid. p. 88). The spirit possessed Medium Si Guangyuan who lived in Beichang Street in Beijing inner city; it was a weasel spirit and an opium addict who would diagnose patients while smoking opium at the same time (ibid. p. 30).

Li Wei-tsu has not provided additional details about these animal spirits, it remains unclear whether these creatures are real and how they exhibit their personalities (e.g., through conversation, possession, or apparition). During my own fieldwork, I encountered comparable stories. Beijing residents described the Four Animals as if they were humans, and they believe that each animal has a distinct personality that becomes more evident as they grow older. Some snakes are curious:

There was once a golden snake living in our yard, and it did not hurt. It burrowed in the cracks of that old wall and liked to crane its neck to look about.<sup>4</sup>

Some snakes are eager to help and do not act as outsiders:

A big snake once came to my house and lived on a beam; sometimes we saw it on top of the bed, sometimes under the table. It helped to catch rats, and no one bothered it. It lived there for several years and then left on its own.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the hedgehogs are funny:

That hedgehog is reckless and likes to shout blusteringly.<sup>6</sup>

Some hedgehogs love to play tricks on people:

That hedgehog loves scaring people; sometimes it attaches a shoe by a string on its paw, when it walks, the shoe shuffles. It also coughs; after eating a bit of salt and coughs exactly like an old man. It's for scaring people.<sup>7</sup>

Some hedgehogs have a particular love/hate relationship with someone.

My grandfather told me a story about a hedgehog. When he was working in the cement factory, there was a man who never got drunk. However, he could not go to my grandpa's house to drink because every time he would get drunk there. This was truly strange. The man later said, "There must be something strange in your house". Therefore, he searched the house and found a hedgehog under the cupboard; the hedgehog was the size of a washbasin. It was the hedgehog that was causing the trouble! It did not like the man and did not like him drinking their family's wine, so it made him drunk each time.<sup>8</sup>

Some weasels have become friends to people; they find each other interesting.

When it's cold, they go up to our roof. We sleep underneath, and they sleep in the ceiling. They like playing inside and stomping around in the ceiling. It's fun for us to listen to.<sup>9</sup>

These animals are familiar to people; in their eyes, all these animals have emotions similar to those of humans: They feel love, dislike, and sorrow.

## (2) Human communication with the Four Animal Spirits

Even when the ordinary animals do not appear in human form or possess a medium, they can communicate with humans, whether by argument or negotiation.

In 1943, the newspaper *Morning Post* reported that a group of weasels suddenly arrived at the home of Wang Gongfeng (王供奉), a famous actor at the Beijing Opera at the time. The weasels came and went freely without any fear. Wang's cat bit one of them that was small and then became insane and psychotic. Wang had to build a small shrine in his garden, making offerings and praying to the weasels for forgiveness. His cat then recovered the next day ([Weasel Mess 1943](#)). Mr. Qi also told me a similar personal experience. There was a family of weasels living in his yard, and they had always been friendly to them; but one day, the weasels suddenly went mad and started barking loudly. Mr. Qi shot them twice with a toy air gun. As the weasels barked back in protest, Qi said: "I told you, weasels, that you can live with me here, as I do not hate you. However, if you become noisy, I will drive you away." The weasels obeyed and never made any noise again. Mr. Qi believes that there is never any rat in his house because of the weasels, so sometimes he gives them a treat. Before giving them treats, he discussed it with the weasels: "The weasels were looking at me, and I was looking at them too. I said, Little Spirits, I will buy you two chicken necks for you to eat tonight. Then, I bought two and left them there, near their home, and the next morning they ate the whole chicken." Mr. Qi believes that the weasels understood him.<sup>10</sup>

The Four Animal Spirits were once abundant in the city of Beijing and remain numerous today. The interactions between these animals and humans vary, ranging from glances and chance encounters to more frequent and diverse forms of interaction, including cohabitation. In a world where humans and animals have long coexisted, the relation-



ship between them is highly personal, context-specific, and face-to-face. Humans can then learn about the personalities of animals and animals can communicate rationally and even argue with and protest against people. As a result, an animal's personality is highly socialized and dependent on its relationship with humans. The next section will describe three different types of relationships between humans and animals.

#### 4. Types of Relationships between the Beijing's Inhabitants and the Four Animal Spirits

There are generally three types of relationships between humans and the Four Animal Spirits in Beijing. These relationships are not fundamentally different from interpersonal relationships in human societies, and this is precisely the point that Li Wei-tsu has emphasized repeatedly: "the principle is the same for humans and deities."

##### (1) Strangers

First, spirits and humans can be strangers to each other. Although humans and animals know each other, they may not be familiar with each other. In this case, they do not disturb each other.

The Four Animal Spirits have morality, emotion, and rationality, but they live in a world that is very different from that of humans. For Beijing's residents, that is a mysterious world, full of unknown situations and uncertainty. It is best to stay away from that world.

Li Wei-tsu explained, "Some villagers believe that it is better to make less contact with the spirits because the Four Animal Spirits are unstable. When they are well worshipped, they bring families peace and prosperity, but if they are worshipped in weak ways, or if the family they come in contact with is declining, the spirit will soon become hostile and destroy the family" (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, p. 17). However, Guo Zeyun (郭则沄 1882–1946), a literato and official who lived in Beijing for over 40 years and had a vast network of friends, proposed a different explanation. In his *Continued Notes on the Cavern Spirits* (洞灵续志), written in the early 20th century, he noted that humans and animal spirits should be kept at a distance. The reason was not the unstable temperament of the animals but the fact that both worlds were ignorant of each other. When we do not know each other's social rules and etiquette, it is best to avoid offending anyone by keeping at a respectful distance (Guo 2010b, p. 278). This attitude is held by most residents in Beijing today in the face of the Four Animal Spirits.

When this thing (spirit) is found in your home, none of you are supposed to offend it or plague it. If you disrespect it, it will bring you disaster. You have to respect it, but there is no need to make offerings; you simply let it live there (in your home), do not bother it. It's fine that no one interferes with anyone. I have chickens at home, and a weasel spirit live there, but it does not eat my chickens. You do not want to offend it; you just ignore it and let it breed and live here, that is all!<sup>11</sup>

You walk down the alley at night, and you see a weasel that runs by. Its two eyes are super shiny and very strange. Do not pay it any attention, just walk your way, but do not push it away. If you ignore it, all will be fine. However, if you blast it, then it will be washed up, you will be chased everywhere you go. In this case, the weasel will strangle people.<sup>12</sup>

##### (2) Mutually Beneficial Relationship

The second type of relationship is a "mutually beneficial relationship". When humans and the Four Animal Spirits are already familiar with each other and no longer strangers, they can then get along as neighbours or friends, and the relationship is reciprocal. In Li Wei-tsu's ethnography, many villagers built shrines in their home to worship spirits, believing that the animal spirits would bring wealth. More commonly, humans offer their own foods to the spirits, by placing the foods in corners frequented by the animals. In this case, there are no special rules about which type of food should be offered.

My family's business is in the Dongsi Batiao Hutong; it is the Deyuanyong (德元永) Pharmacy. When we lived there, there were three rooms facing north in the front and a small backyard, which actually served as a storage room and a back kitchen. It was in this back kitchen that my father liked to make offerings, sometimes snacks, sometimes family food. He wrote a tablet, stating that the offerings were for the Four Animal Spirits. Even during the great famine of 1959–1961, we kept on making offerings to them.<sup>13</sup>

In our family room, by the firewood stack, some spirits live there. We offer them everything, baked biscuits, beans, whatever we eat at home, and we serve them in a small white porcelain plate.<sup>14</sup>

Humans share food with animals, but they always use the word “offering” (供). This word suggests that serving the Four Animal Spirits is the same as worshiping gods: it is similar to going to a temple to offer incense or going to a cemetery to offer wine and food to the ancestors. Providing food can never be described as “feeding” or “giving in charity”. One can feed domestic animals or pets and give food as a charitable act to the orphaned spirits and wild ghosts in some rituals, but one can never use these two concepts when offering the animal spirits food; it is meant to respect and to worship. In return, animal spirits are expected to be quiet and to create no trouble, or as Li Wei-tsu put it, they are expected to bring wealth to humans or help them solve certain problems. One of my interviewees recounted the long friendship between his family and a weasel:

The weasel is magic; it can tell you all about your family over many generations. Why? It has lived with your family for many years, and it has heard everything about your family, even what has happened in your neighbourhood and in the village. It remembers everything. If you are in trouble, try to ask your weasel for help; it will tell you everything once it has possessed a medium. Is not it magic? (Ibid.)

In this mutually beneficial relationship, the rights and obligations of both parties are clear, so humans and animals can live together in peace.

Both Li Wei-tsu and I noticed people making offerings to spirits quite frequently, even more often than they worshipped gods or ancestors. Is this because the animal spirits have a greater impact on people's lives, or they are more sacred? In my opinion, the answer lies elsewhere. Ms. Zhao, the daughter of a general in the late Qing Dynasty who lived near the Old Summer Palace (圆明园) all her life, recalled that her family worshipped the Four Animal Spirits in the same way they worshipped their ancestors. Zhao's explanation for this behaviour was that “the Beijingers were well educated, sophisticated with politeness”, so her family was polite to the Four Animal Spirits. However, when their chickens were stolen, her family stood in the yard and abused the “yellow spirit” (weasel), as the spirit who was the thief deserved no respect at all (Ding 2016, p. 223). Ji Yun also spoke about a similar case in the 18th century. He once recorded a story about a conflict between a human and a fox, where even the gods could not calm the fox's anger. However, the conflict was finally resolved when the human offered a banquet. Ji Yun concluded that interpersonal etiquette was very important and could not be ignored. In our relationships with neighbouring spirits, we should frequently exchange gifts and courtesies to avoid conflicts (Ji 2018, p. 322). Therefore, it is better to consider these offerings as gifts rather than as sacrifices. It is certainly worth exploring the meaning of the gifts exchanged between humans and animals from the perspective of Mauss (1980, pp. 145–279) and his disciples, but this topic is kept for another paper.

### (3) Fictive Kinship Relationship

In the third type of relationship, humans and animals act as if they are part of the same kin group, and this relationship is most typical between the mediums and the spirits that possess them. A college girl once told me her family history with a fox spirit. Her grandmother had been a medium for this fox since her youth, and she had had a difficult life. After her grandmother's death, the fox spirit possessed her mother, which made the

family believe that the grandmother was still home. Until her mother's death, the fox spirit, who was like an "alter ego" of her grandmother, appeared several times in front of this girl. Finally, the girl decided to send the tablet representing the fox spirit to a temple, severed her ties with the family and left her hometown.<sup>15</sup> A similar case was mentioned in Li Wei-tsu's ethnography. A family living in Pingjiao village (northwest of Beijing city) was known for being relatives of the Four Animal Spirits. One of the wives of the two brothers in this family was a reincarnation of a snake and another a reincarnation of a fox. Moreover, a spirit lived in Huang's house, whose name was *Sixi* (四喜); it was the snake's wife's nephew (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, p. 15). In my fieldwork, I found that the most common fictive kinship between humans and animals is that a medium referring to a spirit as his or her "master father" (师父). Ms. Zhao, who has become famous in Beijing in recent years and whose followers are all over the capital, claims to have been a disciple of the Second Spirit Lord (a snake spirit) since she was a young girl and that she has never separated from it. However, being the relative of an animal spirit is dangerous because one will be marginalised and expelled from the community, and therefore lose one's vitality as human beings. This was the case for Ms. Zhao, who was often possessed by her master father in the early years, and later became so consumed that she recently deliberately kept at a distance from him. Kinship is also represented in various forms, such as marriages between a human and a spirit, as discussed in Kang Xiaofei's book about the cult of the fox.

Of the above three types of relationships, I have mostly encountered the first one in my fieldwork. Today, Beijing's residents have become accustomed to maintaining relationships with spirits as if these spirits were strangers. However, Li Wei-tsu's ethnography and people's memories from the 1940s have shown that the second type of relationship is the most dominant. Ji Yun indicated that if a human family is peaceful and loving, the fox might accept to become its neighbour; then, humans and foxes can live together as friends, which represents the ideal model of human-spirit relations (Ji 2018, p. 277). This change in the relationship may stem from the anti-superstition movement but also, and more likely, from changes in urban lifestyles. When old courtyards were destroyed and most urban dwellers moved into buildings, the ties among the residents became increasingly weaker, and animals, as neighbours, were of course also alienated. The third type of relationship has always been considered inappropriate. Turning a stranger into a friend is fine; however, accepting a stranger into the family is more difficult to do. This idea reminds us of the teaching of a great Confucianist, Ying Shao (应劭, 153–196), who said that one could treat his stepmother as a mother but should never give her the title of "mother". People are benevolent when they help strangers they happened to meet, but the Confucian ethics consider that it would be a heresy to consider a stranger as a relative (Ying 1981, pp. 138–39). In my fieldwork as well as that of Li Wei-tsu, respondents all agreed that it is dangerous for people to get too close to animal spirits and that it is quite reasonable to consider that this "danger" comes from a subversion of the kinship order, as Douglas (1966) suggested in her work entitled "Purity and Danger".

In summary, the Four Animal Spirits, like humans, are inhabitants of the city and share living spaces with humans. People are not only familiar with the specific animals around them, but also believe that these animals have their own moral principles and rational laws, which differ from but are not too far removed from those of humans. As a result, these animals can develop various types of relationships with humans. They may begin as strangers but eventually establish mutually beneficial relationships, and in some cases, become fictive kin, often corresponding with mediums. While potentially advantageous, the last type of relationship can also be socially ambiguous and risky for humans. Fictive kinship disrupts the order of actual kinships, making family ethics ambiguous, and has, therefore, always been criticized by Confucian intellectuals. We can see that the same Confucian ethical principles regarding human kinship have been applied to the human–animal relationship.



## 5. The Social Network of the Four Animal Spirits

The Four Animal Spirits are not domesticated animals; they live independently in the city. They have their own world and their own society, maintaining a parallel relationship with the human world. As told in the famous Chinese story “A dream under the southern koch tree” (南柯一梦), Chunyu fen (淳于棼), the hero of the story, went to the land of ants, where all rituals and institutions were exactly the same as in human society. When he woke up, the anthill under the acacia tree was still visible, proving that his dream was not unreal but that ordinary people were unaware of the world of ants.

### (1) Family

Each animal spirit has its own dwelling. The young ones who have not yet adopted a human shape cannot move freely, and people all know where they dwell, for example under a tree or inside a section of a wall. The spirits who already have magic powers also have a dwelling, which acts as their calling card. For example, the Crippled Old Lord mentioned above lived under the Western Tower of the Old Summer Palace (Li and Zhou [1941] 2011, p. 24); the spirit who possessed Medium Gong lived on Santai Hill (三台山), near the royal garden on the southern outskirts of Beijing, while his medium lived on the southeast side of the city (Medium’s shrine 1924). The Old Lady White, a famous hedgehog spirit, lived near the royal garden in the southern suburbs with her medium (Attack on heresy 1932).

In addition to having a fixed dwelling, the Four Animal Spirits also have stable family relationships. Someone told Li Wei-tsu that the spirits’ family was the same as human families and that they all had their respective parents and children. In one of the stories in the Yong’an Notes (庸庵笔记), a collection of anecdotes of the late 19th century, it is told that a certain Beijing resident accidentally killed a male weasel. The next day, the mate of the weasel came to take revenge and fought until she died. The love in the couple was moving (Xue 1999, p. 135). In my fieldwork, I found that some Beijingers were most happy to tell me stories about a large family of weasels and that they mutually enjoyed the company.

Weasels from house to house, I’ve seen it. They move one by one, or one on top of the other, with the big one carrying the little ones in the mouth, walking in a line. I’ve seen it in our yard; they are not afraid of people.<sup>16</sup>

The Casual Records of Night Talk (夜谭随录 *Ye Tan Sui Lu*), a collection of folktales compiled by a Beijing resident during the late 18th to the early 19th century, recorded a well-known story about a family of weasels. The story recounts that a low-ranking official in Beijing was drinking at home and threw goats’ bones on the ground. A moment later, he saw a dozen or so of small men and women, 6 to 7 inches tall, come out to pick up the bones and put them in a basket. When the official hit them with a fire chopper, they all turned into weasels and fled into a hole in the wall. Only one of them was struck and stayed on the ground, grunting (He 1988, pp. 33–36). The newspapers in the early 20th century often contained such “social news” depicting how weasels moved around. In 1889, there was news in the Dianshizhai Pictorial (点石斋画报) about weasels moving in packs to an inn and bringing wealth to the innkeepers. The picture used to illustrate the news showed a pack of weasels running across the roof (Weasels’ move 1889). More news detailed the scene of weasels’ move: one afternoon, someone named An, who lived in the north of the inner city, saw more than one hundred weasels coming out of a small hole on a rockery erected in their courtyard. When the weasels reached a pillar, the large one, which was leading the pack, climbed up, while the smaller ones below it held its tail in their teeth so they could be pulled up by the big one. The process went back and forth several times before the largest weasel exhausted (Weasels move in packs 1934).

### (2) Bureaucracy and Hierarchy

Over 800 years, Beijing was the centre of the Chinese bureaucracy. Similar to humans, fox spirits in the city have also been controlled by their own bureaucracy. According to var-

ious notes and diary documents from the late 19th century, the bureaucratic organisation of these foxes at that time was quite similar to the urban administrative system.

All the foxes living in the forbidden city were under the command of the spirit that lived in Duan Gate (端门); that spirit was known as the “First Lord of Fox”. Before the end of the Qing Dynasty, the guards of the palace believed that they had a bond with the foxes, as they all served the royal family. The First Lord of Fox, who was the head of the fox population living in the forbidden city, was akin to the Chief of the Internal Affairs Department (内务府总管). It had two younger brothers, the Second Lord of Fox, who lived in Baoding (保定), and the Third Lord of Fox, who lived in Tianjin, both of whom had received royal honours, as if the Bannermen (旗人) of the Internal Affairs Department had been sent out to various banner camps (Guo 2010b, p. 288).

The leader of the outer city foxes was called the “Fourth Lord of Fox”, and it lived in the Xuanwu Gate (宣武门) tower and oversaw the southern city, where the literati gathered. That fox was willing to befriend the literati. According to those who had seen it, it was an old man with a white beard and dressed as a Taoist priest. Zhuang Yunkuan (庄蕴宽, 1866–1932), a famous official and educator, was a native of Jiangsu. When he lived in the southern city, the Fourth Lord Fox paid him a visit but missed him. After ten days or so, the fox wrote to him, saying that he hoped they could become friends and that he would not refuse if that were the case. However, in the end, Mr. Zhuang and the fox only corresponded and never met (Guo 2010a, p. 77).

The inner city, on the northern side of Beijing, on the other side of the outer (southern) city, surrounds but does not include the Forbidden City; it had its own fox governor, about whom there have been two accounts. A collection of tales, Notes in the Yutai Spiritual House (右台仙馆笔记), written around 1880, suggested that the fox who was the chief of the inner city lived in the Dongbian Gate tower (东便门城楼), relied on a medium to communicate with humans, and was afraid of human bureaucrats (Yu 2004, p. 85). In contrast, Guo Zeyun suggested that the foxes living in the inner city were all under the control of the Zhengyang Gate (正阳门) celestial fox. Unlike the fox living in the Dongbian Gate, this fox spirit did not need a medium. It had the status of a fourth-ranking human bureaucrat and got along with human officials on an equal footing (Guo 2010a, pp. 38–39). It seems that the former was a civic leader for foxes, while the latter was an official governor. In addition to ruling over the inner city, both could also rule over the outer city and the suburbs, but neither one could cross the boundary to rule within the Forbidden City.

Thus, the fox bureaucracy in Beijing not only had a hierarchy but its authority was bounded. In addition to managing the foxes in their respective areas, these spirits were also attentive to the local customs held by humans and tended to act in a way that was compatible with those customs.

The family represents the foundational social institution for all animals, but only animals with a high level of cultivation could become bureaucrats. Certainly, these fox officials could influence the fate of humans using their magic, but their primary duty was not to respond to humans; instead, they were supposed to govern their own kind, and this role was the essential difference between themselves and gods.

For humans to understand the bureaucratic and hierarchical order of the animal world, there must be an acute awareness that animals, even small and weak, are part of their own social networks and are protected, regulated and supervised by their own elders and governors, who may be far more competent than humans. Therefore, when facing an ordinary animal, humans must consider the entire spiritual world and the intertwined social relations in which the animal live and should not treat it arbitrarily. This consideration is similar to situations in traditional Chinese medicine: the doctor does not address an individual who is sick but cares for the whole community in which the patient lives (Pan 2015). It is in this sense that we can say that knowledge of the Four Animals Spirits differs from religion, in that the concern is not how to worship the gods but rather how to treat specific animals.

### (3) Social change and individual choice

Because animals are independent, have self-will, and are capable of making their own judgements and choices, their behaviour is based on the way they judge a situation, rather than on the instruction given to them by some supreme deity or ultimate ideal. Consequently, the Four Animal Spirits described by Beijing residents are often pragmatists: they stay in the city when they live and have friendship with humans, or they might leave to search for a better environment; the reasons they leave or return are always based on their own rational choices.

During my fieldwork, I kept asking people whether, after the founding of the People's Republic of China and especially during the Cultural Revolution, the Four Animal Spirits remained in Beijing. People often told me that for a long time, not only did the spirits but also the ordinary animals had disappeared due to massive urban development, environmental transformation programs, sanitation campaigns, and the increasing number of people in the city. The city was no longer suitable for animals, and they all left voluntarily. Over the past decade, however, the demolition of the old Beijing has slowed down significantly, and the inner city has become older. Rather than an influx of population, the old city has seen the beginning of an exodus. This situation, coupled with an increase in the area devoted to open land and the animal protection movement in civil society, has led to a gradual increase in animal populations and the return of animal spirits. At first glance, this explanation is the same as what scholars call a "revival of popular religion", but its internal logic is very different. Scholars believe that only human beings have subjectivity and agency; when the external political environment changes, people choose to "suppress" or "revive" their religion accordingly. In the residents' interpretation, animals are the true dynamic subjects, who are keenly aware of change, not only change in the external environment such as buildings, plants, food, and living spaces, but also in the attitudes and intentions of humans; moreover, they are always ready to adapt their behaviours to these changes. Whether they leave or return, it is always the result of their proactive choices. A woman born in Beijing in the 1920s told me:

At that time, who (the spirits) dared to show their face? Once the liberation came, even the great spirit lord of mediums had been lost and had disappeared. They knew that after the liberation, the army and the government did not believe in these deities or ghosts. There was even a campaign against the four pests; therefore, they left before it. These spirits all went to the western mountain (of Beijing) and to the countryside, and they stayed hidden. So today, they are still active in the countryside, where there are still more of them. Nowadays, some people have started to believe in them again, so they are slowly coming back.<sup>17</sup>

In this interpretation, animals do not belong to "nature": "nature" is not created by a supernatural creator, nor is "nature" a background for or object used in human activity. Animals are not metaphors or symbols of some social order; they are subjects of that order.

In this sense, the nexus of intentionalities between the Four Animal Spirits and humans is very different from the relationship between humans and animals in shamanism described by Roberte Hamayon in her book *La chasse à l'âme*. In the book, animals are considered messengers from the heavens, who convey the will of and are ordered by their creator god. The behaviour and intentions of animals constitute a window through which people can guess and understand the will of the gods (Hamayon 1990). In contrast, the relationship between Beijing citizens and the Four Animal Spirits is highly specific and social, and the animals act as independent individuals who understand the network they are in and can even intentionally construct the network. When confronted with such animals, people do not understand them as some kind of natural or supernatural beings that are external to human society but rather as members of a larger society: a holistic urban society.

## 6. Conclusions and Discussion: The Animal World in the Chinese Tradition

As a conclusion, this article explores the Four Animal Spirits, an animal cult that has been prevalent in Beijing from the 19th century to the present day. While scholars have traditionally viewed this cult as a form of shamanism, this article argues that it is more

about the knowledge and practice of living with animals than a belief in the gods. The Four Animal Spirits are more similar to humans than to gods, as they can acquire magical powers or even become immortals through self-cultivation, which parallels the structure of human life in which humans can achieve higher social status and even become saints or gods through constant study, work, and self-improvement. Through recent fieldwork, this article discusses the revival of the animal cult in the last decade and how it is perceived by Beijing citizens. It suggests that this revival is not about the suppression or revival of religious beliefs, but rather the return of animals to the everyday lives of Beijing residents, thus resurrecting people's "zoology" of animal spirits.

Undoubtedly, the idea of the Four Animal Spirits is first and foremost rooted in local knowledge and the everyday experience of residents, which are shaped by the circumstances of the local community. The structure of foxes' bureaucracy, for example, is something that someone familiar with the history of Beijing during the Qing Dynasty would be able to appreciate. However, we also see that the knowledge about the Four Animal Spirits resembles many of the ideas about animals in ancient Chinese classics. In other words, this knowledge is not only local and embodied but also backed by a long and vast tradition. In this tradition, animal spirits are not considered as elements of a "religion" or a "belief" but rather as a widely shared "zoology" that has a long history.

Based on the texts of the Warring States and Han Dynasty (476 BCE–CE 220) and earlier texts to study the concept of animals in ancient China, Roel Sterckx found a general contingency and continuum between the human realm and the animal world. "As signifying living creatures surrounding the human observer, the animal kingdom provided models for authority in human society and functioned as a catalytic medium for the conception of human morality" (Sterckx 2002, p. 240). Similar ideas have emerged out of Beijing's urban society since the 19th century, mainly in the sense that humans and animals are all in the process of change; moreover, animals are not objects in a passive position but rational subjects with multiple connections to humans. Roel Sterckx also found that there were three kinds of classification in early China: lexicographic classification, ritual classification, and correlative classification (Sterckx 2005). However, the Four Animal Spirits have existed in a completely different system of animal classification, in which the categories of animals are determined by how distant they are from human societies, in line with the animal ethics proposed by animal advocates Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011). These issues can only be elaborated upon in future articles.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The French anthropologist Philippe Descola divided human culture into four ontologies: animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism. See (Descola 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Mr. Liu (a farmer born in the 1940s). 2013. Interview by the author. personal communication. Dasungezhuang village in Shunyi district, Beijing, October.
- <sup>3</sup> Ms. Wang (a housewife born in 1925). 2005. interview by the author. personal communication. Qianchuan Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, September.
- <sup>4</sup> Mr. Yang (born in Beijing in 1942). 2014. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Anletang Hutong in Dongcheng district, Beijing, December.
- <sup>5</sup> Mr. E (born in a Beijing Bannermen's family in 1940). 2014. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Xisibei Batiao Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, February.
- <sup>6</sup> Mr. Song (born in Beijing in 1940). 2006. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Xuanwumen West Street, Xicheng district, Beijing, October.
- <sup>7</sup> Mr. Wang (born in Beijing in 1960). 2005. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Maxian Hutong in Dongcheng district, Beijing, September.



- 8 Ms. Liu (born in Beijing in 1976). 2013. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Beijing Normal University, October.
- 9 See Note 4.
- 10 Mr. Qi (born in Beijing in the late 1940s). 2007. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Pica Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, November.
- 11 Mr. Huang (born in a Beijing Bannermen's family in 1946). 2006. Interview by the author. personal communication. Qian Laolai Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, September.
- 12 Mr. Wang (born in Beijing in 1951). 2014. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Gongjian Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, July.
- 13 Mr. Liu (born in Beijing in the 1950s). 2020. Interview by the author. Personal communication via Wechat APP, January.
- 14 See Note 2.
- 15 Ms. Xu (Born in the 1990s). 2017. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Beijing Normal University, October.
- 16 An anonymous woman (born in Beijing in the 1930s). 2007. Interview by the author. Personal communication. Chongshanli Hutong in Xicheng district, Beijing, October.
- 17 See Note 3.

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