



Faculty Research

Sex with Foxes

Fantasy and Power in Traditional Chinese Stories

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Foxes were intriguing creatures in traditional China: they were believed to take human shapes and to haunt, possess, and more notably, to have sex with men and women. A typical story runs as follows.

A young scholar was studying Confucian classics by candlelight. Deep into the night, an extraordinary beauty visited him by surprise, and the two started a secret affair of nightly encounters. As what seemed like a result of this, he became emaciated and soon felt that he was about to die. Even then, he could not resist her sexual allure each night. A Daoist priest finally interfered, accusing the woman of being a fox, and saying that by having sex with the young man, she sucked up his life essence in order to heighten her own and gain immortality. With the advice of the Daoist priest, the scholar woke up to this sexual danger and rectified his life. Meanwhile, the priest exposed the true shape of the fox and exorcised it, and both men thereby learned and grew from their experience with the fox.

For Confucian scholars whose lifelong pursuits hinged on the memorization of Confucian classics and moral control of carnal desires, romantic fantasies about a beautiful woman offered a dangerous, yet necessary, respite from their rigid and monotonous routine. For many others, the sexual vampirism of foxes also embodied the dangerous sexuality of women who died young and unmarried. These women's unfulfilled sexual desires were converted to sexual insatiability, and after they died, they supposedly haunted men so that they could gain life essence and return to this world.

Because they straddled the boundaries between life and death, fox transformation stories enchanted the Chinese for centuries. With their heavy sexual bearings, mythical foxes assumed both divine and demonic roles, as gods of wealth, patron deities of individuals, spirit mediums, or haunting ghosts. Fox shrines were established in countless locations: inner chambers, backyards, ancestral shrines, roadsides, temples, and government offices.

Fox lore in traditional China was popular because of the marginality of the actual fox found in real life: it roamed in the wild and remained untamable for domestic uses, yet it preyed on domestic fowl, built dens in human settlements, and demonstrated quasi-human intelligence. An eighteenth-century Chinese scholar, Ji Yun, succinctly summarized the fox's marginality in popular imagination. In *Yuewei Caotang Biji*, he says, "Humans and animals are different categories, and foxes lie in between humans and animals; darkness and lightness take different paths, and foxes lie in between darkness and lightness; gods and demons follow different ways, and foxes lie in between gods and demons."

Such marginality allowed foxes



A Daoist priest, with sword in hand, performs a ritual to exorcise a fox spirit that had possessed a maid. He exposes the true shape of the fox and wakes up the maid from possession, while the master of the maid watches by the side.

to symbolize marginal outsiders who were usually perceived to be dangerous, yet alluring, and whose characteristics subverted dominant cultural norms, yet remained indispensable for everyday needs. They were a part of wild and tamed worlds at the same time. The fox also acted as a voice for a wide range of common human weaknesses, vices, and predicaments in physical and social conditions. During the eighth century, for example, foxes-turned-women and -men often possessed dancing and singing skills or unintelligible "Sanskrit texts." They represented the "barbarians"—Indians

and Central Asians—who inserted themselves into Chinese life with Buddhist teachings and exotic arts and threatened the literati's conceptions of their Chinese identities.

An important aspect of Chinese folklore that is often overlooked is the sexual liaison that occurred between foxes and young women. The "fox" was used to explain a young woman's rebellion against what was expected of her. Young women normally had no say in family matters, and they might have taken the opportunities of foxes' sexual debauchery to defy male authorities. Daughters denounced arranged marriages,

wives escaped conjugal duties, concubines won legal status, and old maids secured masters' permission to marry. In these stories, women were freed by having sex with foxes!

In one sixteenth-century story, a fox visited the daughter-in-law of a Yuan family for sex. When Yuan caught the fox and tried to kill it, the fox pleaded: "If you release me I will make you rich." Yuan dug at a place indicated by the fox and indeed he found gold, so he let the fox go. The fox then stole more things for him. His family was then rich for several generations—all women who married into the family were subject to the fox's wanton desires, yet the family grew richer and richer. People called them "the Money Spinner Yuans."

Here, young women's sex with the metaphorical fox made the Yuan family wealthy, and the fox became

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these women's weapon to control the source of family wealth. The wealth was characterized as immoral, for it was stolen rather than honestly earned, and the illicit sex violated the Confucian moral code of female chastity. Nonetheless, the story shows that family patriarchs, who should have been the guardians of Confucian morals, in fact gave tacit consent to such liaisons. By virtue of fox magic, they allowed material gains to override moral purity and transform the danger of female sexuality into family prosperity.

In Chinese history, fox stories brought out socially suppressed voices and culturally repressed desires. They reveal the complex ways in which social order and cultural values were constructed in traditional Chinese society. As foxes are prominent "trickery" characters in folklore worldwide, the case of the Chinese fox also offers important insights into the role of a religious symbol in conveying people's perceptions of the world and their own place in it.

Note about the author: Xiaofei Kang received her Ph.D. in history from Columbia University in 2000. Her book, *Power on the Margins: the Cult of the Fox in Late Imperial and Modern North China*, is forthcoming with Columbia University Press.