The Wedding, the War, and the Court Case of the Mouse and the Cat: Beast Epics with Chinese Characteristics

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5pm, November 9, 2016 (Wednesday) FAMES Rooms 8 & 9

Abstract  The story of the wedding of the mouse is a popular subject in Chinese New Year prints, paper cuts and other forms of folk art. Many people know about the story because Lu Xun referred to it in his essays on his youth. But in the ballads and prosimetric narratives of the Qing dynasty it was the story of the court case of the mouse and the cat before King Yama that was far more popular, and in English we have two 19th century translations of different versions. Some of the accounts of the court case also include an account of the marriage of the mouse, but other versions precede the narrative of the court case with a description of the war in which the rodents try to free themselves of the oppression by felines once and for all. In Wuying zhuan 無影傳 (A Tale without Shape or Shadow), an anonymous prosimetric narrative that would appear to have been especially popular in Shanxi, the narrative reaches its fullest extension as the raid of the cats on the bride-fetching party of the mice results in the revolt of the rodents that following their defeat in war seek revenge in the underworld court. As a rare example of the beast epic in China the story invites comparison with beast epics from other parts of the world.

Speaker  Wilt L. Idema (b. 1944), Professor Emeritus of Chinese Literature at Harvard University, studied at Leiden, Sapporo, Kyoto and Hong Kong and taught at Leiden (1970-1999) and Harvard (2000-2013). His research has mostly focused on vernacular literature from premodern China, but he has also written on women's literature of the late imperial period. His most recent publications include The Resurrected Skeleton: From Zhuangzi to Lu Xun (2014); The Orphan of Zhao and other Yuan Plays: The Earliest Known Versions (with Stephen H. West, 2015); The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (2015); Passion, Poverty and Travel: Traditional Hakka Songs and Ballads (2015); The Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven and Other Precious Scrolls from Western Gansu (2015); and Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language (with Stephen H. West, 2016).

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome!