

On the Chinese Tapir

By A. Remusat (Journ. Asiat., 1824, Cah 21) tab. XI

Until the last four or five years, the oriental tapir was so little known that its very existence was still doubted, and it was believed that this species of animal belonged only to the New World. But to dispel this fallacious view one needs only to leaf through the Chinese collection of medical Natural History, where a fairly exact illustration of a tapir, or at least a very recognizable one, can be found. The descriptions have also left no doubt about this matter. Children's primers and the Chinese and Japanese encyclopedias also contain the pictures of this animal among the numbers of known mammals. At that time, then, the Chinese knew of the tapir, which was first discovered in Malaysia and Sumatra by Falquhar and Duvaucel. At this point I give an authentic excerpt about the tapir from a primer-encyclopedia. The other notes, which I have taken from some Chinese works, will show that the tapir was brought to the continent from Malaysia, not from Sumatra.

A very old Chinese dictionary entitled Eul-Ya gives a white panther the name Me, yet the dictionary's commentaries (which are also very old) say: the Me resembles a bear, but has a small head and short feet, and white and black spotted. It can gnaw iron, copper, and bamboo wood; its bones are hard, thick, and the legs are straight and strong. It has little vigor; its skin protects very well against dampness.

According to another very old and respected dictionary, the Choue-Wen, the Me resembles a bear, too, but is yellowish. The animal comes from Chou, as the province Sfestchhouan was called before the fourth dynasty.

According to the Tching-tsey-thoung, the teeth of the Me are so hard that a blow from an iron hammer shatters not the teeth,

but the hammer. When thrown into the fire they do not burn; only the horn of the Ling-yang (the Antelope) weakens them. The same Lexicographer, always inclines to collect folk tales, and the verses of the Khang-hi-Tseu tian, which follow, add other legendary characteristics.

The Pen-thsaokang-mou (or the general work on Natural History) gets directly to the point. It says the Me resembles a bear; the head is small and the feet short; the hair is short and glistening; it is black and white spotted; it has the trunk of an elephant, eyes of a rhinoceros, the tail of a cow, and feet like a tiger; it is very strong and can gnaw iron, copper, bamboo and the big snakes; its legs are strong, straight, and its bones are thick; it has almost no vigor; its excrement can be used to sharpen weapons and polish jasper; its urine dissolves iron; its bones and teeth are so hard that they resist all effects of fire and of hammering with iron, and it has already happened that quacks have distributed these as costly relics and as the teeth and bones of Buddha.

The coat of the Me serves as mattresses and rugs; they protect against dampness and unhealthy air; the very picture of the animal produces the same effect. Under the Thang dynasty, there was also the habit of painting the picture of the Me on the window shutters as protection from unhealthy air.

According to the geographers of the south, the Me was the size of an ass, resembled a bear, etc.

However couched in these exaggerations they may be, one yet cannot fail to recognise the characteristics of the tapir; its size; form of the limbs; the snout which is much longer than that of the American tapir, being comparable to an elephant's trunk; the sturdiness of the bones; the thick skin. All this is referred to in such a way that there can be no mistake. The picture also confirms a second notable characteristic of the animals skin,

which the animal has in its infant stage of life, according to Falquhar. The assertions as to the animal's geographical home and as to the uses to which its skin is put are both noteworthy details, because they prove that the tapir inhabits the western provinces of China and that the animal must be fairly common there.

The Chinese books are full of more noteworthy and, in general, somewhat more accurate observations. One must only know to discriminate the facts from the intermixed legends. The pictures in the books on zoology and botany often differentiate new or little-known genera, and the anatomical descriptions almost always have the uncertainty of the figures themselves. The books are a rich source of information which must not be neglected, for nothing can take their place as long as Europeans are barred from China; ie., as long as China's government understands her true usefulness and does not lose concern for her own well-being.
