

YOUTH

Creatures featured

A new volume brings the beauty and imagination of rare Qing Dynasty natural history encyclopedias to modern-day readers, **Wang Kaihao** reports.

If you like fantastic beasts, we know where to find them. Wait! We're not talking about the Harry Potter prequels, but the story of Emperor Qianlong's (1711-99) albums of rare birds, exotic beasts and marine animals — which probably deserves to be adapted into a fantasy film as well.

Let's put this idea aside for a moment, and look at the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) emperor's literary collection of fantastic animals housed at the Forbidden City, China's former imperial palace, now officially known as the Palace Museum.

Natural History in the Palace Museum, a new three-volume book, which was jointly released in July by the Palace Museum Press and CITIC Press in Beijing, provides children, its target audience, as well as curious adults, a new perspective of the emperor.

His strong interest in zoology is often overshadowed by the stereotypical image of him as a fervent collector of jewels and antiques.

From 1750 to 1761, the emperor ordered two court artists, Yu Sheng and Zhang Weibang, to create paintings of birds and terrestrial animals, while eight high officials with the requisite knowledge were arranged to write explanatory texts for the encyclopedic albums, known as *Niao Pu* ("graphics of birds") and *Shou Pu* ("graphics of beasts").

He also collected a comprehensive book called *Hai Cuo Tu* ("an album of the abundant marine world"), which was illustrated by Nie Huang, a natural scientist who spent decades studying the country's waterways and coastal areas.

"Western painting techniques were introduced into the royal court of the Qing Dynasty through missionaries," says Li Shi, a researcher of ancient painting at the Palace Museum.

"In *Niao Pu*, we can see that the expressive techniques of traditional Chinese ink-water painting are kept," she says, adding, "but there are also paintings in the album which show that typical techniques from Western paintings were applied to deal with shadows and add realistic detail."

Qianlong loved the three encyclopedias and kept them in his residence for frequent reference and the education of his children.

Natural History in the Palace Museum is edited from the three graphic albums by selecting 120 of their illustrations. The subjects' modern names (along with their Latin references, where applicable) are included, as well as vividly-written background information and stories, based on historical documents.

The entries range from animals more commonly seen by the emperor, like tigers, donkeys, and dogs, to those that Qianlong would have never seen in his lifetime, like giraffes on the African savanna or whales breaking the ocean surface.

"In the book, each species is given an 'ID card', which enables readers to look up any information on



A girl reads the three-volume book, *Natural History in the Palace Museum*, which was co-released by the Palace Museum Press and CITIC Press in Beijing in July. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From top: The three-volume book, *Natural History in the Palace Museum*. *Xiezh*, a mythical animal included in *Shou Pu* ("graphics of beasts") of the book. Golden pheasants, a type of birds in *Niao Pu* ("graphics of birds") of the book. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

record, from the past to the present," says Wang Zhigeng, director of children's book department at the National Library of China who is also an editor of the book.

For example, readers may be surprised to discover that wild elephants lived along the coast of Guangdong province as late as the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Now they can only be found in the tropical forests of Yunnan province.

Of course, even royal encyclopedias can make mistakes, due to limitations in the research of the time. For instance, the painters have portrayed the porcupine as a variety of boar with quills.

Wang says the choice of "natural history" in the title is to encourage interdisciplinary creativity among today's young generation.

"People have a long tradition studying natural history and our systematic understanding of nature is constantly being challenged and rebuilt," he says. "But, people wonder why it's rare to see an epoch-making genius like Charles Darwin, a naturalist who was far ahead of his time."

"I think it's partially because zoology, botany, and geography were once mixed together and, therefore, the situation encouraged a boom of new knowledge in Darwin's era," Wang says. "Such interdisciplinary thinking is needed for the younger generation today to keep them competitive."

"I hope the book can break the barrier between humankind and the natural sciences," he says. "We loved the idea of adding a little romance to the book, so we also included ancient poems and cultural allusions relevant to the animals."

Just like *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the magic textbook written for students of Hogwarts, Qianlong's encyclopedias, especially *Shou Pu*, are full of legendary animals, many of which are

said to possess superpowers. Painters were said to be inspired by *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, or *Shan Hai Jing*, a 2,000-year-old collection of mythic geography, beasts and folklore.

The book, despite its title, *Natural History in the Palace Museum*, also includes profiles of many fictional animals, in a bid to stoke the imagination.

Parents who take their children to visit the Palace Museum are often bombarded with questions about the decorations featuring sacred animals, according to Bao Fang, one of the book's editors from CITIC Press. "Children always want to know everything about these animals: Who are friendly and which are vicious. Perhaps the book can help parents answer these questions."

A kaleidoscope of mythical species are presented, including the auspicious unicorn called *qilin*; a flying horse with dragon's wings called *longma*, and the dragon-like marine animal called *jiaolong*.

Zhang Jinshuo, chief curator of popular science at the National Zoological Museum of China, points out that, in recent years, translated works from the West have often been the favored resource. The new book, he says, offers an opportunity for readers to appreciate a record of domestic natural history.

"The paintings' exquisite details bring the creatures to life," Zhang says. "They show a colorful world of natural history."

He adds that if things like the somewhat vague portrayal of some animals through error and imagination "are viewed in the bigger picture of history and society, it will still greatly help us to have a clearer view of our own cultural traditions."

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Deguchi Kana, a Japanese New Zealander who loves Chinese language and culture, visits Jeju Island, South Korea. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Japanese travel lover now calls China home

By YANG FEIYUE
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Since April, Deguchi Kana from Japan has been mixing business with pleasure. Love of travel and interest in China's history and culture has driven her to take a job in the Chinese tourism industry.

Kana, in her early 30s, speaks fluent Mandarin and is working as a trainer in Shanghai at Ctrip, a Chinese online travel agency.

"Working at a travel agency attracted me, as it gives me some insider benefits," Kana says, adding that one such boon is helping her become a wise traveler, learning how to make trips cheaper and more cheerful, such as finding the optimal time to book budget hotels.

Kana's job is to help Chinese employees at the agency's hotel operations to better understand work culture in Japan, so they can better collaborate with their Japanese partners. "They may know how to speak Japanese, but may not know that some daily expressions are impolite in the context of a Japanese work setting," she says.

She also took part in arranging Japanese tests for her 70 Chinese colleagues. She even volunteered to tutor those interested in improving their language skills after work. "They are serious about learning," she says. "Children always want to know everything about these animals: Who are friendly and which are vicious. Perhaps the book can help parents answer these questions."

In her interactions with Chinese colleagues, she found that they are "kind and enthusiastic to learn". She has also learned a lot from them, and thus sees things in ways that she didn't before.

Discovering what the rest of the world has to offer has been the engine for her travel passion since she was 11, after she moved from Japan to New Zealand with her family. Her little world embraced creatures and nature from then on, and her parents bought her two sheep as pets to help her adapt to her new environment.

"Every day after school, my best time was with the sheep. They were so cute and clever — they would leap toward me if I brought bags of bread in my hands," she recalls.

Kana's first visit to China was in 2003 when the high schooler took a two-week study trip, after taking a Chinese class at her school which

had an exchange program with a Chinese high school. She visited Beijing, Shanghai and Shaanxi province's Xi'an. "Everything was so refreshing and big, quite different from the two island countries where I had spent my life," she recalls, adding that the Great Wall, the Palace Museum and the hustle and bustle of the large-scale airports and train stations all impressed her.

Yet, what surprised Kana the most was the local people. "Chinese children paid lots of attention to us and were enthusiastic and friendly," she says.

After the trip, she "wanted to learn more about Chinese history and culture", so she decided to get enrolled in the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand which offered Chinese as a major.

During her college years, she traveled to China often to practice her Chinese. She has left her footprints all across the country, from the northeastern Heilongjiang province, to the southern province of Hainan, and Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous regions in the west. She's also "intrigued by the diverse ethnicities in China", where "food and costumes vary a lot from region to region".

Kana came to study at the Beijing Language and Culture University for a month in 2006, after standing out in a Mandarin test and winning a scholarship. There, she was amazed to meet young people from all over the world who shared the same interests. The trip turned out to be a turning point for her.

Kana enjoyed a great time with other foreign students, but found that their Mandarin was much better. She was determined to perfect her language skills, so she continued to study at Nankai University in Tianjin after her graduation in 2007. To better integrate into the Chinese lifestyle, she spent a few years working in Tianjin.

She then went back home to pursue a master's degree in Chinese and represented New Zealand in the Chinese proficiency competition organized by Confucius Institute Headquarters in 2013, achieving a top 15 finish.

Her current job offers more space and a chance to apply her abilities and do the work she loves. "China is my third home, and it's so convenient to live here, with Alipay and takeout services, to name just a couple of things," Kana says.

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