



# The Forbidden City is Fun 1: Once Upon A Time, The Emperor Had A Zoo

## 故宮好好玩 1- 從前皇帝有座動物園

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**Date:** 11/2023

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64 pages | 21 x 28 cm **Volume:** 1

**BFT2.0 Translator:** Michelle Kuo

This book centers on animal paintings from the National Palace Museum in Taipei. It tells the stories of these animals, many of which originated overseas and were brought to the East as diplomatic gifts, highlighting the cultural exchanges between East and West while weaving in historical insights. Featuring original paintings alongside the author's reinterpretations, the book invites readers to compare and appreciate both, sparking imagination and offering a fresh perspective on ancient artifacts.



Author **Yu-Lin Chen**

Yu-Lin Chen holds a Master's degree in Editing from the Utrecht School of the Arts in the Netherlands. A lover of walking, nature, and chatting with cats, Chen captures the joys and sorrows of everyday life with a warm and thoughtful touch. Chen's talent has been recognized twice at the Bologna Illustrators Exhibition in Italy. Authored works include *Olympics*, *Taiwan's Most Beautiful Places – National Parks Map*, *Taiwan Map*, *The Secret Path*, and *The Mountain that Vents*.

# A New Perspective on the Ancient Chinese Emperor's Zoo

by Shiu-an Chiang

The National Palace Museum in Taipei, one of Taiwan's most renowned museums, houses a vast collection, primarily from the Qing Dynasty's imperial archives. Many of these artifacts are tied to the interests and lifestyle of the emperors, reflecting the possible everyday life and political atmosphere of the Qing court. *The Forbidden City is Fun 1: Once Upon a Time, the Emperor Had a Zoo* is a delightful journey through the museum's vast collection of paintings, particularly focusing on depictions of "rare and exotic beasts." The book moves beyond simple visual descriptions, connecting these animals through fascinating stories, thus creating a vibrant "zoo" on paper.

At the start of the book, readers are introduced to one of the Qing Dynasty's most famous collectors: Emperor Qianlong. He guides the reader through

the central theme of the book, embodied by the character of the "Royal Animal Researcher," who serves as the narrator and accompanies readers through the exploration of nine different animals depicted in the artworks.

Each animal is presented through images from the museum's collection, reinterpreted in the playful and whimsical style of celebrated artist Yu-Lin Chen. This transformation makes the otherwise distant ancient paintings more accessible and engaging for readers. In addition to the reimagined images, the fascinating stories behind these creatures are vividly brought to life, such as the tale of a rejected lion, giraffes from distant lands, and the rhinoceros featured in the first world map of China, *Complete Map of the World*.

Throughout the book, the Royal

Animal Researcher shares rigorously researched anecdotes. These range from the excavation of ancient elephants to the symbolism of peacocks in traditional Chinese art. The stories also explore how these exotic animals were treated in China and the legends associated with them. Additionally, the book reveals the origins of their fantastical names, sparking curiosity in young readers. The explanations are simple and easy to read, making the content engaging and accessible.

*The Forbidden City is Fun 1: Once Upon a Time, the Emperor Had a Zoo* offers a fresh perspective on ancient Chinese paintings for children and families, providing a deeper understanding of the significance of animals in the emperor's collection. It shows that these paintings are not just art; they are vivid historical records. Through Chen's colorful reimagining of the animals in the museum's collection and the inclusion of well-researched knowledge, this picture book succeeds in transforming seemingly

complex artworks into an enjoyable read for children. The text is approachable, and the illustrations are filled with charm, making each reading experience a delightful exploration of new details. This is a wonderful example of how to turn the seemingly difficult world of traditional Chinese paintings into a captivating children's book.

*Born and raised in Taipei, with chapters of life spent in Hsinchu, Tainan, and London, Shiu-an Chiang is captivated by all things that add an extraordinary touch to everyday life—whether it's museums, idol groups, or literature. Once an avid novel reader, she recently noticed her bookshelves filling up with nonfiction. With a background in anthropology and art history, much of her time is spent reading and crafting descriptions of museum exhibitions and artifacts. When not immersed in these pursuits, she enjoys knitting or baking, indulging in the simple joys of creativity and craftsmanship.*





## Research Report on the Royal Animals

The "Emu bird," now known as the wild turkey, is mainly found in the forests of Indonesia's Molucca Islands, Nusa Tenggara Islands, and New Guinea. It is a very large bird that cannot fly but runs extremely fast, making it the third-largest bird in the world. However, it has a solitary nature and will display its sharp claws, which resemble knives, when threatened. It is said that a kick from this bird can either kill or seriously injure a person!



Emu

Wild Turkey

Come on!  
We are so different.  
How are we similar?

## Emu Island = wild turkey?

According to scholarly research, the turkey may have been brought to China quite early. A more concrete record is from the Ming Dynasty, when Southeast Asian countries sent turkeys and ostriches as tribute. So how did the name "emu bird" come about in the reign of Emperor Qianlong? It turns out that "emu" is an Indonesian word, and before the 18th century, "emu" specifically referred to large, flightless birds similar to the wild turkey. The name was transliterated into Chinese as "Emo."

## The Emperor's Favorite

The Emu bird has a hard and large crest on its head, with a blue neck and red fleshy wattles. Its beak is sharp like an eagle's, and its feathers are black and fluffy. Its appearance is very similar to the Shile bird (also called the Taiping bird) depicted in the Ming Dynasty's San Cai Tu Hui. Because of its auspicious meaning, it was greatly favored by the emperor.

Rumor:  
It has no tongue?  
No wings or tail?  
It has voracious appetite and even eats... turkey?  
And I heard it eats ice cubes!



## Painting of the Emu Bird - Scroll Qing Dynasty, Yang Dazhang

The emu bird in this painting comes from the Kingdom of Galaba (present-day Indonesia). The painting is composed of three parts. The top part features my "Ten Verses on the Emu Bird," which expresses my thoughts upon receiving this bird. The bottom part contains a "Imperial Emu Bird Painting Inscription" written by Liang Guozhi, which provides knowledge about the emu bird.

## First-hand Information From the Emperor

The "Imperial Emu Bird Painting Inscription" is an explanatory text attached beneath the emu bird painting. It describes the emu bird in great detail and even refutes several legends regarding the bird's behavior. It is highly accurate, suggesting that the emperor himself really raised emus.

Fact check:  
Nonsense, it has a tongue,  
wings and feathers!  
It likes to eat  
vegetables and fish!





**Holy Roman Emperor**

The emu brought back by the Dutch has become part of my zoo's collection. Even its eggs are kept in my collection of rare curiosities.

Rudolf II

Holy Roman Empire

The Vatican

**Pope**

Someone had already brought me a male and female emu from Japan, making me the first person in Europe to have emus!

Piers V

That's what we brought to Japan from Indonesia.

Dutch person

**Chinese Emperor**

I ordered the creation of the "Ornithological Catalogue," which records both native Chinese birds and foreign birds brought in from overseas and presented as tribute. The section on the "emu" even references Western ornithological knowledge, fully in line with global standards!

Qianlong

Qing Empire

Japan

**The Lord of Hirado Domain**

In 1635, someone already sent us the emu. Later, the Dutch frequently imported these birds to Japan, so it's not something unusual for us!

**Dutch Explorer**

In 1597, when we arrived in Indonesia, we not only brought back spices but also a bird called emu (fire-eating turkey). In the end, this emu was bought and sent to the Holy Roman Emperor!

Indonesia, Java

It was a gift from the Indonesian prince!

**Animal Stories**

The most fashionable collectible in the world.

If you don't have it, you're missing out!

During the Age of Exploration, when Europeans first came to the East and encountered the emu, it sparked a craze for royal collections. Although the emu wasn't particularly rare in China by comparison, royal palaces regarded it as a globally trendy collectible. And, to keep up with the trend, everyone simply called it the emu bird.

How exactly did this bird cause such a sensation in Europe?

**Chief of Madagascar**

In 1671, I bought an emu from an Indian ship and presented it to the King of France.

Madagascar

I also have one!

King

**◆ The Origin of the Encyclopedia**

With the advent of the Age of Exploration, explorers brought various plants and animals back to Europe from around the world. This sparked a fervor for collecting, documenting, and studying flora and fauna. European monarchs were also very enthusiastic about collecting exotic treasures from around the world, especially from the East. To them, this was akin to possessing the entire world.

In response to this trend, encyclopedias documenting these collections of animals and plants emerged. In the East, Emperor Qianlong also displayed immense enthusiasm for creating such encyclopedic records. During his reign, he completed numerous illustrated works, showcasing his mastery of worldly knowledge and proving that he was not to be surpassed.

**Collection of Western Plants** records plants from the Western world.

**Herbal Plants** records fragrant herbs and plants.

**Beast Manual** records auspicious beasts, exotic animals, mythical creatures, and various common animals.

**Bird Manual** records bird species information from "all under heaven" (the entire world).



犬

Dog

✦ The Most Precious  
Little Helper

