

The “Iron-eating bird” on the Silk Roads: the cross-cultural study of circulation of ostrich diet myths

Wednesday, July 16, 2025 10:05 AM (20 minutes)

Abstract: The ostrich was a representative species in the cross-cultural exchanges along the ancient Silk Road. In addition to its striking materiality, myths about ostriches swallowing charcoal and iron, and furthermore refining iron from their bellies, were spread across various cultures in a wide geographical area, including Hebrew, Islamic, Christian Europe and China. These myths have common features such as the positive affirmation of ostriches refining iron, the high efficiency of the immediately available, and the improbability by repeated feeding to obtain a better-quality product. As well as being influenced by socio-economic factors such as the uneven degree of development of iron-making technology in the Middle Ages and the widespread lack of quality steel across cultures, alchemical ideas such as material transformation also provide a fundamental ideaistic context for their existence and evolution. An analysis of the ostrich diet myths suggests that the various dimensions of context may provide explanations for the similarities and particularities that the myths present in various regions.

Key words: ostrich; cross-cultural study; the circulation of knowledge; iron making; alchemy; digestion.

Presenter: CHEN, Wei

Session Classification: The Spread of Knowledge