THE YEAR OF THE TIGER

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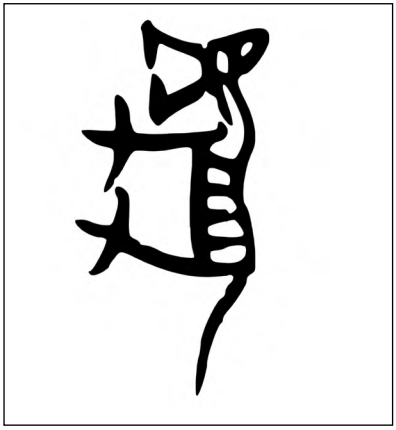
'IN CHINA, THE historical attitude to the tiger is full of contradictions', observed Cao Zhenfeng 曹振峰, a specialist on Chinese folk tradition:

> The tiger is both loved and hated; it is a frightening beast as well as a protecting god; it is a sign of danger and a symbol of good luck; it causes people to flee from it but also to chase after it … Never has there been an animal like the tiger that embodies such distinct and discrepant meanings.[1]

The current geographic territory of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was once home to one of the world's largest tiger populations. In historical times, there were Siberian (or Amur) tigers in the north-east, Indochinese tigers in the south-west, Bengal tigers in the south-east of Tibet, and South China tigers across vast areas south of the Yangtze River.[2] Ancient oracle bone and bronze inscriptions are full of references to the tiger, which is often shown with its claws out, jaws wide open, and tail swinging. This clear pictorial representation of the animal was eventually replaced with the character for tiger used today, 虎,



Oracle bone inscription of a tiger with its wide open jaws and a whipping tail
Source: Chinese etymology

which derives from the seal script of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and is pronounced *hu* in Mandarin in the third tone.

This modern character is made up of two symbols: 虎, meaning the pattern of the tiger's skin, and 儿, representing a person. Chi Hsu-sheng 季旭昇, a specialist on Chinese etymology, believes that the 'human' component was added to the tiger pictograph because ancient texts often compare people to tigers.[3] The character in fact stands for a 'human tiger', just like we say 'he's such a tiger!' today. In common speech, a tiger is a *laohu* 老虎. The prefix 老 means 'old' but is also a form of affectionate and respectful address. A teacher is a *laoshi* 老师, regardless of age.

As a cultural symbol, the tiger stands for power and vigour. Traditionally, it is featured on the clothes and accessories of kings and ministers to signify their authority and courage. Today, some Chinese parents still dress their children in colourful tiger-head shoes and caps, which are believed to protect the wearer from disaster and disease. In martial arts, the *Fu Jow Pai* 虎爪派 or 'Tiger Claw School' draws its inspiration for hand-to-hand combat techniques from the ripping, tearing, pulling, and grasping movements of a tiger's attack.

At the same time, many consider the tiger a menacing predator — a harmful pest. History books abound with records of 'tiger troubles' 虎害 alongside famines and plagues. A famous story from the *Book of Rites* portrays the tiger in such a light, albeit to communicate a political message:

> In passing by the side of Mount Tai, Confucius came upon a woman who was wailing bitterly by a grave. The Master sent his disciple Zilu to

question her: 'Your wailing,' said he, 'is exactly like that of one who has suffered sorrow after sorrow.'

She replied, 'It is so. Some time ago, my husband's father was killed here by a tiger. My husband was also killed by one, and now my son has died in the same way.'

The Master asked, 'Why do you not leave this place?'

'There is no oppressive government here,' answered the woman.

The Master then said to his disciples, 'Remember this, my children. Oppressive government is more terrible than tigers.'[4]

A poster during a vigil held for victims of the Ürümqi apartment fire, a tragedy attributed to China's zero-COVID policy. The slogan 'Oppressive government is more terrible than fires' 苛政猛於火 **is a wordplay on Confucius' famous statement**
Source: @ShengXue_ca, Twitter

Confucius's words ring true even today. The iron-fisted zero-COVID policy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has ushered in a new wave of migration abroad — a phenomenon playfully dubbed by netizens as *run* 润, meaning simply 'run' (though the character itself means profit or to dampen or embellish). Those who are finding ways of leaving are even considered masters of *run xue* 润学, or 'the study of running away'.[5]

Among the rich and colourful expressions inspired by the tiger, a number refer to abusers of power. The idiom *hu jia hu wei* 狐假虎威 ('the fox borrowing the tiger's might') tells the story of how a fox walked in front of a tiger, which scared all other animals away, and so tricked the tiger into thinking that the fox was the most fearsome beast in the

jungle. Another expression, *wei hu zuo chang* 为虎作伥 ('becoming the tiger's servant-ghost'), refers to an old belief that those eaten by tigers turn into evil spirits, helping tigers to catch more victims. In 2022, both terms were directed against the 'army of millions' who helped to enforce China's zero-COVID policy regardless of the human cost.[6]

In the popular imagination, Wu Song 武松, the twelfth-century tiger slayer, represents an underdog defeating a much bigger, stronger adversary, like David against Goliath. This story, as told in the novel *Shui Hu Zhuan* 水浒传 (translated variously as *The Water Margin* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*), begins with the traveller Wu Song arriving at an inn near Jingyang Ridge. After learning that a man-eating tiger has been terrorising travellers, Wu Song disregards the innkeeper's warning: 'Three bowls of wine and you mustn't cross the ridge.' He knocks back eighteen bowls of wine before proceeding to cross the ridge. Drunk, he falls asleep halfway, and awakes, startled, to find himself face to face with the tiger.

An influential reader and literary critic from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), Jin Shengtan 金圣叹 (1608–1661), was struck by the lively and detailed description of Wu Song's ensuing fight with the tiger. In his notes on this episode, he draws the reader's attention to the ten different positions in which Wu Song holds his club during the struggle. The club, at a crucial moment, breaks. Jin writes: 'We are absolutely stunned and hardly dare to read on. After the club is broken, Wu Song's extraordinary power of fighting the tiger with his bare hands can be revealed. However, the reader is so frightened that his heart and liver have jumped out of his mouth.'[7]

Wu Song eventually kills the tiger and becomes a hero to the local people for 'getting rid of the menace' 为民除害. He is even awarded 1,000 strings of cash by the local magistrate. The novel does not say what happens to the body of the tiger. Tigers were then, as they are now, treasured commodities. Their pelts are eagerly sought after and, in traditional Chinese medicine, 'virtues are ascribed to the ashes of the bones, to the fat, skin, claw, liver, [and] blood'.[8] Tiger whiskers are said to be good for toothache while tiger penis, when preserved in liquor, is reputed to enhance

a man's potency. Such ascribed benefits have led to excessive hunting of tigers, especially over the past century. This, combined with deforestation and loss of habitat, has seen the population of tigers decline drastically. In 2018, it was estimated that fewer than 3,900 tigers existed in the wild.[9] The Worldwide Fund for Nature honoured the Year of the Tiger by fundraising for tiger conservation, with artists including Ai Weiwei working with master weavers from the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Afghanistan to create tiger-themed rugs for auction.[10]

From a young age, Mao Zedong was fascinated by the story of Wu Song. In a speech commemorating the twenty-eighth anniversary of the CPC in 1949, Mao declared: 'We must not show the slightest timidity before a wild beast. We must learn from Wu Sung … Either kill the tiger or be eaten by him — one or the other.'[11]

Mao also popularised the term 'paper tiger' 纸老虎 — an idiom first used in *The Water Margin* to denote an empty threat. In 1946, when he was still in Yan'an, Mao used the term to describe hostile imperialist forces such as the US government — a thing that may at first seem as terrifying as a real tiger but can be easily defeated. In recent years, Chinese state media have, on more than one occasion, called Australia a 'paper cat' — an even more deflating variation of Mao's original metaphor.

In the jungle of contemporary Chinese politics, the tiger has become synonymous with corrupt senior officials. Mao used the expression 'hunting big tigers' 打大老虎 during the PRC's first anticorruption campaign in 1951–1952. Half a century later, the expression resurfaced when Xi Jinping launched his major anticorruption campaign soon after coming to power in 2012. The slogan Strike Tigers and Flies Alike 老虎苍蝇一起打 (flies being low-level officials, a lesser but more common pest) has since become a trademark of Xi's 'strongman' image. The party's tiger hunt became a nationwide sport. Just as people in the past loved to hear storytellers talk about Wu Song's conquest of the tiger, many Chinese today enjoy the spectacle of corrupt officials in prison jumpsuits confessing their sins on national television, begging for forgiveness.

The metaphor of tigers and flies so beloved of CPC leaders has its origin in an earlier anti-graft campaign headed by Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Mao's mortal enemy and rival Chiang Kai-shek, whose government retreated to the island of Taiwan in 1949. One year before the defeat, Chiang Ching-kuo arrived in Shanghai to stabilise its economy, which had been marred by years of war, corruption, and rampant inflation. The slogan of his campaign was 'strike the tigers, don't swat the flies' 只打老虎, 不拍苍蝇, making it clear that he was only after the 'fat cats' among profiteers and speculators. Unfortunately for Chiang Ching-kuo, the biggest tigers of all were among his own family and supporters. He might have 'talked tiger' but in the end he could only go after smaller game, as the cartoon by Mi Gu reproduced here suggests.

While in Shanghai, Chiang Ching-kuo reportedly led a crowd of 5,000 young army veterans singing a song called *Two Tigers* 两只老虎 set to the tune of *Frère Jacques*.[12] The same melody had previously served as the Republic of China's military anthem, Song of the National Revolution. It is unclear when tigers were first written into the lyrics of this song, but Chiang Ching-kuo was reportedly fond of it, singing it on various occasions in Jiangxi province, where he served as commissioner between 1939 and 1945.[13] It is agreed that in the context of Chiang's anticorruption campaign, the two tigers represent profiteers and communists. Yet the lyrics, which are about one tiger missing an ear and another missing a tail, could have originally been poking fun at the isolationist United States, unable to hear the cries for help of people around the world, and the Soviet Union, lacking balance and unlikely to survive.

Regardless of its political associations, the song *Two Tigers* went on to become a popular nursery rhyme loved by millions in the Chinese-speaking world. Powerful and protective, menacing and harmful, the tiger remains a complex, ambiguous figure in China's symbolic landscape. And if tigers still symbolically play the villain in the Chinese political agenda, their traditional associations are complex and live on through countless legends, myths, stories, and songs.

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