THE SIBERIAN TIGER and the Country of Tiger Tales

By Laurie Baker

JANUARY 28, 1998 BEGAN THE YEAR OF THE TIGER, OR LUNAR YEAR 4697. BUT THE TIGER, WHOSE POPULATION THROUGHOUT ASIA WAS AROUND 100,000 AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, IS NOW IN DANGER OF EXTINCTION. TEACHERS OF SCIENCE, SOCIAL STUDIES AND LITERATURE CAN BRING THE CRISIS OF THE TIGER'S ENVIRONMENTAL PLIGHT AS WELL AS ITS PLACE IN ASIAN CULTURE TO THE ATTENTION OF THEIR STUDENTS BY PRESENTING AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM—DESCRIPTION, HABITAT AND SPECIES CONSERVATION, ALONG WITH HISTORY AND FOLKLORE—TO STUDENTS IN GRADES K THROUGH 12.

By studying the tiger's home range, students can grasp the geography of Asia,[1] and by studying the folklore and mythology of the tiger, they can understand more about the people who lived near this animal. This essay will concentrate on the Amur, or Siberian, tiger that roamed China, Russia and the Korean peninsula, and on the stories of the Koreans who have remembered the tiger as a protector, brother and friend, as well as an enemy and trickster.

Today, only about 5,000–7,000 tigers of all five subspecies exist in the wild across Asia. In the past their territory ranged from southeastern Russia, throughout China and the Korean peninsula, south to Indochina and Indonesia, west to India and as far north as the Caspian Sea. The Bali, Caspian and Javanese tigers have become extinct in the past seventy years, and other subspecies of tigers are in serious danger of extinction in India and Russia, as well as Northeast and Southeast Asia.

SIBERIAN TIGER. Image purchased from the on-line site: Http://corel.digitalriver.com
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Koreans have such a fondness for this animal that they nicknamed

EVIL REPELLING TIGER WITH MAGPIE. This image can be found at: www.iworld.net/korea/culture/f116.html

Before the turn of the twentieth century the Siberian tiger (also known as the Amur, Manchurian, or Northeast China tiger), the largest of the five subspecies, roamed over China, Russia, and North and South Korea. Forty years ago, after several wars in the region— the Russian and Chinese revolutions, World War II, and the Korean War—the Siberian tiger population was reduced to an estimated twenty-four in the wild. Perhaps through benevolent neglect, their numbers rose again and in 1998 it is believed that there are approximately 400–500 Siberian tigers living in the wild (mostly in eastern Russian) and about 490 in zoo programs around the world (again, primarily in Russia). This is still far from the prewar numbers, however, and while the Siberian tiger may be better off than some of the other subspecies, the demand for tiger bones and parts as a medical panacea makes their complete extinction in the wild a possibility. The Siberian tiger's status is considered to be "critical" by the World Conservation Union (IUCN).[2]

Tigers can survive in a variety of habitats, yet loss of land is one major factor causing their reduced numbers. As tigers have encroached upon farmers' livestock, they have been hunted and killed without license. But the major factor leading to the tiger's demise is illegal poaching for economic gain. Although tigers are protected in many areas of the world, including China and Russia, hunters kill them for their bones and body parts which are thought to give health and potency to people who consume them. China has recently outlawed the sale of tiger parts, on penalty of death, and a "tiger farm" in Harbin, China has been converted into a tourist attraction, which offers its owners legal income for raising tigers. Unfortunately there is still a market for tiger parts, and the products bring high prices in pharmacies from Tokyo to Los Angeles to New York.[3] None of the medicinal claims have been proven, but still the illegal trade continues.

The tiger, which is the largest of the cats, is a creature of great power and mysterious beauty. Its dramatic markings of black or dark brown stripes accented with white might aid in camouflage, but no one knows from where or why the tiger got its stripes. Each tiger has its own distinctive, asymmetrical markings, like human fingerprints, so no two are exactly alike. A creative writing project might ask students to create a story about how the tiger got its stripes! The stripes of the tiger have even been connected to Chinese writing. It is said that the Siberian tiger often has the Chinese mark *wang* ("king") on its forehead.

There are several Internet websites for science and social studies teachers to use to teach their students about the tiger. They contain zoological and geographical data, interactive games and projects, photographs, and resources they might contact to help save all endangered species. One is the IUCN site specializing in cats, http://lynx.uio.no/catfolk/. The Tiger Information Center has an excellent site called "All About Tigers." One of their interactive links, "Tracking the Tiger Trade," gets students to read a story and decide on the course of action to take in order to save the tiger. The link http://www.5tigers.org/teachers.htm will guide you to up-to-date on-line resources for teachers. The Tiger Information Center is sponsored by Save the Tiger Fund (1-800-5Tigers), a program of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.[4]

TIGERS IN ASIAN CULTURE

In the Chinese lunar calendar, one animal rules each year of a twelve-year cycle. Thus, the tiger rules most of 1998, and will again rule the year 2010. The character of the animal, which rules any given year, affects business, politics, love, marriage, changes of home or job, and personal fortunes. Most young people are interested in figuring out their own lunar animal signs by finding their birth dates on a lunar calendar, and teachers could attach this to a lesson about the history of calendars. Students will find out how, according to the Chinese system, the year of their birth affects their personality. They can study lunar horoscopes to find out how to behave, which animals are their natural friends, and in which months they should marry, move or get a job. Two interesting websites to consult for horoscopes are http://www.ddsclub.com/shanghai/cny/tiger.html and http://found.cs.nyu.edu/liaos/ horoscope.html.

their country "the country of tiger tales."

One analysis of the Year of the Tiger, 1998, states that "In this drama-filled year, when everything is done on a grand scale, it is an opportune time to breathe new life and vitality into flagging concerns. It will also be a time for sweeping changes, with the introduction of bold, new and often challenging ideas which could nevertheless help to clean out the cobwebs. A fiery year, perhaps, as befits the Tiger's nature but one which could bring great achievements for those who maintain a sense of humour and let things take their course."[5] In many North and Southeast Asian countries, including Korea, people study Chinese horoscopes to understand themselves and the world around them. The Chinese in Indonesia can certainly attest to the drama in their lives in 1998!

The Korean Tiger

Many Asian cultures tell folk tales about tigers, but Koreans have such a fondness for this animal that they nicknamed their country "the country of tiger tales." It's been a long relationship, and a varied one, starting from the Dan-gun myth which tells us that the tiger was important even at the birth of the Korean nation.

Magpie and Tiger. From the book: *Korean Heritage,* Copyright 1996 by Korean Overseas Information Service. Published by Hollym International Corp.

THE LEGEND OF DAN-GUN (ALT. TANGUN)

A long, long time ago, Hwan-In was ruling over the kingdom of Heaven. He had a son, whose name was Hwan-Ung. Hwan-Ung was a clever, compassionate, and constructive man, and Hwan-In treated his son lovingly. One day, Hwan-Ung looked down into the world of mortals and became interested in them. He asked his father to let him go to the beautiful Peninsula of Korea to govern. Hwan-In granted his son's request and sent him along with Pung-Beg (the Earl of Wind), U-Sa (the Chancellor of Rain), and Un-Sa (The Chancellor of Clouds) to supervise the world of mortals, and help maintain their livelihood. The ministers were able to control rain, wind, clouds, and all natural elements so that grain could grow, life would prosper, and good and evil would be judged fairly. Hwan-Ung and his ministers ruled wisely.

At that time, a bear and a tiger lived on the earth in a cave near a sandalwood tree. They both wanted to become human. When Hwan-Ung discovered their sincere desire he decided to grant their wish. Hwan-Ung called them and told them, "If you endure one hundred days in a dark cave eating only garlic and mugwort, you will become a human."

The bear and the tiger took the mugwort and the garlic into the cave and began their ordeal. They prayed that their wish might be granted. But the tiger was extremely restless and dissatisfied, as it could not control its energy. Finally, the tiger said, "I can't endure these days of sitting quietly in the cave." And the tiger ran away. But the bear held fast to the end, and after twenty-one days her wish was granted and she became a beautiful woman.

The bear-woman was overjoyed and visited the sandalwood tree, where she prayed that she might have a child. Hwan-Ung married the beautiful bear-woman and made her Queen. Soon she gave birth to a prince, whom they named Dan-gun, or the Sandalwood King. When Dan-gun grew up, he reigned as the first human king of the Korean peninsula. He established a new capital at Pyongyang (now in North Korea) and named the kingdom Choson (land of the Morning Calm), now known as Korea. This all happened 4,283 years ago.[6]

S'AN SHIN AND THE MAGPIES. Magpie-Tiger front door guardian, 19th century. Korean National Folklore Museum. Photo by Laurie Baker

Even today, there is a monument in the Taebaek Mountains of the Korean Peninsula where Dan-Gun was believed to have been born. Though the poor tiger was not turned into a human, its stories still vibrate in the Korean people's hearts, and today their affection for the tiger remains strong and unique. The tiger is depicted in Korean paintings and folk stories as frightening, yet familiar; brave and almost sacred, but at the same time rather slow-witted and foolish. He sometimes repays debts, and scolds the hypocrisy of human society; but other times he is the thief and hypocrite himself, as seen in the following story.

THE TIGER AND DRIED PERSIMMONS

A long, long time ago, a tiger who was proud of himself lived in a mountain valley. The tiger thought he was the most powerful and wise of animals, so he was very arrogant. One day the tiger came down to a village for food. The tiger walked into the garden of a small house where it heard a child crying. It listened outside a window as a grandmother scolded a child, "Stop crying this very minute! The tiger is here!" But the child took no notice and went on crying. The tiger, surprised, said to himself, "This child must be very brave. He is not the least bit afraid of me. He must be a hero." So went the thinking of the arrogant tiger.

Then the grandmother said, "Here is a dried persimmon. Stop crying!" And the child stopped crying immediately. The tiger then became frightened and said to himself, "The persimmon must be a terrible creature, since the mere mention of it scares the child." And he crept away quietly, giving up his plan of attacking this house.

The tiger went to an outer house to get an ox to eat instead. There was a thief in the outer house also trying to steal the ox. As it was a moonless night, the thief thought the tiger was the ox so he jumped on the tiger's back. The tiger jumped up, terrified, and ran off as fast as it could go. "This must be the terrible persimmon attacking me!" it thought. The thief still rode the tiger and whipped it so that he could get away before the villagers saw him stealing what he thought was the ox.

When it grew light the thief saw that he was riding on a tiger and jumped off and ran away. But the tiger kept running to the mountains without looking back at the dreaded persimmon![7]

Figure 1: MOUNTAIN SPIRIT AND TIGER. Korean Temple painting of S'an Shin Shrine. Photo by Laurie Baker.

There are dozens of folk tales about the tiger. One collection of stories divides them into chapter titles which reflect people's attitudes about the tiger: "Patron of Filial Piety," "Tiger's Gratitude," "Tiger the Matchmaker," "Tiger with Famous Historical Personages," "Tigers as Divinities," "Greedy and Stupid Tiger," "Tips for Catching Tigers," and even "Tiger Dung" which features two scatological stories.[8]

THE MOUNTAIN SPIRIT

Since ancient times the tiger has been the messenger of the mountain spirit, San Shin. Buddhist temples usually include a small shrine behind the main buildings, up on the mountainside. Inside the shrine is a painting of the old, white-bearded god, who is attended by a tiger and sometimes a young woman (Fig.1). The tiger lies quietly at San Shin's side, waiting to do his bidding, as in the following story.

In this story, the sometimes-fierce tiger plays the romantic go-between, restoring order and happiness to the village per the instructions of the mountain spirit.

THE MATCHMAKING MOUNTAIN SPIRIT

Mountain Spirit, Tiger and Young Woman. 19th century. Photo by Laurie Baker.

Kim, a man of the gentry, had a daughter named Ok-bun. Her beauty was often compared to the rising moon. Pak, a commoner, lived in the same village, and had a son named P'al-bong, who was said to be as bright as the rising sun.

These two young people were of different classes, but since they had grown up in the same small village, they were very close, and they had played together since they were children. They often went hiking together in the mountains, Ok-Bun with her herb basket, and P'al-bong with his *jige*, or A-frame pack.

As they got older, Ok-bun's father could see the inevitable; they were getting serious about each other. But he did not want his daughter to get any mischievous ideas about marrying some commoner. He was determined to marry his daughter to Tol-swae, who was also a nobleman. He told his daughter to stop meeting P'al-bong, scolding that it was not proper for a young noble woman to wander around with a common no-account like P'al-bong.

Ok-bun was not rebellious and did not have the heart to disobey her father, but at the same time she despaired over her impending marriage and separation from P'al-bong. She lost her appetite, and in time, started wasting away. Her father was not worried, though, since he knew she would forget P'al-bong once she married and settled down. He wanted to get her married quickly, however, before she got sick. So he arranged for the engagement and set an early wedding date.

P'al-bong felt awful. Whenever he thought of losing Ok-bun, just because of the class system, he gnashed his teeth and his eyes became fiery balls of pure fury. But neither P'al-bong nor his father had the power to do anything to prevent Ok-bun's marriage.

The wedding day came. After a splendid feast the bridegroom entered the bridal chamber, where Ok-bun was waiting for him. Following tradition, he took off her headpiece, and removed her outer clothing, piece by fragrant piece. Then he put out the light. And then . . . what?!?!? A tiger in the bedroom!!! There was such a commotion that everyone in the house was soon scrambling and running in all directions. In the turmoil the tiger escaped with the new bride.

Grief stricken, P'al-bong and his father had not attended the wedding. They were at home, fast asleep. But then they were wakened by a loud thump in the next room. When they went to see what was going on, they discovered none other than Ok-bun lying there unconscious on the floor.

In the meantime, Tol-swae had gotten a search party together to look for Ok-bun. He thought the tiger had surely killed her. They all went looking for the tiger and the poor bride. P'al-bong's father, who was a righteous man, felt obliged to report what had happened, and he went immediately to Ok-bun's father and explained everything that he could. On hearing this, everyone nodded and said that it was the mountain spirit, San Shin, at his matchmaking again, and that no human should interfere. What else could Ok-bun's father do but go along with this? Even the bridegroom saw that their marriage was not to be.

So a marriage between the two childhood sweethearts was arranged and they lived happily ever after.[9]

MOUNTAIN SPIRIT (Sansindo). Hanging scroll, 18th century. From the exhibition catalog: *Hopes and Aspirations: Decorative Painting of Korea*. This exhibition of Korean decorative painting was held at The University of Michigan Museum of Art (Sept. 19– Nov. 15, 1998), and was organized by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and presented jointly with the U-M Korean Studies Program.

In folk paintings, the tiger is accompanied by Korea's national bird, a magpie.[10] One interpretation says that the magpie is the village spirit that announces good omens, and the tiger is the servant that does his bidding; another says that the tiger is a *yangban* (aristocrat) and the magpie is the representative of the common people, scolding him for his insensitivity to their condition. According to another folk tale, a woodcutter saves a tiger from a trap, but the ungrateful tiger tries to eat his benefactor. The magpie intervenes and saves the woodcutter, and in the paintings he is berating the tiger for his meanness to the woodcutter. In paintings the magpie sits above the tiger and the tiger gazes up at it with an indifferent, comical or almost crazed expression.

There are dozens more stories that I don't have the space to tell here. But students can create stories of their own, perhaps about what happened to the tiger after he left the cave in the Dan-gun myth (recounted in this article) or how the tiger helped San Shin to improve the world in other ways. Teachers can draw parallels between the tiger and animal characters in other cultures which correspond to the tiger tales of Korea, such as the trickster-coyote of Native American mythology, or the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

The value of teaching students about the tiger is not only that the stories are charming and culturally relevant to the study of Asia, but also that the tiger has a definite place as a symbol even in the United States, which has never been its natural home. We see Tony the Tiger as the picture of health and vitality, the Texaco Tiger as the power in our cars, and the verbose toy tiger, (or is he real?) Hobbes, as the wise companion to a boy in the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. Obviously, the tiger is attractive to the American culture as well as to the Asian. Korea named the tiger as its mascot for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and this little tiger (*ho'dori*) was smiling, playful and welcoming, a likable host for the Korean games. From ancient folk tales we can see that humans both love and fear the tiger, but above all we respect him. Hopefully, education about the tiger's folk history, its biology, and its current plight will make students want to save the tiger from extinction before it is too late. ■

NOTES

1. See David Nemeth, "Geographic Gateways to Seeing and Understanding Korea," *Education About Asia*, v.3, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 47–51 for his interesting approach to introducing the geography of Korea. The tiger could easily be used as a "geographic gateway" to the study of Korea.
2. The IUCN is one of the oldest international conservancy groups in the world, which sponsors programs and publications dedicated to the relationship between nature and society. http://www.iucn.org or IUCN/USA, Suite 502, 1400 16th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.
3. http://www.5tigers.org/index.html
4. They can be reached by phone or mail: The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, 1120 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20036, 202-857-0166, 202-857-0162 (fax) in partnership with the Exxon Corporation.
5. http://www.ddslub.com/shanghai/cny/tigers.html
6. The Dan-gun legend and other stories in this essay have been told often throughout the ages with slight variations. I have used two written sources to relate these stories herein: Zong In-Sob, *Folk Tales from Korea*, 3rd edition (New Jersey: Hollym International Corp., 1982), and Kathleen J. Crane Foundation, *Tiger, Burning Bright: More Myths than Truths about Korean Tigers* (New Jersey: Hollym International Corp., 1992). In addition, I have used material told to me by friends and students in Korea who have heard the stories since childhood.
7. ibid.
8. Kathleen J. Crane Foundation, *Tiger, Burning Bright: More Myths than Truths about Korean Tigers*, (New Jersey: Hollym International Corp, 1992), 9–11.
9. ibid., 96–98.
10. David Nemeth gives more information about the magpie as a "gateway" into teaching about Korean geography in "Geographic Gateways to Seeing and Understanding Korea," *Education About Asia*, v.3, no.1 (Spring 1998), 47–51.

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