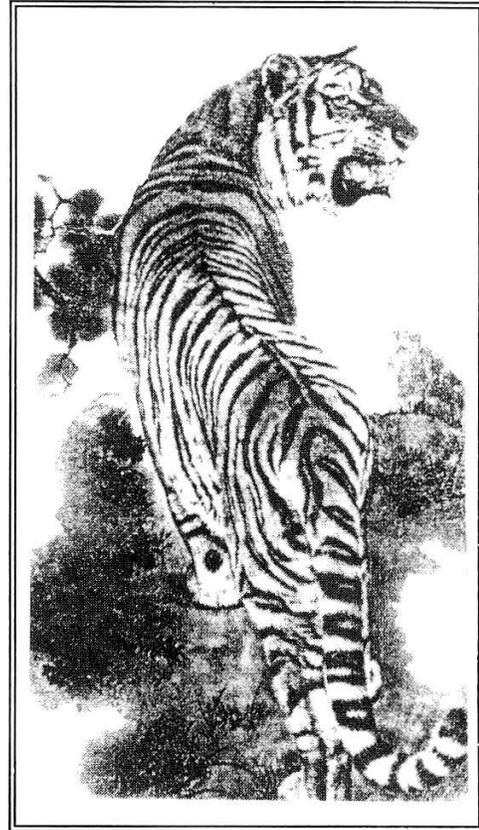


Happy Year of the Tiger

by Michael Sloboda

Tigers in China are now as rare as bears in Europe, but in the old days they roamed quite freely. Today, they can still be seen occasionally in northeast China and in some of the southern provinces. Throughout China's history enough people had close encounters with a tiger for the tiger to acquire a reputation as the king of the forest.

There is a stone carving from the Han Dynasty (202 BC -- 220 AD) of a running man glancing back at a tiger which is gaining on him. At one time China had many tigers, but only about 60 million people, 5% of its current population, so the tiger to person ratio was much more favorable, as seen from the tiger's viewpoint.



“Tiger” has many different meanings

“Tiger mouth” means “jaws of death,” “tiger vigor,” means “daring drive,” while “paper tiger” means “empty bravado.” Paper tigers, however, have another meaning for the Chinese. They are also used to ward off evil spirits and can be seen just about anywhere in great numbers during certain festivals. The various body parts of the tiger are thought by many to have marvelous healing qualities.

The qualities of the tiger

Tigers inspire awe. To the Chinese they are a symbol of courage. In the early days, some Chinese liked to eat tiger liver thinking, that by so doing, they would have the strength and courage of the tiger.

Some even preferred the tiger to the Mandarins. After her husband died, one woman was left alone in a hut at the foot of a mountain. Friends from the village visited her and urged her to move in with them for safety. She answered: "Better the tiger on the mountain than the government in the village."

West, autumn, white

Dong Zhongshu (175-105 BCE) compiled traditional associative thinking and systematized the theories of *yin-yang* and the Five Elements. He linked the tiger to the direction west, the color white and the season autumn

The association with the west is not clear. The association with autumn may mean that autumn in the northern hemisphere often brings wind from the west and frost which is white.

The "white" tiger is complementary to the green dragon and is as honoured as the dragon. Some older Chinese think that the tiger lives for thousands of years. At a certain stage, at about 500 years old, tigers turn white. The tiger then acts as a psychic current running around the earth. He is also a symbol of dignity and vigor.

The tiger is also associated with white jade. Since the male tiger was the god of war and the king of the mountain, white jade was worn only by army commanders. When the emperor authorized a general to move troops, he sent him a talisman in the shape of a tiger.

The Twelve-Year Cycle

There is a Buddhist story about twelve animals that raced to pay homage to the Buddha. The tiger came in third, so the third year in the twelve year cycle belongs to the tiger. Such traditions have been passed down generation after generation, even in Hong Kong where tigers are as rare as frosty nights. People born in the Year of

the Tiger: 1926, 1938, 1950 (Wei Jingsheng), 1962, 1974 and 1986 are said to be daring and dignified.

Save the tiger campaign

On December 16, 1997, Suzhou in Jiangsu Province established a breeding base to save the South Asian tiger from extinction. Word is getting around at last that international trade in tiger bone for Chinese medicine is illegal, and efforts are being made to find a substitute. People are realizing that animals are more valuable alive than dead; that they add to the beauty and the wonder of the world in ways that are hard to price and record on the balance sheet of any accountant.

Animals in creation

Chapters 38-41 of Job contains God's response to Job's anguished questions about evil and suffering in the world. The Lord directs Job's attention to the age and size of the earth, the beauty of the stars, and then speaks at length of a number of wild, beautiful and even terrifying animals. Aside from the horse, domesticated and agriculturally useful creatures are not mentioned, but God expresses delight in the untamable wild ox, the uncatchable ostrich, the powerful behemoth [hippo?] and the dangerous leviathan [crocodile?]. Job's response is not: "Why did you create species which people cannot exploit commercially?" but "I know that you can do all things" (Job 42:2).

A Christian response

As Christians we may find the myths and legends about the tiger interesting and even amusing, but also quaint and quite unbelievable. What we can take from these myths, however, is the spirit that inspired them, the deference these myths convey for all of creation, the emphasis on the value, beauty and the belief that somehow all of God's beautiful creation is linked together in some mysterious and godly plan that needs our respect and awe.

Creation glorifies God, and perhaps especially those parts of it from which no one can get rich quickly.

Despite his misery, Job has eyes to see God's wisdom and beauty in creation. Thus Job is restored to health and prosperity.

On the eve of the Third Millennium, we have ample misery on this planet, yet more people are realizing that a reverence for nature and all of creation are part of the solution.

The Year of the Holy Spirit

Pope John Paul II has designated 1998, the second of three years of preparation for the Great Jubilee 2000, as the Year of the Holy Spirit, Who “fills the whole world and renews all things.” Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth! Renew us to do our small part to care for this earth!

**Happy Lunar
New Year
and
Happy Year of
the Tiger**

*For the Chinese the Tiger is a symbolism
of courage, authority, military skill and long life.*

