



THE TIGER: A RELIGIOUS MOTIF OF TONKIN WOODEN
PRINTS AND CHINESE-INK DRAWINGS

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In the lowlands around the Red River, in the area called Bac Bo (i.e. the northern part of today's Vietnam), the civilization of the Kinh people¹ began to evolve at some time in the first millennium before Christ. Tigers, that had long since inhabited the subtropical forests of the mountainous areas in the north-western part of the country, were known to do harm to people on occasion. It is perhaps for this reason that the tiger became a motif of Vietnamese folk poetry and rhetoric, in which it plays a somewhat inconsistent role, beginning with the almighty lord of the jungle and ending with a fool duped by the other animals, or man himself. 'How the Tiger Came by his Stripes' is one of the popular fairytales with a tiger as the main character.

Long ago, when animals still spoke like people, a man was ploughing his rice field with his buffalo. A tiger, the mighty lord of the jungle, chanced to stray this way, and espied this spectacle: a weak biped, with neither claws nor fangs, driving a strong buffalo hither and thither over a field with nothing but a bamboo cane.

¹ Kinhs or Viets are synonyms for Vietnamese. Besides the Kinh people, members of 54 ethnic minorities live on the territory of contemporary Vietnam.

I must get to the bottom of this, thought the tiger to himself, and hid in the high grass and waited to see what would happen. When the sun had reached the very summit of its heavenly course, the man unyoked the buffalo and let it graze. As for himself, he sat down in the shade of a tree and started eating. The tiger waited until the buffalo was close to him, and then whispered, 'Come here, Brother, and tell me why you, of such strength, listen to a weakling man.'

The buffalo, which had smelt the bloodthirsty tiger, was alarmed at first, but then replied, 'I can explain, oh most powerful of beasts. Man does seem weak, but he possesses a terrible weapon called reason. This lets him master creatures that are much stronger than he himself. And my advice to you is to flee while there is still time!'

'Well,' growled the tiger, 'now I know in what man's strength lies I shall not take to my heels! I am not such a coward as the buffalo. I shall make man give me his weapon. And it will make me the most powerful in the world!'

Whereupon the tiger sprang from his cover and cast himself upon the man, who thought he was about to breathe his last. But the tiger just knocked him to the ground and asked him, 'I have learnt, Man, that you possess a mighty weapon called reason. Is it true? Give me that reason now and then I'll eat you up!'

The man was quick to quell his fear, and answered, 'Noble Tiger, it shall be a pleasure to give you my reason. But please be patient a while. Of course, I do not carry such a precious item around on the field with me. I shall go home to my village to fetch it!'

The tiger did not relish this idea, but what was he to do if he wanted reason so? He had to agree.

'I'd better go with you so you don't change your mind!' decided the tiger.

'As you wish, but I must warn you that when the people in the village see you, they shall reach for their spears, clubs, and stones at once, and they will try to kill you! Why, indeed, you know that you are the terror of the entire area!'



Ngu Ho (Spirits of Five Tigers). Woodblock print from Hang Trong street workshop, first half of the 20th century. 18,7 x 25 cm. No. A 17 377 in Náprstek Museum Collection.

'That is true. Go alone then, but be sure to return with all haste!'

'Certainly, certainly! I do have just one condition, though. When I go off, you will be left here alone with my buffalo. What if you get an

appetite for him, tear him to pieces, and eat him up? We agreed that I would give you my reason, not my buffalo. While I am away you will wait here tied to a tree,' explained the man.

The lord of the jungle could only admit that the biped was right again.

The man made some strong cords out of rice straw and bound the tiger to a tree.

'Right, don't tarry, and scurry off for your reason now,' ordered the tiger. The man burst out laughing.

'You foolish animal, we've always carried our reason around in our heads! That is the force that tied you, lord of beasts, to this tree!'

Then the weary man sat down and made a fire so that he might reheat the lunch the tiger had so unexpectedly interrupted. But the rice cords that bound the tiger went up in flames. The straw caught alight quickly and the flames branded black stripes onto the tiger's fur. Half-crazed with pain, the king of the animals severed the last of his shackles and fled into the jungle. Not only has he had striped for ever since, but a terrible fear of fire.

The buffalo will not forget this incident either. He laughed at the naive tiger so much that he did a somersault and landed on a large stone. He knocked his upper front teeth out and since then all buffaloes have had a gap there instead of teeth. And the man? He has held onto his reason right up to this day.

In folk poetry and rhetoric, then, the tiger is found portrayed as an animal that is physically strong, but stupid. In national mythology and, following up on this directly in art and sculpture, we find a creature conceived quite differently: the tiger as protector, symbol of positive earthly force. In art, the tiger was initially depicted on its own, later to be accompanied by a dragon. The portrayal of five tigers in one piece of art has been particular to the development of Chinese-ink drawings and wood-block prints. After the foundations of the feudal Vietnamese centralized state had been built up in the eleventh century and culture embarked on its abundant evolution, the acknowledgement of eight mythical creatures



Hac Ho (Black Tiger). Woodblock print from Hang Trong street workshop, 20th century. The print is glued onto silk roll and was designed to rich strata of the society. 58 x 45,5 cm. No. A 16 466 in Náprstek Museum Collection.

has been documented: the *dragon*, *rhinoceros*, *turtle*, *phoenix*, *crane*, *fish*, *bat*, and *tiger*². These mythical creatures gradually took up an important role in art and sculpture.

If the tiger is portrayed with the dragon, then it symbolizes 'earthly force', and the dragon is the personification of overall force and power. Depicted alone, the tiger was ascribed the ability to drive away devils and evil demons, which is why we find tigers, in various forms, at the entrances to houses, pagodas, and numerous temples³.

In the art workshops in Hang Trong street, in Hanoi, which came into existence with a view to catering to chiefly the educated strata of society, the tiger became a sought-after motif of national woodblock prints. In the nineteenth century, when the local art workshops reached their peak, the tiger was depicted in different colour variations, or five tigers were portrayed in one picture. Each colour variant had its own, quite distinct meaning. From the technical aspect, this involved black-and-white woodblock prints that were later coloured⁴. As a rule only one matrix was used in the printing process, the black impression of which was indicative of the rough contours of a tiger, or tigers, and the whole scene was later coloured, and the details of the black contours were finished in Chinese ink⁵.

The coloured woodblock print with the scene of five tigers and executed on newsprint is one of the most popular types of pictures with animal themes. The five tigers became famous under the name *Ngũ Ho*, or *Spirits of Five Tigers*, and are depicted with the attributes of five swords and five banners. These attributes made their way into the composition of the picture in more recent history, probably in the nineteenth century; they were adopted from China and are conceived as the symbols of high social status. The tigers themselves compare to the five cosmological symbols of the cardinal points. Naturally, the colours have a specific role to play, the links between which (if made) are not coincidental: this green represents the east, white the west, black the north, red the south, and yellow combined with orange denotes the centre. The Yellow Tiger symbolizing the middle is always positioned in the centre of the picture, but the location

² See Nguyen Phi Hoan, pp. 224-231

³ See Unger, H., Unger, W.: On pp. 102-103 there are photographs of bas-reliefs and statues of tigers in front of different types of temples and pagodas in the country. Here we can find, on the one hand, the gamut of 'effective lords of the jungle', and on the other, fairly naive conceptions of the tiger reminiscent of a child's rendering of a cat.

⁴ Scrolls with tiger motifs can be found in the collections of the Náprstek Museum that are executed in Chinese ink and paints and that come from the Hang Trong artistic workshops.

⁵ There are no known cases of artistic workshops other than those in Hang Trong using Chinese ink to complete the details of the black contours of a picture.



Ngu Ho (Spirits of Five Tigers). The oldest print from Spirits of Five Tigers in the museum: the Black Tiger, symbolizing the north, is positioned on the lower half of the picture. Probably early 19th century, Hang Trong street workshop. 56 x 46,5 cm. No. A 12 249 in Náprstek Museum Collection.

of the other tigers in the picture changes depending on the period in which the given work was created. In early works the Black Tiger, symbolizing the north, was positioned on the left in the lower half of the picture, and the White Tiger, symbolizing the West, in the lower right section of the

picture. The Green Tiger⁶, symbolizing the East, was positioned in the upper left corner, and the Red Tiger, symbolizing the South, in the upper right part. For the European, then, the cardinal points are located somewhat unusually in pictures, as well as in map. That is to say, the Vietnamese also depicted these cardinal points accordingly in their oldest maps. Only upon the arrival of the Europeans⁷ did the Vietnamese start putting down the cardinal points in maps and elsewhere in the manner we are accustomed to today: the north at the top (in a map or a picture), the south at the bottom, the west to the left, and the east to the right. The colours of the tigers are bearers of another series of equally fundamental symbols of the five elements: yellow (again in combination with orange) represents the Earth (Dia Khu), black Water (Thuy Khu), white Metal (Kim Khu), red Fire (Hoa Khu), and green Air (Moc Khu). Overall, the picture is divided into another two levels: the upper half, in which the Green and Red Tigers are set against a background of clouds, with a constellation and the moon between them, represents Heaven; the lower part, where the Black and White Tigers are painted on the ground, represents the earth. The small cloud positioned between both tigers in the lower half of the picture is purely decorative, i.e. it is there to give balance to the composition of the depicted subjects. The Yellow Tiger, optically forming the centre of the whole work, holds a tablet in its paws with the inscription 'Warding Off Misfortune'.

On the following woodblock print bearing the same name, Five Tigers, the composition of the preceding work is retained, but the division of the picture into an upper, heavenly part, and a lower, earthly level is no longer so clear. Both sky and ground are merely suggested. The moon is missing here, and the constellation is hidden behind the markedly long white beards of three of the tigers. The centre of the picture is again taken up by the Yellow Tiger, in front of which a tablet is erected with the inscription 'Warding Off Misfortune'; in the upper left is the White Tiger, representing the west; in the upper right, the Black Tiger, symbolizing the

⁶ The art historian Chu Quang Tru sometimes presents this tiger as the Blue Tiger. It should be noted that sometimes it cannot be discerned, especially on older wooden prints, whether green or blue was used. Also, in Vietnamese there is one word for both green and blue—*xanh*—which must be elaborated further: *xanh la* – green; *xanh troi* – blue. If no clear indication is given of the colour at issue in written sources, the text may be interpreted in two ways.

⁷ A reminder that the Europeans came to Vietnam systematically, from the sixteenth century onwards in this order: the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the British, and the French.

north; positioned at bottom left is the Red Tiger, symbolizing of the south, and at bottom right, the Green Tiger, symbolizing the east. The attributes of the five swords and five banners have been retained.

Tigers frequently appear alone on woodblock prints. A popular gift to a newborn baby is, for example, a picture of the White Tiger, usually executed as a mirror image: originally the pictures hung on two-winged doors, and the depicted tigers were meant to repel evil and impure forces. We can still find images of the White Tiger at the entrances to many pagodas, although no longer as a woodblock print but as a coloured relief.

In the nineteenth century the production of woodblock prints in local workshops became a highly artistic activity, and so works made for wealthy clients were glued onto silk rolls.

In the nineteen-eighties, the Hanoi workshops in Hang Trong street were still in existence, and produced the most demanded woodblock print motifs to order. However, during my last visit to Hanoi, in summer 1998, I did not find a single workshop in this street. The artists, who had hired wood-carvers for generations and worked with them in creating highly professional works, had closed their workshops. Some woodblock printing blocks can be found in the repositories of Vietnamese museums, others have made their way into the possession of the artist Nguyen Dang Che⁸, and some wooden-print blocks are likely to have remained the property of families of artists from the centre of Hanoi. Traditional national art seems to be on the verge of extinction.

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⁸ Nguyen Dang Che lives and works in the village of Dong Ho, in the province of Ha Bac. He is occupied with the printing of firsthand-coloured woodblock prints and woodblock prints coloured at a later date.

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