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King of the Hundred Beasts: a Long View of Tigers in Southern China

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Dark wind blows in the forest, crows and magpies mourn:
People sense a ferocious tiger's coming before it appears.
Eyes burning bright, it crouches in the middle of the road;
Once espied by the general, arrows fly off the bow.
Homes plant thorny stakes as high as their door;
Hogs and suckling pigs are corralled before sundown.
How fierce indeed a tiger, yet all still rejoice
If only it keeps to its swaggering far off in the mountains' depths.

Gao Qi (1339-1374), Ballad of a Ferocious Tiger

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In the winter of 1992, when I arrived in the rugged mountains of western Fujian province to conduct research on the history of people, tigers, and landscape ecology in southern China, I met two elderly men with first-hand knowledge of wild tigers [1]. Both had hunted the *huananhu* (South China tiger), but their motives and methods were different; to me they represented distinct phases of the primordial relationship between humans and tigers. The first, Huang Zaiqiu, was a *liehushijia*—a master tiger hunter. Still wiry and strong as he approached 70, Huang was the last in a mixed Han and She (minority nationality) family of specialists who prayed to the dog-god Panhu for hunting success, and who knew the habits of tigers well enough to place groundset crossbows, with triplines and poisoned bolts, at just the right spots along paths in the high elevation grasslands to bring down an animal that had become extremely rare when he killed his tenth and last, in 1982 (Fig. 34.1).

The second, Mao Piao, a kindly man known locally as *Mao Laohuduizhang*—‘Mao the Tiger Team Captain’—was a former fighter in China’s revolutionary army who was appointed by the government in 1956 to lead a squad of over thirty locals in a ‘Hazard-Elimination Hunting Team,’ one of many platoons in the *Dahuyundong* (‘Kill the Tiger Movement’), which was itself just one of many theaters in the Maoist ideological war on nature. After a tiger killed a child and numerous livestock in Dehua and Yongchun counties, Mao was put in charge of farmers, hunters, and former soldiers armed with muzzle loaders, modern rifles, machine guns, grenades, and other military weaponry. After 3 months of failure, and under pressure from government filmmakers deployed to document their heroic efforts, they finally roused out a tiger in the mountains of Yongchun, shot it in the leg, and pursued it to a boulder strewn summit where they encircled it, hurled grenades into the high grass, and closed in to find the remains of a 100 kilogram female pregnant with two cubs.

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By the early 1990s, Huang Zaiqiu, Mao Piao, and many other people in southern China were still either hunting the South China tiger or interested in its whereabouts, but by this time they were pursuing it to save it from extinction. A sizeable reward was offered for the first verifiable photograph of a live wild tiger. Huang Zaiqiu was retained by the Meihuashan Nature Reserve to investigate reported signs and sightings, and so it was not strange that on the morning of May 7, 1995, he and I were hiking up an extremely steep trail through a mixed broadleaf and pine forest above the tiny village of Dayuan to look at a tree scratch found by a local man named Guan Yitong. Far below us, a news team from Southeast China Broadcasting Service struggled up the slope lugging a TV camera to document evidence of



(a)

(b)

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FIGURE 34.1 Huang Zaiqiu, one of the last crossbow tiger hunters in the region, demonstrates the ancient crossbow and tripline method used by tiger hunters in China and Southeast Asia since prehistoric times. The bolts were placed on the cocked cross-bow, and the tripline was set across a game trail. A toxin was applied to the iron points of the crossbow bolts.

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tigers. Ascending 500 meters in an hour through castanopsis, Masson pines, and bamboo forests, we followed Guan off the trail to a medium sized nanmu tree (*Phoebe spp.*) growing close to ancient tea trees on the ruins of manmade terraces at an elevation of 1,225 meters. Guan pointed to numerous vertical scratch marks surrounding the trunk and extending above two meters from the ground. Huang examined the signs closely; they were old—some were covered in young moss—but they appeared authentic. It was then that Guan explained that he had found them 6 years before, when he happened upon a tiger caught in a leghold trap set at the base of the tree. The scratch marks may have been simply made in desperation. When a WWF researcher named Gary Koehler was led to the same site with Meihuashan reserve staff in 1991, they found a broken tooth ‘from a young felid’ embedded in the bark [2]. Along with ground scrapes, tracks, and anecdotal evidence of sightings, Koehler included this site in the record of evidence that tigers were still living and reproducing in Meihuashan and several other locations in southern China. These were the last pieces of evidence of wild tigers to be verified by Chinese and Western researchers. Guan Yitong later told me that he had set the leghold trap where the tree scratch was ‘found,’ and I found the claim entirely plausible in light of how widespread leghold traps, guns, snares, and other such devices were in the homes of mountain villagers seeking quick cash or a delectable meal of wild meat.

p0040 When Ron Tilson and colleagues reported in *Oryx* that ‘no remaining viable populations of South China tigers occur within its historical range,’ it marked the end of an epoch; the tiger was functionally extinct, reproducing only in zoos [3]. Chinese officials were loath to accept empirical evidence of the extinction of an animal that defines so much of Chinese culture. Extinction signifies not only the disappearance of the top carnivore from China’s subtropics, but also the end of an ancient and complex interspecies relationship. Only in China are there systematic written records of human-wildlife interactions spanning more than five centuries. The relationship between humans and ‘The King of the Hundred Beasts’ (*baishouzhawang*) was a matter of deep political, historical, and cosmological concern [4], and unlike the decline of elephants, which was complete in a given area as soon as forests were replaced with croplands and permanent settlements [5], tigers co-existed with humans in much of rural southern China well into the 20th century, with an estimated 4,000 individuals surviving to 1950.

p0050 I have analyzed 511 local gazetteer records of human-tiger encounters in four provinces in southern China dating from the 1st century AD and spanning 1,900 years. Most entries describe the intrusion of tigers into human settlements, or the loss of humans and livestock, and though records are sporadic for any given place, many individual episodes involved high numbers of casualties. The gazetteers show that over 10,000 people were killed or injured by tigers, and this figure would be much larger but for the fact that only a third of the records include specific numbers. The number of records increased dramatically in the mid-1500s, with a peak in the last quarter of the 1600s, and a smaller peak in the late 1800s (Fig. 34.2). The first rise corresponds with increased human disturbance of the interior uplands, a result of the massive migration of disenfranchised coastal plain farmers to the interior, increased forest clearance, and more frequent conflicts with tigers.

p0060 Tiger incidents were political incidents, and they were taken seriously; even a *sighting*, if it occurred in or near a town, counted as history. This annalistic concern stemmed largely from the fact that the state and nature were linked through a traditional cosmo-magical concept known as the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*), according to which disharmonies in the natural order, or Heaven (*Tian*), signaled political disorder and misrule. The peak in political

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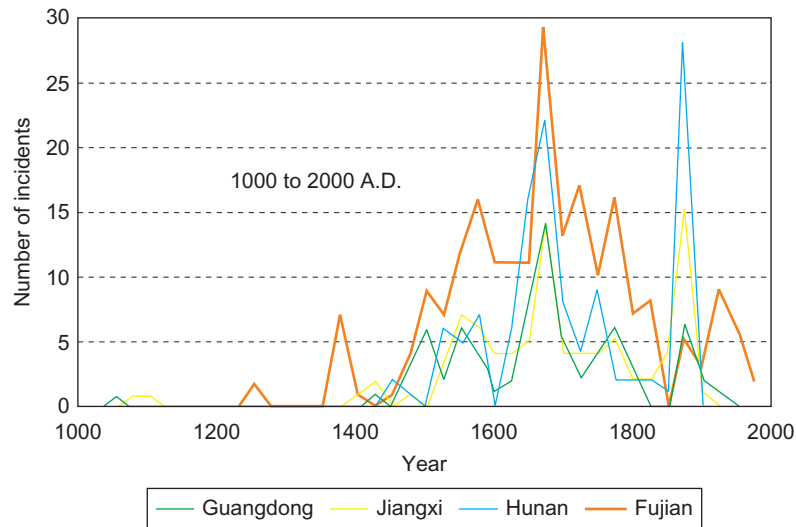


FIGURE 34.2 A temporal profile of gazetteer records of human-tiger encounters in four provinces during the second millennium. The rise in incidents in the 1400s marks a period of increased human disturbance of the mountain ecosystems of the southern interior.

unrest in the late-1600s—the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties—may account for the peak in recorded events. The same may hold true for the peak in the early 1900s, around the end of the Qing dynasty (1911). The hypothesis that records were kept more assiduously—especially in the early Qing—in order to impugn the authority of new political regimes, is supported by a highly similar profile of typhoon records in Guangdong province.

Unlike typhoons, however, tigers were also seen as having conscious volition and free agency. As emissaries of Heaven—the cosmos—they were held in awe, and as with all inauspicious (super) natural phenomena (droughts, plagues, floods, typhoons, *inter alia*) management of tiger attacks fell within the purview of local officials, who could mediate with heaven to restore harmony through ritual expiation. The following gazetteer entry from Fujian illustrates how tigers and people were engaged in a complicated dance of cosmic agency and deferential human intervention:

In spring of the 7th year of Ming Chongzhen (1634), in Pinghe county, tigers rampaged through the mountain forests...with countless attacks on people and livestock...The county magistrate pleaded with the city god and the mountain spirits for mercy. As a result, one tiger was killed, two tigers sacrificed themselves (*zibi*) [probably in traps], and two tigers fled. The disaster was then quelled. The local person, Zhu Longxiang, had a tiger-destroying sign (*miehuji*) [probably a written charm] [6].

Given the reverence for the tiger that infuses Chinese art, literature, folklore, and medicine, one might ask what caused the extermination of the ‘King of the Hundred Beasts’ throughout most of its range by the late twentieth century? Certainly tiger parts were highly valued as medicine, and man eating tigers were often killed, but annihilation of the species was not a human prerogative, or even a conceivable event, in the Chinese cosmology. Even today, tiger figures serve as protective icons to ward off evil spirits, and these take the form

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f0030 **FIGURE 34.3** A tiger talisman in Zhongping village, Meihuashan Nature Reserve. This clay tiger face and other tiger icons are sculpted on house roofs and walls to ward off evil spirits.

of clay effigies on the walls of rural homes (Fig. 34.3), miniature figures sewn into children's shoes or hats, and other talismans, all of which have the character for 'king' (*wang*) on their foreheads—three horizontal lines bisected by a vertical line. The vertical line represents the just ruler, uniting heaven, the people (and other beings), and the earth.

p0090 The settlement of large numbers of Westerners in China, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had a profound influence on indigenous views of nature, natural resources, and the symbolic capital of wild animals. Western colonial inroads into China were underwritten by profits from the opium trade, and the British empire became the world's largest trafficker of illegal drugs. Chinese government resistance to the drug trade led to the Opium War (1839–1842), China's military defeat, and the opening of five treaty ports from Canton to Shanghai in which foreigners had the right to settle and trade. This led to extraterritorial rights for foreigners and an influx of Western missionaries, adventurers, and scientists through much of the Chinese backcountry, in an era of unprecedented poverty, resource scarcity, famine, and disease, all of which were closely related to a demographic explosion that raised the population from roughly 100 million at the end of the Ming (1644) to nearly 500 million by 1900. The world's greatest empire, where even rural people were accustomed to a certain degree of security, had become the 'sick man of Asia.' Into this socio-political morass stepped capitalism, science, Christianity, industrial technology, and 'progress.'

p0100 A brief example illustrates how new conceptions of nature were part of the package. Harry Caldwell, a Methodist missionary from Tennessee who was also a hunter and naturalist, left a detailed autobiographical account of his experiences with the people and wildlife of western and central Fujian in the early 1900s [7]. Caldwell describes local perceptions of wildlife, including the 'superstitions' that he vowed to destroy through hunting and preaching

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FIGURE 34.4 A tiger killed near Xiamen (Amoy) in 1928 by a rifle shot by an American adventurer/journalist named William Lord Smith, who was aided by local trident-bearing hunters.

the gospel. Deploying superior firepower, Caldwell saw tiger hunting as ‘a means for advancing the knowledge of the Christian God in the heart of Asia,’ and he sought to refute local beliefs about so-called ‘spirit cats’ that were protected by local deities (Fig. 34.4). He noted that the magico-religious prohibitions against killing the animals were stronger than game laws would have been, had they been part of the legal code, but blind to any possible conservation functions in these customs, the minister sought to portray local mores as aberrant superstitions.

Caldwell was not alone; many foreign naturalists and adventurers were active in southern China, local people were employed as hunter-guides and specimen collectors, and from about 1900 on, there was a transfer of values and technology, as well as the formation of a new market for wildlife parts and specimens. This period marked the beginning of a transformation in local perceptions of wild animals, from supernatural beings, to natural objects for scientific investigation, and from a source of sacred medicine that was sold in local and regional venues, to commercial commodities to be sold in a growing international market (Fig. 34.5). The vast environmental changes to come after 1949, as the Chinese Communist Party attained power, were driven by new definitions of ‘natural resources’ and a revolution in the speed and thoroughness with which nature could be exploited. Wildlife and other forest resources became mere commodities, the sole purpose of which was to serve the economic needs of ‘the people.’

Aberrant as it may seem in retrospect, Mao’s ‘war on nature’ can best be understood in the light of Cold War geopolitics, China’s isolation from the world community, and the Marxist-inspired religious zeal to embrace science, technology, industrialization, and progress to insure that the country would rise again to face a hostile world head on. Modernization came amid socially disruptive ideological movements: land reform, the Great Leap Forward, communization, the Backyard Iron Smelting Movement with the ‘Three Bad Years’ resulting from gross neglect of agriculture (up to 30 million people died as a result), and finally, the destructive climax of ideological fervor known as the Cultural Revolution.

Since the 1980s, China’s government has renewed its longstanding concern with the ‘King of the Hundred Beasts,’ and there are several government-sponsored and NGO-based programs

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f0050 **FIGURE 34.5** Methodist missionary and naturalist, Harry Caldwell, with a tiger he shot in Fujian in the early twentieth century.

to reintroduce captive tigers to the wild. Still, national pride makes it difficult for officials to accept the idea of enhancing the severely jeopardized gene pool of captive ‘South China tigers,’ by breeding them with ‘impostors’ from beyond China’s borders in Southeast Asia. Since there may be no other way to maintain some of the distinctive traits that South China tigers may have developed through time, we should keep in mind that conservation efforts, and is thus no small part of the evolutionary process, must now reflect human desires; it cannot simply preserve some imagined pristine nature in which humans have played no part:

‘Nature’s success stories from now on are probably going to look a lot more like the apple’s than the panda’s or white leopard’s. If those last two species (sic) have a future, it will be because of human desire; strangely enough, their survival now depends on what amounts to a form of artificial selection. This is the world in which we, along with Earth’s other creatures, now must make our uncharted way. (Michael Pollan) [8].’

p0140 Human intervention in the fates of our non-human counterparts is becoming a requisite part of their survival and our own. But let us not imagine that our concerns for the South China tiger and its haunts are new, or peculiarly ‘Western,’ they have simply taken on a stark and troubling urgency that calls for international cooperation. Successful tiger recovery depends on enhanced international scientific teamwork in captive breeding programs, the cultivation of local cooperation and support from rural communities across the region, and a systematic understanding and restoration of the prey base and habitat in areas slated for reintroduction. The return of a lethal predator with a history of man-eating to areas with relatively high rural population densities calls for an unprecedented level of commitment from multiple stakeholders, but if conducted with care, the effort could be of great benefit for ecosystem restoration and community economic development. Community-oriented conservation programs and state–local–NGO partnerships have emerged rapidly in many parts of China over the past decade in conjunction with changing popular values regarding nature.

p0150 Restoring a viable population of tigers to southern China may be harder than putting a man on the moon, but if humans have a built in desire for sweetness that has set apple trees

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blossoming across the hills, we may also have a scarcely understood need for beings larger than ourselves; creatures who may make peril from time to time, but who also sustain mystery; hunters we relate to, fear, and admire; predators we can never fully claim as our own. Tigers should be granted the right to roam the hills in rough cover beyond the orchards, if for no other reason than to free us from the solipsism of endless self reference by reminding us that we too could be eaten, especially when the world that we make falls out of harmony with the universe that we inhabit. For as long as there are tigers in our world, there will be hunters and managers who act as boundary keepers like Huang, Mao, and Guan. We must decide if those who have the most to gain and the most to lose will approach the tiger with knowledge, reverence, and finesse; with a brute force born of fear and fanaticism; or with a cold and deadly mercenary interest. In southern China, hunters can be passionate supporters of tiger conservation, and during our last talk, in the summer of 1995, Mr. Guan left me with a thought-provoking cautionary analogy: 'Tigers will be like dragons; there will be paintings, but no evidence of their real existence. If you scare people with a dragon and it doesn't exist, it's a lie. Have you seen dragon paintings? Your descendants will call you a liar if you paint a fine picture of a tiger and it no longer exists!'

'When men lack a sense of awe, there will be disaster.' Laozi, *Daodejing*

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