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'Come on Tiger': An exploration into the political and ecological challenges for tigers in premodern and modern-day Korea

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Abstract Throughout Korean history, the tiger has held importance, playing a variety of roles with diverse meanings depending on the period and context. I aim to showcase a range of images of the tiger in premodern culture that were foundational to establishing the tiger as the national symbol of Korea, a development that was catalysed in the colonial period when Japanese propagandists used the killing of tigers as a symbol of the invasion and colonization of Korea (1910–1945). I also argue that in response to Japanese colonization the tiger was increasingly promoted as a national symbol by modern intellectuals like Choe Namseon 崔南善 (1890–1957), a trend that has shaped contemporary understanding of the animal's significance. In turn, this has prompted a reconsideration and consolidation of this eclectic collection of premodern tiger images into a more coherent conception, as one of the prime representations of Koreanness.

한국어 초록 호랑이는 한국 역사를 통틀어 시대와 맥락에 변화에 따라 다양한 의미와 역할을 수행해 온 중요한 존재로 인식되어왔다. 본고는 한국 전근대 문화에 나타난 호랑이를 주제로 한 여러 문화적/시각적 표상을 분석한다. 이런 맥락에서 본고는 특히 일제강점기(1910-1945)에 일본이 한국에서 진행한 호랑이 사냥이 일제의 한국 식민화를 홍보하는 상징으로 쓰인 것에 주목한다. 또한 이에 대한 반작용으로 동시기에 호랑이가 한국/한국인의 민족성을 구현하는 상징

으로 떠오르게 된 것 역시 주목한다. 실제로 일제의 조선 식민지화에 대응하는 방법으로 최남선 崔南善(1890-1957)으로 대표되는 당대 조선 지식인들이 호랑이가 한국 정체성의 상징으로 자리잡게 추진한 것이 현재 한국 호랑이의 이미지 형성에 큰 영향을 끼쳤다. 상기한 과정을 통해 한국 전통 문화에서 드러난 호랑이의 이미지가 체계적으로 재정립되어서 호랑이가 한국인의 정체성을 상징하는 존재로 더 공고히 자리잡을 수 있었다.

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Introduction

The tiger was the mascot for the 2018 Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang of South Korea.¹ It was not the first time a tiger was selected as the mascot of the Olympic Games in South Korea. In 1988, it was the mascot of the Seoul Summer Olympics, the first Olympic Games in South Korea's history. It is not surprising to note that in modern South Korea, the tiger is widely acknowledged as a symbol representing Korea and Korean identity in many ways; it is the symbol of the South Korean national soccer team as well as a professional baseball team, the Kia Tigers, and the emblem of Korea University, one of the country's most prestigious universities, as well as of many other organizations. Korean oral tradition is replete with tiger stories, so much so that the modern intellectual Choe Namseon 崔南善 (1890–1957) commented that 'Korea is a country of tiger tales' and that 'our tiger stories alone [can] constitute books such as *The Thousand and One Nights* and *The Decameron*. They can also grow to be the equivalent of the works of Andersen and the Grimm (Jacob-Wilhelm) brothers' (Sin 2017, 93, 109). Numerous Korean folk stories begin with clichés, such as the Korean equivalent of 'once upon a time': 'When tigers used to smoke pipes' (see Figure 1). There are also many proverbs associated with tigers such as, 'Even if you're bitten by a tiger, you'll survive it if you keep your wits about you' and 'The rabbit becomes the king of a mountain if a tiger is not present.' The Korean government even tried to explain to foreign tourists the reasons for selecting a tiger as the Olympic mascot. An Olympic catalogue published in 1984 notes: 'The tiger was undoubtedly frightening at times... but for Koreans who had grown up hearing "humorous stories" of the tiger on their grandmother's knee, the animal was more of a "gentle, humorous being" than a "wild, man-eating beast"' (Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 495).

1 For the Romanization of Korean, I use the Revised Romanization of Korean (RR). For the titles of articles or monographs including terms in McCune-Reishauer Romanization, I kept these intact. For Romanized Korean terms in the references I have cited, I have converted them into RR.



Figure 1: Korean folk painting depicting a tiger smoking pipe. Author unknown, Joseon (1392–1910) period. Released under PDM 1.0 DEED.

Nowadays, the culture of associating tigers with Korea seems quite widespread among non-Koreans as well. Numerous books and articles in English make use of the tiger image—for example, the monograph *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea* (Clifford 1998), which discusses the relationship between the development of the Korean economy and government officers in Korea in the late twentieth century, and a semi-autographical fictional work, *Tiger Hunt* (J: *Toragari* 虎狩) (Nakajima 1942), which consists of a series of episodes about the author (a Japanese boy) living in Korea in the 1920s, his Korean classmate, and their complicated friendship. Although no actual event of tiger hunting occurs in the story, this book skilfully portrays multifaceted power dynamics between the colonizer (with the metaphor of being a potential tiger hunter) and the colonized (comparable to the tiger being hunted down) both in and outside of the classroom when the peninsula was under Japanese colonial rule. The use of tigers to represent Koreans is so clear in these book titles that no further explanation is necessary, even for readers who are not knowledgeable about Korean culture.

2 Tigers in Korea were the same subspecies as the Amur or Siberian tigers.

Ironically, it has been about a century since tigers were extirpated in modern Korea. The tigers for which Koreans have held such immense emotional attachments are no longer found in the Korean ecosystem. They were eliminated in 1922 during the Japanese colonization of Korea. Even the tigers in present-day Korean zoos are imported from Siberia.² What made tigers disappear even though they became the national symbol of Korea? And why, nearly one hundred years after their eradication from the Korean Peninsula, does the tiger remain the animal that Koreans believe represents their identity? This article aims to answer this question with regard to increasing degrees of anthropogenic environmental impact on tigers' habitats in Korea. In this context, the article builds on work currently being undertaken on premodern tigers in Korea to prove that starting from the beginning of the Joseon period (1592), tiger-human co-existence faced a challenge caused by increased human interference with the environment, especially tiger habitats. More importantly, I endeavour to clarify the factors contributing to the total eradication of tigers in the Japanese colonial period (1919–1945), which also marked the transition between the Palaeoanthropocene and Anthropocene in the ecosystem of the peninsula. I also aim to discuss how tigers turned into an icon of resistance against the military and political invasions of the Japanese in modern and contemporary Korea, in addition to the eclectic cultural politics behind them.

The emergence and development of seeing a tiger as a Mountain God with supernatural power

In real life, violent encounters with tigers often resulted in the loss of human lives. There are numerous records in (both official and unofficial) Korean history indicating that Koreans suffered casualties caused by these wild, flesh-eating beasts. Some Korean scholars believe that tigers, as apex predators, with their ferocious appearance and enormous physical strength, were objects not only of fear but also of awe and respect, which developed into tiger worshipping (Gim and Yi 2018, 70). The custom of seeing a tiger as a powerful spiritual presence in Korea has a long history, which dates back to the drawings of tigers found in the petroglyphs found in Ulsan and Gyeongju, presumably created in the Bronze Age (G. Gim 2017, 11). Statues of tigers found in the royal tombs from the Silla period (BCE 57–936 CE) are another example (G. Gim 2017, 11). In such official Chinese historical records as *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Record of the Three Kingdoms) by Chen Shou 陳壽 (237–299 CE) and *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of Later Han) by Fan Ye 范曄 (389–446 CE), we can find references to tiger worshipping by ancient Koreans, such as the Ye people (an ancient



Korean people represented by the tiger in their foundation myth, which will be discussed below), who offered sacrificial ceremonies to their tiger god (*ji hu yiwei shen* 祭虎以爲神) (An 2010, 130; Yun 1998, 160). In a relevant context, *Fengsu yanyi* 風俗通義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Mores), a work on a wide variety of strange and eccentric matters authored by Ying Shao 應劭 (150-203 CE), describes the tiger as having the power to defeat the evil spirits who harm humans by devouring them (Gim and Yi 2018, 71–2). It seems that the Koreans in the same period shared this belief; tigers, being the object of fear and respect in Korean tradition, were treated as an auspicious deity with the power to suppress the evil spirits (Gim and Yi 2018, 71–2).

Numerous additional records verify that tigers were treated as a deity by Koreans in the past. Described as the ‘Lord of all mountainous animals’ (*shanshou jun* 山獸君) in Lee Shizhen’s *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Compendium of Materia Medica, 1578), the tiger was revered as a Mountain God (*sansin* 山神) in Korea (An 2010, 118–9). The *sansin* is represented in numerous folk paintings, especially in shrines and Buddhist temples. In these paintings, tigers are depicted either as the Mountain God or the guardian or messenger of the Mountain God (Gim 2019, 37, 64; Grayson 1996, 120). More importantly, in Korean culture, the tiger as a Mountain God is not a mere local deity for the particular mountain it resides in; rather it has much richer historical and mythical connotations, as elaborated in the foundation myth of the first Korean state.

Among a number of the different versions of the foundation myth, the one in *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (The forgotten histories of the Three Kingdoms), recorded in the thirteenth century by Iryeon 一然 (1206–98 CE), is best known. The relevant part is as follows:

The Old Record notes that in olden times, Hwanin’s illegitimate son, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of man. Knowing his son’s desire, the father surveyed the three higher mountains and found Mount Taebaek the most suitable place for his son to settle and help man... Therefore he gave [Hwanung] three heavenly seals and dispatched him to rule over the people. [Hwa]ung descended with three thousand followers to a spot under a tree by the Holy Altar atop Mountain Taebaek, and he called this place the City of God...

At that time a bear and a tiger living in the same cave prayed to Holy [Hwan]ung to transform them into human beings. The king gave them a bundle of sacred mugworts and twenty cloves of garlic and said, ‘If you eat these and shun the sunlight for one hundred days, you’ll assume human forms.’ Both animals ate [the spices] and avoided the sun. After twenty-one days the bear became a woman,



but the tiger, unable to observe the taboo, remained a tiger. Unable to find a husband, the bear woman prayed under the altar tree for a child. [Hwan]ung metamorphosed himself, lay with her, and begat a son called Dangun Wanggeom.

In the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Yao, Dangun made the walled city of Pyeongyang the capital and called his state Joseon... but *later he [Dangun] returned and hid in Asadal as a mountain god* at the age of 1,908. (Lee 1981, 4; emphasis mine)

In this myth, a tiger is presented alongside a bear as one of the two animal candidates who desired to transform into humans. Whereas there are various interpretations of what the bear and tiger symbolize, this myth shows that the tiger, along with the bear, was already considered to represent the Korean people in the thirteenth century when the *Samguk yusa* was written, not to mention far earlier when the myth was formulated, allegedly as early as the fourth century BCE.³

3 The state of Joseon existed as an independent entity until 109 BC; this redacted narrative (Iryeon's version of the myth) must have been in existence at least by the middle of the second century BC, and the original narrative at least two hundred years before that (Grayson 2001, 40–42).

More specifically, a number of scholars believe that the bear and tiger in the myth each represent a certain tribe or people whose totems were the bear and the tiger respectively, and that the myth is the product of an amalgamation of different peoples who founded the first Korean state together (Allen 1990, 795; Yun 1998, 11, 18). This interpretation shows that the tiger was one of the two totemic animals representing one of the three peoples who founded the first Korean state. As Seeley and Skabelund aptly put it, 'Regardless of differences in interpretation, the tiger's prominence in the Korean foundation myth reinforces its historic and cultural prominence' (2015, 482).

The myth ends when Dangun, who allegedly founded the first Korean state, retires to the deep mountains 'as a mountain god' (Lee 1981, 4). Based on this record that posits Dangun as the first known Mountain God in Korean history, James H. Grayson provides the following observation:

As Dangun is also described in this myth [the foundation myth of the first Korean state] as the grandson of the Ruler of Heaven [Hwanin], the Mountain God is perceived to be an extraordinarily powerful spirit. Thus Sansin is *not simply the deity of a mountain, but a guise of the founder of the Korean nation*. He is the god of all the mountains of Korea and therefore serves in the role of *a national guardian spirit*. (Grayson 1996, 120; emphasis mine)

Further, Grayson affirms that 'the sansin differs from the mountain spirits in adjacent areas of Asia' in that, unlike the mountain spirits in China and Japan, whose roles are limited to 'localized divinities' associated with



Figure 2: Mountain God (*sansin*). Author unknown, Nineteenth century, painting (panel, ink and colour on cotton). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Released under PDM 1.0 DEED.

‘local mountains and fields’ (1996, 120), the Korean Mountain God is the ruler of an aspect of nature (121). The Mountain God of Korea represented by a tiger is a presence possessing sacred, supernatural power, whose numinous influence is efficacious all over Korea.

The Korean perception of the tiger has not changed much since it remains ‘a symbolic species with deep roots in the Korean consciousness’ (Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 476). In Roberts and Choe’s quantitative investigations into contemporary beliefs in the supernatural traits of Korean animals, out of forty-seven select animals, the tiger was voted as the highest ranked one, retaining all three positive traits: power, well-being, and success (1984, 113–114). This research indicates that many contemporary Koreans have continued to believe that tigers, among all animals, are the ones with the highest scale of positive supernatural attributes that can help them thrive. Roberts and Choe’s investigation also classifies the tiger as a Mountain God, which is the object of prayers and rituals, since Koreans believe that the tiger will protect them from natural disasters. Furthermore, Koreans also acknowledge the tiger as a humorous

personality rather than a scary beast (Roberts and Choe 1984, 117; also see Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 495) (Figure 2).

Threats, tiger-human co-existence, and environmental changes in the Joseon period

Copious records verify that there were numerous tigers in Korea for an extended period, and although the Goryeo state (918–1392 CE) sometimes pursued tiger hunts, humans and tigers maintained a relatively peaceful state of coexistence compared to the Joseon (1392–1910 CE) and Japanese colonial periods (1910–1945 CE). Buddhism was introduced to Korea during the period of the Three Kingdoms (c. third century–678 CE) and became a national religion supported by the kings and royal families in the Goryeo period (918–1392 CE). One of Buddhism’s core teachings, respecting all forms of life and refraining from harming them, helped tigers survive without experiencing large-scale hunting organized by the government (An 2010, 124). The time-honoured belief in Korean popular religion, or shamanism, that sees the tiger as the guardian of the Korean people, messenger of a god, or a god itself also facilitated tigers’ survival during this period (Grayson 1996, 120–1; Lee 1973, 156; Yun 1998, 1, 13). In terms of the ecological aspect, Korea’s population in this period was less dense compared to the Joseon period. Tigers and humans did not share their habitats in most cases (An 2010, 124–25); tigers resided in the deep mountains, whereas many people lived in the cities. The records of tiger-related casualties in this period were considerably fewer than those in the later periods.

However, tiger sightings and casualties noticeably increased beginning in the Joseon period. In the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄 *The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*, hereafter *Sillok*), tigers are mentioned a total of 684 times, of which 350 occasions (between the years 1345 and 1884) were related to actual sightings of tigers (Kim et al. 2019, 39). Incidents of tigers entering the royal palaces were quite frequent, with tigers emerging from the Changdeok royal palace and nearby forests in the eleventh year of King Sejong’s reign (1465), in addition to the thirty-sixth and the fortieth years of King Seonjo’s reign (1603 and 1607). In the fifth year of King Taejong’s reign (1404), a tiger emerged from the Geunjeong Hall of the Gyeongbok Palace. In the twelfth year of King Sejo’s reign (1463), commotion ensued when a tiger was chased following its emergence from a pond in the Gyeongbok Palace. In the sixteenth year of King Sejo’s reign (1467), a tiger appeared on the Bugak Mountain, and King Sejo personally led the chase, eventually killing the tiger when it hid in a ravine.



Tigers even appeared frequently in the king's heavily guarded residences, a fact that shows the delicate state of the coexistence between humans and tigers during the Joseon period. In the fortieth year of King Seonjo's reign, a tiger gave birth to a cub in the Changdeok Palace. During the reign of King Yeongjo (1724–1776), tigers appeared in the palace three times. In the first year of King Jeongjo's reign (1776), a tiger bit a royal guard right outside the palace. In the tenth year of King Yeongjo's reign (1734), there were so many *hobwan* 虎患 (tiger-related disasters) that the *Sillok* reports:

The rampage of ferocious tigers was sighted everywhere, which resulted in the death and injuries of people and livestock. The royal court received reports regarding the tiger disasters from all eight provinces of the country almost every day. The total number of people who died of tiger attacks from the summer to the fall reached 140.⁴

In this context, Koreans have suffered casualties caused by tiger attacks so often, especially from the Joseon period onwards, that a specific term *hobwan-mama* 虎患媽媽 (tiger-related disasters and smallpox) was coined in the Joseon period to refer to the tiger attack, as one of the two most lethal causes of death, along with smallpox.

Several environmental factors led to the Joseon people suffering considerably more tiger disasters than in preceding dynasties. Scholars have cited multiple reasons. The change in Joseon's ecosystem, especially increased human interventions in tigers' environments, was a major reason. With more land converted into rice fields to feed an increased population, Joseon saw a steady increase in the rice harvest. Farmers preferred to have high-yield rice fields adjacent to their residences and also close to the sources of water. As a result, many rice fields were developed in or near towns or cities, especially where the forests fringed houses (Kim et al. 2019, 39). However, humans and tigers alike needed a consistent supply of water to survive; it was unavoidable that the tigers would approach these areas where there were houses with watered rice fields, which resulted in an overlap of human and tiger habitats (Kim et al. 2019, 40–42). In this context, it was not a coincidence that Seoul, the capital city of the Joseon dynasty, had the most records of tiger sightings. It is surrounded by double layers of mountains on all four sides and possesses the stretched, extensively wide Han River running through the centre of the city, an environment that attracted an increasing number of inhabitants (Hong 2018, 105). Tigers preferred these deep mountains connected with each other along the abundant water supply of the Han River, ideal conditions not only for the city's human inhabitants but also for tigers. In addition, the Joseon royal court often strictly enforced restrictions against

4 *Joseon wangjo sillok*, *Yeongjo sillok* (Veritable records of King Yeongjo's reign), year 10 (1734), month 9, day 31. https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kua_11009030_004. The online version of the *Sillok* cited is an unpaginated database version of Joseon's annalistic history; therefore, references are given to the date of the entry, for ease of identification hereafter.



entering the mountains surrounding Seoul; lumbering and burials that could have resulted in deforestation of these mountains were also prohibited (Hong 2018, 105). For the sake of maintaining the court's ideal geomantic arrangement (風水 Ch: *fengshui*, Ko: *pungsu*), protecting the king's and royal family's residences, and also securing the king's private game preserve, all actions even potentially detrimental to the ecosystem of the mountains surrounding Seoul were banned in general (Hong 2018, 105). Some Joseon kings also endeavoured to plant and keep thousands of pine trees on the sites of their palaces.⁵ These changes in the ecosystem of Seoul, namely well-maintained forests in deep mountains surrounding the capital city, an abundant water supply, and well-preserved trees in the palaces, made the city an ideal place for tigers to seek refuge for their survival. Therefore, the Joseon capital city became a habitat favoured and shared by tigers and humans alike; such ferocious animals as tigers and leopards were frequently sighted in or near Seoul, especially near or sometimes even inside the royal palaces (Kim et al. 2019, 39; Hong 2018, 106). L.H. Underwood (1851–1921), the wife of H.G. Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary dispatched to Korea from the U.S., witnessed tigers and leopards roaming in residential areas of the city at night when she was working in Korea in the 1890s. In her memoir about her life in Korea, published in 1904, Underwood observed, 'You look longingly at the open porch or *maru*, but there are leopards and tigers that prowl at night' (42). Tigers also came into sight in other major cities, such as Daegu, Andong, Hamheung, and Gaeseong, for the same reasons (Kim et al. 2019, 42). These ecological changes caused by agricultural and urban development resulted in tigers entering the human residences more often, which also led to tigers preying on humans and their livestock in the city.

Tiger attacks reveal the different attitudes of Joseon kings toward balancing the preservation of nature and the environment with care for the well-being of their people. From its founding, Joseon policy strictly followed the Neo-Confucian teachings of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).⁶ As an important Confucian virtue, frugality was emphasized, with the king leading by example, and any unnecessary military action or the raising of private armies was strictly discouraged. In this context, the king's hunting was kept in check by his subjects. However, tiger attacks were a common and real threat, and the Joseon kings sometimes used them as an excuse to mobilize their guards and troops. Indeed, it was not a coincidence that the *chakho gapsa* 捉虎甲士, a special cohort of warriors deployed to subjugate tigers, were the elite troops of the Joseon. They were mostly experienced riflemen, but the tiger hunting army included not only these riflemen but beaters, infantry, hunting dogs, cavalry, and sometimes even royal guards. Records show that by the late seventeenth century the number of tiger-hunting soldiers increased into the

5 For example, in the eleventh year of King Taejong's reign, the king mobilized 80,000 men in twenty days to plant as many pine trees as possible in the palace (Hong 2018, 105).

6 In this context, as de Bary mentions, 'The case of the Yi [Joseon] dynasty would seem to be a singular instance in which Neo-Confucians played a large role in the creation of a new regime...' (de Bary and Haboush 1985, 36–7.)



tens of thousands, which demonstrates that the Joseon court was serious about minimizing casualties caused by tigers.⁷

In this context, Joseon kings were obligated to prevent their subjects from being harmed by frequent tiger disasters. King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800), whose palace had been attacked by tigers several times during his reign and also during his grandfather Yeongjo's reign (r. 1724–1776), initiated several major tiger hunting events. But Jeongjo also sometimes issued orders banning tiger hunting, adeptly using these two seemingly opposite commands to promote his political agenda of taking care of his people. At one point, he banned tiger hunting, claiming that human life took precedence over those events. A record from the third year of King Jeongjo's reign (1778) shows that he ordered his court officers not to cause any trouble to commoners by chasing the tiger that had entered Seoul. He said:

If there is a tiger in Seoul and we try to hunt it down, each district [of Seoul] will need to dispatch soldiers within the boundary of a hundred *li* 里 or so. Doing so will disrupt [many] towns and even harm the chickens and dogs in them. The harm the soldiers would cause could be greater than that by the tiger. In the future, if a tiger enters the city and cannot be traced, it should be driven to a distant place, so as not to cause disturbance to the people.⁸

For the same reason, in the winter of the twentieth year of the reign of Jeongjo (1776–1800), when a tiger sighting occurred in a place near the Seonggyun-gwan Royal Academy, the royal army intended to hunt it down, but the king refused to allow it. He reasoned that the consequences of hunting a tiger in the heart of a severe winter would be even worse than the beast itself.⁹ It seems that King Jeongjo indeed apprehended the Confucian aphorism about tigers and politics in *Liji* 禮記, or *Book of Rites*, which reads, 'Cruel governance is fiercer than a tiger' (苛政猛于虎 Ch: *kezheng meng yu hu*).¹⁰ Tigers provoked fear, but the act of causing trouble to innocent people under the pretext of catching a tiger could be even more devastating. King Yeongjo (r. 1724–1776), Jeongjo's grandfather, also refused to fortify the walls for the boundaries of Seoul when a tiger sighting was reported. He mentioned that the tiger disaster occurred due to the lack of virtues of the ruler (i.e. King Yeongjo himself): therefore, the cultivation of virtues was the prime solution rather than building more walls, a mere temporary remedy (Hong 2018, 12). This Confucian countermeasure was in accordance with King Yeongjo's image as one of the most distinguished rulers of the Joseon period. It also shows a striking contrast with King Sejo's (r. 1455–1468) reaction to tiger disasters. Sejo led numerous soldiers whenever a tiger was sighted near the palace, even trying to kill a tiger himself (Hong 2018, 10–11). This bloodthirsty

7 Seeley and Skabelund note, 'By 1696 the numbers of tiger-hunting soldiers had grown to 11,000 in the northern province of Pyeong-an alone' (2015, 482).

8 *Joseon wangjo sillok*, *Jeongjo sillok* 正祖實錄 (Veritable records of King Jeongjo's reign), year 3, month 11, day 3, entry 2.

9 *Joseon wangjo sillok*, *Jeongjo sillok*, year 20, month 11, day 13, entry 1.

10 *Liji* 禮記, *Tangong xia* 檀弓下. Cited from Yuan et al. 2017, 121.

behaviour was not surprising considering his image as someone who usurped the throne from his nephew, the legitimate successor, who was framed and killed by Sejo, in order to claim the sovereignty he was not allowed to have. In addition, Sejo's heavy taxation and exploitation of local commoners made many poor people lose their homes. In many cases, they were forced to move to the deep mountains where they started slash-and-burn farming, which resulted in deforestation and in turn, drove the tigers from the habitats in the mountains into the city of Seoul (Kim et al. 2019, 40). In this context, Sejo's harsh treatment of his people resulted in more fatalities for both tigers and the residents of Seoul while providing him with further opportunities to show off his hunting and martial skills. Overall, the way Joseon kings dealt with the tiger disasters is indicative of how they weighed the cost of tiger predation on the population against the equally resource-intensive task of hunting tigers.

Images of tigers in premodern Korean culture

As noted above, tigers were fearful predators to Koreans in real life, while in Korean folk literature and popular religion they were seen as protectors of nature. Although the Joseon government tried to limit the number of casualties from the tiger disasters, the veneration they received as the Mountain God showed no signs of diminishing. As tigers have traditionally been considered to possess mystical traits in many ways, there are numerous records in the *Sillok* comparing the bravery and martial prowess of superior warriors to those traits of a tiger.¹¹ In fact, as a symbol of their martial valour (*wu* 武), the military officers in the Joseon period had patches of tiger(s) embroidered on the breast and the back of their official uniforms (see Figure 3).¹² The meritocratic *yangban* 兩班 officials of Joseon consisted of two distinct roles, which were the civil scholar-officers (*munban* 文班) and military officers (*muban* 武班). These military officers were often called tiger officers (*hoban* 虎班) since tigers in Korea represented exceptional martial prowess.

In her writing on Korea, L. H. Underwood emphasises, 'Many are the tiger stories told by Koreans; their folklore abounds with them' (1904, 46). Korean folklore is full of stories about the interactions between animals and humans. Such animals as foxes, bears, tigers, rabbits, magpies, and turtles are often the main characters in these folktales. However, the number and importance of tiger stories far exceeds all other animal stories (G. Gim 2017, 11). In a number of stories, the tiger is described as an intelligent god who could either reward or punish people based on their deeds, often reflecting Buddhist or Confucian values popular in the premodern period.

11 For example, when King Seonjo and his officers were discussing Kiyomasa, a Japanese commander, Ryu Seongryong, the Chief State Councillor, described his martial valor by mentioning, 'Kiyomasa truly is a figure comparable to a tiger.' *Joseon wangjo sillok*, *Seonjo sillok*, year 28 (1595), month 2, day 30.

12 Regarding these tiger-shaped patches, L.H. Underwood wrote, 'Korean noblemen when in attendance at the palace wear a dark blue coat... An embroidered breastplate is worn over the chest, representing a stork for civil office and a tiger for military rank' (Underwood 1904, 22–23).



Figure 3: Embroidered patches of two tigers for a high-ranking military officer's court attire in the Joseon period. *Ssangho hyungbae* 雙虎胸背, date unknown. National Folk Museum of Korea. Released under PDM 1.0 DEED.

Tigers in Korea vs. Japanese tiger hunters in twentieth-century Korea

Joseon Korea encountered its downfall when the Japanese colonized Korea in 1910. The beginning of the Japanese colonial era brought massive social and cultural changes not only to the Joseon people, but also to the tigers in Korea, in terms of rapid and extreme changes in tiger-human relations. Tiger sightings in Seoul and other areas of Korea continued until the very end of Joseon; frequent tiger hunts meant frequent invasions of human habitats by the tigers, as observed by Underwood in her essays. Significantly, upon its establishment in 1910, the Japanese colonial government started to interfere with the ecosystem of Korea. Their imperialistic intention to expand human habitation to the areas long reserved for wild animals resulted in the drastic transformation of Korea's natural environments. In this context, the Japanese showed great interest in tiger hunts all over Korea. From the start of its colonization of Korea, the Japanese colonial government in Seoul launched nationwide tiger hunts in the name of exterminating harmful animals (*haesu guje* 害獸驅除), mobilizing a large number of people on a scale never seen before in Joseon for any kind of animal hunting (Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 485; Sin 2017, 91–2).

Endo Kimio, a Japanese historian of ecology, notes that, from 1915 to 1916, the Japanese colonial government assembled 6547 police officers and military police, 192 government officers, 5417 hunters, and 135,712 beaters to hunt down ‘harmful animals’ (Endo 2009, 319). As a result, between 1919 and 1924, in just 5 years, 65 tigers, 385 leopards, and numerous wolves were killed. From 1925 onwards, the accounts of tiger sightings in Korea decreased drastically (An 2010, 127). Although the Joseon government had maintained a large tiger-hunting army, there had never been such a huge scale of tiger hunting, with so many personnel equipped with modern firearms and mobilized simultaneously. Endo Kimio’s investigation of the number of hunting firearm licenses issued by the Japanese colonial government to the Japanese and Koreans respectively, shows a strikingly contrasting gap. In 1911, 9,431 Japanese held these licenses whereas only 24 Koreans held them, which was even smaller than the number of rifle licenses held by foreigners in Korea, at 194 (Endo 2009, 210). In 1921 when the last documented tiger hunt (by a Japanese officer) occurred, the licenses held by the Japanese were about ten times greater than those held by Koreans, with 12,532 licenses held by the Japanese and 1,203 by Koreans (Endo 2009, 211). Based on these statistics published by the colonial government, Endo concludes that in less than 15 years after the colonization of Korea, the Japanese colonial government was mostly responsible for the drastic decrease of the number of tigers in Korea (2009, 211). This demonstrates the imperial government’s prejudiced interest in granting priority to Japanese applicants for hunting permits in Korea. Endo further argues that the ‘harmful animals extermination project’ was promoted in part to encourage Japanese migration to the remote areas of Korea and that, in this context, the number of Japanese people who moved to Korea until the end of the colonial period reached 900,000 (2009, 348–49) (Figure 4).

In addition to the Japanese colonial government, individuals and private parties from Japan also organized large-scale tiger hunting events in Korea. The account of Japanese millionaire Yamamoto Tadasaburo 山本忠三郎 (1873-1927) is a case in point. He spent huge sums organizing massive nationwide tiger hunting events in November and December of 1917, mobilizing 19 reporters, 10 staff members, 24 hunters, and around 150 beaters to hunt down tigers throughout the Korean peninsula (Sin 2017, 101). While the nominal purpose of the event was to boost the morale of the youth, the event is believed to have been an effort to subdue the Korean people’s will for independence, as the extermination of the tigers in Korea was closely associated with Japan’s imperialist goals of subjugating Korea (Sin 2017, 101–03; Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 486–90). In this context, Hasegawa Yoshimichi 長谷川好道 (1850–1924), the then Governor-General of colonized Korea, voluntarily had an audience



Figure 4: Kashiwade no Omi Tatebe in combat with a tiger. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (歌川国芳), *Tora* 寅 (Tiger), c. 1840, woodblock print The Trustees of the British Museum, released under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

with Yamamoto and the tiger hunting army he organized, ensuring that they would be provided with nationwide cooperation for their hunting. In the winter of 1917, once tigers were caught, Yamamoto displayed their bodies as trophies. He invited around 200 Japanese politicians and celebrities to a tiger meat-tasting event at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. In 1918, he published a book titled *Seikoki* 征虎記 (A Record of the Conquest of Tigers), which was distributed to the Japanese patrons of the tiger hunting events (Sin 2017, 101–03; Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 486–90).

It is significant that Yamamoto refers to these hunting expeditions as acts of ‘conquest’ (征 Jp: *sei*) rather than ‘hunts,’ which calls to mind the ‘punitive expeditions’ as chronicled in the embellished nineteenth century accounts of Katō Kiyomasa’s tiger conquest during the Imjin War (1592–1598). The Imjin War, the Japanese invasions of Joseon Korea beginning in the year *imjin* 壬辰 (1592), initiated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598), was one of the most detrimental struggles in Korean history. According to Samuel Hawley, the Imjin War ‘remains to this day the worst calamity that has ever befallen the nation, to be rivalled only by the Korean War of 1950–53 for devastation and loss of life’ (2005, 564).¹³ It was the first international war fought on Korean soil by three East Asian countries, namely Ming China, Joseon Korea, and the Hideyoshi armies, and was the largest invasion by Japan in the history of Korea, with over 170,000 troops dispatched to the peninsula. Tigers played a significant role in Japanese accounts of the Imjin War.

13 Some scholars assert that the Mongol invasions of Goryeo Korea (1231–1257) brought even bigger human casualties than the Imjin War.

Katō Kiyomasa 加藤清正 (1562–1611) was one of the spearheads of the Hideyoshi’s army during the Imjin War and the commander who made the strongest impression on the Koreans by capturing Seoul and two royal princes. He is well-known in Japan for allegedly hunting tigers in Joseon during the war. In fact, historical records show that tiger hunting was a popular event among several Japanese commanders dispatched to Korea. They presented the big game to Hideyoshi in his headquarters in Japan (Choe 2011, 59ff). Hideyoshi presented each of them with a handover certificate, a confirmation proving that he indeed received the tiger bodies they had sent to him. Hideyoshi believed that the tiger was an animal with supernatural powers and it possessed mystical energy; he ate its meat, skull, and gall bladder as medicine to improve his health (Choe 2011, 58) and to absorb the magical power he believed the tigers in Korea possessed (Gim and Yi 2018, 78).¹⁴ In Japanese literature, however, instead of these commanders who officially hunted tigers in Korea, including Kamei Korenori, Kikkawa Hiroie, Shimazu Yoshihiro, Shimazu Tadatsune, and Nabeshima Naoshige, the most famous Japanese general known for hunting tigers in Joseon is Katō Kiyomasa (1562–1611). Katō was by far more famous for his military accomplishments during the war both in Joseon Korea and Edo Japan than any other Japanese warrior who hunted tigers in Korea. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, in various versions of the fictional works demonstrating his victorious quests in Joseon, namely, *Ehon Taikōki* 繪本太閤記 (*Illustrated Records of the Taiko* [also known as *Toyotomi Hideyoshi*]) and *Ehon Chōsen seibatsuki* 繪本朝鮮征伐記 (*Illustrated Records of the Punitive Expedition of Joseon Korea*), Kiyomasa is depicted as a Japanese hero killing Korean tigers (Choe 2011, 68–72). Although there were no tigers living in Japan, tiger paintings from Korea were a popular item imported to Japan in the late eighteenth and

14 The medicinal effect of tiger bones is mentioned in *Bencao gangmu* (Compendium of Materia Medica, 1578) and in *Sanlim gyeongje* 山林經濟 authored by Hong Manseon 洪萬選 (1643-1715).



early nineteenth century. Tigers in these paintings, as the king of all beasts, were received among the Japanese as a spiritual being that can expel evil, as the Koreans believed (Gim and Yi 2018, 67–71). However, from the late Edo period (1853–1867), the image of a tiger in Japan transformed into an external enemy emerging from a foreign territory, representing the non- or anti-Japanese. Gim and Yi assert that in the *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 prints, tigers are depicted as an ‘antagonist’ who challenges and is defeated by Kiyomasa, a samurai warrior who ‘conquered’ Korea (2018, 76–8). Many Japanese were so proud of Kiyomasa’s conquest of Korea that he was listed as the first hero among the one hundred heroes in Chinese and Japanese history in *Wakan Eiyu Hyakunin Isshu* 和漢英雄百人一首 (One Hundred Poems for One Hundred Japanese and Chinese Heroes) authored by Ryūtei Tanehide 柳亭種秀 (1804–1868) in 1853 (Choe 2009, 192).

Indeed, Kiyomasa’s hunting of tigers in Korea in the sixteenth century became a popular anecdote that symbolized Japan’s conquest of Korea in the nineteenth century, appearing numerous times in various *ukiyo-e* prints and different versions of the aforementioned novels (Choe 2011, 67–8). These stories and prints, coupled with the rise of nationalistic sentiments in the late Edo period (1853–1867), led to the heroization of Kiyomasa, a key figure in Japan’s invasion of the Korean peninsula in the late sixteenth century, in Japanese popular literature and art. Furthermore, the story of Kiyomasa’s tiger hunting later came to symbolize the nationalistic discourse that helped justify the Japanese colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century. This reveals how Japanese imperialists like Yamamoto regarded tiger hunting in Joseon Korea as a repeatable discourse for their expansionism, based on Kiyomasa’s expedition for tigers in Joseon. As Napoleon once said, the object of conquest is occupation. The accounts of tiger hunts described as ‘conquests’ represent the occupation of Joseon’s nature, including its land and inhabitants (humans and animals alike) by force. A poem in the collection *Seikoki* discloses such perspectives:

The account of Kato Kiyomasa

Is now succeeded by Yamamoto’s conquest of tigers with his troops
Come on, Tiger

Come on tiger, come on tiger, with iron cannons and guns on our back
Let us go into the snow to the north

Let the Japanese menfolk show their courage
Roosevelt counts as nothing to us¹⁵
Come on, Tiger

15 Alice Roosevelt, the daughter of the American President Theodore Roosevelt, paid a visit to the royal tomb of the Korean ruler’s late wife in 1905 and abruptly rode a stone elephant there. Arguably, Tadasaburo believed killing tigers in Korea could damage Koreans’ national pride more than riding an elephant statue.

Come on, tiger, come on leopards, come on wolves and bears
If you don't come out, we will shoot you with a five-shooter [revolver]
Come on, Tiger

This year, we are going to hunt down all tigers in Korea
Next year, we will hunt bears in Russia
Come on, tiger. (Sin 2017, 111)¹⁶ (Figure 5)

16 Here, Tadasaburo, who represents Japanese imperialists, reveals their ambitions to 'conquer' not only Korea but also Russia.

Among the Japanese, from the late Edo period, the tiger was increasingly seen a symbol of their enemy state and therefore an obstacle to overcome. Eventually, the uninterrupted tiger hunting in this period led to the last documented hunting of a tiger in Korea in 1922. A Japanese police officer named Miyake killed the last tiger in Korean history (An 2010, 127). He then presented the tiger's fur to Prince Kan'in Kotohito (閑院宮載仁親王, 1865–1945), a prominent member of the Japanese imperial family and a military general. The last tiger in Korea's official history came to an end as a gift to a Japanese imperial prince.

Within less than two decades of Japan's colonization, the tigers in Korea that survived the well-disciplined tiger-hunting armies of Joseon for about five hundred years went extinct. To this date, there are no tigers found in Korea's ecology.

The tiger remains a potent symbol in the discourse surrounding conflict and rivalry between Korea and Japan. This tension shows no signs of abating. At the 2021 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, South Korean athletes hung a banner in their athletes' village that read 'A tiger is coming' with an illustration of a tiger in the shape of the Korean Peninsula. The tiger banner immediately faced a backlash from the Japanese mass media and numerous angry postings on the Internet. It was soon taken down by the International Olympic Committee at the request of the Japanese Olympic Committee. One of the numerous news articles regarding this incident noted, 'Japanese commentators reacted by saying, "In Korea, many people believe that the Japanese exterminated tigers in Korea and we see this [banner of a Korean-peninsula-shaped tiger] is based on that belief"' (Mun 2021). As mentioned above, the large-scale and relentless tiger hunting activities in Korea during the Japanese colonial period resulted in the extirpation of tigers in Korea by the mid-1920s. In return, a cult of defensive nationalistic sentiments against such tiger hunting arose among Koreans. Intellectuals like Choe Namseon 崔南善 (1890–1957) endeavoured to emphasize the time-honoured image of tigers as the guardian of Korea and its nature as a means to resist Japanese imperialism. This action was initially a response to Koto Bunjiro's (小藤 文次郎, 1856–1935) claim in 1903 that the shape of the Korean peninsula is similar to that of a rabbit. Such a claim was supported and quoted by several Japanese



Figure 5: Yamamoto in front of two tigers he allegedly hunted. Original image is from *Seikoki* 征虎記 (A Record of the Conquest of Tigers), 1918. Permission granted by The Tiger and Leopard Conservation Fund in Korea.

scholars. In 1908, Choe responded to this claim by asserting that the shape of the Korean peninsula is similar to that of a tiger (Bak 2015, 24ff) (Figure 6).

To facilitate Japan's occupation of Korea, beginning from the late Edo period, some Japanese scholars tried to provide a theoretical and historical framework that could rationalise Japan's rule over Korea. Chizuko Allen summarizes this trend as follows:

Another view popular among Japanese historians, especially those influenced by the Japanese National Studies (*Kokugaku*) approach which emphasized the Japanese chronicles, *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters) and *Nihon shoki* (Chronicle of Japan), was that Japanese emperors during the ancient period controlled the Korean peninsula. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the view that Korea had been under Japanese domination in the distant past was



Figure 6: Illustration of the Korean peninsula resembling the shape of a tiger in the first issue of *Sonyeon* (Boys). Choe Namseon, 1908. Released under PDM 1.0 DEED.

widely circulated among the Japanese through popular articles and school textbooks. (Allen 1990, 792)

Choe was one of the scholars offended by such a provocative assertion (Allen 1990, 792). Starting from 1908, Choe endeavoured to enhance the image of a tiger in Korean history and culture, emphasizing its traditional image as the guardian of all mountains, namely the Korean territory, as a means to resist Japanese rule over Korea. He endeavoured to find a counterargument based on Korean history and found the foundation myth of Korea to be the most relevant. He asserted that the Taebaek Mountain where Hwanung descended to rule over the Korean people is the Baekdu Mountain (J. Gim 2021, 13ff), a place deemed sacred and auspicious by Korean nationalists. He also emphasized the importance of Dangun as the founder of the first Korean state. As the myth goes, Dangun became a Mountain God, and the image of the tiger as a Mountain God (or the god's messenger) became equally important to Choe's interpretation of Korean history (J. Gim 2021, 15; Bak 2015, 15–26). While the paintings



Figure 7: Kiyomasa hunting tigers in Korea during the Imjin War. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, nineteenth century. Released under PDM 1.0 DEED.

of Kiyomasa killing Korean tigers started to be published in Korea from 1912 onwards (Bak 2015, 27) and tigers in Korea were being hunted down in the name of the ‘harmful animal extermination project,’ Choe all the more promoted the tiger as a ‘representation of Korea’ (Bak 2015, 23). In this respect, Seeley and Skabelend observe, ‘both colonizing Japanese and colonized Koreans deployed the tiger as a symbol of Korean identity to either represent the subjugation of the peninsula or to suggest that its people might rise up against colonial rule’ (2015, 491). In this connection, the phrase ‘a tiger is coming’ alone was enough to agitate many Japanese personnel, given the long and convoluted history of the connotations of tigers for both the Koreans and Japanese (Figure 7).

Conclusion

Due to the ecological and geographical circumstances of major cities in Korea (especially Seoul), tigers and Koreans shared their habitats for a long time. About seventy percent of Korea’s land is mountainous. Given this situation, in the Joseon period, tiger hunting experts were trained to lead tiger raids to contain their numbers. However, this was mostly to prevent excessive human casualties, not to wipe out the entire species of tigers, as we have seen in King Jeongjo’s comments regarding his tiger hunting policies. For each tiger disaster he encountered, Jeongjo carefully

measured the cost of reducing tiger casualties against the costs of actually waging those campaigns.

The extinction of the tigers was accelerated by the Japanese colonial government, which relied on modern weaponry to pursue a full-scale, nationwide ‘harmful animal extermination project’ (Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 485; Sin 2017, 91–2). It is worth noting that, although government-initiated tiger hunts had been a norm in Korea starting from the Joseon dynasty, the killing of tigers in the colonial period was on a much larger scale, which resulted in total extermination of tigers in Korea under Japanese colonial rule. This is comparable to the distinction between the Palaeoanthropocene and the Anthropocene, discussed in the introduction to this special issue, in which the earlier and later periods both involve anthropogenic environmental impacts, but to vastly different degrees.

The consequences of the environmental events under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) also shaped particular reactions among the Koreans, including the way contemporary people now view premodern cultural history. Ironically, Japan’s rule over Korea and its massive tiger hunting campaign facilitated the ‘tiger nostalgia’ among Koreans (Seeley and Skabelund 2015, 476) and helped the tiger to remain a representation of Korean identity and culture long after tigers in Korea went extinct.

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