

“What Immortal Hand or Eye Dare Frame Thy Fearful Symmetry?” The Image of the Tiger in Indian and Korean Culture: Cases of Gond and Minhwa Traditions

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[...] instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*.

(Cassirer 1953: 44)

Symbols, or in other words representations which convey a meaning, are the fundamental feature of culture. Images, figures, sounds, colours, gestures, flowers, animals, parts of the body etc., any “object can be described as a symbol of something else, if it seems to represent it because it is connected with it in a lot of people’s minds” (Cambridge Dictionary). For instance, it could be the tiger from William Blake’s poem, quoted in the title of this essay, forever “burning bright in the forests of the night” (Blake 2002: 73f.) and creating the ambiance of fascination and fear, generation after generation. Or, the tiger of flesh and blood, a symbol of strength and courage in Asian cultures and folklore,¹ which in the case of both India and Korea developed into an emblematic national animal,² apparently symbolising the most characteristic qualities of the two nations, at least in the eyes of a considerable number of citizens of both the countries.

Recognising human ability to perceive and describe reality through the use of symbols, Ernst Cassirer created a philosophical concept of “symbolic forms” based on his assumption that man’s outstanding

¹ China and Japan have used tigers excessively in their various folklores, tales and myths. Thus, these animals have become important parts of a number of identities traceable in different cultures. This essay, however, focuses only on India and Korea.

² The tiger is also a national animal of Malaysia and Bangladesh. However, these two countries remain outside the interest of this essay.

characteristic is to be defined not by his nature (metaphysical or physical), but rather by his work. Convinced that humans create a universe of symbolic meanings, in his three-volume *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Cassirer 1923–1929), translated as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer 1953–1957), Cassirer claimed that humanity can only be known through the analysis of the symbolic universe, created by mankind in history. Hence, man – as a symbol making, or a symbolising being – should be defined as *animal symbolicum*. This notion became the departure point for Cassirer to explore symbolic forms in all aspects of human experience, and consider them the means to understand the nature of man (Cassirer 1953: 106):

In every linguistic “sign”, in every mythical or artistic “image”, a spiritual content, which intrinsically points beyond the whole sensory sphere, is translated into the form of the sensuous, into something visible, audible or tangible. An independent mode of configuration appears, a specific activity of consciousness, which is differentiated from any datum of immediate sensation or perception, but makes use of these data as vehicles, as means of expression.

Because of this phenomenon which Cassirer terms as “an independent mode of configuration” it is quite impossible to presume how a particular human being or any specific culture would symbolise *something*. Therefore, it seems simply natural to suppose that every culture has its own set of symbols associated with different experiences and observations, which the members of this culture must interpret and reinterpret over time.

However, India and Korea, two ancient cultural traditions which developed independently with only scarce verifiable historical interactions, both seem to have given a special significance to the symbolic image of a tiger. This symbol is historically and presently used for the purposes of national (and also nationalistic) discourse, as well as commonly employed by artists of the native folk traditions: Gond painters of India and Minhwa of Korea.

The aim of this essay is to describe the role of the image of the tiger in Indian and Korean cultures, and to seek probable sources of analogies in tiger depictions of the two traditions both in aesthetic approaches as well as artistic realisations.

The Tiger in India

The Royal Bengal tiger, the national symbol of India and one of its sacred animals, has been used as a symbol in South Asia since the times of the earliest known urban culture of that region, known as the Indus Civilisation.³ Most probably this is the reason why in Indian media and other popular sources we come across a statement that the Bengal tiger has been a national symbol of India since 2500 BCE, several millennia before even the concept of India as a state was born. It was then that a symbolic image of a tiger appeared on one of the seals of the Indus Valley Civilisation, known as the “Pashupati Seal”. Several centuries later, the Bengal tiger was also the symbol of the Chola Empire (4th–13th century CE).

Also in the distinctive tradition of Hinduism, the tiger occupies an important place. It is said that when Brahma created the animals, he hid a specific secret in each of them to signify their spiritual importance to humans. He attributed tigers with grace, determination and a sense of responsibility, especially for those who needed protection. They are therefore considered as advanced beings, some of whom might have been humans in their past lives, or may assume a human birth in their next lives.⁴ Besides, perhaps because of their large size, tigers in Indian tradition represent royalty, majesty, fearlessness, strength, and ferocity. On the negative side, they represent death, aggression, anger, cruelty, and violence.

Apparently there are no references to tigers in the *Rgveda*, whereas the *Yajurveda* contains prayers and invocations that revere gods by attributing them with the strength and the abilities of tigers.⁵ In later times, Shiva is portrayed wearing a tiger skin, whereas Shakti (in her various manifestations) employs the tiger as her vehicle. In the images and sculptures she is shown as riding or sitting upon it.

³ The nuclear dates of the civilisation appear to be about 2500–1700 BCE, though the southern sites may have lasted into the later 2nd millennium BCE.

⁴ For example, in the *Manusmṛiti* (12.59), there is a passage declaring that those who take pleasure in hurting others will be born as carnivorous animals, perhaps such as tigers (Bühler 1886: 497).

⁵ For example, in the *Yajurveda* (V.5.7) hymn to Rudra and Agni, both gods are described as possessing the ferocity of a tiger; “tiger” is mentioned also in V.3.1, V.5.11 and V.5.21 (Keith 1914).

Tigers also occupy a prominent place in Indian folk tales, as well as *Jātaka* stories and the *Pañcatantra*. In many tribal traditions of South Asia, the worship of the tiger-god, known under several different names, is prevalent. Visual confirmation of such tribal worship is, for instance, provided by the artists of Madhya Pradesh (Central India) who belong to the Gond culture⁶ where a tiger-god, named Bagh Deo (also: Baghbana Dev, Bagheśvar), is worshipped and considered as the saviour and protector of his devotees (Crooke 1994: 322–325).

The Tiger in Gond Art

The tradition of Gond painting evolved from ritual storytelling,⁷ accompanied by decorating the walls to commemorate special occasions and bring good luck and protection from evil. The paintings were traditionally created on the mud walls of village dwellings, with the use of natural colours produced from available materials. The artists found (and still find) inspiration in everyday objects, depicting their surroundings, plants, animals, religious festivals, or weddings, and portraying various deities and scenes from mythology. Gond art is based on working with detailed patterns of dots, stripes, and simple shapes, used along with colours to create the various forms of people, animals or plants. The different types of patterns used, establish individual artistic style. The depictions can be of a slightly hallucinogenic character, with all the painted forms entwining and intermingling. Individual images are often of distorted perspective and exaggerated proportions. Due to the lack of re-

⁶ The Gonds are one of the largest Adivasi communities in India, with a written history that can be traced to the 14th century. Their name is derived from the word *kond* which means “green mountains” in the Dravidian language spoken by the Gondi people. The origins of Gond art lie within a unique relationship between oral and visual storytelling systems (Arur & Wyeld 2016).

⁷ Before the Muslim invasions of the 14th century, the Gond people were a culturally significant tribe in central India. Traditional Gond art includes dance, song and painting, therefore, it is justified to presume that the tradition of Gond painting dates significantly prior to the 14th century, whereas their stories are passed on orally through folk songs. The Gond art form saw a decline in the late 20th century as members of the community migrated to nearby towns and cities. However, the tradition has recently been revived with the growing popularity of Gond artworks and the success of its leading practitioners, which has attracted younger generations to the art form (Vajpeyi 2007).

search in this field, it is not clear what meaning the patterns hold for the Gond people. Their paintings include forms like ants, a trident, a peacock feather, a rope, water ripples, tiger stripes, etc. They are used to worshipping nature as a mode of seeking protection, and warding off evil (Arur & Wyeld 2016). In many tribal clans of Central India, including the Gonds, there is a tiger or Bagh of Baghel clan sept, the members of which consider themselves descendants of the fearful predator (Mehta 1984: 420). Since the Gond artists themselves believe that looking at a good image brings good luck (Arur & Wyeld 2016), particular attention is often given to portraying the tiger, for it is considered among the strongest and most powerful animals in the jungle.

The Tiger in Korea

Similarly, in the Korean tradition the tiger enjoys a strong presence. It is regarded both as a guardian that drives away evil spirits and a sacred creature that brings good luck, as well as a symbol of courage and absolute power. From ancient times until the dusk of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1879), the Korean Peninsula was home to such a large population of Siberian tigers that it was frequently referred to as the “Land of Tigers”. Besides, in the regional geopolitical discourse, Korea’s position between China and Japan has been described as a tiger approaching China, or a dagger pointed at Japan (Clark 2000: 8).

A symbol of power, the king of the animal kingdom, but also able to transform into human form, the tiger is often featured as a guardian deity in Korean funerary art. The figures of this mighty animal, perhaps due to people’s beliefs that they would safeguard the permanent dwellings of the dead, can therefore be found around the royal tombs (UNESCO).

There are several instances which prove that from the earliest times the inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula expressed their admiration and respect for tigers in various ways, beginning with a reference to a tiger in the foundation myth of Korean civilisation, the legend of Dangun, told in the *Samguk Yusa* (“The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”). And, even though “the myth itself does not present the importance of the tiger spirit” (Lee 1981: 19f.), it is still a justifiable proof of the presence of the tiger’s image in Korean everyday imagination.

According to popular sources (Wikipedia), there are 635 historical records about tigers in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty. In Korean Shamanic traditions, the animal is also known to be a guard and an aide for the mountain guardian spirit, Sansin, responsible for securing the peace

and well-being of the village under his protection (Zoric 2015: 369). Hence, a common belief is that the tiger was ordered by the spiritual guardian of the mountain to watch over the villagers and keep them safe (Lee 1981: 19f.). Also, in Korean Buddhist temples, there is always a shrine, located at some distance from the main temple buildings, in which there would be a painting – a depiction of the guardian spirit of the mountain and a tiger.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Korean Folklore and Traditional Culture*, for Koreans the tiger was “one of the favourite folk characters” (Jingi 2010: 167). Therefore, the image of this animal often appeared in charms as a consequence of a common belief that it had the power to chase away evil spirits. Besides, Koreans posted tiger paintings on the doors or walls of their homes on New Year’s Day, since “[h]anging a tiger painting on the door was also considered beneficial for prevention and recovery from malaria and cholera” (ibid.). The same source also claims that there are families who “hung a tiger bone over the main entrance of their house in the belief that no evil spirit would dare cross the threshold when it saw the sign of the king of animals” (ibid.).

The Tiger in Minhwa Art

In Korea, just as in the case of Indian tradition, these amazing physical and spiritual qualities made the tiger one of the most popular characters of traditional stories. Furthermore, this grand animal is “probably the most popular image in Korean folk painting and decoration” (Pratt et al. 1999: 471), that is, mainly in the tradition of Minhwa, a significant component of Korean culture and religion.

This tradition of folk art includes all kinds of ordinary objects, made and decorated by anonymous artisans, to be used for everyday purposes by ordinary people. In this way it was a welcome counterpart to art created for the cultural elite that required specialised knowledge of classical Chinese poetry. Minhwa was easily available and understood by common, illiterate people whose down to earth wisdom came from traditional narratives and folktales which were meant to entertain, communicate religious beliefs, and reinforce social values. With the passage of time, the motifs from the people’s tales became the most common themes also of Minhwa painters.⁸ Minhwa can, therefore, be defined as “paintings that

⁸ Naming the exact time of the beginnings of this folk art tradition seems quite

expressed truly Korean notions and feelings”, “paintings of ordinary people, expressing their desires and beliefs, and protecting them from harmful spirits as well as decorating their surroundings” (Yoon 2004: 327). A unified definition of Minhwa does not seem to exist; different scholars propose different definitions which are sometimes contradictory even in principle, including the basic issue of whether this folk art form was created by professional or amateur craftsmen (ibid.). However, it is said that the “ultimate goal of Minhwa is not artistic, nor did they seek beauty, therefore to understand Minhwa one should know the role that Minhwa had in the lives of the people” (ibid.: 325). The paintings include many auspicious symbols of longevity and good fortune whose main role was to drive away evil creatures, bad spirits or demons, and protect the people against any disturbances in their everyday life.

From ancient times, it was the common belief that the paintings possessed magical powers which would protect against disasters, therefore keeping at home the pictures of animals with spiritual qualities was considered a good method to drive away any evil spirit. Perhaps this is why one of the most common motifs in Minhwa was the tiger, who possessed a symbolic power and was used in folk paintings as a talisman to bring good luck and ward off evil.

Gond and Minhwa Art in Comparison

As can be seen at this point, there are apparent parallels between Gond and Minhwa paintings. These include their narrative origins, as well as the auspicious magical function of creating images on house walls or on ordinary everyday objects. But even more so, these parallels can be observed when focusing on the role of a tiger in both the folk painting traditions.

While taking a closer look at tiger images created by the Gond and Minhwa artists, we realise that in both cases the animal is a metaphor which is utilised to express notions of harmony in the universe and the supernatural potency which intervenes when this order is violated or disturbed. According to Gond stories, the tiger is believed to have incredible otherworldly powers, which include fighting demons, creating rain,

impossible. The sources refer to the Joseon period (1392–1910) as the time of a new emphasis on Minhwa. Besides, just as it happened outside India for the art of the Gond painters, “the interest in Minhwa began outside Korea, at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century [...]” (Yoon 2004: 327).

keeping children safe from nightmares, as well as healing. These tribal beliefs, depicted in arts and crafts, often place the tiger as a central symbol of worship. And even though in everyday life the tiger, as any predator, is considered to be a wild, dangerous animal, the members of this indigenous cultural tradition mythicise the animal as a watchful guardian and the provider of prosperity. Therefore, the tiger images in Gond art are rather unrestricted imaginary projections of its mighty nature than records of tangible experiences.

Tigers can be portrayed by Gond artists in many colours, and their bodies may appear distorted and disproportional. However, a slight grin, or even smile, can usually be detected on their faces. Taking a closer look, this expression can resemble a grimace of cold cynicism. Quite often tigers are also attributed with auspicious symbolic objects, birds, or other animals. The presence of a tree – even if portrayed only symbolically as in the case of the paintings by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam and Jangarh Singh Shyam – is a significant feature of Gond tiger depictions. It represents the animal's inherent association with the forest, and through that, indicates a relationship with the tribal people who live there as well.

In Minhwa tradition, the paintings are usually categorised by means of individual themes. Auspicious paintings of tigers serve to prevent disasters, and they are classified as a separate genre of Korean folk painting, *hodo*. “Most Koreans grow up hearing [tiger] stories that are sometimes funny and sometimes scary. [...] Some paintings [...] humorously portray the scene of a mighty tiger being defeated by the apparently weaker rabbit. [...] Even though the tiger is one of the most dangerous animals, Korean paintings depicted it in a rather humorous way, with arched back, and exchanging conversation with magpies” (Yoon 2004: 333).

The images show a tiger in situations when it is derided by a much smaller animal, or mellowed by the presence of its cubs. It is portrayed rather as a silly, slightly clumsy being, and not as the emperor of the forest. Also, the faces of Minhwa tigers are usually quite friendly – at least at first glimpse. Sometimes they can even show a big grin or a friendly smile. Perhaps because of these images depicting a friendly attitude, in the Chinese sources Korea can be referred to as “*Hodamjiguk*, »the country that speaks with the tiger«” (Yoon 2004: 333).

Even such brief observations of the most distinctive surface features make it possible to point at some obvious parallels, not only in the basic roles and functions of folk painting and the place of the tiger in India and Korea, but also at some more detailed characteristics featured in both the discussed traditions. Among them, the most outstanding seems to be the

inscrutable facial expression of the painted tigers which apparently depicts the duality of their symbolic nature, being both of the merciless savage creatures and also of a gently humane animal. The dichotomy of the tiger's nature appears to be a characteristic feature in Gond painting and Minhwa alike. Correspondingly, the bright jolly colours often used by Indian painters, just as the almost constant presence of a magpie undermining the tiger's authority in Minhwa tradition, seem to facilitate a similar purpose of the painters – to depict the fearful beast as a cute, clumsy or even comical animal, almost pet-like.

The reasons behind this method of depiction, based on the ability to turn the fear and admiration for the cruel creature into seemingly disrespectful, distorted images, were studied and described by Dan Ben-Amos. And even though he focused his research on the features typical for African folklore, his concept of "order" and "disorder" in social narratives (Ben-Amos 1982: 27–30) provides clarification as to why the folk painters from India and Korea portray the tiger in their chosen way.

According to Ben-Amos, "[t]he creation of order is an attempt to conceptually duplicate reality verbally, to tell history 'as it is', to narrate experiences as they really happened and to recount visions as they were originally seen" (Ben-Amos 1982: 28), whereas narratives "of disorder are for all intent and purpose verbal creations that establish a world of a different reality, one that is unknown to either speaker or a listener" (ibid.), or – just as in the case of the discussed subject – the reality known neither to the painter nor to the viewer. The need to create narratives of disorder, in Ben-Amos's view, "could be interpreted as a verbal creation of wishful reality, a desired state of affairs that does not exist" (ibid.: 29).

Conclusion

Possibly due to our dreams about occupying a superior position in this world, most human beings need to create a reality in which the imaginary power they wish to possess is not endangered. Perhaps this is why in the discussed examples of folk art, just as in most folk tales, strong characters are usually less intelligent than the weak. After all, such motifs are common in animal stories, and opposites of this kind are evident in the oral as well as pictorial folk narratives.

It seems to be rather definite that the majestic beauty of the tiger and the power that it represents were the reason why it has always been present in many forms of culture. In India and Korea, through the ages, people seemed to have had at least one thing in common: they greatly feared

but also greatly respected the tiger. The fearful predator suddenly appeared and disappeared in the darkness of dense forests, was most active in the night time, and its presence was marked only by a pair of burning eyes. The animal was hardly ever seen close up and, if so, those who had seen it rarely or never had a chance to give any accounts of their ultimate encounter. All these traits had influenced human perception, attributing the tiger with the status of an otherworldly, supernatural being. In this way, the tigers who radiate power and inspire astonishment, could perfectly facilitate man's need to create symbolic structures, going beyond the human intellect's "need of images", and fulfilling its "need for symbols" (Cassirer 1953: 80).

To fulfil that need, the artists of Gond and Minhwa traditions for many generations have portrayed tigers as noble symbols of superiority, as well as auspicious creatures that ward off evil spirits. The tigers are occasionally shown with a severe and cynical expression, or perhaps a jovial grin, but unchangeably they serve their purpose as lucky symbols of security, prosperity and protection. They retain their symbolic status maybe also thanks to changing approaches, attitudes, and scholarly interpretations as well as reinterpretations. For, as Ernst Cassirer states in his *Essay of Man*, "human works are vulnerable [...]. They are subject to change and decay [...] in a mental sense. Even if their existence continues they are in constant danger of losing their meaning. Their reality is symbolic, not physical; and such reality never ceases to require interpretation and reinterpretation" (Cassirer 1953: 233f.).

However, even though the Royal Bengal tiger of India became almost completely extinct during the period of British rule,⁹ and the Siberian tiger, mainly due to the actions of the Japanese occupants, has not been seen in South Korea for almost one hundred years, it can quite safely be assumed that in popular imagination in India and Korea, the mysterious tiger from William Blake's poem still remains "burning bright".

⁹ The estimated number is approximately 2,967 individuals (Roy 2019).

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