

The Tiger and its Association with Protection and Prosperity in Late Imperial China

Because of their ferocious nature, tigers occupied a special place in Chinese animal lore. They were particularly appreciated for their ability to destroy evil spirits and as guardians of wealth. In these two capacities in particular, tigers became common motifs in eighteenth-to early twentieth-century woodblock prints. This essay introduces a selection of printed tiger images and the uses of such prints. These include the tiger as mounts for Zhang Daoling, credited with the power to banish evil spirits, and for Zhao Gongming, the Military God of Wealth. It considers how the tiger is invoked for household protection and the security of riches. An analysis of the tiger imagery reveals evidence of two special characteristics of production generally overlooked in print studies. First, that artisans and shop owners were aware of local preferences and incorporated these into their prints. Second, print shops were not adverse to introducing changes and modifications in established imagery. Presumably, both of these practices were motivated by efforts to attract customer appreciation and subsequently to increase print sales.

Keywords: tiger; woodblock prints; Zhang Daoling; Zhao Gongming; household protection; wealth; happiness; print production.