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What does tiger mean in korean

Folklore, myths, and stories all contribute to a nation’s culture, history, and identity as much as its language, food, and population. The depiction of tigers has long been a symbolic figure in Eastern mythology ranging from Turkey, across Siberia, into China, and as far as Japan. It reaches deep into India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia to create an expansive canvas of fairytale narratives. Korea is no exception as the country’s identity is based off the tiger. Alongside the tiger, however, appears an interesting character just as valuable and historical as its powerful counterpart: the persimmon.Importance of the Tiger Once upon a time, or should I say (Korean fairy tales oftentimes start off with “the time when tigers smoked”), Korea’s founding story was told about the son of the Lord of the Heavens named Hwanung who came to Earth to live among humans. One day, a (horangi - tiger) and a (gom - bear) pleaded with Hwanung to become human and thus had to endure a test. While the tiger gave up, the bear persisted and was then transformed into a woman named Ungnyeo. Ungnyeo then married Hwanung and together they had a son, Dangun, who is fabled to have established the first Kingdom of Korea dating back to 2333 B.C. (check out Dangun, Korea’s Foundation Myth for more on the myth). Regardless of the story, tigers are revered as guardians and divine spirits and symbolize courage and power. The rarest of them all is the white tiger, which turns white once it has overcome many tests and would only become angry when rulers go rogue and do harm to their people and country. The unrelenting spirit of the white tiger is what has united the common people when times have been tough and thin. This has led to the plethora of tiger imagery in pieces of art, as it is said the animal can ward off evil. Some people even hang up paintings called Jakhodo, which depict a tiger and magpie in their home during the Lunar New Year. Lastly, the most recent depiction of tigers in Korea has been during the 2018 Winter Olympics in Seoul. Looking back in history, the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul also had an orange Amur tiger named (Hodori) to represent Korea. As Korea was hosting the Olympics in 2018, no better mascot could have been chosen than (Soohorang), a white tiger. The name Soohorang is a play on words “soho” meaning “protection” and “horangi” meaning “tiger,” much like how our Kraze mascot is named Horangi! Carrying on with the theme, the 2018 Winter Paralympics also chose to have a Asiatic black bear named (Bandabi) to tie together the Tale of Dangun.Importance of the Persimmon Just like the tiger’s long history in Korea, persimmons, known as (gam), are deeply rooted in Korea’s mythology. Aside from being a Buddhist symbol of transformation (where green bitter fruits transform into bright orange and produce sweet nectar), persimmons are an important ritual fruit in Korea according to the food culture of the Jongga ancestral rituals (tracing back the origins of a familial line). Additionally, wood from a persimmon tree has been used for furniture and trays and even paired with carvings such as tiger feet on tables. Scriptures state that if you plant a persimmon tree from a seed, it will result in small fruit whereas grafting a branch from another persimmon tree will produce a more superior fruiting tree. Like many things observed in nature, scholars have used this as a metaphor to emphasize the importance of education and civic engagement.Aside from being a large horticultural produce grown in Korea (learn more about seasonal fruits by reading Korean Autumn Produce to Fall in Love With), persimmons hold strong meaning in folklore. While a white tiger may symbolize courage and protection from evil and pose no harm to man, a normal tiger is seen as a keen and fearless predator, capable of great mischief and feared by all. However, according to folklore, persimmons are said to protect from these impish tigers. In the tale of the Tiger and the Persimmon, a tiger creeps into a village in hopes of stealing a cow from the villagers while a burglar attempts to do the same. Throughout this, a child is overheard crying. No matter what he is threatened with, the child does not stop crying, even when threatened by the big, scary tiger. Suddenly, the tiger hears someone say, “Here’s a dried persimmon,” and the child stops crying. This halts the tiger in his tracks and has him thinking what a fearsome thing a dried persimmon would have to be to stop a child from crying if even a tiger couldn’t scare the child. At the same time, the burglar who mistook the tiger for a cow, jumps on the tiger’s back. Out of fear, the tiger bolts out of the village with the burglar on his back thinking it is the fearsome dried persimmon.While there are many other variations of the story, the tale incorporates two strong motifs that have persisted in Korean history and folklore. The moral of the tale depicts that mischief (tiger) and corruption (burglar) will not prevail should benevolence be planted deep, like the persimmon tree, in the hearts of the people’s culture. While just a children’s tale at first glance, symbols of tigers and persimmons prove to be teaching tools to ensure generations of righteous citizens to come. ◀ Back to List More article by this Writer “Tiger and Magpie” from the late Samsung Chairman Lee Kun-hee’s collection. The painting was created in the 19th century. (NMK)After winning the John Newbery Medal for the most distinguished children’s book in 2020 with “When You Trap a Tiger,” author Tae Keller said the book was inspired by a folktale that her Korean grandmother used to tell her. The Korean folktale she was referring to was “The Sun and the Moon” that centers on two siblings and a tiger. Keller’s storybook also includes a tiger from a Korean folklore which appeared at a grandmother’s house to find something that was stolen.During the exhibition “A Great Cultural Legacy: Masterpieces from the Bequest of the Late Samsung Chairman Lee Kun-hee” at the National Museum of Korea, held from July to September this year, there was a painting of “Tiger and Magpie” from the 19th century during the Joseon era.“Tiger and Magpie” by Shin Jae-hyun from the 19th century (Leeum Museum of Art)The appearance of Keller’s tiger character and the tiger in the painting were not mere coincidences. Appearing frequently in Korean legends and art pieces, the animal is considered a national symbol and is associated with humor, bravery and nobility. According to the Academy of Korean Studies’ database on folk literature, 1,283 stories include animals of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs. Among them, around 40 percent of them have a tiger in them. During the Joseon era, tigers were considered the strongest beast that can provide protection and also a symbol of a person of virtue, so many hung paintings of the animal in their homes with hopes that they would drive away evil spirits and evoke blessings.“When You Trap a Tiger” by Tae Keller (Tae Keller’s website)How did the tiger become so popular?Tigers have been with Koreans from the very beginning. The “Dangun Wangggeom” legend, which tells the story of how the first Korean kingdom was established, also has a tiger character in it.In the legend, a tiger and a bear ask Hwanung -- the son of Hwanin, the lord of heaven -- to transform them into humans. Hwanung tells them they can become human if the two only eat garlic and sacred mugwort for 100 days while staying in a cave without seeing the sunlight. However, the impatient tiger gives up shortly after. The bear stays in the cave and on the 100th day, the bear becomes a woman and later becomes the mother of the founder of Korea’s first nation.“It makes more sense to have more stories about bears since the legend says that the bear is the one that became human, but it is difficult to see folktales with bears in them in Korea,” National Folk Museum of Korea curator Kim Hyung-joo told The Korea Herald. Although the specific reason behind the tiger’s influence on Korean culture remains a mystery, Kim said it could be partially due to its familiarity.“Tiger Under a Pine Tree” by Kim Hong-do from the late 18th century (Leeum Museum of Art)“There used to be lots of tigers in Korea. Different from now. Now we can only see them in zoos,” Kim said. “There are also some records written by foreign travelers that show there were lots of tigers on the Korean Peninsula.“According to Kim, “Korea and Her Neighbors” written by Isabella Bird Bishop around 120 years ago says, “Joseon people hunt tigers for half a year, and tigers hunt Koreans for the other half year.”“To Koreans, the tiger is an animal that holds the emotions and culture of our people,” National Folk Museum official Kang Kyo-pyo said in the “Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Symbols: Tiger.”Love for tigers ongoing in K-pop K-pop boy band SuperM (S.M. Entertainment)Last year’s hit K-pop song “Tiger is Coming” by traditional Korean music-inspired band Leenachii also tells a story related to a tiger. It is a reinterpreted song of the verses from the pansori “Sugungga,” a traditional type of narrative singing. In the song, a turtle who comes on land to get a rabbit’s liver, a cure for an ailing Dragon King, mistakenly calls up a tiger instead and this mistake causes a commotion.Leenachii featured this song in the Korea Tourism Organization’s “Feel the Rhythm of Korea” promotional campaign video, which recorded more than 600 million views from around the world.Popular K-pop boy band SuperM from Korean entertainment giant S.M. Entertainment also released the song “Tiger Inside” in September last year. S.M. Entertainment brought together members from established boy bands under its wing, including EXO, SHINee and NCT 127, to form the group.“We chose the tiger to show the color of SuperM. It (The tiger) was chosen to show the synergy and concept that the seven members have. The song brings out the inner beast hidden in everyone,” an S.M. Entertainment official told The Korea Herald. “We also created a choreography that was inspired by the movement of a tiger. There is a growling sound in the song itself as well.”“Tiger Inside,” an art film created jointly by artist Kim Jung-gi and S.M Entertainment’s boy band SuperM. (S.M. Entertainment)Symbol of KoreaThere are lots of illustrated characters and mascots of tigers that show Korea’s national identity. Local illustration brand Muzik Tiger is a notable example. The brand, which is known for its cute orange tiger character, has been collaborating with various firms like LocknLock, Pascucci, 7-Eleven and Gucci.Gucci’s emoticons launched in collaboration with local illustration company Muzik Tiger.(Muzik Tiger)Muzik Tiger CEO Song Eui-sub said he created the character after working in a design team at Hyundai Motor.“No matter how much we tried to make an American-style or European-style design, it was different from the ones that are created originally from America or Europe. We did not see a good result from them,” Song said. “When we tried blending in a Korean style, that was when we saw some meaningful results.”Song said this is why when he started his own illustration company, he chooses the tiger, an animal he thinks can show Korea’s identity, to do business. National Folk Museum of Korea curator Kim explains that the tiger started being a symbol of Korea around the early 20th century, thanks to Choi Nam-seon who was the first person to draw a map of the Korean Peninsula in the shape of a tiger. The map has since sparked a plethora of re-creations. The symbolic image also became stronger when it was used to represent Korea in international sports events.At the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, an orange Amur tiger named Hodori became the official mascot. The Seoul Olympic committee at the time said the tiger was chosen because it is a familiar animal to Koreans and has a courageous image. At the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, a tiger once again appeared as the mascot. Soohorang is a white tiger, which is considered a sacred guardian animal in Korea. “When the white tiger Soohorang was chosen as the mascot for the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, many people called the Soohorang as a direct descendant of the Hodori,” National Folk Museum of Korea curator Kang said in “Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Symbols: Tiger.”“It is believed that Soohorang has inherited the emotion of the national brand tiger, which has become a symbol of Korea during the Seoul Olympic Games.”By Song Seung-hyun (ssh@heraldcorp.com) ◀ Back to List More article by this Writer MOST POPULAR

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