

The Lung and the Tiger Image: An Example of Decoding the Symbolic Record of Chinese Medicine



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The six vibrational patterns of the universe establish both yin and yang channel systems in the human body. These are thus directly associated with the twelve months of the year, the twelve earthly branches, the twelve divisions of the sky, the twelve rivers, and the twelve time periods of the day. The twelve channels, therefore, represent the concrete way in which the organ systems of the human body are receiving, and are in resonance with, the Dao of heaven.

–Huangdi neijing lingshu, chapter 11

In the ancient Chinese holomap that interrelates microcosm and macrocosm, the functional network of the Lung is associated with the first month of spring in the Chinese calendar (approximately February 5 – March 4).¹ According to the approach I initially outlined in the article “The Science of Symbols,”² all properties of the first month of spring are therefore a direct clue for the definition of the complex physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual functions of the Lung in the microcosm of the human body. The information below may serve as an example as to how much detailed information about an organ network can be

gleaned from examining just a single one of the many symbolic markers associated with a specific time of the year. Furthermore, how this information can be utilized to bring into sharper (and clinically extremely relevant) focus the complex and multi-dimensional type of information once associated with the traditional Chinese organ networks—the definition of which has become extremely blurry, generalized, and simplistic in the eyes of most modern-day Oriental medicine practitioners. In this particular case, a host of valuable details about the physiology and pathology of the Lung network is revealed by focusing on one of many symbols associated with the first month of spring—the image of the tiger.

Ancient Chinese texts describe the properties and functions of the first month of spring in a variety of ways: a) description of natural phenomena occurring during *zhengyue* (the first month; literally, month of the right beginning); b) description of the symbolic content associated with the related earthly branch, *yin*; c) description of the symbolic content of the related tidal hexagram, *tai* (hexagram 11); d) description of the related vibrational frequency in nature, the “pitch standard” *taicu*; e) description of the natural phenomena occurring during the related two seasonal nodes of agricultural activity, *lichun* (Beginning of Spring) and *yushui* (Rain Water).

In addition, some of these rubrics have spawned exegetic subcategories that further enlarge the etymological word field associated with the first month of spring, and by extension, the Lung. This is a typical feature of ancient symbolism, which is best exemplified by the method of the *Yijing*, wherein one layer of symbolic representation is enhanced by another, and yet another. In the case of the *Yijing*, hexagrams are further explained by pictograms, which in turn are

further elucidated by number; all three of these are annotated by text, which is further interpreted by commentaries. The example I chose to examine in this article is the ancient Chinese image of the tiger, which, in its function as one of the twelve *shengxiao* (animal images representing the functional energetics of various Chinese cycles of time, such as twelve years, twelve months, twelve days, and twelve hours), is a hermeneutic subcategory elucidating the contents of the associated earthly branch *yin* on a level that is both more obvious and viscerally striking than the image of the first month’s branch itself. The tiger image, moreover, is doubly important as a signifier for the various functions of the Lung, since it is also the animal associated with the direction of West and the season of fall, both of which are associated with the Lung according to five phase element classification.

The following is a list of characteristics attributed to the tiger in Han and pre-Han dynasty writings. It includes mythological as well as biological and behavioral traits that make it a natural emblem of Lung function in the human body:

- The tiger was regarded to be the chief of the earth-bound animals: “[The tiger] is the vanguard of all four-legged creatures” 百獸之長 (*Fengsu tongyi*); “[The tiger] is the principal of all mountain animals” 山獸之君 (*Shuowen jiezi*).
- Tigers like to be positioned high, but remain firmly connected to the domain of earth: they cannot fly, and have difficulty climbing trees.
- Tigers live in the wilderness 野外 the outermost layer of human space (the rain forest, which in Chinese texts is often represented as the “body hair” 皮毛 layer of the earth).
- The tiger traditionally has a strong association with another aspect of

outermost layering, the skin. Most cultures have valued the tiger's hide as the skin of skins, prized for its stunning color and markings. The Chinese character for skin, *fu* 膚, contains the word tiger, *hu* 虎.

- The tiger is an emblem for beauty, looks, appearance. The Chinese word for skin is equivalent with beauty, especially with regard to its expression of color. Tiger fur is brightly colored and dazzles the beholder (often associated with the color of the rising sun). While the emanations of sound and smell are generally associated with the more subtle energetic aspects of the world, color represents the texture and the beauty of matter and the physical body.
- The traditional image of the tiger stands for strength, weaponry, and protection. The tiger is described as a “yang animal” 陽物 (*Fengsu tongyi*), protected by the strength of its skin, its “weapons” (claws and teeth), its thunderous growl, and its ferociousness. Thus it is considered to have the power to drive out (yin) demons (including epidemic pestilences). Chinese shamans often donned tiger skins/masks in exorcism; warriors often used tiger skins on their shields, armor, or helmets to intimidate the enemy; Chinese living rooms often feature tiger images to drive out evil influences. “The tiger devours demons and evil spirits. When people meet with bad fortune, therefore, they incinerate tiger skin and drink the ashes. Or they touch a tiger claw, which can also drive out evil influences.” (*Fengsu tongyi*). In contrast, humans compare as naked, weak and defenseless creatures: “Humans are defenseless beings by nature, since they lack sharp teeth and claws, as well as thick muscles and skin to ward off heat and cold.” (*Lü shi chunqiu*, chapter 20)
- The tiger's growl is associated with

thunder and wind: “When the tiger roars the Valley Wind [East Wind of creation] picks up” (*Huainanzi*, chapter 3). The Chinese concept of wind contains sexual connotations (first there is wind, then there are “clouds and rain,” a traditional synonym for intercourse), and tigers are indeed known to vocalize most vigorously when mating or fighting over a mate. Wind is also a reference to nature's breath, as well as to the tiger's naturalness and unrestrained manner. Like the wind, it comes and goes as it pleases, showing up suddenly and unexpectedly, sometimes with devastating force. As a pathological influence, wind is “the principal of all diseases,” (*Huangdi neijing*) just like the tiger is often regarded as the principal of all vicious and harm bringing animals. Note that both wind and thunder are associated with East, springtime, and the phase element wood.

- Many tiger parts have traditionally been used as medicinal items. The *Bencao gangmu* lists 17 of them: tiger bone (especially skull bone and bones of front legs of the male tiger), “authority bone” (*weigu* 威骨, located at sides of chest), tiger meat, tiger fat, tiger blood, tiger belly, tiger kidneys, tiger gallbladder, tiger eyes, tiger *po* (*hupo* 虎魄: the tiger's essence that resides in the night hunter's eyes at night, obtained by shooting the illuminated eye with an arrow at night and collecting the “white stone” that it was said to transform into after falling to the ground), tiger nose, tiger teeth, tiger claws, tiger skin, tiger whiskers, tiger feces, and bones found in tiger feces. All of these examples have been classified as anti-wind drugs, capable of expelling wind related pathogens causing unpredictable cramping and pain, as in epilepsy and malaria (use skull bone, eyes, etc.), or arthritis (use front or hind

legs). Some interpreters have pointed out that this wind repellent quality of all tiger materials mirrors the relationship of tiger and wind (metal and wood): metal controls wood as the tiger controls wind. Alternately one could say that the tiger, as a symbol for the first month of spring, represents the essence of yang righteousness (*zhengqi*), capable of driving away all evil invading winds (*xieqi*).

- The tiger possesses the most acute of animal survival instincts, which are generally labeled *po* 魄 in ancient Chinese medical terminology. Since the breathing instinct is the most basic of animal impulses, it seems only natural that according to the medical classic “the *po* spirits are stored in the lung.” (*Huangdi neijing*). These instinctual abilities are often described as the soul of the physical body—they are there at birth without the need to be cultivated, and they vanish at death. A recently unearthed Chinese text contains the term *hupo* 虎魄—the tiger *po*, a term that later became the name of amber (generally written 琥珀). Amber is colored in the characteristic orange of the tiger, and preserves the physical body of the insects trapped inside forever—as if it was their corporeal “tiger soul.”
- The tiger is a cat, and thus exhibits many qualities of a cat, such as great flexibility, predilection for cleanliness, and the assumption of the crouching position when stalking its prey (“Hidden Dragon, Crouching Tiger”). During the hunt, the tiger readies itself like an arrow on extended bowstring (compare the oracle bone version of the associated earthly branch *yin* 寅, resembling the image of an arrow on a bow), then suddenly lurches forward while stretching into full physical form (compare the meaning of *shen* 申, “stretching out”—the earthly branch associated with the 7th month and the beginning of fall, directly opposite of the first month position on the holographic map), and finally strikes the prey (like an arrow meets its target). The tiger symbol thus seems to be situated in the same etymological word field with both wind and arrow, which in turn is traditionally associated with wind. “The sage avoids wind like arrows” (*Huangdi neijing lingshu*, chapter 77). Wind can bring pathogenic influences, arrows can deliver poison. Together, they represent the quality of the sudden strike and the potential of deathly intrusion.
- As yang creatures, tigers exhibit sexual prowess, and their body parts are treasured aphrodisiacs. Tigers have frequent intercourse, climaxing in a dramatic ejaculation when the male tiger roars and bites his partner’s neck (in traditional Chinese literature, intercourse is likened to clouds—clouds are the *qi* that is produced when heaven and earth embrace—while ejaculation is equal to the bursting of the clouds, bringing fertilizing rain).
- The ferocious nature of the tiger and its “iron teeth and metal claws” (*Bencao gangmu*) cause it to be associated with weaponry and military themes. Soldiers and generals are often referred to as “tigers,” and jade tablets engraved with tiger images 琥 were traditionally used as invitation letters for military campaigns. (*Shuowen jiezi*)
- The image of the tiger signifies power, authority, and severity. Along with the wolf, the tiger is one of the few animals capable of killing humans, partially due to its physical strength and the “weapons” it carries. Representing the laws of the mountain forest, it protects with its ability

to punish. This quality has made the tiger the main Chinese symbol for the “severe,” “killing,” or “punishing” influence of the fall season and its associated direction, the West. Justice, vengeance, and the law belong to its domain.

- To ancient Chinese observers, the tiger always has a snarl on its face; it is said to look annoyed, judgmental, and ready to punish. The word *mi*, a combination of the pictorial components tiger and heart (literally: tiger emotions) equals *chou* 愁 (autumn feelings, or unhappiness). Even today, Indonesian jungle dwellers consider tigers to be the enforcers of proper human behavior in the forest, ready to punish infringements of the village people’s code, including adultery, logging violations, etc.
- The seven stellar constellations in the Western sky over Han Dynasty China were called Baihu 白虎, the White Tiger, presiding over the down-bearing, “killing” atmosphere of the fall season.
- Although fierce, the tiger primarily asserts authority by way of posturing (“saber rattling”), displaying teeth and claws, bristling whiskers, and bloodcurdling howls. As a result, the tiger rarely fights, even with rivals of his own species.
- The tiger is the emblem of status, as well as the confidence of knowing one’s rank and place. Although the tiger is powerful when moving, one most often finds it “sitting in place,” “dwelling at home,” or “presiding from his lair” while surveying its kingdom, acutely aware of everything going on beneath. Kings, generals, and judges are thus often depicted as officiating from “chairs” that are ceremoniously draped with tiger skin. Two Chinese characters indicating “place/rank/position”—*chu* 處 and *xu* 虛 are written with the component for tiger.

- Tigers are the epitome of the wild animal, displaying powerful survival instincts and a need for freedom. They need “breathing space,” and thus roam and defend vast territories.
- Tigers are elusive and intensely private, challenging anyone invading their sphere of influence. While they are primarily solitary animals, they are drawn toward each other in regular intervals for elaborate and vocal mating rituals.
- Tigers are sexually dimorphic: males and females are clearly distinguishable by appearance.
- Tigers are enigmatic animals with intense traits that often express opposite qualities: the tiger both represents wind and drives out evil wind influences; is dangerous but just; solitary with a strong urge to mate; and representing both the unbridled wood energy of spring and the refined metal energy of fall. This general theme of polarity is further expressed in the tiger’s complex relationship to humans. While on one hand it is seen as the main icon of the dangerous wild animal, ancient sources noted that “it can be captured and domesticated.” (*Fengsu tongyi*) Furthermore, tigers are said to “have feet that look like human feet” (*Shuowen jiezi*), live in lairs resembling human dwellings (*shi* 室),³ and “draw and write lines” (*wen* 文) on the ground and on trees to demarcate their territory. The act of “observing and imitating nature’s lines” most pertinently represents the human quest for symbolic expression, cultural refinement, and civilization.

As is the primary attribute of all symbols, the image of the tiger translates abstract immaterial function into the three-dimensional sphere of the physically tangible and viscerally compelling. The various characteristics of the

tiger point to the multi-dimensional web of functions that are ushered in by the first month of spring in the sphere of the macrocosm, as well as those administered by the Lung network in the sphere of the microcosm. In the absence of many direct statements about Lung function in the *Neijing* and other medical classics, the qualities transmitted via the archetype of the tiger confirm, clarify, as well as greatly expand the common picture of lung physiology and pathology encountered in most modern Chinese medicine classrooms around the world.

The following are two lists containing a greatly enhanced repository of qualities that define Lung physiology and Lung pathology, all of which were directly derived from characteristics attributed to the tiger above. While not all of the key features and emotional and spiritual nuances of Lung function are complete in this account, the singular image of the tiger contains, in truly holographic fashion, almost everything that could be considered relevant for a comprehensive account of Lung function.

The Healthy Tiger Inside:

Key Qualities of Lung Physiology

- Power and vitality of the physical, acuity of animal instincts, being fully in the body; ferociousness.
- Wildness, nature bound, freedom, need for breathing space, territorial, clear sense of personal and professional boundaries.
- Vanguard, authority, status, charisma, confidence of rank and place, self-worth, commanding respect, sense of nobility; military power.
- Bound to earth but yearning for heaven, attraction of opposites, yin/yang (male/female) magnetism, sexual prowess, rainmaker.

- Radiant complexion, attractiveness, appearance, adornment; imposing posture; knowing how to strike a pose, natural ability to act; rare, prized, expensive.
- Surface, outer layer, skin, protection against external pathogenic influences, protector of nature and natural laws, weaponry, killing, just wrath and vengeance, punishment, justice;
- Symbol creation, civilization, knowledge.
- General yang quality balanced by a yin side: patience, quietude, solitude, hermit behavior; sudden and brief display of force (bursts of activity) following resting (breathing) phase; associated with yang-East (position in the 12 Earthly Stem Cycle), but also with yin-West, the mountains, and the fall season (position in the 5 Phase Element cycle).

The Sick Tiger Inside:

Key Qualities of Lung Pathology

- Physical weakness, reduced immunity, reduced instincts, slowed reactivity, feeble voice, pale complexion.
- Inability to defend oneself against all types of invasive challenges, especially those into the privacy of the human body (including viral attacks) and the home turf of home and relationship; lack of boundaries; letting things get “under the skin.”
- Poor growth of body hair, especially in males. On the other end of the spectrum: excess growth of body hair.
- Inability to breathe, claustrophobia, sense of impinged freedom.
- Wind diseases, such as getting winded, symptoms characterized by unpredictable onset and movement (allergies, especially affecting the respiratory tract and skin).
- “Demon invasion,” such as the sudden and

violent onset of epidemic disease, especially affecting the respiratory tract and skin.

- Lack of self-worth; physical, social, and financial impotence; inability to establish oneself and find one's place in society; sense of being an outcast. On the other end of the spectrum: megalomania; seeking the limelight, ambition to be in the public eye.
- Emotional wounds around respect; inability to command respect; lackluster, especially with regard to body color, choice of clothing, aura strength, and vocal expression; inability to connect with others and to attract a mate; loner behavior; poor body language; poor verbal expression (with regard to both the spoken and the written word); disheveled looks (clothing, hairstyle, grooming).
- Sexually amorphous (especially with regard to body shape, skin characteristics, clothing, and voice).
- Morally ambiguous, without clear sense of right and wrong; disregard for the law. On the other side of the spectrum: being a stickler for rules; rigidity and inflexibility.
- Ill at ease in the physical body; disjointed and stiff body movements.
- Superficiality (obsession with expensive jewelry, clothing items, or other material trophies; inability to make deep and intimate connections); cheap and unrefined taste (wearing ostensibly fake jewelry and poor quality imitation designer brands); thick and gaudy make-up; vanity, narcissism; aloofness; preoccupation with nobility (buying false aristocratic or scholarly titles); arrogance; sensation of being common and unattractive.
- Sudden and unexpected outbursts of anger and shouting; vengefulness; obsession with

punishing others; obsession with weapons, killing, and death; obsession with hunting large game or domesticating dangerous exotic cats.

- Sensation of being unsafe and ill at ease; anxiety (associated with sensation of being overwhelmed, unsafe, alone, or having no place, no power, no money, no peace); grouching, frequent moaning and groaning; tendency to dramatic display of emotion.
- Disregard for nature, resulting in the destruction of wild spaces and extinction of rare animal species.

Endnotes

¹ Note that from the perspective of five phase element categorization, the lung zang organ network belongs to the metal phase and is thus associated with the season of fall (capturing the downward momentum of lung function in symbolic form). In the more complete *gestalt* of the twelve system, which combines the numerological approaches of at least four different systems of categorization (2, 3, 5, and 6), the lung is associated with the 1st month of spring and the daily time period of 3-5 am.

² Heiner Fruehauf, "The Science of Symbols: Exploring a Forgotten Gateway to Chinese Medicine," Part I and II, *Journal of Chinese Medicine* (February and June, 2002); available online at classicalchinesemedicine.org.

³ Note that one of the two stellar constellations associated with the position of the first month on the Han dynasty cosmograph is called *shi*, The Lair.

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