



## Tiger in Chinese Culture and the Year of the Tiger

In traditional Chinese culture, the tiger has been held highly for its significant symbolism for centuries. It is praised and admired for its superb beauty, majesty and prowess, and symbolises power, strength, fearlessness and ambition. The tiger is also seen as a guardian of protection and luck, as tigers are believed to be able to bring the balance of cosmic forces, often opposing ones and maintain harmony. In Chinese history, the tiger totem represents leadership, justice, integrity and courage. Unlike the Lion King of the West, the tiger rules over the animal kingdom in its native China. Chinese people believe that the consistent pattern of the stripes on the tiger's forehead resembles the Chinese character 王 (*wang*), meaning “King”, so tigers are seen as natural-born rulers.

While the dragon is also a symbol of supreme imperial power in traditional Chinese culture, it is a mythical animal. Tigers, on the other hand, exist in the real world. Hence, they have an immediate resonance and relatability with people and its symbolism has become part of everyday life and imagination. Because of the fear tigers evoke in all other animals and even humankind, tigers are depicted as supernatural heroes in Chinese folklore who protect the virtuous and annihilate the wicked. Tiger charms are used to ward off diseases and disasters; their images are often painted on the walls of homes and temples to keep evil spirits at bay. Tigers are also engraved on tombs and monuments to protect the dead from evil forces. Even today, Chinese babies are often given colourful booties with embroidered tigers as a gift from well-wishing parents and family friends for protection and good luck. Traditionally, during Chinese New Year, children wear hats made in the shape of a tiger's head, in a similar fashion to wearing Santa's red hat for Christmas.

Because of its brave, adventurous and fearless nature, the word tiger in Chinese 虎 (*hu*) is used as a compliment, for example, “tiger general”, “tiger soldiers”, and children who are tough and full of life and energy are called “little tigers”. This traditional compliment has been extended to the contemporary coinage of “tiger parents”. And there are many tiger-related idioms in the Chinese language, such as 卧虎藏龙 (*wo hu cang long*), “crouching tiger and hidden dragon”, now a household phrase due to Ang Lee's Oscar-winning film of the same title, reminding people to never underestimate anyone who may lay low but is gifted with special hidden talents. Other interesting idioms include 虎落平阳 (*hu luo ping yang*), “tiger out of the jungle”, meaning “out of one's territory and safety zone”; 放虎归山 (*fang hu gui shan*), “let the tiger return to the mountains”, meaning “store up trouble for the future”; 虎头蛇尾 (*hu tou she wei*), “tiger's head and snake's tail”, meaning “starts big, ends small”, or “starts with a bang, ends with a whimper”; 骑虎难下 (*qi hu nan xia*), “when riding a tiger, it is difficult to get off” (without the risk of being eaten alive), meaning “you can neither stop nor keep going, you are trapped” and 虎口拔牙 (*hu kou bay a*), “pull a tooth out of the tiger's mouth”, meaning “taking a great risk”, similar to the English idiom “beard the lion in his den”, and a most popular one 老虎屁股摸不得 (*lao hu pi gu mo bu de*), a tiger's bum can't be touched, meaning a person is too self-conceited to take criticism.

In 2022, the Chinese New Year is the first of February. So if you were born in 1914, 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1998, 2010 or will be born on and after 1 February 2022, you are, and will be a Tiger. The Tiger ranks third among the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. Due to its complacency and over-confidence, it was beaten by the cunning Rat and the diligent Ox in the great race to the New Year party hosted by the Jade Emperor, who according to legend named the years of the lunar calendar according to the order in which each animal arrived. So the King of the jungle had to swallow its pride and settle for third place.

Tigers are born leaders known for their great ambition, intelligence, courage, tenacity and love for independence and freedom. As leaders, they are insightful, decisive and bold. When faced with adversaries and obstacles, they never budge or retreat. Armed with an adventurous spirit and a fearless mind, and driven by sky-high ambitions and fierce competitiveness, tigers believe in hard work and labour tirelessly to realise their dreams with the aim to make a difference. Being confident and charismatic with a good sense of humour, tigers have a magnetic charm and are great influencers. Their audacity and desire to change are shown in their rebellious nature. Tigers are resolute, dynamic and driven, as well as compassionate and idealistic, although they can also be over-confident and obstinate.

Famous Tigers in human history include Qin Shi Huang (China's First Emperor), Marco Polo, Karl Marx, Georg Hegel, Sun Yat-sen, Ludwig van Beethoven, Queen Elizabeth II, Mahatma Gandhi, H. G. Wells, Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, Oscar Wilde, Allen Ginsberg, Kofi Annan, Helen Clark, Alan Greenspan, Richard Branson, Harper Lee, Whoopi Goldberg, Jodie Forster, Robbie Williams, Steve Irwin, Joan Sutherland and so on.

One thing for sure is 2022 will see many fundamental changes and there will be no dull moments in the Year of the Tiger.

Professor Jing Han  
Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture  
Western Sydney University

