Paradigm Academic Press
Art and Society
ISSN 2709-9830
FEB. 2025 VOL.4, NO.2

Tigers as Imagery: Spatiality and Identity in Southeast Asian Art

Hanyu Guo[1]

[1] Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, School of Arts and Humanities, Chongqing, China

Correspondence: Hanyu Guo, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, School of Arts and Humanities, Chongqing, China.

doi:10.56397/AS.2025.02.05

Abstract

As a natural species, the tiger, conventionally regarded as a quintessential Asian animal, occupies the apex of material and energy flows within forest ecosystems. Beyond its natural form, the tiger has emerged as a cultural signifier across diverse ethnic spaces. This "imagined tiger" functions as a cultural "Other" in European art, evolving into an Asian cultural icon and, within postcolonial contexts, as a medium for addressing regional traumas. Over millennia, the interactions between tigers and humans in Southeast Asia have been shaped by spatial and temporal changes, influencing both the natural environment and human social activities. These dynamics have given rise to a history of material relations and symbolic representations between tigers and humans. Within Southeast Asia, a region marked by cultural, historical, and identity-related complexities, the tiger serves not only as a natural creature but also as a vessel of cultural memory, defining and representing human spatial identities in various ways within social realities. Therefore, by examining the spatial changes in the geographic distribution of tigers in Southeast Asia, this paper analyzes how tigers have functioned as ecological and cultural symbols within the Southeast Asian context. It further explores how the "imagined tiger" in Southeast Asian art continues to haunt the present as a phantom image, narrating issues of identity and power, even after the extinction of the ecological tiger, whose material presence as a symbol has vanished. Through the lens of tigers, this study seeks to uncover the regional cultural characteristics and identity issues in Southeast Asian art and reflect on how to reconstruct Southeast Asian art within a postcolonial framework.

Keywords: tiger, Southeast Asian art, geography, cultural identity, phantom images

1. Introduction

Tigers in the wild are commonly found in Southeast Asia, and thus their range of activity and image are often narrowly defined as a cultural symbol of the "Other". However, when considering the image of the tiger within the local Southeast Asian context, it is not hard to see that specific regional cultural features and historical legacies have led to a close intertwining of tiger-human interaction. Tigers not only guard the order of the jungle and villages in the natural environment, but also play a role as a symbol of identity within human social environments, embodying a mix of regional and cultural elements with a "postcolonial trait" that speaks to the unique worldview of nature in Southeast Asian art.

In *Dialectics of Nature*, Friedrich Engels hypothesized the spatial genesis of the Earth, arguing that "if the Earth is a product of generation, then its current geological, geographical, and climatic conditions, as well as its flora and fauna, must also be products of gradual formation. They must have a history of parallel existence in space and a sequential history in time."[1] Under the flux of human social activities and the passage of time, spatial entities are not merely ecological actors but rather configurations of social relations. In this context, I argue that the relationship between tigers and humans encompasses a complex web of material and symbolic interactions. The identities of tigers and humans are fluid, and their interactions trace an interwoven landscape between "nature" and "culture," reflecting a constellation of material social practices and their symbolic representations. Thus, the image of the tiger in Southeast Asia is indeed a complex and worthy subject of inquiry. This paper

contemplates how the spatial and local interactions between tigers and humans produce influence, and questions the fate of the tiger as a cultural "Other" in Western contexts when its purely ecological presence vanishes or becomes extinct. Additionally, this paper examines how the "imagined tiger" in postcolonial contexts reflects on itself and projects trauma.

2. The Geographical Distribution and Historical Changes of the "Natural Tiger" in Southeast Asia

Tigers in the wild are found across most of Asia, with notable populations in places like Java, China, India, and Sumatra between the 16th and 20th centuries. However, from the 1950s to the end of the 20th century, the tiger populations in Southeast Asia nearly went extinct due to a combination of natural and human factors (such as European hunting and human societal activities like production), leading to significant changes in the geographical distribution of this species. As a result, the interaction between humans and tigers began to evolve in local regions.

	1820	*1900*	*1950*	*2000**
Malaya	2,000	3,000	3,000	500
Sumatra	7,000	6,500	6,500	500
Java	2,500	500	25	0
Bali	150	125	0	0
Total	11,650	10,125	9,525	1,000

Figure 1. Peter Boomgaard, Estimated number of tigers in the four "Malay" regions, 1820–2000, Boomgaard 2001: 213. * For 2000, Seidensticker et al. 1999: xvii.

According to the research by Dutch scholar Peter Boomgaard (Figure 1), the tiger population in Southeast Asia remained relatively abundant from the late 19th to the early 20th century. However, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the number of tigers on Bali and Java islands plummeted, leading to the disappearance of this species from the Southeast Asian region. Where have the tigers that once inhabited Southeast Asia gone? I argue that the key factor influencing their population is the overlap between the ecological spatial distribution of tigers and human ecological positions. Before the 19th century, "the tiger was a rather common animal in Java."[2] They rely on hunting wild hoofed animals for sustenance, evolving and breeding at the forest edge. On one hand, by preying on wild animals, they protect human fields; on the other hand, they have never entered human villages or farmland, rarely disturbing humans or domesticated livestock. Similarly, humans, residing at the forest's edge and subsisting on the remnants of prey, coexist with tigers, farmlands, wildlife, and livestock. Each operates within its limited resources and environment, as if a geographical boundary demarcates their territories, which neither attempts to cross. This coexistence, shaped and constrained "an integral and fragile web ... molded and bound by the nature of their resource base and the forces of their environment."[3] In the mid-19th century, the opening of forest plantations disrupted this fragile web. Tens of thousands of laborers migrated to the area, expanding agricultural land at the expense of forests. The limited resource base could no longer sustain human survival. This shift led to a rupture in the dynamic equilibrium, resulting in an overlap of ecological niches between tigers and humans. The effective use of firearms for hunting and ongoing deforestation attracted more tigers to attack villages, entering the boundary zones between human settlements and nature. Consequently, the ecological and geographical distribution of tigers underwent significant changes.

With the geographical shift, many humans and livestock were injured or lost their lives. The natural image of the tiger gradually transformed into a terrifying killer, a man-eating tiger posing a threat to human survival and livestock. During the 19th century, as people fortified their villages, learned about tiger behavior and habits, and developed traps and poisoned darts for hunting, the number of tigers in human settlements and farming areas indeed decreased and eventually disappeared. "Often unbroken tracts of permanently cultivated agricultural land had rendered the area unattractive to tigers and other game owing to a lack of cover."[4] In the 20th century, European hunting activities led to a precipitous decline in tiger populations, culminating in their extinction by the 1980s. Similar to Java, Bali had a relatively low tiger population that seldom interacted with humans before the 20th century. However, with the establishment of colonial rule in the early 20th century, European hunting activities further decimated the tiger population in the region. Compared to the spatial overlap between tigers and humans in Java, the human-tiger relationship on Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula seemed to reach a more balanced state in the first half of the 20th century. With a relatively sparse population and abundant forest edges for tiger survival, neither the expansion of agricultural land nor European hunting activities posed significant threats to tiger populations. However, large-scale tiger hunting did not occur until the 21st century. This does not

mean that villagers on the Malay Peninsula did not hunt tigers. Faced with the threat of tigers, villagers mostly took necessary precautions, such as reinforcing their villages with building materials and setting toxic traps to protect themselves and their livestock. The colonial rulers on the Malay Peninsula, on the other hand, aimed to eliminate tigers both for hunting purposes and to assert authority.

Based on this, I argue that the distributional changes of tigers in the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, and Bali reflect not only the evolutionary processes in nature but also the ecological overlaps created by geographical shifts, representing the dual interactions between tigers and humans within these spaces. More precisely, the records of these changes embody the shifting boundary relations between mountains and villages, as well as between culture and nature. The spatial contexts involved in these records transform existence into a relationship between nature and culture, thereby influencing this relationship.

3. Between Nature and Culture: The Symbolic Persistence of the "Imagined Tiger"

"Beyond their essential roles in natural environments, animals also hold significant positions within human social contexts."[5] The extensive interactions between tigers and humans, documented throughout history, have not only influenced human behavior and cultural practices but also constructed and shaped individual and social identities. While the "natural tiger" occupies the apex of material and energy flows within forest ecosystems, it also functions as a cultural signifier across diverse ethnic spaces. As the "imagined tiger," it metaphorically embodies the fundamental relationship between humans and animals, carrying dual roles of "actual predation" and "symbolic authority."

As Southeast Asian historian Anthony Reid has noted, "Throughout Southeast Asia, rulers would conduct sacrificial rituals on the holy days of Islam and Buddhism, using animal combat to display the majesty of the king."[6] The hunting activities that link rulers to their ancestral beliefs confirm the legitimacy and supremacy of their power. Meanwhile, the notion of tigers shapes human identity in this process. For instance, rulers in Java commonly kept tigers in their courts and held grand court ceremonies, including tiger-buffalo combats (Figure 2) and the practice of tiger sticking. In typical confrontations between tigers and buffaloes, "... the buffalo wins by taking the tiger on its horns and crushing or goring him."[7] Attempts to control tigers through various means serve dual purposes: first, to assert the Sultan's position at the pinnacle of the social order by subduing this threat to the established hierarchy; second, to identify oneself with the victorious buffalo that overcomes the barbaric and ferocious tiger, symbolizing the ruler as a paragon of civilization and authority.

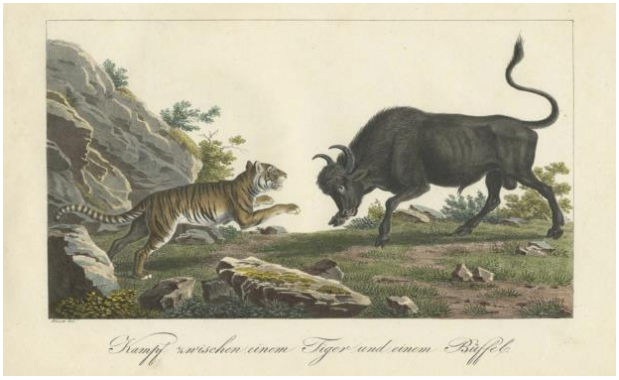

Figure 2. Johann Jakob Xaver Pfyffer zu Neueck, *Fight between a tiger and a buffalo, Animal fight on Java*, 25cm×37cm, Skizzen von der Insel Java und den verschiedenen Bewohnern derselben

During the colonial period, this symbolism persisted. In the 19th century, the Dutch, as the colonial power in the region, implemented a similar practice by offering bounties for tiger hunters. However, according to Boomgaard, this "likely only accelerated European hunting activities, as indigenous peoples would not target these 'innocent' tigers that had not harmed humans or livestock".[8] This practice, in my view, seems to position the tiger as a symbol of transboundary uncertainty between humans and nature. Colonial powers attempted to maintain order by hunting tigers, thereby legitimizing their own identities. However, the indigenous court rituals, previously used to display martial prowess and authority, also changed with the deepening of the colonial process. The tiger-buffalo combat and tiger-sticking ceremonies were transformed into spectacles for European tourists. During these events, indigenous Javanese people often compared the relationship between tigers and buffaloes as a metaphor for competition. They viewed the "tiger" as the barbaric European — a violent leader disrupting the nation's civilizational progress — while the "buffalo" represented the civilized victor — a symbol of the local civilization's order — subduing and controlling the wild tiger. As noted by Singapore's British founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, "In these entertainments the Javans are accustomed to compare the buffalo to the Javan and

the tiger to the European, and it may be readily imagined with what eagerness they look forward to the success of the former."[9]

Thus, between nature and culture, the singular notion of nature that we have long known is continually deconstructed, and the identities of humans and animals become fluid. The symbolic persistence of the tiger, from its natural form to its imagined form, can be categorized into two main types. The first type, akin to the tiger's image as the "king of beasts" in nature, symbolizes authority and martial power. The second type, emerging from colonial contexts, is the cultural image defined as the "Other," which "does not reflect nature itself but rather the various forms of life constructed by humans under the guise of 'nature'."[10] Today, with the disappearance of the predecessor of the symbol — the "natural tiger" — I suggest that the "imagined tiger" may now function as a spectral image, continually returning from history to the present to narrate the unique identity and power of Southeast Asia.

4. Tigers as a Medium: The Projection of Identity Memory in Southeast Asian Art

In the view of renowned social scholar Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, Southeast Asia is an "excellent locus" and a testing ground for "the specter of comparison".[11] The region's complexity and its frequent return in contemporary art through visual practices are undoubtedly related to its historical legacies, cultural characteristics, and regional memories. As one of the common animal images in Southeast Asia, the tiger has conventionally served as the "Other" in European art, evolving into a cultural symbol for Asia under Western modernity. For instance, in Paul Rubens' works, the tiger is a significant symbol of exotic culture, metaphorically representing the Western iconographic tradition from a Eurocentric perspective. Boomgaard notes that "it was the bounties and hunting that enhanced the power and prestige of the colonial state, making the East safe for empire. In this sense, it is easy to see the tiger as representing the entire East".[12] As I mentioned earlier, the uncertainty of the tiger brings unease to Europeans. This animal species, mainly found in the East and representing "the East," is embedded with uncertainty in the European context and becomes a carrier of "Other" meaning in discursive practices.

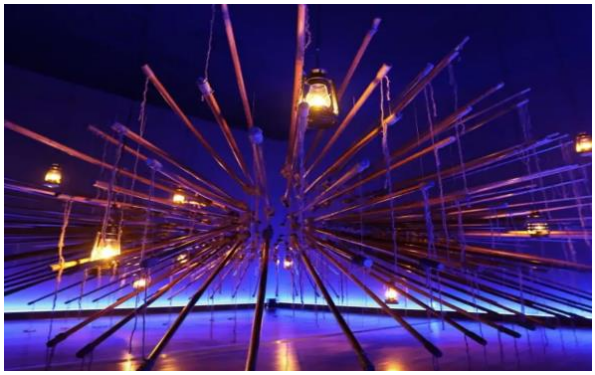

Figure 3. Timoteus Anggawan Kusno, *The Death of a Tiger and Other Empty Seats*, 2020, Mixed media installation. Exhibition images courtesy of museum of modern and contemporary art (MMCA) Korea, Photo by Moon June Hee

But what happens to the "imagined tiger" in the contemporary context when the predecessor object as a symbol disappears? Do the recurring tiger images in Southeast Asian art convey a colonial trauma representing identity? In the artwork *The Death of a Tiger and Other Empty Seats* by Indonesian artist Timoteus Anggawan Kusno (Figure 3), he emphasizes the colonial relics by starting from court rituals such as the tiger and buffalo battles held in ancient Java, appropriating the exoticism from the colonizer's perspective, attempting to deconstruct the image of the tiger, as well as the complex forms of power and ritual behind it, and rearticulating a self-defined identity. Similarly, in the visual work: *Others or 'Rust én Orde'* (Figure 4), an attempt is made to release Western modernity and colonial trauma through ghostly images. In the 2021 Southeast Asian art group exhibition *Tiger of the Jungle* at the Contemporary Tangren Art Center, the tiger appears as a complex entity in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film: *Tropical Malady*, constantly reappearing under a postcolonial lens, telling stories of identity and memory from history to the present. Beyond this, the recent retrospective exhibition of Ho Tzu Nyen at the Singapore Art Museum: *Time & the Tiger* (Figure 5), similarly appropriates the tiger — a figure often embedded in "Other" oriented thinking — into his own art. It restores the original local style within the Southeast Asian context, attempting to escape cultural standardization and open up the unconscious identity trauma of Southeast Asia through a transformed image, thereby resisting the "traditional" forces of Western modernity.

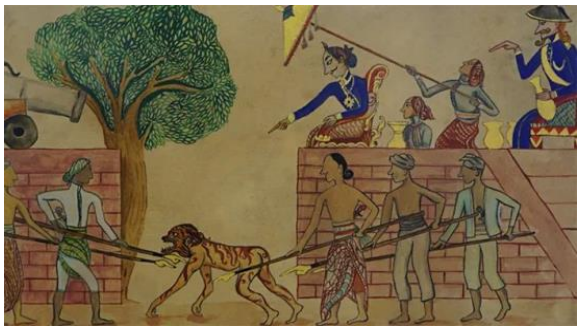

Figure 4. Timoteus Anggawan Kusno, *Others or 'Rust én Orde'*, 2017
Single-channel color video with sound, 16 minutes 17 seconds

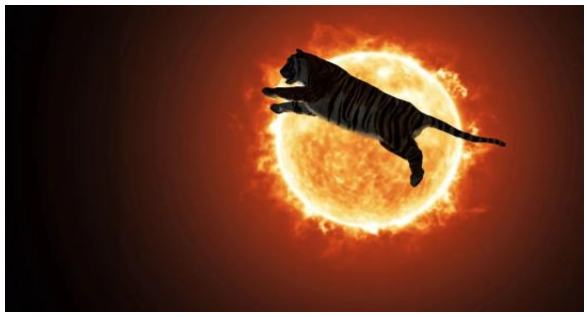

Figure 5. Ho Tzu Nyen, *One or Several Tigers* (2017), video, smoke machine, automated screen, show control system, 14 wayang kulit puppets in aluminum frames. Video, two-channel HD video projections. Duration: 33 minutes. Installation image from Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & the Tiger, June 22 – December 1, 2024. Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Photo: Olympia Shannon, 2024

In these three artists, we do not see the universal artistic language of Western modernity. Instead, we witness a reflection on identity and a re-engagement with historical contexts within the complex and unique ecosystem of Southeast Asia. Through the medium of the tiger, they primarily restore the deep-seated memories and perceptions of local spaces within their indigenous contexts.

5. Conclusion

The cultural, historical, and identity-related issues within the Southeast Asia region are diverse and ambiguous. It is precisely in this unique geographical space that the tiger, not only a natural animal but also a carrier of cultural memory, defines and represents human spatial identity in various ways within social realities. As Anderson notes, "The large historical similarities of the Southeast Asian region indeed allow it to share certain elements, such as tropical plants and jungles. The unfinished history and an obscure past repeatedly cast the 'specter of history' over this land."[13] The tiger, as a transformative animal image in Southeast Asia, continually re-emerges in postcolonial Southeast Asian art. Amidst the shifting dimensions of time and space today, it prompts us to actively confront the visual products of local and global experiences, to revisit the spatial identity issues that were once "Othered," and to reflect on how to reconstruct Southeast Asian art within a postcolonial framework.

References

Gong, Z.J, Chen H and Nobuo Takamori., (2014). The Return of Ghosts: Hauntology in Taiwanese Contemporary Art. Chinese Taipei: Chew's Culture Foundation.

Liang, T.Y., (2023). The Narrative Techne of the Shaman: The Speculation of "Essay" and "Incantation-Image". *ARTS REVIEW*, 44, 175-205.

Wessing, R., (1995). The last tiger in East Java: Symbolic continuity in ecological change. *Asian Folklore Studies*, *54*(2), 191-218. https://doi.org/10.2307/1178941.

[1] Marx, K., Engels, F., (2016). *Collected Works of Marx and Engels: Volume 20*. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 414.

[2] Van Balen, J. H., (1914). De dierenwereld van Insulinde in woord en beeld. Vol. 1: De zoogdieren. The animal world of the Indies

described and illustrated. Vol. 1: The mammals, 384.

[3] Seidensticker, J., Suyono, I., (1976). The Javan tiger and the Meru-Betiri Reserve: A plan for management. Bogor: World Wildlife Fund, 60.

[4] Boomgaard, P., (2001). *Frontiers of fear: Tigers and people in the Malay world*, 1600–1950. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 221.

[5] Cao, Z. H., (2010). Tigers and humans: A study on the human impact factors of the geographical distribution and historical changes of tigers in China. Shaanxi Normal University.

[6] Reid, A., (1988). *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce*, 1450-1680. Vol. 1: The lands below the winds. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 183-184.

[7] Boomgaard, P., (2001). *Frontiers of fear: Tigers and people in the Malay world*, 1600-1950. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 146.

[8] Boomgaard, P., (2001). Frontiers of fear: Tigers and people in the Malay world, 1600-1950. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 105-106.

[9] Marks, R. B., (2006). Asian tigers: The real, the symbolic, the commodity. *Nature and Culture*, *1*(1), 63-87. https://doi.org/10.3167/155860706780272042.

[10] Anderson, K., (1995). Culture and nature at the Adelaide Zoo: At the frontiers of "human" geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 20, 276.

[11] Lin, L., (2019). Identity Territory and Historical Memory: How to Explain the Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Art*, *18*(4), 50-55.

[12] Boomgaard, P., (2001). *Frontiers of fear: Tigers and people in the Malay world*, 1600–1950. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 226.

[13] Anderson, B. R. O'G. (2012). T*he specter of comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the world (H. Gan, Trans.)*. Yilin Press.