



The Tiger Son

A TALE FROM CHINA

RETOLD BY SUE COWING

Hundreds of years ago, tigers roamed the forests of China. Almost everyone had seen one sometime in his or her life, and everyone knew someone who knew someone who had come to harm in a tiger's jaws.

In the village of Zhaocheng, a man who was too poor to marry lived with his widowed mother. He took good care of her, making repairs on her house and providing her food. But to hunt for their meat and firewood, he had to go into the forest beyond their village, and in that forest he had often seen a large tiger hunting and swimming in the stream.

The widow warned her son to be careful.

He laughed. "Don't worry, Mother," he said. "Wasn't I born in the Year of the Tiger? I will always return."

But one day as she waited for him, dusk fell around her. Her son did not come home all night.

The next morning, some neighbors came running to tell her the terrible news. The tiger had pounced on her son and eaten him. All that was left of him were his bloody clothes.

The old widow's grief was very great, but so was her anger. She went straight to the local magistrate and beat on the drum at his gate with her cane, demanding that the tiger be arrested and put to death.

"I deeply respect your loss, Old Mother," said the magistrate, "but a tiger cannot be held responsible for what he does by nature. Shall we arrest bees for stinging?"

But the old woman would not leave until something was done. At last the magistrate asked his court, "Who will go and arrest this tiger?"

ARREST BEES FOR STINGING? WHAT A GOOD IDEA!



A deputy named Li Neng, who had had too much wine to drink, said that he would, and the old widow went home.

Of course Li Neng was just saying this to quiet the old lady, and he did nothing about the tiger. But the magistrate scolded him.

"You have given your solemn word. As a matter of honor, you must go get the tiger and bring him here."

For weeks Li Neng searched for the tiger, but could not find him, much less catch him. The magistrate had the deputy beaten for his failure. Desperate, Li Neng went to the village shrine and threw himself on the ground. What was he to do?

Suddenly a large tiger appeared in the doorway of the shrine. This is surely the end of me, Li Neng said to himself. But I might as well die, since I cannot fulfill my duty.

The tiger did not attack. Instead, he sat quietly, showing neither teeth nor claws.

Li Neng took a deep breath and said, "If . . . if you are the tiger who killed the widow's son, you must come with me. You are under arrest."

To his surprise, the tiger lowered his head so Li Neng could put a loop of rope around his neck.

SHOULD WE ARREST
UGLY FOR BEING . . .
UGLY? EVEN IF IT'S
HIS NATURE?



ESPECIALLY
IF IT'S HIS
NATURE!



The people of Zhaocheng were amazed to see the deputy returning to the village with the tiger walking behind him.

The magistrate quickly set up court and said to the tiger, "Did you eat the widow's son?"

The tiger nodded.

"How did you expect her to live after you killed her only son?"

The tiger closed his eyes.

"If you take a life, your own must be taken. That is the law . . ."

The tiger nodded again.

To tell the truth, the magistrate was impressed by the animal's show of remorse.

". . . but the law does not say *how* you must give your life. If you are willing to serve the old woman as her son, I will spare you."

The tiger nodded once more, solemnly.

So they released him and sent him on his way.

When the old widow learned of this, she was furious. "Now I have no son and no justice either," she said.

But the next morning she awoke to discover a freshly killed deer at her gate. She kept some of the meat for her supper and traded the hide and the rest of the meat for things she needed.

REMORSE MEANS
REGRET FOR DOING
SOMETHING WRONG.




PITEOUSLY MEANS
WRETCHEDLY SAD
AND SORROWFUL.



The next day she found a fresh wild pig in the same place.

Day after day the tiger brought fresh meat to the widow. It was always more than she herself could eat, so she always had some to trade or sell. Before long she was living very comfortably, and she was grateful to the tiger. She began letting him into her garden in the mornings to rest in the shade. Soon no one in the village was afraid of him, in spite of his fierce appearance.

After several years, the old widow died. The tiger came to her graveside and bellowed piteously for days. Then he left and was not seen again in those parts. The people of the village built a shrine to honor him, “The Shrine of the Ethical Tiger,” because he had been like a son to the old woman. 



Author’s Note The Chinese have always loved stories about animals who behave like—and sometimes better than—people. Their ancient sage Confucius believed that we humans, through education, can learn to rise above the animal or brutish side of our natures to do what is proper and right. To the Chinese, the most important duty has always been to care for your parents in life and to mourn for them respectfully after their death, as the tiger in this story demonstrates when he honors the old woman, fulfilling the duties of her lost son.

“The Tiger Son” is a favorite story in China that the writer Pu Songling (1640–1715) included in his book *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. The tale has survived better than the actual animals. Once numerous in China, tigers are now nearly extinct in the wild.

I WONDER IF UGLY WOULD
BECOME ETHICAL IF WE
ARRESTED HIM AND MADE
HIM DO COMMUNITY
SERVICE...



AN UGLY BIRD
DOESN'T CHANGE
HIS STRIPES! ER,
FEATHERS.