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Traditional Chinese Medicine and Tiger Beliefs: Tracing an Animist-Analogist Transition in China and Vietnam

Nikolas Århem*

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is often considered the main driver of the declining number of increasingly rare animals (including tigers, rhinos and pangolins), although there is little biomedical evidence supporting the usage of animal products from these species. What, then, are the underlying cultural and ontological factors driving demand for them? Based on published sources on Chinese (Han) and Vietnamese (Kinh) tiger lore and culture as well as anthropological fieldwork among the Katu and related Katuic-speaking groups, this paper analyzes how the tiger has been viewed over time in Vietnam and China, two core demand areas for animal-based traditional medicines, and compares "high-culture" and rural perceptions in the Sino-Vietnamese region. Tentatively, the paper reveals a transition from a view of the tiger as a divinity or powerful spirit towards a more material and instrumental (magical) perception in more recent iterations of the TCM complex. Heuristically using Descola's typology of ontologies, the paper attempts a holistic analysis of this perceptional and conceptual transformation, interpreting it as a movement along an animism-analogism continuum.

Keywords: animism, analogism, ontology, tiger bone, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), tiger spirit, Katu, Vietnamese folklore, Chinese folklore

Introduction

Approximately four thousand wild tigers remain in the world today, a decline of 96 percent compared to one century ago. During the last seven decades at least, this decline has been fueled primarily by demand for the animal from China, countries with large ethnic Chinese communities, or countries strongly influenced by ideas from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). According to the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), these countries are now also driving trade in animal parts from leopards, African lions, and jaguars, with parts of these big cats "being passed off as tiger." Tibetan traditional elites

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Southeast Asian Studies

were once big consumers of such items, but the EIA claims that the leading consumers are now China's elite. According to the EIA, "bones, teeth and claws [from the tiger] are also very much in demand and trafficked by the same criminal networks dealing in other big cats, pangolin scales, bear gall bladder, ivory, rhino horn, musk deer pods and red sandalwood from south Asia into China."[1)]

Evidently, insatiable demand in East- and Southeast Asia for traditional medicine, notably substances derived from tiger bone, is the major driver of the near extinction of the wild tiger. Why do people believe that tiger bone contains healing and empowering properties and why is this belief so widely spread and deeply entrenched in Chinese culture—and in other countries influenced by Sinitic civilization? These and related questions are the issues addressed in this paper.[2)]

I suggest that at least a beginning of an answer is to be found in the mindset, or ontological character, of the Sino-Vietnamese civilization. The French anthropologist Philippe Descola (2013) refers to this ontological type as "analogism," owing to its strong emphasis on analogical thinking, or the notion that the cosmos is a coherent whole integrated by the symbolic associations and correspondences among its constituent elements.[3)] Another characteristic of analogism is the pervasiveness of what I call magical causation, or the notion that nature's forces may be harnessed and directed by human agency. These features distinguish analogism from other ontologies such as animism and naturalism, as the former is premised on the principle of social, or inter-subjective, causation and the latter on material, or physical, causation (or the "laws of physics"). Briefly, my proposition is that the TCM complex is founded in large part on an analogistic elaboration of the universal human faculty of symbolism and the idea of magical causation—essentially as formulated by J. G. Frazer in his "laws of sympathetic magic" (Frazer 1967 [1890]).[4)]

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1) https://eia-international.org/wildlife/saving-tigers/tiger-trade/

2) Note that some studies suggest pharmaceutical properties in the chemical compounds found in tiger bone (Li *et al.*, 2017). The question remains whether the price and demand for tiger products are proportionate to the value of these chemical properties.

3) Descola (2013, 13) outlines four generic ontological types—animism, naturalism, totemism and analogism—under which he subsumes all known cosmologies, past and present. His point of departure is the presumed universal cognitive dichotomy between "interiority" (mind, soul) and "physicality" (roughly corresponding to "bodily endowments and dispositions"). Starting from this premise, there are four logical possible ways in which any subject ("Self") may identify an "Other" in terms of similarity or difference: (1) shared interiority, different physicality (animism); (2) shared physicality, different interiority (naturalism); (3) shared interiority and physicality (totemism); and (4) different interiority and physicality (analogism). For a synthesis of Descola's typology and a discussion of his concept of analogism, see Århem, K. (2016a, 8–9, 13–15).

4) Frazer distinguishes between two categories of magic: one is the notion that like produces like, which he called the Law of Similarity (or homeopathic magic); in the other, things which have ↗

Magical causation, I maintain, accounts for the assumed effectiveness and curative powers of tiger-bone substances—as well as many, if not most, other animal-derived substances in TCM and "magical medicines" more generally. Significantly, magical medicines figure prominently in analogistic ontologies past and present and across the world, characteristically in complex and stratified premodern states, or in societies influenced by such polities—in Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Mesoamerica, the Andean region of South America, and in medieval and early-modern Europe (Descola 2013). Ancient Chinese cosmology is prototypical of such an analogistic ontological regime (Descola 2013, 201, 206; cf. Granet 1968; 1998). Although there is no single or monolithic tradition of "Traditional Chinese Medicine," I argue that the TCM complex, particularly its ideas pertaining to *animal-based medicine*, can be seen as an expression of analogism as defined by Descola. Indeed, in many respects, the TCM complex appears to operate on the analogistic-magical principles characteristic of what medieval and early-modern scholars and practitioners refer to as "natural magic," i.e., the idea that certain natural objects and substances have intrinsic occult powers to cure or cause illness or other perceived effects (Descola 2013, 202; Kieckhefer 2014).[5)]

The cultural perception of the tiger, and the human-tiger relationship in East- and Southeast Asia as a whole, is complex and varies significantly according to social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Different sectors and segments of the societies and populations in the region are influenced by different religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and so on), political-economic ideologies (Marxism, capitalism, and so on), and ontological orientations (notably, animism, analogism, and naturalism). In this paper, I focus on the relationship between—and the complex inter-twining of—animism and analogism understood as ontological types, or regimes, viewed through the prism of the human-tiger relationship.

Alongside the objectified and instrumental (magical) notion of the tiger as a source of medicine expressed in the Sinitic TCM complex, a very different perception of the tiger as a revered and feared spirit being, or divinity, exists in Southeast Asia. Such a perception is typical of an animistic ontology. In the animistic universe, all beings and most things are perceived as intentional subjects in a social cosmos populated by human

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↘ once been in contact continue to act on each other, even at a distance. This notion he called the Law of Contact (or contagious magic). In his discussion of Frazer's view of magic, Tambiah (1990) has observed that the first Law builds on metaphorical associations and the second on metonymical ones. On magical causation, see also Mauss (1972), Gell (1998), and Århem, K. (2016a, 14).

5) This magical power was not necessarily believed to derive from the physical properties of specific objects or phenomena, but rather from certain features of these entities that *associated* them with occult powers in the realm of nature, or "influences that flowed from the distant reaches of the cosmos" such as "emanations coming from the stars or planets" (Kieckhefer 2014, 13).

and other-than-human beings, including animals, plants, natural phenomena, celestial bodies, and a plethora of lesser and greater spirits and divinities that all act and interact as meta-persons in an intersubjective cosmic society (cf. Århem, K. 2016a; Sahlins 2017).

While the objectified and instrumental notion of the tiger seems to permeate all classes and segments of Chinese (and Vietnamese) society today, the *consumption* of tiger-bone medicine is a prerogative of the wealthy, urban population. The subjectified animistic conception of the tiger as a divine being, on the other hand, remains predominant only among ethnic minority groups and peasant communities in the uplands and rural hinterlands of the region. This social and spatial distribution of the two contrasting perceptions—and the ontological regimes of which they form a part—is, I propose, a result of a long and complex historical process involving a gradual ontological transition from animism towards analogism, a process probably originating in the urban power centers of Sinitic civilizations millennia ago and continuing in the present, as evident in traces of animism in Sino-Vietnamese culture today (including in the TCM complex).

At a general theoretical and methodological level, this paper addresses the little explored issue of ontological change and to what extent it is possible to empirically determine the boundaries between different ontological types as defined by Descola. In other words, where does one ontological regime end and another begin in what would seem to be a fluid and continuous cultural-historical process? In the paper, we will thus explore the nebulous conceptual borderland between animism and analogism and the apparent transition from animism to analogism in the Sinitic civilization common to China and Vietnam. In this venture, the changing perception and cultural role of the tiger is, I suggest, particularly revealing.

The ethnographic and historical data presented in the following derive from my reading of published sources on Chinese (Han) and Vietnamese (Kinh) culture as well as my anthropological fieldwork among the Katu and related Katuic-speaking groups[6] in the Central Annamitic region of Laos and Vietnam. In addition to my in-depth research among Katuic groups, I have lived and worked in China and Vietnam for several years and, as a result, have acquired some degree of familiarity with both majority and minority cultures in the two countries.[7] It is worth stressing, as will become clear in the follow-

6) The Katuic ethno-linguistic group belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family.

7) The author spent one and a half years in Northeastern China, teaching English and studying Chinese in Harbin (2000–01) and about four years in Vietnam between 2004 and 2010, including two years based at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi (in collaboration with the Department of Social Anthropology at Gothenburg University), and four months doing socio-economic consultancies for the World Wildlife Fund and SUFORD among ethnic minorities in Central Vietnam (and Laos). Later, from 2007–14, he carried out research for his PhD on Katuic culture and religion, conducting fieldwork for five months among the Katu people in Vietnam, and an additional three weeks among Katuic groups in Sekong Province of Laos. This paper is not only based on these fieldwork periods, but also on general observations made while living in Hanoi.

ing, that minority and majority traditions are intimately intertwined in both countries, just as they are throughout the region as a whole. This is not least evident in the tiger lore reviewed below.

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Having outlined the general questions and objectives of the paper and briefly introduced my argument in the preceding pages, I want—before proceeding—to clarify the selection of my sources and their scope, and finally, to offer a brief note on the relation between Chinese and Vietnamese medical traditions.

First, this paper is greatly inspired by Chris Coggins's seminal book *The Tiger and the Pangolin*, particularly the chapter dedicated to human-tiger relations in China's southeast (Coggins 2003, 51–86). Coggins attempts to trace the evolution of tiger-perceptions from an "animistic view" as found in rural villages in the region, but also as it appears in a variety of *official* records. He then analyzes changes in the conceptions of the tiger caused by European big-game hunters, missionaries, and, in more recent times, the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist materialist ideologies. In his analysis, he relies on various historical records, mainly written by state officials, as well as on his own field-work and interviews.

Coggins's book makes frequent reference to the accounts about tigers and tiger beliefs recorded by Caldwell, an American missionary who lived and worked in rural Fujian (then Fukien), during the first decades of the twentieth century. Caldwell's accounts fill an important gap between historical records, which tend to be terse, and stories collected by Coggins from rural villagers during his fieldwork in Fujian. Coggins makes no overt claims to represent "the totality of Chinese culture," but he does include data that are relevant outside the narrow scope of a particular region. Although the region described by both Caldwell and Coggins was, and is, mainly inhabited by a mixture of different Han Chinese groups—primarily Hakka-speakers in Coggins's case—it can nonetheless be seen as representing certain facets of Chinese civilization and popular culture.[8] Many of my arguments in this paper are extrapolations and elaborations of arguments made by Coggins.

Interestingly, Coggins points out that the original inhabitants of his principal study area (in Meihuashan, Fujian) were probably Yue (believed to be related to the ancient Vietnamese) and Man groups (ancestors of the Miao-Yao-She ethnic groups). He notes

8) This is another reason for using these two sources to gain some understanding of what the tiger means in (South) Chinese folk culture, as the tiger has been extinct for hundreds of years in other parts of China. Southern China is, in fact, one of the parts of China where the tiger survived longest, and Caldwell's account is one of very few accounts available in the English language that gives us valuable insights about tiger lore of people who lived *among* tigers.

that the latter groups, according to the *Houhan Shu* (Book of the Later Han), "believed that their primary ancestor turned into a white tiger after his death" (Coggins 2003, 54). However, for the last several hundred years, indeed probably for more than a millennium, Southeast China has been predominantly populated by several linguistically diverse Han Chinese groups, with Coggins's study area now inhabited by Hakka-speaking Han Chinese. The ethnic She are still present in some areas of Fujian and sometimes intermarry with the Hakka-speakers, but the bulk of the original ethnic groups have migrated further south and into Southeast Asia.

A noteworthy detail, according to Coggins, is that "philologists believe that the Mandarin word for tiger (*hu*) may have derived from Austro-Asiatic and/or Miao-Yao-She roots.[9] This is the same root word as the standard word for tiger in Vietnamese (*con hổ*). The tiger also has several nicknames in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Katu languages. In Vietnamese, for example, the tiger is often referred to as *Ông Ba Mươi* ("Sir Thirty"). Meanwhile, the Katu word for tiger, *abhuy*, literally means "spirit" or "god." As a sidenote, we may note that Khmu for tiger (*rwaay*) is quite similar to both the Katu word for soul (*röväi*) and the Chewong word for soul (*ruwai* [cf. Howell 1989]). and the Chewong word for soul (*ruwai*); these three peoples all speak languages of the Mon-Khmer family.

When reading Coggins and Caldwell, I was struck by the many similarities between their accounts of South Chinese folk beliefs regarding the tiger and my own material collected among the Katu in the highlands of Central Vietnam. As part of my comparative analysis, I decided to cross-check if similar notions and ideas about the tiger were documented by the French missionary Léopold Cadière in his three-volume work on Vietnamese folk religion, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Viêtnamiens* (also compiled during the early decades of the twentieth century). This monumental work covers a vast array of Vietnamese religious traditions, from rural folk beliefs to religious-philosophical ideas about the nature of the human soul (the latter perhaps more familiar to the urban Vietnamese elite). The meticulous accounts of rural folk-religion, which Cadière collected during his more than fifty years in Central Vietnam, make these volumes priceless.

It seemed to me that these sparse but important sources on tiger lore and human-tiger relations (by Coggins and Caldwell in Southeast China and Cadière in Central Vietnam), together with my field research among the Katu, could provide a comparative basis for tracing a process of ontological transformation from animism to analogism in the Sino-Vietnamese region. Highland Katuic groups are generally regarded as typically animistic (cf. Århem, K. 2016a), while Chinese high culture and philosophical traditions (including many of the philosophical foundations of the TCM complex), as noted above, have been

9) Please refer to Coggins (2003, 54) for the references he provides for this statement.

categorized by Descola as analogistic. In other words, folk-religious notions of the tiger in the source material from South China thus suggests a gradual transformation from an animistic conception of the tiger (and of reality more generally), which persisted until recently in the rural hinterland of China, to an analogistic one, which has been dominant in Chinese civilization for centuries and is manifested in the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) complex.

Finally, a word on the relationship between the medicinal traditions of China and Vietnam. Vietnam was a vassal state of China for nearly one thousand years (with interruptions, the figure of 800 years is often cited). Despite this, Vietnam has developed a distinct medicinal tradition, referred to as *thuốc nam*, or "southern medicine" (as opposed to *thuốc bac*, or "northern medicine," i.e., Chinese medicine proper (cf. Hoang Bao Chau *et al.* 1999, 3–31)). The oldest *thuốc nam* texts extant today appear to be the writings (in Chinese) of the Vietnamese monk Tuệ Tĩnh (1330–89), who died in China. Nonetheless, Vietnamese scholars generally agree that many *thuốc nam materia medica* texts existed prior to those by Tuệ Tĩnh, but that these writings were destroyed during the Ming invasion from 1420–27 (Hoang Bao Chau *et al.* 1999), or have been lost for other reasons. Most other Vietnamese *materia medica* texts are of a later date. However, as *materia medica* traditions are typical of the urban intellectual elite, all *thuốc nam* texts are heavily influenced by Chinese traditions. Just like in China, however, local traditions in Vietnam's rural communities (even communities located close to cultural/urban centers) can differ from the high-culture medical norms (cf. Frick 1957; Strickmann 2002). With this background, let us turn to our first ethnographic example, the Katu people in the uplands of Central Vietnam.

I Tiger Ethnography among the Katu in Upland Vietnam

As mentioned above, the word for tiger in Katu is *abhuy*, meaning "spirit/god." The tiger may also be referred to simply as *abhuöp*, or "grandfather" (implying a relationship of deep respect). Sometimes the two words are used together, i.e., *abhuy abhuöp*, or "grandfather spirit." According to the Vietnamese ethnographer of Katu culture, Luu Hung, his elderly informants insisted: "In the past, our fathers and grandfathers never dared to hunt tiger" (Luu Hung 2007, 119). Nonetheless, they could provide detailed information about what needed to be done in case a tiger was accidentally caught and killed in a spear trap: the trap owner should return to the village, narrate the event in whispers to a friend, and then go to another village to stay for a few days before returning home. Meanwhile, on hearing the news about the killed tiger, the villagers should go to the site of the kill

to enact a ritual dialogue between the villagers and the spirit of the tiger, with one man representing the villagers and another the tiger:[10)]

> Villager: Why are you dead, Sir [Grandfather]?
> Tiger (Spirit): I have died because I have fallen. I have been too stupid.
> Villager: Why have you died, Sir?
> Tiger: I have died because I am too cruel; I have eaten the pigs and the cows [belonging to the village]. You have not killed me.
> Villager: Can we eat your flesh?
> Tiger: Yes, you can. (Luu Hung 2007)

Thereafter, the two men should silently leave the site of the kill while other villagers, their faces hidden behind masks, approach the carcass, beating gongs and drums and howling to drive away the spirit of the dead tiger. A fire is made to singe and grill the animal while continuing to beat drums and gongs. Then:

> . . . the villagers, including old folk and women, eat the meat of the tiger on the spot, not leaving the place until they have completely consumed the animal, even if that required them to spend the night in the forest. When all [the meat] is eaten, the bones of the tiger are wrapped and buried in the soil, and this place would become a sacred and feared spot which [henceforth] no one would dare to visit. (Luu Hung 2007)

Another of Luu Hung's Katu interlocutors provides a slightly different and more elaborate account of what happens after the capture and killing of a tiger (Luu Hung 2007, 120). The following is a summary of this account. After the kill, the men return to the village to celebrate the event by raising a decorated ritual pole to which a "fake buffalo" (in the form of a bunch of banana flowers) is tied. The villagers kill a chicken and walk around the post, beating gongs and drums. They then go to the place where the body of the tiger remains, to cut its head and bury it "so that the tiger spirit would not come to the village and harm its inhabitants." They move the tiger's body to another place, where they burn "all its hair," and then they carry the body to the village. There, to the sounds of drums and gongs, they again walk around the decorated ritual post, carrying the tiger's body, and eventually take it to the Village Hall (*guöl*)—the ritual and political center of the village—where the village elders sacrifice a pig dedicated to the tiger spirit. Following these ritual procedures, the men chop up the body, cook the meat and eat it—all in the *guöl*. The remaining bones are then collected and buried far away from the village in the forest. Villagers are henceforth prohibited from visiting or even passing by this place as well as the site where the tiger body was singed.

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10) This and the following paragraphs, including the quotations, mainly draw on Luu Hung (2007).

Back in the village, further rituals are carried out. The trap owner, posing as a tiger and wrapped in a blanket, leaves the village accompanied by a group of men beating drums and gongs. They pass through a "tunnel" of bamboo stems and flowers erected for the occasion and stop at a spot some distance from the village gate. At this spot, which is enclosed by a bamboo fence, they plant several wooden spears in the ground to mark where the tiger spirit must remain, never to enter the village again. This enclosed space is called *töram*, or "forbidden place."[11] Other evidence suggests that the *töram* is regarded as a kind of grave, or "home" for the slain tiger's soul or spirit. Indeed, the *töram* enclosure is explicitly compared to the Katu lineage ossuary (*ping*), where the bones of deceased kinsmen are placed and their souls find a permanent resting place.[12]

In several respects, the rituals following the killing of a tiger and the feasting on its meat recall the Katu buffalo sacrifice and communal feast, which accompany every important public event, such as a wedding, a funeral, or the construction of a new communal house. The act of driving away the spirit, or ghost, of the tiger reproduces the rituals following the burial of a deceased villager (which also traditionally take place some distance away from the village). Among the Katu, the spirit of the dead person is perceived as a threat to the living until a protracted funerary process is completed. In the past, this process involved a second burial in which the bones of several dead lineage members were collected and placed in the collective lineage grave, or tomb house (*ping*), in the village cemetery.

Luu Hung's accounts of the rituals after a tiger kill also largely accord with my findings, although differing in certain details.[13] My interlocutors repeatedly affirmed that tigers *could* purposely be trapped, but only if they posed a great danger to the village and its livestock. Even though the Katu leave their livestock to roam freely around the villages, it appears that livestock would only rarely be attacked. But it is important to note that villagers feared— and still do fear—the dead (i.e., killed) tiger more than the live animal. One informant explained that the entire body of the tiger must be eaten during the night after a kill and gongs and drums must be continuously beaten during the entire night; otherwise, the spirit of the tiger "could strike the whole village dead." Likewise, the whiskers of the tiger are cut and secretly buried by the trap owner at the site of the kill to prevent any stranger or ill-willed person from using them for sorcery to kill or

11) The word *töram* marks a particular place or space that is forbidden to visit and it carries the connotation of danger. In this case, the naming signals that the enclosed space is inhabited by the dangerous tiger spirit.

12) Information provided by elderly Katu informants on the explicit comparison between the tiger *töram* and the ossuary (*ping*) or "tomb house" of the deceased comes from personal communication with Århem, K. and his unpublished field notes (2019), which he has kindly shared with me.

13) See Århem, N. (2009).

cause harm to the villagers. Indeed, informants claimed that the whiskers are the most dangerous part of the tiger's body.[14] My informants added that whenever a tiger is killed, the hunter must also address the spirit of the tiger, asking it to be merciful and forgiving, saying: "Excuse me [Grandfather Spirit], I did not intend to kill you; I put the trap for other animals to get some food for my family. Please do not be angry, do not take revenge on our village or give us bad luck . . ."

The parallels between a tiger burial and the funerary process of a deceased human person are remarkable: the bones of the tiger are buried in the forest, far away from the living, and the spirit of the slain tiger is given a "second" burial, as it were, in the *töram* near the village of the killers. These parallels strongly suggest that the tiger was perceived and treated as an "other-than-human person," indeed, as a superior spirit (cf. Sahlins 2017). This subjectification of the tiger—subjectification being the hallmark of an animistic ontology—contrasts with the objectified (magical) notion of the tiger as a source of medicine and whose bones, far from being ritually buried, are turned into a magical substance to be sold and consumed as a curative and potentiating super tonic (see below).

It must be noted, however, that with the War in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Katu solidified their identity as belonging to the Vietnamese Nation and entered a period of rapid and profound cultural transformation that continues into the present. One effect of the War was a massive inflow of rifles, which, in turn, allowed the Katu to actively hunt tigers to supply the animal-trade networks in the region with tiger bones for medicine production in the urban centers of Vietnam and China (cf. Århem, N. 2015).[15] By the early 2000s, simultaneously with the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Highway that now cuts through the Annamite region connecting Northern and Southern Vietnam (Århem, N. and Nguyễn Thị Thanh Bình 2006), tigers had already become exceedingly rare in the region. It is now believed that the tiger is virtually extinct in the Central Annamites.

II Tiger Traditions among the Kinh (Vietnamese) in the Not-so-Distant Past

The spiritual relationship to the tiger exemplified by the Katu case and typical of an animistic worldview more generally is not limited to the indigenous upland groups in Vietnam. In his seminal book on Vietnamese culture, ethnologist Nguyễn Văn Huyên

14) Århem, K. (personal communication).

15) While the tiger is now virtually extinct in the Central Annamites where the Katu live, other rare and commercially valuable animals are currently hunted or collected by Katu hunters, including pangolins, bears, rare turtles (for their supposed medical properties) and game animals (whose meat is in great demand in urban centers).

(2002, 243) writes:[16]

> Certain animals have a supernatural power because of their strength and their age. The tiger for instance is a popular object of cult. It is given names as 'venerable,' 'master,' 'general' in respect. It is venerated not only because of its terrible strength but also because of its powerful spirit: it is sensitive to the pleadings of people; it is a lover of justice and eats only those who commit a crime punished by celestial laws, if it devours by carelessness an innocent person or the only son of a helpless old man, it knows how to redeem its error in meeting the needs of the unfortunate parent, even paying the expenses of the funeral.

Nguyễn paints a picture of ideas that were likely disappearing in many areas of Vietnam well before his own death in 1975. Hữu Ngọc, however, in his book *Wandering through Vietnamese Culture* (2006, 71), demonstrates that certain forms of tiger worship were still very much alive and well in more recent years, even in areas of central Hanoi. These Vietnamese scholars, in their English-language books, do not provide the Vietnamese terms for tiger, but Cadière (1955, 229) does: *ông thầy* (master), *mệ* (prince), and *ngài* (Your/His Highness). These terms also provide insight into Vietnamese tiger beliefs. Even if these beliefs are far less important today than previously, traditional perceptions of the tiger are important to understanding the historical trajectory of the animist conception of the tiger and its transformation in Vietnam during the twentieth century.

Cadière (1955) dedicates considerable attention to the folk conceptions of the tiger in his study of Vietnamese religion and traditions. He confirms Nguyễn's findings, writing that some of his informants even referred to the tiger as *trời* (heaven).[17] He gives several examples of how villagers, when sensing or seeing a tiger in the vicinity, plead for its mercy and prostrate before it, asking the tiger not to attack them (after which the tiger supposedly left them in peace). Here is one account of the many given by Cadière:

> At the beginning of July 1898, an individual from Cương-hà, looking for wild jackfruit in the mountain area of Rềnh Rềnh, found a particular tree that was heavily laden with fruits. He picked a large quantity of the fruits and then began to eat them while sitting at the foot of the tree. Suddenly, a tiger came out from the underbrush and attacked him, *placing a paw on one his ears*, but then leaping a short distance away and squatting down. The unfortunate fruit-collector lost consciousness and fell to the ground. After a while, returning to his senses, he addressed the tiger: "Lord, you have everything, you lack nothing, but I am poor and I came here only to look for jackfruit not to die from hunger. Please, I beg you not to harm me." After this, the man straightened himself up and made three large prostrations towards the tiger, which then left without harming him further. (Cadière 1955, 233, author's translation and italics added)

16) Professor Nguyễn Văn Huyên was one of the most renowned and respected Vietnamese ethnologists of the twentieth century. He was also Vietnam's Minister of Education from 1946 to 1975. His book *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam* was originally published in Vietnamese in 1944 and has been reprinted several times. Apart from the English translation published 1995, it has also been published in French.

17) Among them a sergeant of the Royal Tomb in Huế (Cadière 1955, 229–230).

A curious but perhaps significant detail in this passage, which Cadière does not comment on, is that the tiger retreats momentarily after touching the man's ear. Interestingly, Chinese tiger lore collected in the 1920s by Caldwell (2007) in rural communities of Southern China, thousands of kilometers away, also mentions that if a tiger happens to touch its victim's ear during an attack, it leaves the victim unharmed. (We shall have more to say on Chinese tiger lore below.)

Returning to Vietnam, both Cadière and Nguyễn Văn Huyên tell us of worship directed to the Tiger Deity, even though it remains unclear whether this deity is the tiger itself or not. Another revealing tiger story related by Cadière is that of a man named Sâm, a medical practitioner residing in Kẻ-chao Village (in Nha-tịnh), who was one day attacked and killed by a tiger. A few days later, the late Sâm appeared in the dream of a friend, Sergeant Nuôi. According to the latter, Sâm's spirit told him: "I am very unhappy; the tiger has already caught several people [before], there is no longer space on its back and I am forced to sit all the way back, next to the tail. It's a very embarrassing situation, you must save me!" Sergeant Nuôi replied (in the dream) that he would try to help him, but insisted that Sâm, in turn, help him make the tiger fall into his (Sergeant Nuôi's) trap. He also promised Sâm's spirit that he would put a pair of *batonnets* [sacred rods, possibly incense] in the temple of Đức thầy. Although Đức thầy literally means "Noble Master," it is also understood to be the name of the "Tiger Deity" (Cadière 1955, 232). It is unclear whether this deity is a tiger or simply presides over tigers. The *batonnets* would serve as an invitation for Sâm's spirit to take part in the offering ceremonies given by the local villagers to Đức thầy on certain ritual occasions. According to the account, the day following the dream, Sergeant Nuôi went to the forest to dig a tiger pit-trap in which the tiger was eventually caught and killed (Cadière 1955, 232).

According to Cadière, the account reflects a general belief that the spirits of people previously caught by the tiger actually "guide" and "direct" it, helping it avoid traps. These spirits could also make a tiger capture and kill several people from the same family, since the spirit of the deceased person riding on its back would yearn for the places where it used to dwell and thus unwittingly lead the tiger to attack the first victim's kin. To avoid this calamity, it was important to find the body of a tiger-victim and bury the person properly, with all the appropriate funerary ceremonies.[18)]

Very similar ideas exist today among the Katu. In one village, I was told that the spirit of a human who is killed by a tiger "follows the tiger," although the expression that

18) The moral of the tale seems to be that as long as a person killed by a tiger remains unburied, his spirit belongs, as it were, to the tiger who killed him—as a helper and ally of the tiger. But, as soon as the victim's body is recovered and properly buried, his spirit is returned to his human kinsfolk.

the victim "rides on the back of the tiger" was not used in this case.[19] However, other Katu interlocutors claimed that the female Animal Guardian (Komorbarr)—an important figure in the Katu spirit pantheon—sometimes "rides the biggest animal in a wild-pig herd" and when she does so, the herd avoids all kinds of traps.[20] Certain magical leaves could, however, be used by hunters to cause Komorbarr to lose "concentration" (i.e., momentarily lose control over her animal herds), after which the animals would run straight into the hunters' traps. It is perhaps significant that in the origin story of Komorbarr, she is described as once having been an ordinary maiden who was killed by the forest spirit after insulting a dead game animal and upon death was mystically transformed into his wife (Århem, N. 2009; cf. Århem, K. 2016b).

Despite the traditional notion of the tiger as a divine or quasi-divine being, it was occasionally hunted in rural areas by ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) even in pre-colonial times. The hunting, however, appears to have been primarily "defensive" or protective in nature. As a rule, tigers were only killed if they had attacked, or threatened to attack, people or their livestock (again, the same idea is held today by the Katu). Cadière also tells us that sacrifices were regularly offered to the Tiger Deity, and a further sacrifice was required before killing a tiger caught in a pit trap. None of our historical sources, however, give any indication that a tiger would be hunted specifically for the sake of selling its body parts—as is the case today.

Although Cadière's ethnography is extremely detailed and rich, the only tiger body parts he mentions as used after the animal has been killed are the collarbones (see below). It is significant that nothing in Cadière's account suggests the practice of using tiger bones to produce medicine concoctions for curative or protective purposes in the rural communities he studied. Instead, Cadière's interlocutors seemed to emphasize the potential harm that the tiger's body parts could cause. The first thing to be done after killing a tiger was to burn its whiskers, mainly because they could otherwise be used by evil sorcerers to exterminate entire clans within the village (cf., the observation above of an almost identical practice among the Katu). To be more precise, tiger whiskers can be used to construct an evil fetish called the *con thuôc đ̣ộc* (literally: "poison medicine creature").[21]

This evil subject-object is the mirror image of a similar (but opposite type) of

19) But I did hear a story of a woman who was carried away on the back of a large "spirit bird" only to be brought back to her house after the intercession of the village medium.

20) In China, the idea that demons ride on people and animals is common (Strickmann 2002).

21) I use the term "fetish" to signify an object that is perceived as an embodied, sentient subject—a powerful metaperson. In this case, the "evil" fetish made from the tiger's whiskers is a magical object in the sense that it embodies the tiger's fierce, predatory power, i.e., it operates on the associative principle of "contagious magic" in which the whiskers metonymically represent the power of the tiger as a living predatory animal.

fetish-creature: the benevolent *con ngọc*. (Cadière translates *con ngọc* as "animal-pearl" but a more literal translation would be "jade creature.") Cadière describes how villages of the high valleys of Thanh-Ha, in the Song-Gianh area, were accused by other villages of producing and keeping *con thuôc đ*ộ*c* and he provides two accounts of how the "breeding" of such evil creatures was done:

> The person [who wants to produce a poison creature] takes the whiskers of the [dead] tiger and inserts them into a young bamboo stand . . . After three months and ten days, those tiger whiskers give birth to what some say is a mouse, while others say is a snake. It is the excrement from this creature which is poisonous. The person that has raised the creature [the breeder] feeds it once a year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. He will need to grill either rice or maize and then bring it to the creature in his garden. The poison creature does not stay in his house. The creature approaches [the food], eats it, and then deposes its excrement nearby. The breeder then carefully collects the excrement. When he wishes to use the poison, he takes a small pinch of this substance and throw it on [food or medicine] products that he sells at the market, or otherwise [spreads] the substance on other exposed goods there. However, not all of those who later eat the contaminated items will die, but only those belonging to the clan [*ho*, lineage] that the poisoner has in mind . . . . All mysterious diseases are considered to be caused by *con thuố*c *doc*, and certain doctors are specialized in curing such illnesses; the remedies [they use] are equally mysterious [magical]. (Cadière 1955, 227–228, author's translation)

In another version [of the accounts about the poison-creature]:

> The tiger's whiskers eventually give birth to a multitude of worms that the breeder-poisoner painstakingly collects and carries far away from his house. The following day he will find two worms coming towards him, one male and one female, and these are the poison-creatures ["animaux-poisons"]. He will feed them with meat and then collect their saliva ["bave"], which will constitute the poison. Those who cultivate [breed] poison-creatures do so to receive favors from their *ma* [spirit, ghost], an evil and hateful *ma*. The more harm they [the poisoners] cause to people, the more the *ma* will protect them, and the more successful they will be in their enterprises. Often the spirit will allow the poisoner to convey the poison to his victims in the shape of seemingly good medicine, and only after seven months, the victim will suddenly die of a mysterious disease. If for some reason the poisoner fails to produce victims [for the *ma*], the spirit of the poison-creature will instead take vengeance on the poisoner himself, making him ill. (Cadière 1955, 227–228, author's translation)

These accounts are reminiscent of similar beliefs among the Katu. The "good" fetish of the Kinh (i.e., the "pearl-creature" mentioned above) resembles what the Katu call *djerriel* (usually described as beautiful stones or sometimes as stones found inside the stomach of wild animals), which are believed to bring their owners good fortune. *Djerriel* stones, however, need to be "fed"—that is, given offerings or sacrifices. Among the Katu, certain *djerriel* (and other fetish-like subject-objects) are more powerful than ordinary

djerriel, but they are also more demanding. For example, the *djerriel acha baak* (literally "white dog stone") and *kalurr* (the leaves of certain magical trees called "black cobra trees"), two spirit-objects that the Katu used in the past when they attacked other villages (or were attacked by enemy villages), must be fed with human (enemy) blood or they will attack their owners.[22)]

The ideas behind the poison-creatures described by Cadière are also reminiscent (although not in the details) of the deadly spirit of the *chölaar* poison, which figures in Katu folk beliefs and is made by burning a piece of tree bark mixed with several other ingredients. A man can request the spirit to attack an enemy village, potentially wiping out all its inhabitants by causing lethal illness (cf. Århem, N. 2009). The main difference between Kinh and the Katu stories about "poison-creatures" is that, in the Katu case, no such spirit object was regarded as categorically "good" or "evil," yet these fierce spirits "naturally" craved human blood; if you were not prepared to feed them, you must simply avoid using them.

Regarding popular uses of the tiger body parts among rural Kinh people, Cadière only mentions the collarbones (*vây-khái*) as having benign and protective power. A tiger collarbone (the left one if it was from a male, the right one from a female) could be worn as powerful talismans to repel tigers. If a person wore a female collarbone, the tiger would escape towards the left of the wearer, and vice-versa. A curious detail here is that the collarbone amulets were also believed to give their wearer "protection from the power of mandarins" in that the wearer would be treated benevolently in all dealings with the mandarin authorities. Tiger collarbones therefore sold at a high price. That said, I find it odd that Cadière does not even mention the usage of tiger bones to produce "tiger-bone glue," since today there is hardly any Vietnamese who has *not* heard of this substance, which is generally regarded as a powerful medicine (*thuốc*). I return to this issue in Section 5. First, however, we make an excursion into Chinese tiger lore.

22) The "dog stone," a white stone of particular shape with a red spot, signaled its presence with a barking sound. When found in the forest, it was brought into the village where it was kept in the village hall, the Guöl. Its spirit was said to protect the village from enemy attack, but also to sometimes accompany the warriors when raiding enemy villages ("blood hunting"). The *kalurr* spirit, or "black cobra spirit," by contrast, was regarded as an exceptionally aggressive spirit. Leaves of the *kalurr* tree were invariably carried by the warriors when raiding enemy villages to make the raiders fierce and brave, but the leaves were also used as a protective measure to avert revenge attacks after a successful raid; the leaves were buried in the ground in a circle around the village to repel the attackers (Århem, N. 2009, Ch. 9; see also Hickey 1993, 117–121; Costello 1972; and Århem, K., unpublished manuscript).

III Chinese Tiger Accounts from the 1920s

The above observations on Vietnamese tiger lore are very similar to the ones made by Caldwell, who hunted big game in southern China in the 1920s. In his book *Blue Tiger* (2007 [1924]), Caldwell describes how, in his struggle to convert villagers to Christianity in rural Fukien Province, he discovered that he could use his hunting skills to prove the superiority of the Christian God over the divinities and spirits worshiped by peasants, local shamans, and literati. In one instance related by Caldwell, villagers claimed that in one mountain area, all the animals were protected by the local spirits and therefore "impossible to kill." These were, according to locals, spirit animals, or shape shifters, rather than "mere animals." Thus, when Caldwell killed several of the supposed spirit animals, he managed to dispel the "superstitions" about their immortality and promote his Christian faith.[23)]

Caldwell also relates, how, on other occasions, the local literati and other knowledgeable people refused to acknowledge the tigers that he killed as "true" tigers if they lacked certain internal or external markings—presumably because true tigers were believed to be "impossible to kill."[24)] The idea that certain animals are not "ordinary animals," but rather spirit beings in animal form, is prevalent among the Katu to this day. Similarly, an ordinary pangolin, for example, may be killed for food or commercial purposes, but if the pangolin is seen in water, it is not considered to be a mere pangolin, but rather a *böyöa* an aquatic spirit creature in pangolin shape.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Caldwell's account for our present purpose is what he has to say about how his Chinese interlocutors regarded tiger body parts. He writes:

> From the Chinese point of view, the skin is not the most valuable part of the tiger. Almost always before a tiger hunt or drive is made . . . the hunters burn incense and offer sacrifices before the gods in a temple, or at some shrine, and a solemn covenant is entered into to the effect that, if the hunt is successful, the skin of the trophy becomes the property of the god. Thus, it happens that in many temples may be found handsome tiger-skin robes spread in the chair occupied by some *god having to do with the chase*. Both the god known as Duai Uong, or 'god of the land' or place, and the 'Pearly Emperor' [the Supreme God or Heaven] have thus become the possessors of far too many handsome tiger and leopard skins. (Caldwell 2007, 55, italics added)

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23) Chris Coggins (2003) provides an overview of what is historically known about tiger hunting and tiger lore in this same region (Southern China); the picture is similar to that given by Cadière concerning Vietnam in the past.

24) Caldwell does not say what the locals meant by "true tigers," but the perception of them as immortal strongly suggests that true tigers were held to be divine beings and therefore "could not be killed."

One cannot fail to see parallels here with the Katu, who make sure that certain body parts of a killed game animal, particularly the skulls, are always placed in the communal *guöl* house, henceforth becoming objects of reverence. During the collective ritual in the *guöl* following every successful hunt, the spirit of the slain animal (*röval addah*), which resides in its skull, is returned to the female Animal Guardian (Komorbarr), who is the exact Katu counterpart to Caldwell's "god having to do with the chase" in the quote above (see Luu Hung 2007; Århem, N. 2009). This divinity is most likely identical with the Tiger Deity (Đức thầy, literally "Noble Master") mentioned by Cadière (1955).

However, Caldwell mentions the medical usage of tiger flesh, bones, and blood among rural folks in South China:

> The flesh of the big cat is very valuable for medicinal purposes. When a hunt is successful it often happens that several cows are killed and the flesh mixed with that of the tiger, all then being sold at the exorbitant price which [is] cheerfully paid for tiger meat. The bones of a tiger are boiled for a number of days until a gelatin-like mass is produced. This is [also] sold at very high prices as an exceptionally efficacious medicine . . . .
> . . . In fact, but little attention was paid to the tiger until every available drop of blood had been sopped up with rags torn from the clothing, while men and children almost fought for the blood-stained grass. The blood of the tiger is very highly prized for two purposes. A bit of blood-stained rag is worn about the neck of a child as prevention against attack by measles or smallpox devils. And, too, it is claimed that a blood-stained handkerchief or rag waved in front of an attacking dog will flag the animal, causing it to turn tail and retreat. (Caldwell 2007, 55)

Caldwell also describes a specific incident when a "well-dressed literati" sopped up the blood oozing out from a tiger he had killed. Caldwell calls this "literati" a scholar, but it should be noted that the term was used more generally to designate any educated person working within the Chinese administration during this period. Overall, Caldwell's accounts do not allow us to separate which elements of tiger lore originated in folk beliefs and which were more likely derived from the upper strata (literati) of the communities he visited. Nonetheless, there appears to be a fair amount of co-existence and admixture among what might be termed "magical" (analogistic) notions of tiger-derived medicine, on the one hand, and more animistic perceptions of the tiger as a divinity, on the other. This is not surprising, since many of the communities Caldwell describes were not far from urban centers and the influences of metropolitan Chinese culture.

From what we can learn from Caldwell's account of South-Chinese tiger lore, most of the rural inhabitants of Fukien in the 1920s regarded the tiger as a divine being and, therefore, the animal should (or could) not be hunted *solely* for food or to be sold in parts as medicine. Tigers were only hunted when they became a serious threat to livestock

and humans, but even then, the matter was hardly taken lightly; killing a tiger required extensive ritual precautions and sanctioning by local authorities. How and when does the tiger change from being regarded as a divine being into a source of medicine, an important element in the pharmacopeia of Traditional Chinese Medicine? Is it possible that the tiger was never entirely "de-spiritualized"? Does the high price that its body parts fetch today, particularly tiger-bone products, derive from the animal's formerly divine status? In other words, are there traces of animism in the latter-day medicinal consumption of tiger products?

It is near at hand to assume that it is precisely because of the animal's (former) divine nature that its bones and other body parts are attributed with extraordinary healing powers. But, judging from the evidence from the Katu and other indigenous upland groups, animistic people in the region do not seem to have, or have had, such a notion. The idea that a dead tiger poses a lethal danger certainly exists among the Katu, but this does not translate into "tiger-bone glue" becoming a super-tonic. Katu folk-medicine has been, and remains, primarily herbal, even though the Katu consider wild game meat more nourishing than the meat of domestic animals. The ideal game animal for Katu traditional hunters is, and always has been, the wild pig. While certain rare and strange-looking animals, such as the pangolin, are associated with spirits and attributed with spirit powers, the Katu do not believe that the pangolin's body holds any particular medicinal properties.

Similarly, from what we know about rural folks in Vietnam and South China, the tiger was also widely regarded as a divine or quasi-divine being well into the twentieth century and killed only when it was considered necessary to protect life and livestock. This brings us back to the questions of how—and when—did the tiger turn into a source of potent medicine? To answer these, we must briefly examine the TCM complex and its conceptual underpinnings.

IV The TCM Complex: An Overview

In his classification of ontological types, Descola (2013) describes classical Chinese philosophy and cosmology—which presumably includes the ontological premises underlying Traditional Chinese Medicine—as analogistic. But what is TCM and to what extent can it be regarded as founded on a coherent theory or system of ideas? Liz Chee (2021), a sinologist and specialist on the TCM complex, provides an illuminating overview. According to her, there is no monolithic Traditional Chinese Medicine. Rather, TCM in its current form should be understood as a blend of various cultural, ideological, and

scientific influences originating not only from within China, but also from outside it. While animal-based medicine appears to have played only a minute role in classical Chinese medicine (the medicine documented in the old scholarly treatises), its importance increased radically during the Communist era. However, in "folk," or "vulgar" (popular), medicine, which is less well documented in the early treatises, the role of animals has likely always been important. Communist-era medicine has drawn widely from both classical and folk medicine traditions. Western observers, however, have tended to downplay or disregard the "vulgar" part of Chinese medicine in their efforts to "upgrade perceptions" of those components of Chinese medicine they find valuable (e.g., plant-based pharmacopeia and practices such as acupuncture).[25] Ironically, much of this process of unwittingly ignoring certain parts of the TCM complex took place precisely as the Communist state frenetically increased production of animal-based medicine, particularly during the 1960s and 70s (Chee 2021).

The evolution of Chinese medicine during the Communist period, however, has also placed it within a framework explicitly viewed by the Chinese state as thoroughly scientific, using many of the same tools as biomedicine to validate it (such as test protocols, laboratory experimentation, laws, and regulations). Despite the havoc that traditional Chinese medical ideas has caused to the survival and conservation of many of the world's rare animal species and the controversies concerning TCM's role in the spread of zoonotic diseases, TCM, as a whole, has steadily gained global acceptance and prestige. Yet, animal-based medicine within TCM remains an "Achilles heel" within the otherwise widely accepted body of knowledge (Chee 2021, 3–4). Chee thus argues that, rather than having always been a core element of Chinese medicine, animal-based Chinese medicine, in its contemporary form, is a unique product of modern Communist China born of a process she calls "faunal medicalization" (Chee 2021).

When asked about the origins and the role of animal-based medicine, TCM physicians interviewed by Chee often answered by quoting classical sayings such as "*yi du*, *gong zu*" ("use poison to attack poison") and "*yi xing*, *bu xing*" ("use shape to nourish shape," e.g., because walnuts have the shape of a brain, they are good for the brain). In other words, they cite old maxims implying pure homeopathic magic, echoing Frazer's Law of Similarity. Another saying Chee often heard was that certain animals were "*bu yi jingxue*" ("enriching to essence and blood"). To understand these sayings, one must grasp that in traditional Chinese medicine, particularly in its vulgar (popular) form, the body is not entirely material, nor is it monolithic. Rather, it is a composite entity, or a body-cum-soul divided into multiple constituent parts, thus exemplifying Descola's characterization of

25) For further discussion of this, see Chee (2021, 2).

analogism almost to the letter (cf. Descola 2013, 201, 207).[26] To simplify, important bodily organs, substances, or fluids, such as blood, are soul-like components in themselves (cf. Cadière 1955). Nourishing your blood with the blood of an animal was thus not only, or exclusively, a "physical" process in Chinese folk medicine. In the new "scientized" version of this medicine, however, the process is presented as an exclusively physical one (i.e., basing the efficacy of Chinese medicine on the same logic as that of biomedicine). Interestingly, however, Chee notes that Chinese researcher Zu Shuxian (in a paper published in 2019) proposed the theory that Chinese animal-based medicine is "derived from the worship of animals" (Chee 2021, 5).

In this light, it can hardly be seen as controversial to claim that much of classical Chinese medicine has a magical component. Much of the ethnography bears this out. Strickmann (2002) shows how cow bezoars, now vital in TCM, were previously sought precisely for their demon-expelling qualities. In his in-depth study of local medicine during the earliest days of Communist China, Frick (1957) likewise claims that "magic and medicine are inseparably associated in the minds of people." In popular thought and in practice, any animal-derived medical substance was considered to have both spiritual-magical *and* material-physical efficacy. However, modern, state-sponsored Chinese medicine emphasizes the latter. Nonetheless, the Communist state has actively popularized local medical traditions such that they are now available to an infinitely larger client base beyond China. Moreover, globalization has brought new products into the (now-) global animal-based medicine market. For example, Chinese road construction teams in the Amazon have created a market for jaguar parts, thus incorporating a new species into the TCM pharmacopoeia (Chee 2021, 7). Indeed, the massive construction projects that form part of the Belt and Road Initiative often work as "giant vacuum cleaners of wildlife" (Nijman, quoted in Chee 2021, 7).

In sum, modern-day Sino-Vietnamese animal-based medicine is an odd, multifaceted mixture of old and new ideas, practices, and substances that is difficult to characterize according to a single classification system, including Descola's ontological types. Some aspects are animistic, others lean towards analogism or even naturalism. In my view, and in line with Descola's typology, the analogistic elements dominate. On this account, I suggest that exploring cultural perceptions of the tiger in the Sino-Vietnamese region is also a means of exploring the differences and similarities between animistic and

26) Descola (2013, 201) writes: "[analogism] is a mode of identification [ontology] that divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms and substances . . . arranged on a graduated scale so that it becomes possible to recompose the system . . . into a dense network of analogies . . . ." He continues: "This immeasurable multiplication of the elementary parts that make up the world is reflected within each of those parts (including human beings), [bringing] the material and the immaterial together . . . in the respective scales of the microcosm and the macrocosm" (Descola 2013, 207).

analogistic cosmologies—not only as ontological types, but also as cultural practices.

V Tiger-bone Medicine: A Contemporary Vietnamese Case

At this point, it may be appropriate to hear what a retired Vietnamese wildlife trader in Hanoi, whom I interviewed in early 2022 (via WhatsApp), had to say about the trade in tiger-derived medicine and how it is prepared. The region in northern Vietnam where he worked as an animal trader is one populated by Kinh, Thai-speaking groups, and Hmong. The Hmong, according to this informant, were the most proficient hunters and therefore very useful as helpers and assistants, but there was no lucrative market for the animals among the Hmong. The animals he caught (or bought) were virtually always sent to Hanoi, where they would fetch the highest price. A popular product is *cao hổ cốt* (what he translated as "tiger-bone glue"), a sticky, gelatin-like substance derived from cooked tiger bone. Noting that when he was young, "tigers were rare [in northwest Vietnam], but people could see them once in a while," he gave a detailed account of how to prepare the glue, why people buy it, and how to sell it:

> First, the meat is taken off from the bones. The [cooked] meat is tasty, but the smell is so bad that you can only take a few bites. Then, the carcass is put in a stream for about ten days. The bones are then cut into small pieces and put in a big pot of water, first to boil and then to simmer. Other animal bones are also added to the mix, including bones from *son dương* (serow) and a single black cat. It is important that the animals [skeletons, carcasses] are added in odd numbers: 1, 3, 5, 7, etc. To make a very strong *cao cốt*, the complete skeletons of three tigers should be used. We learned all this from visiting Chinese people.
>
> The medicine is good for people with aching joints. We believe the medicine works because the tiger is very strong, it is the top predator, and it can move very fast. We always bought tigers from ethnic minority hunters. In 2009, tiger glue sold for about 10 million VND per 100 g in Hanoi. One tiger, plus the correct amount of other animal bones, yields about 1.5 kg of glue. You only sell the glue to relatives because there is no way to tell real glue from fake glue. You must be able to trust the seller.

Much of this account is confirmed in Dr. Đỗ Tất Lợi's (2006) opus magnum about Sino-Vietnamese traditional medicine.[27] In it, he writes:

> [I]n the past, tiger-bone glue was only cooked in the mountains and the forests because the people in the lowlands were superstitious and feared that preparing it in the house would bring misfortune.

27) Dr. Đỗ Tất Lợi is a renowned expert and practitioner of Traditional Vietnamese Medicine (TVM) and author of the standard treatise on the subject. Traditional medicine is considered a science in both Vietnam and China and in 1996 Đỗ Tất Lợi received "The Ho Chi Minh prize for science" for his book and his longstanding research on TVM.

> Now, however, it is possible to prepare it normally in factories. . . . In the mountainous areas, according to traditional practices, people rarely use only tiger bones but add bones from many other animals and plants. When preparing the glue, it is best to use five tiger skeletons, one skeleton of monkey and one of *sơn dương* [serow]. Since the tiger is considered "the king," it should be followed by "two [auxiliary] gods" . . . The carcass should be left for 15–20 days in a stream. After that, the bones should be hung to dry. It was believed that this would "clear out the bad *qi*" [vital substance or energy]. (Author's translation)

The "present" in Đỗ Tất Lợi's account likely spans from the 1960s to the 1970s, which is when he conducted the research for his book (which has been reprinted in Vietnam several times). During this time, wild animals were used to produce traditional medicine in state factories. Because we know very little from this period, we can only conjecture that the system was relatively similar to that established in China during the same period (Chee 2021). It is also possible that tiger bones from Vietnam were sold directly to the TCM industry in China and processed there. In any case, Vietnamese state-employed traditional medicine practitioners were quite familiar with the Chinese system under Mao (see below).

VI The Tiger and the TCM Complex in Broader Context: Culture, Politics, Commerce

Returning to folk conceptions of the tiger in Vietnam and Southern China, it is clear from the accounts of Cadière, Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Hữu Ngọc (Vietnam), and Caldwell (China) that the tiger remained a divine or quasi-divine being well into the early- and even mid-twentieth century. It was certainly not merely perceived as a source of medicine, and definitely not in the Western bio-medical sense of the term. In China, members of the ruling class, mandarins, and noblemen had for centuries used tiger parts and tiger hunting to symbolically express their power. Strassberg (quoted in Marks 2006, 70) demonstrates that this practice dates at least to the writings of Mencius (372–289 BCE). Describing the reign of the Duke of Zhou, held up as an ideal ruler with the Mandate of Heaven, Mencius writes: "The duke of Zhou assisted King Wu of the Zhou dynasty to destroy [Shang] . . . He drove the tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants far away, and the world was greatly delighted" (Marks 2006, 70).

Prior to that, Duke Huan, another ancient paragon of wise rulership, is described in the *Guanzi* as "displaying his control over the wild periphery" by frightening off a tiger, and, "hence asserting his right to rule" (Marks 2006, 71).[28] Marks, following Strassberg,

28) The *Guanzi* is a collective work attributed to the so-called Qi scholars, including Mencius, likely dating to the middle of the fourth century BCE (Bellah 2011, 443–444, 464).

also provides later evidence of similar traditions among the Chinese aristocracy with close ties to the imperial court during the Manchu period. Thus, he notes how "Manchu noblemen and Chinese officials of various ranks had their portraits painted with them seated on chairs draped with a tiger pelt" (Marks 2006, 69). Indeed, this dominance over tigers and other wild beasts was ritually enacted in the yearly autumn hunt of the Manchu rulers, when "hundreds, if not thousands of deer, wild boar, birds of all kinds, and occasionally tigers [were killed]" (Marks 2006, 69).

More than two millennia after Mencius, when Mao initiates the national Dahuyundong campaign with slogans such as "kill the tiger, banish evil," he is knowingly or unknowingly continuing the longstanding tradition of asserting divine power by subjugating wild animals (Coggins 2003, 428). This campaign coincided with a record production of animal products in the state's medicine factories, one of the few sources of foreign currencies for the People's Republic at the time. Chinese medicine under Mao encapsulates many of the paradoxes that continue to characterize the TCM industry today. In the immediate aftermath of the establishment of China's Communist state (1949), many of China's Western and Japan-trained doctors were motivated to finally modernize medical sciences in China and completely abandon the millennia-old TCM tradition, which they regarded as incurably non-scientific. Many openly characterized Chinese medicine at this time as "witchcraft" (Chee 2021, 29–31). However, the sheer number of traditional practitioners and their swift involvement in politics made it hard for the "Western" faction to eliminate them.

Instead, a middle-ground position began to dominate, articulated in the slogan *fei yi, cun yao* ("retain Chinese drugs, abandon Chinese medicine"). This meant, in essence, respecting the existence of an ancient "people's medicine," which had discovered many useful herbs and concoctions over time, while recognizing that the major tenets and discourses of Chinese traditional medicine were unsubstantiated. The task at hand was to scientifically analyze this "great treasure house" (in Mao's words) through modern methods. Unfortunately for those in the "radical Western medicine faction," by explicitly claiming that Chinese medicine could never make any sense through the lens of scientific medicine, they contradicted Mao's dictum, leading to their eventual eradication. In fact, despite *seemingly* positioning themselves in the middle ground (through their slogans etc.), Mao and several others within the top echelon of power preferred Chinese medicine over Western medicine and wished to combine the two (Chee 2021, 32).

This situation explains how the national production of animal-based medicines in the new, Communist understanding of TCM increased exponentially, as did Chinese export of these products, particularly to other East Asian countries. Even when supplies of high-value ingredients for TCM could not be supplied by China itself, it imported

these from other places (notably, rhino horns from Africa) and continued to increase its production of traditional medicine for export until the 1990s. Although there was already an extensive trade in the body parts of tigers and other rare and high-value animals for medicinal purposes in pre-Mao times, the scale and volume of this trade massively increased during the Communist period. In fact, the trade in wild animals was one of the few means for the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) to accumulate foreign currency during its first several decades of existence. A peak period in both domestic consumption and foreign exports of animal-derived medicines can be marked as beginning in 1978, when China's "Open Door Policy" began, and tapering in the early 1990s, when China drastically reduced its trade in wild animals as it ratified the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and joined the World Trade Organization (cf. Mills 2015).

By the early 1990s, however, the tiger and other animal species important for the medicine trade were virtually extinct in the wild (cf. Coggins 2003) and many Chinese medicine firms were already operating with animal parts imported from other countries. According to Dang (1998, 26), in the year 1990, China made a record profit of 700 million USD from the export of medicinal products, a considerable portion of which was animal-based medicine. The exact proportion of these medicinal exports comprised of particular animals is impossible to confirm, but Chee (2021, 73–76) notes that the exports remained very high both during the Great Leap Forward period and during the Cultural Revolution. Dang (1998) also notes, hinting at the well-established trade in TCM products between Communist China and several non-Communist countries, "[that] in South Korea in the year 1988, up to 80% of private hospitals [had made use of] medicines made from Rhinoceros horn." When the journalist and conservation activist J. A. Mills carried out her research on animal trade in South Korea in the early 1990s, she confirmed that whereas TCM clinics and practitioners were still a prominent feature of the national health sector, various bans on animal trade had already rendered the import of animal medicine products very difficult (Mills 2015).

The enormous demand for wild animal products by an increasingly opulent clientele, consisting of nouveau-riche domestic and overseas Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and South (and even North) Koreans, proved an existential threat to the wild tiger in China and Vietnam and contributed to diminishing tiger populations in Laos, Thailand, India, Indonesia and Russia. When, in the early 1990s, Chinese and Vietnamese authorities began to cooperate with Western-based NGOs to protect the tiger (initially perhaps hoping to be able to continue to use them as a resource for traditional medicine production), it was too late to save the wild populations in the two countries.

Conclusion: An Ontological Transition?

A central question addressed in this paper is whether the original impetus for the growing demand for tiger-bone medicine is based on the animistic notion of the tiger as divinity and, hence, whether the notion of the tiger as a source of traditional medicine can be seen as part and parcel of an animistic worldview. We established in the first half of the paper that there is, or has been until recently, widespread folk traditions about the tiger among ethnic Vietnamese (and rural Chinese) very similar to the animistic ideas of indigenous upland groups, as exemplified by the tiger ethnography of the Katu people in Central Vietnam. In a brief ethnographic and historical survey of tiger lore among indigenous groups and rural folks in the Sino-Vietnamese hinterland, we found little evidence of tiger bones (or other animal body parts) being regarded and used as medicine. We did find, however, traces of such ideas and practices existing alongside a predominantly animistic notion of the tiger in rural parts of South China and inland Vietnam (as reported by Caldwell, Cadière, and Nguyễn Văn Huyên in accounts dating from the early- and mid-twentieth century).

I therefore contend that the notion of the tiger as a source of medicine—as manifested in the Sino-Vietnamese traditional medicine complex—developed in China in an intellectual and ontological environment that progressively distanced itself from its animistic roots. Centered on ideas such as the "theory of the five elements," the cosmological dualism of *yin* and *yang*, and the "doctrine of correspondences," this was the intellectual milieu that, in the fourth and third centuries BCE, gave birth to the philosophical-religious complex today labelled Taoism. This ancient Chinese root cosmology, according to some scholars defining Chinese thought well into the twentieth century (see Overmyer, 1993, 981), can be understood as a Sinitic version of the generic ontological type Descola calls analogism.[29)]

Also prominent in this intellectual tradition is the idea that nature's forces may be harnessed and directed by human agency. The use of tiger-bone medicine as a curative and empowering super-tonic in the Sino-Vietnamese medical tradition is a manifestation of this underlying idea of magical causation (as is geomancy, or *feng shui*). A super tonic such as tiger-bone medicine, which is presumed to "balance the cosmic forces of yin and yang," cannot be easily translated into the language of Western biomedicine. Yet, like biomedicine, its healing and potentiating effects are assumed by its users and practitioners to be "natural," objective, and empirical. These effects are inherent in the physical substance itself (tiger bone, in this case) and mediated only by the expert knowledge and skills of the traditional medicine practitioner (and the production process

29) Schipper's (1993) account of Taoist cosmology is perhaps the closest one can come to a concretization of what Descola means by analogism (cf. Descola 2013, 207 [referring to Granet 1968]).

of the medicine), not by any spiritual or divine agency, as in animism.

As such, the TCM conception of the tiger is neither typically animistic nor naturalistic. It is, I propose, in terms of Descola's ontological typology, analogistic. More precisely, it rests on what may be called a "magical theory of reality," where magical causation is elevated to the integrating principle of the cosmos—a cosmos made comprehensible by symbolic associations and analogical correspondences and sustained by human ritual action, such as offerings, animal sacrifices, and the worship of ancestors and divinities. This mode of thought (or, rather, onto-praxis) is not only typical of Sino-Vietnamese analogism, but also characteristic of the theories and practices of natural magic, alchemy, and astrology in medieval and early-modern Europe as well as of what is pejoratively known as "fetishism" in present-day West- and Central Africa and of "traditional medicine" in Africa more generally.[30)]

In sum, I have in this paper proposed, based on anthropological fieldwork among Katuic-speaking upland groups in Vietnam (and Laos) and a review of historical ethnography from Vietnam and China, that it is possible to distinguish two prototypical notions of the tiger and the human-tiger relationship in the region. In one, the tiger is perceived as a divinity or spirit being in animal form. In another, the tiger is perceived as an exceptionally powerful animal whose body parts, particularly bones, can be used for making vitalizing and curative medicines. The former notion is typical of animistic indigenous upland groups; the latter, particularly as manifested in so-called traditional medicine in China and Vietnam, represents an analogistic ontology typical of the Sino-Vietnamese civilization.

I have also provided evidence that suggests that an animistic notion of the tiger has been widespread among the majority populations in China and Vietnam and, thus, that there has been a cultural and historical shift from an animistic toward what I call a magical concept of the tiger in these civilizations. This conceptual shift, I argue, suggests a major, albeit incomplete, ontological transformation from an animistic understanding of reality towards a fundamentally different, analogistic, ontological orientation. I say "incomplete transition" because traces of animism remain evident in the predominantly analogistic traditions of both Vietnam and China. Conversely, analogistic features are present in the animistic cosmologies of the upland minorities in the region, as indicated by the use of magical objects (such as spirit objects, or fetishes) in these populations, as briefly described above.[31)]

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30) The parallels between the Sino-Vietnamese and African preoccupation with traditional (magical) medicine and their common penchant for wild-animal foods ("bush food") are remarkable and deserve further study.

31) Some of these analogistic elements in Katu cosmology, and in Katuic culture more generally, are briefly discussed in Århem, N. (2015) and Århem, K. (2016a).

These preliminary conclusions intimate that the conceptual boundaries between the two ontological types under consideration are elusive and empirically difficult to establish. An account of the transition from animism to analogism, as has been attempted here, is necessarily incomplete. A full account of ontological change is a complex undertaking, requiring painstaking ethnographical, historical, and comparative study of whole regions; one which, in the process, is likely to challenge any typology of ontologies and, possibly, constructively reconsider the concept of ontology itself.[32] In this light, the paper can be considered an exploratory journey through the uncharted conceptual and empirical borderland between animism and analogism in the Sino-Vietnamese region.

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32) I here refer primarily to ontology as defined by Descola (2013), which I find instructive and heuristically useful.

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