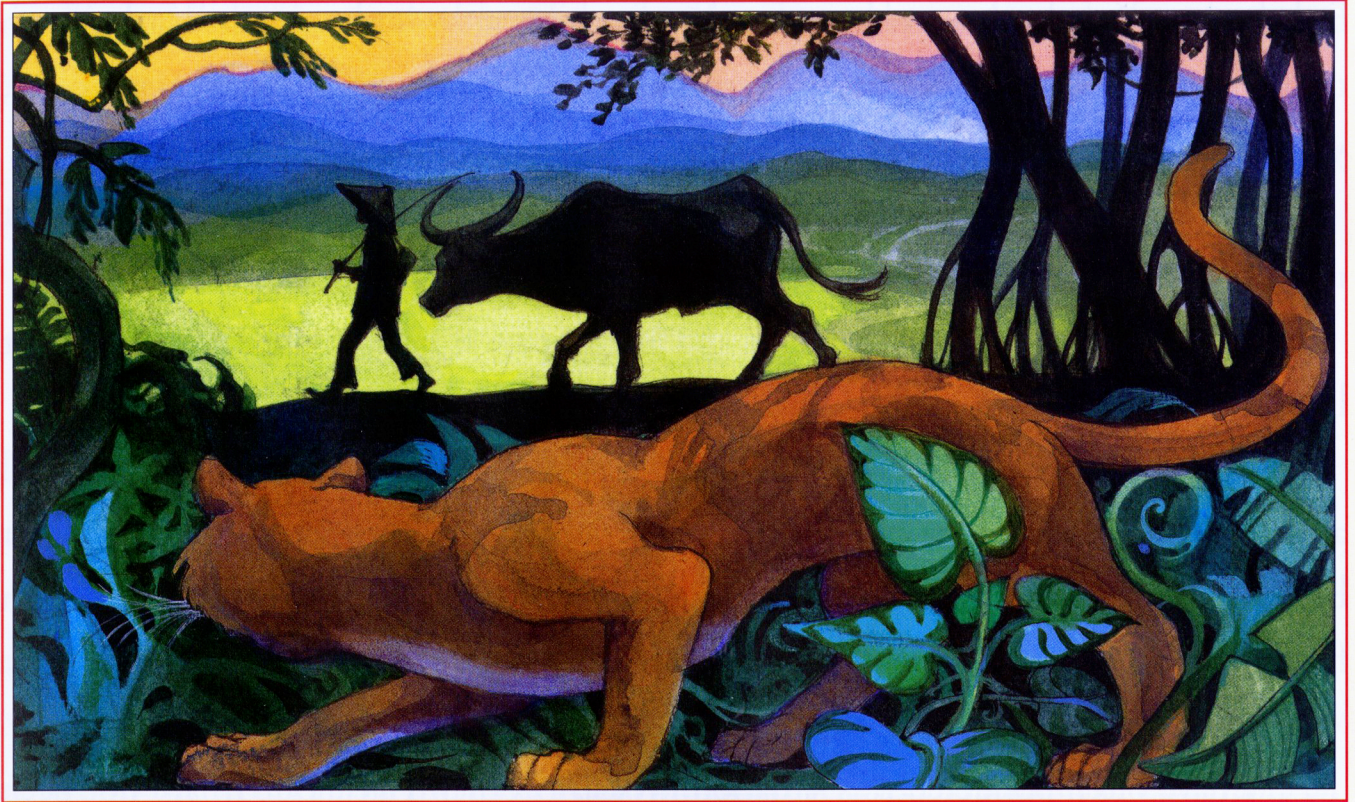




How the Tiger Got Its Stripes

A VERY LONG TIME AGO, when animals could still speak like people, a rice farmer awakened early one morning inside his bamboo hut not far from the jungle-covered mountains. While gray mists swirled over the rice paddies, this farmer led his water buffalo down the dirt trail toward a grazing pasture. Although the water buffalo was many times larger and stronger than the farmer, the slow-moving animal followed obediently. If the buffalo tried to stop to eat some tender young rice plants along the way, the farmer only had to say, “No!” and switch the animal’s nose with a small bamboo stick. Never questioning his small master, the water buffalo walked on.

Soon they arrived at a patch of bright green grass on the other side of the clay dikes that surrounded the rice fields. While the buffalo grazed, the farmer settled down under a mango tree to watch the sun rising over the mountains. As he removed his cone-shaped leaf hat, he watched a flock of boisterous ravens fly from tree to tree and listened to the noisy chatter of playful monkeys. Shrill screams of brightly colored parrots filled the air as the farmer began to eat his breakfast of hot tea, and sticky rice pressed between banana leaves.



Meanwhile, in the shadowy jungle, a tiger awakened. He was ravenously hungry because he had not caught anything to eat in two days. His powerful muscles rippled as he stretched his mighty golden body, which back then had no black stripes. As the tiger stalked out into the sunlight on his big padded paws, he spotted the grazing water buffalo. Greedily he watched the large animal, and he licked his lips as he imagined how delicious a buffalo steak would taste.

But when he spied the small farmer, the tiger paused. Though hunger pangs rumbled in his empty stomach, he itched with curiosity.

“Excuse me, Brother Buffalo,” the tiger said in his deep growly voice, “but I have watched you come here before. Every day this tiny man leads you here and sits beneath the mango tree while you eat the grass. You are many times bigger and stronger than this

little human. Your horns are sharp enough to cut him, and your hooves are hard enough to trample him. The only weapon he carries is a flimsy bamboo switch to slap your face, yet you never stray into the rice paddy or run away.”

The dark gray water buffalo slowly lifted his head. Bits of grass clung to his wet nose. He twitched his ears and swatted a bothersome mosquito with his bushy tail.

The tiger sat back on his haunches and lifted a paw as he continued to speak about his observation.

“And in the rainy season the farmer harnesses your shoulders and forces you to pull a plow through the paddies in mud so deep it tickles your stomach. Or he loads your back with heavy bags of rice and drives you to market. I’ve heard you grunt and moan from the hard work, but still you stay. Why is this, Brother Buffalo?”

The water buffalo swallowed the grass, then he spoke in a smooth, mellow voice.

“I have often pondered this situation myself, Brother Tiger. But I have not been able to solve the puzzle. Perhaps you should ask my master, Mr. Farmer.”

The tiger nodded. He turned to the farmer, who was pouring some hot tea into an empty coconut shell. The farmer rose to his feet, a worried expression clouding his face. If the tiger ate his only buffalo, how would he be able to plow his field next spring?

“Please tell me, Mr. Farmer, what makes Brother Buffalo obey you so willingly?” asked the tiger.

“I will tell you, sir,” the farmer replied. “I have something that gives me power over all animals. It makes them do the hardest work for me. It is called wisdom.”

“Hmmm...how very amazing,” said the tiger. “I would do anything to see this thing you call wisdom. Would you be so kind as to show it to me?”

“Certainly, but it isn’t here with me. I keep it inside a gilded box carved with dragons and a golden phoenix. I must go back to my hut to fetch it.”

“Good,” the tiger said with a sly smile. “I will stay here and watch over the water buffalo for you while you are gone.”

“But, sir, how can I let you do that, when you look as if you haven’t eaten in a long time? My water buffalo would make a delicious meal for you, I’m afraid.”

The tiger smiled his most sincere smile. “I promise not to eat your buffalo while you are away.”

The farmer scratched his chin and shook his head. “Now, it isn’t that I do not trust you, Mr. Tiger, but I have heard your stomach rumble. How can you resist your hunger with such a mouth-watering temptation in front of you, no matter how honorable your intentions? Why don’t you let me tie you up to that coconut palm tree? Then I will be happy to go get the wisdom you want to see.”

The tiger was indeed anxious to see the thing called wisdom, so he gladly agreed to be tied to the tree. But he thought, *When the farmer returns and unties me, I will jump on him and rip him apart with my sharp claws and teeth. After that I will eat his water buffalo. With his magic box of wisdom, I shall command cows and deer and delicious wild boars to lie down at my feet. I shall never have to spend my days hunting for dinner again.*

With a bow the tiger strolled up to the palm tree, stood on his hind feet, and held up his front legs.

“Go ahead and tie me up.”

The farmer unfurled a rope that he sometimes hooked to the buffalo’s nose to lead him about. He wrapped it around and around the tiger’s golden body until the hungry beast was secured to the palm tree. Then the farmer left, but he soon returned carrying something behind his back.

The tiger eagerly peered at the small man.

“Did you bring the wisdom for me to see?”

“Yes, I will show you my wisdom. But I don’t keep it in a box, foolish tiger. It is here in my head with me all the time. Now I will teach you to stay away from my precious water buffalo.”

Quickly the farmer pulled a small burning torch from behind his back and set fire to the weeds at the tiger’s big feet.

“Owww!” The tiger howled as the flames began to burn his paws and lick at the rope.

The smell of the tiger’s singed fur filled the air as the rope turned black. At last it burned in two and fell to the ground, freeing the tiger. As fast as lightning the tiger fled into the deep, dark jungle.

When the tiger felt safe, he stopped at a pool of refreshing mountain water to drink. He saw his reflection and roared. Big black stripes now circled his golden body. The tiger knew he would never forget the magic called wisdom.

Meanwhile, Brother Buffalo, happy that he was saved from being the tiger’s lunch, laughed so hard that he fell and hit his mouth on a rock, knocking out his front teeth.

And this is why the water buffalo has no front teeth and the tiger has stripes.



IN THE PAST, hundreds of tigers roamed Vietnam, but unfortunately many of them were killed in the last war and others were killed by poachers. Today the beautiful tiger is almost extinct in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese word for water buffalo is con trau. A full-grown male can be six feet tall at the shoulders and weigh up to twenty-five hundred pounds.

Con trau raised in the mountains by tribesmen are aggressive fighters. The males (bulls)

