Tigers—Real and Imagined—in Korea’s Physical and Cultural Landscape

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People throughout Korea’s history have valued tigers more as symbols than actual living beings. Pre-modern Koreans assigned a variety of cultural meanings to the tiger—including trickster, divine messenger, and benevolent protector. Yet actual encounters between tigers and humans were frequently defined by violence, and from ancient times various dynasties, most significantly the Chosŏn (1392-1910), pursued wild tigers as threats to the safety of their subjects and as sources of valuable fur. Human population growth, agricultural expansion, and overhunting placed significant pressure on tigers by the late nineteenth century, but tigers’ cultural mystique continued. While Japan ruled Korea as a colony from 1910-1945, nationalists recast the tiger as a symbol of ethnic unity and resistance to imperial rule. This did little to alter prevailing attitudes towards wild tigers, however, as continued hunting and widespread destruction of tiger habitat contributed to their disappearance by the mid-twentieth century. But even in their absence tigers continued to function effectively as cultural emblems. Rather than diminishing the tiger’s symbolic importance, their very elimination encouraged a feeling of closeness and affinity for the animal. Nostalgia for tigers in modern South Korea have led some to consider bringing them back, but the tiger in Korea remains little more than a caricature, a symbol with more importance as a cultural idea than a living member of the natural environment. While considering the longue durée of human-tiger relations on the peninsula, this talk will emphasize the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Aaron Skabelund specializes in modern Japanese history, with an emphasis in the social and cultural history of imperialism, animals, and the military. Dr. Skabelund joined the history department in 2006 after completing a Ph.D. in modern Japanese history at Columbia University in 2004 and a postdoctoral fellowship with the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science at Hokkaido University. His research has also been supported by a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship and the Japan Foundation, among other external and internal fellowships. His first book examines the history of empire—Western and Japanese, human and canine—by analyzing the actual actions and metaphorical deployment of dogs. In a second project, he is exploring the history of the Japan’s post-Second World War military, commonly known as the Self-Defense Force.