

Dragon Legend in Chinese Art Motifs (Jade, Bronze, Porcelain, and Folk Arts)
Chinese Culture and Society Series

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The cultural significance of the dragon in China has made it one of the most wonderful subjects in Chinese art since the Neolithic period. The Chinese dragon is the most distinctive cultural creature in the world civilization. The Chinese dragon image is abstract and concrete; it is a belief and a myth; it has a rooted traditional symbolic meaning and a broader contemporary social interpretation; it has affected the political, social, and economic lives of the Chinese for centuries, and it currently affects art creativity and daily life consumptions. Therefore, the dragon legend is the reflection of Chinese culture and civilization. Dragon culture is one of the most significant representations in Chinese culture and in its art creation (Su, 2000; Lin and Lin, 2000). To understand the dragon legend (the origin, images, and the cultural contents) in China is to understand the soul of Chinese civilization and the evolution of Chinese art motifs. The purpose of this presentation is to depict the evolution of dragon images in various art forms (jade, porcelain, bronze, and folk art) and the interpretation of its symbolism in the cultural context.

Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. Dragon Images in Jade
- III. Dragon Images in Bronze
- IV. Dragon Images in Porcelain
- V. Dragon Worship
- VI. Dragon Robes
- VII. Dragon in Popular Culture
- VIII. Dragon in Folk Arts

Questions about the Dragon Legend in China

1. What are the interpretations of “long,” the Chinese character for dragon?
2. Who were the creators of the Chinese (“Dragon”) race? Why do the Chinese call themselves the descendants of dragon?
3. What does the China’s “first” dragon look like?
4. Why does the dragon have the image of combined animals?
5. What was the earliest dragon’s image in ancient China? Does that image remain the same today?
6. What are the similarities and differences between the concepts and images of the dragon in the East and West?
7. What is the evolution of the Chinese character for dragon? What is oracle bone?
8. Which animals are associated with primitive forms of the Chinese dragon?
9. What is “nine resemblances three turns”?
10. What are some of the characters of the ancient dragon?
11. What is “jade dragon”? What is its religious significance?
12. How did the associations between the dragon and natural phenomena, such as clouds, lightning, and tornadoes, develop?
13. What is the association between the character “deaf” and “dragon”?
14. Why is the number “nine” an auspicious number?
15. What does a dragon robe look like? What is the symbolism for the dragon robe?
16. Is there a system for painting dragons during the Song Dynasty?
17. How many types of dragons are there? What does a walking dragon look like? What does a female dragon look like?
18. How was the dragon image portrayed in ancient bronze during Shang, Zhou, Spring and Autumn, and Warring States Periods (Dynasties)?
19. What is the symbolic meaning for dragon and phoenix?
20. Explain the folk religion portrayed in the T-shape silk painting found in the tomb of the Ma Wang Dui in Han Dynasty. How are the dragon images depicted in the painting?
21. What is the function of the “Green Dragon” in Chinese belief system?
22. Why is dragon a culture animal in Chinese society?
23. Who is the king of sea?
24. Why did the artists paint the dragon on the wall in the temple during Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD)?
25. What is the major difference in the dragon image between Song and earlier (Han and Tang) dynasties?
26. What are the distinctive characteristics of the dragon images during Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties?
27. What is the meaning of the “five claw” dragon?
28. How do the Hakkas in Miaoli, Taiwan, celebrate the Dragon Festival?

The Evolution of Dragon Image in Chinese History

- **Shang** (Ca. 1600–Ca. 1100 BC)
 - Influence from *Hong-Shang* Culture
 - Influence from *Yang-Shao* Culture
 - *Kuei, Pan, Chi, and Giao Long* images in bronze and jade
 - *Jade Long*: ceremonial jade in the shape of a dragon
 - The evolution of the character *Long*
- **Zhou and Western Zhou** (Ca. 1100–250 BC)
 - Horns take cloud shape or ear like morphology
 - Double headed dragon; one head/double bodies
 - Dragon image becomes clear during Western Zhou
 - Dragon body resembles snake; but walking dragon image begins to show up
- **Spring Autumn and Warring States** (770–556 BC)
 - S shape
 - Grains or cloud patterns decorate the body of dragon in jade
 - The Chinese character for Jade Dragon (*Long*)
 - Three dimensional and one dimension motif
 - Believe that dragon can swim
- **Han** (206 BC–220 AD)
 - Applications of the dragon image have broadened to painting, lacquer ware, mirrors, bricks, seals, etc.
 - The T-shape silk painting excavated from the Ma Wang Dui tomb
 - *Cang Long* has horns, mane, tiger-look tail, three craws
 - Walking beast motif
- **Six Dynasties** (Period of Disunity 220–589)
 - Influence of Buddhism
 - Folklore: The Sea Dragon King
 - The fairy's dragon ride
 - Lofty and graceful dragon image
- **Sui and Tang** (589–618; 618–907)
 - Dragons are made into gold or silver
 - Influence from the Middle Eastern
 - Dragons in the court paintings
 - Fast walking dragon image
- **Song** (920–1279)
 - Different approaches of dragons (official image vs. folk art)
 - Numbers of the dragon's claws
 - Return to snake image
 - The dragon image of the Song Dynasty looks closest to the dragon today

- The number of claws vary
 - The dragon wings disappeared
 - Prototype dragon image
- **Yuan** (1279–1386)
 - Clear rule sets out to forbid the commoners to use dragon motifs
 - Regulations for the number of claws of the dragon
 - Small head
- **Ming** (1368–1644)
 - The spirit or the vitality of the dragon image is often synchronized with the strength of different reigns: *Yonglo* (1407–1424), *Xuande* (1426–1435), *Chenghua* (1465–1487), *Jiajing* (1522–1566) & *Wanli* (1573–1620)
 - Dragon’s head and body turn bigger than that of Yuan; good proportion on the overall image
 - Hair and mane pull back to show movement
 - It is in *Xuande* that five claws are set as the official standard for royal dragon
 - Notice other characteristics during different reigns in Ming Dynasty
- **Qing** (1644–1911)
 - *Dragon images of the early reigns of Qing: Kangxi* (1662–1722), *Yongzheng* (1723–1735) & *Qinglong* (1736–1795)
 - Generally speaking, Qing dragon looks older, never the less, Qing dragon conveys energy, dignity, and force
 - Full forehead with bump on it, bulged eyes, horns stretch apart, distinctive nose shape like a lion’s
 - Circular mane
 - Thumb claw separates from the rest of the four claws to form 180 degree apart
 - Powerful and twisted body
 - Powerful facial expression
 - Emperor’s seal, furniture, dragon robes, etc.

Dragon Culture

- I. The legend of dragon culture in Chinese society
- II. Related dragon festivals and celebrations
- III. Modern day expressions pertain to dragon
- IV. Dragon and the Chinese beliefs (beliefs and religion; life philosophy)
- V. Dragon and Chinese folk arts (paper cutting, folk tales, leather shadow play, etc.)

- VI. Dragon images in Chinese textiles (Chinese baby hats, purse, baby carriers, etc. from the Christi Lan Lin's collection)
- VII. Dragon images in Chinese art forms (jade, bronze, and porcelain)

Key Concepts

- The dragon in China is a cultural animal, not a natural animal
- Dragon motifs are found in all kinds of artifacts since antiquity
- Chinese people believe that dragon is a powerful and auspicious being
- Jade dragon is used to pray for rain during drought
- Dragon culture reflects culture integration and assimilation among ancient clans in China
- Dragon culture enhances our understanding of the evolution of Chinese art history and written language
- Dragon worship is a significant culture activity among Chinese minority groups
- The multifold types and variations of dragons in ancient Chinese art are representatives of different forces of nature and deities. The religious conceptions led to the creation of dragon motifs in Chinese art. Hence, dragon in China is closely related to art and religion.

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