

Chinese Mythology: Dragons and their Importance

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This print focuses on the dragon as it appears in Chinese Mythology. Given my Chinese heritage, I have grown up with stories and depictions of dragons. To better understand the symbolic importance of dragons in Chinese culture, I researched the origins of these ancient mythological beings.

Dragons are often depicted playing in the sky; they are said to be the masters of weather, water, and rain. Because of this, the dragon is a favorable, positive, and lucky creature - bestowing fortune and blessings upon the people around them. However, if dragons become upset, they do not act benevolently, performing precisely the opposite of what the people prayed for.

Chinese dragons have often been depicted with animal-like characteristics: the body of a snake, mane of a lion, antlers of a deer, tale of a fish, ears of a cow, belly of a clam, scales of a carp, paws of a tiger, and claws of a hawk. These physical traits grant the dragon behavioral characteristics such as bravery, fierceness, loyalty, and elegance, mirroring the animals they resemble. The number of claws also plays an important role in a dragon's status in the mythical world. The Chinese believe that dragons originated in China with five claws. As the dragons traveled further from China into other Asian countries, they were debased and began to lose their claws. As a result, Korean dragons have four claws and Japanese dragons have three claws.

Here, I portray a five clawed dragon. The color gold symbolizes luck and superiority, and the color blue to symbolizes spring, nature, growth, and optimism. I carved three large scale linocut blocks by hand. Then, using water-based printing ink, I inked, registered and printed each block. The final print shows the complete image and layers of color with gold leafing.

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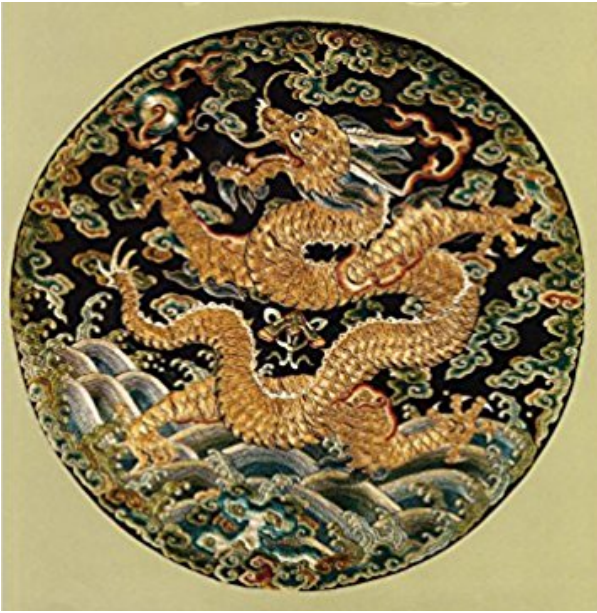


I was born on December 16th, 2000, the Year of the Dragon, as the first generation American from a Chinese family. My first language is arguable; I never spoke the Chinese language as my first, but rather I was raised with the language and culture. The American side of my life however played a larger role in my life. Because of the two languages at once, it became difficult for me to learn any communication skills so the Chinese was dropped. At the age of six, I started to relearn the culture that I gave up. It was decided by my parents that it was time to pick up on the family culture and traditions. To me, learning to read and write Chinese was a difficult and boring process, but it was the stories that I was interested in. The stories that my mother would use as our lessons were intriguing; stories of treasures, adventures, heroes, and monsters, but not your typical types: heroes such as a monkey turned from stone, a boy born again from a lotus, a man who shot nine suns, a monk set on a journey to the west, and many more. These stories always captivated me during my childhood. They were the reason why I looked forward to my lessons in Chinese class. But, again I was to forget those traditional stories and focus on my other studies, unable to look back at these stories and remind myself that this is what sets me apart from others and what I tend to find interesting. Recently, I looked back on these cherished stories that I never knew I had memorized.

These stories were all based on Chinese mythology passed on from many years of cultural traditions. Since there are so many stories to reference in Chinese mythology, I decided to focus on the importance of dragons in Chinese mythology. I have always had an interest in these creatures because I was born on the year of the dragon, and they tend to be a major symbol in the myths.

Dragons are a major symbol in the many legends, myths, and traditions in China. As said in the article, *Under the Influence*, they are often shown playing in the sky with clouds as they are the masters of the weather, such as rain. In Ancient China, the people were heavily dependent on agricultural weather leading them to pray for the right amount of rain so the dragons who lived alongside mankind, providing protection and guidance. Because of this, the dragon is seen to be the basis for all that is favorable and positive in Chinese society. The dragon has always been symbolized as a lucky creature, bestowing fortune and blessings upon the people.

According to the article, *What Do the Colors of the Chinese Dragon Mean?*, there are four different types of dragons, all different in color, meaning, season, and sea. The four different dragons as listed are: blue and green, black and white, red, and yellow and gold. Starting with the blue and green dragon, these colors are associated with spring, nature, growth, harmony, and health as the patron of the East China Sea. The black and white dragon represents a balance such as the *ying* (black) as winter and *yang* (white) as autumn, a patron to both the North and West Chinese Seas. The red dragon is known to be the symbol of the summer, good fortune, and happiness. It is also the patron for the South China Sea. And finally the yellow and gold dragon, the most superior dragon of them all, symbolizing wisdom and wealth. This particular dragon is associated with the imperial family of China, since China's first imperial dynasty called themselves "descendants of the dragon" and are said to possess dragon blood within them. As a result, embroidered dragons feature heavily in imperial clothing (American Museum of Natural History, *Imperial Dragon*). It is said that the Chinese dragons spend their time on the ocean floor during the winter and later rise to the heavens during the spring with the formation of clouds, thunder, and rain for the lands. From sea to sky is what's embroidered on the imperial robes.



Not only are the different meanings of each dragon important, but also the small details that most people would disregard. As mentioned in the article, *Dragon Imagery in Chinese Imperial Textiles*, the number of claws that each dragon has determines its status in both the mythical world and imperial court. The five clawed dragon is considered the most important, associated only with the emperor and empress. The four, three, and two clawed dragons apply to those with lower social status in the imperial court. Not only do these small differences represent the status of the people and dragons, but also the surrounding Asian cultures. In the article, *New World Encyclopedia*, the number of claws tells the difference between the types of dragons in the surrounding Asian cultures. The Chinese believed that their dragons started with five claws because they were the most superior. As the dragons traveled farther away from their land, they began to lose their claws. The further they flew, the more they lost. This results in the difference that Korean dragons have four claws while the Japanese dragons have three claws.

Since dragons symbolize the power of the royal families, dragons are thoroughly featured in the architecture of the Forbidden City. The most prominent part of the city involving dragons is the Nine Dragon Wall, the number nine being one of the lucky numbers in China. This wall in the Forbidden City was built to block the interior of the city from those who were not of imperial status. Everywhere, the Nine Sons of the Dragons are used as decor in Chinese architectural designs. These nine decorations include: *Bixi*, *Qioniu*, *Yazi*, *Chaofeng*, *Pulao*, *Chicken*, *Bi'an*, *Suanni*, and *Fuxi* (China Highlights, Chinese Dragons).



The symbol of dragons are also widely used during the Chinese holidays. During the Chinese New Year, dragon dances are performed for the audience to enjoy. The people hope that the dancing will bring them favorable weather, luck, and drive away evil spirits for the new coming year (China Highlights, Chinese Dragons). The making of both the structure of the dragon and choreography of the dance is also thought out thoroughly. The dragons can be made into different forms such as the cloth dragon, grass dragon, fire dragon, bamboo dragon, and wooden dragon. The longer the dragon and dance, the better luck it will bring for the new year. Therefore, the custom goes on.

According to China Highlights, The Year of The Dragon, every year within a 12-year cycle of the lunar calendar is represented in Chinese mythology by one of 12 animals. In order, the Chinese zodiac includes: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Of all twelve animals that make up the traditional signs of the Chinese zodiac, the dragon is the only mythical creature. Based on personality descriptions, dragons have a reputation of being hot headed and sharp-tongued because of their beliefs of having the most dominant and ambitious traits. Dragons are gifted with courage, intelligence, and the will to take risks. However, dragons do not consider themselves irritating and arrogant as they strive for a smooth future. According to Chinese tradition, when the year of your birth sign comes around after the twelve year cycle, it is considered to be bad luck. During that year, general aspects of your life will not go well such as love, health, career, and finance.

I remember at the age of twelve, I was told to be cautious year round. To prevent further "bad luck," I was to wear red all day, everyday, all year long. To do so, I wore a red necklace with a jade dragon pendant tied well in order to never come off. I personally do not believe in these types of superstitions, but I found the tradition to be quite interesting to participate in so I was open to the suggestions. I also do not apply dragon personality traits to myself. While I never considered myself hot headed or sharp tongued, I partially agreed in terms of intelligence

and risk taking. I still find the cultural beliefs and traditions fascinating today. Hearing what the family that I am surrounded by have to say on suspicious aspects on life, but not necessarily agreeing with them. I find it interesting to reflect on their thoughts and reasons to understand why they concluded themselves with those beliefs. The beliefs that have run thru with this family that has carried on with me is exciting to have the knowledge of the chinese culture that I originate from.

The importance of mythology in general is that these myths were used to justify existing traditions, customs, social systems, religious rituals, weather, morals, and much more. From my personal experience, traditions such as celebrating the New Year, customs like eating long noodles for a longer life, social systems as portrayed in the historical dramas, religious rituals such as praying to dead loved ones on the 4th of April, praying to the dragons for a better year of weather, and the morals of the stories that I was to learn in my childhood. All these aspects of Chinese mythology no doubt made an impact on my life. These beliefs gave reason to what my family has done for the majority of their lives and into mine. Not only to my life, not only just Chinese mythology, but all other mythologies. They gave reason and meaning to the world for others. Myths came before the arts, written words, languages, literatures, religions, philosophies, and sciences. Mythology was used as the psychology of the culture's shared unconscious. The mythology of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Norse, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Africans, Native Americans, and so much more, provided them with stories to tell for the many generations to come.

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