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## Dragons and Tigers

Many countries have used and still use the image of an animal as a symbol of national pride. The United States of America is symbolized by the bald eagle. The bear stands for Russia's might. And, up until 1912, China had the dragon emblazoned on its flag. A significant difference between these countries, though, is that the Chinese have consistently used the dragon in a relatively unchanged form as its symbol even though the image held various meanings and purposes within different time periods of China's history. The dragon has long been a symbol of China and things Chinese. In fact during the Qing Dynasty<sup>1</sup> (1644-1911CE), the image on China's flag was a dragon on a plain field. It was only after 1911 that the dragon lost its prominence as the focal symbol of China because of the government's attempt to modernize and distance itself from imperial rule. At the same time it seems that the dragon lost favor with artists. Other icons, such as the tiger, have also been used within Chinese culture since the Neolithic period (c. 5<sup>th</sup> millennium-18<sup>th</sup> century BCE). In the geomantic system of feng shui, the tiger is seen as the balancing symbol of the dragon. But in contemporary art, the tiger seems to be used primarily as a folk symbol, and the dragon, until very recent times, was rarely used at all.

We have artifacts depicting images of the dragon that date from the Neolithic Period, a time when animism was practiced. Scholars note that the dragon may have once been an actual terrestrial lizard with the ability to raise up

on its hind legs when excited or attacked (Ball 194; Lim 35). Even so, the dragon was likely an imaginary creation derived from the image of one animal, or it was an amalgamation of animals, such as the lizard, crocodile, snake, horse or ox (Keverne 81; Yang 10-12). The *lung*, which, according to Ball and Williams, is the only authentic type of dragon, is said to have the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a rabbit, the ears of a cow, the neck of a snake, the belly of a frog, the scales of a carp, the claws of a hawk, and the paw of a tiger (Ball 191; Williams 133). Long associated with water, the dragon could merely be a modified form of the alligator, a creature that is occasionally found in the Yangtze River today (Williams 132-3). The pig, the domestic animal that is closely related with man's daily life and production within an agrarian society, best fits the description of dragon. It has been postulated that the head and some features of the dragon may have been derived from the pig, while the body form was borrowed from the snake. Keverne describes a piggish dragon that has a round mouth and long lips, a flat face, and a prominent nose with two nostril holes at the front, and a long mane on the neck and spine (81-3).

Further evidence supports how the dragon image is a conglomerate of animal forms found in China. For example, figure 1 is a rubbing from a stamped tomb tile dated from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-221 CE); on this figure it appears as if the prancing horse has been drawn from observation. However, ancient Chinese writings provide us with more than a visual account of what the artist saw when producing the horse. Historians remark that during the Han

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<sup>1</sup> My references show dates that are similar rather than exact dates; so for the purposes of this paper I will use the annotated chronology of Chinese historical periods, dynasties and reigns from

period dignitaries from Ferghana, in central Asia, gave as gifts to the emperor of China horses that were more powerful horses than those of the Mongolians. These horses were “prized war steeds, with long, narrow heads, large eyes and nostrils, and imperiously arched necks” (Fong 5). Figure 2 depicts, in the round, the image of one of these “flying horses.” This image is attributed to the horses of Ferghana, known as the “celestial” breed (Honour 265), and also dates from the Han period. Figure 3 shows a striding dragon that dates from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (219-580 CE). This dragon, which resembles the image of the horse, is likewise composed of rounded and curved shapes. The artist that depicted a “heavenly dragon horse” conceived the horse in a dragon-like form, or as a supernatural equine beast. Figures 1 through 3 show how artists worked: they neither relied solely on life forms nor on imaginary forms; they relied on both life forms and their imaginations to create a contemporaneous design.

Likely, the image of the dragon developed independently in several places within China at the end of the Neolithic Period in accordance with local graphic conventions and agrarian lifestyles. Since the origin of the Chinese dragon is not entirely clear, the meaning or purpose of the dragon fluctuates throughout its history in China. In fact, the dragon is the earliest object of Chinese mythology, chief of all scaly reptiles, an emblem of guardianship and vigilance, and an imperial symbol (Morgan 3-7; Williams 138). One account of the purpose for the creation of the dragon states that P’an Ku, the Chinese Adam, called the Azure Dragon to aid in the creation of the sun, moon and stars (Morgan 3). Thus the dragon’s “celestial” title is born. In addition, images of the dragon are connected

to agricultural fertility through water and clouds (Keverne 82; Lust 264; Williams 132-3; Yang 14).

It was during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (1260-1911 CE) that the dragon became an imperial symbol. But because of its long history and positive attributes, its depiction by ordinary people (especially on clothes) did not wane; however, the use of the dragon was seen as an encroachment on the imperial authority. Even though the rule of the Yuan emperor was brutal and many orders were issued to dissuade ordinary people from using the dragon, the emperor was forced to make compromises in the dragon's use. Hence, the dragons used in the design of the palace and imperial clothes would have five claws (figure 4), dragons used by the upper princes would have four claws, and the dragon of lesser princes and officials would have three claws. The Yuan ruler's stipulations even changed the name of the animal. A five-clawed dragon was still called a dragon, but a four-clawed dragon was called a python. It must be remarked, however (as seen in figure 5), that from the Shang Dynasty (1766-1111 BCE) to the Five Dynasties (907-960 CE) most Chinese dragons had only three claws (Qiguang 73).

Classical Chinese authors, religious and philosophical thinkers, and imperial figures further abstracted the image and meaning of the dragon. For example, Taoists believe that the dragon is a mysterious or spiritual symbol. In tombs that date from the Zhou Dynasty (1111-221 BCE), the image of the dragon is wedded with that of the tiger. The two stand for yin-yang<sup>2</sup>, east and west, and

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<sup>2</sup> It was only from the Northern and Southern Dynasties onward that the ubiquitous *taiji* diagram (yin-yang symbol) came into being.

the elements fire and metal (Little 130). According to a legend in Shiji (Records of Grand Historian), Confucius visited with Lao Zi (Lao Tzu), the great Taoist.

After the visit Confucius said,

Birds, fly, fish swim, animals run. The running animals can be caught in a trap, the swimmers in a net and the flyers by an arrow. But there is the Dragon: I don't know how it rides on the wind or how it reaches the heaven. Today I met Lao Tzu and I can say that I have seen the dragon (Sima, vol. 7, p. 2140).

It seems that Confucius meant to say that Lao Tzu was, in fact, a dragon. A different interpretation reads that when Confucius met Lao Tzu, he said, "I saw a dragon today. It condenses into an entity and disperses into nothing. It rides on cloud, appears and disappears." It is read here that Confucius meant that the dragon was only a drifting patch of cloud or watery vapor (Yang 14).

Additionally, Confucians often take the dragon as a concrete emblem of the emperor, who guarantees the order of the cosmos and the continuation of convention. It is interesting to note that numerous Chinese emperors claimed to have descended from a dragon, while the mothers of numerous emperors claimed to have conceived from a dragon father (Qiguang 77). In fact, Ball relates that the Chinese emperors sat on a "dragon throne," wore a "dragon robe," rode in a "dragon cart," and slept in a "dragon bed" (191). It is clear that the Chinese dragon was more than a concrete form; it was an intangible, spiritual and sacred creature and an abstract concept used for socio-economic, religious, philosophical or imperial reasons.

Just as the dragon has a long history as an icon in China, so, too, does the tiger. Tigers were very common in ancient times. A cast bronze plaque showing a tree and a tiger was made in the third or fourth century BCE (figure 6). The motif of fighting animals stylized to fit into a rounded shape is derived from the animal art of Central Asia (Tregear 49). Early Chinese people used a tiger's-claw charm to give the wearer the courage of the tiger and protect the wearer from sudden fright (Morgan 133). The tiger is taken as an emblem of magisterial dignity and sternness. It is used as a model for the courage and fierceness that should be characterized in a soldier, as is evidenced by the fact that soldiers used to paint a tiger's head on their shields or adorn port-hole covers in forts with a tiger's head. The tiger was also embroidered on the robes of some grades of military officers (Williams 398). Interestingly, in tombs that date from the Zhou Dynasty, the tiger image appears alongside that of the dragon (figure 7) as two important elements in *feng-shui*, literally wind and water. The tiger represents one of the two currents running through the earth, and the other is the green dragon (Ball 269-271, 661; Williams 178-9).

The dragon and the tiger share a long history within China's culture of the Chinese. Only in the twentieth century did they fall out of favored use in China. In the eighteenth century, the triangular flag with a dragon, the sign and symbol of the imperial Manchu, was first adopted by the Chinese to distinguish their navy, that consisted of foreign made ships, from foreign navies. The dragon was the sign and symbol of the Manchu, which was the ruling power. However, after the establishment of the Republic this flag was replaced with an oblong flag

composed of five horizontal red, yellow, blue, white and black stripes representing the Manchus, Chinese, Mongolians, Mohammedans, and Tibetans, respectively (Ball 242; Williams 189-190). Anything that contained the image of a dragon—public or private—was mercilessly destroyed to purge the new republic of the Manchu dragon (Lim 96). China turned to Japan and the West in an attempt to modernize and industrialize. It was this Western influence that was central to China's development in twentieth century (Bernhart 295-354; Tregear 188-201), and which led to the modernization movement in contemporary art in which the traditional signs and icons of the dragon and tiger were suppressed.

Yet, the tiger is still evident in contemporary art. Zhang Shiyong, head of the Creativity Unit at Sichuan Provincial Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting Academy, specializes in tiger paintings, which are prominent in his native province of Guangzhou (Silbergeld 179). Shao Fei, a contemporary artist and member of the taboo-breaking Star group, depicts an energetic toddler that dances around a tiger's tail. The piece, in ink and watercolor on paper, is constructed very much in the traditional style; however, the image was inspired by a folk-art product—a child's "tiger" pillow toy from the rural Shanxi Province (Cohen 142). The establishment of a New Year's painting department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Liu Shaohui also encourages students to learn the "old" forms to encourage the students to retain authentic features in creating new Chinese art with the use of folk figures, such as the tiger pillow. Cohen notes that "artists all over China collect folk materials, either as important ethnographic

artifacts or as charming exotica” (149). The collected materials are then used as subject matter for contemporary art works.

While the tiger is seen in contemporary art, today the dragon image is rarely seen. There are still occasions, however, where the image of the dragon is used to commemorate happy occasions. For important events the dragon dance is performed using a costume that has an enormous head and serpentine body. Skilled dancers bring the dragon to life by making it writhe and curl; dancers twist and turn to the beat of gongs and drums. The dragon dance, though, is less common today and has become less popular than the lion dance (Lim 94).

The dragon fell out of favor as an important icon or sign in contemporary Chinese art. The catalog for the show “Reckoning with the Past” suggests there are four modalities of historical knowledge in contemporary Chinese art: remembering, which is concerned with history; traducing, which seems to be a position of Cynical Pop; forgetting, where history is blurred into being unremembered or forgotten; and outside history, which attempts to stand outside a preoccupation with history (Knight 18-20). These modalities, coupled with the backlash against the Manchu rule, help to explain the lack of the image of the dragon and tiger in recent times. I find it is curious that these icons and symbols which once held such prominence have only recently returned to represent China and things Chinese.









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