

Qiguang Zhao Series Works

Dragons, East and West

Qiguang Zhao



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To my parents

Professor Zhao Jingyuan and

Professor Wang Shuxian

With deepest love and respect

Qiguang

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

CXJ

Xu Jian, *Chu Xue Ji* (A Guide to Learnings), rpt. Taibei: Xinxing Book Co., 1972.

GJTSJC

Chert Menglei, *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (A Classified Collection of Ancient and Modern Books), comp. 1727, rpt. Taibei: Ting Wen Book Co., Ltd. 1977.

TPYL

Li Fang, et al, *Taiping Yulan* (An Imperial Classified Readings of the Taiping Period), comp. 983, rpt. Taibei: The Commercial Press Ltd., 1968.

YWLJ

Ouyang Xun and Wang Shaoying, ed., *Yiwen Leiju* (Reference of Arts and Literature), comp. 636, rpt. Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Co., 1965.

ZZJC

Zhuzi Jicheng (Selected Works of Great Ancient Scholars), rep. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Co., 1986.

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CHAPTER 1

Our Approaches to Dragonology

Dragons do not actually exist – none ever did exist. Nevertheless, beliefs in their actuality, ideas of their images, and descriptions of their activities have prevailed all over the world since antiquity, and have attained a certain reality through historic, literary, mythological, folkloristic, social, psychological, and artistic representations. Few symbols saturate human civilization so broadly and thoroughly as those of the dragon: proudly flicking its tail across the tapestries of Bhutanese courts, elatedly tossing its mane over Chinese New Year parades, vividly emblazoned on the great shields of European kings, copiously bleeding from the deadly thrusts of many archetypal heroes, furiously roaring on the “Day of Judgment” – dragons are creatures both ubiquitous and enigmatic.

The dragon is known in many other parts of the world: in Hanoi, which was once known as the Dragon City; in Iceland, where the god Loki has associations with a female dragon; in the British Isles, where there are dragon caves and dragon-haunted lochs; and in Hawaii, where all the dragons are descended from the mother goddess Mo-o-inanea, “the self-reliant dragon.”^[1]

[1] Richard Cavendish, ed., *Man, Myth, and Magic*, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1983, 695.

The dragon represents one of humanity's first known attempts to express the dualism of nature and society within a consistent framework. A complete account of the dragon would represent the scope and depth of the expression of humankind's aspirations and fears over the past thousands of years: For the dragon symbol has evolved with human civilization, and has left a mark on almost every material and intellectual achievement of world culture. Scholars have noticed the phenomenon and have done a great amount of work on the subject, but dragonology is not yet an established study. International scholars have done, and are still doing, their work about dragons independently. "Dragonologists"^[1] have not possessed a sense of academic belonging and have not established a common terminology. Dragonologists talk of themselves as mythicists, folklorists, psychologists, anthropologists, iconologists, theologians, paleontologists, archaeologists, zoologists or literary critics, who have just happened to select dragon studies as a specialty within their own fields. Most dragonologists have made their research on an original basis, observing the flying creature from a level ground without standing on one another's shoulders.

To remedy this state of affairs, dragonology ought to be established as a subject in its own right, by bringing together literary, folkloristic, and psychological theories into a common "frame of reference." This study will form and develop arguments about comparative dragonology on the basis of other scholars' work and my first hand research into dragons. The more I study the dragon, the more I realize that these arguments are only a

[1] No one has yet acknowledged this title because dragonology has not yet come of age.

few of the many possible approaches to our branch of learning. I have not found, and probably will not be able to find, a unique approach to dragonology since it opens into numerous disciplines and approaches.

The present study will compare and analyze the morphology and symbolization of the Eastern and Western dragons, and treat them as one of the highest crystallizations of human imagination, psychology, culture, ethics, mythology, folklore, and wisdom. Some “Finnish historical-geographical method” might be discernible, but the present study as a whole does not belong to the so-called “Finnish School,”^[1] which holds that a tale or an image that has been found in a great number of variants among different peoples must have originated in one time and one place, and that the “wave-like” diffusion of the tale or image occurs over an expanding geographical area. Rather, I draw attention to theme, incident, phenomenon, and religious/ideological belief in different cultures. As far as dragons are concerned, these cultures may have strong or limited influence upon each other. The purpose of our examination is to reveal and compare dragons’ multiple appearances and meanings, not to identify their geographical origin or wave-like diffusion. This aim will manifest itself in the end-result, but not in the process. In other words, influence may be discussed, but not to discover origin or direction of diffusion. Three distinctions will help in the study of

[1] The comparative folklorist of the Finnish School endeavors to reconstruct the history of a folktale or a folk image. The standard works about the Finnish School are Kaarle Krohn, *Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926, and Roger Welsch, *Folklore Methodology*, Austin: University of Texas press, 1971.

the dragon:

1. The distinction between image (appearance) and symbol (implication), i.e. the difference between what the dragon looks like and what it symbolizes. Each dragon is to be seen as being made up of a physical substance and an abstract symbol.

2. The distinctions between esoteric and exoteric factors (I will define them later), which will be extended to the antithesis between positive and negative, native and alien, good and evil, fire and water, demonic imagery and apocalyptic imagery, symbolized respectively by the Eastern and Western dragons. The contrast between esoteric and exoteric may be understood as that between indigenous and exogenous. In a later part of this chapter, we will see that the esoteric and exoteric add a group sense of belongingness to the more general concept of positive and negative.

3. The distinction between dragons in myth, in folktale, and in legend, i.e. the taxonomy of mythological and folkloristic genres.

The three distinctions complement and condition each other, and their combination organizes the contrast of Eastern and Western dragons. In other words, the comparison and contrast of dragonic phenomena will be described by three coordinate axes: esoteric vs exoteric, the system of signs, and the taxonomy of dragon narratives. Naturally, other critical approaches can also be applied to comparative dragonology. This frame of reference aims at offering an example of the study of comparative dragonology and does not intend to draw boundaries around itself. As a matter of fact, in the process of my study, general literary criticism, folkloristic methods, and psychological approaches are

interlocked with the three distinctions.

I will describe how Chinese dragons resemble one another but suggest different emotional and abstract ideas in different contexts, while most Western dragons have different appearances but often denote a single concept – evil. Western dragons’ great variety of appearances and their essential unity of symbolic meaning contrast sharply with that of their Eastern counterparts. In other words, East Asian dragons in appearance are homogeneous, but as symbols, they are heterogeneous, while Western dragons are heterogeneous in appearance but homogeneous as symbols. We may say that Eastern dragons are homogeneous as signifiers and heterogeneous as signifieds, while Western dragons are homogeneous as signifieds and heterogeneous as signifiers:

	Eastern dragons (East Asia)	Western dragons (Middle-east and Europe)
appearance	homogeneous (nine classic resemblances)	heterogeneous (arbitrary combinations of reptiles, birds, and other animals)
symbolic content	heterogeneous (different in myth, folk religion, and folktale)	homogeneous (evil or obstacle to overcome in all narratives)

To avoid confusion I will use more general terms such as appearance, symbol, image, and implication instead of “signifier”

and “signified.” I view the dragon as a system of signs in mythological, folk, and literary contexts. Each sign is to be seen as being made up of a physical form (appearance, capacity, and scope of activity) and a symbolic content (implication, meaning, and concept). When we contrast the appearance of Chinese dragons with the shapes of Western dragons, we are referring to their forms. When we discuss their evil or beneficent natures, we consider them as symbolic contents. The dragon is a unity of form and content. For example, in Chapter Three we will see that the European dragon’s physical attribute of spitting fire (form) manifests itself as a symbol of evil (meaning), and in Chapter Five the Chinese dragon’s attribute of summoning rain (form) is transformed into a symbol of vigor and prosperity (meaning).

Another important concept of my study lies in esoteric and exoteric factors. Wm. Hugh Jansen was one of the first folklorists to use these terms.^[1] Jansen, like his fellow folklorists Henri Gaidoz, Paul Sebillot, Archer Taylor, A. A. Roback, and Ed Cray, is concerned with the specific oral traditions used by one group in reference to another. The esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself. The exoteric is what one group thinks of another. With the dichotomous concept of the esoteric and the exoteric, I intend to argue that the dragon acts not only as a unifying force in terms of one group’s identity (esoteric) but also as a divisive force in terms of molding or confirming one group’s attitudes towards another group (exoteric). To some extent, the esoteric

[1] See Wm. Hugh Jansen, “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore,” *Journal of Folklore Studies*, Vol. 2, 205-11. Also Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965, 45-51. My definition of esoteric and exoteric factors is broader than Jansen’s.

Chinese mythological dragon as a symbol belongs to a divine world as indicated by the forms it assumes through the workings of the human imagination, while the exoteric Western dragon as a symbol takes part in a demonic world that is utterly repulsive as an object of desire.

The concept of esoteric and exoteric includes not only intergroup relationships but a society's attitudes towards its own social and natural conditions. For example, I believe that the typical image of a European dragon bleeding from the deadly thrusts of the archetypal hero reflects not only the traditional European people's attitude towards the pagan or exoteric world, but also their concepts about social, natural, and psychological obstacles inside their own society, which I also call exoteric factors. Similarly, the esoteric factor may be found in a Chinese dragon flicking its tail across the tapestries of the ancient Chinese courts, which symbolizes not only the Chinese emperor's chauvinism towards his "barbarian neighbor," but also the Chinese people's esoteric concepts of authority, harmony, nature, stratification, and divinity. Esoteric and exoteric factors often need concrete expression to organize their abstract implications. As far as comparative dragonology is concerned, the concentrated expression of esoteric and exoteric factors rests with water and fire, which dominate many Eastern and Western dragons' antithetical implications. As we will see later in this chapter, an approach to "Oriental hydraulic despotism" may help us to explain the relationship of water and social organization.

With all our expansion of the concept of esoteric and exoteric factors, we must not forget their point of departure: The esoteric factor frequently stems from the group sense of