

Dragons as Talismanic and Totemic Creatures

The Chinese dragon originated in the Neolithic period, in stylized depictions of natural creatures that evolved into mythical animals during the Bronze Age of the first millennium BCE. Perceived as a powerful serpentine reptile with talismanic and totemic powers, these sinuous and graceful forms of dragons were carved into jade or cast onto ritual bronze vessels in three-dimensional forms or coiled shapes, creating stylized geometric patterns. Their presence on ritual objects suggests their ceremonial status in early belief systems.

Dragons as Rulers of Weather and Water

Since ancient times, Chinese dragons have been strongly associated in popular belief with life-giving rain and weather. They are believed to be the rulers of moving bodies of water, such as storms, seas, and river waves. The Dragon King known as Longwang is the dispenser of rain as well as the zoomorphic representation of the masculine *yang* power of generation. This association with water and weather links the dragon to agriculture and, by extension, prosperity and abundance.

Dragons as Symbols of Heavenly Power

During the late Bronze Age, in the late first millennia BCE, the Azure Dragon emerged as the primary figure among four celestial deities. It is regarded as the guardian of the East, along with the White Tiger in the West, the Vermilion Bird in the South, and the Black Tortoise (a tortoise intertwined with a snake) in the North. Each of the creatures is closely associated with an asterism, or grouping of stars (the dragon symbolizes the eastern asterism of constellations), as well as a cardinal direction, a color, and other aspects of the universe, including a season of the year. The dragon was thought to possess the power to control the sky, and therefore was commonly depicted as airborne, sometimes among clouds.

Dragons as Deities and Guardians in Religious Art

The popular cults in China were for the most part incorporated into organized Daoism, and many popular divinities—including the Dragon King, a god of water and weather—were absorbed into the hierarchy of the Daoist pantheon. Dragons help communicate between the realms of heaven and earth and are often depicted in paintings as the steeds for immortals. When Buddhism spread throughout China, its visual language was adapted to suit Chinese culture. Naga, a snake-like mythical creature that originated in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, was intermingled with Chinese dragon forms and served as a guardian in Buddhist art, often shown holding a Chintamani jewel.

Dragons as Auspicious Creatures in Popular Culture

During the late imperial dynasties, dragons remained one of the most enduring and ubiquitous motifs in Chinese popular culture and secular art. The mystical and ritual powers they held in earlier periods had been diluted to some degree, and they were primarily revered as benevolent and auspicious creatures. Dragons were often depicted on decorations for celebrations such as the Chinese New Year, to attract good fortune for the coming year and to serve as neutral guardians.

Dragons as Symbols of Imperial Power

Ever since the Han dynasty emperor Liu Bang (r. 202–195 BCE) claimed to have been conceived when his mother encountered a dragon, the formidable creature gradually began to be associated with rulers and used as a symbol to represent imperial power. Every emperor referred to himself as the “heavenly son of the real dragon,” and the beast’s image was used to decorate palaces, imperial furniture, clothes, and daily utensils. During the late Qing dynasty in the 1800s, the dragon was even incorporated into the national flag.

Dragons as Icons of the Clouded Past

The dragon is still a ubiquitous image in China today and has been intricately woven into the fabric of people's day-to-day life. In art, they are often stylized to a degree that they are no longer recognizable as the magical and potent creatures of ancient times. As dragons have increasingly become commonplace—stereotypical icons of a clouded past—some Chinese thinkers and artists have begun to think profoundly about the fading of the mystery and spiritualism of the creature, an effort to retrieve the true soul of the dragon.

Dragons as the Primary Creatures of the Chinese Zodiac

The dragon is the primary creature of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac, which is used to designate years in the lunar calendar. In order, these animals are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. People came to believe that their character and destiny were related to the animal associated with the year of their birth. The grouping emerged in literature as early as the 3rd century BCE, with the earliest known set dating to the 5th century BCE. At first, the animals were either in naturalistic forms, or hybrids depicted as robed human bodies with animal heads. Later, another form emerged in the early 6th century, though rare, in which each animal appears as a miniature sculpture on the hat of a court official.