


A cross-cultural analysis of dragon symbolism in east Asia

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Abstract: This article examines the cultural and mythological significance of dragons in China and other East Asian countries. It analyzes the historical roots of dragon symbolism and its influence on art, literature, and religion. Special attention is given to a comparative analysis of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean dragons, highlighting their shared features and distinctions. Using the methodology of comparative cultural studies, the study aims to reveal the role of dragons in shaping Eastern philosophical and cosmological concepts. Leading scholars in Oriental studies published before 2010 base the research on works. Dragons, as mythological creatures, not only reflect cultural traditions but also serve as powerful symbols bridging the past and present.

Keywords: Dragons, China, East Asia, mythology, culture, symbolism, Oriental studies.

Introduction: The dragon holds a unique place in East Asian cultures, serving not only as a mythological creature but also as a potent symbol embodying the values and worldview of the region's peoples [1, p. 15]. Unlike Western traditions, where dragons are often associated with destruction and evil, Eastern cultures perceive them as symbols of wisdom, power, and nobility [2, p. 30].

The Chinese dragon (long) is typically depicted as a long, serpentine creature with four claws, capable of flight due to its magical nature. In Japanese culture, dragons (ryū) carry slightly different connotations and are frequently associated with water. Korean dragons (yong), in turn, are regarded as patrons of fertility and rain. These variations underscore the richness of Eastern mythological traditions and their enduring relevance in modern society.

The purpose of this article is to explore the cultural and mythological significance of dragons in China and other Eastern countries, as well as to conduct a comparative analysis of their depictions. This will provide deeper insight into how dragon symbolism influences various aspects of Eastern societies, including religion, art, and literature.

Literature Review

Research on Eastern dragons has a long history. Chen Yongxia's *Dragons in Chinese Culture* [1] thoroughly

examines the evolution of the dragon's image in Chinese mythology and its impact on art and religion. The author emphasizes the uniqueness of the Chinese dragon (long), which differs markedly from Western interpretations.

In *The Dragon in Korean Mythology* [3], Kim Sung-hee analyzes the characteristics of Korean dragons and their connection to shamanic traditions. The author notes that Korean dragons are often linked to aquatic elements and are considered protectors.

Japanese scholar Takashi Yamamoto, in *Japanese Dragons and Their Symbolism* [4], explores Shinto and Buddhist influences on the dragon's image in Japan. Yamamoto highlights the significance of dragons in Japanese folklore and art, particularly in woodblock prints and temple architecture.

Cross-cultural studies, such as M. Lafaye's *A Comparison of Eastern and Western Dragons* [2], provide valuable insights into the differences and similarities in dragon perceptions across cultures. The author argues that understanding these distinctions deepens our comprehension of cultural values and worldviews.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the study's objectives, the methodology of comparative cultural analysis was employed. This approach identifies common and distinctive features in

the depictions of dragons across Eastern cultures. Additionally, the historical method was used to trace the evolution of the dragon's image, while semiotic analysis helped decode the symbolism and meanings attributed to dragons in various contexts. The study also incorporates qualitative analysis of folklore, myths, and legends to identify recurring themes and archetypes associated with dragons.

RESULTS

The Chinese Dragon

The Chinese dragon (long) is one of the most revered mythological beings in Chinese culture. It symbolizes imperial authority, wisdom, and prosperity [1, p. 22]. Chinese dragons are typically depicted as long, serpentine creatures with four claws and no wings, capable of flight through innate magic.

Dragons occupy a central role in the Chinese zodiac and calendar. The Dragon Boat Festival is a key cultural event tied to dragon worship and ancestral veneration [5, p. 48]. Moreover, dragons feature prominently in creation myths, where they are associated with rain and harvest, underscoring their agricultural significance.

In Chinese art, dragons adorn engravings, sculptures, and decorative objects, embellishing temples, palaces, and everyday items. Traditional Chinese medicine also assigns symbolic meaning to dragons, representing vital energy (qi) essential for health [6, p. 33].

The Japanese Dragon

In Japan, dragons (ryū) hold profound cultural significance. They are frequently associated with water and regarded as guardians of seas and rivers [4, p. 75]. Japanese dragons resemble their Chinese counterparts but are usually depicted with three claws. Their imagery often connects to weather phenomena and natural forces, emphasizing their link to life and death.

Dragons appear in Shinto and Buddhist myths, sometimes as benevolent beings and other times as fearsome entities. In art, they decorate temples and scrolls, symbolizing strength and protection [6, p. 60]. Many Japanese festivals incorporate dragon motifs, reflecting their cultural importance.

The Korean Dragon

Korean dragons (yong) exhibit unique traits. They are commonly linked to rain and agriculture, seen as bringers of fertility [3, p. 33]. Korean dragons are often portrayed with long whiskers and sometimes hold a orb symbolizing wisdom or energy.

In Korean mythology, dragons appear in legends of kings and heroes who transform into dragons after death, reinforcing their noble status [7, p. 82]. Folktales

depict dragons as both protectors and antagonists, illustrating the complexity of Korean mythology.

Comparative Analysis

A shared feature across East Asian cultures is the dragon's positive symbolism—strength, wisdom, and protection. However, variations exist in their depictions. For instance, the number of claws differs: Chinese dragons have four or five, while Japanese dragons have three, reflecting historical and cultural distinctions [2, p. 41].

Dragons' associations with natural elements also vary. In China, they are tied to air and weather; in Japan, to water; and in Korea, to earth and fertility. These differences mirror each country's environmental and economic conditions.

Dragons also play central roles in festivals and rituals. In China, dragon boats symbolize communal unity; in Japan, dragon imagery ensures protection; and in Korea, dragons feature in weddings and funerals as guardians of prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Dragons remain vital mythological and cultural symbols in East Asia, reflecting regional values and influencing art, religion, and daily life. Comparative analysis reveals both shared perceptions and unique cultural adaptations.

Future research could explore dragon symbolism in modern media (film, animation, video games) and its evolution in a globalized context. An interdisciplinary approach combining cultural studies, anthropology, and art history would further enrich our understanding of dragons' enduring legacy.

In conclusion, dragons not only symbolize power and protection but also continue to shape cultural identities and worldviews. Their study offers valuable insights into both Eastern traditions and global cultural exchange.

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