Views of a Mythical Beast

In an effort to contrast and analyze symbolism cross-culture, I focused on the differences of Eastern and Western perspective on one of the most common and powerful mythical creatures - the Dragon. To start with, the Dragon is seen as a creature of evil in Europe, it was a toxic creature, a great treasure hoarder and a destroyer. This negative connotation may have stemmed from the labelling of vague references of evil from the Old testament with ‘draco’. Thus, creating this perpetuating symbol of evil. In Eastern culture, especially for the Chinese, the Dragon symbolizes great power and good luck. “The Emperor of China usually used the dragon as a symbol of his imperial power and strength.”* Nobody would ever dream of killing a dragon for heroic purposes, it was unfathomable.



Illustration of a winged dragon from a 1658 edition of Edward Topsell's
The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents.

The Western dragon had a specific set of features such as two legs, bat wings, and looked like a giant lizard that could breath fire. In contrast, there were many varieties of dragons in Chinese culture. In one depiction it had the parts of nine animals.



Ming Glazed Terracotta Architectural Sculpture of a Dragon
China, 1368 AD to 1644 AD

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“The people paint the dragon's shape with a horse's head and a snake's tail. Further, there are expressions as 'three joints' and 'nine resemblances' (of the dragon), to wit: from head to shoulder, from shoulder to breast, from breast to tail. These are the joints; as to the nine resemblances, they are the following: his horns resemble those of a stag, his head that of a camel, his eyes those of a demon, his neck that of a snake, his belly that of a clam (*shen*, 蜃), his scales those of a carp, his claws those of an eagle, his soles those of a tiger, his ears those of a cow. Upon his head he has a thing like a broad eminence (a big lump), called [*chimu*] (尺木). If a dragon has no [*chimu*], he cannot ascend to the sky.”**

In fact, there has been over a hundred dragon names in ancient Chinese manuscripts. And while the European dragon was commonly associated with the elements of earth and fire, the Chinese dragon was strongly connected to the element of water and the weather. In fact, there were Four Dragon Kings for each of the Four Seas. Many Chinese villages by bodies of water would sacrifice to shrines dedicated to their Dragon King. The correlation of the water element and the dragon was so strong that “The King of Wu-Yue in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period was often known as the "Dragon King" or the "Sea Dragon King" because of his extensive hydro-engineering schemes which "tamed" the sea.”***

Unlike the spiritual and slightly religious treatment of Chinese dragons, the Western dragon was viewed like a trophy. Something sought out to be hunted for, and when it was defeated yielded a bountiful reward. There were exceptions. “Dragons of Slavic mythology hold mixed temperaments towards humans. For example, dragons (дракон, змей, ламя, (х)ала) in Bulgarian mythology are either male or female, each gender having a different view of mankind.

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The female dragon and male dragon, often seen as sister and brother, represent different forces of agriculture. The female dragon represents harsh weather and is the destroyer of crops, the hater of mankind, and is locked in a never ending battle with her brother. The male dragon protects the humans' crops from destruction and is generally loving to humanity."**** This assignment of gender is also an exception for the Chinese because the Dragon symbol was only allowed for the Emperor. The Empress would take on the symbol of the Phoenix. However, the fickle nature of the Dragon was the same for both cultures. Initially believed to always be good and wise, Buddhists later introduced the concept of malevolence. They mentioned that while the Dragon can bring great harvests and luck they can also flood and destroy vast amounts of land with their power. Thus, great devastating floods were believed to have been caused by someone upsetting a dragon.



"Festa da Coca" during the Corpus Christi celebration, in Monção, Portugal

In both cultures, there are festivities done in honor of this creature. However, the intentions behind each cultural festival are very different. In Portugal, they have a female dragon named coca who fights with Saint George on the Corpus Christi holiday, the victor determines the outcome of the crops for the year. In Italy, there are also many depictions of saints fighting dragons. This tradition stems from the Middle Ages where dragons were seen as demonic and, in some cases, embodiments of Satan.

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In contrast, for the Chinese New Year, the dragon dances celebrate the appearance of the Dragon and symbolizes good fortune to come. There is also intense dragon boat racing and very loud drumming keeps the rhythm for both events. While the Western dragon seems tangible, the Eastern dragon is strongly spiritual and held up as a creature that cannot be touched. Only those at the utmost status can communicate with a dragon.



The Chinese were very detailed on the usage of the dragon and had specifics about its physicality. For the first Ming Emperor, he declared that the dragon would be his emblem and that it would have five toes. For nobility and high-ranking officials, they could use the four-clawed dragon and the three-clawed dragon could be used by lower ranks and the general public. Improper use of these symbols were punishable by execution of the offender and their entire family.

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Nine Dragons Carpet woven silk and metal-wrapped thread Beijing China mid to late Qing Dynasty (1735-1911)

The number nine was connected to the Chinese dragon as well because it was the largest single digit. “ For example, a Chinese dragon is normally described in terms of nine attributes and usually has 117 (9x13) scales - 81 (9x9) Yang and 36 (9x4) Yin. This is also why there are nine forms of the dragon and the dragon has nine offspring. The "Nine Dragon Wall" is a screen wall with images of nine different dragons, and is found in imperial Chinese palaces and gardens. As nine was considered the number of the emperor, only the most senior officials were allowed to wear nine dragons on their robes — and then only with the robe completely covered with surcoats. Lower-ranking officials had eight or five dragons on their robes, again covered with surcoats; even the emperor himself wore his dragon robe with one of its nine dragons hidden from view.”*****

The depiction of dragons in Western cultures were very warlike and aggressive. They

were tangible and able to be killed and rid of, like pests. In the Eastern culture, they were considered to be deities. In fact, their material tangible counterpart were tigers and it was said that dragons and tigers were locked in an eternal struggle because of how well they countered each other. Dragons were seen as symbols of such power that no one dared to mess up an image of a dragon and people did not trivially use an image of a dragon. Even in Chinese criminal organizations where members would often tattoo themselves with symbols, the dragon was not normally used. “As such, it is believed that one must be fierce and strong enough, hence earning the right to wear the dragon on his skin, lest his luck be consumed by the dragons.”******

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