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イヤー・オブ・ザ・ドラゴン - Year of the Dragon

Dragons are mythical monsters that have puzzled Western scholars since the 19th century, when they found out that belief in them is a worldwide phenomenon. Some have wings (mostly in Europe) some don't (Japan) but all can fly except in North America; some have a beard (China), all have scales; all have horns (except in Central America) and some even have feathers (America); all breathe fire, some are sexed but most are androgynous. All of them are associated with water, and, except in Europe, have the power of bringing or stopping rain. In Europe dragons are emblems of wars and catastrophes, associated with malicious powers that need to be conquered, while in Asia, even if some have a the tendency to terrify young women or sometimes impregnate them with demonic children, by and large dragons are regarded as both sacred and auspicious.

Wood head of a dragon. 17-18th century. Private Col.

In Chinese astrology the dragon is the fifth animal of the zodiac, between the hare and the snake, also associated with the period of the two hours between 7 and 9 in the morning.

In Asia, Dragons are often associated with snakes, and sometime with crocodiles. That ambiguous origin is also the case in Japan. The Wamyô-ruijushô encyclopedia (和名類聚抄), written between 931 and 938, is a summary of the Japanese and Chinese knowledge of the time, tracing the origins of all animals to deities (*kami*). The 19th volume is about *mushi*, which designates insects in actual taxonomy but had a much broader meaning in medieval Japan. At the top of the *mushi* taxonomy is a venomous snake. Then the hierarchy is divided between earth and water. The top earth *kami* is again a venomous snake who reigns on the world of larva, insects, worms and earth mollusks. The world of water is ruled by a dragon-king and a tortoise. The tortoise reigns over shells, crustaceans and water mollusks, while the dragon-king has several vassals: a venomous snake, a crocodile, a dolphin and fishes with human body. Together they reign over the fish world. So as we see, snakes are present at all levels, both above and below dragons, and the confusion between them is often encountered in mythology, as we will see further.

Japanese sword guard (tsuba). Early 19th century.

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Dragon-kings are a special species, coming from Chinese culture, according to which these special creatures are living in wonderful palaces at the bottom of the ocean. Their origin is the *nâgas*, who are Indian râjahs (or kings) taking the appearance of snakes, and who were converted by Buddhist priests. There were originally eight great *nâgas* rajahs who, in Mahayana Buddhism (or Great Vehicle), became followers of the Buddha. When passing to China they became the “Eight great dragon-kings”, translating the word *nâga*, cobra, as “dragon”. The Japanese used the Chinese translation to designate the *Hachidai-ryûô*, which, even if it clearly mean that there is 8 dragons, is usually assimilated to a single entity. More frequently the term to designate dragon-kings is *Zennyo ryûô* (善如龍王 or 善女龍王: *zen* 善 " virtuous", *nyo* 女 "female" or *nyo* 如 "like" and *ryūō* 龍王 or 竜王 "dragon-king").

Dragons in China precede Buddhism, however, and have been associated with the ruling authorities. Yen Ti 炎帝 (The Flaming Emperor/God), one of the legendary Three Sovereigns who ruled in pre-dynastic China (2852-2697 B.C.), was said to be the son of a dragon; also called Ch’ih Ti 赤帝 (the Red Emperor/God), he reportedly had a human head and a serpent body. Later on, as powerful deities, dragons became symbols of the Chinese emperors.

Central medallion of a large plate (shown on page 4).

In Japan too, dragons were said to belong to the earlier genealogy of imperial family. Toyotama-hime, the mother of the first emperor Jimmu, was the dragon daughter of the ocean dragon-king Wakatsumi-no-kami. Furthermore, according to legend, Jimmu was half human, half dragon (or snake). That dragon origin is further symbolized by the sacred sword, one of the three Japanese imperial regalia (with the mirror and the gem). According to the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan compiled before 720), that sword, also called “Cloud Cluster”, is the metamorphosed tail of a bad eight-headed dragon killed by Susano-o, the brother of Amaterasu, deity of the Sun and the divine ancestress of the imperial family...

Ai-Kakiémon (imari). Early 18th century.

Besides their imperial genealogy, however, dragons in Japan are mostly associated with rain. One of the most famous rain-dragons is a dragon-king. In Japan rainmaking has long been an essential part of Buddhist rites, based on native rituals that existed prior to the advent of Buddhism. In particular, the 9th century seems to have been a period of increased specialization of the rainmaking rites, leading to a competition between Buddhist and Shintô rituals. When the Nara capital was moved to Heian in 794, the *tennô* government tried to build a ritual network independent from the influence of the powerful Buddhist temples of Nara. Veneration of the dragon increased at that time, both in the shrines rituals of rainmaking, and in the rituals of various Buddhist temples.

The oldest recorded rainmaking deity (*kami*) is the dragon *zennyo ryûô* of the Murô cave at the base of Mount Murô near Nara, where the Murô-ji temple was built between 778 and 793 attached to the Shintô Murô Ryûketsu shrine already inhabited by the spirit of a dragon-king. That dragon-king was made to appear by the Buddhist priest Kûkai during a famous rainmaking competition at the Heian imperial palace in 824. The triumph of Kûkai, and the following development of a lineage of Buddhist monks capable of invoking the dragon-king in period of drought with rain rituals, assured the further success of the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism within the Heian aristocracy, under imperial protection.

Choko (cups) with design of dragons and *namban-jin* (Dutch sailors). Early 19th century.

Finally, for commoners like us who have never seen a real dragon, let's describe it just in case we encounter one. It is said that dragons in Asia have a camel or a horse head, the horns of a deer (from which they can hear, since their ears are deaf), the eyes of a hare or a demon, the neck of a snake, the paws of a tiger, the ears of a rat or a cow, the abdomen of a clam, and the claw of an eagle. Its body is covered with scales of a carp, it has long curling whiskers sprouting from either side of its mouth, and sometime a beard. But beware, dragons have the power to expand or contract; they can become as large as the universe or as small as a silkworm, or may even become invisible. Thus, you may never know when you cross path with a real dragon! When visible, dragons are often carrying a sacred pearl between their claws, or in the mouth or under their chin.

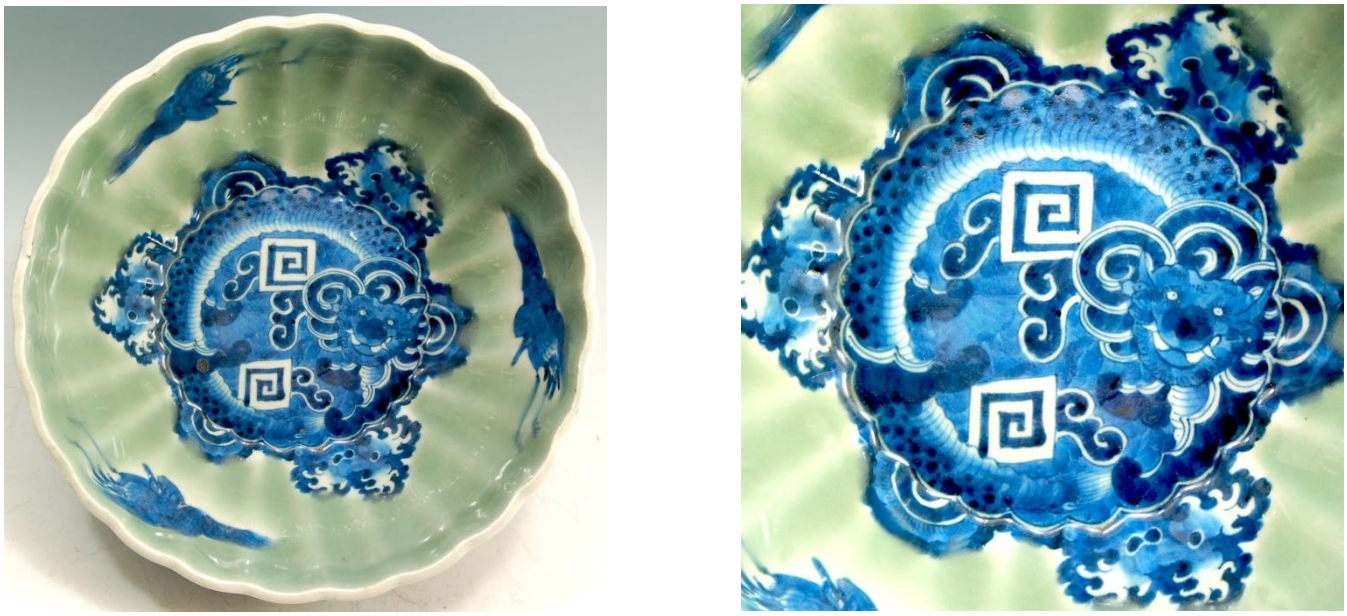
The number of claws on each leg of the dragon is often invoked to distinguish Japanese from Chinese dragons. Some legends says that dragons originated in Japan and had only three claws, then when traveling to China they grew more and more claws, four in Korea and five in China. Of course, the same legend is told in China in inverse order, dragons losing their claws while traveling away from the Middle Kingdom. More credibly, the five-clawed Chinese imperial dragon is most likely a reference to the Chinese organization of the universe in five directions, symbolized by the five elements and five colors (yellow-center-earth, red-south-fire, black-north-water, white-west-metal and blue-east-wood). Until the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), only the emperor could wear a yellow robe with five-clawed dragons. During the following Qing dynasty (1694-1911), that privilege was extended to imperial sons and prince and princes of the blood of first and second rank. Other court members of the court had to contempt themselves with four-clawed dragons, and towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) decadence and the crumbling of hierarchical structures meant that everyone could be seen wearing robes depicting five-clawed dragons.

Red Kutani-yaki bowl with a dragon medallion. 19th century.

In Japan dragons traditionally have three claws. Although we have not found any symbolism associated to that ternary appendage, it could be referred to the tertiary organization of the universe in Japanese

tradition, with the sky, origin of the gods, the land (meaning Japan archipelago) creation of the gods for the humans, and an underground world of the dead embracing the marine world[i].

Claws are not, however, the only way of distinguishing Japanese from Chinese dragons in artistic representations. Quite often, Japanese dragon have gentle faces – almost manga like – at least in ceramic decorations, but also on lacquered objects. It is rare to see a frightening dragon in Japanese iconography, while it seems more common in China.



Imari bowl with Celadon and Blue and white decoration. Late 19th century.

Pair of large imari plates with a central medallion of a dragon surrounded by 3 shi-shi lions on a vermillion background filled with gold arabesques and flowers. Mid 19th century.

[i] Even though Japanese cosmology is more often seen as a dualistic order, starting with the two sexed divinities of Izanagi and Izanami, and the opposition between sky and earth, mountain and sea, etc. See Laurence Caillet, « Espaces mythiques et territoire national », *L'homme*, Vol. 31 n°117, 1991 pp 10-33.