



Dragon & Phoenix

The dragon and the phoenix are the principal motifs for decorative designs on the buildings, clothing and articles of daily use in the imperial palace. The throne hall is supported by columns entwined by gilded dragons, the central ramps on marble steps were paved with huge slabs carved in relief with the dragon and phoenix, and the screen walls display dragons in brilliant colours (*see the [Nine-Dragon Screen in Beihai Park](#)*). The names in the Chinese language for nearly all the things connected with the emperor or the empress were preceded by the epithet "dragon" or "phoenix"; thus, "dragon seat" for the throne, "dragon robe" for the emperor's ceremonial dress, "dragon bed" for him to sleep on, and "phoenix carriage", "phoenix canopies" and so on for the imperial processions. The national flag of China under the Qing Dynasty was emblazoned with a big dragon. The earliest postage stamps put out by China were called "dragon-heads" because they showed a dragon in their designs. Even today the dragon is sometimes adopted as the symbol of Chinese exhibitions held abroad or the cover designs of books on China printed by foreign publishers. "The Giant Dragon of the East" is becoming a sobriquet for the country.



Belief in the dragon, and drawings of the imaginary animal, can be traced back to primitive society when certain prehistoric tribes in China adopted the dragon among other totems as their symbol and guardian god. Some of the recently unearthed bronze vessels of the

Yin Dynasty, which existed more than 3,000 years ago, are decorated with sketches of dragons of a crude form. Earliest legends in China described the dragon as a miraculous animal with fish



scales and long beards. As time went on, it became more and more embellished in the minds of the people, acquiring the antlers of the deer, the mane of the horse and the claws of the eagle -- in short, appropriating the distinctive features of other creatures until it became what we see today everywhere in the

palace.

The Chinese phoenix, likewise, exists only in legends and fairy tales. Sovereign of all birds, it has the head of the golden pheasant, the beak of the parrot, the body of the mandarin duck, the wings of the roc, the feathers of the peacock and the legs of the crane; gloriously beautiful, it reigns over the feathered world. An early design of the phoenix can be seen on the silk painting discovered in a tomb of the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) near Changsha in Hunan Province.

The dragon and the phoenix often served in classical art and literature as metaphors for people of high virtue and rare talent or, in certain combinations, for matrimonial harmony or happy marriage. As an important part of folk arts, dragon lanterns, dragon boats, dragon and phoenix dances are still highly popular on festivals among the people of all localities.

Chinese dragon

Chinese dragons are [legendary creatures](#) in [Chinese mythology](#) and [folklore](#), with mythic counterparts among [Japanese](#), [Korean](#), [Vietnamese](#), [Bhutanese](#), [Western](#) and Turkic dragons. In [Chinese art](#), dragons are typically portrayed as long, scaled, serpentine creatures with four legs. In [yin and yang](#) terminology, a dragon is *yang* and complements a *yin* [fenghuang](#) "[Chinese phoenix](#)".

In contrast to [European dragons](#) that are considered evil, Chinese dragons traditionally symbolize potent and [auspicious](#) powers, particularly control over water, rainfall, and floods. The dragon is also a symbol of power, strength, and good luck.

In Chinese daily language, excellent and outstanding people are compared to the dragon while incapable people with no achievements are compared with other, disesteemed creatures, such as the worm. A number of Chinese [proverbs](#) and [idioms](#) feature references to the dragon, for example: "Hoping one's son will become a dragon" (望子成龍, i.e. be as a dragon).

Symbolic value

Historically, the dragon was the [symbol](#) of the [Emperor of China](#). In the [Zhou Dynasty](#), the 5-clawed dragon was assigned to the [Son of Heaven](#), the 4-clawed dragon to the Zhuhou (seigneur), and the 3-clawed dragon to the Daifu. In the [Qin Dynasty](#), the 5-clawed dragon was assigned to represent the Emperor while the 4-clawed and 3-clawed dragons were assigned to the commoners. The dragon in the [Qin Dynasty](#) appeared on [national flags](#).^[1]

The dragon is sometimes used in the West as a [national emblem](#) of [China](#). However, this usage within both the [People's Republic of China](#) and the [Republic of China](#) on [Taiwan](#) as the symbol of nation is not common. Instead, it is generally used as the symbol of culture. In [Hong Kong](#), the dragon is part of the design of [Brand Hong Kong](#), a symbol used to promote Hong Kong as an international brand name.^[2]

In European-influenced cultures, the dragon has aggressive, [warlike](#) connotations and it is conjectured that the [Chinese government](#) wishes to avoid using it as a symbol, but most Chinese disagree with this decision.^[3] Westerners only sometimes confuse the disposition of the benevolent Chinese dragon with the aggressive Western dragon.

Many [Chinese people](#) often use the term "[Descendants of the Dragon](#)" ([simplified Chinese](#): 龙的传人; [traditional Chinese](#): 龍的傳人; [pinyin](#): *lóng de chuán rén*) as a sign of ethnic identity, as part of a trend started in the 1970s when different Asian nationalities were looking for animal symbols for representations.^[1] The [wolf](#) was used among the [Mongols](#), the [monkey](#) among [Tibetans](#).^[1]

In [Chinese culture](#) today, the dragon is mostly used for decorative purposes. It is a [taboo](#) to disfigure a depiction of a dragon; for example, an [advertisement](#) campaign commissioned by [Nike](#), which featured the [American basketball](#) player [LeBron James](#) slaying a dragon (as well as beating up an old [Kung Fu](#) master), was immediately banned by the [Chinese government](#) after public outcry over disrespect.^[4]

Dragon worship

The origin of Chinese dragon is not certain, but some scholars believe that it originated from [totems](#) of different tribes in [China](#). Some have suggested that it comes from a stylized depiction of existing animals, such as snakes, fish, or crocodiles. An alternative view, advocated by He Xin, is that the early dragon depicted a species of crocodile, specifically, *Crocodylus porosus*, the saltwater crocodile, which is the largest living reptile, and once ranged into China during ancient times. The crocodile is known to be able to accurately sense changes in air pressure, and be able to sense coming rain. This may have been the origin of the dragon's mythical attributes in controlling the weather, especially the rain. The association with the crocodile is also supported by the view in ancient times that large crocodiles are a variety of dragon. For example, in the *Story of Zhou Chu*, about the life of a [Jin Dynasty](#) warrior, he is said to have killed a "dragon" that infested the waters of his home village, which appears to have been a crocodile.

Others have proposed that its shape is the merger of totems of various tribes as the result of the merger of tribes. The coiled snake or dragon form played an important role in early Chinese culture. Legendary figures like [Nüwa](#) (女媧) and [Fuxi](#) (伏羲) are depicted as having snake bodies. Some scholars have noted that a myth arose that the first legendary [Emperor of China Huang Di](#) (黃帝, Yellow Emperor) used a snake for his [coat of arms](#). According to the myth, every time he conquered another tribe, he incorporated his defeated enemy's emblem into his own, thus explains why the dragon appears to have features of various animals.

Nonetheless, the presence of dragon in Chinese culture can date back several thousands of years with the discovery of a dragon statue dating back to the fifth millennium BC from the [Yangshao culture](#) in [Henan](#) in 1987,^[5] and jade badges of rank in coiled form have been excavated from the [Hongshan culture](#).^[6]

Mythical creature

From its origins as totems or the stylized depiction of natural creatures, the Chinese dragon evolved to become a mythical animal. The [Han Dynasty](#) scholar [Wang Fu](#) recorded Chinese myths that *long* dragons had nine anatomical resemblances.

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.^[7]

Further sources give variant lists of the nine animal resemblances. Sinologist Henri Doré lists these characteristics of an authentic dragon: "The horns of a [deer](#). The head of a camel. A demon's eyes. The neck of a snake. A [tortoise's](#) [viscera](#). A [hawk's](#) claws. The palms of a tiger. A cow's ears. And it hears through its horns, its ears being deprived of all power of hearing."^[8] He notes that, "Others state it has a [rabbit's](#) eyes, a [frog's](#) belly, a carp's scales." The anatomy of other legendary creatures, including the [chimera](#) and [manticore](#), is similarly amalgamated from fierce animals.

Chinese dragons were considered to be physically concise. Of the 117 scales, 81 are of the yang essence (positive) while 36 are of the yin essence (negative). Initially, the dragon was benevolent but the Buddhists introduced the concept of malevolent influence among some dragons. Just as water destroys, they said, so can some dragons destroy via floods, tidal waves and storms. They suggested that some of the worst floods were believed to have been the result of a mortal upsetting a dragon.

Many pictures of oriental dragons show a flaming [pearl](#) under their chin. The pearl is associated with wealth, good luck, and prosperity.

Chinese dragons are occasionally depicted with [bat](#)-like wings growing out of the front limbs, but most do not have wings, as their ability to fly (and control rain/water, etc.) are mystical and not seen as a result of their physical attributes.

This description accords with the artistic depictions of the dragon down to the present day. The dragon has also acquired an almost unlimited range of supernatural powers. It is said to be able to disguise itself as a silkworm, or become as large as our entire universe. It can fly among the clouds or hide in water (according to the *Guanzi*). It can form clouds, can turn into water, can change color as an ability to blend in with their surroundings, as an effective form of camouflage or glow in the dark (according to the *Shuowen Jiezi*).

In Singapore and many other countries, folktales speak of the dragon having all the attributes of the other 11 creatures of the zodiac, this includes the [whiskers](#) of the [rat](#), the [face](#) and horns of an [ox](#), claws and teeth of a tiger, belly of a rabbit, body of a snake, legs of a horse, the [beard](#) of a [goat](#), wit(or brain) of a monkey, [crest](#) of a [rooster](#), ears of a [dog](#), the [snout](#) of a [pig](#).

In some circles, it is considered bad luck to depict a dragon facing downwards, as it is seen as disrespectful to place a dragon in such manner that it cannot ascend to the sky. Also, depictions of dragons in [tattoos](#) are prevalent as they are symbols of strength and power, especially criminal organisations where dragons hold a meaning all on their own. 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 dragon.

Ruler of weather and water

Chinese dragons are strongly associated with water in popular belief. They are believed to be the rulers of moving bodies of water, such as waterfalls, rivers, or seas. They can show themselves as water spouts ([tornado](#) or twister over water). In this capacity as the rulers of water and weather, the dragon is more [anthropomorphic](#) in form, often depicted as a humanoid, dressed in a king's costume, but with a dragon head wearing a king's headdress.

There are four major [Dragon Kings](#), representing each of the four seas: the East Sea (corresponding to the [East China Sea](#)), the South Sea (corresponding to the [South China Sea](#)), the West Sea (sometimes seen as the [Indian Ocean](#) and beyond), and the North Sea (sometimes seen as [Lake Baikal](#)).

Because of this association, they are seen as "in charge" of water-related weather phenomenon. In premodern times, many Chinese villages (especially those close to rivers and seas) had temples dedicated to their local "dragon king". In times of drought or flooding, it was customary for the local gentry and government officials to lead the community in offering sacrifices and conducting other religious rites to appease the dragon, either to ask for rain or a cessation thereof.

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.

Symbol of imperial authority

According to Chinese legend, both Chinese primogenitors, the earliest Emperors Yan Di and Huang Di were closely related to 'Long' (Chinese Dragon). At the end of his reign, the first legendary Emperor, Huang Di, was said to have been immortalized into a dragon that resembled his emblem, and ascended to Heaven. The other legendary Emperor, Huang Di's brother, Yan Di was born by his mother's telepathy with a mythic dragon. Since the Chinese consider Huang Di and Yan Di as their ancestors, they sometimes refer to themselves as "*the descendants of the dragon*". This legend also contributed towards the use of the Chinese dragon as a symbol of [imperial](#) power.

The dragon, especially yellow or golden dragons with five claws on each foot, was a symbol for the emperor in many [Chinese dynasties](#). The imperial throne was called the *Dragon Throne*. During the late [Qing Dynasty](#), the dragon was even adopted as the [national flag](#). The dragon is featured in the carvings on the steps of imperial palaces and tombs, such as the [Forbidden City](#) in [Beijing](#).

In some [Chinese legends](#), an Emperor might be born with a [birthmark](#) in the shape of a dragon. For example, one legend tells the tale of a peasant born with a dragon birthmark who eventually overthrows the existing dynasty and founds a new one; another legend might tell of the prince in hiding from his enemies who is identified by his dragon birthmark.

In contrast, the [Empress of China](#) was often identified with the [Fenghuang](#).

Modern belief

In modern times, belief in the dragon appears to be sporadic at best. There appear to be very few who would see the dragon as a literally real creature. The worship of the [Dragon Kings](#) as rulers of water and weather continues in many areas, and is deeply ingrained in Chinese cultural traditions such as [Chinese New Year](#) celebrations. Dragon kites are also used in these celebrations.

Fenghuang

Fenghuang are [mythological](#) birds of [East Asia](#) that reign over all other birds. The males are called **Feng** and the **females** **Huang**. In modern times, however, such a distinction of gender is often no longer made and the Feng and Huang are blurred into a single feminine entity so that the bird can be paired with the [Chinese dragon](#), which has male connotations.

The Fenghuang is also called the "August Rooster" ([traditional Chinese](#): 鸞雞; [pinyin](#): *kūnjī*) since it sometimes takes the place of the Rooster in the [Chinese Zodiac](#). In the [West](#), it is commonly referred to as the **Chinese phoenix** or simply **Phoenix**. [Fenghuang Ancient City](#) is an ancient community in [Hunan Province](#).

Appearance

A common depiction was of it attacking snakes with its talons and its wings spread. According to scripture [Erya](#) - chapter 17 *Shiniao*, Fenghuang is said to be made up of the beak of a [rooster](#), the face of a [swallow](#), the forehead of a [fowl](#), the neck of a [snake](#), the breast of a [goose](#), the back of a [tortoise](#), the hindquarters of a [stag](#) and the tail of a [fish](#).^[1] Today, however, it is often described as a composite of many birds including the head of a [golden pheasant](#), the body of a [mandarin duck](#), the tail of a [peacock](#), the legs of a [crane](#), the mouth of a [parrot](#), and the wings of a [swallow](#).

Its body symbolizes the six celestial bodies. The head is the sky, the eyes are the sun, the back is the moon, the wings are the wind, the feet are the earth, and the tail is the planets. Its feathers contain the five fundamental colors: black, white, red, blue and yellow. It is also sometimes depicted as having [three legs](#). It is believed that phoenix only appear in areas or places that are blessed with utmost peace and prosperity or happiness.

Chinese traditions cite it as living atop the [Kunlun Mountains](#) in northern China.^[*citation needed*]

Origin

Images of an ancient bird have appeared in [China](#) for over 4,000 years, the earliest as [Shang Dynasty](#) pottery motifs, then appearing decorating bronzes, as well as [jade](#) figurines (many of the most beautiful from the [Liao Period](#))^[*citation needed*]. Some believe they may have been a good-luck [totem](#), believing that it is a totem of eastern tribes in ancient China. Current theories^[*citation needed*] suggest that it is likely based in part - for example the snake-like neck - on [folk memory](#) of the [Asian Ostrich](#) which was common in [prehistoric](#) China but became extinct several thousand years ago. That this bird was well-known to the early modern humans in Asia, noted for its peculiarity, and hunted for food, is attested by numerous archaeological finds, such as pottery decorated with what appear to be painted [ostriches](#), and bones by early campsites.^[*citation needed*]

Fenghuang seems to have no connection with the phoenix of the [Western world](#), which derives from [Egyptian mythology](#). Peculiarly, the Egyptian [phoenix](#) may also in part reference a prehistoric bird, the [Bennu Heron](#). Unlike the Fenghuang, which is a [chimera](#) not very much like any one extant bird, the Egyptian phoenix is most often considered similar to a [heron](#) or [eagle](#).

During the [Han Dynasty](#) (2,200 years ago) two phoenixes, one a male (feng, 鳳) and the other a female (huang, 凰) were often shown together facing one other. Later, during the [Yuan Dynasty](#) the two terms were merged to become the generally translated "phoenix", but the "King of Birds" came to symbolize the Empress when paired

with a dragon as a dragon represented the Emperor. From the period of the [Jiajing Emperor](#) (1522–66) on, a pair of phoenixes was differentiated by the tail feathers of the two birds (typically together forming a closed circle pattern—the male identified by five serrated tail feathers (five being an odd, or yang number) and the female by what appears to be one, but is in fact, two (two being an even, or yin number) curling or tendrilled tail feathers. It was also in the [Ming Dynasty](#) that phoenixes first began to appear with combs, hence comb-less phoenixes are pre-Ming, and phoenixes depicted with combs, Ming or post-Ming.^[2]

Also during this period, the feng huang was used as a symbol representing the direction south. This was portrayed through a male and female facing each other. Their feathers were of the five fundamental colors: black, white, red, green, and yellow. These colors are said to represent the Confucian virtues of: loyalty, honesty, decorum, and justice.^[citation needed]

The phoenix represented power sent from the heavens to the Empress. If a phoenix was used to decorate a house it symbolized that loyalty and honesty were in the people that lived there. Or alternatively, phoenix only stays when the ruler is without darkness and corruption (政治清明).

Meaning

The Fenghuang has very positive connotations. It is a symbol of high virtue and grace. The Fenghuang also symbolizes the union of [yin and yang](#). [Shan Hai Jing](#) - chapter 1 *Nanshan jing* records each part of Fenghuang's body symbolizes a word, the head represents [virtue](#) (德), the wing represents duty (義), the back represents propriety (禮), the abdomen says belief (信) and the chest represents mercy (仁).^[3]

In ancient and modern Chinese culture, they can often be found in the decorations for [weddings](#) or [royalty](#), along with [dragons](#). This is because the Chinese considered the [dragon](#) and phoenix symbolic of blissful relations between husband and wife, another common yin and yang [metaphor](#).

In some traditions it appears in good times but hides during times of trouble, while in other traditions it appeared only to mark the beginning of a new era.^[4] In China and Japan it was a symbol of the imperial house, and it represented "fire, the sun, justice, obedience, and fidelity".^[4]

Modern usage

- *Phoenix talons* (鳳爪) is a [Chinese dish](#) of chicken feet cooked in a black bean sauce.
- *Fèng* or *Fènghuáng* is a common element in [given names](#) for Chinese girls (likewise, "dragon" is used for boys' names).
- "Dragon and Phoenix infants" (龍鳳胎) is an expression meaning a set of male and female [fraternal twins](#).
- **Fenghuang** is also a [county](#) in western [Hunan](#) province of China, formerly a [sub-prefecture](#). Its name is written with the same Chinese characters as the mythological bird.
- In Korea, the Chinese phoenix / fenghuang has been used for the royal emblem (more especially for Queens) and the presidential emblem.^[citation needed]
- The [Vermilion Bird of the South](#), one of the [Four Symbols](#) (*Ssu Ling*) of Chinese myth, is sometimes confused with the Fenghuang, though they are distinct entities.^[citation needed]
- Pokémon's Legendary Pokémon Ho-Oh is based on the Fenghuang.
- Digimon's Hououmon an evolution of Birdramon & Garudamon's name and design derives from the Fenghuang.