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## There Be Dragons: History and Meaning of Dragon Imagery in Art (and Religion)

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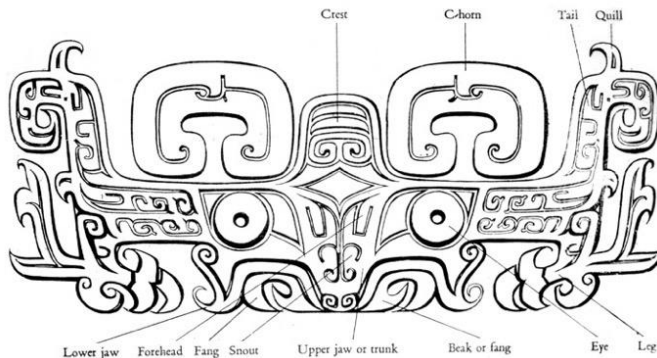
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# THERE BE DRAGONS

Jim Lewis, PhD. - Bethel university

**THE DRAGON MOTIF** first appeared in China's religious, artistic and cultural history in the Shang Dynasty (1600-1050 BCE). Ritual bronze vessels with proto-dragon surface images were buried in tombs of emperors and their nobility. Unearthed around 1900 CE they stored grain, wine, water and foods for use in the afterlife. Under a microscope scholars are stunned at the precise execution characteristic of squared spiral designs on the surface. Troughs (not "V" shaped) etched into the bronzes are  $\frac{1}{32}$ " (or less) in width and  $\frac{3}{64}$ " in depth. The corners are perfect 90 degrees. A lost-wax or ceramic mold technique produced them.

Museums in the Western world collected them in the 1930s including our Minneapolis Institute of Arts where I took students in my course "Religion and Art in Asia." Gifted by the Dayton family they have recently been removed from view in the Asian gallery while officials of the People's Republic of China seek to repatriate them.



**CALLED THE TAOTIE**, its basic design is displayed across a bronze vessel's surface and has been interpreted as both a mask and a creature. Over time its form evolved in paintings and ceramics into the composite body of a serpent, legs of a lizard, scales of a fish, horns of a goat with ferocious and menacing maw. But the source of the dragon motif was not known until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century discoveries in

China's heartland not far from present-day Xian.

Serving initially to protect the contents of the ritual vessels, the dragon motif has found its way broadly into the mythology, texts, and cosmology of not only Chinese civilization but all of the societies influenced by China including Vietnam, Korea, Japan and those of their diaspora.

**THE MORAL QUALITY** of the dragon runs a spectrum. It may have malevolent overtones but is primarily positive and protective. The dragon was considered Yang in the Yin-Yang taxonomy of ancient China. Yin was incomplete without Yang and Yang was incomplete without Yin. Used to classify the natural world and human behavior they were opposite but complementary energy modes as seen in the classic the *Dao De Jing*. As such the dragon was male, good, light and East oriented. Female imperial vestments displayed a Phoenix; male vestments the dragon. Only the emperor's family could display a five-toed dragon, otherwise it was three-toed like that of Josh Vana's art.

**UBIQUITOUS**, the dragon motif is diffused in Asian culture past and present. It is found in tombs, temples, folk and classic paintings, literature, the performing arts and popular entertainment. Myths of origin such as that of Vietnam tell of their descent from the union of a dragon and a

fairy. Place-names include the word dragon such as Hong Kong's "Kowloon" meaning nine (*kow*) dragons (*loon*) referring to its eight mountains, the emperor being the ninth. The Mekong River flowing from Tibet into the South China Sea is known in Vietnam as the "Seven-headed Dragon." Dragon-boat races in Southeast Asia occur annually on the fifth day of the fifth month. The dragon dance is performed during New Years celebrations around the world entertaining crowds and renewing the motif in popular consciousness.

**DOES THE DRAGON HAVE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE?** In Biblical and Christian culture it undoubtedly does. In China, as we have seen, it had its protective role in rituals serving ancestral worship from Shang times forward. It predated but was subsequently uploaded into Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions each of which incorporated it symbolically in different ways. The Buddhist temple in Roseville might serve as an example. The dragon encircles worship-hall pillars, rides the ridge-line of its roof and is found in numerous other locations. Buddhist temples



I have visited in China and Southeast Asia also include the dragon in its decorative and architectural arts. But it is primarily extrinsic to the religious purpose of the temple, its texts and teachings.

However, it is undeniable that it has played and continues to play a part in the numinous world of many in Asia's religious traditions. A Hmong friend told me his sick grandmother, while in a coma, saw a male and female dragon in Lake Phalen which she

believes are protectors of fish. She warns Hmong fishermen that fish are children of the dragon and they should only be taken for food. Mistreatment will cause them harm.

The Lake Phalen dragon has a malevolent side according to one Hmong mother. Her son, who was swimming in the lake, was taken under by the dragon and drowned. Angry at the dragon, she took a machete and ceremonially struck the lake three times in revenge. Shortly afterwards, lightning appeared in the skies which confirmed the dragon got the message. There is also a belief that pregnant women should avoid the lake as the dragon would try to steal the baby.

In all, the dragon motif has for centuries fascinated the imagination and enriched Asian and world cultures through art, literature and folk-lore. Student Josh Vana's creative work now on display in Bethel University's Library has ensconced the dragon more permanently in my mind than ever before. And I think I will stop fishing in Lake Phalen, just to be safe.

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/Users/jamesflewis/Desktop/ Proto-dragon motif.docx