

Christian Rommel, packaging consultant, collector and book-author, is reporting on one of the most important symbols of traditional Chinese package design

The dragon is a unique phenomenon, and to this day has lost none of its cultural and historical significance or its mystical symbolism for both the eastern and western hemispheres. Dragons are mythical snake-like creatures with powerful and domineering characters, stories of which have a long tradition on almost all continents of the earth. The wide range of myths has given rise to an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted image of the dragon, with huge differences between the Eastern and Western viewpoints.

In Western culture the dragon is usually depicted as a gruesome sea monster - a fearless creature, which was mentioned in the same breath as the devil. The dragon personified the omnipresent temptation of evil, it served as a symbol for the abyss, was the incarnation of the Antichrist, a harbinger of the Apocalypse.

Nevertheless, the dragon is one of the most widespread motifs in European fairy tales, where it is depicted as a gigantic, seven-headed snake- or lizard-like winged monster that breathes fire and spreads panic and fear and lives in underground caves or in rocky chasms.

Besides myths and legends the fascination of the dragon phenomenon is unbroken, this mysterious creature has stimulated the imagination of generations. In jewellery, fashion, or as a popular tattoo motif, the multifaceted and complex figure of the dragon is seen in the West as an attractive fantasy figure for children and adults.

Yet in East Asian culture both the historical origins and the folk significance of the dragon are totally different. Here the dragon is seen as a powerful symbol of wisdom and strength. Dragons are among China's most multi-layered symbols. The Chinese call their country long de guxiang, 'the home of the dragon', and refer to themselves as long chuanren, 'the descendants of the dragon'.

In China dragons are usually kind and benevolent creatures. With the spread of Buddhism the symbol of the dragon, an essential part of Chinese culture, was brought to neighbouring countries such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam. The earliest findings of depictions of dragons originate from the 4th century BC. At that time large numbers of primitive peoples in China worshipped a totem made by their tribe as a tutelary god. One such people living on the lower reaches of the Yellow River had a snake as their totem and gave it the name of 'dragon'.

After conquests and battles with other tribes, the totems of the latter continued to be used, but to their characteristics were added those of the conquering tribe's totem, to publicly demonstrate the victory over the subjugated tribes.

The dragon epitomises the characteristics of various outstanding animals that are of great economic significance or that exercise immense power and fascination. By adding striking features of animals in this way, the power of dragons is supposed to be increased.

Although the outward appearance of dragons may vary, classical texts describe nine characteristic features that now are archetypal of the figure of the Chinese dragon. Dragons have the horns of a stag, the head of a camel, the neck of a snake, the belly of a mussel, the eyes of a rabbit, the scales of a fresh water carp, the talons of an eagle, the paws of a tiger and the ears of an ox.

Dragons are said to create harmonious order in rivers, oceans and on land, and are believed to regulate the equilibrium between the forces of nature. Dragons have control over storms and ensure sufficient rainfall. Due to their crucial role as fertility symbols, they are worshipped as deities in China.

Alongside folk beliefs many further myths and legends developed. Chinese chronicles tell of the legendary 'yellow emperor', who was the head of the primitive peoples in the 26th century BC in what is now central China. According to the legend, the yellow emperor was accompanied to heaven by a divine dragon. From then on the emperor was worshipped as 'the son of heaven'.

Since the 21st century BC in the Xia dynasty of emperor Qi the dragon was officially recognized as the symbol of the descendants of the emperor. Qi also took over the so-called '12 decorations' of the emperor's court gown, including the decoration depicting a dragon. The symbol for dragon was added to the name of all the objects that the emperor used. His throne, for example, became 'dragon throne' and his bed, 'dragon bed'. The use of these decorations was a privilege of the emperor and was forbidden for subordinates.

Dragons are divided into four categories in China. The sky dragon tian long symbolizes the regenerative power of the sky, the ghost dragon shen long is said to be a harbinger of fruit-bearing rain, the treasure-guarding dragon fu cang long is said to watch over gems and precious metals, and the earth dragon di long is said to have power over springs and rivers.

Dragons protect humans against droughts; they are symbols of strength, of courage and of luck, and images of them are often used as personal or home decorations. For this reason dragons have a special status and popularity in all areas of Chinese art and culture.

Pictures of dragons can be seen everywhere in China. They serve as decorations on carpets, paintings and ink drawings; they can be found as embroidered or printed motifs on garments and textiles; they enhance as ornate carved figures furniture and musical instruments; they are made into door handles and walking sticks; they are beloved and popular folk motifs in silhouettes and advertisements; they are used as decorative figures on varnished pots, ceramics and porcelain, and they form the basis of stone and metal sculptures. As rainmakers dragons sit ridges of roofs and on city walls to protect buildings against fire; they watch over the entrance portals to newly built hotels and historic temples, and wind themselves as reliefs around columns and bridge supports.

Additionally, dragon decorations can be admired on virtually all kinds of Chinese packagings like tins, bags and boxes for tea, cakes and candies, noodles and vegetables, cigarettes packs and labels of alcohol bottles.

But not only food items make use of the dragon. They can be found on covers of packagings for chop sticks, card games, office supply goods, toys or medicines, which all want to participate from the immense popularity of the dragon within the Chinese nation. Whatever article they want to present, package designers in China try to attract customers with these specially dragon-designed products as the dragon seems almost to be a best selling guarantor.

The dragon is maybe also such an exceptional fine example of typical Chinese package design, because the whole Western world of sophisticated package design does not have any equivalent of such a well-known, unrestrictedly accepted and unparalleled positive symbol, with such an nation-wide and unique impact in package design. That's why the dragon does not only represent the fascinating world of traditional Chinese package design, but China's cultural heritage as an integral whole.

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