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ChinaDragon



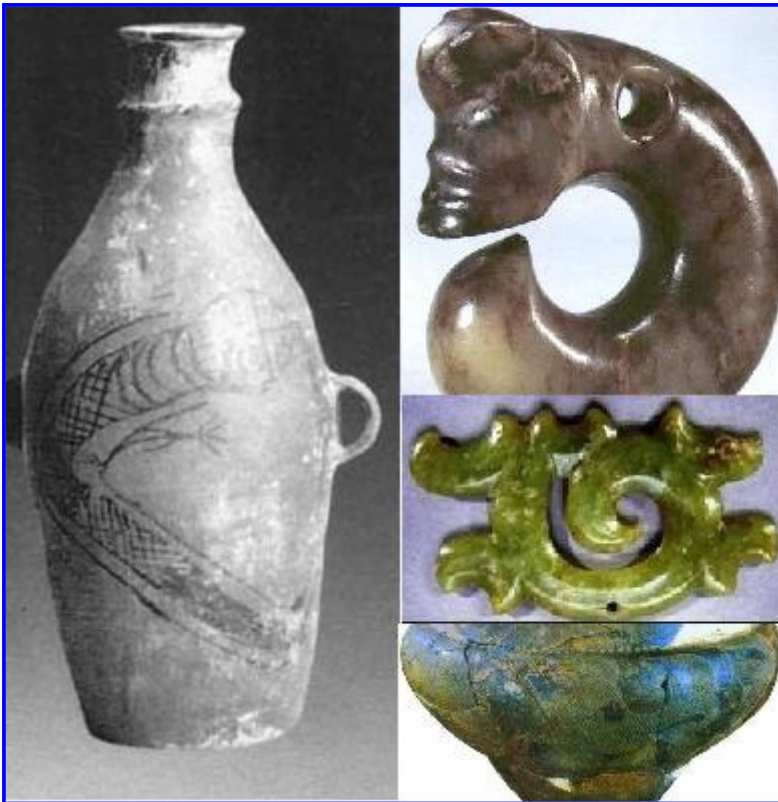
the origin

The idea of the dragon arose from snake fertility worship. The story of Eve and the serpent showed that (a) Eve, the mother figure of the Hebrew tribe, could talk to the snake, meaning that the tribe had an affinity to the snake (b) The serpent taught Eve and Adam to have sex, meaning that for the tribe the snake symbolized sexual knowledge and fertility (c) God condemned the snake to crawl on its belly, meaning that before this the snake could rise up, in other words, the specific snake the tribe worshiped was the cobra, which was also worshiped in other locations of the world including Egypt and India. However, as the Hebrews exited from their primitive pagan state, they underwent religious changes, and the snake turned into an evil figure, just as sex turned from a religiously worshiped activity to something private, even shameful.

The widespread nature of snake worship in primitive times could be discerned from the above diagram showing ancient rock carvings from several European location with figures of entangled snakes - these were clearly predecessors of the swastika, the symbol of the Indo-Europeans. The Yin-Yang figure is actually showing two entangled snakes, and the white dot in the black part and black dot in the white part were just the snakes' eyes - they were later given philosophical interpretations that there is a little Yin in Yang and a little Yang in Yin. The three medieval witchcraft diagrams, each showing the Uroboros serpent that swallows its own tail, are more recent, but we have vague stories that they represent ideas much older than middle ages. For example, by joining the head with the tail, the figure says "the end is the beginning", in fact the same idea as the Taoist notion "thing and nothing are the same; from the void arose the universe". Laozi lived 2500 years ago, but in fact sophisticated coiled snake figures made from jade were discovered in Chinese tombs dating 5000 years ago; since it took a long time to develop the skills and tools needed to carve jade, the idea of Uroboros must have existed long before then.

The association of snake with fertility presumably has something to do with the resemblance of snakes to the penis, the swastika showing our primitive ancestors observed entangled snakes mating and thought this important. Further, snakes hibernate in winter and emerge in spring, as if to signal humans to start planting, thus associating with agricultural productivity - fertility again. Some snakes can kill a human with just one bite, showing their fearsome power requiring appeasement by worship. These are just the more obvious reasons for snake worship.

However, the dragon is much more than the snake, being associated with cloud, rain, thunder, lightening, river, sea, etc. How did this major conceptual leap occur? I feel the cause was the tornado, which looked like a giant black snake with its head in the clouds and a powerful, highly destructive tail on the ground, accompanied by cloud, thunder, lightening and rain. Because tornados usually occur in spring and summer, they looked like giant snakes that woke up after winter hibernation and flew to heaven. In short, the dragon was the primitive tribes' idea of the heavenly snake, a cut above the snakes that stayed on the ground. The association with rain, however, soon extended to all water, and dragons were assumed to reside in rivers and seas as well.



the neolithic dragon

The above diagram shows ancient artefacts discovered by archaeologists from several locations in China. Each shows some version of the coiled snake body attached to a particular head. The jar on the left was found in northwestern china, presumably a wine vessel used in shaman rituals. The two jade dragons were found in Manchuria, one obviously related to the Uroboros, while the other showing just a hint of the swastika. The pottery urn came from a site in Inner Mongolia, with the extended snake body curviciously winding around the surface, attached to heads of pig, bird, deer and some other animal too defaced to discern. The particular stylistic representation seems to be related to the green jade dragon in some way.

We do not know when the neolithic people arrived in China, nor where they came from, but given the commonality in ideas between east and west, the snake worshipping people must have come from a common point of origin, perhaps in India because of the cobra worship (to be further discussed below.)



the Taoist dragon

The pottery and jade objects with the dragon motif were all used for some shamanistic ritual that we do not understand. The two ground sculptures of the dragon shown in the above diagram are better understood: they are mythical animals that tribal shaman chiefs would ride to go to heaven. This constitutes a significant departure from the ideas of the previous era: the earlier thinking was totemic, that the people of a tribe and their worshiped animal are one and the same, that the people that worshiped the snakes were themselves snakes that had taken the human form. Under the Taoist thinking, dragon and people are separate, and a dragon is merely a medium through which special humans can reach heaven. Later, this idea would further evolve, making it possible to believe that anyone that performed the right rituals, chants, meditations, etc, would acquire cosmic power and become immortal, that you can control the medium that reached heaven.

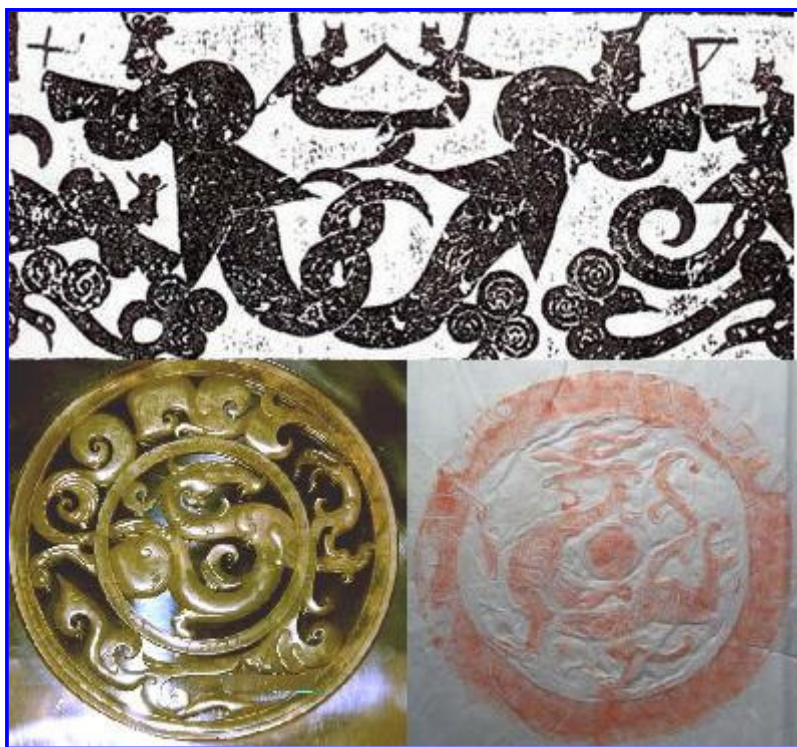


the Zhou dragon elaboration

Around 3000 years ago the Chinese tribes began to have the idea of a territory and therefore statehood - previously, a tribe stayed in one place only as long as the location provided plentiful animals for hunting/fishing and the soil remained fertile; when things became less abundant, the people simply moved to another place. When population increases made it harder to freely migrate, people had to learn to make better use of the territory they already occupied. It took many centuries of learning and practising before they were able to breed and raise animals in enclosed pastures and sties, and to rotate crops and fertilize their land with their own waste products so that the soil remained productive year after year.

The Zhou nobility used the dragon as their emblem, with the king using banners showing two entangled dragons, one rising and one descending; other nobility were only allowed to show the descending dragon.

The above examples of jade dragons show that they were more decorative than religious. The "end is beginning" design still appeared occasionally, but its meaning was probably lost to the people. Various elaborations had crept into the dragon's appearance.



the Han composition dragon

For the Hans, the dragon was first of all a historical and legendary object. The top diagram shows Fuxi and Nuwa, the Chinese equivalent of Adam and Eve (with the additional detail that they were brother and sister, and their marriage was incestuous - the Chinese idea of original sin), half human and half snake, standing up (like cobras do) with tails coiled together (snakes mating). One holds the compass, used to draw round circles, and one the right angle, used to draw squares, hence symbolizing round heaven and square earth.

The two figures below, one a jade pendant found in the grave of a local prince, and the other a paper rubbings taken from brick sculptures, show the dragon in even more elaborate forms than the previous Zhou jade dragons: the dragon now sported highly decorated crowns and tail feathers like birds, and it had legs and a torso like a mammal/reptile - the dragon was trying to be everything all at once.



the imperial dragon

It took another thousand years, in Song Dynasty, before the dragon settled on the design we know it today, by royal decree. The head had standardized to something like a horse's head, but with horns of a deer; the feet were those of eagles, while the tail was that of a fish. Its body is now covered by fish scales. Specific rules were made on who was entitled to wear robes with which particular dragon design, though details changed with ministerial discussions and whims of the particular emperor. The ultimate taboo was the five-claw dragon that only the emperor could have on his robe.



modern chinese dragon

With no royalty ruling China, the dragon has lived on as a traditional decorative motif. Even its previous connotations of ambition, talent, maleness (in contrast to the female phoenix - male dragon/female phoenix is actually a fairly recent concept), etc, have largely gone into disuse. You have to cite Bruce Lee (Li Xiaolong - Lee the little dragon) and Crouching tiger-hidden dragon (for Hongkong and Taiwan people accustomed to kungfu movies, an old fashioned story, though new to Americans and some mainlanders) to be reminded of these ideas.



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Favorite quotes:

"History repeats, first time as tragedy, second time as farce" - Marx 历史重复，一次悲剧，一次闹剧 - 马克思

"Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it" - Santayana 忘记历史注定重复历史 - 山塔亚那

"Those who remember their history are also condemned to repeat it" - Yuen 记得历史也注定重复历史 - 阮宗光

"Oscar Wilde was wrong about cynics knowing price not value; cynics know value is always less than price" - Yuen

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