

The Dragon: The Principle of Cosmos

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Dragon stories are found throughout the world, but there is a symbolic difference between oriental and occidental dragons. This study examined the different types and symbolic meanings of dragons in myths and fairy tales from British, Celtic, Slavic, Chinese, and Korean cultures. The dragon in Korean mythology is particularly rich with symbolic meaning: the king and his power, the god of water, a hero, a follower of Buddha, and transcendent transformation.

Keywords Dragon, Myth, Sandplay, I Ching, Symbol

INTRODUCTION

In Korea many villages have names that include the word *Yong*, which is Korean for “dragon.” In these villages, legends have been passed down from ancestors that dragons once lived in the nearby mountains, rivers, and waterfalls. For example, the nine small waterfalls of the So-geum River, called the “Nine Dragons Waterfalls,” (Figure 1) are stretched in a row over three kilometers, suggesting that all nine dragons each have their own waterfall. It is known as a numinous place because of its magnificent sounds and beautiful surrounding clouds.

Since childhood, I have heard many stories and legends about dragons. As I listened to the stories, I felt awe and numinosity in relation to the mountains, rivers, sky, and earth surrounding these mythical beasts.

In my sandpicture the dragon appeared with a *citamani*, a crystal ball, in the rear left corner of the tray. There was also a Native American village in the near centre of the tray, with women and children sitting around, while men armed with weapons were discussing something on the near right side. The following story came to mind:

The village is peaceful but not safe because a very threatening

dragon lives in the faraway mountains. Only the women know the way to stop the dragon.

My inner voice told me that this did not mean that the way the women knew involved fighting the dragon. Thus this story was different from the occidental myth that heroes fight and slay the dragon. *What is the meaning of the dragon appearing in my sand-tray? What is the way that the women know to stop the dragon? What is the meaning of this archetypal image for me as a Korean woman?* These questions as well as my life experiences compelled me to explore the dragon for my symbol paper.

In my exploration of the etymology of the Korean word for dragon, I found the following examples: “Becoming a dragon” means becoming a highly evolved human being imbued with divine energy. “Bearing the dragon” means carrying the potential to become a noble human being, a person of excellent capability. “Not to be able to transform from a serpent to a dragon” means having a sneaky, debased nature (Naver Korean Language Dictionary, 1999).

I also explored the origin of the Chinese character for Chintamani, which is a magical jewel that fulfills one’s wishes (Encyclopedia, 2007). In Chinese mythology, Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy, holds this jewel in both hands and with it she is able to ease the suffering of humanity. In dragon symbology, the Chintamani takes the form of the pearl that is held below the dragon’s chin. This “dragon ball” has been variously suggested as rolling thunder or the moon as rain-bringer, with the dragon swallowing the pearl as the waning of the moon and belching it forth as the waxing moon. In Taoism and Buddhism it is the pearl which grants all desires, the pearl of perfection, that is to say wisdom, enlightenment, and the spiritual essence of the universe. It can also represent the Bodhisattva of instantaneous enlightenment

Received: Oct 31, 2013 Revised: Dec 10, 2013 Accepted: Dec 31, 2013

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Figure 1. Nine dragons waterfall.

(Cooper, 1978). If a human being accomplishes the difficult task of obtaining the pearl, they would be omnipotent.

THE DRAGON AS A SYMBOL OF THE KING AND HIS POWER

The dragon was used as a symbol of the king and his power (Ku, 2004) throughout Korean history, and dragon images and sculptures are often found in palaces and temples in Korea (Figure 2). During the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), the features of the dragon were related to the king's attributes. The king's face was referred to as the face of the dragon, the king's throne was called the dragon throne, the king's chariot was called the dragon's chariot, and symbols of the dragon were attached to the front and back of the king's robe.

The king of the Goryeo Dynasty wore a golden robe with round golden symbols of a dragon with five feet. Bearing the symbolism of the opposites, the king had, on the front and right shoulder of his robe, a dragon with a red Chintamani, representing the sun and, on the back and left shoulder, the dragon had a white Chintamani representing the moon (Choe, 2007).

About six hundred years ago during the Joseon Dynasty, King Sejong emphasized the metaphor of the dragon when referring to the previous five generations of royal ancestors. He also published a text, *Yongbieocheonga* ("Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven"), the first work written in the Korean alphabet, to honor his ancestors' virtues (Ku, 2004).

THE DRAGON AS A SPIRITUAL OR RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

According to research by Ku Mi-rae (2004) on animal symbols in traditional Korean religion, farmers used to hold a ceremony

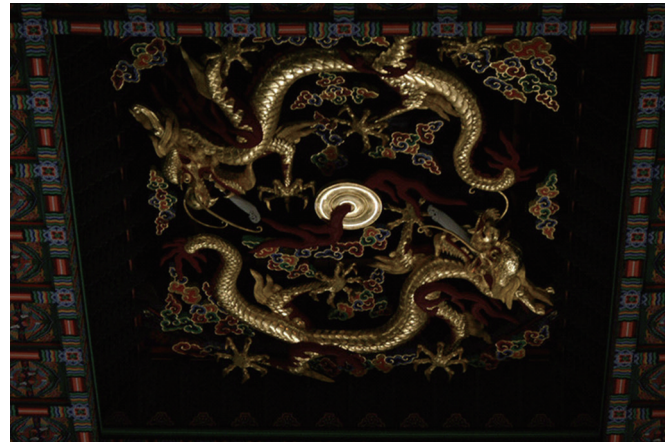


Figure 2. Drawing of a dragon in the Kyungbok Palace.

in the spring in which they performed music and waved flags that depicted the Dragon God of Rain. In this ritual, the farmers prayed for sufficient rain during the farming season. Similarly, the fishermen held a festival in which they floated a dragon-shaped boat to implore the Sea God to extend his favor so that they would catch lots of fish. Similarly, our ancestors also worshiped the dragon as the ruling god of the east and childbirth (see below, *Oriental and Occidental Dragons*).

In Buddhism, the dragon is considered to be a follower of Buddha (Ku, 2004). The legend says that after the Buddha returned to the land of the dragon kings from his sojourn under the Bodhi tree and told them about the Truth emanating from his vision, they became his followers. For this reason, there are many sculptures of dragons holding up the pillars and roofs of Buddhist temples (Figure 3).

In the Bible the Devil is associated with the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve. Therefore, snake-like dragons have a connotation of evil. The dragon, like the snake, embodies primal powers that are hostile to God and must be overcome. In the book of Revelation the dragon is represented as the satanic principle which follows a woman clothed with the sun who gives birth to the Christ child. The archangel, Michael, slays the dragon (Wikipedia, 2006).

The figure of the dragon is equated with the serpent, and is referred to as "that old serpent," meaning the power of evil, the Devil or Tempter, the enemy of God. It can also represent darkness and death, even paganism and heresy (Cooper, 1978). The Old Testament refers to the "place of dragons" that is associated with the "shadow of death" or deep waters, considered to be places of desolation and destruction. When one is able to subdue a dragon, one is reputed to be victorious over the powers of evil and heresy (Cooper, 1978).



Figure 3. Temple with dragons holding up pillars.

ORIENTAL AND OCCIDENTAL DRAGONS

Stories about dragons are found throughout the world. These stories show that there are symbolic differences between oriental and occidental dragons, and between dragons with different forms. In the Orient, the dragon is represented as a combination of nine different animals: the dragon's horns resemble those of a stag, his head that of a camel, his eyes those of a rabbit, his neck that of a snake, his belly that of a clam, his scales those of a carp, his claws those of an eagle, his soles those of a tiger, and his ears those of a cow. The scales consist of eighty-one pieces. Eighty one is the square root of the number nine, a "positive" number because Oriental people regard it as lucky. The dragon, described as having a roaring sound like a copper tray, has a long beard around its mouth and a marble under its jaw (Ku, 2004).

Zmey, the dragon in Slavic mythology, is similar to the archetypal European dragon (Figure 4). Zmey breathes fire and leaves a fiery wake as it flies through the sky. Usually in Slavic traditions the dragon symbolizes evil, though there are some exceptions. For example, in Serbian and Bulgarian folklore dragons are also defenders of the crops, fighting against destructive demons called Ala, whom they shoot with lightning (Wikipedia, 2006).

Scandinavian and Germanic dragons were called Lindworms and depicted as serpent-like dragons with either two or no legs. British and Celtic legends feature a similar type of dragon called a Wyvern, which was a winged reptilian creature with either two or no legs. These creatures were believed to symbolize envy, war, pestilence, and viciousness. However, in a nobler aspect, they have been depicted on banners and shields for centuries as a sign of strength, power, and endurance. A notable example is the flag of Wales (Figure 5).

Generally speaking, Oriental mythologies (Chinese, Korean, Japanese) regard dragons as gods, heroes, with qualities of tran-



Figure 4. Dobrynya Nikitich slaying Zmey Gorynych, by Ivan Bilibin.

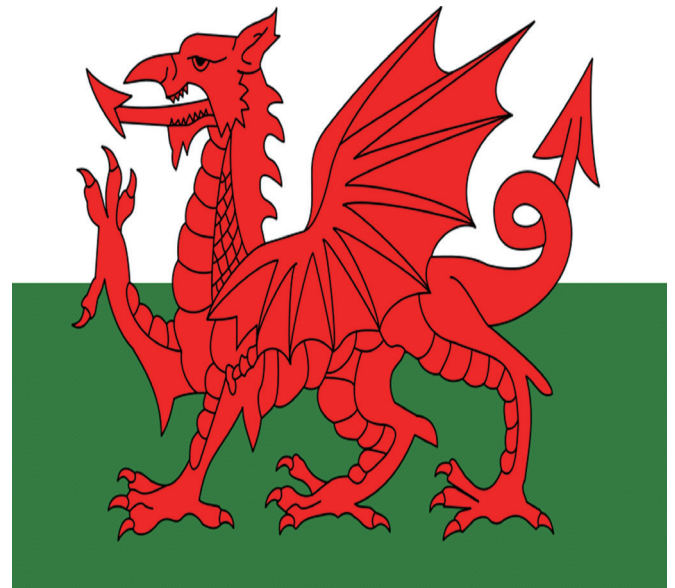


Figure 5. Welsh flag. Source of the photo: <http://www.sarahwoodbury.com/the-welsh-dragon/>

scendent transformation. In terms of godhood, the dragon is one of four divine creatures in the Chinese cosmology which control the universe, along with the Qilin, Phoenix, and Turtle. Similarly, in Korea there is a tomb painting from the Goryeo period called the Sashindo, which shows a turtle, phoenix, and tiger, along with a yellow dragon (Figure 6), offering a Korean variation of the four divine creatures. Furthermore, the Chinese revered a Blue Dragon as the god of the east (Current Events Dictionary, 2006).



Figure 6. Dragon in the Sashindo tomb painting.

The oriental dragon is also used as a metaphor for the hero. For example, people call an extraordinary person “a divine dragon” and describe a war between two countries as a “fight between two dragons.” In the Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (14th century), this conception is illustrated. Cao Cao, the ruler of Wei, said to Liu Bei, who was hiding: *The dragon can freely change its shape. It hides and comes out. Once the dragon flies, it can go even into the universe and into the water to hide itself* (Ku, 2004). Here the ruler is comparing the dragon to a hero who has the power to conceal himself when necessary and fly away. Today Liu Bei is a popular hero in China and Korea as he was a just and generous man who later became emperor, without forgetting his humanity towards other people. At the time of Cao Cao, Liu Bei had to conceal his true powers in deference to that ruler, who was issuing a warning to Liu Bei not to usurp his authority. Chinese rulers were known to have an image of a dragon on their clothes and their throne in order to associate themselves with the dragon’s power and authority.

In another Chinese myth the Longma, or “dragon horse,” is presented as a beneficial figure that helped the legendary hero Fu Xi learn cosmic principles and divination so that he could rule China. It is said he acquired this knowledge from trigrams inscribed on the dragon’s back when it emerged from a river. According to tradition, Fu Xi’s record of these trigrams became the *I Ching*, the classic Chinese text on cosmology and divination. The philosopher Confucius said of Fu Xi’s encounter with the creature: “The dragon is soaring from the Yellow River to teach the round of The Great Opposite, symbolizing the interaction of cosmic duality. Some emperors use dragons to pull the carriage

they sit on, others breed the dragon. The country of these emperors carries on continuously in prosperity” (Seo, 2004).

In the *I Ching*, the dragon symbolizes the birth of a hero (Seo, 2004). The text speaks of four transformations: the hidden dragon, the visible dragon, the flying dragon, and the ascending dragon. According to Seo Dae-won (2004), the first phase is the hidden dragon. The hidden dragon is still in the water, meaning that it is a period of unborn life contained in the water of the mother. This is an infinite space, a period of chaos in which there is no differentiation. The *I Ching* says, “Do not use the hidden dragon.” This means that the energy is immature and not accessible for use.

The second phase, that of the visible dragon, is the period when the dragon appears finally. After a period of chaos, it is the period of the formation of the Great Opposites when day and night are created in the cosmos and all things are born in Yang and Yin. The *I Ching* notes that “as the visible dragon is in the field, it is good to meet the great man.” This “great man” may be interpreted as the self.

In the third phase, that of the flying dragon, it is time for the dragon to fly up into the sky, the domain of god. Here the dragon has finished its preparation and it is the right time for ascension. It also means that the human is in consensus with a god.

The fourth phase is that of the ascending dragon. This is the time when the soaring dragon reaches the limits of the sky in a supreme state, bearing a Chintamani. It means the period of expiration, when all things die and go back to nothing or chaos. The *I Ching* says, “The ascending dragon has remorse” (Seo, 2004). The regret of the ascending dragon applies to the king as dragon.

When he ascends he has to die because he does not have the power of God. A man reaching the highest level that he can attain can go no further. No more transformations are possible. In history many men only reach the supreme position of a common man. The king's position is open only to the royal line. If the common man attempts to reach that position, he is killed or discarded by the king who has supreme power.

In another interpretation of the *I Ching* (Kim, 1994), the number nine is yang and heaven energy. It interchanges with the number six (a reversed nine), which is yin and earth. It is believed that all things are made from this interaction of yang and yin energy. In nine the energy is in an immature state, similar to the hidden dragon, so the energy is unavailable for use. It is necessary to wait until the energy matures.

Kim Seok-jin's interpretation only deals with the transformation of yang energy, not yin energy. As he presents it, the second phase is double nine and this energy appears on earth, where yin energy is located. These phases of transformation of yang energy continue to six nines which is the supreme level. The relationship of yang energy to the dragon is the same as in the union of yang and yin energy. What is different in this interpretation is that the dragon is associated only with yang energy. It is the Chintamani that brings in yin energy so that the two energies can be united. With the Chintamani, the dragon can soar to great heights.

The association of the dragon with transcendent transformation is common. Many stories have been passed down from ancestors that the dragon originally lived in the earth or water and ascended into the sky with a Chintamani. For example, there is a story of a venomous snake who became a viper after living for a thousand years. The viper became a python after another thousand years, and the python found a Chintamani after a further thousand years. Then with the consent of the sky, the python turned into a dragon to fly into the sky. It was believed that if the python did not become a dragon, it would harass and torment people. In this story, the change from python to dragon symbolizes the transcendence of a snake who lived underground and underwater into a dragon that ascended into the sky. Having endured such a long period of transformation, the dragon was held in high esteem by people. Cooper (1978) writes that the dragon, or winged serpent, combining the characteristics of a serpent and bird, is a symbol of the union of matter and spirit. Originally viewed as wholly benevolent, the dragon symbolized the life-giving waters (as a serpent) and the breath of life (as a bird). Therefore, it was identified with both sky gods and their ambassadors on earth.

I will now discuss occidental references to the dragon. In his work on heroes and the Mother archetype, Jung (1985) cites a creation myth from ancient Babylonia. In this story the hero, Marduk, armed with the wind and a net, conquers a gigantic dragon, Tiamat, who is the mother of the gods. He creates the

world by dividing her body into two sections. Jung refers to Tiamat as a "whale-dragon," implying a dreadful "throat" that devours and smashes people. He also refers to Marduk who fights against the "snake of the night."

Jung (1985) said that the heroes are devoured by monsters, "snakes of the night," and then they descend into the snake's body to yell and stay for a while in this "jail of night ocean." Therefore, by necessity, the hero has to fight with the "snake of the night" (146). Psychologically, the dragon monster is symbolized as the negative side, the "devouring" of the unconscious (323). The creation of the world occurs through the death of the mother dragon. In other words, the creation of the world is accomplished with the libido of which the Mother is deprived. Creation is also accomplished through the hindrance of regression of libido which threatens to dominate the hero (149).

A German legend also tells of a fight between a dragon and a hero. In this story, the dragon was a dwarf who turned into a dragon and hid in a cave to guard a ring which had been stolen from his race. The hero, Siegfried, enters the cave and fatally stabs the dragon in the heart with his sword and attains the treasure. Jung (1985) said about this story that the dragon, dwelling in a cave and guarding a treasure, is "greed incarnate" (323). Here, the dragon symbolizes the Devouring Mother, or the Unconscious, which threatens to possess the son's libido. The son, in the form of hero, represents an oppositional archetypal image to unconsciousness, that is, by defeating the dragon, the youth claims his own energy and develops consciousness, achieving his own life treasure.

India, the place where occidental and oriental cultures are blended, also offers a dragon story. The legend tells of a fight between a demonic dragon, Vritra, who causes harm through a drought, and a divine hero, Indra. In his work *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell (1962) writes that the dragon's name has the same root as Viruna, the name of the Hindu god of justice and destiny. In the story, Indra is presented as a god of war with attributes of bravery, power, and victory. He drinks Soma, the liquor of the gods, in one gulp and after it fills his body he defeats Vritra by causing thunder which, presumably, is followed by rain and relief from the drought (Kang, 2005). Campbell (1962) uses this myth to illustrate how the universal ruling matriarchal theory, represented by Vritra, was defeated by the autonomous ego theory, as represented by Indra.

In another version of the story, a dragon appears and lives in a water palace after becoming a follower of Buddha. This dragon, which has seven heads, guards Buddha while he meditates during seven days of heavy rain. These stories suggest that there is an evil dragon that is beaten by the thunder of Indra and a good dragon that becomes a positive guardian as a follower of Buddha (Kang, 2005).

As shown above, the symbolism and imagery of dragons in oriental and occidental myths differ greatly. In *Lao-tze and Myth*,

Seop (2003) cites Joseph Campbell who suggests that occidental myth is usually created out of a patriarchal society or nomadic society, while oriental myth is created in an agrarian society. Occidental myth thus presents a god's victory or domination over a goddess, while oriental myth presents a matriarchal goddess society. As I understand, the worship of the dragon in the Orient is in the matriarchal tradition whereas in occidental mythology it is in the patriarchal tradition.

Seop also states that most occidental myths express ambition, violent desire, and heroism striving for an independent ego, while oriental myth expresses interaction, peace, and regression to unconsciousness by weakening or disabling the ego. In other words, the dragon of occidental myth is one to be eliminated by the hero. By defeating the dragon, the hero revives from unconsciousness and creates the world with his independent ego. In oriental myth, the dragon is divine, giving benefits to people, and the hero receives help from the dragon. The oriental hero realizes the truth by understanding the cosmic principle that includes the opposites, including unconsciousness which is symbolized by the dragon.

DRAGONS IN CONTEMPORARY MOVIES

The Korean fantasy movie *D-War* (2007), released internationally as *Dragon Wars*, is set in Los Angeles but features dragons and other creatures from Korean mythology. The film concerns a pair of monsters called Imoogi, one good and one evil, which resemble gigantic serpents but are not true dragons. Its storyline is inspired by Korean legends that an Imoogi could transform into a dragon if it found a Yeouiju, an orb akin to a Chintamani jewel, which bestowed omnipotence on its bearer. In the film the Imoogi engage in a destructive battle for the Yeouiju, which is personified as a young woman, until the good Imoogi's victory enables it to transform into a dragon.

The Yeouiju is anima energy which unites with the good Imoogi, and guides the main character, a man whose job was to protect the Yeouiju, to transcend and attain self-actualization. Conversely, the destructive scenes with the evil Imoogi represent the repressive shadow part of an individual who resists, defies, and opposes wholeness. The human being who disregards his wholeness and neglects to know his shadow part only follows achievement, leaving the shadow part in the unconsciousness. This energy, like the evil Imoogi of the story, can become very dangerous.

DRAGONS IN DREAMS

Dragons from the unconscious sometimes appear in dreams. Koreans regard them as auspicious such as foretelling pregnancy (Ku, 2004). Han (1997) studied dream interpretations in Korean folklore and delineated the following details of dragon dreams

that have been passed down: if one sees a dragon in their dreams, they are lucky; if the dragon flies, they will be highly honored; if one rides a dragon into the water, good things will happen; if the dragon goes into a well, one will suffer hardships; if the dragon is lying in the water, it meant that things were not going well. Jung (1984) said that sometimes dreams involve fights with dragons who are guarding a treasure. The person who must slay the dragon must overcome his old unconsciousness and make its psychic content conscious in order to proceed with his life in a new way.

CONCLUSION

Exploration of the dragon as symbol let us know about the archetype of the dragon in Oriental and Occidental cultures. There are a lot of symbolic differences between the oriental and occidental representations of dragons. Joseph Campbell's statement about matriarchal and patriarchal traditions explains the differences between the cultures of the Occident and the Orient.

The *I Ching* teaches that the dragon's power, competence, and speed are not the greatest attributes. Therefore, we have no need to be powerful and hasty and, like the ascending dragon, end up with regret. What is more important is to live a heroic life, to live our life with courage to face the challenges we meet.

The appearance of the dragon in that workshop sandpicture foretold a transformation in me which allowed the female warrior and animus initiator to emerge from the shadows and present themselves in a later sandpicture in my personal process with my therapist. The dragon continues to give me the energy of transformation as I hold the images of the warrior woman and the masculine initiator.

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