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Drawing the Dragon

Western European  
Reinvention of China

Zhijian Tao

euro-sinica



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## Introduction

### 1. The *Long* and the Dragon

The accidental, or maybe not so accidental, equation of the *Long* [龍] with the dragon is a minor, yet in many ways symbolic, incident in Western European reinvention of China. On great scales, China has been represented for the West by the typically Western symbol of the dragon. The dragon is, of course, a purely mythical invention, the contradictory product of imagination, mystification, demonization and sometimes idealization. But there are no “dragons” as such in the Chinese language and culture. The dragon is a being specific to the Western tradition. I emphasize the Western constitution of the “dragon” because it bears a Western nomenclature and carries a Western myth. This distinctively Western European figure of the dragon has somehow been pressed into service as the closest equivalent to the Chinese *Long*, which is born of a geographically distant and culturally distinct world, and, as will be shown, bears essentially divergent valences. The *Long* and the dragon are not the same thing. It will be made clear in the following pages that fundamental cultural misunderstanding, arising from deep and unacknowledged ethnocentric underpinning, is evident in the Western European juxtaposition and identification of these two symbols. The title of this book, therefore, has been chosen in order to foreground the essentially imaginary picture the European West has had of China.

*The Modern Chinese Dictionary* describes the *Long* as “A divine and mythical animal in ancient Chinese legend, with an extended body, scales, horns, and feet, competent in walking, flying and swimming,

as well as in summoning clouds and inducing rain.”<sup>1</sup> Prehistoric Chinese mythology, mainly recorded in the Han Dynasty geographical and mythological work, the *Shanhai Jing* [Mountain-sea Classic], tells of divine beings who had human heads and snake’s bodies. These beings were the prototypes of the *Long*. The scholar and poet Wen Yi-duo wrote a book, entitled *Fuxi Kao* [Exploring Fuxi], to investigate the earliest Chinese mythological figures.<sup>2</sup> In this book he points out that the image of the *Long*, as a symbol of the Chinese nation, was formed by an amalgamation of the images of the snake and various other animals, which gave the *Long* its body, its four legs, its horse’s mane, hyena’s tail, deer’s horns, dog’s claws, and fish’s scales and feelers.<sup>3</sup> The amalgamation, as Li Zehou sees it, tells the story of a prehistoric snake-worshipping Chinese people’s gradual subordination of, and unification with, other tribal organizations, when the snake totem took on features of other totems (6–9).

An amalgamation of the totems of diverse peoples, the *Long* stood as a symbol of unity and peace, and presumably it is for that reason it has been gradually transformed into a symbol of a unified Chinese nation. This background surely passed down to the figure its favourable sense of power and vigour in idiomatic and figurative usage. Therefore, the “*Long*-horse vigour” is something we would do well to have. And when “*Long*s and snakes are jumbled together,” we know it will take efforts to tell good from bad. The *Long* and the *feng* (usually translated as “phoenix”) are paired in excellence: “*Long-feng* displays auspiciousness;” “*Long*’s cubs and *feng*’s young” are used in praise of extraordinary talent in youngsters. Such positive attributes undoubtedly entitled the *Long* for a symbol

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1 *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* [Modern Chinese Dictionary]. Beijing: Shangwu, 1980.

2 Fuxi is one of the chief figures in Chinese mythology, the legendary creator of the *bagua* or the eight trigrams. He is described as having a human head and a snake’s body in some mythological works (see *Diwang Shiji* [The Monarchs’ Chronicles]).

3 See Li Zehou, *Meide Licheng* [A History of Beauty] (Beijing: Wenwu, 1981), 7–8.