

In The Traditions of Our Ancestors

The Year

of the

Dragon



*Middlesex County
Cultural & Heritage Commission
Folklife Program for New Jersey*

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The Year of the Dragon
from the series entitled
In the Traditions of Our Ancestors

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Master Artist Hing K. Cheung



Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission and its Folklife Program for New Jersey celebrate the **Year of the Dragon** in 2012 with the creation of this unique publication.

To the Chinese people, the dragon represents auspicious power and is often ascribed divine attributes. The dragon is also a significant cultural symbol for a number of Asian cultures. The Japanese style of dragon, for instance, is considered a water deity. In Korea the dragons are benevolent beings related to water and agriculture. According to an ancient creation myth, the Vietnamese people are descended from a dragon and a fairy, and to this day, the dragon watches over the people of Vietnam by bringing rain - so essential to agriculture and good fortune. One important scripture in Tibetan culture is called *Klu* or the scripture of one hundred thousand dragons. It is divided into three parts: colorful dragons, black dragons and white dragons. The Tibetan dragon is named *Druk*, *Drug* or *Zhug* (variant spellings). Bhutan, the kingdom at the southern border of the Himalayas, is called *Druk Yul* - the land of the peaceful dragon (or the thunder dragon land).

Join us as we explore Chinese dragon traditions and learn more about this ancient and beautiful cultural symbol.

Mr. Hongyan Wu was born and raised in Beijing. He is a community leader who has spent countless hours researching and documenting Chinese cultural traditions practiced outside of China. He is the President of the *Beijing Alliance of New Jersey*, an 800-member affiliate that furthers cultural exchanges among those with an interest in the culture of Beijing and cultural traditions found throughout China. Hongyan Wu has worked with the Commission and our Folklife staff for over 10 years. We owe him a debt of gratitude for sharing his knowledge in the writing of this monograph, translating important text, conducting fieldwork and, in general, believing in the work of the Commission. Thank you, Mr. Wu.

Mr. Hing K. Cheung, a resident of New Jersey, was born in Hong Kong. He is a master painter who teaches brush painting from time to time in our Folklife Program. It was a serendipitous discovery to learn that his life's work included decades of dragon paintings. We are honored that his paintings grace the pages of this publication. As a special treat to our readers, Mr. Cheung prepared drawing materials which have been photocopied. Each person requesting a copy of this book will also receive drawing samples so that you too can sketch a dragon in the Chinese tradition, and welcome the power, good luck and mythology of the dragon.

Anna M. Aschkenes, Executive Director

Middlesex County Cultural & Heritage Commission

The Chinese people call the dragon . . .

the divine mythical creature that brings with it ultimate abundance, prosperity and good fortune.

Eastern dragons (Chinese) are considered to be beautiful, friendly, helpful and wise, unlike dragons of the Western or European cultures where the dragon is thought to be an evil creature that must be destroyed - dragon slaying is common among Western mythology.

In ancient times, the dragon symbol was used to denote the emperor of China and was considered divine. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271 to 1368) no civilian was allowed to associate themselves with the symbol of the dragon or wear clothing with its image. (The Yuan Dynasty or the Great Yuan Empire was established by Kublai Khan who ruled both China and Mongolia.) However, during the Qing Dynasty (1636 to 1911) the Chinese dragon symbol appeared on the national flag and became a common icon used in many aspects of daily life.



Cover image is a dragon formed into the shape of a Chinese character that represents the word for spring. It was painted as a spring festival decoration.

Dragons are symbols of the natural world, representing adaptability and transformation. They are credited with great powers that allow them to make rain. They have the ability to control flooding (the dragon parts the waters by striking the river with its tail, thus diverting the floodwaters). Dragons are believed to transport humans to the celestial realms after death.

In ancient China, no one doubted the existence of dragons. All the people afforded the dragon great respect. It was custom to prostrate one's self before the image of a dragon, whether part of a sculpture, depicted in drawings or seen in carvings.

This painting by Mr. Cheung shows the dragon once used as the official symbol of the Qing Dynasty.



Even the emperor had to bow before the dragon's image, as the dragon was treated with reverence and awe. As a result, this unreal animal became the spiritual sustenance for a nation: firstly, as the totem of a tribe and secondly, as the symbol of the nation, when the dragon's image was placed on the national flag by the last feudal dynasty, the Qing Dynasty.

In the minds of the early Chinese people, the dragon was a god that embodied the will and ideals of the Chinese people. It is said that the dragon can become dark or bright, large or small, long or short. It can fly into the sky in the spring and live under the water in the fall.

It seems the dragon is capable of anything.

Traditionally, the dragon was attributed with the power to control the weather. The dragon decided when and where to open the heavens and release life-giving rain.

The Chinese dragon is a divine creature that was described visually by the Chinese ancients as *chimera* (a creature whose body is a combination of mismatched animal parts). It is described in appearance as having parts from nine animals:

1. horns of a deer
2. head of a camel
3. eyes of a rabbit
4. neck of a snake
5. abdomen of a large cockle
6. scales of a carp
7. claws of an eagle
8. paws of a tiger
9. ears of an ox

and with the powers of the gods – able to form the clouds, mist, thunder, lightning, and the rainbows.



This elegant painting is of a sea dragon, shown partially submerged in water and playing with a bead or pearl. It was painted in 2006/2007. Colors in this painting are light and delicate.

Origin of the Dragon

No one knows the actual origin of the dragon. It is thought, however, that its development stems from primitive Asian societies more than 7000 years ago. Some believe the dragon legend comes from the mist found in the mountains of Sichuan and the propensity of the area for earthquakes, which ancient people thought were caused by angry dragons.

The emergence of the dragon in Chinese culture during the Neolithic Xinglongwa cultural period 興隆洼文化 has lead archaeologists to postulate that the dragon is based on *Crocodylu Porosus*, a breed of giant crocodile whose fossilized remains have been found in rivers throughout the mountainous regions of Asia.

Dragons were thought to live in caves deep in the bowels of mountains. In ancient China, people building a house on a hill or mountain were always careful to build their house along the slope, so as not to upset the dragon that lived beneath.

Chinese scholar Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) proposed the theory that the dragon represents the unification of China and its unique body is a totem of all the Chinese people. About 2700 B.C., history tells us that the Yan and Huang people united when the Huang emperor was victorious in a conflict between the two groups. Together they became the largest cultural tribe in the lands that are now mainland China. The original or core totem had the body of a snake. Other, smaller tribes joined, and each of these cultural groups had an identifier ~ a totem or symbol that was added and the dragon became a composite of the totems.

The formation of the Chinese dragon legend historically kept pace with the integration of different ethnic nations. Thus the dragon symbolizes the ancient cultural tribes of China. It is often said, that this is the reason why the people of China call themselves “descendants of the dragon.”

The Imperial Dragon

The dragon reflected the deity of the imperial throne and was accepted as a symbol of the emperor's divinity. An emperor was said to have a direct relationship to dragons - some claimed lineage as dragon descendants. For hundreds of years, Chinese emperors sat on thrones behind bamboo curtains because, it was said, the emperors could change into dragons at will.

Before recorded history, China's first emperor Fu Xi (Fu Hsi) was said to have had a human body but a dragon's tail. Fu Xi was apparently given the knowledge of writing by a dragon. Shen Nong (Shen Nung), the emperor after Fu Xi, was said to have a dragon as a father. Chi Yu (Yu the Great), who was the founder of the Xia dynasty in about 2,000 B.C., was said to have been born a dragon and to have possessed supernatural powers.



The dragon is considered very wise. It served as advisor to the royal family. Seeing a dragon meant the ruler was doing a good job. Conversely, the dragon was known to get angry when an emperor did not follow his advice. Because of this, the dragon might cease to bring rain or cause the lands to flood. If catastrophes like these occurred, the people assumed the emperor foolishly ignored the counsel of the dragon.

In turn, the emperor paid homage to the dragon, adorning his robes with a five-toed dragon image. The emperor slept in a dragon bed, sat on a dragon throne, and even had a dragon-shaped boat. Embroidered on the emperor's robe, one might see a dragon attempting to swallow the sun. This is a metaphor, meaning - as impossible as it is for the dragon to swallow the sun . . . so too is it impossible to corrupt the emperor. Long ago, if anyone but the emperor wore the five-toed dragon on their clothes, they were beheaded.

Timeline of Chinese History

Prehistoric Era

Paleolithic Era: 2.6, or 2.5 million years ago – 12000 years ago

Mesolithic Era: from 10000 years ago

Neolithic Era: from 10000 years ago to 7000 – 2000 years ago

Legendary Time (Three sovereigns and five emperors):

7000 – 8000 years ago to 1000-2000 years ago

Xia Dynasty: 21 century BC to 16 century BC.

Shang Dynasty: 17 century BC to 11 century BC

Zhou Dynasty: 11 century BC to 256 BC

Western Zhou Dynasty: 11 century BC to 771 BC

Eastern Zhou Dynasty: 770 BC to 256 BC

Spring/Autumn Dynasty: 770 BC to 476 BC

Zhan Guo Dynasty: 476 BC to 221 BC

Qin Dynasty: 221 BC to 207 BC

Han Dynasty: 202 BC to 220

Western Han Dynasty: 202 BC to 9

New Dynasty: 9 – 23

Eastern Han Dynasty: 25 – 220

Three Kingdoms: 220 – 280

Jin Dynasty: 266 – 420

Western Jin Dynasty: 266 – 316

Eastern Jin Dynasty and 16 countries: 317 – 439

Southern/Northern Dynasty: 420 – 589

Song Dynasty: 420 – 479

Qi Dynasty: 479 – 502

Liang Dynasty: 502 – 557

Chen Dynasty: 557 – 589

Sui Dynasty: 581 – 618

Tang Dynasty: 618 – 906

Wu Dai Shi Guo Dynasty: 907 – 960

Song Dynasty: 960 – 1279

Northern Song Dynasty: 960 – 1126

Southern Song Dynasty: 1127 – 1279

Western Xia Dynasty: 1038 – 1227

Jin Dynasty: 1115 – 1234

Yuan Dynasty: 1271 - 1368

Ming Dynasty: 1368 – 1644

Qing Dynasty: 1644 – 1911



This is a modern style of dragon. It was painted by Hing K. Cheung in 1988 and was selected for publication in a calendar.



The Manchu Emperor Yongzheng (Yong Cheng) (1722-1735) from the Qing Dynasty (left) and his spouse the Empress Xiaojing Xian (right). Yongzheng was a hard working ruler whose goal was to create an effective government without great expense. He created the Grand Council which had a major impact on imperial China. The dragon on court robes indicated the royal's ability to mediate between heaven and earth. Therefore, the people of China consider dragons the “Angels of the Orient.”



H. Zhen 2000



This painting has a Sitting Dragon depicted in the center with two small dragons and multi-colored clouds. Across the bottom is a representation of the sea. Note the symbol in the top-left quadrant “卍” as this is a sign of Buddhism. It stands for wisdom. These characters “卍 and卐” are originally from ancient Greece, but later were adopted by Buddhism and other religions.



The dragon is spraying water, indicating its control over the rivers and the sea.

Numbers and colors have historical and symbolic meaning to the Chinese. For instance, yellow has long been associated with the Qing Dynasty of China and is found often on imperial garments.

The number nine appears in many facets of Chinese life. For instance, there are nine dragons on the imperial robe. Three are placed on the front, and three on the back. One dragon is placed on each shoulder of the garment and one is placed on the lapel or neck trim of the robe. As a result, no matter where a viewer stands in relationship to the imperial robe, five of the dragons can be seen at all times. This is a ratio of nine (9) to five (5) - numbers that indicate respect.

Every element embroidered on an imperial garment is carefully chosen and may include the sun, moon, clouds, stars, mountains and lucky animals. The bat, as an example, is one of the zodiac symbols, but also is considered lucky; when it is pronounced or said out loud its name is the same sound as a Chinese blessing.



Royal families were the only ones allowed to eat the meat of dragons. Consuming the flesh of the dragon was thought to make one smarter.

The basic qualities of the dragon directly relate to the well-being of humans. These changeable creatures, capable of flight, are in control of life-sustaining waters and have direct access to the highest authorities. They educate and give advice to leaders about ethics, justice and how one can tell right from wrong. And, dragons have been known to foretell misfortune.

The spirit of the Chinese dragon is a spirit of unity and cohesion. As times changed, modern society no longer attributed divinity and power to the symbol of the dragon.

Today, the dragon continues to be a major part of Chinese culture. It can be found adorning pottery, and as the subject of paintings, stories and songs. Dragon symbols are depicted in architecture, dances, movies and as part of seasonal celebrations.

The spirit of the contemporary dragon is the spirit of stirring oneself to action and living as a pioneer. The dragon has evolved from a divine chimera to an icon of Chinese tradition.

Types of Dragons

龙王 Dragon King of the water world, controls generations of clouds and rainmaking. This dragon is one of the four wizards in ancient mythology. The book *太上洞渊神咒经* lists five dragon kings, one for each of the four different compass directions and the fifth referring to the center of the compass.

龙母 Dragon Queen represents kindness and universal love.

龙女 Dragon Daughter is smart, clever, intelligent and bright.

Traditionally it is said the Dragon King had nine sons (the number nine in Chinese culture is highly important) and they were sent to help the first emperor conquer China.

After completing their mission, the nine dragons were preparing to return to heaven. But the emperor played a trick on the most powerful dragon, the sixth son, rendering it unable to move. None of his brothers would leave without him and so they all remained in the human world. The dragons, however, would no longer work for the emperor.

The nine dragon sons are

龙子之囚牛 Qiu Niu is the patron of musicians and is often carved on the bridge of instruments.

龙子之睚眦 Ya Zi is bad tempered and inclined to fight. His image is often depicted on weapons, making them accurate and more powerful.

龙子之嘲风 Chao Feng, a lion-like beast, is one that likes steep edges and precipices, so it is placed on all the high corners of buildings.

龙子之蒲牢 Pu Lao loves to roar. This dragon was carved on bells, drums and musical instruments so the instrument sounds would travel far distances.

龙子之狻猊 Suan Ni is shaped like a lion. It is associated with fire and smoke. Its image often decorates incense burners.

龙子之霸下 Ba Xia Legend tells of this turtle-shaped dragon carrying eight mountains on his back. He is also the symbol for longevity and luck. Its likeness can be seen on columns and the foundations of buildings, as if carrying the weight of the structure.

龙子之狴犴 Bi An appears as a tiger and is said to protect justice, helping humans to distinguish between right and wrong.

龙子之负屃 Fu Xi is good at literature and calligraphy and is a symbol for education and knowledge.

龙子之螭吻 Chi Wen has the head of a dragon but the body of a fish and is known to fight fires. This dragon is placed on top of buildings to protect the structures from fire.

Other Dragons

龙子之玃 Hou is able to communicate with the heavens and is often asked to pass messages to ancestors.

龙子之貔貅 Pi Xiu is auspicious but violent. His function is to protect against evil and to fight evil.

龙子之饕餮 Tao Tie loves to eat and can be found on bronze food vessels where his presence assures that one's home will never be without food. However this dragon died from overeating.

龙子之椒图 Jiao Tu likes things closed and secure. Its likeness is often placed on the doors of homes to protect the doorways and entryways.

龙子之夔虬 Ba Fu is known to be a good swimmer. His shape is a combination of a dragon and shrimp. He can suppress demons.



Historically, a dragon facing forward could only be used or worn by the imperial family. No other dragon may be drawn or depicted in this manner. This is a Sitting Dragon.

This painting was done by Mr. Cheung to commemorate the birthday of the Empress Dowager Cixi (Ts'u His) who reigned from 1861 to 1908.

Dragon Shapes

坐龙 Sitting Dragon is dignified and honorable. It faces forward. There is a ball of fire under its chin; its limbs are outstretched and facing four different directions. *Sitting Dragons* are usually placed in the center of an image, surrounded by other dragons.

行龙 Walking Dragon is viewed from the side and is shown in a walking stance. Usually they are depicted in pairs and placed on the front of buildings; the dragon pair is playing with a fire ball. When a single *walking dragon* is shown, it will be “looking” backward - a more lively posture .

升龙 Rising Dragon is so called because it is in motion, rising and flying. When it is moving leftward it is said to be a *left rising dragon*, leading to the upper right - a *right rising dragon*. There is also a *slow rising dragon*, *urge rising dragon*, and a *backing dragon* - the latter when its head is facing upward but the dragon is actually in a downward motion.

降龙 Downwarding Dragon is also flying but moving downward with its head facing down. There are a *left downwarding dragon*, a *right downwarding dragon*, *slow downwarding dragon*, a *radical downwarding dragon*, and a *rebound dragon* or *upside down dragon* - the latter has its head looking up but its motion is downward.

云龙 Cloud Dragon produces the clouds with its breath. It is often depicted as rising in the sky. Sometimes this dragon appears to be hiding, as parts of its body are behind the clouds - its image “broken up” by cloud formations, giving a magical disappearance/appearance. This dragon was most common in ancient times.

草龙 Grass Dragon or *Curly Grass Interlocking Dragon* is S-shaped and intertwined in curly grass. Usually the head can be easily discerned, but the body, tail and limbs appear to become one with the curly grass. There are endless variations of this dragon.

拐子龙 the “工” shaped dragon originated from the *grass dragon*, but it is drawn in a simpler fashion. This charming dragon is decorative and often carved or painted on furniture and architectural framework.

团龙 Circular Dragons originated in the Tang Dynasty, but were commonly used in Ming and Qing Dynasties. *Circular dragons* were commonly depicted as *four circular dragons* or *eight circular dragons* and used in decorative costumes. Later these dragons appeared in groupings of 10, 12, 16, and 24 worked into embroidery, woven brocades, and used as illustrations on objects and structures.

双龙戏珠 Twin Dragons date back to the Han Dynasty. They are painted playing with a fire bead (the fire bead is derived from the moon). They are auspicious festive decorations, also found painted onto structures and adorning precious vessels.



The dragon is used in dances and celebrations. One example is the Dragon Dance performed in the USA and in China. The dragon dancers hold a large, colorful fabric or paper dragon above their heads, as illustrated in the painting on the page above. The dancers move in wavelike actions, through the streets or grounds of a festival, simulating the undulations of the dragon.

Red is the typical color of the dragon. Red is used because it is the color of heat and summer and also the color of the number five. The dragon dance is performed for the lunar festival, held the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. This date is selected in hopes of pleasing the dragon.

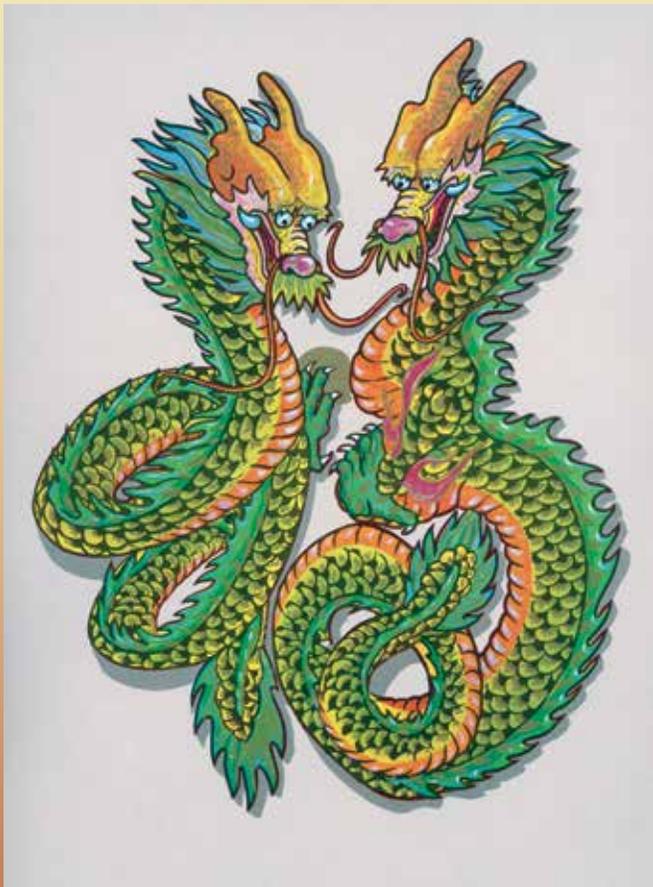
History records that the dragon dance was performed in China as early as 960 A.D., thus it is a very ancient cultural tradition marking the beginning of the Chinese Lunar Year. At this time, people dance, set off firecrackers and race boats painted red, which are constructed in the shapes of dragons.



This painting by Hing K. Cheung illustrates a garment made for an imperial wife during the Qing Dynasty more than 300 years ago. The blue color of the background represents the sky; clouds are surrounding the dragon. The use of the color red is for luck. Clouds in multiple colors stand for happiness.



There is a celebration in the fall called the Mid-Autumn Festival that takes place on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Chinese calendar, when the moon is full. This festival marks the time when the dragons hibernate.



These two dragons form a Chinese character that means “Blessing” or “Good fortune” 福. This image is a good one to use when giving a gift or good wishes.



Similar to the image on the cover, this dragon and phoenix are configured into a Chinese character. Here the meaning of the character is “peace.”

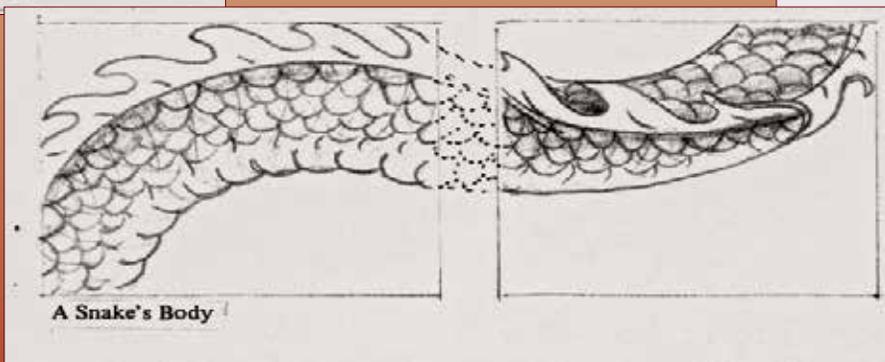
Today, the dragon is very important in Chinese life. It is a prominent icon in celebrations and is found in imagery and language. For instance, one common saying is, "the carp has leaped through the dragon's gate," which has a meaning of “success.” It is also said that - if a carp successfully jumps rapids and waterfalls, it will turn into a dragon.





Persons requesting a copy of this monograph will receive drawing samples, similar to those shown here. Prepared especially for you by master artist Hing K. Cheung, the drawings may be enlarged and duplicated. They are ideal for student groups working with an educator or art teacher, and fun for adults who wish to try their hand at dragon painting.

Dragon head and body parts from drawing samples prepared by Hing K. Cheung



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This monograph was produced
in a 14-point decorative font.
It is available in alternate
formats of 14-point sans serif
and audio, upon request.



The Folklife Program for New Jersey is a project of the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission through which we honor and celebrate the rich ethnic and cultural traditions of



the people of New Jersey. We regularly present regional folk artists who are recognized by their community for excellence in programs of dance, storytelling, music, song, handcrafts, costume, and traditions born of work, place and language. You are invited to participate in our folk arts educational programming and cross-cultural experiences. All folklife programs are offered free of charge and open to the public. **Funding in part is provided by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Dept of State, a partner agency of National Endowment for the Arts.**

In the Traditions of Our Ancestors is a series of original monographs produced from fieldwork by the Commission's *Folklife Program for New Jersey*. Publications are offered without charge, but are printed in limited quantities. To learn about each of the titles, go to the Commission's website listed on this page and click on the icon for *publications*. You may email a request from the website or call the Commission offices to obtain copies of this and others in the series.