



Cultural Differences of Chinese Loong and Western Dragon

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Abstract

Dragon is a mysterious animal that never exists in our real life. The culture of dragon is developing in different civilization with the elapse of time. However, people have different cognition about the origin, the cultural symbolization and the usage of loong and dragon because of the cultural difference. Chinese people regard loong as the symbol of auspiciousness and authority. By contrast, in Western people's eyes, dragon is the symbol of devil and bugbear. This paper aims to analyze the cultural differences between Chinese loong and western dragon to indicate Chinese loong is not exactly equal to the dragon in western culture, aiming to avoid the misunderstanding on dragon that are caused by these cultural differences.

Key words: Dragon; Loong; Cultural difference

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INTRODUCTION

The development and perfection of Chinese loong culture has been going on in the historic process of Chinese civilization. Loong culture has a so important position in Chinese traditional civilization that every person who works to learn and spread Chinese culture has to know something about it. In the development of western civilization, dragon also exists and forms a kind of dragon culture which is quite distinct from Chinese loong culture. Since the cognition of Chinese loong and western dragon

is quite different, there are some misunderstandings in our communication. To learn and understand the culture difference between Chinese loong and western dragon is beneficial to the cultural communication between us.

In Xinhua Dictionary (1980), the original meaning of loong is a kind of a supernatural animal, which carries horns and whiskers and only has one head. It can make rain as wanted in legend. Another meaning of loong refers to the head of animals, which can be black or bright, can be slender or coarse, can be short or long, flying to the sky in spring, and diving in the sea in autumn. Chinese people regard loong as the symbol of auspiciousness and authority. In the ancient China, loong is the symbolization of emperor. Hence the look of emperor is called loong yan, the clothes emperor wears is called loong pao, and the chair emperor sits is called loong yi. Chinese people regard themselves as the offspring of loong and China is called as "dong fang ju loong" which means China is a big oriental country. Nowadays, people still regard loong as an auspicious creature which can bring good luck. In the phrase "wang zi cheng loong", loong means a successful person with prestige. Loong is rooted deeply in Chinese culture. Although the cultural meaning of loong no longer has a close connection with emperor these days, people in China still regard loong as something auspicious.

While Chinese believe loong can bring prosperity and good fortune, the creature is regarded differently in Western countries. Dragon exists not only in ancient Greek mythology but also in the holy dogmas of the middle ages. Moreover, dragon can be found frequently in the western films nowadays. We can easily draw a conclusion that dragon culture is, in some aspects, an important part of western life. However, dragon is a symbol of evil in their minds. In a widespread Christian legend, the huge and violent dragon is the embodiment of demon. the dragon in some role-playing computer games is a monster that can help the player to beat the opponent and the dragon in films is always a super devil that attempts to destroy the earth.

Although loong and dragon play important roles in both Chinese and western culture, there are many cultural differences between them. These differences mainly lie in the origin, the symbolization and the usage of western dragon and Chinese loong. The different cognition on these aspects makes Chinese and the western have so different views of loong and dragon. To recognize these differences can help us to solve the misunderstanding and communicate easily.

1. THE ORIGIN OF DRAGON AND LOONG IN DIFFERENT CULTURE

When we discuss the cultural difference of western dragon and Chinese loong, obviously, the origin of dragon and loong will come into our minds first.

1.1 The Origin of Dragon in Western Countries

In the Mesopotamian epic, the god Narduk killed Tiamat—the evil dragon. He cut it into two. One became the sky, and another became the earth. Thus God created the world. Moreover, in the Ancient Greek Mythology, Zeus defeated the ferocious dragon which has one hundred heads. In the *Bible*, dragon is the snake of Satan's avatar. Although there are many literatures have mentioned about dragon, we still don't have a clear concept of what is the origin of western dragon. Actually, there are two popular opinions about the origin of dragon.

1.1.1 Seraphim in Traditional Christian Angelology

A branch of the Semitic people created the Judaism. Some people thought that the Seraphim was the dragon which was the incarnation of justice. Among the western civilization, Seraphim was similar with Chinese loong in essence, meaning and characteristic. Seraphim means "python" in ancient Hebrew, which was the plural form of "Seraph". In ancient Hebrew, since there was no word for dragon, the word "python" was used to represent "dragon". Some historical materials of Hebrew mythology reflected that the image of Seraphim in the early period is similar with Chinese loong.

1.1.2 Dragon in the *Bible*

The dragon we mentioned before is holy and miraculous, but most people tend to the view that the dragon is evil. In the *Bible*, dragon is a devil incarnation of Satan who fought with the God and turned himself into a snake in the Garden of Eden to tempt Adam and Eve to eat fruits on the tree of wisdom. The emergence of Christian made the meaning of dragon totally changed. Dragon was turned into another name for Satan. In the *Bible*, the huge red dragon with seven heads and ten horns was a prime enemy of God and the human beings.

1.2 The Origin of Chinese Loong

In China, loong is a miraculous creature which can travel back and forth between heaven and ocean. In the same time, it takes charge of rain. Hence, people in ancient times pray for a favorable weather and a good harvest to loong. However, No final conclusion has yet been reached

on how and when loong appeared in Chinese culture. The earliest loong that we found in China existed in six thousand years ago. In 1989, archaeologists excavated a picture of loong which was accumulated by shells in a tomb in Xishuipo, Puyang. It was regarded as the first dragon in China. Archaeologists also find a jade loong in Nei Mongol, which has a history of more than five thousand years. In the Shang-Zhou Period which is three thousand years ago the image of loong has existed on the bronzes and bone objects. There are 100 kinds of writings of loong in the inscriptions on oracle bones. It is in the Warring States period which is two thousand years ago that loong was vividly painted on silk for many times. Until to the Han Dynasty, the image of loong is equal matched with what we see nowadays. After that, with the processing of each dynasty, the appearance of loong is more and more dignified. In *Zhouyi*, loong was described as a miraculous creature which lived in the abyss, flied in the heaven and fought in the ground. In the description of a flood in Zheng state in *Zuo Zhuan*, there were two loongs fighting in the abyss outside the city gate. Moreover, in *Shan-hai Ching*, loong played a role as a miraculous and powerful god. Although there are so many legends about loong in Chinese history, the origin of Chinese loong is still a mystery. People tend to two explanations that are the fuzzy combination in Neolithic Age and the Totem in Xia tribe.

1.2.1 The Fuzzy Combination in Neolithic Age

For the origin and essence of Chinese loong, Pang Jin (2007) introduced an idea that loong originated in fuzzy combination in Neolithic Age. In another word, loong was a miraculous creature which was a fuzzy combination of animals-like fish, alligator, snake, pig, horse and cattle and nature phenomenon-like clouds, mist, thunder, lights and rainbow. It was an art creation by primitive people which was based on the living things and the nature phenomenon. Actually, it has a history of more than 8000 years. At that time, the primitive men bred the wild horses, cattle and pigs rather than lived on the gifts of nature. They planted crops, built simple houses by the using of woods, grind stone and bone tools, and made fire for themselves. However, when they contacted with the nature broader and broader, they found that the nature was incredible and had an amazing power to change their life. There were so many phenomena that they couldn't explain. Such as why there were thunder and lights, why flood could destroy their houses in a second. Consequently, they assumed that there must be a magical fetish that had the power to control the nature phenomena. As an object of worship, it is at that period of time, Chinese loong originated as a fuzzy combination.

1.2.2 Loong Totem in Xia Tribe

Although the fuzzy combination of loong convinced some people, many experts hold that loong is a composite of totem originated in Xia tribe. According to their

viewpoint, in ancient clan society, the Huaxia tribe in the Huanghe River valley which used snake as totem defeated the other tribes and united them into a large clan tribe. At the same time, they combined their totems into one. The totem of loong appeared. Thus, loong has the body of snake, the head of pig, the horn of deer, the ears of cattle, the beard of goat, the talons of eagle and the scales of fish.

2. THE CULTURE SYMBOL OF LOONG AND DRAGON IN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

2.1 The Culture Symbol of Loong in China

In traditional Chinese culture, loong is the symbol of authority and nobility, and there are three opinions about the symbolization of loong. Firstly, people think that it is the symbol of the Chinese nation. This is the reason why Chinese people regard themselves as the offspring of loong. Secondly, loong is the symbol of emperor. It stands for the supreme power of the emperor. As we mentioned before, in Chinese history, the emperor of each dynasty called himself the real loong. Even all the emperor's daily stuffs are named with a character of loong, such as loong ti, the body of the emperor, loong guan, the splendid official cap, etc. At last, it is a symbol of wisdom. Zhu Geliang who is a sage is called as "wo loong" (Chen, 1959) which means a sleeping loong. That is to say although he is cultivating his mind at that time, once he finds a proper chance, he can have a great achievement. A person who has great ambition, outstanding abilities and extraordinary achievements always be called as loong. So when someone says "wang zi cheng long", it does not mean that he wants his child to be a creature with wings in back and horns on head. He really wish is that his child can be a person filled with wisdom.

2.2 The Culture Symbol of Dragon in Western Countries

Because of the cultural difference, the symbols of western dragon and Chinese loong are quite different. In western culture, dragon is known for its huge size, strong power and magic ability. It is a greedy, cruel and autocratic monster. The mythologies of Satan and Cadmus, the stories of the dragon-slayers etc, reflect that western dragons are bad, hateful, destructive and monstrous. The derivatives of dragon are always negative. In medieval times, dragon is the symbol of evil, Satan in the *Bible* was called "the great dragon" by the god. Hence, some believers were considered to be heroic and valiant by killing a dragon. Cavaliers also found that they could obtain honor, property, amazing power and the heart of girls by hunting dragons. Since the dragon is the enemy of human beings and it is vicious, slaughtering a dragon becomes the behavior of bravery and conquering nature.

3. DIFFERENT USAGES OF LOONG AND DRAGON IN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

3.1 Positive Usage of Loong in China

There are many expressions about loong in Chinese language. Most of their meanings are active and inspiring. For example, loong feng cheng xiang (龙凤呈祥), it is a phrase which means loong and phoenix could bring bliss and auspiciousness. It can also be used as an adjective to describe the love between a couple. Loong fei feng wu (龙飞凤舞), which is used to describe the splendor of mountains or the power of someone's handwriting. And it illustrates that loong and phoenix are active and vigorous animals. Some other phrases such as sheng loong huo hu (生龙活虎) and loong ma jing shen (龙马精神) also exhibit the vitality of loong.

As loong can stand for auspiciousness and bliss, it is often used to describe a person who holds these features. When you want to describe a son-in-law who is respectable and decent, you may use cheng loong kuai xu (乘龙快婿), whose literal meaning is that a well-content son-in-law is just like riding a loong and bringing you happiness. Loong is also an indomitable animal. Therefore there are some phrases about loong to describe a person who persists in his goal and never gives up, such as li yu yue loong men (鲤鱼跃龙门), which means a carp could finally be a loong after his insistent efforts of leaping into the loong gate. Moreover, loong is full of abilities and talents, and the phrase wo hu cang loong (卧虎藏龙) refers to those talents who are not recognized by others.

3.2 Negative Usage of Dragon in Western Countries

Since dragon is regarded to be evil in western culture, some derogative expressions about dragon are derived there.

For example, if someone has got the "dragon", he needs to brush his teeth, because here "dragon" just means bad breath. In another case, when you find a man wearing a pink skirt and blue heels, you may want to "dragon" his outfit, or say "That guy's outfit is so 'dragon'." You mean the outfit makes you feel sick. It is so disgusting.

Dragon can refer to those impenetrable women vividly. (Yang, 2000). For instance, "She is a real dragon. You'd better keep away from her." Here dragon has a metaphor meaning of shrew. If you call a woman "dragon", you mean that she is unpleasant and fierce. For example, "She is a bit of dragon around this place."

In English slang, the phrase "chasing the dragon" means smoking heroin and inhaling the fumes. This slang derives from the description about dragon of ancient legends. Since a dragon can breathe out fire and smoke, someone taking the heroin is like chasing the dragon.

Moreover, there is an English idiom which says "sow dragon's teeth". It takes from a Greek mythology. After

the prince Cadmus killed a dragon, he planted one of the dragon's teeth in the ground. However, a procession of ruthless soldiers grew out. They fought with each other. There were only five of them still alive after the slaughter. So people use the idiom to indicate "foment trouble". It is clear that dragon is the symbol of evil and cruelty.

CONCLUSION

Since culture is a crucial element in international communication, the cultural differences between two languages are extremely important for learners to study in order to get to know another country better. Take Chinese loong and western dragon as example, they have been playing a tremendous part both in Chinese and western history. Throughout the endless development of civilization, loong and dragon has played different roles in Chinese and western culture. Those cultural differences caused some misunderstanding in the communication between Chinese and westerners. It may be hard for westerners to understand why Chinese call themselves the offspring of loong, and it's not easy for Chinese to accept that the dragon always plays the role of cruel monster in western movies. In this paper, through the comparison of the different origins, cultural symbols and usage, we have found the cultural differences between Chinese loong and western dragon. Because of those cultural differences, Chinese and westerners have different cognitions of loong and dragon and there are misunderstandings about loong and dragon. In order to save those misunderstandings, we can use the word "loong" in translation to represent this Chinese mythic creature instead of dragon. Because

"loong" not only can distinguish images between Chinese and western culture, but also can rightly circulates the outstanding features of Chinese loong. In addition, we need an extensive dissemination of Chinese loong culture which can make westerners have a better understanding of loong. To sum up, treading the cultural difference properly is beneficial to make Chinese loong culture accepted internationally.

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