A Study of the Dragon Symbol in Japan and Myanmar from the Perspective of Cultural Adaptability

Lé Lé Wynn

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to present a new approach to study the uniqueness of respective cultures, which are mainly concerned with their cultural adaptability, by making a specific study of the cultural symbol, which in turn it reflects the persistent ways of thinking in respective cultures. In this paper, I have attempted to make a comparative study of the adaptability of Japan and Myanmar to foreign cultures through the Dragon symbol adopted from Indian and Chinese culture.

The symbol of a culture is necessarily concerned with the natural environment as well as the creative imagination of the people who live in this culture. Therefore, we can see the originality of a culture by observing its symbolic representations. Among the conspicuous symbols of ancient culture which are still recognized as important cultural symbols in East and South-East Asia, the Dragon is the most prominent because of its individual character. However, the Dragon symbol is not only limited to its original sphere of mythology and legend; we can also see that the Dragon symbol in China represents the idea of natural phenomenon rather than religious thought, and that the Dragon symbol in India is intimately related with religious thought rather than that of natural phenomenon.

Etymologically, the Japanese Dragon is called by the name "Ryū" which is of Chinese origin and the Myanmar Dragon is called by the name “Nagā” which is of Indian origin. The Myanmar “Nagā” and the Japanese "Ryū" are recognized as important cultural symbols in several phases of their respective cultures not only in the case of religious meaning but especially also in the case of Kingship. In this paper, I have attempted to grasp this point by analyzing these symbols, which have a close connection to Kingship.

Key Words: (1) Cultural Symbol (2) cultural adaptability (3) Dragon symbol (4) "Ryū" (5) "Nagā" (6) Kingship

Associate Professor, Dr., Department of Philosophy, West Yangon University
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the a new approach to study the uniqueness of a culture, which is mainly concerned with its cultural adaptability, by making a specific study of the cultural symbol, which in turn reflects the persistent ways of thinking in this culture. The prominent symbol in a culture may resemble that of another culture in their usage and meaning due to shared origins. However, it is impossible for the instincts of the people and the environmental influences of certain cultures to be identical.

Among the conspicuous symbols of ancient culture which are still recognized as important cultural symbols in East and South-East Asia, the dragon is the most prominent because of its significant representations and rich diversity of symbolic meaning. In addition, the dragon symbol is endowed with the universality of symbolic function. Thus the dragon symbol is not only limited to its original sphere of religious mythology but it has the power to expand its symbolic territory into the several phases of the respective cultures.

In this paper, I will attempt to make a comparative study of the cultural adaptability of Japan and Myanmar to foreign cultures through the dragon symbol adopted from India and China. As a matter of fact although the dragon symbol is usually regarded as a religious symbol in many cultures due to its origin of primeval serpent worship this religious aspect of the dragon symbol is also intimately connected with the concept of kingship, particularly in East and South East Asia. The reason I have chosen the dragon symbol is that it is the most prominent and important cultural symbol in East and South East Asia not only because of its significant or energetic character and godlike power but also its vital role in the founding myth of kingdoms in these cultures.

To evaluate this paper, I will use the analytical and comparative method to study the ryū and the naga from the stand point of “the significant features of cultural adaptability”. In order to explore this problem, I will focus on the close association of the dragon symbol with kingship in Japanese and Myanmar literature.
The Distinctive Features and Sources of Dragon, Ryū, and Nagā

Etymologically, the Japanese dragon is called by the name ryū which is derived from a Chinese origin and the Myanmar dragon is called by the name nagā which is derived from an Indian origin. Due to the difference in culture the term ryū for the Japanese dragon and nagā for the Myanmar, each has its own peculiar character and diversity of symbolic meaning.

The etymology of the term dragon derived from the ancient Greek drakōn means serpent, and it refers to real snakes as well as to mythical snakes or snakelike figures. There are many theories about the origin of the dragon symbol. Sometimes, its monstrous appearance is often endowed with features or parts belonging to various animals in many cultures. For example, a body like a lizard’s or a crocodile’s, with a feline’s or a reptile’s head, a bat’s wings, an eagle’s or a lion’s paws and claws, and a mouth endowed with many tongues and pointed fangs (See Figure-1). In most western mythology, dragons are presented mostly as chaotic beings, responsible for death and disorder, and slain by gods or heroes. Contrary to the evil character of western dragons, the dragon of East and South East Asia are presented as powerful and helpful beings, responsible for life energy, and are considered as guardians who play a vital role in the founding myths of the kingdoms.

Nevertheless, we can generally classify the dragon notion of Asia into two traditions. One is the nāga of the Indian culture and the other is the lóng of the Chinese culture. The former is pointed out as one of the roots of the western dragon as a chaotic being by some scholars. Actually, nāgas are pre-Aryan fertility deities of the Indian subcontinent whose fundamental relationship with agricultural pursuits has led to their incorporation into the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons as low-level devas (gods), or as a separate category of deities among devas and demons and ghosts. In addition, nāgas are intimately related with the symbolism of kingship and play a significant role in the myths and rituals of the Buddhists of South and South East Asia. In this paper, I will focus on this notion of nāga which is often represented as the guardian spirit or a great devotee of Buddha in Buddhist literature and the great influence it has on the founding myth of the kingdom in Myanmar culture.

The lóng of the Chinese culture can be distinguished from the Indian dragon even though both have snakelike features in their appearances. Generally, the Chinese dragons embody the fertilizing qualities of water. Far from being a mere symbolic expression of the natural elements, however, the
Chinese dragons represent the rhythmic forces that rule the life of the cosmos. In Daoism, the dragon is regarded as a symbol of rhythmic life because it embodies the water that guarantees the living order of the cosmos by its harmonious movement. The shape and origin of the Chinese dragon is really full of diversity and its shape has been changed continually throughout time and only after the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 BC), was it expressed in specific forms. Here, we can generally classify the shape of Chinese dragon into three types, such as, the kui-dragon (鬳龍), the ying-dragon (應龍), and the huáng-dragon (黃龍). These three types of the Chinese dragon were transformed from the kui-dragon to the ying-dragon, and finally to the huáng-dragon (See Figure-3, 4 and 5)). In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the dragon pattern was used for the royal family only, and especially, the dragon with five nails especially was considered the symbol of the emperor because emperors were conceived as Sons of Heavens who were also representatives of cosmic rhythms and givers of fecundity.

As mentioned above, East and South East Asia cultures were influenced by two ancient traditions of the dragon notion that originated in India and China, particularly with regard to the religious aspect and the philosophy of kingship.

Introduction and Development of the Notion of Lóng in Japan

The earliest evidence of the introduction of lóng (the Chinese dragon) into Japan dates back to the Yayoi period (ca 300 BC – ca AD 300). To cite archaeological evidence, it was found that the earthenware of the Late Yayoi period (ca 100- ca 300) was decorated with the dragon motif (See Figure-6). On this evidence most scholars have inferred that the motif and notion of dragon had already been introduced into Japan together with the introduction of the agricultural system from China since the Middle Yayoi period (ca 100 BC – ca AD 100).

However, the earliest chronicle evidence of the introduction of the Chinese dragon relating to kingship into Japan dates back to the 3rd century AD. According to what the Japanese call the “Gishi Wajinden”, a section in “Wei zhi” (a Chinese chronicle of the 3rd century AD), Himiko, the female ruler of the early Japanese political federation known as Yamatai, sent envoys to Wei in 239. The Wei emperor Ming responded by granting her the title qin wei wo-wang, (shingi wao in Japanese) which means “Wa ruler friendly to
Wei” and sent a mission with numerous tributes to Himiko. Among these, a hundred dōkyō (bronze mirror inscribed with four deity-like animals, namely the green-dragon; white-tiger, phoenix, and genbu which is the figure comprising turtle and snake) and kōjikōryū no nishiki (the cloth figured with a pattern of two dragons) are notable for studying the connection between the dragon symbol and kingship in ancient Japan. Since the reign of Himiko, the Chinese dragon, particularly the sei-ryū (green-dragon) has been appreciated as the symbol of kingship and has been directly adopted into the court ceremonies of Japan up to now (See Figure-7). For example, the motif of kon-ryū can be seen on the formal court dress of Tennō (Emperor) (See Figure-8). On the other hand, the nāga concept of Buddhism was also introduced around the sixth century AD through the Buddhist scriptures which had already been translated into Chinese and inscribed in Chinese characters (龍). In addition, the dragon figure of Buddhist art which was assimilated with Chinese dragon was also introduced at that time.

**Introduction and Development of the Notion of Nāga in Myanmar**

It is difficult to estimate when the notion of dragon or nāga was introduced into Myanmar because of the scarcity of archaeological as well as historical evidence or records concerning the dragon motif. According to historical records, there is no room for doubt that Myanmar had intimate cultural exchanges with India as well as China since ancient times. Accordingly, it is possible that the notion of the Chinese dragon had been introduced in Myanmar since the Pyu era through a visiting Chinese delegation. Apparently, we often see the dragon motif with limbs likened to the Chinese dragon (long) on the pillars of pagodas or monasteries. However, the earliest evidence of the nāga notion in Myanmar culture is buried in the chronicles. According to Hmannon-Maha-Yarzawin or The Glass Palace Chronicle of The Kings of Burma, there was nagā-worship during the reign of king Thamoddarit. In a story of king Pyusawhti, it was narrated that there was a nagā hole in the garden of Thado Adeissaraza, and at that time it was customary for the people of the villages to pray and give offerings to the nagā daily, if they desired the gift of a son. It is obviously this tradition of nagā-worship that originated from the Indian tradition of serpent-worship to pray for fecundity and fertility. However, most of the nagā figures are associated with the birth of founding kings and the guardian spirit of the Buddhist scriptures.
Ryū and Kingship in Japanese Culture

The essential part of the sacred-kingship ideology in Japanese culture was the belief in the emperor's heavenly origin, and this belief was clearly expressed in the myths of Ninigi no Mikoto, as narrated in the Kojiki (“Record of Ancient Matters” compiled in 712) and the Nihonshoki (“Chronicle of Japan” compiled in 720). Genealogically Ninigi is connected with both the god Takaki (Takamimusubi) and the sun goddess Amaterasu through the marriage of Takaki’s daughter to Amaterasu’s son, to whom Ninigi is born. He is born in the heavenly world and, at the command of either Takaki or Amaterasu or both, descends onto the summit of Mount Takachihō.

However, it is a noteworthy fact, that the myth of the birth of a descendant of Ninigi who became the first ancestor of the Japanese royal family as the fruit of a marriage with a female dragon is still being constantly recounted. According to both chronicles, after Ninigi descended onto the summit of Mount Takachihō, he took the daughter of the Great Mountain Deity in marriage and he had two sons by her. One day, the younger brother Hiko-hoho-demi no Mikoto lost the fish-hook borrowed from his elder brother. So, he went and moaned by the shore of the sea. There he met an old man and that old man made a basket without interstices, and placing in it Hiko-hoho-demi, sank it in the sea. Then, he met a daughter of the Sea-God, named Toyotama-hime and he took her as wife. When she started to expect a child she requested him to make a parturition house near the sea-shore and forbade him not to look upon her during delivery. However, because he could not restrain himself, he went secretly to take a look. Now Toyotama-hime was in the midst of childbirth, and had changed into a ryū (dragon) or a wani (crocodile). She was greatly ashamed, so she wrapped the infant in rushes, and abandoned it on the sea-shore. Then she barred the sea-path, and passed away. Accordingly, the child was called Hiko-nagisa-take-u-gaya-fuki-aezu no Mikoto. Her younger sister, Tama-yori-hime cherished the child. When he grew up he took his aunt to wife and she bore him four children. Among them, the fourth child who became the first king (Tennō) of Japan, was called Jinmu-Tennō. It is interesting to note that there were two different descriptions about the transfiguration of Toyotama-hime, one as ryū and the other as wani. This point indicates that there were divergent opinions concerning the question of how to heighten the role of the legitimacy of Tennō (king). In other words, although the Japanese had been influenced by the Chinese court custom or ruling system in their court culture since the fourth century AD,
here has always been the tendency to resist the Chinese ideology of the
dragon as the ancestor of emperor or imperial family.

There are many stories concerning the legitimate lineage of kingship
in which the serpent-god, the guardian spirit of a territory, was placed in the
important role in these chronicles. There is a famous myth concerning the
origin of the sacred sword, Kusanagi no Tsurugi which is an important item
among the three sacred regalia (sanshu no jingi) that are the symbols of the
legitimacy and authority of the emperor. According to the chronicles, the
sacred sword was removed from the tail of the serpent Yamata no Orochi by
Amaterasu’s brother, Susanoo no Mikoto, and presented to the goddess as a
sign of his submission. In this story, the serpent Yamata no Orochi symbolizes
the sovereign of the Izumo territory or guardian spirit of the earthly world as
opposed to Susanoo who represents the direct descendant of heavenly gods.

Thus, to insist on the legitimacy of the descendant of the sun goddess
Amaterasu, it is inevitable to desire Kusanagi no Tsurugi from the Yamata no
Orochi, the former inhabitant of Izumo. Furthermore, there are also stories
which narrate the intimate relation between the serpent and royal family. This
point indicates that although the Japanese were influenced by the Chinese
tradition in their court culture, they did not fully adopt the dragon ideology of
Chinese tradition into their culture. In other words, the dragon ideology of
Chinese tradition was merely superimposed on the indigenous serpent
worship. The serpent worship was the primeval belief of the Japanese peoples
since Jōmon period (ca 10000 BC - ca 300 BC) (See Figure-9). This deeply-
rooted traditional belief of serpent worship is an ancient legacy of indigenous
Japanese culture which is still alive. The Shimenawa, which are hung in front
of the main worship hall (haiden), before the altar, and across the Torii
entrance gate) in Shintō shrines, are obvious evidence of this tradition (See
Figure-10). They may also be hung around old trees that are revered as
hintai (abodes of the divine) or unusually large rocks upon which deities
have been thought to sit. They are also hung from Shintō altars in homes or,
most commonly at New Year’s, over doorways or the front bumpers of
automobiles.

**Nagā and Kingship in Myanmar Culture**

The essential part of the sacred-kingship ideology in Myanmar culture
was the belief in the “universal king” or “sēkyərmin” ideal, and this belief was
earily expressed in the myths of founding kings in the Hmannan-Maha-
Yazawin. Genealogically the legitimate lineage of Myanmar kings can be traced back to the Sun dynasty. They are said to be descendants of the noble Sakiyans. Thus, in order to maintain their legitimacy of “universal king”, the birth of a famous kingly ancestor was attributed to the marriage of a sun prince and a female nagā which symbolizes the union of a watery power and solar power. It means that for the sovereign of the earthly world to be able to claim universal kingship it is inevitable that he also claim sovereignty over the other two worlds, the watery world and the heavenly world.

In Hmanman-Maha-Yazawin, the birth of king Pyusaawhti is a most typical example of this motif. According to this chronicle, Pyusawhti was born of the marriage of a female nagā called Zanthi, who was a grandchild of the nagā king, Kala, to the Sun prince. Another story which shows the association of nagā and kingship is the myth of king Dwattabaung. In the chronicle, one of the two queens of king Dwattabaung is the naga princess Besandi.

Many stories pertaining to the intimate relation of nagā and kingship with different motifs can be found in this chronicle. For example, in the myth of “the founding of Sriksetra”, the Nagā, like Sakka can be found among the list of Seven Exalted Ones, who helped in the founding of the city. However, when king Dwattabaung fell from grace due to his immoral behavior and thus exhausted the karma of his good acts, the nagās became so angered that they carried him away in the nagakye boat which they had once presented to him, to the nagā country. These two events state that nagās are considered the guardian deities of noble kings. Therefore, if the king maintains moral purity, the nagās make submit to the king with great respect, but if the king commits immoral acts then the nagās are apt to punish him severely in Myanmar mythology.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the notion of dragon in Indian and Chinese cultures have had a lot of influence on the notion of Myanmar nagā and Japanese ryū since ancient times. Nevertheless, we can say with great certainty that neither culture took over the whole notion of dragon in its original form. Although both cultures inevitably borrowed the notion of dragon from these two great cultures, India and China, together with other cultural influences, they tried to adapt it in their own way. Depending on the
varying degrees of the direct or indirect influences from these two exotic cultures, they found different ways and means to adapt it to suit their own environment and their own inherited traditions. In other words, these different ways of adaptability indicate the unique characteristics of the respective cultures and how they put the stamp of their own cultural identity on an alien cultural motif so that it became their very own.

This fact was reflected in the myth of founding kings in the chronicles of the respective cultures, particularly in the myths of marriage between the watery figure of female nagā or ryū and the solar figure of sun prince. Similarities can be seen in the fact that both cultures have strongly insisted that they are originally descended from the noble sun goddess or sun dynasty in common. But, noteworthy is the fact that there are two decisive differences that illuminate their distinctive ways of adaptability.

One is associated with their beliefs of paternal lineage. In the case of Myanmar, they maintained that their ancestors are descended from the noble sun dynasty of the Sakiyans of Indian tradition so that they took their paternal lineage in a human-like motif. The Japanese on the contrary maintained the beliefs in their emperor’s heavenly origin from the male descendants of the sun deity Amaterasu so that they took their paternal lineage from divinity. The other difference is associated with their cultural background or indigenous religious thought. In the case of Myanmar, although there was nagā worship in ancient times, it was introduced from Hinduism of Indian tradition and they have no indigenous worship parallel to it. So the concept of nāga was a newly adopted notion. Nevertheless, as stated earlier they changed and assimilated it as part of their own culture. It was no longer recognizably Indian in character. On the contrary, there had been the serpent worship in Japan since the Jōmon period so that although they introduced the Chinese lóng into their culture as the symbol of emperor, it was just to keep up with what was considered the more sophisticated or advanced culture of the time. Therefore, the ryū, male serpent or snake-god is described in many stories, sometimes as the figure of a chaotic creature slain by hero or heavenly descendant and sometimes as the marriage partner of the ancestor of the emperor. Noteworthy is the fact that this cultural adaptability is an important mark of Japanese culture, for example, the syncretic system of Shintō-Buddhist beginning around the 10th century, and the Meiji government (1868-1912) policy of the separation of Shinto and Buddhism (Shinbutsu Bunri) to promote Shintō as the state religion are typical Japanese cultural phenomena. This tendency suggests an important source of Japanese Nationalism too.
To conclude, we can highlight the fact that although Myanmar and Japan have been deeply influenced by the Indian and Chinese cultures associated with the notion of kingship and the dragon symbol, they adapted these cultural influences in their own way. Consequently, new ideas of the notion of dragon and kingship arose in the respective cultures. In addition, the distinctive style of cultural adaptability in both cultures suggests the cultural identity of the respective cultures.

**Figure-1:** *A vanquished dragon by Saint Georgius* (Saint Georgius Minster, Venice, Italy)

**Figure-2:** Dancing of Krishna on the serpent king Kāliya (11th century, South India)

**Figure-3:** *kui-dragon* (夔龍) In a shape of a cow’s head or a snake’s head with one horn and it was very popular in the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1766-256 BC)
**Figure-4:** ying-dragon (應龍) In a shape of wings and legs with four scales and it was conceived as a water figure, was made to propitiate rainfall during droughts in the ritual practices of ancient China from Qin dynasty to Tang dynasty (B.C.220-907 A.D).

**Figure-5:** huáng-dragon with 5 claws (黃龍) (Nine dragon on the wall of Zijin Cheng, Pekin, 1417) It appeared first in the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1127) and became popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912). The dragon with five nails was considered the symbol of the emperor.

**Figure-6:** Dragon motif on earthenware of Late Yayoi period. (Excavation of funabashi site, Osaka prefecture)

**Figure-7:** sei-ryū on the inside wall of Takamatsu-tsuka barrow (Late Nara period)
Figure-8: The Dragon with 3 claws in Konryō no Kinu (Formal Dress of Tennō for Coronation Ceremony)

Figure-9: The Earthen Doll of Goddess was pulling the snake over her head (the Middle Jōmon period, Nagano prefecture)

Figure-10: Shimenawa at the worship hall of the Izumo shrine, Shimane prefecture
List of Illustrations

Figure-1: *A vanquished dragon* by *Saint Georgius* (Saint Georgius Minster, Venice, Italy)

Figure-2: Dancing of Krishna on the serpent king Kāliya (11th century, South India)

Figure-3: *kui-dragon* (遊龍). In a shape of a cow’s head or a snake’s head with one horn and it was very popular in the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1766-256 BC)

Figure-4: *ying-dragon* (應龍). In a shape of wings and legs with four scales and it was conceived as a water figure, was made to propitiate rainfall during droughts in the ritual practices of ancient China from Qin dynasty to Tang dynasty (B.C.220-907A.D)

Figure-5: *huáng-dragon* (黃龍). (Nine dragon, on the wall of Zijin Chéng, Peking, 1417)

   It appeared first in the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1127) and became popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912). The dragon with five nails was considered the symbol of the emperor

Figure-6: Dragon motif on earthenware of Late Yayoi period.

Figure-7: *sei-ryū* on the inside wall of Takamatsu-tsuka barrow (Late Nara period)

Figure-8: dragon with 3 claws in *konryō no Kinu* (Tennō’s formal dress of coronation ceremony)

Figure-9: The Earthen Doll of Goddess was pulling the snake over her head (the Middle Jōmon period, Nagano prefecture)

Figure-10: *Shimenawa* at the worship hall of the Izumo shrine, Shimane prefecture.

References


