

## **A Mythical Animal Codification in *Wish Dragon 2021***

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to find out the manifestation of Chinese dragon in movies. In this research, the researcher used the theory of popular literature by Simon (2000), and cinematic representation by Stuart Hall (1989). The research method used is a qualitative descriptive method with data collection techniques using documentation techniques and then analyzed using analytical techniques by Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. K. (2010). The result of the research is, the depiction of dragons in various movies is depicted differently due to historical and cultural influences. The differences are also made to construct a reality that the movie maker wants to show. Even though the dragons in movies are depicted differently, the shape of the dragon still adheres to the general form of the Chinese dragon

**Keywords:** Chinese Dragon, Cinematic Representation, Movies

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## INTRODUCTION

China is a country that is rich in culture. In Chinese culture, there are four sacred animals, namely, Lóng (dragon), Qílín (unicorn), Feng Huang (phoenix), and guī (tortoise). Chinese people believe in myths and legends about the existence of these mythological creatures. Because the role of mythological animals is considered important as part of noble culture, these mythical animals are widely present in works of art. As an object that is often used in works of art, these animals also have meaning. Mirkes and Sergeeva (2011:1795) in their research on the codification of ornaments on Krasnoyarsk Street, said that an ornament carries a set of meanings and signs from a culture that belongs to the ornament. They also say that disclosing the codified meaning of a particular object will make it possible to understand the cultural code. A cultural code is an information encoded in a certain form to identify a culture. For the Chinese people, the dragon is a spiritual being that gets the highest respect and is considered the most powerful creature. Revealing the codification of a dragon as a mythical animal in a work of art makes it possible to understand the meaning, purpose, and reason behind the dragon's existence.

Dragon is one of the most important images in Chinese traditional culture. The dragon is a mythical animal in Chinese mythology and a symbol of wealth and prosperity. The dragon also symbolizes masculinity and fertility, the elements Yang 陽, are positive, and masculine. In today's society, the dragon is often recognized by the society as a symbol of traditional Chinese culture; as a social and cultural memory (Kustedja, S., Sudikno, A., & Salura, P., 2013: 527)

The image of the dragon appears in many forms and is used by people for various purposes, and is still used by all

classes of traditional Chinese society in all aspects of daily life.

This is popular culture as folk culture, a people's culture that serves the people. Folk art develops from the bottom. It is a spontaneous, native expression of the people, shaped by themselves to suit their own needs, rather than benefiting from high culture. Popular culture is a culture that originates from "the people". It objected to any approach that suggested this was something imposed on "the people" from above. According to this definition, the term can only be used to denote the "authentic" culture of "the people" (Storey 2015: 9).

Williams in Storey (2015:2), suggests that culture can be used to refer to 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity'. In other words, the culture here means the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, produce, or be the occasion for the production of meaning. In China, the dragon is depicted as wisdom, strength, and good luck. There are lots of temples and places of worship in China that present visual dragons as their aesthetic elements, both in 2 dimensions and 3 dimensions. Some famous dragon paintings passed down from ancient times, namely 'nine dragons' and 'six dragons' by Chen Rong (Zaman. 2022:110)

Previous studies have also examined the Chinese Dragon in Chinese art. According to Zaman (2022:114), Chinese imperial clothing or dresses are also filled with dragon visualization, especially during the Qing Dynasty. Zaman (2022: 107) said that the dragon is a symbol of wisdom, strength, and luck in Chinese culture. The importance of dragons in Chinese mythology and culture makes the visualization of

dragons always appear in various aspects of Chinese society's life. Kustedja et al. (2013:538) in their research on the meaning of dragon icons as the main element of traditional Chinese architecture said that dragon symbols and icons can survive to this day because they are supported by the concept of dragons that can always provide luck as well as the concept of dragons that can be freely interpreted by the community according to the needs, intentions and cultural references owned by each user.

Apart from being depicted in 2D and 3D, dragons also often appear in movies, either as decorative objects such as statues and paintings or as characters. A movie with Chinese cultural background that has a dragon as its character is *Wish Dragon*. *Wish Dragon* (2021) was released theatrically in China on January 15, 2021, and on Netflix internationally on June 11, 2021. This movie is a computer-animated fantasy comedy. Written and directed by Chris Appelhans and produced by Sony Pictures Animation and Tencent Picture. Well-known actors such as Jackie Chan are also producers and voice actors in the Chinese version of the movie. This movie has been nominated for several awards such as the Annie Awards (2022) in the category of Outstanding Achievement for Character Animation in an Animated Feature, Golden Rooster Awards (2021) in the category of Best Animated Feature, and International Film Music Critics Award (IFMCA) (2022) in the category of Best Original Score for an Animated Film. The movie also received a rating of 7.2/10 on IMDb and 4.7/5 on Google.

*Wish Dragon* movie with a strong Chinese cultural background, researcher is interested in analyzing dragons in Chinese culture contained in *Wish Dragon* movie. Using the theory of

popular literature by Simon (2000) that said popular literature refers to the phenomenon of international best-sellers as well as serial literature, novels, genre fiction (including thrillers, romances, science fiction, fantasy, and war books), television, and movie. Thus, the adjective "popular" not only denotes a majority's common taste, but it also always connotes accessibility and "of the populace" - the populace's choice (Simon, 2000:792) and cinematic representation by Hall (1989) that refers to how movies depict and construct reality, including cultural identity (Hall, 1989:70). This research focuses on analyzing how is dragon manifested in Chinese movies.

## METHODS

This research uses qualitative descriptive research methods. This research was conducted by describing the data then the description of the data was developed by interpretation. In this research, the primary data is the movie itself, namely *Wish Dragon* (2021) and the secondary data is a journal, articles, books, and the internet that explain the theory, the dragon in Chinese culture, and previous studies. For the data collection technique, the researcher uses the documentation technique. Documentation means the researcher gain information to answer the research question by collecting information from documents (Creswell, 2012:223). In this research, the researcher uses rich, thick description by Creswell (2013) for the data validity. It means that the researcher gives detail when analyze the problem. For the data analysis technique, the researcher uses 6 steps of analysis by Creswell (2009:186) there are, prepare the data, read the data, coding the data, use coding to perform a description, conduct detail discussion, and give conclusion. For the research procedure, there are 6 steps according to Creswell (2012:7), namely, identifying a research problem, reviewing the literature, specifying a purpose for research,

collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and reporting and evaluating research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the movies, the dragon also has a different form even though the movie uses the same Chinese cultural background. By using popular literature theory from Simon (2000) and cinematic representation by Hall (1989) where cinema is one of the media commonly used to explore and express cultural identity.

### DRAGON IN CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

The dragon as a Chinese cultural identity is known to be very popular because of its use until now, the use of dragons in various media has become one of the factors for the popularity of dragons. The codification of dragons in various media such as paintings, ornaments, and statues is proof that dragons are an important element in the life of Chinese society. Kustedja et al. (2013:527) in his research found a dragon codified in a mural placed at the entrance of the temple which functions as a guard and repels reinforcements. Dragon ornaments on the roofs of buildings in temples are believed to be messengers and prevent buildings from fires. During the ancient empire, dragon ornaments were also seen on imperial clothing which served to distinguish the hierarchy of imperial officials.

Since ancient times dragons were codified in official imperial buildings, emperor palaces, temples, official government buildings, houses of nobles, in carved pillars of buildings, depicted on ceilings, walls, windows, stairs, palace gardens as well as bridge ornaments. In palace furniture such as an ancestral ash censer, military equipment to porcelain and ceramics (Kustedja et al., 2013:533). Dragon codification in this media can be found in various sides of people's lives

which are believed to bring messages of good luck, happiness, and kindness.

In Chinese mythology, dragons have at least eight names namely, Lung Wang, Shen Lung, Li Lung, Chiao Lung, Ying Lung, Chiu Lung, Tsao Lung, and Tu Lung. As the names differ, these dragons also have characteristics that distinguish one from another. Like Li Lung and Chih Lung who have wings, Shen Lung controls and operates the sky, sea, and marshes, and Lung Wang, or dragon king can transform into a human (Hayes, 1923:15) Shen Lung is also the third spirit dragon, the real dragon and the dragon that has ruled China since the days of Yao and Shun. Every ocean has dragon kings, dragon kings are a slightly different species because dragon kings rarely grow old and never die. Other types of dragons never appear in any art form and are only occasionally mentioned in Chinese literature (Hayes, 1923:16)

Dragons, which are mythological creatures, do not have a complete explanation and references in Chinese literature are mostly related to dragon's performances and little to dragon's appearance. So, to make a study of dragons, it takes a process of collecting, eliminating, and coordinating many stories, proverbs, and events from history as well as conducting studies of pictures and carvings to interview those who claim to have seen dragons.

Hayes (1923:24) says that there is one writer who describes the dragon in many animal terms. Like having a camel head, deer horns, cow ears, snake neck, fish body, goldfish scales, eagle claws, the eyes of a devil, and the paws of a tiger. The dragon's body is divided symmetrically into three equal parts, namely from the tip of the nose to the shoulder, from the shoulder to the thigh, and from the thigh to the tip of the tail.

A book written in the Tang dynasty, Shoh Wen, said dragons have powers such as visible or invisible, can become long or short, and coarse or fine (Hayes 1923:24). Dragons also have different colors, namely red, yellow, blue, white, black, green, white, purple, spotted and dragons with mixed colors on their bodies (Yoswara et al., 2011:20). In the Manchu dynasty, the yellow dragon was the imperial dragon and in the Ming dynasty, the red dragon was the official imperial dragon (Hayes, 1923:27).

The word "dragon" occupies a place within a word just as asparagus is known as dragon's beard grass, many cities, prefectures, rivers, and mountains have the character dragon among their names. As the name of a river, namely Hei Lung Kiang or black dragon river, it is believed that a large black dragon appeared in the river (Hayes 1923:58)

Chinese people's belief in dragons has entered all aspects of people's lives. As a symbol of the empire, the temples and shrines built in honor of the hero dragon are considered religious and serve as a bridge between the human and spirit worlds. Dragons have entered aspects of Chinese people's lives from religion, politics, and literature to art (Yoswara et al., 2011:19). Every building, painting, or literary work that is made to glorify something will have a dragon in the middle because the dragon a myth that lives in the soul of Chinese society for generations as a philosophical basis and the embodiment of these works is based on people's belief in dragon mythology.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that dragons are popular literature, which can be seen from their distribution in literary works, proverbs, and stories. The consumption of dragon stories is believed to be at least seven out of every ten Chinese (Hayes 1923:3). This popular belief is deeply rooted and

widespread in the fields of art, literature, folklore, zoology, history, and religion. According to Simon (2000:792), the word popular not only shows the tastes of the majority but also always connotes the people and the people's choices.

## CHINESE DRAGON IN MOVIES

As well as literary works, works of art, and proverbs used to disseminate and tell about the existence of dragons in the life of Chinese society in ancient times. At this time, dragons have been included in many movies, both as decorations and as characters in the movie. Dragon as a Chinese cultural identity that is considered as a carrier of goodness is often found in movies as a "guard".

In *Mulan* (1998), Mushu is a guardian dragon who helps *Mulan* to become a war hero. In *Mulan* (1998), Mushu is depicted as a small red and yellow dragon that has horns, hair on the nape, four legs, and also has a mustache. As previously explained, Hayes (1923:24) said that dragons can have long or short bodies. In the *Shang-Chi* movie and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the dragon in the movie has a large and long shape. The dragon depicted in *The Avatar: The Last Airbender* has wings and can breathe fire, has four legs, horns, spines on its back, a beard, and a mustache. The dragon depicted in *Avatar* is the animal guide that each avatar has and the other two dragons are firebending masters. In *Shang-Chi*, there is a white dragon as the great protector. The dragon in the *Shang-Chi* movie is described as having no wings, four legs, red scales, a mane, horns, can swim and fly even though it doesn't have wings.

In *Mulan*, the dragon named Mushu has a small red body, just like the dragon in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The color red is believed to be good luck for the Chinese people. Mushu is known as the guardian dragon and protector of

Mulan. Just like the white dragon in the Shang-Chi movie which is a creature that protects the people of Ta Lo. But in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the dragon depicted is a guide animal for the Avatar of the fire nation and also a respected fire-bending master for the fire nation.

This is in line with what was explained by Hayes (1923:24) that dragons can have coarse or fine fur, and dragons can also have the ability to change shape to become small or large like the dragons in the *Mulan* and *Wish Dragon* movies. Yuan and Sun (2020:76), in their research on the comparison of Chinese dragons with Westerns, also made comparisons of dragons in movies with different appearances. It is said that the different interpretations of the dragon are cultural differences between China and the West.

Based on the context of this research on the appearance of dragons in movies, the differences and similarities between these dragons are cultural differences, and interpretation between movies aims to create different nuances between backgrounds from one movie to another.

Apart from the similarities and differences in the appearance of dragons in movies, this is a cinematic representation used by movies to depict and construct reality in movies. It involves the use of cinematic techniques to create a particular vision of the world that will be shown in the film. As the appearance of dragons in various movies, Cinematic representation can be used to challenge the dominant narratives and representation of cultural identity and to offer alternative perspectives and interpretations of how Chinese dragons manifest in movies.

In *Wish Dragon* movie, the dragon in this movie is described as having a pink color, soft fur, a purple mane, four legs but no claws, no scales,

and no thorns on its back. *Wish Dragon* is a light movie for all ages. This might be one of the reasons why the dragons in *Wish Dragon* are described as very kids friendly. Long is not described as having scales, claws, and sharp teeth like a dragon in *Shang-Chi* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Although his appearance is different from other dragons, Long is still depicted with a long body, a head like a cow, and also small horns like a deer. Although some reviews say that *Wish Dragon* has the same storyline as *Aladin*, this movie has its characteristics by showing modern Chinese life and dragons that are still depicted based on Chinese mythology. Some reviews from IMDb say that Long has cute characteristics and is liked by children even adults.

## CONCLUSION

Dragon as a Chinese mythological creature that is believed to be a creature that brings good luck, wisdom, and goodness is a Chinese cultural identity. To this day, dragons have been used in visual arts, performing arts, architecture, and literature. The use of dragons in these arts is also found in movies.

The embodiment of dragons in this movie is the result of the spread of dragons as popular literature. The differences between dragons in art, literature, and also in movie are due to cultural influences. The different interpretations of dragons in movies, aim to create the nuances, backgrounds, and experiences that the movie maker wants to show in the movie. Although dragons are depicted in various shapes for various purposes and meanings, the depiction and use of dragons in movies still refer to authentic Chinese culture

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