

## **Dragon Images in Japanese Culture: Genesis and Semantics**

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### ***Abstract***

The article deals with the genesis, semantics, and functions of the dragon image in Japanese culture. The relevance of the study is due to the increased attention of researchers to the basic values of local cultures, issues of symbolism, inextricably linked to the problems of national self-identification. The methodological basis of the study is the structural-semiotic approach, which was used to analyze the value content of the dragon image, the descriptive-analytical method, and the method of cognitive interpretation of the semantics of linguistic means verbalizing the dragon image in the Japanese language. In contrast to the Western tradition, in the culture of the peoples of East Asia, a dragon is a revered and significant symbol of power, strength, and authority.

Stories about dragons are found in ancient texts of both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is established that the formation and evolution of the dragon cult in Japan was influenced by the mythical Chinese dragons, Indian Naga snakes, and the belief in dragons as deities of the water element. The author examines the genesis and evolution of the dragon image in different historical epochs, the influence of cultural-historical, natural, and religious factors on its transformation. It is shown that, in medieval Japan, the dragon was considered the protector of Buddhism, personifying strength, wisdom, prosperity, good luck, and images of these mythical creatures became an organic element of Buddhist culture. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the image of the dragon as a sign of the Chinese zodiacal calendar, the representations of dragons in Japanese mythology, fairy tales and legends, in *Hitachi Fudoki*, *Kojiki*, *Nihon*

*Shoki*. In the mythological picture of the world of the Japanese, the dragon is ambivalent and has both positive and negative features.

It is revealed that the image of the dragon occupies an important place in Japanese traditional culture, painting, architecture, arts and crafts, calendar holidays, is widely represented in proverbs and sayings, set phrases and idioms. The reference to Japanese phraseology allowed to expand the base of the study and to reveal the totality of ideas about the dragon in the worldview of native speakers of the Japanese language. The author concludes that, nowadays, the image of the dragon in Japan has lost its sacral significance and is mainly used as tribute to tradition.

**Keywords:** Japan, culture, semantics, dragon image, legends, myths, zodiac, water deities.

## Introduction

Dragons are mentioned in legends, myths, and folklore of all ages and peoples. “The dragon image is characteristic for a relatively late stage of development of mythology: it is present mainly in the mythologies of early states (Sumer, Egypt, Ugarit, India, Greece, China, Japan, Mexico), in most of which economy was based on artificial irrigation... It is believed that the dragon image combines the images of animals which initially embodied the two worlds which were opposite to each other and distinct from the earthly one – the upper world (birds) and the nether world (snakes and other reptiles)” [Tokarev 1994, p. 394]. In the creation myths, the cruel and mighty dragons are defeated by gods. A popular mythological plot is a battle with a snake-like monster: the battle of Jason with a dragon in the tale of the Argonauts, the victory of Heracles over the Lernaean Hydra, the freeing of Andromeda, who was sacrificed to a sea monster, by Perseus, the killing of dragon Fáfnir by Sigurd, the victory of Saint George over the dragon and his saving the king’s daughter. In the Christian symbolism, a dragon is associated with the devil. The Book of Revelation tells about an omen which appeared

in the sky: “[...] behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads” (Rev. 12:3). Archangel Michael fights the dragon and defeats him: “And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Rev. 12:9).

As Hans Biedermann says, “dragons are often associated with the element of fire and are depicted as breathing fire, are perceived as products of primal chaos, which can only be defeated with force” [Biedermann 1996, p. 76]. Slaying the dragon symbolizes the inevitable victory of good over evil, light over darkness, virtue over vice. In the Russian Orthodox culture, the dragon image is also an embodiment of evil and evil spirits. In the Russian folklore, the fire breathing “vicious” and “mean” Zmei Gorynich, the kidnapper of beautiful maidens, is always defeated by bogatyrs.

Unlike the Western tradition, in the culture of the peoples of East Asia, a dragon is a revered symbol of might, force, and power. “In the Ancient Chinese worldview, it symbolizes the primal element of *yang*, i.e., personifies procreation, fertility, and activity, and, due to this, often becomes an element of decor with the function of protection from demons. In many legends and fairy tales, dragons play the dominant role, and in the arts and crafts, they become the dominant theme” [Biedermann 1996, p. 76].

The goal of this article is to study the dragon image in the Japanese culture. To reach this goal, we intend to define the role of dragons in the culture of the peoples of East Asia, to determine the origins of the Japanese dragon and to define its distinctive features, to analyze the peculiarities of the dragon as a sign of the Chinese zodiac calendar, to study its image in ancient chronicles and the *fudoki* texts, folklore, myths, to describe its role in art, calendar festivals, and daily life.

## **Dragons in Asian Cultures. Characteristics of the Japanese Dragon**

Chinese researchers claim that the dragon image, with all its functions, existed as early as 8 thousand years ago in the territory of the present-day province of Liaoning, from where it spread into the central part of present-day China. After that, as the ethnic groups (numbering more than 40) which had dragon as their totem united and unified its image, having removed differences about its appearance, an “export-ready” dragon went to Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia [Somkina 2010, p. 30–31].

Many of the legends and myths connected to dragons are universal for various regions. This is caused by common laws in the development of traditional ways of life of ancient people and the influence of their natural environment. “Not a single one of the mythical creatures is as common for the Far Eastern art and literature as the dragon. Interestingly, in Japan, three different types of dragons, of the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese origin, can be found alongside each other. For a superficial observer, all of them belong to the same class of deities sending rain, thunder, and storm, but a careful study shows that they differ from each other” [Visser 1913, p. 2].

The genesis and evolution of the dragon cult in Japan was influenced by the beliefs in the mythical Chinese dragons and the Indian Naga snakes. The Chinese dragon has “... the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a hare, the scales of a carp, the paws of a tiger, and the talons of an eagle. Besides, it has moustache, a brightly shining gem under its chin, and a crest on the top of its head, which allows it to soar to Heaven when it wants to” [Visser 1913, p. 200]. Dragons can be of feminine and masculine gender: “The horns of a male dragon are wavy, concave, steep; they are thick at the top but become very thin down below. A female dragon has a straight nose, a round mane, thin scales, and a strong tail” [Visser 1913, p. 39].

Some researchers [Davis 2008; Gould 2002] tried to distinguish Japanese dragons from the Chinese ones by the number of taloned fingers

on their paws. Charles Gould wrote that, in Japan, a dragon is invariably depicted with three fingers, whereas, in China, it always has four or five, depending on whether it is a common or an imperial dragon. In Japan, it is believed that the three-fingered Japanese dragon was growing talons as it was becoming further removed from Japan: after coming to Korea, it got four talons, and as it arrived in China, it received five. However, three-taloned dragons also come from China: their depictions decorated Tang (618–907) era garments. The dragon was established as a symbol of Chinese imperial power in the Song (960–1279) era; eventually, five-fingered dragons came to be depicted on clothing and daily items belonging to the emperor, and four-fingered ones – belonging to high-ranking officials.<sup>1</sup>

In Shinto, the dragon (龍 *ryū* or 竜 *tatsu*) is associated with rain, bodies of water, the sea. In agricultural cults, dragons played an important role. It was believed that bodies of water were inhabited by water spirits Mizuchi (蛟 or 虯), which could cause plentiful rain. The etymology of the word can be traced back to the ancient word みつち *mitsuchi* (み *mi* – water, つ *tsu* – indicator of the genitive case, ち *chi* – snake). Usually, the Mizuchi is described as a snake-like creature which lives in the water, has horns and extremities, and hurts people by spewing poison. The Mizuchi can reach 24 meters in size.<sup>2</sup>

It is believed that dragons can cause storms and typhoons, deluges, tornado. The word “water whirlwind” 竜巻 *tatsumaki* literally means “dragon’s scroll.” To avoid drought or to stop torrential rain, rituals to pacify the ruler deities of the water element were conducted, and in fishing villages, near the bodies of water, where, as it was believed, the dragon god lived, prayers for bountiful catch were performed. “Ancient Japanese chronicles often speak about killing droughts which brought the country to famine and impoverishment. They were believed to be

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<sup>1</sup> Dragons in Japanese Culture – Kaito Japan Design: <https://kaitojapandesign.com/blogs/japanese-dragon/dragon-in-japanese-culture>

<sup>2</sup> Mizuchi to wa? Imi to tsuikata [What is Mizuchi? Meaning and use of the word]: <https://kotobank.jp/word/蛟-637987>

divine punishment or, at any rate, a calamity that could only be stopped with sincere prayers and offerings to the same deities. In particular, from ancient times, the old dragon-shaped river gods (the “river uncles,” 河伯 *kawa-no kami*) were believed to bring rain, and they were begged not to take away their blessings from the drying and suffering land” [Visser 1913, p. 84]. “[...] [T]here existed sixteen Shinto shrines the deities of which were worshipped to cause or stop rain” [Visser 1913, p. 86]. To this day, a specific set of archaic beliefs called the “Dragon God Faith” (龍神信仰 *ryūjin shinkō*) has persisted. As a rule, its followers practice prayers for rain or for stopping torrents, for calm sea, and plentiful catch.<sup>3</sup>

Historian Kuroda Hideo notes that the image of a dragon is an unalienable part of Japan’s medieval history. In the Heian era, this image was interpreted according to the “Teaching of Yin and Yang” (陰陽道 *onmyōdō*) and was, once again, connected to the water element and the rites to cause or stop rain. According to beliefs, dragons could also cause earthquakes. Besides, dragon gods were thought to be protectors of the Japanese. In times of crisis, for example, during Kublai Khan’s attempted invasion of Japan in 1274, it was believed that dragon gods were fighting a bloody battle to protect Japanese land [Kuroda 2003, p. 134].

In the Muromachi era, the dragon symbol gained particular popularity, especially in Buddhist art and architecture. Dragons as protectors of Buddhism personified power, wisdom, prosperity, and good luck. Dragons can be seen on the ceilings of Buddhist temples, they appear as decorative elements in the places of hand ablution, as carved or painted images meant to protect buildings from fire. In the Edo era, Buddhism gave way to newly resurgent Shintoism and Neo-Confucianism [Goreglyad 2006, p. 30–31]. In the Meiji era (1868–1912), under the influence of the policy of separation of Buddhism and Shintoism

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<sup>3</sup> Mukaeru 2024 nen wa tatsu (ryū) nen. Ryūjin-sama o matsu Nihon no ryūjin shinkō, ryū jinja to wa? [2024 is the Year of the Dragon. What are the “faith of the dragon god,” “temples of dragon”?] : <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000010.000116710.html#>

(神仏分離 *shinbutsu bunri*), the dragon image, which was closely connected to Buddhism, virtually disappears from Shinto shrines. Even though images of dragons could be found on coins, they were no longer used as symbols of the emperor's power. Professor Arakawa Hiroshi claims that a five-fingered dragon has never been a symbol of the emperor's power in Japan, and the reason for this was not only the unwillingness to imitate China, but also the intention to state the Japanese emperor's uniqueness to China [Arakawa 2021, p. 188–189].

### **Dragon as a Zodiac Sign**

The author of a fundamental work *Chronology of the Countries of East and Central Asia* L. R. Kontsevich writes: “The sixty-year cycle is the basis of the Far Eastern calendar. It is the most ancient and widespread system of counting time in all countries of the “Chinese character” area in East Asia. This cycle is used to count years, lunar months, days and hours, as well as cardinal directions, angles (in degrees), etc. The cycle was based on the natural philosophical teaching about *yin-yang* and the “five primal elements” (陰陽五行説) [Kontsevich 2010, p. 31].

According to chronicles, in Japan, the zodiac calendar based on Chinese astronomy, cosmology, and philosophy was adopted as early as in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese legends and myths tell about the origin of the zodiac signs. “In ancient times, the Yellow Ancestor... decided to pick twelve guards from the animals known to him. He organized a competition among animals to select his guards, who became the twelve Zodiac signs after that, one after another... All animals strove to win, and there were many unexpected situations in which the animals revealed themselves in some way. Eventually, twelve winners were determined. These were, in turn, rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig” [Jia Huimin 2016, p. 196]. Dragon, despite being good at flying and swimming, ended up only in fifth place, even though everybody had believed that he would defeat his opponents. According to legend, dragon told the Jade Emperor that he had to stop a couple of times to help village

residents and cause rain. And, on his way to the finish line, he saw a small rabbit on a log and decided to cause some wind to help it reach the shore.<sup>4</sup>

In 1872, Japan abandoned the lunar calendar in favor of the Gregorian one, but, to this day, many temples use the lunar calendar during the key festivals and celebrations, and they also sell amulets and figures of zodiac deities [Izotova 2018, p. 106]. The zodiac animal figures become particularly popular during the New Year festivities. They are depicted on New Year postcards, calendars, souvenirs, and used as talismans.

## Dragon in Japanese Mythology and Literature

The first dragon-related artifacts in Japan date back to the Yayoi era. A jar with a depiction of a snake-like body with triangle fins, which was identified as a “dragon motif,” was found during excavations in the city of Izumi and dated 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. All over Japan, more than 30 such artifacts were found. As professor of Tenri University Kuwabara Hisao notes, there is a theory according to which the depictions of dragons on Yayoi ceramics can be traced back to images on bronze mirrors of the Late Han dynasty [Kuwabara 2020, p. 6].

In Chinese and Japanese mythology, the dragon is one of the four mythical creatures guarding the four cardinal directions: the Vermilion Bird Suzaku (朱雀) guards the South, the Azure Dragon Seiryū (青龍) – the East, the Black Tortoise Genbu (玄武) protects the North, and the White Tiger Byakko (白虎) – the West. These four creatures, known as the Four Heavenly Emblems, appeared in China during the Warring States Period (476–221 BCE), and they were often depicted on the walls of Chinese and Korean tombs. The dragon is the guardian of the East, it is associated with the season of spring, green/blue color, the element of wood (sometimes also water), virtue, justice, male energy *yang*; it supports and protects the country (controls rain, symbolizes the power of the emperor). It is

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<sup>4</sup> Chinese Zodiac | Mythology : <https://depts.washington.edu/triolive/quest/2007/TTQ07030/mythology.html>



worth noting the dual interpretation of the relationship between dragons and birds. The Vermilion Bird, the guardian of the South, is sometimes identified with the phoenix (鳳凰 *hōō*). Dragons and phoenixes are often depicted together and symbolize the unity of the opposites of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>5</sup> In the Buddhist legends, the *Garuda* bird people (迦楼羅 *karura*) are depicted as enemies of the *Naga* dragons (那伽 *naga* or 龍 *ryū*),<sup>6</sup> even though both of them can serve as temple guardians.

In Japan, the Azure Dragon is believed to be the guardian of the ancient capital city of Kyoto, corresponds to the Kamo River, and protects the city from various misfortunes and natural disasters coming from the eastern side. According to a legend, every night, the dragon drinks water from the spring of the Clean Water Temple, Kiyomizudera (清水寺).<sup>7</sup> As long as the water in the spring remains clean, the guardian will protect the city. Twice a year, in autumn and in spring, as gratitude to the heavenly patron, believed to be the embodiment of Bodhisattva Kannon, the temple holds the Azure Dragon Festival (青龍会 *seiryē*).<sup>8</sup> The 18-meter dragon figure is carried around the nearby streets of Kyoto, and the residents of the city greet their protector. As another legend says, the white dragon Ogoncho (おごんちょ) lives in the vicinity of Kyoto. Once every 50 years it turns into a golden bird, which announces famine, bad harvest, and natural calamities with its shriek, which sounds like wolf's howl [Reese 2023].

There are numerous mentions of dragons in ancient Japanese literature. Let us consider the most important of them. The early 8<sup>th</sup> century historic and geographical chronicle *Hitachi Fudoki*, in the

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<sup>5</sup> Shijin (Shishin) – Four legendary Chinese creatures protecting the four compass directions: <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/ssu-ling.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> Naga – a Sanskrit term uniting all types of snake-like creatures, including snakes and dragons.

<sup>7</sup> In 1994, the temple was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

<sup>8</sup> 青龍会 [Azure Dragon Festival] : [https://www.kiyomizudera.or.jp/event/seiryu\\_e.php](https://www.kiyomizudera.or.jp/event/seiryu_e.php)

description of Namekata District, tells about the struggle of a hero named Matachi with an evil deity Yatsu no Kami:

[T]here was a person called Yahazu no Uji no Matachi who cultivated new rice-fields by reclaiming and opening up swamp land in a valley west of the District Office. At this time Yatsu no Kami would gather together and come to obstruct and hinder things in one way or another, not allowing the fields to be cultivated.

(The local people say that these are snakes called Yatsu no Kami. They have bodies of snakes and horns on their heads. If anyone should look at them when escaping to avoid disaster, his household will be ruined and he will have no heirs. There are many of them in the fields around the District Office). And so Matachi became greatly enraged and put on armor, took his halberd, and killed them or drove them away.<sup>9</sup>

The description of Naka District tells about Nukabime from the village of Ubaraki, who gave birth to a flying snake son from an unknown man. The mother and the uncle believed the snake child to be a son of a god: “During daytime, he said nothing, and when it was dark, he talked to his mother” [Konrad 1969, p. 53]. The snake child grew fast, stopped fitting in the vessel in which Nukabime put him, and it was decided to send him to his father. “When the time to part came, from its great anger the snake child killed [his] uncle with a lightning strike and intended to ascend to the sky, but, at this time, his mother, frightened, took a *hiraka* vessel, threw it [at her son], hit him, and he, [having lost his divine strength], could not ascend to the sky. So, he stayed on the same hill of Kurefushi” [Ibid., p. 54].

The “Records of Ancient Matters” (古事記 *Kojiki*, 712) and the “Chronicles of Japan” (日本書紀 *Nihon Shoki*, 720) describe the victory

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<sup>9</sup> The English-language version is taken from [Funke 1994, pp. 16–17]. Note that the Russian-language version used by the author of the original publication mentions the Yatsu no Kami in the singular [Konrad 1969, p. 41].

of the brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu, the god of wind Susanoo no Mikoto, over the eight-headed snake Yama no Orochi (八岐の大蛇). The earth god Ashinazuchi and his wife Tenazuchi had to sacrifice one of their eight daughters to the “frightful snake, the eight-tailed, eight-headed snake from Koshi” every year. The last daughter, Kushinada Hime, was saved by god Susanoo, who killed the beast. This is how *Kojiki* describes the giant snake: “Its eyes are like red *kagachi* [fruit], and out of his body come eight heads and eight tails. And on his body grow moss, cypresses, and cryptomerias. And it is as long as eight valleys, and as tall as eight mountains. And if you look at its belly, all of it is oozing with blood.” [Grishchenkov 2000, p. 99]. Susanoo no Mikoto ordered: “Boil the eight-times-purified sake, and build a fence in a circle, and open eight gates in this fence, and build a platform near each gate, and place a sake barrel on that platform, and pour plenty of eight-times-purified sake in that barrel, and wait.” The snake drank the sake and fell asleep, and Susanoo cut it into small pieces. As Susanoo cut the middle tail, he found the Kusanagi no Tsurugi (草薙剣) sword. Earlier, the name of the sword was interpreted as the “Grass-Cutting Sword,” but, recently, the translation “Snake [Hitting] Sword” has been adopted, where *nagi* is understood as an ancient Japanese word meaning “snake” [*Bogi, svyatilishcha...* 2010, p. 91]. The Kusanagi no Tsurugi sword is a symbol of the emperor’s power and one of the three imperial regalia.<sup>10</sup>

*Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* tell about Wata Tsumi no Kami – the Sea Spirit God, who lived in an underwater palace built like “fish scales” [Grishchenkov 2000, p. 167]. His daughter, Toyotama Bime no Mikoto, the Maiden of Plentiful Pearls, became the wife of Hoori no Mikoto, who lived in the underwater palace for three years and returned to land on the neck of a “one-*hiro*-sized crocodile”.<sup>11</sup> When it was time for

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<sup>10</sup> The three attributes of imperial power – the Three Sacred Treasures (三種の神器 *sanshu no jingi*): the bronze mirror Yata no Kagami (八咫鏡), the jade jewel Yasakani no Magatama (八尺瓊勾玉), and the Kusanagi no Tsurugi sword.

<sup>11</sup> *Hiro* – 1.81 m.

Toyotama Bime no Mikoto to give birth, her husband built a hut on the seashore. “And when she was about to give birth, [she] told her husband: “Everywhere in foreign countries, people, when it is time for them to give birth, give birth taking on the appearance of their [native] country. So, I am now about to give birth in [my] former appearance. I ask of you: do not look at me” – so she said. Then, considering her words strange, [he] secretly looked when she was about to give birth, and [she], having turned into a giant crocodile, was slithering and wringing” [Grishchenkov 2000, p. 175]. *Nihon Shoki* says that “when it was time to give birth, Toyo Tama Pime turned into a dragon” [Ermakova & Meshcheryakov 1997, p. 165]. M.W. de Visser believes that this legend contains many Chinese features as well as Indian ideas about *Naga* dragons as rulers of the sea; the crocodile (鰐 *wani*) “is an old Japanese sea deity in the image of a dragon, or a snake, and the legend is an ancient Japanese tale clothed in Indian garments by later generations” [Visser 1913, p. 77]. It is worth noting that, in the Nagasaki Prefecture, there is one of the most ancient shrines, Watatsumi Jinja (海神神社), which is included in the national list of Shinto shrines. The shrine is dedicated to sea deity Watatsumi and goddess Toyotama Hime [*Bogi, svyatilishcha...* 2010, p. 170].

According to *Kojiki*, the child of Toyotama Bime no Mikoto and Hoori no Mikoto, Amatsuhiko Hikonagisatake Ugayafukiaezu no Mikoto, married his aunt, goddess Tamayori Bime no Mikoto and produced four sons, one of whom was Wakami Kenu no Mikoto, or God-Ruler of Sacred Young Food. Another name is Toyomikenu no Mikoto, God-Ruler of Plentiful Sacred Food. Another name is Kamuyamato Iware Biko no Mikoto, Young God Iware from Divine Yamato [Grishchenkov 2000, p. 178]. *Nihon Shoki* provides one more name of God Iware from Divine Yamato – Sano no Mikoto. “He was given the name Sano when he was still young of age. And then he pacified the All-Under-Heaven and ruled the Eight Island Lands” [Ermakova & Meshcheryakov 1997, p. 167]. God Iware no Mikoto is known as the first emperor and the founder of Japan – Jimmu. Therefore, according to chronicles, the first legendary emperor of Japan, Jimmu Tennō, was a great grandson of both Ninigi, the grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu, and Wata Tsumi no Kami,

the God Spirit of the Sea, the ruler of the Sea Kingdom. So, dragon god Ryūjin (龍神) is one of the ancestors of the Japanese emperors, and the emperor's name of the "dragon-faced one" (竜顔 *ryūgan*) is justified in the myth. The phrase 龍顔を拝する (*ryūgan o haisuru*, lit. "to bow before the dragon's face") means "to receive an audience with the emperor." This phrase combines the awe before the mighty ruler and the honor of meeting him [Ikegami 2003, pp. 12–13].

A popular plot of many Japanese fairy tales and legends is a travel to the underwater kingdom and a meeting with the ruler of seas and oceans, the dragon god. Such are the tales "Urashima Taro," "Jellyfish and Ape," etc.

The dragon image is associated with the only goddess in the pantheon of the "Seven Gods of Happiness" – the patron of eloquence, music, and other arts Benzaiten (弁才天), the prototype of which is the Indian water goddess Saraswati. "Like Saraswati, the Japanese goddess of happiness Benten is considered the patron of water, as she was born out of the legends about the Dragon and is his wife. This is why she is often depicted sitting on the ground or on a dragon with a traditional Japanese string musical instrument *biwa* in her hands" [Sadokova 2020, p. 72].

Let us now turn to one of the legends about Benzaiten and the Dragon. In 1047, a monk of the Tendai school Kokei (977–1049) wrote the text "On the Origin of Enoshima Island" (江ノ島縁起 *Enoshima Engi*), in which goddess Benzaiten is presented as a savior of the island's residents. The residents of local villages had for a thousand years been terrorized by a five-headed dragon Gozūryū (五頭龍). He was even offered human sacrifices, but everything was in vain. Learning about the plight of the people, Benzaiten descended from heaven, raised Enoshima Island from the bottom of the sea and settled there. The dragon fell in love with the goddess and offered to make her his wife. Benzaiten rejected his proposal but, using her gift of eloquence, persuaded the dragon to leave the people alone. The pacified dragon rushed to the south of the island and turned into a hill, which was named "Dragon's Maw" (龍の口 *tatsu no kuchi*) [Hein 2014, pp. 4–5].

## **The Semantics and Functions of the Dragon Image in the Daily Life of the Japanese**

The archetypical dragon image goes back to totem images and mythological ideas. It has a complex multidimensional structure, which is explained by its millennia-long history. According to C.G. Jung, the dragon symbol is an embodiment of the deep unconscious: “This is the place of primordial unconsciousness and at the same time the place of healing and redemption, because it contains the jewel of wholeness. It is the cave where the dragon of chaos lives and it is also the indestructible city, the magic circle or *temenos*, the sacred precinct where all the split-off parts of the personality are united” [Jung 1994, p. 26].

The dragon image in the daily life of the Japanese is represented in the festivities, folk beliefs, in literature and poetry, in decorative art, mass culture, and Japanese set phrases.

Chinese culture exerted a strong influence upon the Japanese rites and festivals. Borrowed from China by Japanese aristocracy, the festivals were organically incorporated in the Japanese daily life and are now perceived as Japanese. Ancient Chinese characters, lions and dragons, act in some of the Japanese festival performances.

For example, one of the notable events of Japan’s cultural life is the “Golden Dragon Dance” (金竜の舞 *kinryū no mai*), which can be seen on March 18 and October 18 in the Asakusa district of Tokyo at the Sensōji Temple (浅草寺), also known as the “Temple of Young Grass on the Mountain of the Golden Dragon” (金龍山浅草寺 *Kinryūzan Sensōji*). According to legend, on the 18<sup>th</sup> day since the founding of the temple, a thousand pine trees grew on this mountain in one night, and, after three days, a 100 *shaku* (ca. 30 m) long dragon with golden scales descended from heaven to the pine grove. It has never been seen since then. For the first time, the dance was performed on October 18, 1958, during the ceremony of opening the new temple hall. The 70 young men and girls who were performing the dance were volunteers from local youth clubs and not professional dancers.

It is believed that the Golden Dragon Dance helps to attract good luck and prosperity.<sup>12</sup>

On October 7–9, in Nagasaki, at Suwa Shinto shrine (諏訪神社), the autumn festival of Kunchi takes place, during which the Dragon, or Snake Dance (龍(蛇)踊り *ryū (ja) odori*) is performed. The festival is also called the Harvest Festival, as it coincides with the end of the harvest season. Initially, the dance was performed during New Year festivities by the Chinese who settled in Nagasaki in the Edo era. The festival has been held since 1634, and in 1970, the Dragon Dance received the status of “significant intangible cultural heritage of the people”.<sup>13</sup>

In the rich fishing areas in Japan, in the beginning of summer, races are held on rowing boats built in the shape of dragons, which are called *hārī* (ハーリー). Such competitions are particularly popular on the island of Okinawa. This water festival is an expression of a plea for rich catch and safety on sea.<sup>14</sup>

On May 5, Children’s Day (子どもの日 *kodomo no hi*), a traditional holiday, is celebrated in Japan. Once it was called the Festival of the First Day of the Horse (端午の節句 *tango no sekku*). On this day, the Japanese hang images of carps made from fabric or paper, 鯉幟 *koinobori* (鯉 *koi* “carp,” 幟 *nobori* “flag”), on poles near their houses. A carp is considered a symbol of success and courage due to the ancient Chinese legend about a steadfast and resolute carp who turned into a dragon after swimming up the current of the Yellow River. According to the legend, in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, there is a waterfall called “Dragon Gates” (龍門 *ryūmon*). A carp who manages to climb the waterfall becomes a dragon. The phrase “ascending the Dragon Gates” (登龍門 *tōryūmon*)

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<sup>12</sup> Kinryū-no mai | Asakusa ōhyakka [Golden Dragon Dance. Great Encyclopedia of Asakusa]: <https://asakusa.gr.jp/jp/?p=156>

<sup>13</sup> Nagasaki kunchi to wa [Nagasaki Kunchi Festival]. URL: <https://nagasaki-kunchi.com/about/>

<sup>14</sup> Hārī no kisetsu tōrai! (Okinawa no dentō gyōji) [The season of races on hārī rowing boats has come! (Traditional event on Okinawa Island)]. URL: <https://www.okinawastory.jp/news/notice/1678>

symbolizes courage and perseverance in overcoming obstacles on the way towards success.

The dragon image is represented in Japanese set phrases: in proverbs, fixed expressions, and four-character idioms 四字熟語 *yōjijukugo*, which are “aphoristic sayings built according to the rules of *wenyan*, the old literary Chinese language, which date back either to a saying of a particular historical character, or to an ancient tale or legend” [Gurevich 2011, p. 3].

The idiom “dragon’s head, snake’s tail” (竜頭蛇尾 *ryūtō dabi*) means a situation when something started well, but then came to naught – “loud beginning, infamous end,” “start with a bang and end with a fizzle”.

The four-character phrase “battle of a dragon with a tiger” (竜虎相搏 *ryūko sōhaku*) is a fierce battle of two opponents of equal strength.

“The art of killing dragons” (屠竜の技 *toryō no gi*) means a skill which can be obtained but has no practical application. This is a reference to a Chinese parable about a man who trained for a long time and learnt to kill a dragon, but this ability turned out useless, as he did not find a single dragon.

The proverb “to paint a pupil in a dragon’s eye” (画竜点睛を欠く *garyō tensei o kaku*) goes back to the ancient legend about a Chinese artist who was painting the walls of a temple with images of dragons. When he painted the pupils of two dragons, they became alive and flew away. This is spoken about an unfinished business, about the necessity to add the final, decisive touch.

The fixed phrase “to pet a dragon’s moustache” (龍のひげをなでる *ryū no hige o naderu*) is a metaphor of reckless and rash action. It is often mentioned in combination with the expression “to step on a tiger’s tail” (虎の尾を踏む *tora no o o fumu*).

The proverb “to draw a dragon like a dog” (竜を画いて狗に類す *ryū o eigaite inu ni ruisu*) is used when one speaks of an overly ambitious and self-confident person who tries to do something which is obviously beyond their ability. A similar proverb “an ant aims for the dragon’s beard” (竜の鬚をアリが狙う *ryū no hige o ari ga nerau*) is a metaphor of grandiose plans which are not meant to be fulfilled.



“To escape a tiger’s den and enter a dragon’s cave” (虎口を逃れて竜穴に入る *kokō o nogarete ryūketsu ni iru*) means to fall from one trouble into another, even greater one, “to go from bad to worse.”

The expression 竜馬の躓き *ryūme no tsumazuki* – “even a wonder horse which flies like a dragon stumbles” is used when one says that even an experienced person can be mistaken – “anyone can make a mistake,” “happens to the best of us.”

The proverb “a dragon is ready to soar to the sky even if it is one *sun*<sup>15</sup> long” (竜は一寸にして昇天の気あり *ryū wa issun ni shite shōten no ki ari*) is spoken about a person who shows outstanding talent since childhood.

The phrase “a dragon flies up from under one’s feet” (足元から竜が上がる *ashimoto kara tatsu ga agaru*) means a sudden change, the appearance of an unexpected factor which can change the course of events.

The proverb “when a fitting moment comes, even earthworms become dragons” (時至れば蚯蚓 (ミミズ) も竜になる *toki itareba mimizu mo ryū ni naru*) means that, under fortunate circumstances, even without natural talent one can achieve success.

The meaning of the proverb “a cloud follows the dragon, and wind follows the tiger” (雲は竜に従い風は虎に従う *kumo wa ryū ni shitagai, kaze wa tora ni shitagau*), which originates from China, is that dragons and tigers gain strength where there are wind and clouds. Strength attracts strength.

The phrase “wings to the dragon” (竜に翼 *ryū ni tsubasa*) means “double profit.”

The dragon image is widely used in modern mass culture, in anime and manga (the *Dragon Ball* (ドラゴンボール *doragon bōru*) manga and its numerous screen adaptations; the white dragon Haku in Miyazaki Hayao’s film *Spirited Away*; the steel dragon in the *Ultraman* series, etc.), in video games. The dragon image can be seen in the patterns of traditional male and female kimonos. A dragon is also a popular motif in the art of Japanese tattoos [Meshcheryakov 2008, p. 487].

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<sup>15</sup> *Sun* – 3.03 cm.

At the same time, according to Professor Miura Masayuki, at present, many young Japanese do not like the depiction of a dragon, as they consider it old-fashioned. The dragon is not a symbol of Japanese identity, so the younger generation do not wish to bring its image to the future. In visual arts, the Japanese prefer other images, such as the phoenix, unicorn, lion, crane, and the depiction of the dragon is considered cumbersome and difficult. Besides, during many historical periods, the dragon was closely connected to Chinese culture, and, in the process of formation of the modern Japanese culture, its image was relatively little used [Nguyen 2015, p. 45].

## **Conclusion**

The dragon image occupies an important place in the traditional Japanese culture, literature, visual arts, architecture, decorative arts, legends and myths, calendar festivals. The history of its appearance and evolution illustrates the process of formation and transformation of mythological thinking and symbolic means of its actualization. Even though the dragon image was borrowed from China, the cult of this mythical creature formed over a long time, obtaining distinctive features and national cultural semantics.

In the mythological worldview of the Japanese, the dragon is ambivalent and has both positive and negative features. In ancient literature, one can find images of scary bloodthirsty dragons; at the same time, it speaks about the dragon god, the ruler of seas and oceans, one of the mythical ancestors of the Japanese emperors. The Japanese dragon is related to the water element, it was imbued with functions of patron and protector from natural calamities: droughts, torrential rain, typhoons.

The multifaceted nature and the rich connotative contents of the dragon image testify to its high associative and metaphorical potential. In our days, unlike China, where the dragon image is a symbol of collective identity and national unity, in Japan, it has lost its sacred significance and is largely used as tribute to tradition, for the purpose of commercial multiplication of images traditional for the East Asian culture.

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