



# HOW THE dragon Image Evolved

*By Zhenhua Jiang*

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As a beautiful and mysterious motif, the dragon has a long history around the world. From serpent forms in Greece to man-eating beasts in India and France and even godlike creatures ushering in hurricanes and storms in the Caribbean, the dragon image developed according to local legend and fear. In China however, the dragon has transcended myth to become the symbol of China.

The dragon design in China that people are familiar with today is the result of thousands of years of evolution. There are many ways to understand the history of the dragon's development, but one of the best paths may be to study the ancient Chinese history of jade carving.

**Neolithic culture:** The earliest jade dragon preserved to date is a Neolithic archaic discovery from the remains of the *Hongshan* Culture dating back to 3,000 B.C. The dragon had a distinct form but was simple, its head and facial features sketched out by a few intaglio lines.

**Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties:** The dragon culture and jade-carving art became indispensable parts of Chinese culture, developing and evolving side by side. Chinese jade-carving techniques matured significantly in Shang and Western Zhou (16<sup>th</sup> century B.C. – 771 B.C.). The Shang dragon's head became prominent in size, especially in relation to its body. The expression was fierce, with open mouth, sharp teeth and wide eyes. The body of the dragon began to appear consistently with motifs of double-circles, rhombus, and cloud-thunder. Two short, thick horns that were mushroom-shaped appeared in the back of the dragon's head. Although similar to the Shang dragon, the Western Zhou dragon had a foot with three or four claws. It also had a tail, similar to that of a fish, at its rear. With these new developments, dragons of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties started to resemble a reptile, an important deviation from the dragon of the Neolithic period.

**Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods:** With the invention of iron tools and the discovery of *Hetian* nephrites, jade carving reached its climax during the Spring and Autumn (770 B.C. – 476 B.C.) and Warring States Periods (475 B.C. – 221 B.C.). Decorative carvings show the dragon with upward-turning horns and two pointy ears, round or elliptic eyes, and open mouth. For the first time, the dragon was long and sinuous, with four limbs, each of which had two claws. Its body was covered with carved motifs of grain, clouds, fish scales, feathers, or net. This was achieved through shallow relief carvings and intaglio lines. With its expressive power, the dragon served the daily and ceremonial needs of ancient people whose lifestyle focused on simple ornamentation and religious belief.

**Han Dynasty:** The decorative characteristics of Warring States dragons somehow disappeared in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). Jade artisans in this period put much more emphasis on portraying the expression and the power of the dragon. They lengthened the head and opened the dragon's mouth, now as wide as the width of its head. Behind its head, horns extended backward and upward. By the end of the Han Dynasty, the coiled dragon body was supported with straight forelimbs, while the rear limbs were bent. Amazingly, such a dragon image, full of force and momentum, was often completed with only a few simple intaglio lines.

***Sui and Tang Dynasties:*** It was not until Sui (581 A.D. – 618 A.D) and Tang (618 A.D. – 907 A.D.) when the well-known Chinese dragon image was fully established. The image was descriptive but not loaded with trivial detail. The dragon had a strong and full-sized snake body that was decorated with rhombus-like scales that no longer looked like fish scales. It had fins on its back and an S-shaped tail. Its claws were bird-like with triangular nails that were sharp and strong. Noticeably, the dragon motif was, for the first time, surrounded by the cloud motif.

***Song Dynasty:*** Dragons began flying in the Song Dynasty (960 A.D. – 1279 A.D.). During this period China began to undergo the dramatic cultural and economic developments that would forever change this country. Social esteem escalated and self-confidence was on the rise, and the dragon image started to be linked to the image of the Chinese nation. The Chinese had never thought of the dragon as merely an animal ? it was always a mythical creature with superior power, and ruled as the master of human life! This is why all the Chinese emperors loved to be associated with the dragon. And during this time, in addition to its attributes of superiority, the dragon took on the added status of the god of rain. To be consistent with this belief, the Song dragon was elevated off the ground, and no longer crawling, lying or coiling, it started to fly.

***Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties:*** Compared to earlier periods, Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368 –1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties achieved much less in their dragon designs. The Yuan dragon had a smaller head and a thinner neck. However, it had four strong limbs revealing three claws. The design of the Ming dragon was inferior to those designed in the Tang and Song Dynasties. Given the size of its body, its dragons had exaggerated heads decorated with dull eyes and big, everted noses and moustaches. Overly detailed body hair was mostly pulled up and forward. Limbs had either four or five claws. Appearing to be strong, the entire dragon image was rather weak. Qing artisans utilized various techniques to present overly fine and detailed images of dragons. Gaining in refinement, the dragon lost its ferocity. Compared to the Ming dragon, the Qing version had a shorter and wider twisting body. Its head, with protruding forehead, was often finely carved. The cupped claws, handed down from earlier dynasties, were transformed into chicken claws. The dragon in this period was no longer an effective symbol of strength and power.

Simple or sophisticated, a successful dragon design creates the effect of mystery, authority, and contrast via the means of balance and symmetry. Showing characteristics from different periods and dynasties, the dragon design can be seen on jade, bronzes, porcelains, textiles, furniture and architecture. Understanding the evolution of the dragon design is helpful for anybody who appreciates Chinese antiques. It also provides direct or indirect support for appraisals.

***Zhenhua Jiang is the art appraiser for the East Corner Company, specializing in Chinese archaic jade and Ming and Qing furniture. He is widely published in his native China and does research with colleagues from the Shanghai Museum and Tianjin Artistic Museum. Mr. Jiang can be reached at 212-645-8052.***

