



Comparative Study of Visual Representation of Dragons in Films of China and United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Dragons, a mythological creature is a major part of various cultures and holds various meanings. The paper explores the different ways that a dragon is perceived in different cultures. The focus is on how a dragon, an ancient entity, is perceived in the modern contexts of media of different cultures. It provides the basic understanding of dragons in the films in China and United Kingdom on portrayal of dragons in the films – a comparative study of visual appearance and personality.

KEYWORDS

Dragon, Films, China, United Kingdom, Mythological Creature

BROAD AREA OF RESEARCH

This study falls under the broader area of Film and Media Studies with a focus on Character Design and Cultural Representation. It examines how visual elements and narrative roles in films reflect and communicate cultural beliefs, values, and symbolism. By analysing both Eastern and Western cinematic portrayals, the research explores the intersection of visual design, storytelling, and audience perception across different cultural contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dragons are mythological creatures that are seen across various cultures in various contexts. They are part of heroic stories, folklore and fairy tales. They are portrayed as mysterious and powerful beings. Dragons are a major part of the eastern culture where they are portrayed as wise and guiding, whereas in the western culture they are often portrayed as beings of destruction and danger.

Dragons are considered a major part of the identity of China¹ – from their folklore to their national identity.. They are used to symbolize creatures of mystical power. Dragons are seen as a positive force and were worshipped. They were also believed to be messengers to the divine. In the Chinese culture the dragons were connected to power and authority. Each type of dragon represented the authority and the position that an individual holds in the social hierarchy - such as a five clawed dragon was seen to be fitting for the highest rank of the societal hierarchy which includes the representatives of the royals, the four clawed dragon was seen fitting for the individuals who were not direct representatives of the royal family³.

The dragons in the western culture are perceived as negative sources. The shape of dragon is a collective of different types of animals where the body is that of a snake. According to the bible, the snake is a representation of the devil and since the dragon was seen similar to that of a snake it became the reason that the people associated dragons as the ones that bring destruction and perceived as negative by the western culture.

In the united kingdoms, dragon stories are often linked to that of knights. The stories often include the destruction caused by a dragon and how the act of slaying the dragon by the knight was seen as an act of bravery.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dragons : A symbol of evil in European synagogue decoration by Ilia Rodov (2005), the scholar discusses the depictions of dragons as evil in the eighteenth century art through archaeological references. The scholar also discusses the reason for depiction of dragons as evil in the Christian art with the reference to the Bible.

The Evolution of the Western Dragon by Sharon Khalifa Gueta (2018), the scholar discusses about the origin of dragon figures in snakes and discusses about the various kinds of dragons that are there in different cultures and their origin.

Descendants of the Dragon: The Dragon as a Symbol of Chinese National Identity by Daniela C. Zhang (2023), discusses about how a dragon came to be the national identity of China. The association of Chinese as dragon part of their cultural identity and consider to be the descendants of dragons.

The Chinese Dragon - History and Manifestations by Miguel Pinto-Correia (2024), the scholar discusses about the different meaning of dragon in the Chinese culture and the different uses of dragons in China. The scholar talks about the different meanings that a dragon holds and their connection to power and authority to represent the position that an individual holds in the social hierarchy.

3. AIM

To compare the visual and cultural representation of dragons in films in China and United Kingdom through character design analysis.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

This study uses a mixed-method approach combining character design analysis of selected Chinese and British films with a survey to understand audience perceptions.

Component	Method
Research Type	Qualitative and Comparative Study
Primary Sources	Films (Mulan, Wish Dragon, Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire)
Secondary Sources	Research papers, articles on dragon symbolism, character design studies, cultural analyses
Data Collection Tools	Online survey form, Visual analysis framework; Note-taking sheets
Analysis Method	Comparative analysis; Visual analysis of dragon design; Thematic analysis of survey data
Sampling	Convenience sampling

5. DRAGONS IN CHINA

Dragons in China are seen as beings of power and are worshipped by the people of China. Seen as a positive force that guides them in their time of need and provides protection to them. They are very common in the Chinese folklore. They symbolize power, wisdom, carrier of good fortune and messengers to the divine. They are often associated with water and controlling the weather in the stories.

The common depiction of dragon in the Chinese films is usually of a long serpentine body with four legs that moves smoothly. A key features of the Chinese dragons is that they are without wings but still have the ability to fly, which underlines their supernatural abilities. Chinese dragons often have additional features like long mustache and a beard which portrays them as ancient, benevolent and wise creatures. Common colors for the dragons are bright or golden colors, golden being the representation of power and wealth.

These traditional characteristics can be seen in the Chinese films such as *Mushu* from the Disney film, *Mulan*(1998) and *Long* from Sony Pictures Animation's film *Wish Dragon*(2021). Although both characters are an adaptation to the modern audience, the cultural aspects are reflected in their appearance and personalities.

Mulan(1998) : In the film *Mulan*(1998) by Disney, Mushu is a small comic relief character. He was a dragon sent to guide and protect Mulan by her ancestors due to her decision of going to war. Throughout the film he shows loyalty and support towards Mulan. He gave his opinions and Mulan sought him for advice and saw him as a companion for her. His personality was depicted as humorous and playful. Mushu's visual characteristics are depicted that of the Chinese culture – long serpentine body with four arms, smooth scales and long mustaches.



Fig 1 : Image of the dragon, Mushu from the Disney film *Mulan*(1998)

Wish Dragon (2021) : In the film *Wish Dragon* by Sony pictures Animations, Long is a wish giving dragon who was given to the protagonist *Din Song* by a god. *Long* is described as soft to touch by the protagonist and shown as a being with human emotions, frustrations and curiosity which is seen during the scene that he travels with the protagonist is immersed into the modern world. The display of power by him were illusions which shows that he was a creature that wouldn't cause harm. He has a long round face which provides further depiction of him being a creature of peace.



Fig 2 : Image of the dragon, Long from Sony Pictures Animation's film Wish Dragon(2021)

6. DRAGONS IN UNITED KINGDOM

Dragons in United Kingdom are portrayed as creatures of greed, destruction and monstrous. They are often shown as hoarders or guardians of treasure like huge piles of gold. The common attribute of dragons and their power is displayed as fire breathing ability as fire is seen as chaos. The idea of dragon is linked to evil due to their resemblance as snakes in China, which in the western culture is associated with the religious context of devil². The association to devil leads to the idea of hell which is depicted as a place of fire and burning. The connection contributes to the use of fire by dragons. The tales from United Kingdom that feature dragons focus on knights, where the act of slaying the dragon is seen as bravery and heroism.

The common depiction of dragon in the United Kingdom films is of large muscular bodies with scales and long spikes. The structure of the head includes a long jaw with rows of sharp teeth and multiple spikes attached to the head. The colors of the dragons are muted which stimulate as sense of danger.

Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves (2023) : In the film *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor among thieves* by Paramount Pictures (2023), the first appearance of a dragon is of Themberchaud, which is a dragon known for his destructive nature. Before the reveal of the dragon the entrance was covered with piles of skeletons which points towards danger and death. The initial reaction of the dragon on seeing people was to attack them and were seen as food for the dragon. The dragon has an enormous body, the head is covered with spikes and the mouth has long sharp teeth. The sharp spiked scales of the dragon are muted colors.



Fig 3 : Image of the dragon, Themberchaud, Dragon from Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves (2023).

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005) : in the film dragons appear as a part of the contest in which the participant was required to steal the golden egg from the dragon. The dragon is shown as hostile and is tied down with chains. The dragon has a large serpentine body with rough scales and numerous spikes attached to a pointy shaped head. The character of the dragon portrayed in the film is as greedy and treasure hoarder.



Fig 3 : Image of the dragon from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005)

7. EXPERIMENT

The experiment for this research was conducted through an online Google Form designed to understand how viewers perceive dragons in general and how they differentiate between Chinese and Western dragon portrayals.

The survey aimed to measure the audience's perception of dragons as either good or evil, and to identify how cultural depictions in films influence these perceptions. Participants were asked whether they associate dragons with positive traits (such as protective or divine qualities) or negative traits (such as danger or destruction). They were also asked specific questions about how they view dragons shown in Chinese films and how they view dragons shown in films from the United Kingdom.

8. INFERENCES

The majority of participants view dragons as enigmatic and powerful. Few consider dragons to be solely dangerous and destructive or benevolent and wise. Participants do not strongly connect dragons with attributions of good or evil. Instead, the responses suggest for dragons as complex beings, that do not fall within the spectrum of good or evil.

There is awareness that Chinese cinema follows the traditional cultural view of dragons as divine and protective beings. This supports the widespread understanding of Eastern dragons as symbols of prosperity, wisdom, and spiritual authority.

Participants widely recognize the Western narrative tradition where dragons represented as threats or monsters.

The majority of participants agree that Western media has a significant culture impact internationally. Although Eastern representations are different from the Western traditions, the Western representation, especially from Hollywood and other global streaming channels, impacts audience understanding of dragons internationally.

9. CONCLUSION

The dragons in the Chinese films are shown as friendly towards the protagonists. The first appearances of the dragons are humorous encounters in the film. They also interact with the protagonist and offer their guidance and opinions. The common features of the dragons being the personality and the role of dragon in the film. The shape of their body is represented to be non-threatening by making them small or round and soft.

The dragons in the films in the United Kingdom are shown as aggressive. Their initial appearance—or even the first mention of them—is often accompanied by displays of hostility, such as breathing fire or launching an immediate attack on the protagonists.

10. REFERENCES

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11. FIGURES

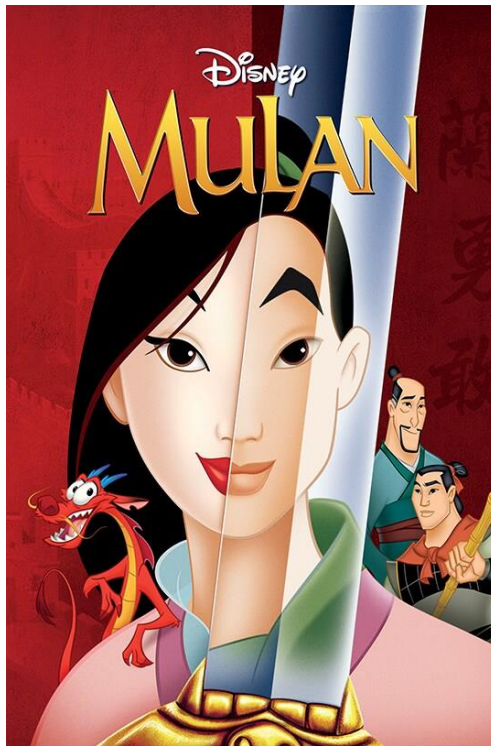


Fig 1 : Mulan. Directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Walt Disney Pictures, (1998)



Fig 2 : Wish Dragon. Directed by Chris Appelhans, Sony Pictures Animation, (2021).



Fig 3: Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves. Directed by John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein, Paramount Pictures, (2023).



Fig 4 : Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Directed by Mike Newell, Warner Bros. Pictures, (2005).

Age

Age
52 responses

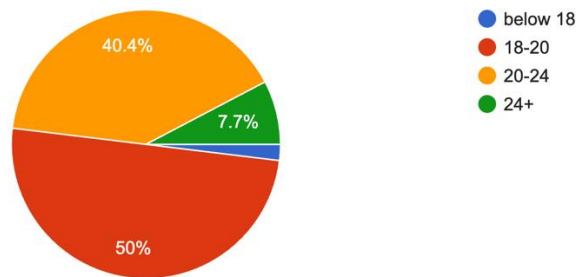


Fig 5 : Age Graph of participants

What types of film or television genres do you usually watch?

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52 responses

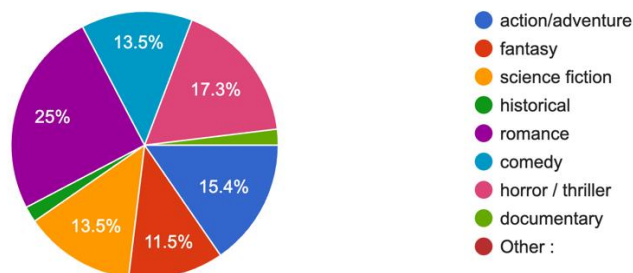


Fig 6 : Genre Preference Graph

How familiar are you with dragons in popular media (movies, books, games, etc.)?

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52 responses

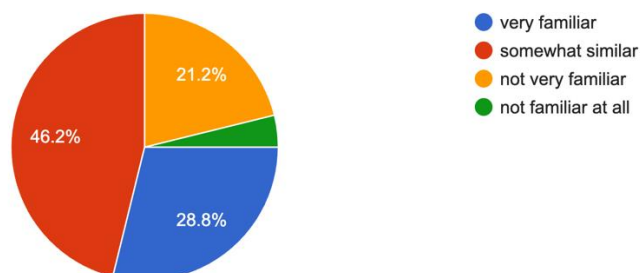


Fig 7 : Familiarity Graph

How would you generally describe dragons?

How would you generally describe dragons?

52 responses

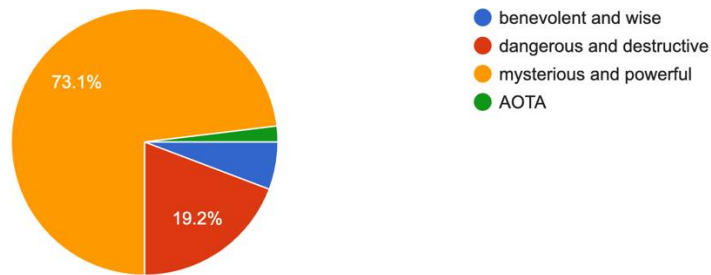


Fig 8 : Graph of perception of dragons

In your opinion, are dragons mostly associated with good or evil?

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52 responses

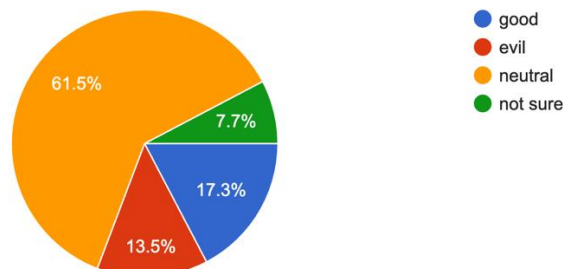


Fig 9 : Graph of common perception of dragons

In Chinese films, dragons are often portrayed as divine or protective beings.

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52 responses

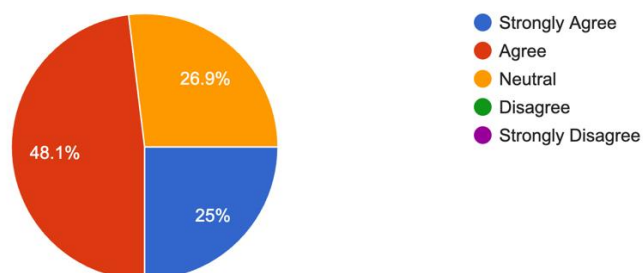


Fig 10 : Graph showing views of dragon in Chinese films

In Western films, dragons are often portrayed as dangerous creatures that must be defeated.

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52 responses

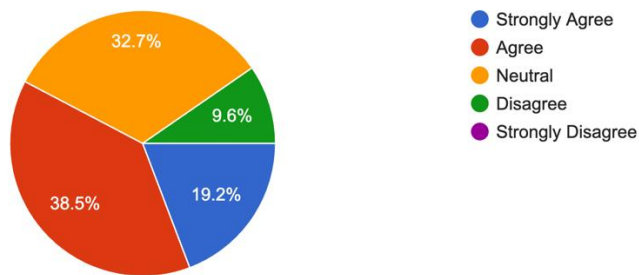


Fig 11: Graph showing views of dragons in western films

Do you think Western media has influenced how dragons are perceived globally?

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52 responses

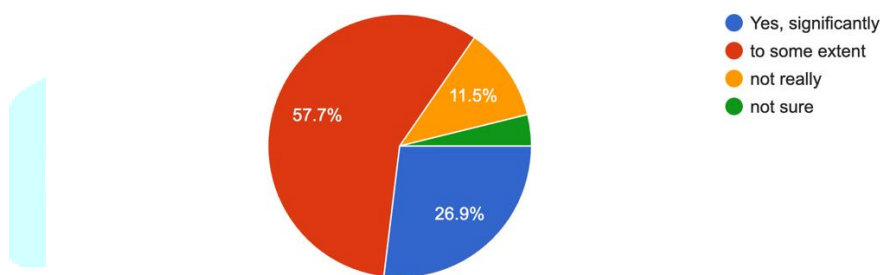


Fig 12 : Graph of impact of western media on perceptions