

Lunar Year of the Dragon

The dragon is an important totem of the Chinese people. It is stated in the ancient Chinese dictionary “Shuowen Jiezi” that “The dragon, leader of the scaly animals, can go in the dark or light, can be small or giant, short or long, and rises into the heaven in the spring equinox and submerges to the abyss in the autumn equinox”.

The dragon, the fifth of the twelve animals of Chinese Zodiac, corresponds to “Chen”, the fifth of the twelve earthly branches, which is why it is also known as the “Dragon of Chen”. In ancient times, the dragon was often associated with rain prayers. In the “Luanlong” chapter of the “Lunheng” (an important work by the philosopher Wong Chong on the customs, beliefs and superstitions of the Han dynasty), it is mentioned that Dong Zhongshu (another Han dynasty philosopher) mentioned in “The Annals of the Spring and the Autumn” that a dragon made of earth was used in rain prayers, because it was believed that there was an interrelationship between the clouds and the dragon. In the Chinese astronomical system, there are twenty-eight constellations, with the “Seven Constellations of the Sky-Blue Dragon” in the east being called the “Seven Constellations of the Blue Dragon”. The twenty-eight constellations have “four quadrants” (north, south, east, west), with the “Sky-Blue Dragon” being the protector of the eastern quadrant. The dragon is also associated with the “majesty”, the “sacredness” and the “solemnity”, which is why, in the past, its image represented the imperial authority. Thus, in the “Jiyao” chapter of the “Lunheng”, the expression “Death of the Ancestral Dragon” is a reference to Qinshihuang (the first Emperor of the unified China), in which “Dragon” means the emperor and “Ancestral” the beginning. As Zheng Xuan mentioned, the hearses of the emperors of the Zhou dynasty were decorated with dragons. The names of the reigns (of the emperors) with the word “Long” (dragon) include “Longfei”, “Longshuo”, “Shenlong”, “Jianlong”, “Longde”, etc. Besides, the clothes worn by the emperors were called “dragon robes”, the chairs they sat on “dragon chairs” and the beds they slept in “dragon beds”, among other examples.

The description of the shape of the dragon is associated with various animals. In the “Bencao Gangmu” (compendium of medical matter), it is mentioned that “The shape of the dragon is associated with nine elements: the head is like that of a camel; the horns are like those of a deer; the eyes are like those of a rabbit; the ears are like those of a cow; the neck is like that of a snake; the belly is like that of a “shen”; the scales are like those of a carp; the claws are like those of an eagle; the paws are like those of a tiger”. People believe that the dragon can appear in various forms and that it has the ability to give life to everything around it, always giving it a positive and encouraging meaning. Thus, it is common to say “wish the child to be a dragon” (to belong to a successful elite), “the spirit of the dragon and the horse” (to have strength and energy), “dragon and phoenix of the men” (someone with great wisdom) and “the dragon and the phoenix bring fortune” (wishes for a good Chinese New Year), all idiomatic expressions that contain the word “dragon” and through which something good is wished or a compliment is made.

Today, the relationship that people have with the dragon is not one of mere worship, but is increasingly integrated into the daily life of the Chinese people, in which they believe is part of their culture. People call the undulating mountains “dragon veins” and the places where the energies of the mountains and water currents cross and concentrate “dragon caves”. According to the traditional Chinese folk customs, on the “second day of the second month, the dragon raises its head”, and people perform the Dragon or the Lion Dances to invoke good fortune and a bountiful harvest for the coming year. At the Dragon Boat Festival, various activities are organized, such as the dragon boat races and the creation of “dragon heads”, which in recent years have become part of the local cultural tourism programmes and are major events that combine cultural and entertainment elements.

The year 2024 is the Lunar Year of the Dragon. May everyone have “The Strength and Energy of the Dragon” and fly ever higher with this auspicious animal.

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