

Live **LOONG** and prosper

Happy Chinese New Year!



Louis Vuitton places an azure dragon outside its Taikoo Li Qiantan store in Shanghai. — IC

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The Year of the Dragon begins tomorrow.

For the Chinese, it's the Year of the Loong. This is not a matter of semantics; it's a significant cultural difference between two mythical creatures with different appearances, different characteristics and different symbolism.

The Chinese New Year gives us a chance to explore this dichotomy in greater detail and, perhaps, gives Westerners a chance to revise their thinking.

The Western dragon is depicted as a ferocious, lizard-like creature with wings, a long tail and breath of fire. It is considered evil and to be slain by heroes.

The loong, sometimes called the Chinese dragon, is a serpentine creature with no wings and a noble aura. Its image is a composite of nine animals, including the antlers of a deer, the body of a snake and the claws of an eagle. It is a benevolent creature associated with controlling power over water, and has long symbolized prosperity, wisdom and the authority of the emperor.

Slowly, Westerners are becoming cognizant of these differences and why they matter.

Scottish Whiskey brand Johnnie Walker named its limited New Year artist edition and exhibition "Loong to Walk."

And Badaling, the most popularly visited section of the Great Wall, launched a virtual IP image in December — a cartoon Chinese dragon called DaDaLoong.

Shanghai-based designer Christina Huang, 25, said the loong presents a good design element, both visually and for word-creation in both Chinese and English contexts.

"Visually, it has a long body. The two Os are easy to decorate creatively, and you can always add more Os," she explained.

"Loong is also similar to the English

word 'long.' With the Chinese pronunciation of Chinese dragon, you can create a lot of new phrases in English, interchanging it with 'long,' or in Chinese, interchanging it with the Chinese character."

When the Chinese say "may you live loong and prosper," they are evoking a common blessing for longevity and good fortune.

Cultural sensitivity has proven a stumbling stone for global brands trying to indulge one of the world's largest consumer markets. Their campaigns and products have often been tripped up by a failure to understand Chinese tradition or by the use of outdated cultural stereotypes.

Many luxury brands have been mocked by Chinese consumers for their ubiquitous use of red colors or red characters to appeal to local consumers, who don't make the cultural connection or consider the choice offensive.

Many brands have come to realize that modern Chinese consumers "like products with a Chinese feel," and it's important to "show respect for local traditions and be relevant for local consumers," then Adidas CEO Kasper Rorsted said in a 2022 interview with CNBC, when explaining the sportswear maker's big drop in revenue in the region.

When it comes to loong, one of the most important cultural symbols of China, brands tread carefully but not always wisely.

Apple was the latest to spark a backlash among Chinese netizens for its Year of the Dragon iPhone case, priced at 498 yuan (US\$70).

According to the product description on the company's website, the case "brings to life the dragon's bold personality through bursts of peony-shaped fireworks, swirling lines and bright colors."

Netizens lambasted Apple's depiction on Chinese social media platforms, saying it doesn't resemble the culturally accepted five-clawed loong of China.