



Emma plans to carry the spirit of the dragon as a symbol for togetherness. — Hu Jun

# How a dragon can bridge cultural differences between East and West

**Emma Leaning**

**M**y husband is a dragon. He's ambitious, energetic, funny, gentle, a great leader, and above all, I'm lucky to have him. But move the first five words of that paragraph into the Western world and my husband is a fire-breathing monster I should be rescued from.

Isn't that difference weird?

With Chinese New Year celebrations having blessed the city and my husband's zodiac sign in full swing, I got thinking about cultural representations of the dragon and what they mean. More to the point, do they matter? And if so, why?

In various Chinese traditions, the dragon plays a central role. And over the past few weeks, I've enjoyed seeing Shanghai filled with everything from dragon dances and sculptures to dragon toys and WeChat stickers. All wishing us luck for the New Year.

Recently I learned that China is called the "country of the dragon," and Chinese people are known as dragon descendants. The Chinese dragon is often depicted as being beautiful and thought to bring rain for harvest and

oversee social justice. Its function in society is much greater than elsewhere. The Chinese dragon represents hope and imperial power.

Compare that to the bone-crushing, city-destroying dragon of the West.

Where I'm from, people think of dragons as a beast with huge wings, horns and eagle-like claws. The dragon is watchful, guarding treasure and enslaving princesses. It's cruel, inhumane and capable of causing endless harm to mankind. Even in modern language, dragons hold negative connotations. The word "dragon" represents someone with a fierce temperament. You might refer to your boss or mother-in-law as a dragon, and it's not a compliment.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. Hollywood films like "Pete's Dragon" and "How to Train Your Dragon" depict a misunderstood creature that befriends people. But perhaps the most atypical representation of a dragon in Western culture is the Welsh flag.

Wales has a population of just 3.1 million people. China has more than 1.4 billion. Yet this comparatively tiny nation has an affiliation with China's beloved creature. The dragon was

officially adopted for the Welsh national flag in 1959 and thought to symbolize the struggle of the Welsh people against Saxon invaders and their ultimate triumph. It's also associated with King Arthur who was said to have a red dragon on his shield. Today the dragon is a significant symbol in Welsh culture and a source of national pride.

It's assumed that the Chinese dragon and the Western dragon were produced around the same time, and yet their images have followed two very different paths. Could the stark contrast between these two legends come with consequences? How might the difference in dragon culture contribute to relationships?

For example, given the dragon is so central to Chinese culture, might a misunderstanding of its symbolism lead to difficulties in understating the Chinese national spirit? If the different interpretation of the dragon is a microcosm of cultural differences between China and the West, I think there's something we can learn.

The dragon, with its rich symbolism and deep roots in both Eastern and Western cultures, serves as a powerful

metaphor to see beyond our differences. Despite the interpretations of the dragon — seen as a symbol of strength, wisdom and good fortune in the East, and as a fearsome creature to be fought in the West — the dragon remains a shared symbol of humanity.

By acknowledging and appreciating different interpretations, we learn beyond our own biases. Through curiosity, dialogue, education and artistic collaboration, we can build stronger, more inclusive communities that celebrate diversity and foster awareness. Imagine a world that celebrates difference rather than using it as grounds for conflict.

There is one parallel between Chinese and Western dragons. The Chinese dragon empowers emperors with its might, while Western knights become conquerors for slaying one. Both cultures use dragons to create hero legends. Proof that when we look closer, we may have more in common than we think.

As we kick off the Chinese New Year, I plan to carry the spirit of the dragon with me as a symbol for togetherness. Because respect for each other is not only a moral must, but a practical necessity in today's often messy and divided world.