

2015

HARVARD-YENCHING  
INSTITUTE WORKING  
PAPER SERIES

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TO SHAPE CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN  
VIETNAM AND JAPAN

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# THE SYMBOL OF THE DRAGON AND WAYS TO SHAPE CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN VIETNAM AND JAPAN<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Vietnam, a member of the ASEAN community, and Japan have been sharing Han-Chinese cultural ideology (Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism etc.) and pre-modern history; therefore, a great number of common values could be found among the diverse differences. As a paddy-rice agricultural state of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has localized Confucianism and absorbed it into Southeast Asian culture. Therefore, Vietnamese Confucianism has been decentralized and horizontalized after being introduced and accepted. Beside the local uniqueness of Shintoism, Japan has shared Confucianism, the Indian-originated Mahayana Buddhism and other East Asian philosophies; therefore, both Confucian and Buddhist philosophies should be wisely laid as a common channel for cultural exchange between Japan and Vietnam.

This semiotic research aims to investigate and generalize the symbol of dragons in Vietnam and Japan, looking at their Confucian and Buddhist absorption and separate impacts in each culture, from which the common and different values through the symbolic significances of the dragons are obviously generalized. The comparative study of Vietnamese and Japanese dragons can be enlarged as a study of East Asian dragons and the Southeast Asian legendary naga snake/dragon in a broader sense. The current and future political, economic and cultural exchanges between Japan and Vietnam could be sped up by applying a starting point at these commonalities.

*Key words: Vietnam, Japan, dragon, diversity, unity, cultural identity<sup>2</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number VIII1.3-2012.01 and Sumitomo Foundation (2014).

## **1. Vietnam and Japan in the context of East and Southeast Asia**

a. Vietnam is a tropical monsoon country in Southeast Asia, with the economy - cultural forms original of paddy-rice agriculture (Tran Ngoc Them 2001). When considering Vietnam's traditional culture, they refer to the Northern area (Red River-Ma River Delta and surrounding area) and the Vietnamese (Kinh) as cultural subject. Early ancient Vietnamese people settled in the Red River - Ma Delta region – with the paddy-rice agricultural lifestyle, organizing community in closed village units, taking paddy-rice agriculture as the main economic platform.

In the historical dimension, Vietnam's culture underwent three major cultural periods, including (1) the period of local culture formation which is recognizing from the prehistoric to BC 111 when Trieu Da/Zhao Tuo invaded North Vietnam; (2) the period of disputing and cultural exchanging with China, India, including cultural exchanges with China is the deepest (from BC 111 to to present); and (3) the period of interaction with Western culture (from XV-XVI centuries to present).

With natural conditions (such as topography, soil, climates) and the specific historical - social conditions, Vietnam's culture has the paddy-rice agricultural style of traditional Southeast Asian countries. This type is the inevitable product of three totally harmonious elements, including (1) the convenient living environment with the warm climate and rivered terrain, (2) the static quality of the gatherers and South Asian population (Austro-Asiatic) who were the modern Vietnamese ancestry; and (3) economic type of which mainly is paddy-rice agriculture.

This Vietnam's feminine/yin cultural type has been more or less impacted from outside, especially from Confucianism in relation with China and from the influence of Western civilization.

The above conditions have impacted on defining the important features of Vietnam's cultural characteristics, directly affecting the perceptive notion of filial

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is financially supported by Sumitomo Foundation (2014-2015).

piety in traditional culture, including the collectivism, the interaction with harmony, yin-oriented essence, synthetic and flexible culture (see also Tran Ngoc Them 2006).

In the threshold of ASEAN regionalism, Vietnam has moved closer to the other Southeast Asian nations, the training and researches on Southeast Asian roots of Vietnamese socio-cultural practices are being emphasized; therefore the overall picture of Vietnamese culture has been fully depicted as the absorption of Southeast Asian paddy-rice agriculture civilization and the imported East Asian philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, state-organizing and operating principles etc.). The acculturation and absorption of both Asian cultural layers have regulated the features and rules of development of most of Vietnamese classic imaginary figures as well as other related socio-cultural practices.

For instance, Vietnamese Confucianism has changed profoundly from the original source because of the refraction due to the impacts of local Southeast Asian culture; therefore, instead of expressing the strong family and social hierarchy, Vietnamese Confucianism has been feminized, softened and sentimentalized to fit the horizontal essence of local society.

Furthermore, the diversity in geographical and climatic conditions has produced the diverse ecological living background which strongly expressed the fragmentation of local communities from the north to the south and from the coastal lowlands to higher lands. The feudal centralized cultural principles used to be implemented in diversity within the flexible range of possibility since the Vietnamese applied the spirit “Royal law is not effective as village’s unwritten rules/國法不如鄉約” which has been resulted after thousand years of dealing with Chinese feudal policies.

b. Japan is located in the Northeast Asia, having worse terrain and geomorphological environments compared with Vietnam. There’s a majority area of rocky hills (~ 70%) and the narrow, fragmented and less fertile coastal plains. Japan lies in the temperate belt, being relatively moderate in summer and cold in winter. Those natural conditions defined the nature of "mixed farming and herding 農牧雙存

" in Japan's traditional economic – social form.

Unlike Vietnam with 54 ethnic groups, Japan is relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnic group (the vast majority is Japanese while the rest are Ainu, Chinese..). The homogeneity in subject easily creates the consensus and uniformity characteristics of the concept and cultural personalities. The Japanese have ancient origins are Altai - Siberia hunting - nomadic breeding residents, while Vietnam's ancestry are South Asian – Baiyue/百越- farming residents.

During Japan history, Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism has absorbed with each other and separated temporarily at different periods; all have acculturated and combined in shaping Japanese cultural characteristics. In comparison with Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Japanese society has been strongly built under the vertical axis of hierarchy even during the fragmented periods (the Muromachi period 室町時代, the Edo period 江戸時代 etc.).

Both Japan and Vietnam were experiencing the similarities of historical - social conditions, but each country had its own nature. There were three phases in both countries' history, consisting of (1) the formation of local culture; (2) the period of absorbing Chinese cultural influence, and (3) the period of shaping pre-modern and modern culture<sup>(2)</sup>. However, Vietnam was under the Chinese domination by nearly 10 centuries, while Japan in particular was free during her history. This difference reflects that the time Japan positively received direct influences from China, so the motivation for shaping for classic cultural development is absolutely strong. During the modern time, the Japan began industrializing - modernizing their country early from Meiji era, so the experiences in facing and overcoming the modern challenges of family moral relations, including the filial piety, are richer and more effective than Vietnamese.

c. When discussing the cultural relations between Vietnam and Japan, the former writers usually emphasize the similarities, such as the fate of history, the ideology of

traditional societies, the conception of the universe and human beings; however, those remarks do not reflect appropriately the fundamental nature of these two cultures. Being observed under the perspective of cultural typology, the two cultures show up clearly their different starting points created by two different types of economic and cultural origins.

While the Sinicization period in Vietnam lasts for almost 10 centuries (Christ era to 10<sup>th</sup> century), Japan stood dependently for almost the history. This difference reflects the fact that Chinese influence over Japan is not as deep as over Vietnam. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the marvelous Japanese industrialization and modernization processes, Japanese people are well-prepared to face and overcome challenges of modernity; therefore, Japanese's worldwide integration is more effective than Vietnam.

In cultural personalities, both nations appreciated the harmonious attitude with nature, but it was quite different in nature and characteristics of the community aware sense, in thinking styles, in emotional moral ties and social nature.

Both Japanese and Vietnamese emphasize the sense of collectivism but at different starting points. While the Vietnamese attach the importance to rural life of self-contained village with highlighted characteristic of rural collectivistic democracy (集體民主), the Japanese focus on the importance of kinship (traditionally) and social hierarchy; therefore, Japanese people emphasize on social hierarchy. While the Vietnamese are born with the traditional synthetic mind which strongly associated with the paddy-rice economy, the Japanese are more capable of analytical thinking and somehow the harmony between the synthetic and analytical sources. As a result, the Vietnamese are more sentimentalistic while the Japanese are somewhere between sentimentalistic and rationalistic (see also Tran Ngoc Them [2010]). In regarding the cultural essence, Vietnamese society demonstrates the ambivalent relationship between horizontal (the collectivistic democracy) and vertical (the Confucianism-based hierarchy) while Japanese bold in social hierarchy (vertical).

In regarding the cultural essence, Vietnamese society demonstrates the ambivalent relationships between horizontal (the collectivistic equality) and vertical (the Confucianism-based hierarchy) while Japanese bold in social hierarchy (vertical). In the article "The Cultural Perspective of Vietnamese – Taiwanese Marriage", author Phan Thu Hien (2010) when comparing social characteristics between Vietnam and Taiwan which bold Northeast Asian cultural traditions has emphasized that Vietnam's social development is on the "horizontal axis", while Taiwan's is on the "vertical axis". This comment of the author is entirely consistent with our analysis in the case of comparison Vietnamese and Japanese societies.

In relationship with China, Japanese and Vietnam stood at two active and passive Extremes in dealing with the cultural exchanges through interaction. Confucianism as an example, Japanese were absolutely active in receiving attitude as well as always show the systematic – overall nature of Confucian doctrine, while Vietnamese is passive, absorbing only what they need rather than the whole (Tran Van Doan 2002: 82-88).

Along with the boom of information technology and modern goods production, the face of Japanese society has fundamentally changed into the direction of modernization, however, the traditional social relationship and its moral values have been firmly maintained. It is understood as the maintenance of the traditional hierarchy, the social order built on the vertical axis, which was formed and continuously developed in its long history. The Korean writer Kim Jae Un [1991: 134] once remarked: "If the Japanese can sacrifice his own life for his country, a Japanese tends to sacrifice himself for the happiness of his family"(see also Tran Ngoc Them: vanhoahoc.edu.vn).

d. Dragon/龍 is a popular symbol in East Asia which encompasses of human understanding, being either the nature of things extracted from secular life, as they are in themselves, their relations, and their manner of operation or which man himself ought to do, as a rational and voluntary agent, for the attainment of any happiness and

prosperity. By applying Locke (1823/1963)'s definition on semiotics, dragon symbol can be understood as the ways and means whereby the knowledge of both the one and the other of these is attained and communicated. According to Dinh Hong Hai (2014), the language of symbol is actually the hidden expression of the culture (the signified) through the symbols (signifier). When approaching the dragon and the signified meanings, the theory of semiological structuralism needs to be analyzed. Romand Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Louis Hjelmslev, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and other cultural anthropologists have actually laid the concrete base for the research on dragon. Therefore, in order to investigate the symbol of dragon, semiological approaches and theories in cultural anthropology are priorly dominant. The signifier and its composition, its natural and social background are simultaneously generalized to help understand the way the symbol is form as well as the philosophies, the mindset of the symbol owners. In the other side, the signified meanings of the dragon itself is the main target of the research, especially they are put in the local contexts of each societies at different historical period for the sake of investigating the nature and the values of dragon in both countries, Vietnam and Japan. Furthermore, social features and cultural characteristics of both countries are also partly portrayed through the signified meanings and the impacts of the dragons.

Ký hiệu (Sign) =	Cái biểu đạt (Signifier)
	Cái được biểu đạt (Signified)

(Dinh Hong Hai 2014)

Beside structuralism, the investigation and analysis on the dragon has to be approached through the functionalism and post-modernism. Malinowski (1884-1942) suggested the structures of functions that a cultural being may contain, including the biological, psycho-social and religious/faith functions. The East Asian dragon has been shaped surely by the absorption of many secular animals on the base of a snake as to encompass the worldly powers (thunders, lightning, rainfall, volcano, typhoon, earthquake etc.) and overcome all the secular unevens in life (the process of being a

signifier). In different social contexts of East Asia, the dragons are perceived and used differently (the signified) under different discourses or different selections that fit the tastes and social essences. The dragon has been coated with sets of hidden values, expressed in various shapes, colors, structures and meanings. In summary, the dragon, the signifier at first, has been used to express the ideology and mindset of the owners themselves. Therefore, the social and cultural implications of the symbol of dragon may vary from culture to culture, from the previous period to the later ones. For instance, according to the Chinese feudal Tianxia (All-under-Heaven) tributary system, five-claw dragon is normally to symbolize the emperor and royal power, four-claw dragon for the supernatural powers (gods, Buddhas etc) and mandarin class, the three-claw dragon for the folk; this regulation is not correct in the case of Japanese dragon (almost three-claw) because the Japanese refused to follow Chinese tribute system and simply number 3 is the auspicious number in Japanese culture. In addition, East Asian dragon has been closely attached with supernatural world for the sake of (1) taking advantage of the faith to reach the targets of life: controlling all natural unevens or balancing the spiritual needs of human beings; (2) the connection between the dragon and the supernatural powers can draw the complete submission of all people. These three layers of functions (by Malinowski) have fully presented by the symbol of dragon in both Japan and Vietnam. Closely to the structure of function by Malinowski is Maslow's (1943, 1954) *hierarchy of needs*, including biological and physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs, all are found at different discourse of the dragons in both Vietnam and Japan.

The process of decentralization of the symbolic dragons at the pre-modern and modern East Asia has broken the traditional signification mode of the dragon. The loose hierarchical meanings of the Vietnamese dragons have become more independent and flexible in shape and implication. The Japanese dragon has been minimized the signified values and tends to shift into a “heritage” of the past rather than a modernized symbol in a dynamic society. The post-modernism movement follows but not to replace the modernism, the dragon in Japan are strongly transferred

into a post-modern art or a newly-signified symbol of physical strength (ganster, athlete), secular aesthetic fashion (body art, tattooing) and other new meanings<sup>3</sup>. Unlike Japan, Vietnam has not got a strong post-modernism affected; therefore, it seems that the dragon has tood at the end of the process of decentralization.

Dragon has been found as the auspicious at almost all parts of Asia Pacific including China, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Bhutan, Nepal, India and others. In South and Southeast Asia, the dragon coexists with the symbol naga snake which derived from Indian Hinduism and has been widespread into other places. In India, the dragon and dragon king has appeared to be imported from China during multural exchanges while in Southeast Asia the dragon is popular in those Chinese-influnced cultures (Vietnam, Chinese communities etc.) or is newly born due to the organic absorpion of Chinese and Indian cultures into the local foundation. The Indonesians combine the symbol of sacred snake *naga* and sacred bird *garuda* to make their own dragon. Yet the popular East Asian dargons are normally found in China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Vietnam. Among these sources, Vietnamese dragon is the most decentralized while the Japanese dragon the most homogeneous (see more Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2013).



*Bhutanese flag with a thunder dragon*



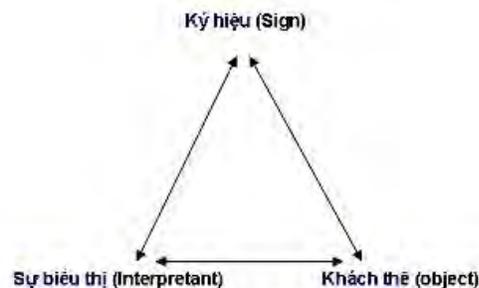
*Naga snake sculpture at a Thailand Temple*

The comparative research on Vietnamese and Japanese dragons cannot be put out of the East Asian historical and cultural contexts; therefore, the cultural exchanges and historical relations between Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese are

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<sup>3</sup> In all aspects of life, only literature and arts are deeply affected by post-modernism.

included in the analysis. However, the study on the relationship between the center and surrounding (extension) needs to be critically discussed by applying the theories of cultural area in East Asia. Thanks to F. Boas (1858-1942), L.C. Wissler (1870-1947), A.L.Kroeber (1876-1960) for their contributions, there may have many “centers” in one area and the creativeness of each state within an area is relatively taken in account. The “center” has strongly absorbed the wisdoms from the extended surroundings, profoundly acculturated the internal and external and re-shape (reshape) under a new and higher form before widespreading (see more Ngo Duc Thinh 2007). The so-called East Asian dragon might have absorbed the similar creatures in all East Asia before being inclusively occupied by Chinese emporers. In this research, the search for the root(s) of Vietnamese and Japanese dragons is not necessary for its vague illustrated evidences. Instead, the real expression, the way the dragon becomes a signifier and its signified values are priorly discussed for the sake of investigating Vietnamese and Japanese philosophy of life. Triadic relation by Charles Sander Peirce (1829-1914, described below) is well-fitted in this approach:



(Dinh Hong Hai, 2014)

## 2. The dragon and the cultural characteristics of Vietnam

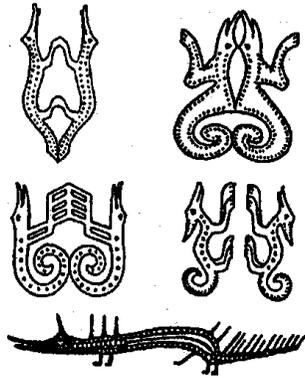
a. The symbol of dragon in Vietnamese culture has also shown the specific essence of the local historical and psychological background. The Vietnamese has not been firmly shaped yet during thousands years, each dynasty or period has got their own value set; therefore, the shape of the dragon is accordingly adjusted or modified at different parts. In comparison with Japanese dragon, the Vietnamese dragon

consists of three main characteristics: (1) non-standardization; (2) diversity; and (3) always under the process of shaping the appearance for almost two thousand years.

Firstly originating from the combination between the crocodile and the snake as decorated on the bronze drums (named at different ways: giao long/蛟龍, thuong luong v.v.), the Vietnamese dragon has absorbed the cultural implication of Chinese and Indian sources to restructure the dragon after localizing the imported significance. The ancient Viet dragon carries the important traits such as (1) originating from crocodile and snake which are popular at the local tropical area; (2) preferring living under water; (3) being an imaginary figure of the abstract-mind people. The current Vietnamese people has self-addressed as “descendants of the dragon father Lac Long Quan and the fairy mother Au Co”. The Chinese writer Wen Yiduo in his work “Duanwu kao/端午考” (1993) linked the dragon’s origin with the dragon-boat festivals of the Southern peoples south of Yangtzi River. The Russian anthropologists D.V. Deopik (1993) and N. I. Niculin<sup>4</sup> also affirmed that the ancient paddy-rice Viet farmers possessed their own primitive dragon. According to *Huai Nan Zi* 淮南子 and *Shan Hai Jing* 山海經, the ancient Viet people kept practicing dragon tattooing on their face and their thigh in order to avoid being attacked by river creatures. This tattooing habit was totally prohibited under King Tran Anh Tong’s reign (1293-1314). Under Vietnamese’s eyes, the dragon is the symbol of luck which protects people and their life. The dragon is the first classic imaginary figures (dragon, unicorn, turtle and phoenix).

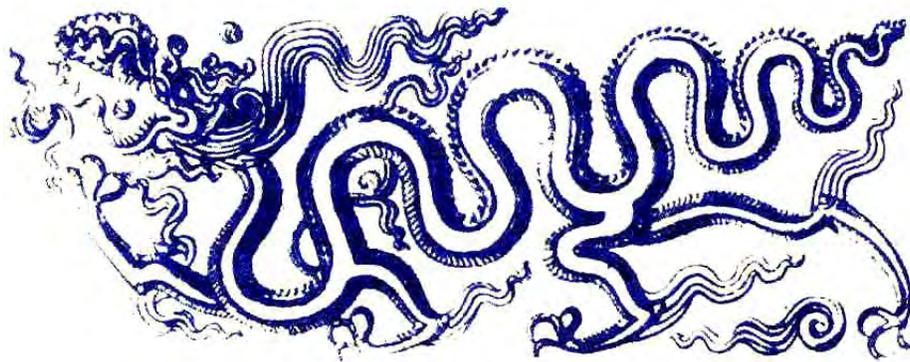
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<sup>4</sup> See also Tran Ngoc Them, Nguyen Ngoc Tho: “The origin of the dragon under the perspective of culturology”, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2011.



*The dragon's decoration in Dongsonian bronze drum*

At Christ era onward, Vietnam went on the Chinese occupation period, the dragon appeared clearly under the form of combining the local primitive dragon, the Southeast Asian naga snake and the Chinese dragon. The capital was named Thang Long/Ascending Dragon City. The Ly dynasty's dragon (11-13<sup>th</sup> century) was the long snake-like figure with non-scale and zic-zac curly body. Such a body reminds us the shape of the river which carries water and floating soil to nurture the rice-fields. This dragon has got three claws in each leg, erected head and the small teeth teasing a pearl. In the forehead, the "S" shape motif is found as it implies the thunder and rain which is considered to be useful for the rice-field<sup>(5)</sup>. In general, the Ly dynasty's dragon is a Buddhist one since Buddhism was deeply influential to the spiritual life of the people as well as the cultural exchanges between Vietnam and Indian/Chinese Buddhism was at the peak.

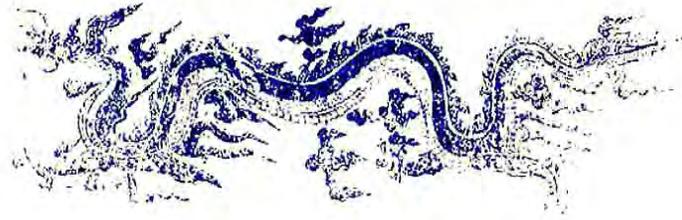


*The Ly dynasty's Buddhist dragon (10-13<sup>th</sup> century)*

<sup>5</sup> See Institute of Arts: *The arts of Ly dynasty*, Van Hoa Publishing House, 1973



*The Tran dynasty's dragon (13-14<sup>th</sup> century) – a transitional dragon*



*The Le dynasty's Confucian dragon (15-16<sup>th</sup> century)*

The Tran was to replace the Ly dynasty. It witnessed the rise of Confucianism and Confucian teaching during the period which made the change on form and implication of the dragon. The dragon body became bigger/fatter, the claws were sharper, the head and the neck were irregularly changed while the dragon tail maintained the former way. From Le dynasty onward, the dragon was greatly influenced by the Chinese one; therefore, the local features became naturally fading. After the centralized dynasties were broken at the middle of 16<sup>th</sup> century, the dragon became degrading. Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945) promoted the effort of Confucian renaissance, however the effect was limited. After 1945 – the last feudal dynasty ended, the noble significance of the dragon became weak and gradually disappeared. Simultaneously, the impacts of Western culture have been strongly influential, directly and profoundly affecting sense of philosophy, aesthetics and arts which has melted a part of the tradition.



*Rahu or rong ho phu, Tomb of Nguyen Dien, Van Tuong, Tien Son, Bac Ninh, dated 1796 (Nguyen Du Chi cb. 2000: 140)*



*Minh Mang Emperor portrait by the Li van 螭吻 on top of a local temple in North Vietnam* (<http://www.hue.vnn.vn/>)



*Li van 螭吻 on top of a local temple in North Vietnam* (<https://www.flickr.com/groups/dragons/pool/page2>)

b. From 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the Vietnamese migrated southwards to Mekong River Delta. They have passed the new lands, confronted the new cultures with new ideologies: the Hinduic Cham culture in the Central Land, the Theravada Buddhist Khmer in South Vietnam. In order to become the marority and major cultural people in the whole country, the Vietnamese have to widen their ideology, have to learn to accept, absorb and screen the new cultural practices and new ideological features to attain the multicultural harmony. Such a process has not ended in South Vietnam; so is the dragon, too. The Vietnamese dragon has been collided and negotiated with the Hinduic and Therevada Buddhist symbol of naga snake; the dragon's implication has absorbed many different sources of different religions such as Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, Hoahaoism, Caodaism, Catholicism, Protestantism etc.. The Vietnamese dragon has moved toward to processes of the decentralization, popularization and diversification. Such interleaving trends of multicultural integration of the Vietnamese dragon have shown up the people's psychology and conscious mind: moving toward the ASEAN integration on the foundation of East Asian Confucian cultural background.

Along with the southward migration, the Vietnamese migrants and their mandarins of Nguyen dynasty brought the dragon symbol to the southern land. These migrants those who almost the poor farmers of inferior social status originating from

Thuan-Quang lands<sup>6</sup> when leaving without a complete dragon symbol left behind the traditional feudal hierarchical culture to be well adapted to the new living conditions. In the local people's consciousness, the dragon embodied the king and his power in the former homelands, therefore, the dragon was to preserve as the royal legacies. South Vietnamese idiom says: "Dragons serves at Hue capital, in Dong Nai lands there is only the horse...". After the popular migrants class, the elite officials arrived in the South. Along with their feet, the centralized social status ranking system with the social hierarchy was also carried on. Since then, the dragon has entered the cultural mainstream of the South. One of those tracks is the most recognizable at two dragons on the Thoai Son stone stela– the earliest Vietnamese stone tablet in South Vietnam.



*Thoai Son stone stelea (Nguyen dynasty)- the earliest stone tablet in South Vietnam (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014).*

Along with the Thoai Son stone stela, the earliest dragons can be found at the Confucius temples in the area (Tran Bien, Vinh Long, Cao Lanh temples), shrines of heroes or historical figures (Le Van Duyet Shrine at Binh Thanh HCMC; Thoai Ngoc Hau Temple at Chau Doc and Thoai Son, An Giang; Nguyen Trung Truc at Rach Gia city, Kien Giang; Nguyen Huynh Duc Temple at Long An v.v.), at the local communal halls in the South etc. The four-claw dragons decorated on those

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<sup>6</sup> Central land places.

constructions are well organized with hierarchical and aesthetic criteria since they symbolize the spirits of high ranking officers (noble class). They look stately in appearance, likely the bravery warriors in the battles against the invaders. However, the recently-repainted dragons have been created under the total de-hierarchical notion, such as the dragons at Vo Duy Duong – Nguyen Tan Kieu Shrine in Go Thap – Thap Muoi District, Dong Thap province with the bravery spirit and five claws (five-claw dragon was only for the king). Additionally attached with the power of the heroes in the sacred temples, the dragons are also used for decorative purposes, normally the curly and flowery dragons (lotus dragon, bamboo dragon, apricot dragon etc.).



*The dragon pillar at Nguyen Trung Truc Shrine, Rach Gia, Kien Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*

*The dragon altar of Thien Ho Duyong and Doc Binh Kieu, Go Thap, Hong Ngu, Dong Thap (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*

In the other popular beliefs, dragon symbol was used accordingly under the Nguyen dynasty's hierarchical code, usually presented as solid body and 4-claw dragon with the mysterious and powerful look. Throughout the South, powerful 4-claw dragon symbolizing the supernatural forces can be popularly found at almost every gods/goddesses shrines, halls and temples of the ethnic Viet, ethnic Chinese gods/goddesses temples and ancestral halls. Besides, the dragon king, water dragon gods/goddesses such as Dragon King Temple 龍王廟, Water Dragon Goddesses

Temples 水龍娘娘廟 at Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, Tien Giang etc.. In general, the social status of the dragon owners or the implied characters is clearly presented. However, when renewing the constructions, the current artist or religious practitioners unconsciously break the hierarchical principle when creating the full 5-claw dragon in the public popular situations (dragon trademarks, dragon decoration at Ba Chua Xu Goddess Temple in Chau Doc, An Giang province, or Tian Hou Temple 天后宮 of the ethnic Chinese in My Xuyen District of Soc Trang province, etc.).



*The dragon motif at Ba Chua Xu, Chau Doc, An Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*Ne Zha/Na Tra/哪吒 riding on a dragon at Tuong Nghia Tu, Rach Gia (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*Thuan Thien Goddess Temple, Binh Duong (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2012)*



*The dragon and the tiger at Vinh An Cung, Vinh Long (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The dragon figure on the fish bone worshipped at Guan Gong 關公 Temple in Bac Lieu (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*



*The dragon protectors of Guan Gong 關公 at Tian Hou Temple in Gia Rai District, Bac Lieu province (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*



*The dragon altar at Tian Hou 天后 Temple in My Xuyen District, Soc Trang province (Nguyen Ngoc Tho)*



*The dragon at Tian Hou 天后 Temple in Soc Trang City (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*

Similarly, every local ethnic Chinese temple possesses the dragons at different size and shapes. The ethnic Chinese use more decorative dragons than the local Viet people, normally the dragons are depicted in the classic imaginary couples (blue dragon and white tiger; dragon – phoenix etc.). Especially the dragon motifs have been also painted at different places of the temple's walls, crossbeams, pillars, ceilings and roofs. In comparison with the Vietnamese, the local ethnic Chinese diversify the form of arts (including painting, sculpture and both sculpted painting), the shapes of the dragon and the dragon-like sacred figures. At a certain level, the local ethnic Chinese maintain the feudal hierarchical code in using the dragon and its implication.



*Female Taoist fairy riding on the dragon in North Vietnamese communal House, Bac Ninh (Tran Ngoc Them 2004)*



*Dragonhead is worshipped in Kwan Kong Temple, Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan Province (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*



*God Cao Guojiu 曹国舅 riding the dragon at Tuong Nghia Tu, Rach Gia, Kien Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The seahorse dragon on the roof of Tian Hou Temple in Ha Tien, Kien Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014).*



*Tang Xuanzang Monk 唐玄奘 and his students riding a dragon on the crossbeam at Tian Hou Temple, Vinh Chau town, Soc Trang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho)*



*The dragon protector at Phuc Duc Kim Long in Vinh Chau town, Soc Trang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The twin dragons on the roof of Guan Gong Temple in Hong Ngu, Dong Thap (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*

In the religious system of the South, a dragon with its position as "guardian" or decorative motif is present in most of the places of worship of all religions, including Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Hoahaoism, Caodaism and Christianity.

Mahayana Buddhism takes dragon as the protector of Buddhist dharma and the guardian of the Buddha. The multicultural dragon has early become the “sacred guardian”, the ambassador and the rider of the Buddhas. In some of the Buddhist temples, the general motif of Buddha riding on a dragon, Tang Xuanzang 唐玄奘 and his students riding on the dragon or dragon-boat symbolizing the idea that on the journey to the Pure Land they can give the ride to the Buddhist followers and the folk. In some other temples, the complex Kwan Yin riding on a dragon stand at a corner of the temple yard, the complex the dragonheads covering Buddhas, or the complex dragon serving the character 卍, the lotus, the calatash/葫芦, the sun etc. are also very popular.



*Dragon, dharma Protector at Tay Tang Temple, Binh Duong Province (fieldwork Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2012)*



*Kwan Yin riding on a dragon at Tian Hou Temple, Song Doc town, Ca Mau province (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*



*The twin dragons facing the world Buddha at Kim Lien Temple, Hanoi, dated 1445 (Nguyen Du Chi cb. 2000: 64)*

Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia and Hoahaoism - the newly born religions uniquely in South Vietnam, possess the dragon as the religious principle protector. The dragon appear at almost every corner of the religious temples such as the twin dragon serving Buu Son Ky Huong, the twin dragon serving the Haohaoism founder Huynh Phu So, the twin dragon heading the pearl, the decorative dragons etc.. A Tu An Hieu Nghia follower in An Giang once said “the dragon after submitting the

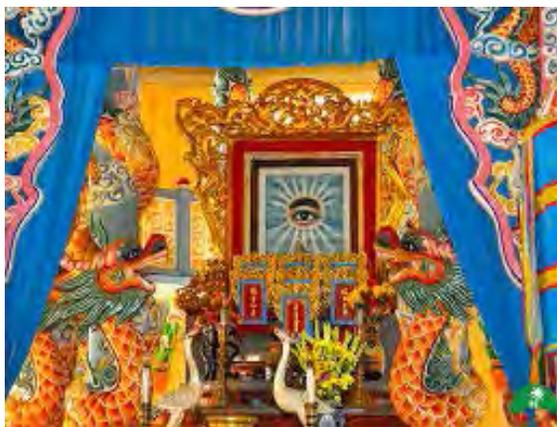
Buddha then in turn it also submits the founder Doan Minh Huyen<sup>7</sup>”, then added “the dragon is an actual student and guardian of Hoahaoism founder Huynh Phu So either” etc. (fieldwork at Thoai Son, An Giang 2014).



*The twin dragon serving “Buu Son Ky Huong”, Nui Sam, Chau Doc, An Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The twin dragon and lotus cart carrying the left photo of Hoahaoism founder Huynh Phu So in May 18, 2014 (lunar calendar) in Dinh My, Thoai Son, An Giang (Bui Viet Thanh, 2014).*



*The twin dragon serving the Holy See at Caodaiism Temple in My Tho, Tien Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The dragon pillars at Tam Buu Temple (Tu An Hieu Nghia) in Ba Chuc, Tinh Bien, An Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014).*

The dragon’s supreme power in comparison with other classic animals can be seen in the Caodaiism symbol of Holy See in many localities (temple’s roof ceiling, dragon

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<sup>7</sup> Tu An Hieu Nghia is a 19<sup>th</sup> century-born religion under the combination between Buddhism and ancestor worship by Doan Minh Huyen.

pillars etc). In Cao Dai Temple in My Tho city, people can encounter the twin dragon icons submitting the Holy See/天眼.

Christianity is the worldwide religion introduced into the South in nearly two centuries along with the process of opening the new land. The Christians are generally quite conservative in accessing and receiving dragon symbol to protect the supreme monotheism. However, in a small number of religious temples have appeared dragon symbol at the front gates, which means that the dragon is not really absorbing into the central religious pantheon. At Vong Dong church, Thoai Son District, An Giang province, the twin dragons heading the cross on the front gate are ready to welcome guests or practicers. When being asked, Mr. Nam, age 72, Vong Dong resident) said "the divine dragons have been kept from the grand-parents, they serve the cross as to submit the holy Jesus". Similar status can be also seen at Thanh Tien church in Vinh Thanh District of Can Tho. However, this phenomenon appear recently and mainly used for decorative purpose.



*The twin dragons submitting the cross at Vong Dong church, Thoai Son, An Giang (Bui Viet Thanh, 2014).*

The local Theravada Buddhist Khmers in South Vietnam use both the symbol of the sacred naga snake and the newly absorbed dragon (the called naga dragon) from the Viet neighbours, which can be seen at the temple walls and the ceilings of the main halls of a number of temples. Typically many dragons and pheonixes are decorated on the outdoor crossbeams. Similarly the classic complex of a sacred bird *garuda* curling a *naga* snake has been replaced by a *garuda* attacking a dragon (an actual 5-claw dragon) at the ceiling of Samrongek Temple in Tra Vinh City. Simultaneously, on the roof of Ratanaransi Temple (Rach Gia, Kien Giang), the icon of Southeast Asian naga has transformed into a harmonious symbol of naga-dragon as

an evidence of the integration of the local ethnic Viet, Chinese and Khmer in the region.



*The naga-dragon at the roof of Ratanaransi Temple, Rach Gia, Kien Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014)*

Normally the Vietnamese folk rarely use the dragon in daily life due to the perception that the dragon is understood as a symbol of sacred power/supernatural power associated with palaces, temples, pagodas and shrines; therefore, they tend to spend a respect toward the dragon and express a specific expectation from it. With this concept, the dragon has been associated with the national emblem at the local martyrs cemetery located in Cai Rang District of Can Tho, also seen at Ben Duoc temple, Cu Chi District of Ho Chi Minh City. Exceptionally, the rich and a number of entrepreneurs used the dragon as to show up their social status (wealth). At the central yard of Binh Tay Market (District 6, Ho Chi Minh City) people can find 4 bronze-casting dragons all heading the altar of Mr. Quach Dam, the founder of the market.

*c. The cultural characteristics of Vietnam through the dragon icon*

Generally, Vietnamese dragon has passed three significant periods: germination, formation and development. The dragon likely originated from the ancient Viet period (primitive time to Christ era) under the free ideological movements of the archaic people; the dragon basically appeared to be the figure of a crocodile-like dragon. After the Christ era, because of the coming of Confucian philosophies and principles, the dragon got collided, negotiated and absorbed with the Chinese mainland-based

style, finally molded a snake-like dragon at around the early 10th century. This basically Buddhist snake-like dragon continued transforming under the Confucian impact when Confucianism served as the national ideology at the early 15th century. The dragon became a hierarchical figure with regular shapes and sizes which represented different social classes. The fall of the feudal family at the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century went on with the stronger influence of Western style of iconic implication, the dragon got decentralized and diversified in free style. The dragon kept transforming after the decentralization since it absorbs different tastes of different ethnic cultures and different philosophies (including Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Catholicism etc.) rather than the traditional Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism. At present, the dragon is not fixed its final shape yet since the modern ideological movements are still under the process. As a live manifestation of cultural identities, the transforming dragon symbolizes the mind and thinking way of the contemporary Vietnamese people: keeping updated and being well-adapted with the new backgrounds and always absorbing the new wisdoms of the world.

Vietnam fully joins ASEAN, the political, social and cultural touches between Vietnam and ASEAN member states are more successive and effective. Vietnam is getting Aseanized, Vietnamese dragon is getting Southeast Asianized when it absorbs more and more physical features and hidden implication of the Indian-rooted naga snake. Current Vietnamese dragon becomes the symbol of renewal of life and fecundity which are probably the significances of a naga rather than a hierarchical Confucian icon. At a certain level, Vietnam is on the way to regional integration of ASEAN community.

As one of the live evidence of such a movement, the complex of Buddha statue and nine naga-like dragons on his head is currently found at some of the Mahayana Buddhist temples in South Vietnam. This motif was once very popular in the ancient Dvaravatian, Mon, and Angkorian cultures and is currently available in Northern Thailand and Lao PDR. The Vietnamese nine-head dragon is actually the extension of a real Southeast Asian naga since in these cultures, the three-head naga is understood

as the riding figure of the god Indra, the five-head dragon for the god Vishnu, seven-head dragon for the dharma protector of Buddha. This motif could not be found at the Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist temples historically. Similarly, nine naga-like dragons statue at the front square of Can Tho City Hall (the capital city of Mekong River Delta) are unlike the traditional ones since they appear to be closely the naga snakes. The decorative dragon design on the lamp posts of Tra Vinh City in Mekong is basically the dragon; however, the dragon's beards are straightly upright, making it a naga-like figure. In return, the naga snakes at the local Theravada Buddhist temple built by the Viet ethnic monks in District 9, Ho Chi Minh City are absolutely like the dragons. Such absorbing dragons emerge popularly in contemporary Vietnam.



*A nine-head dragon and Buddha statue at the Viet's Mahayana Buddhist temple in Ca Mau city, Ca Mau Province*



*The naga snake at Buu Long Temple, District 9, Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The naga-snake at the front square of Can Tho City Hall (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2013)*



*The local Viet dragon which absorbs the head feature of naga snake decorated at a square of Tra Vinh City (Nguyen Ngoc Tho December 12, 2014)*



*The fish-dragon symbol at the front square of People Committee of Ben Tre Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The decorative dragon-like naga snake at Buu Long Theravada Buddhist temple in District 9, HCMC (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The seahorse dragon on the roof of Hainanese Native Place Hall in Ha Tien, Kien Giang province (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*Fish-dragon at Kwan Kong Temple, Tan Chau, An Giang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2015)*



*Fish-dragon at Sea God Temple, Ghenh Da Dia, Phan Rang (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*The crocodile dragon at Tam Vi Temple, Cai Nuoc, Ca Mau (filedwork, 2015)*



*Kirin-shaped dragon painting at Chua Da, Duc Tho, Ha Tinh (Nguyen Du Chi cb. 2000: 144)*

As discussed and conclusion in the former papers<sup>8</sup>, Vietnamese traditional society was built on the principle of adopting and localizing Confucian philosophies under the foundation of an Southeast Asian paddy-rice agricultural polity. Such Southeast Asian core values have protected the indigenous identities as well as its ASEAN essence in social development. Additionally, the absorption of the Confucian principles into the local society making Vietnam an East Asian Confucian state, especially the Confucianism strongly affected on the high culture of the high-ranking social classes. However, Vietnam society is considered as a horizontal society while China, Korea and Japan the vertical societies.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014: “Hallyu in contemporary Vietnamese society”, *Immunhak Journal of Chonbuk University*, Korea; Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2013: “Confucianism and Vietnamese cultural characteristics”, *Journal China and the World*, Vol.3, Social Sciences Publishing House, Beijing, China; Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014: “Vietnam and Korea: Filial Piety across two cultures”, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, USSH, VNU-HCMC.



*Dragon boat racing in North Vietnam (<http://dulichtrongnuoc.com>)*



*Dragon dance on the Tet traditional New Year in Vietnam, Hanoi 2012*



*At the fruit festival in Ho Chi Minh City, 2012*

Under the horizontal essence in mind, the Vietnamese started applying the notion “Serving the South by applying the North’s wisdom 北體南用” when getting in touch with the Confucian world (Northeast Asia); then came to continue with “serving the East by adopting the West’s wisdom 西體東用”, finally emerges as an integrative society to the whole world which plays an important for the process of ASEAN regionalism in reality. Before that, the Japanese during Meiji Revolution in 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Korean after the Korean War, both started the process of modernization under the vertical and hierarchical mind and the absorption and localization the Western wisdom (science, technology etc.), finally both attaining the marvelous height in social development. People can see through manga pictorial books, Doraemon cartoon in Japan, and K’pop, K’movie, K’fashion in Korea the skillful talents of creative absorption and regeneration of the contemporary Northeast Asian people.

### **3. The dragon and the cultural characteristics of Japan**

To compare with the Vietnamese, the Japanese see dragon both familiar and strange at the same time, they would like to acknowledge while refusing its existence. In Japanese, dragon is called Ryu, borrowed from China latest in Nara period. Like other East Asian culture, the dragon in Japanese culture is seen as one of four classical imaginary figures (also in fengshui arts), including seiryū青龍, suzaku朱雀, Byakko白虎 and Genbu 玄武.



*Bronze sarira tower with dragons in Saidaiji pagoda, Nara period (Source: The organizing committee for the games of the XVIII Olympiad/日本古代美術展図録 1964: 160)*



*A fairy riding on the dragon (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美術》/World Fine Art)*

According to analyses of Japanese authors, the Japanese in Nara period/奈良時代 after the process of directly approaching Chinese culture, Japanese overseas students in Chang'an/長安 of Tang China and Japanese Confucian scholars are the ones who brought dragon symbol into Japan. However, Japanese dragon in Nara period appeared quite limited in number, mainly existed within small group of Confucian scholars and Mahayana Buddhist monks. The most popular dragon symbol is the bronze sarira tower-shape bell with dragon decoration in Saidaiji Temple. The Japanese author 井筒雅風 in the book *History of Japanese clothes/《原色日本服装史》* (1989) once stated, there were few dragon images in all clothes of Nara period preserved in Japan, including royal costumes as well. In this paper, we find out three pieces with dragon symbol, including the set of 一舞樂陸王(井筒雅風: 116-117) and kachi-e (井筒雅風: 102-103) etc.. According to legend, in the Buddhist temple Hōkō-ji 法興寺 (also called Asuka-dera 飛鳥寺) was dedicated at Nara in 596, "a purple cloud descended from the sky and covered the pagoda as well as

the Buddha hall; then the cloud became five-coloured and assumed the shape of a dragon or phoenix" (Visser 1913: 180).



*The cloth—舞樂陸王 (井筒雅風: 116-117)*



*The cloth for royal soldier (Source 井筒雅風: 102-103)*



*The dragon in 华严宗祖师绘, Kyoto. (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Art)*

Muromachui /室田丁(1336–1573) is the prosperous period of Zen/Meditation and Mahayana Buddhism after the Heian, therefore the dragon symbol has become more popular especially in Buddhistic architectures and paintings.



*The dragon and tiger painting/龙虎图 (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Art)*



*Round twisted dragons in the Muromachi (Source: History of Japanese fine arts/日本美術史)*



*Terracotta seat with dragon decoration in Muromachi period (Source 日本美術史)*



*Candle base of Muromachi period in Toshodaiji pagoda/唐招提寺 Nara region (Source 日本美術史)*



*Twin dragons on the bronze mirror in the Heian preserved at Shōsōin/正倉院- (Source: Japanese Modern History Researching Association 2006: 72)*



*Water dragon – painting of Muromachi period (Source: History of Japanese Custom, Pictorial Magazine – vol 2)*



*Ascending Dragon, Muromachi-Momoyama period, 16th century - See more at: [www.oberlin.edu](http://www.oberlin.edu)*



*The dragon painting at Dojo-ji/道成寺 aged early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美術》/World Fine Art)*

In Edo period /江戸(1603-1868), under the strong policy against Christianity, Tokugawa shogunate took advantage of Buddhism to propose Danka regime (檀家), forced people to register in a temple and provide foods for monks, Buddhist priests had more rights to control on births, deaths and marriages. In the end of Edo period, the policy “尊王讓夷/Respecting the emperor and easing the Westerners” was implemented, shogunate government had to give back the power for Mikado. From there, the campaign Being against Buddhism developed, the tradition Shintoism-Buddhism harmony/神-佛集合 gradually became fading, offered its highest place to Shintoism in Meiji era (明治, 1868- 1912), called Shintoism-Buddhism separation/神-佛分離. The dragons connected closely with Buddhism gradually became away from Shinto shrines, however we can still find out some pieces of dragon in some local Shinto architectural works.

The typical for Edo's dragon is the work dragon-head boat (Egami Namio/江上波夫1988: 117) and twin dragons 正倉院(see the author Egami Namio/江上波夫(1988) in the book Animal God Legend 《聖獸傳説》, published by Kodansha). Takuseibyō Temple entrance gate/多久聖廟(worshipping Confucius) was made with many dragon-sculpture pillars (辻惟雄1966: 169).



*The Edo painting* (Source: 世界美術全集: 1964 年)



*Dragon boats* (Source: 朝日百科 132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Art)



*The Edo's dragon.*  
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sushifactory/3050109210>)

*Descending Dragon* (Katsushika Hokusai, 1760-1849)



Similarly main gates and main chamber's ceilings of some Japanese pagodas have round-twisted dragons/團龍 (辻惟雄<日本文化史> 1965: 257) symbolized for the supernatural power (the Buddha). For example, the gate of main chamber, main gate and the ceiling of Nikkō Tōshō-gū/日光東照宮 contain many round-twisted dragons/團龍decorations (辻惟雄1965: 12, 254). The same but four-claw dragon decorations can be found at Takuseibyō's entrance, the Temple of Literature /多久聖廟(following the Chinese Tianxia hierarchy).



*Dragon sculpture on Edo architecture (Source Japanese Fine Arts)*



*The entrance of the Temple of Literature Takuseibyō/多久聖廟 worshipped Confucius with many dragon-sculpture pillars (辻惟雄 1965: 169)*

The book *Japanese Fine Arts/日本美術* (Kodansha, 1964: 103) lively presents many dragon symbols in Takuseibyō pagoda/日光東照宮:



*Dragon-sculpture motif in Takuseibyō pagoda/日光東照宮(日本美術1964: 103)*



*The symbol dragon head and animal body in Nishi hon ganji pagoda/西本原寺 (日本美術 1964)*

Similarly, the book *Kyoto Style - trends in 16th-19th century Kimono* /《花洛のモード：きものの時代》(2001) of Kyoto Scholar Museum/京都國立博物館編 displays many images of antiques but rarely sacred animals and none of dragon, while mainly flowers, trees, pine forest, funguses, samurais, Japanese natural landscapes are very popular.

In Modern time, the Japanese dragon symbol absorbs Western culture, lively presented in quite a number of architectural works and paintings, however it gradually loses symbolized meaning and toward decorative function. In Kyu Kaichi Gakko/舊開智學校/Khai Tri school in Fukuoka, the main door is decorated with short-body 3-claw Edo dragon (日本文化史1966: 11). Many dragon paintings in modern Japanese fine arts preserve Edo-style dragon motives. The Edo antique treasury museum in modern Japan still conserves many bronze tools sculptured with dragon images such as incense-burners, vases, pots, containers etc. at different size and colors. Nevertheless, the quantity of dragon-decoration antiques is obviously fewer than other similar symbols in Japanese culture, for example vermilion bird, unicorn/kyrin, tiger, elephant, etc..



*Cloudy dragon, aged 1624-1644 (Source 朝日百科132 《世界的美術》/World Fine Art)*



*Dragon-carved vase in Meiji era*



*Dragon on bronze vase in Meiji era*



*Dragon-carved vase in Meiji era with dragon head was break off*



*Dragon-carved vase in Meiji era*



*Bronze incense-burner decorated with dragon and bronze dragon card in Meiji era  
[<http://www.ebay.com/>]*





*Dragon-carved vase in Meiji era*



*Bronze dragon container in Meiji era*



*Twin vases in Edo period (www.ebay.com)*



*Dragon porcelain, Kyoto, the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century – early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Arts)*



*Dragon-tiger painting/龍虎圖, Meiji period (Source: 朝日百科132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Art)*



The main entrance of Kyu Kaichi Gakko 開智學校 carved dragons on the Western style architecture (Hashimoto Gahō/橋本雅幫: 日本文化史1966: 11)



Dragon painting in Modern Japanese Fine Arts (Source 日本美術史1966)



Dragon and tiger/龍虎圖 (Hashimoto Gahō/橋本雅幫 1966: 32)



Dragon and phoenix on modern architectural work in Osaka (Source 日本美術史 1966)



*Dragons in Modern Japanese Culture (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/569635052845205002/>)*

Nowadays, many Japanese young people do not like dragon motives, according to Prof. Miura Masayuki, because of its old-fashion and “external origin”. Prof. Miura Masayuki emphasized that dragon is not a part of Japanese identity; therefore the young generation are not willing to bring it into the future. The Japanese use many other sacred animals such as phoenix, unicorn, lion, crane more than dragon. In the aspect of fine arts, the Japanese prefer small and medium size sacred animals while dragon image is so long and difficult to use. Secondly, the dragon is told to be closely connected to Chinese culture for many historical periods, therefore, it has lacked of the fashionable essence and has been usually forgotten in the process of forming modern Japanese culture.



*Some popular sacred animals in Shinto Toshogu shrine*  
 (<http://venividizoom.com/japan/woodcraft/>)



*Four fengshui classic figures*



*Four sacred figures*



群仙图, 18<sup>th</sup> century (Source 朝日百科132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Arts Vol. 132)

b. In the Japanese dragon pantheon, there are many kinds and names of dragon. *Ryu Jin* or *Ryo Wo* (龍神 or 龍王) is the dragon god originated from Shintoism, is understood as a guardian of the Shinto faith. The main 'dragon kings' recognized in Japan includes: *Sui Riu* is a rain-dragon, which causes red rain, coloured by its blood when in pain; *Han Riu* is striped with nine different colours and is forty feet long; *Ka Riu* is a small fiery red dragon, only seven feet long; *Ri Riu* has wonderful sight and can see more than 100 miles; *Fuku Riu* is the Japanese Dragon of Good Luck, usually depicted as "ascending" – the sign of good luck in Japanese culture; *Kinryu* is a golden dragon; *O Goncho* is a white dragon that signals famine; *Yamata-no-Orochi* is an eight-headed dragon and many other dragons. In the next paragraphs, each of the dragons will be selectively discussed.

The Western writer, Visser (1913:135) once stated "In the oldest annals the dragons are mentioned in various ways, but mostly as water-gods, serpent- or dragon-shaped." The *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* both mention several ancient dragons. Most of Japanese dragons have 3 claws, but sometimes we can see 5-claws dragons (especially royal dragon) and four claws. The author Miura Masayuki<sup>9</sup> distinguished due to Chinese dragon has 5 claws, the Japanese are aware themselves that Japanese

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9 Prof., Hiroshima University.

dragon must differ from Chinese dragon, therefore besides outlining dragon symbol different from Chinese dragon, additional factors such as color, number of claw, dragon beard, ect. must contain Japanese characteristics. As for this professor, the number 4 is unlucky so ancient Japanese shrines and pagodas only used 3-claws dragon. Japanese dragon does not or rarely go with phoenix as a couple, although dragon has ying and phoenix has yang qualities. Meanwhile, dragon paintings are sometimes presented in the context “dragon and tiger fighting” 龍虎圖, and the most popular is dragon going with turtle or unicorn. Additionally, four-claw dragons are found at the local Literature Temple in Japan which is fully absorbed in Confucian hierarchy.



*Japanese dragon with 4 claws (number 1106) in Japanese Fine Arts Exhibition, Nagoya (September, 2012)*

Most of Japanese dragons have snake-long body with *sea characteristic/marine essence*, former the typical quality of Japanese geo-ecology, although still appeared short-body sacred animals with dragon head (mainland feature). This sea-oriented factor makes Japanese dragon different from dragon world in Asia mainland (China, Korea, Vietnam). Although Vietnamese dragon is considered as amphibian sacred animal, it can fly up in the sky, walk on land and live in the water, it is the water deity but not the dragon who governs rivers in people’s religious consciousness. As for Chinese and Korean culture, Dragon King is the ruler of oceans, rivers or wells, but he has anthropoid shape different from Japanese sea dragon. For example, the sculpture of sacred animal with dragon head and animal body in Nishihon-ganji Temple/西本原寺(日本美術1964), sacred animals with dragon-elephant head (elephant-shaped dragon) in some Buddhist architectures from Edo period afterwards, dragon decorations on modern architectural work in Osaka etc. could be easily found (Source 日本美術史1966) .



*Sacret animal with dragon head on the roof gable of Daishoin pagoda - Hiroshima (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014)*



*Twin dragons – bronze jewelry box, date 1146 (Source: Modern Japanese History Researching Association 2006: 167)*



*Bronze vase carved with ung long (dagon with wings) in Meiji era (<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/a-pair-of-japanese-bronze-dragon-vases-5341324-details.aspx>)*



*Koi fish with dragon head in Meiji era [<http://www.ebay.com/>]*



*Fish dragon in Edo period  
(<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/an-iron-articulated-model-of-a-dragon-5595728-details.aspx>)*



*Faucet with dragon head, Nara, Japan  
(<http://www.pbase.com/frelaix/image/61906580>)*



*Dragon head with horn in Nara  
(<http://venividizoom.com/japan/woodcraft/>)*

c. Japanese dragon in the history has connected with belief, religion and folk culture with Meiji era (1868-1900) exception. In Japanese medieval history, almost each Japanese temple have carved or sculptured (on wood, metal) the dragon image as sacred animal decoration. Japanese dragon appears in greater number in Buddhist agencies as well as in popular facilities such as architectures, dragon boats, paintings, clothes (rarely). At Meiji era, the dragon became the symbol of emperor (royal symbol); therefore, the dragon was casted on coins and carved at royal architecture works. Of course, besides the dragon symbol, Meiji emperor also selected many other animals or symbols such as chrysanthemum, lion, turtle, phoenix, etc.. After Meiji era,

under the Shintoinism-Buddhism separation, the dragon image gradually disappears in Shinto shrines. Nowsaday, the modern Japanese carve or sculpt dragon on daily-used tools/facilities as well as on the auxiliary equipments in Shinto shrines such as candle base, container, pillars etc..

Unlike the Vietnamese dargons painted in many different colors<sup>10</sup>, Japanese dragon has two main colors, blue (青龍) and black (黒龍). Blue dragon symbolizes for beauty, nobleness while black dragon the luckiness since people believe black dragon can help make rainfalls and bring prosperity. Therefore, under Japanese's eye, the dragon is primarily the deity of rain. The carved iron or wooden dragons at different temples in almost very prefectures of Japan can help remind us the wish of fertility or wish of fine weather for all Japanese lands.



*Watering Dragon*

(<http://www.pbase.com/frelaix/image/61906576>)



*Dragon-head boat in Nara, Japan*

(<http://venividizoom.com/japan/woodcraft/>)



*Fuji-Yoshida City, Japan*

(<https://www.pinterest.com>)



*Dragon at Murou-ji, Nara, Japan*

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<sup>10</sup> Yellow, blue and red dragons are more popular.



*Watering Dragon in Seishō-ji Temple  
(<https://www.pinterest.com/trickyrik/dragons/>)*

Japanese dragons combine native legends with dragon stories from China, Korea, and India. Like these other Asian dragons, most Japanese dragons are associated with rainfall and bodies of water. The Japanese strongly understand the yin-yang circulation; as the rain deity becomes extreme, he makes typhoons or storms. As a matter of fact, the oceanic dragons in Japanese myths are depicted as the typhoon creator. This feature of Japanese dragon seems to be different with the Korean dragon which is usually understood as the protectors or fortune givers.



*Dragon in Senso-ji pagoda, Tokyo*



*Cloudy dragon (provided by Prof. Miura Masayuki)*

*Korean dragon: Earthen Bodhisattva rides on the “Wisdom Dragon Ship” leading sentient beings to the Land of Ultimate Bliss at Pong’un Temple (Source Hye-young Tcho 2007: 105).*



*Picture of dragon-boat for nobleman in Yamato-Nara period (quoted from Midyear Travelling Notes)*



*Patterns carved dragon and sacred animals on Japanese Buddhist architecture.*

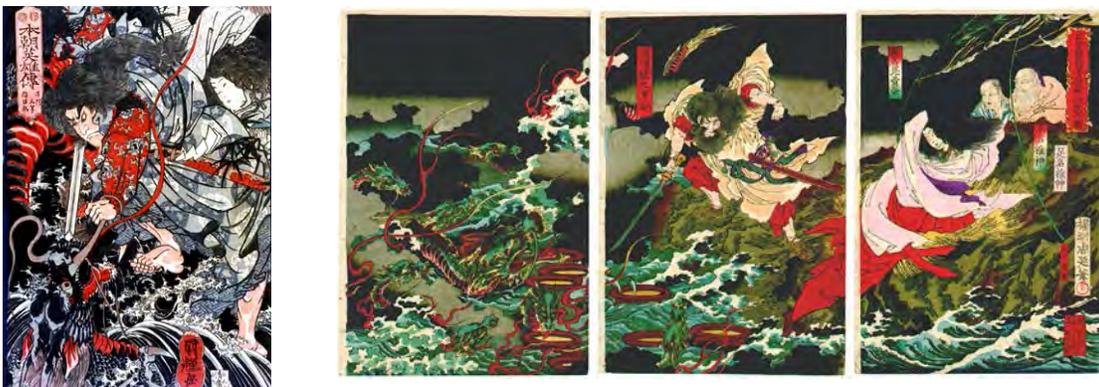


*Dragon-ornamented wares*

The dragon is one of the twelve zodiac signs used in Japan and other East Asian cultures (the years 2012, 2000, 1988, 1976, 1964, 1952, 1940, 1928 etc.). People believe those who are born in the year of the dragon are healthy, energetic, excitable, short-tempered, and stubborn. Among the dragons, Blue-Green Dragon is the guardian of the Eastern signs of the Japanese Zodiac.

In Japanese's myth, the dragon king appears to be the god of fortune which has shown the oceanic inprints in Japanese dragon culture. The Japanese consider Ryūjin or Ryōjin (龍神) as the king of the sea dragon/tutelary deity of the sea – a concept originated from Chinese culture. Ryūjin or Ryōjin (龍神), also known as Ōwatatsumi, symbolizes the power of the ocean, which has a large mouth, and is able to transform into a human shape. Ryūjin lives in Ryūgū-jō, the palace under the sea built out of red and white coral, from where he controls the tides with magical tide jewels. His servants include sea turtles, fish, jellyfish and other beings.

The Japanese still keep telling the story of Ryūjin the jellyfish which lost its bones. Accordingly, Ryūjin wanted to eat monkey's liver, and sent the jellyfish to get him a monkey. The monkey managed to sneak away from the jellyfish by telling him that he had put his liver in a jar in the forest and offered to go and get it. As the jellyfish came back and told Ryūjin what had happened, Ryūjin became so angry that he beat the jellyfish until its bones were crushed.



*Hero Susanoo is slaying Yamato-no-Orochi in Japanese mythology by Toyohara Chikanobu (豊原周延) (1838–1912)*

Here it is another dragon oceanic myth by the Japanese. Wadatsumi (海神) was a legendary Japanese dragon and tutelary water deity. In Japanese mythology, Ryūjin 龍神 or 龍王 has got the other name Ōwatatsumi kami (大綿津見神) - the ruler of seas and oceans<sup>11</sup>, and described as a dragon capable of changing into human form. He lives in the undersea Ryūgū-jō 龍宮城 "dragon palace castle", where he keeps the magical tide jewels. Urashima Tarō rescued a turtle which took him to Ryūgū-jō and turned into the attractive daughter of the ocean god Ryūjin. The earliest written sources of *Kojiki* (712 CE) diversely transcribe the sea *kami* (神 /god, deity, spirit) named Wadatsumi. Ōwatatsumi kami and Watatsumi Sanjin (綿津見三神) were ruling the upper, middle, and lower seas which were created through the divine progenitor Izanagi's ceremonial purifications after returning from "the underworld", Yomi. Marinus Willern de Visser (1913:137) compares the Japanese rain god Kuraokami that was similarly described as a giant snake or a dragon.

*Yamata no Orochi* (八岐の大蛇, 8-headed and 8-tailed giant snake, shortly *Orochi*) is a legendary Japanese dragon that was slain by the Shinto storm-god Susanoo<sup>12</sup>. The legend is originally recorded in two ancient Japanese texts *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*. The *Kojiki* (ca. 680 AD) transcribes this dragon name as 八岐遠呂智 and *Nihongi* (ca. 720 AD) as 八岐大蛇.

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11 Japanese Shiryū 四竜(龍王) are the rulers of the seas, including Gōkō - Aoguang 敖廣 "Dragon King of the East Sea", Gōkin - Aoqin 敖欽 "Dragon King of the South Sea", Gōjun - Aorun 敖閏 "Dragon King of the West Sea" and Gōjun - Aoshun 敖順 "Dragon King of the North Sea".

<sup>12</sup> In both texts, Susanoo or Susa-no-Ō is expelled from Heaven for tricking his sister Amaterasu the sun-goddess. After expulsion from Heaven, Susanoo encounters two "Earthly Deities" (國神, *kunitsukami*) near the head of the Hi River (簸川), now called the Hii River (斐伊川) in Izumo Province. They are weeping because they were forced to give the *Orochi* one of their daughters every year for seven years, and now they must sacrifice their eighth, Kushi-inada-hime (櫛名田比売 "comb/wondrous rice-field princess", who Susanoo transforms into a *kushi* 櫛 "comb" for safekeeping). The *Kojiki* tells the following version.



*Princess Tamatori steals Ryūjin's jewel, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi.*



*Susano slaying the Yamata no Orochi, by Yoshitoshi*

*Another Susano slaying the Yamata no Orochi*



*Eight-headed serpent drinking sake*



*Eight-headed serpent in Japanese folk art*

The depiction of Japanese Dragon King is quite different with Korean or Chinese description. Zennyō Ryūō 善如龍王 is a rain-god depicted either as a dragon with a snake on its head or as a human with a snake's tail. Ryūjin's daughter, Toyotamahime 豊玉姫, was purportedly an ancestress of Emperor Jimmu in Japanese royal legends. In Korean religious pantheon, Dragon King/Yongwang/龍王 is in charge of the rain, water, and he also controls storms; therefore he is being worshipped in some specific temples. There is a legend of a poor Korean fisherman who once caught a gigantic carp. It begged him for mercy so out of his compassion, the fisherman set it free. The carp turned out to be the son of Yongwang, and the fisherman was richly rewarded. The worship of Yongwang was mostly developed during the Choson dynasty due to the ban of on the worship of Heaven from Chinese Emperor (Hye-young Tcho 2007: 100).



*Korean dragon King/Yongwang at Cheonbulsa Temple (koreantemples.com)*

Similarly, there are other legendary dragons locally expressed in many localities. Mizuchi 蛟 or 虯 is a river dragon and water deity. The *Nihongi* records legendary Emperor Nintoku offering human sacrifices to this Izuchi which was angered by his people. Nure-onna 濡女 was also a dragon with a snake's body and a

woman's head, typically seen while washing her hair on a riverbank and would sometimes kill humans when she angered. In the local myth, the Ryūō of Lake Biwa 琵琶湖 requested the hero Tawara Tōda 田原藤太 to kill a giant centipede (fiece dragon). In other myth, Benten is the Japanese goddess who rides on a nameless dragon. She frequently descends to earth to stop the evil doings of other dragons. Similarly, the god of fertility and agriculture named Inari was sometimes depicted as a dragon or snake instead of a fox.

In Japanese Buddhist culture, the dragon contains the significances of victory and righteousness. The Japanese Mikkyō Buddhist myth (密教) has kept telling the story Immovable Buddha/不動明王 swallowing the rivalry sword. Legend has it that Immovable Buddha/不動明王 while fought with 95 heterodox species had incarnated into “wisdom fire sword” /智火之劍, after that heterodox species turned into wisdom fire sword continuously fighting, then he turned into Furikara Fudo-myo-oh Dragon/俱利伽羅龍/ Immovable Buddha, used his 4 claws to seize tightly the sword of heterodox species and swallowed it, therefore defeated them.



*Fudō statue (http://ink361.com)*



*Fudō statue, Kamakura Period, 1195 AD.  
Located at Jyōraku-ji Temple 浄楽寺 in  
Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture  
(www.onmarkproductions.com)*



*Fudo-myoo masks (<http://www.fvstore.com>)*



*Immovable Buddha and the sword*

Many Buddhist sources related to dragons can be found at some specific temples throughout the country. The legend from Heian-period Kyohime Temple recored in 大日本國法華經驗記 has also shown these features of Japanese dragons. The Edo paintings at Dojo-ji/道成寺 tell us the wonderful story of a dragon (Kiyohime 清姬) getting angry because of her friend Anchin/ 安珍's disappearance (see also 日本風俗歴史畫報 - Volume 2). The Heian-period story said once in Kii no kuni, Kiyohime 清姬 fell in love with the monk Anchin. She turned into dragon which frightened Anchin, forcing him to hide up inside the great iron bell in Dojo-ji. He was finally fired by her anger (see 『大日本國法華驗記』).



The legend Anchin and Kiyohime 安珍與清姬 at Dojo-ji/道成寺



The dragon getting angry because her beloved man disappeared – the Edo painting at Dojo-ji/道成寺 (Source: 日本風俗歴史畫報- Volume 2)

Some of the popular Buddhist Japanese dragons are primarily mentioned including Hachidai ryūō 八大龍王 (8 great naga kings) assembled to study the Buddha expound on the Lotus Sutra. Mucharinda ムチャリンダ was the Nāga king who protected the Buddha when he achieved bodhi which is frequently represented as a giant cobra. Kuzuryū 九頭龍 (9-headed dragon) is told to derive from the multi-headed Naga king シエーシャ, currently worshipped at Togakushi Shrine in Nagano Prefecture.

The popularity of the symbol of dragon engaged in Buddhism can be demonstrated by the case of Daishoin Temple next to the Shinto Shrine of Itsukushima in Hiroshima Prefecture (fieldwork, 2014). The dragons are carved on the decorative motives on top of pillars, girders, painted on the lacquers, carved on incense-burner, the entrance and many other places as if dragon is the ambassador of Buddha, the holy deity which helps carrying the Buddhist dharma to the secular world. In many Buddhist's mind, dragon has been the symbol of mysterious power which can feed people's wishes and the symbol of gods/goddesses which can survive people from "ocean of sorrows".





*Wooden and painted dragons in Daishoin Temple, Hiroshima (fieldwork, 2014)*



*The twin dragons in Luhuong at Daishoin Temple - Hiroshima (fieldwork, 2014)*      *Kwan Yin riding on a dragon (Sorace 朝日百科 132 《世界的美术》/World Fine Art)*

In Japanese culture, the dragon was once the holy deity especially when Shintoism was attached with Buddhism. At the Shintoism-Buddhism harmony period, the dragon is obviously acknowledged as a sacred animal, the messenger of supernatural power to connect with human beings world; but from Meiji afterwards, dragon

gradually left Shinto architectural works. Dragon lore is associated with both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. There are many legends of famous dragon deities living in the ponds, lakes, and rivers nearby the shrines. Therefore, there are quite some temple adopting the names engaged with dragons, for example, the Rinza sect's Tenryuji (天龍寺<sup>13</sup>), Ryutakuji (龍沢寺<sup>14</sup>), and Ryoanji (龍安寺<sup>15</sup>), Shitennō-ji (四天王寺<sup>16</sup>), Gogen Temple in Hakone, Kanagawa, and the shrine on Mount Haku<sup>17</sup> etc..



*The dragon pillars at 岩木山神社 (Source 朝日百科132 《世界的美術》/World Fine Art)*

In Shinto tradition, Ryūjin shinkō (竜神信仰) is a form of Shinto religious belief that worships dragons as water kami (god). It is connected with agricultural rituals, rain prayers, and the success of fishermen. However, we still can find out dragon image in architectures or auxiliary tools in Shinto shrines. The following is a case study of dragon symbol heritage in Itsukushima Shrine at Hiroshima Prefecture, the abode of the sea-god Ryūjin's daughter (fieldwork 2014):

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<sup>13</sup> 京都府京都市 右京区嵯峨天龍寺.

<sup>14</sup> 326 Sawaji, Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture 411-0043, Japan

<sup>15</sup> 13 Ryoanji Goryonoshitacho, Ukyo Ward, Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture 616-8001, Japan

<sup>16</sup> 1-11-18 Shitennōji, Tennoji Ward, Osaka, Osaka Prefecture 543-0051, Japan

<sup>17</sup> As described in the Genpei Jōsuiki, a Zen priest saw a 9-headed dragon transform into the goddess Kannon.



*Bronze pillar with  
dragon pattern in  
Itsukushima shrine  
(Miyajima island,  
Hiroshima Prefecture) –  
fieldwork 2014*





*Dragon pattern in bronze pillar at Itsukushima shrine (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014)*



*Wood spoon with green dragon pattern - World Guinness record in Miyajima island, Hiroshima  
(Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014)*



*Dragon-craved statue on wood girder inside ancient house built in Edo period at Itsukushima shrine group (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014).*

*Dragon and turtle board with carved words “Genroku year, Edo period” offered by people, in the ancient house at Itsukushima shrine group (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2014).*

In Japanese society, dragon presents in both sides of royal culture and folk culture. In royal life, dragon symbolizes imperial power due to usually associated with emperor. Ryūjin/龍神 is the father of the beautiful goddess Otohime who married the hunter prince Hoori. Otohime and Hoori gave the birth to the first Emperor of Japan, Jimmu. Therefore, Ryūjin is said to be one of the ancestors of the Japanese imperial dynasty.

Accordingly, Ryūjin shinkō (dragon god faith) is a form of Shinto religious belief that worships water gods: dragons. It is surely attached with agricultural rituals, rain prayers, and the general success of fisherman.

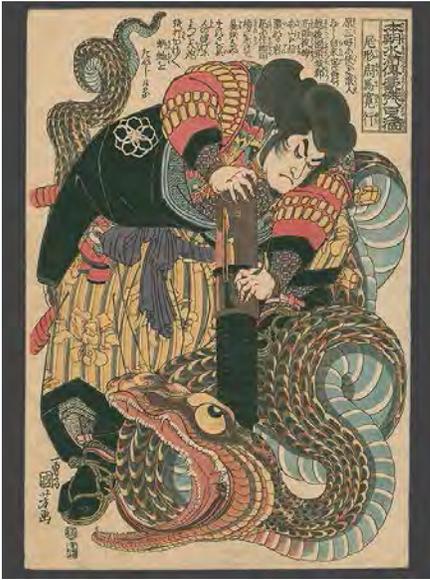


*Dragon boat Kyoto (Source (江上波夫 117) )*

If in royal culture, dragon symbolizes hierarchy and power; then in folk culture dragon has the tendency associated with belief, religious, and took the role of messenger between supernatural deities and human beings. After the Edo, dragon had the tendency of entering daily life as a symbol or history's heritage.

At present society, dragon tattooing is preferred by a number of young Japanese people. In Japanese cities, it is not very difficult to find the tattooing shops or corners. However, under the eyes of other Japanese people, the dragon tattooing as well as

other tattooing motives make them remember the image of the gangster/Yakuda, a negative character in Japanese culture.



*Tattoo motif of Susano slaying the Yamata no Orochi in Modern Japanese culture.*



*A yakuda man (www.modifikasi.com)*



*Wine vase with waterly dragon in Itsukushima shrine (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*



*Wine vase with flying dragon in Itsukushima shrine (Nguyen Ngoc Tho 2014)*

Dragon arts in Japan has strongly guided by social ideology. At Shintoism-Buddhism harmony period, paintings on dragon and scholars, dragon and Buddha, dragon and samurai, dragon and tiger or dragon and other classic imaginary figures were wuite popular within the intellectual world, which was once the expression of social wisdom. The painting the white dragon and the scholar shows deeply the soul

of Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism in which the Japanese identity is still obviously clear with the facilities, the decoration, the costume and the number of the dragon claws etc. Many other paintings reflect the evident content and implication of the traditional myths, legends such as *Susanoo slaying the Yamata no Orochi*, *Anchin and Kiyohime*, Fudo-myō-ō Dragon/俱利伽羅龍 etc., which has shown the unity of the meanings and values of the dragon (the signified) and its social application.



*Nihon Rekishi Kyokun series – Lessons from Japan's History - Tajima no kami Norimasa* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyohara\\_Chikanobu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyohara_Chikanobu))



*Susanoo slaying the Yamata no Orochi*, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utagawa_Kuniyoshi))



*Picture of god riding dragon* (provided by Prof. Masayuki, 2015)



*The female sage Tai-shin flying across the ocean on a white dragon, by Kunisada, 1860.*



*The carved iron dragon*

After the Shintoism – Buddhism separation movement, most of the dragon decorative motives are closely attached with Buddhist temples, easily found at lower roof, crossbeam, on the head of pillars or at the entrance gate. Rarely is dragon motif carved or sculptured on top of the house as it is popular in China, Korea or Vietnam. This is still unsolved question for there is not any persuasive evidence found so far. In modern Japan, the post-modernist tattooing dragon art, origamia dragon art etc. are to bring the new breath to the symbol of dragon under a new form and new values.



*Dragon-shape origami arts in Japan*

During World War II, the Japanese military named many armaments after the dragons, such as the midget submarine *The Kōryū* 蛟竜/蛟龍 and the rocket kamikaze aircraft *Shinryū* 神竜/神龍. Similarly, the Imperial Japanese Army division (the 56th Division) was codenamed the Dragon Division.

The modern Japanese society has spared specific spaces for using the dragon as the marks such as *Chunichi Dragons* baseball team, *Dragon Ball*, the *Dragon Quest*<sup>18</sup> and *Breath of Fire* series video games, the video game *Legend of Dragon 2000*, the manga work *Dragon Ball* (1985), the dragon robot *Nāsu* ナース in the *Ultraman* series, the short story "Ryū (龍)" or *Dragon: the Old Potter's Tale* by *Ryūnosuke Akutagawa*, the river dragon *Haku/Kohaku* in the fantasy-adventure anime film *Spirited Away* etc.. Similarly, the sea-dwelling serpentine dragon guardian of the underwater Kingdom of Mu. *Manda Manda* serves as one of the primary antagonists in the tokusatsu film *Atragon* (1963) as well as in minor roles in the *Godzilla* film series<sup>19</sup>. These cases of dragon's contribution is to show the long-living power of the sacred creature.

In performing art, the dragon joins in both religious arts and festival arts. The former ones contains the historical values for it was originated from the Buddhism, Taoism or Shintoism and developed to be performed on the stage at the specific

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<sup>18</sup> Dragon Quest is a popular video game series by Akira Toriyama in 1986.

<sup>19</sup> King Ghidorah, the three-headed golden dragon is commonly portrayed as a rival for Godzilla.

occasions. For instance, the Kinryu-no-Mai (Golden Dragon Dance) is held at the Sensoji Temple in Asakusa every Spring. The dancers take the long dragon through the grounds of the Sensoji in a parade and then into the temple itself. According to the legends, Sensoji was founded in 628 after two fishermen found a golden figurine of Kannon in the Sumida River and golden dragons ascended into heaven for some reason. The *Golden Dragon Dance* celebrates the temple founding and provides good fortune and prosperity for all. The viewers throw money into a grate and touch the dragon for luck before the dramatic performance is organized.

Similarly, the play *Courageous man and Izzumo Kagura Dragon* rooted in Shimane/島根县, Ranryo-oh Dance at Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima or the play Susanoo defeating Yamata no Orochi etc. are also seen as the legacies of the past in Japan.



*Ranryo-oh Dance at Itsukushima Shrine, Hiroshima*  
(<http://www.visit-miyajima.jp/blog/?p=1416>)



*A kagura dance showing Susanoo defeating Yamata no Orochi (kusuri-bako.tumblr.com)*

During the history, changes in interpretation of myth and the setting where myths have led to the change in style of dragon performing art at a certain level, especially the trend of secularization. However, such a change is fewer to compare with the post-modernist dragon paintings or sculpture in current Japan. For example, the Kagura art (sacred music and dance) and Kanyogoto ritual (inaugural ceremony of the Izumo Kokuso) are preserving mostly on dramatic stage since it is performed in the traditionalistic atmospheres.



*Dragon mask*



*Courageous man and Izzumo Kagura Dragon*



*Kagura mask ([http://www.miyaeshi.co.jp/en/shrine\\_articles.html](http://www.miyaeshi.co.jp/en/shrine_articles.html))*

Beside the Japanese owning the dragon dance, the ethnic Chinese in Nagasaki, Yokohama and many other cities periodically organize the dragon dance at the local temple festivals or in the lunar new year as to show a part of their cultural identities among the modernized Japanese society.



*Dragon dance in 浅草 Temple, Tokyo (Sensoji Konryu No Mai) 日本观光协会: 51*



*The play Courageous man and Izzumo Kagura Dragon rooted in Shimane/岛根县. Source 日本观光协会: 163*



*Dragon dance in Nagasaki* 日本観光協会 : 190

d. In comparison to Vietnamese dragon, Japanese dragon is absolutely *the symbol of masculinity*/陽性 while the Vietnamese dragon rationally understood as masculine powers but it is set freely with goddesses or Buddhist Kwanyin in the local shrines or temples (陽中有陰). Under the feudal dynasties, Japanese three-claw dragons were concretely attached with the power of the Emperor under Confucian impacts as well as the power of Buddha under the folk's mind, in which the later is more dominant in pre-modern and modern Japan. While Korean people went under the Confucianism axis, because of the limitation of claw number<sup>20</sup> and the ban of Chinese emperor over the worship of Heaven (天), snakelike dragons decorate the rafters of many Korean temples, helping carry prayers up to heaven, *the Japanese have enjoyed the freedom to choose the number of dragon claws*: the number 3 – the auspicious number, also the number different with Chinese and Korean dragons which can help shape the Japanese identity. In other hand, the dragon can become the extreme power of typhoon, of evils or the gangsters due to Japanese oceanic feature of Japanese geography. Being both auspicious and inauspicious symbol as well as a decorative motif, the Japanese dragon is one of the popular images in Japanese art and culture after the symbols of kirin, turtle, phoenix or vermilion bird. In some cases, the dragon

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<sup>20</sup> In East Asian ideology, five-claw dragon is the supreme powerful icon, a symbol of emperor, used to be occupied by Chinese emperor.

is understood as the symbol of destruction, the Japanese dragon is quite different with the other auspicious figures (phoenix, turtle, crane, fish, kirin...).

The Vietnamese dragon is normally viewed as both a guardian deity that protects humans and wards off evil spirits and a secular decorative motive in popular culture. The dramatic features of the dragon—large staring eyes, flaring nostrils, wide-open mouth with protruding sharp fangs, and single horn—convey a fierceness and invincibility in keeping with such apotropaic functions. The theme of protectiveness is echoed in the decoration on the bell, which features a swastika, a Buddhist symbol of safety and peace. Under the Buddhists' eye, the dragon is currently the symbol of supernatural power, the auspicious strength, the “the Other Shore Bridge”, the Fountain of Healing, the Protector of Buddha, Dharma and Buddhist followers or simply to symbolize the traditional legacies (as the decorative motives in the old architecture remain their historical values). Unlike the Vietnamese dragon, the Japanese dragon has shown both positive and negative meanings. The dragon in Japanese Buddhism shows both the power of sacredness to survive people or help people get over the hardships. Dragon can be seen as both ambassador of Buddha and evil which has been controlled or killed by Buddhas (the Buddhist legend of *Fudomyo-oh*, the legend Anchin and Kiyohime/安珍與清姬 at *Dojo-ji*/道成寺). In Shintoism the similar situation can be seen at the decorative motives at Itsukushima Shrine or the killed evil by a samurai in the legend *Susanoo slaying the Yamata no Orochi*.

The Vietnamese love having children born in the lunar dragon year 辰年, like 2000, 2012 etc. for they believe their children can be able to become wealthy and successful. This actually leads to the facts that the number of “dragon” children far exceeds the yearly number, making schooling more difficult to be well-organized. In Japan, this trend might exist in the past and become not a social phenomenon in these days. Therefore, the dragon is mostly the auspicious figure in Vietnamese culture while it is unclear in Japan.

As analyzed in part 1, Japan has got the special environment of oceanic islands, harsh climatic and geomorphological conditions (typhoon, earthquake, volcano etc.) as well as the nearly absolute unity of ethnicity and national culture; therefore, the Japanese manifests the consistency in shapes and significances. Japanese dragons may vary from different feudal dynasties, however they have archived the homogeneity in the dragon's shapes (three-claws, the blue, green and dark colors) and significance (the dilemma of both protector and destroyer) throughout the country in each period. This feature of Japanese dragon reminds us *the vertical essence of Japanese traditional society*. Meanwhile, Vietnam contains the essence of diversity in ecological environment as well as in ethnic culture and socio-historical processes. The Vietnamese dragon has shown the features of *region-based geographical diversity* and *multi-ethnic diversity*. Such diversity was once stimulated by the process of De-Sinicization or Decentralization, especially after the cancellation of Vietnamese in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contradiction with Japanese dragon, Vietnamese dragon has really been *the expression of the horizontal essence of Vietnamese traditional society*. The difference in nature of Japanese and Vietnamese societies has also been analyzed in researches in Confucianism by various Vietnamese, Japanese and Chinese scholars<sup>21</sup> recently. At a certain level, Japanese dragon is the symbol of the hierarchical power of the superiors (emperor, god, Buddha, thunder, typhoon etc.) toward the inferiors (the folk people) while Vietnamese dragon the ambassador of the sacred supernature toward the suffered folk. The dragon is more popularized and closely attached to daily life as well as religious world of Vietnamese people while it is strongly engaged in royal and religious life (Buddhism, Shintoism etc.) in Japan.

The secularism is also seen as the commonality between Japanese and Vietnamese dragons since they are set to offer the worldly purposes. Vietnamese dragon once joint

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<sup>21</sup> Such as Doan Le Giang (2007), Phan Van Cac (2005), Tran Quoc Vuong (2000), Tsuboi Yoshiharu (1992), Chen Yan (2014), Nguyen Ngoc Tho (2013) etc.. Accordingly, Vietnamese Confucianism focuses on Righteousness 義; Chinese Filial Piety 孝 at family perspective, Loyalty 忠 at national perspective; Korean Filial Piety 孝 and Respect 順/敬; Japanese Bravery 勇 and Loyalty 忠.

different religious movements during the French ruling period (the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century) as a wish to survive people from the “Ocean of Sorrows” while the Japanese dragon has occasionally become the symbol of emperor (or royal power) under the attachment of Shintoism and Buddhism at Emperor Meiji time and the previous feudal periods. The Japanese Buddhist dragons are closely connected to Mahayana tradition while Vietnamese dragons have absorbed the symbol of Southeast Asian naga snakes at a certain level, the symbol of renewal of life and the incarnation of the gods to rescue human being from sorrowful secular world.

In regarding the relation of the dragon and its owners – the people, the Vietnamese seem to be more submissive to the dragon and its power. Such a feature can be easily seen through the Vietnamese idioms and proverbs which usually describe the dragon as a holy or noble image. For instance, when distinguishing the difference between social classes, people say “the dragon’s egg will surely give birth to the dragon while the mother snake give birth to the minor snakes/Trứng rồng lại nở ra rồng, liu điu lại nở ra bầy liu điu”, or when welcoming the guest: “The dragon is coming/arriving at the shrimp’s house/Rồng đến nhà tôm”. In Japan, it used to be similar situation at pre-modern periods, however, there are quite a number of stories and paintings to show the fact that human being can control or conquer the fierce dragon, such as the myth *Hero Susanoo is slaying Yamato-no-Orochi*, *Princess Tamatori steals Ryūjin's jewel* etc. Of course, this trend is not popular and correct throughout all periods of Japanese history.

In facing with the Chinese concept of Tianxia/天下 and centralized imperial hierarchy during history, the Vietnamese applied the flexibility attitude in designing the image of dragons. The five-claw dragon is seen as decorative motive at feudal forbidden city of Thang Long<sup>22</sup> (presently Hanoi) and Hue<sup>23</sup> despite Chinese emperors strictly prohibited the surrounded states in using five-claw dragons. After

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<sup>22</sup> The ancient capital of Ly dynasty (1010-1225), Tran Dynasty (1125-1400); Le Dynasty (1428-1788).

<sup>23</sup> The capital of Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945).

the fall of last dynasty – Nguyen Dynasty - in 1945, different styles of dragon with three, four and five claws are freely carved at various architecture and sculpture constructions throughout the country (see part 2). Generally speaking, Vietnamese dragon was semi-attached with the Chinese hierarchy before the decentralization. In Japan, the ancient hierarchical dragon after being introduced into the islands (through Korean peninsula or directly from China) has been decentralized in the early time (thanks to the isolated location of Japan). Four or five dragons of Nara or Muromachi periods are sometime found at the older historical sites while more three-claw dragons exist in Japanese culture. Comparing to the four-claw hierarchical dragon of Korea, the Japanese are freely and positively self-controlled in building the symbol of dragon. At a certain level, the Japanese dragon contains *the essence of self-controlled freedom*. The Japanese are more flexible and self-controlled in shaping the national cultural identities during history.

Along with the boom of information technology and hi-tech economy, the face of Japanese society has fundamentally changed into the direction of modernization and post-modernization which leads to different significant transformation of traditional cultural practices. The symbol of dragon in Japan has gradually minimized its meaning, the auspicious dragons are hidden quietly under the roof or on the wooden crossbeams, the wooden pillars of Buddhist temples and considered as the legacy of history while the tattooing dragon motives are commonly acknowledged as the negative symbols. This change is proven clearly in the generation who are highly embracing the influence of individualistic Western-style aesthetic education, making a part of the tradition gradually looser.

In Vietnam, the process of modernization comes later, under the current transition of socio-cultural practices the symbol of dragon has been continuously changing and seems not to stop transforming. Under Vietnamese people's eyes, keeping transforming to fit the socio-cultural background is undoubtedly a part of Vietnamese cultural identities; therefore, there has not a complete symbol of dragon fixed yet in Vietnamese history. As a part of Vietnamese identities, changing to be well-fitted in

the new social circumstance is always welcomed since under Vietnamese mindset the process of living also means the process of molding the better presentation of society and culture.

### *Conclusion*

Applied fine arts are seen as the crystallization of the folk consciousness, they convey the full lively meaning of the state people and carry a part of historical and cultural legacies which produces the core orientation of future development. Regardless the origin of the birth, both Vietnamese and Japanese dragons have passed the similar historical periods since both nations share the same social destiny: formation, centralization and decentralization. During this long procedure, Vietnamese and Japanese dragons have absorbed into Confucian and Buddhist philosophies, presenting to be the symbol of Confucian hierarchical powers and sacred guardian of Buddhist dharma and survivor/protector of human beings. This trend of dragon's liberation in contemporary East Asia has pushed the dragon nearer to the Southeast Asian holy naga snake.

Because of the specific historical background (French invasion and ruling from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century), Vietnamese feudalism in which the Confucian hierarchical dragon was strongly protected has been weakened and abolished, the dragon has absorbed into many spiritual religions (Buddhism and Buddhism-based religions) and religious movements as well as shifted/transformed into many variants. At a certain level, the Vietnamese dragon has been feminized and decomposed its feudal hierarchy because of the refraction caused by the special socio-historical backgrounds of Vietnam. On the other hand, Vietnamese dragon harmoniously absorbs with Southeast Asian Naga snake, making dragon and naga snake the interactive icons unified dramatically within ASEAN community. As a matter of fact, the Vietnamese dragon is still under the process of forming and has not ended yet, it has shown an important essence of Vietnamese ideology and cultural identities: open-mindedness and well-adapted and well-adjusted mechanism.

Japanese dragon was once solidly attached with the Confucian hierarchy and Buddhist sacred powers; therefore, the abolishment of feudal structure at pre-modern period gives ways to the prevailing Buddhist dragon and its implication. At pre-modern and modern ages, Japanese dragon has slightly drawn back to become a part of legacies or to transform into post-modernist icon in popular culture (tattooing, manga books, video games, J'fashion etc.). At a certain level, Japanese people have enjoyed flexibility and autonomy in adjusting the dragon's expression and significance as well as in shaping cultural identities.

After the process of decentralization, Vietnamese and Japanese dragons are strongly similar to the other classic imaginary figures such as vermilion bird, turtle, kirin, tiger, fish etc, all are understood as symbols of luck, mysterious powers, Buddha and god's ambassadors, dharma/faith guardians and incarnation of human universal values (truth, goodness and beauty)<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> This paper is conducted under the supports of Sumitomo Foundation.

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