



# Enter the Dragon

By Lim Chey Cheng



On 23 January 2012, Chinese people will welcome the Year of the Dragon, which ends 9 February 2013. Tradition holds that the Chinese calendar originated with Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, in 2637 BCE, making this the year 4649.

The Chinese calendar is commonly thought to be a lunar one, but this is not completely accurate. It is a luni-solar one based on complex rules incorporating lunar and solar cycles. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Chinese have also used a 60-year cycle for recording the years. Each year is named for one of 12 animals of the Chinese Zodiac and one of the five elements (wood, water, fire, earth and metal). The year 2012 is the Year of the Water Dragon.

The dragon is the fifth (and the only mythological animal) in the Chinese zodiac. Unlike the evil dragons of the West, the Chinese dragon is highly esteemed, associated with power, strength, glory, good luck and all things auspicious and believed to control water, rainfall, hurricanes and floods.

The origin of the Chinese dragon is uncertain; the earliest depictions are from the Neolithic Yangshao Culture (5000 to 3000 BCE). Throughout Chinese history there have been varying descriptions of the dragon. It is believed to be a composite of nine (some sources say 11) animals. Variants abound, but in the main it has:

- the head of an ox, camel or horse
- whiskers of a rat
- ears of a cow
- eyes of a rabbit or demon
- horns of a deer or stag
- neck and body of a serpent covered with carp scales
- belly of a frog or rabbit
- palms or soles of a tiger and
- claws of an eagle or hawk.

Near its mouth is a flaming pearl or jewel, believed to represent the sun and to be associated with wealth, good luck and prosperity.

The dragon supposedly had nine sons whose shapes were variants of their father – hence ‘nine types’ of dragons.



*Dragons at Thian Hock Temple in Telok Ayer Street; photo courtesy of Benedict Lau*

Each has a strong personality and they often ornament various objects according to their attributes. For example, Pulao, the third son, likes to roar, so bell handles are made in his shape – a curved, two-headed one. The image of the valiant, bad-tempered and bellicose seventh son, Yazi, adorns the handles of many ancient weapons.

Legend says that after his death, the Emperor Huangdi ascended to Heaven immortalised as a dragon. Since the Chinese consider Huangdi their ancestor, they sometimes refer to themselves as ‘descendants of the dragon’. This legend contributed towards the Chinese dragon becoming a symbol of imperial power. Imperial dragons have five claws whereas nobles’ are four-clawed and commoners’ are three-clawed. The five-clawed dragon motif applied to everything used by the emperor – from his robes to his bed and throne – hence the term ‘dragon throne’.

When the dragon is paired with another mythological creature, the phoenix, the two represent a matrimonial couple, the ultimate being the emperor

and empress. A traditional motif for Chinese weddings is the groom and bride as ‘emperor and empress’.

Endowed with such potent and auspicious attributes, it is no wonder dragon years are the most favoured for having children. It is believed that people are influenced by the characteristics of their zodiac animal. Those born in dragon years are full of vitality, strength, intelligence and talent, gifted with power and luck, and capable of great achievements.

Throughout the world, Chinese people still try to have ‘dragon babies’, particularly if they hope to have boys. Even in modern Singapore, dragon years see spikes in birth rates. During the one in 2000, there were 4,000 more births than in 1998 – a tiger year (the least favoured). Will 2012 prove to be the same? Most definitely!

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*Dragon cameo photos courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch*