



'The Laidley Worm of Spindleston Heughs', Yvonne Gilbert, from Rosalind Kerven's *Northumberland Folk Tales*.

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Tales beyond Europe: Dragons of East and West

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Here's a word association game. I say 'dragon'. You say...?

Assuming you're reading this article in the Western world, you might well come up with a list that includes: 'fierce', 'danger', 'evil', 'fire' and 'destruction'; perhaps also 'princess' and 'treasure'. That's because most British and European dragon tales do indeed portray these mythical reptiles as misogynistic, fire-breathing monsters that devastate whole countries with their fiery breath. They also reputedly have a taste for abducting and devouring virgins of royal blood, and hoarding enormous caches of treasure.

However, for those raised on the ancient tales of China, Japan or Korea, the word 'dragon' conjures up quite different images. True, they might well agree with 'fierce' and 'danger', for their dragons are also formidable creatures, not to be trifled with. But instead of 'evil' they would assume overall benevolence. 'Fire' would be irrelevant, for Eastern dragons are inextricably linked with water; be it sea, lake, river or rain. Leading from this, instead of destroying lands they hold the key to their fertility. Princesses could well be on their list too, but not because dragons consume them: instead, they commonly materialise as 'dragon-princesses'.

There are, however, some things that stories from both regions agree upon: dragons are universally reptile-like creatures, generally enormous; and they can fly.

Starting on familiar ground, one of the oldest extant European dragon stories can be found within the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. Here trouble begins when a servant foolhardily steals a golden cup from the treasure piled in a dragon's lair. The 'fire-spewing dragon' retaliates in a fury by laying waste to the surrounding countryside. The aging super-hero Beowulf determines to fight it, but is mortally wounded for his efforts. After he dies, his men raid the dragon's cavern and find a poignant array of stolen and decaying valuables:

vessels a-standing...
Cups of the ancients ...
helmets in numbers,
Old and rust-eaten, arm-bracelets many,
Artfully woven...
an all-golden banner

High o'er the hoard, of hand-wonders greatest,
Linkèd with lacets: a light from it sparkled,
That the floor of the cavern he was able to look on

The final demise of the dragon is symbolised by water quenching fire:

the dragon eke pushed they,
The worm o'er the wall, let the wave-currents take him.¹

The Beowulf story lives on, but since medieval times, English dragon lore has been more in thrall to the legend of St George – so memorably illustrated in the 15th-century painting by Paolo Uccello in the National Gallery. There are several different versions: a well-developed one says that the monster of the title takes up residence not in England but in Egypt, where it lays waste to the land and devours all the local maidens. Just as it seizes the King's own daughter, George – a heroic Englishman of noble birth but abducted and raised by an evil enchantress – arrives in the nick of time to slay it and rescue her.² Of the same ilk, and also firmly rooted in the Middle Ages, is the legend of Tristan and Isolde, once well known in France and Germany as well as Britain. It features the eponymous hero proving his worth by slaying a dragon which has been scorching the Irish countryside and crops with its fire and gorging itself on cattle.³

Many local British folktales echo these themes, older versions often using the archaic terms 'serpent' or 'worm' (related to old Norse *ormr*) instead of 'dragon'. In the Scottish story of Assipattle and the Mester Stoorworm, a hopeless 'ash-lad' wins his colours when he destroys a dragon that has been devastating the kingdom and, true to form, wins the princess in marriage.⁴ The hero of the Lambton Worm, a Co. Durham tale, is not so lucky: a feckless young nobleman inadvertently fishes up a malevolent dragon that lays waste to the land and when he finally overcomes it, nine generations of his family are cursed as a result.⁵ There are numerous local variants, for example from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Somerset, Cumbria, Sussex and the Scottish Borders, for it is not so long ago that many people in these islands seriously believed in dragons, with dragon's fat and blood routinely listed as ingredients in medieval medicine⁶ and many texts recording sightings down the centuries. Dragons are of especial symbolic importance to Wales, with an enormous red one dominating the national flag, though surprisingly they scarcely seem to feature significantly in that country's rich bank of folktales.

I have so far discovered few memorable dragon tales in English translations of European folktales, although Russia does have some excellent ones. In these, the dragons' savagery tends to be softened by dark humour: One tells of three princess abducted from their palace garden and imprisoned by three fierce dragons: one with five heads, one with seven and the worst with twelve. A trio of unlikely young heroes decapitates them all.⁷ Another features a dragon that seizes and devours every maiden in the land until only the Tsar's daughter is left: while the

beast dithers over whether to eat such a beautiful child, she tricks it into revealing the name of the only man in the world stronger than itself. Fortunately this hero is a resident of the nearby city and is persuaded to undertake the task of defeating it in battle. Afterwards, in an echo of Beowulf, he persuades it by trickery to enter the sea where drowning completes its demise.⁸

But let's leave these tales of conflict and death behind, and travel as the dragon flies straight to the Far East. Here we are greeted by creatures that, despite a physical similarity to their Western kin, have much pleasanter associations.

Long, long ago, in old Japan, the Kingdom of the Sea was governed by a wonderful King. He was called Rin Jin, or the Dragon King of the Sea . . . He was the ruler of all sea creatures both great and small, and in his keeping were the Jewels of the Ebb and Flow of the Tide . . .

The Palace of Rin Jin was at the bottom of the sea, and it was so beautiful that no one has ever seen anything like it even in dreams. The walls were of coral, the roof of jadesstones and chrysoptase, and the floors were of the finest mother-of-pearl.

Rin Jin, however, is not a happy dragon, for he lives in this exquisite palace in miserable solitude. Eventually he sends his retainers to search through the sea for a suitable bride. But there's no danger of him abducting a human girl, for in the East dragons themselves are just as likely to be female as male. The tale gives us an intriguing glimpse of dragonish beauty, for eventually they bring to Rin Jin 'a lovely young dragon. Her scales were of a glittering green like the wings of summer beetles, her eyes threw out glances of fire, and she was dressed in gorgeous robes.' Their wedding is a grand affair, attended by 'every living thing in the sea, from the great whales down to the little shrimps'.⁹

From this we can surmise that there are no dragon 'commoners': the dragon royal families are typically surrounded and attended by fish and other marine creatures. Despite the exotic trappings of their lives, they also have many human qualities. They love each other dearly, and when the young Dragon Queen falls ill, Rin Jin is desperate to have her cured.

Sometimes humans can find their way into the dragon kings' undersea worlds. A common story is of a youth or old man who does some kindness to a sea creature, never guessing that it is actually the transformation of a dragon; in return he is invited to pay a visit to their realms.

In a Korean version, an old fisherman spends a whole day at sea without catching anything, then finally hauls in a single huge fish which stares at him with urgently appealing eyes. Convinced it is begging for its life, the kindly fisherman throws it back into the water; even though it means that he and his wife must go hungry that night. The next day he is approached by a handsome young man who introduces himself as the messenger of the Great Dragon King, sent to invite him to the dragons' undersea world as a reward. It turns out that the fish whose life he spared was actually the

Dragon Crown Prince in a different manifestation. The astonished fisherman watches as, 'Facing the sea, the young man lifted up his arms and chanted a strange incantation. As if by magic, the turbulent waves became still and parted and a beautiful road appeared from nowhere.'¹⁰ They follow the road to the bottom and through a golden gate to the Dragon Kingdom.

There is a similar story from Japan. Here a youth rescues a turtle from some boys who have been tormenting it. The next day another turtle takes him to the submarine palace of the Dragon King, where he is rewarded with the hand of the Dragon Princess in marriage. They live together in happiness until he becomes homesick; returning to his own world, he discovers that those who enjoy dragonish hospitality may unfortunately become victims of the 'supernatural passing of time' – for 300 years have elapsed in his absence.¹¹ This folktale may be a corruption of the ancient Japanese myth about Hohodemi Yamasachihiko, a descendant of the Sun goddess who loses his brother's fish-hook. He travels in search of it on a basket made by a wise old man until he reaches the palace of the Dragon King of the Sea, where it is eventually recovered. He stays there for three years (in this case time seems to pass normally) and returns home with a wondrous gift: two jewels that control the ebb and flow of the tides.¹²

It is clear from some of the above examples that, far from hoarding treasure like their miserly Western counterparts, Eastern dragons use their wealth generously to honour charitable mortals. In another Japanese tale, a young hero stumbles upon a huge 'serpent' blocking a bridge. It introduces itself as a Dragon King of the nearby lake and challenges the youth to kill a magic centipede of enormous proportions which is threatening his realm. The youth successfully completes the task, and again is rewarded with great riches.¹³

In these Korean and Japanese tales, the dragons unambiguously have dragon anatomies. However, in many Chinese stories dragon royal families are shape-shifters who can also assume human form: either in their own subaqueous world, or else when they rise into the mortal realms. There is a wonderfully entertaining folktale that adds a further, inanimate dimension to the strange business of dragonly transformation. A man known as 'Baldhead' obtains a magic pig which, when boiled in a pot on the seashore, causes the sea to split open revealing the road to the Dragon King's palace. There he is made an honoured guest, and before leaving receives the gift of a magic vase. Back in his own home, the vase transforms into a beautiful Dragon Princess, who explains:

"Several years ago, a wicked magician who had a quarrel with my father turned me into a vase. Because you admired me enough to care for me, even in that lifeless form, the spell has been partly broken to allow me to escape from it for a few hours each day ..."

"Well," said Baldhead wonderingly. "And what must I do to free you from the spell entirely?"

"You would have to marry me," said the Dragon Princess.¹⁴

Like many of her kind, this Dragon Princess is a capable and spirited lady, who not only conjures up great wealth for them to share, but also rescues her mortal husband from the evil tricks of a covetous neighbour. She seems to have no great loyalty to the dragon realms.

A shape-shifting Dragon Princess with similarly ambivalent feelings to her underwater home appears when the people of a particular valley are afflicted by a year-long drought. A local girl boldly takes it upon herself to climb the neighbourhood mountain to investigate, and finds that the lake near the summit is blocked by a gate in the form of two huge stones. The Dragon King's youngest daughter takes human form in defiance of her formidable father's curfew, and rises from the water to help the heroine. Together they obtain the key to the gate from the royal treasury. The Princess's punishment is to be banished forever into the mortal realms with her new friend, forever denied from resuming her dragonish form; however, the story indicates that she regards this as liberation.¹⁵

A third Dragon Princess is even more grateful to a mortal saviour. She is married to a cruel Dragon King of a lake, who rejects her and deports her to the human realms where she is forced to work as a goat herder. There she meets a young graduate and persuades him to carry a desperate letter to her father, whose palace lies under another lake. The graduate accesses this by striking an orange tree three times with his belt, thus summoning up a messenger who parts the waters and leads him down to the royal palace. The disgraced Princess's father soon dispatches 'a red dragon, a thousand feet long, with red scales, mane of fire, bloody tongue, and eyes blazing like lightning' to destroy her malicious husband. The graduate is offered the Dragon Princess's hand as a reward. Initially he is too awestruck by his supernatural new friends to accept, but they do eventually marry. The source book claims this may be a true story, set in the eighth century A.D. It also claims they were able to have a child together – an inconceivable union in the West!¹⁶

Sometimes dragonish shape-shifting can be dangerous – for both dragons and mortal bystanders. An elderly monk welcomes a curiously magnificent young stranger into his monastery. As their friendship develops, the guest reveals himself to be the dragon of the nearby Green Pond. The monk begs the reluctant guest to transform into his dragon shape, and despite repeated warnings that this would be a terrifying experience, he eventually gives in. Initially he manifests himself merely as an innocuous small snake with a pair of horns on its head, but as the monk constantly urges him not to be inhibited, he grows into a truly awesome size. This illicit trick not only deprives him of the ability to change back into human form, but also causes him to be swept away into the pond – which floods until it becomes a lake and overwhelms the monastery.¹⁷

The general characteristics of the dragon realms appear to be broadly similar across China, Japan and Korea. They were vividly described early in the last century by the sinologist E.T.C. Werner in his book *Myths and Legends of China*:

The Sea-dragon Kings live in gorgeous palaces in the depths of the sea, where they feed on pearls and opals. There are five of these divinities, the chief being in the centre, and the other four occupying the north, the west, the south, and the east.

Their dragon forms sound truly formidable:

Each is a league in length, and so bulky that in shifting its posture it tosses one mountain against another. It has five feet, one of them being in the middle of its belly, and each foot is armed with five sharp claws. It can reach into the heavens, and stretch itself into all quarters of the sea. It has a glowing armour of yellow scales, a beard under its long snout, a hairy tail, and shaggy legs. Its forehead projects over its blazing eyes, its ears are small and thick, its mouth gaping, its tongue long, and its teeth sharp. Fish are boiled by the blast of its breath, and roasted by the fiery exhalations of its body.

Chinese tales often describe dragons emerging from the water, usually to fly away on some official divine business. Werner says:

When it rises to the surface the whole ocean surges, waterspouts foam, and typhoons rage. When it flies, wingless, through the air, the winds howl, torrents of rain descend, houses are unroofed, the firmament is filled with a din, and whatever lies along its route is swept away with a roar in the hurricane created by the speed of its passage.¹⁸

Many Eastern dragons are connected with either water supplies or the weather, as in the following regional tale about a village afflicted by a year-long drought. The desperate local people dig deep for a new well; but just as they strike water, a dragon falls from the sky, as badly in need of a drink as they are. They generously share their find with it, but the dragon swallows so much that the well quickly dries up. Stoically, they dig a new one – but this time too much water gushes out, deluging their land, for they have inadvertently linked their new borehole to

the sea. The dragon returns their previous kindness by using its own body to plug the connection, turning their excavation into a much welcomed lake.¹⁹

Then there is the curious story of a warrior, lost at night whilst out hunting, who finds lodging in a rather strange house. At midnight he is shaken awake by an old woman and ordered to carry out the work of making rain, in place of the dragons who normally do this. He finds himself mounted on a horse and riding across the sky, with a jar from which he must shake water drops onto its mane. This causes the clouds to burst, showering the land with much needed rain. He is rewarded for this daring labour with a gift of magic pearls.²⁰

This is a most valuable gift, since a dragon's pearl can be a catalyst for shape-shifting between human and dragon form – not just for dragons, but occasionally also for humans. An impoverished Chinese boy finds one of these pearls by chance, having no idea what it is. His mother, alarmed by such a seemingly valuable jewel coming into their possession, tells him to hide it in the rice jar. They are astonished the next morning to find that it has caused the few grains of rice they had left to multiply, filling the whole jar. This magic transforms their standard of living, and it is not long before envious neighbours discover the secret, and break into the boy's house to steal the pearl. Desperate to keep it from them, the boy swallows it. At once he is consumed by insatiable thirst, causing him to race to the river and drink from it until it is drained completely dry – at which point he is transformed into a dragon.²¹

In Chinese popular mythology the Dragon Kings are closely associated with the 'bureaucracy' of Heaven, whose ruler is often known as the Jade Emperor. Werner says, 'The five Sea-dragon Kings are all immortal. They know each other's thoughts, plans, and wishes without intercommunication. Like all the other gods they go once a year to the superior Heavens, to make an annual report to the Supreme Ruler.' However, most of the time they stay under the sea,

where their courts are filled with their progeny, their dependents, and their attendants, and where the gods and genii sometimes visit them. Their palaces, of divers coloured transparent stones, with crystal doors, are said to have been seen in the early morning by persons gazing into the deep waters.²²

This submarine world of royal dragons is vividly and humorously brought alive in Wu Ch'êng-ên's anarchic yet profound 16th-century novel *Monkey*. The animal hero, having already acquired immortality, is now eager to obtain an outstanding weapon to help him fulfill his ambition to control both Earth and Heaven. He decides to seek this from the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea. Unlike the heroes of the stories above, he is unable to make the waves part, so instead chants a spell to protect himself from the water and simply jumps in. Explaining his errand to a submarine guard, Monkey is soon welcomed by the Dragon King himself at the door of his palace, with his dragon children and grandchildren milling around him. As in the Japanese stories,

he is attended by soldiers, guards and servants in the form of fish: shrimps, crabs, trout, whitebait, bream, carp and eels are all mentioned. The arrogant Monkey insolently demands to be presented with a weapon, completely unfazed by his host's magnificence, and even insulting the Dragon King with a proverb: 'It's no use the Dragon King pretending he's got no treasures'.

Eventually the King is advised by the Dragon Mother and her daughter to offer Monkey the priceless Golden Clasped Wishing Staff from the inner sanctuary of his treasury. Monkey accepts the gift disdainfully, then complains that he should be supplied with suitable clothing to complement it. This time the Dragon King is unable to help himself, but submits to Monkey's order to summon his brother Dragon Kings from the Western, Northern and Southern Seas. Within moments of a crocodile beating a drum and a turtle sounding a gong, these three royals arrive running. They are so awestruck by Monkey's audaciousness that they present him with a pair of cloud-stepping shoes, a phoenix plume cap, and a golden chainmail jerkin. They seem totally impotent to control or hinder Monkey's ambitions, instead merely threatening to complain about him to the higher bureaucratic authorities of Heaven. This is a far cry from the respect accorded to the Dragon Kings in most Eastern stories, and such audacity is unimaginable in dealings with a Western dragon. But then Monkey is a unique character.²³

In very general terms, we can now see a clear dichotomy between dragons of West and East:

WESTERN Dragons	EASTERN Dragons
Pure EVIL	Tending to BENEVOLENCE
Associated with FIRE	Associated with WATER
Bring DESTRUCTION	Bring FERTILITY
ALL MALE	MALE or FEMALE
STABLE appearance	SHAPESHIFTING appearance

However, as with all traditional tales, these definitions are very fluid and there are numerous exceptions. Take the associated elements: I have not yet found any Eastern stories which identify dragons with fire. However, Western tales perversely include some with distinctly watery connections.

For example, in Arthurian legend, an ancient king of Britain, Vortiger, lives in constant fear of attack and attempts to build a great tower to protect himself, but it constantly collapses. Eventually the wizard Merlin declares that the cause of the tower's instability is that it stands over a red and a white dragon, which are lurking in an underground pool. The King accordingly excavates the tower's foundations and exposes the dragons in their aqueous lair.²⁴ There are also two watery dragon stories from north-east England: the infamous Lambton Worm (see above) is actually found in a river; and in another tale, a dragon can only be destroyed by luring it away from the well where it keeps its tail.²⁵

Another exception concerns shape-shifting. Although this is not usually a characteristic of Western dragons, the well-known Norse myth of Sigurd, much illustrated in Viking carvings, features a dragon who was originally a man: he assumed the bestial shape in order to guard an ill-obtained hoard of treasure, only to be killed by the tale's hero for his efforts.²⁶ Then there is a story from northern England known as 'The Laidley Worm of Spindleston Heughs', in which a princess is transformed into a dragon by her wicked stepmother; in a curious blending of motifs, she can only retrieve her proper form by being brutally attacked by a young knight.²⁷

As for whether dragons are intrinsically good or evil, I do not know of any Western traditional tales in which dragons are portrayed as benevolent to humankind. On the other hand, in many localised Chinese tales, the fabled virtues of that country's beasts are missing. The misuse of their powers over water is a common theme.

For example, one Chinese story tells how the Dragon King of a particular river – helped by his son and a tortoise attendant – takes delight in stirring up the surface every summer to flood both fields and houses, whilst riding a magnificent carriage over the inundation.²⁸ There is a woman-eating dragon in Japanese mythology which consumes several young goddesses, until the god Susano saves the last sister from its jaws by inebriating it with poisoned sake and then killing it.²⁹ Similarly bloodthirsty is the dragon in charge of making the weather over a particular village, who demands a beautiful girl to be sacrificed to him each year in return for desisting from creating destructive storms.³⁰ This latter motif is so similar to European stories that one might wonder whether it is an import; however, its resolution is distinctly Chinese, for the dragon is vanquished not by a knight in shining armour, but by one of its female victims, who actually volunteers herself for the sacrifice and then destroys it by stealing its crystal ball.

Interestingly, such female courage is not unusual in Eastern stories, for despite their reputedly low status in traditional cultures, women do not hesitate to oppose rogue dragons – either single-handedly, or jointly with a male partner. When two dragons steal the sun and moon as play-things, plunging the whole world into perpetual darkness; they are overcome by a young woman and her husband.³¹ Another dragon comes to a village demanding food, destroying the houses and devouring both domestic animals and children; again it is a young couple who together defeat it.³²

This sketch offers a very brief introduction to the dragons of West and East. I am simply a collector and reteller of old tales, but would like to toss the ball to those with proper analytical skills to examine and dissect them, and perhaps offer some suggestions about their significance. Where did the concept of dragons come from? What is their symbolic meaning, especially when set against the traditional Christian cultures of the West and the Buddhist/Daoist/Confucian/Shinto cultures of the East? And why have these extraordinary mythical beasts haunted storytellers' imaginations through so many centuries?

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