

Western dragon and Chinese Long: Mistranslation and resolution

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Abstract: At the end of 2006, there was a fiery debate in China over whether to slay dragon as the national emblem of China. Supporters of this action feared that dragon, which is now the translation of Chinese Long, an evil monster in the westerners' eyes, and it would hurt the positive image of China while the opponents held is an auspicious animal that brings power and wealth to people. This paper compares and analyzes various kinds of differences between western dragon and Chinese Loong. It points out that the misinterpretation of Chinese Loong as the western dragon has caused certain damage to China's positive image and the Chinese character “龙” should be translated into loong. The author hopes that the revised translation could help clear up the confusion and help foreigners better understand Chinese Loong, China's history and Chinese culture.

Key words: western dragon; Chinese Long; mistranslation; loong

1. Introduction

On December 5th, 2006, professor WU You-fu from Shanghai University of International Studies said in an interview that China should consider discarding dragon as the national icon of China as the imaginary creature is considered evil and aggressive by the westerners and as a result it may bring bad reputation to China. A heated debate then began across China, and the majority of Chinese people opposed to WU's suggestion and reaffirmed that dragons occupy a special position in Chinese mythology and are deeply rooted in the country's culture. It symbolizes wealth and power among Chinese people. It has become a symbol of China, a symbol of Chinese, and a symbol of Chinese culture. We are “descendants of Long”. As a matter of fact, there are some problems with the translation of “龙”. Chinese Long should not be translated into dragon. For according to Nida, “translation consists in the reproduction in the receptor language of the message of the source language in such a way that the receptors in the receptor language may be able to understand adequately how the original receptors of the source language understand the original message” (1995, p. 119).

2. The differences between western dragon and Chinese Long

Western dragons and Chinese Long originated from different sources; they have different appearances, different nature, different behaviors and they stand for different things. Moreover, once people run into the two, people have completely different feelings and different attitudes toward them.

2.1 Different sources

Western dragon and Chinese Long are both legendary and imaginary animals but western dragon came into people's mind much later than Chinese Long did. In *Enuma Elish*, a Mesopotamian creation epic written in about

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2000 BC., one of the central figures of the legend is the goddess Tiamat, a dragon like personification of the oceans, who headed the hordes of chaos and whose destruction was prerequisite to an orderly universe. Therefore, western dragon has only about 4,000 years of history and it was usually aggressive and destructive. However, the Chinese Long has a history of at least 8,000 years, originating in the early period of the New Stone Age. Some people assume that Chinese Long's image is the reflection of the picture in the sky when there are thunder and flashlights before rain. Still, the legend has it that the HUNG Di (Yellow Emperor) used a snake for his coat of arms, every time he conquered another tribe; he added his defeated enemy's emblem to his. That is why the Chinese Long looks like a combination of many animals now.

2.2 Different appearances

If two things/objects are completely/mostly the same, they will be in full equivalence and translation between two different languages should be easy, such as "Qiche" in Chinese and "car" in English. But western dragon and Chinese Long are different in appearance. According to Microsoft encyclopedia online explanation, "dragon is a scaly green monster, a mythical creature that has green scaly skin, wings, and a long tail and breathes fire". And *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* considers dragon as a large imaginary animal that has wings and a long tail and can breathe fire (2004, p. 566). It is known that the typical western dragon is a large scaly creature resembling a dinosaur or a huge lizard. It is usually portrayed as having wings and can fly, and often it will breathe fire. However, Chinese Long usually has no wings, cannot breathe fire and its color is usually yellow, not black. For Chinese people, Longs are described visually as a composite of parts from nine animals: the horns of a deer; the head of a camel; the eyes of a devil; the neck of a snake; the abdomen of a large cockle; the scales of a carp; the claws of an eagle; the paws of a tiger; and the ears of an ox. Most of the time, Longs are shown to have a lion-type mane around their necks, on their chins, and on each elbow. They have two antler-type horns, their wide-mouthed heads, and two long "feeler" whiskers spreading out from their snouts.

2.3 Different nature and different behavior

Western dragons are usually considered bad-tempered, evil and brutal. They often tend to live in caves, in mountains or hidden away in the forest, and kill and eat humans. In *Saint George and the dragon*, dragon destroyed the area around Cappadocia; in Greek mythology, the dragon that has nine heads swallowed herds of cattle, destroyed large sum of areas, brought people great disasters; in the *Bible*, "Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon hath devoured him, he hath crushed me, he hath made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me up like a dragon, he hath filled his belly with my delicates, he hath cast me out" (Jeremiah, 51, p. 34); in *Beowulf*, (in about 5-6 century AD) as the treasure it protected had been stolen, the evil dragon began its crazy revenge: it breathed fire to the houses and fields. The fire scorched the land, brought the castle to the ground and killed many Celtic people. However, Chinese Long is traditionary kind, benevolent and noble. Long does not eat anything on earth, it flies into the sky (though it has no wings) in the spring and live under water in the fall. It brings rain to the thirsty land and controls flood when it is to cause losses.

2.4 Standing for different things

In some western folklore of antiquity, dragon is a symbol of violence, aggression and destruction. This concept is found, for example, in *Enuma Elish*, in *Saint George and the dragon*, and in *Beowulf*, etc. In the sacred writings of the ancient Hebrews, the dragon frequently represents death and evil. Christianity inherited the Hebraic conception of the dragon. In Christianity, the dragon symbolizes sin and paganism. The *Bible* said, "and he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent which is the devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years".

Because of its fearsome qualities, dragon was employed as a war emblem. The Roman legions adopted it in the 1st century AD, inscribing the figure of a dragon on the standards carried into battle by the cohorts; the

folklore of the pagan tribes of northern Europe also contained terror-inspiring dragons; the legendary monster was also depicted on the shields of the Teutonic tribes that invaded Britain.

According to *Microsoft encyclopedia* online dictionary, dragon also means “an offensive term for a woman regarded as fierce and formidable”.

What is worse is that, today, some western media use the word “dragon” to describe terrorist or “rogue states”. In 2005, there was a cartoon depicting US President George W. Bush fighting with an ugly dragon, and there were three names inscribed onto it, “Syria, Taliban, and Iran.”

However, Chinese Long enjoys a good reputation and is being respected by most people. Long is a symbol of auspiciousness, harmony, wealth and power. From the West Han Dynasty (206BC-8AD) on, Long began to represent the emperor, and from the Yuan Dynasty (1271AD-1368AD) on, it was only the emperor that could wear robes with a golden five-clawed Long on it. Chinese emperors believed that they were the real Longs, and the sons of heavens. Thus the beds they slept on were called “Long beds”, their thrones called “Long seats” and the emperors’ ceremonial dresses called “Long robes”. Long is a symbol of imperial power, if people want to say “the emperor is happy.” They would say instead, “the Long is in a good mood. This explains why Chinese parents like to name their children as “Long” and some Chinese people’s surname are “Long” as well. Now, Long has become the symbol of Chinese nation, Chinese people like to call themselves “descendants of Long”.

2.5 People’s different attitude toward the western dragon and Chinese Long

Since dragon in the westerners’ mind is evil, vicious and cruel, once they meet the monster they will very much likely feel frightened and terrified. As a result, there were many legends, fairy tales, and religious books in history telling stories about heroes fighting and killing vicious dragons. According to statistics, there are over 1,000 stories in Europe about dragon-killings, the earliest of which is from ancient Greek mythology, in which the son of Zeus, Heracles, killed a nine-headed giant dragon. Other cases of such have been mentioned above, such as *St. George and the dragon*, *Beowulf*, etc. The highest achievement of a hero in medieval legend was the slaying of a dragon.

There are a few western movies today telling heroes fighting the black monster and finally conquered it such as *Dragon heart*, *Harry potter and the bowl*, etc. In Field Forest District in Germany, there is still dragon-killing performance regularly and it has a history of over 500 years. A great number of people from nearby areas go there and enjoy it. A giant dragon which is 18m in length, 4m in width, and 3.5m in height opens its wings, breathes fire and dust from its mouth. At this time, a knight carrying spears goes near it and stabs it to death.

Western dragons are fearsome monsters. People cannot wait to kill them once they appear. On the contrast, Chinese Long is kind, benevolent and awesome, Chinese people admire and love it. It is the national icon of China and once Chinese people, no matter he is in China or abroad, meets the yellow Long, they will certainly feel proud and excited. As it is a symbol of power and wealth among Chinese people, “Long” is carved on the daily necessities, such as vase, bronze ware, cloth and jewelry, etc. Moreover, in the hope that their children will become wealthy, famous and strong, parents put the character “Long” as part of their children’s names. There are also people who have their surname as “Long”.

On various Chinese traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival, the Long Boat Festival, etc., Chinese people at home and abroad, perform Long dancing and Long boat racing to express their good wishes, their expectation of good weather, good harvest and good fortune. Zhuang nationality, Yao nationality in central and south China and Hani nationality in southwest China have “pay-tribute-to-long festival” in every February or March (Lunar calendar). Villagers give pork for Long to “eat”, hoping that Long will protect their family members and their livestock.

3. Resolution

From the above comparisons, we know that western dragon and Chinese Long came to people's mind at different times and they are from different sources; they are different not only in appearances but also in nature and behaviors; they stand for different things and cause people's different feelings on themselves. Western dragon and Chinese Long are different in images and implications, they are not equivalent. "Translation is the exploration of an unbridgeable gap and of a tension between cultures, variable according to the historical time and the socioeconomic motivations of the assessment. Its function is to develop cross-cultural constructions while at the same time bridging and understanding the differences" (Lance Hewson & Jacky Martin, 2003, p. 68). Therefore, the Chinese character "龙" should be translated according to its sound, just as Tofu, Kungfu, Kowtow, and litchi are. But people are not in agreement in this matter, there are at least three options on the table, "long", "liong", and "loong".

Some people argue that the Chinese character should be translated into "Long", the Chinese pronunciation of it. And it is in accordance with "the names of Chinese people and places should be translated as they sound in Chinese." But this will generate more confusion. "Long" in English has already has many meanings attached to it. Following is one testimony of this:

It is a long story about long,
Long long ago,
There is a long,
The long has a long body,
And long whiskers, long tail,
The long lives beside a long river,
It sleeps a long time everyday.

Besides, "Long" is also the Chinese way of saying "wolf".

Still, some others maintain that the Chinese auspicious creature should be translated into "liong", which is also similar to Chinese way of speaking it. They argue that the word "lion" plus the letter "g" can best express its implication. Lion is a large, strong animal of the cat family from Africa and Asia which has yellow-brown fur, and the male having a large mane. It is some sort of similar to Chinese Long. It also means a brave man, a famous person, or a strong country. This is similar to long's implication.

However, in 2004, a Taiwanese scholar called MENG Tian-xiang proposed in one of his papers that Chinese Long should be translated into "loong" which is similar to the former in pronunciation and is origin the transliteration of "long" in English. This kind of translation and its uses are familiar to many Chinese at home and in foreign countries. For example, in Australia, people use the word "loong" to name "loong lantern performance", the famous Kungfu star LI Xiao-long's English name is Lee Siu Loong, the current premier of Singapore is called Lee Hsien Loong. And the two "o"s in "loong" looks like the two eyes of a "loong".

In short, advantages of the translation "loong" include:

- (1) No negative reflections,
- (2) The pronunciation is identical to that in Chinese,
- (3) It is a single word just as it is a single character in Chinese,
- (4) "Loong" is snake-like, thus it is long in length.

As far as concerned, the paper strongly recommends the last option. Chinese character "Long" should best be translated into "loong".

Meanwhile, as the Chinese character "Long" should not be translated into dragon, the English word "dragon" should either be translated into the Chinese character "Long". It should be translated, according to its

pronunciation, into “jiegeng” (劫更), which means “disaster” or “robbery” in English. This translation can fully express dragon’s concept, meaning, connotation and denotation.

4. Ways to make known the revised translation of “loong”

First, of course we must retranslate some traditional names that have a loong in it. For example, we must not use “Dragon Boat Festive”, “Dragon Dance”, “Dragon Boat Racing”, or “the Year of Dragon” any more, instead, we must say “Loong Boat Festive”, “Loong Dance”, “Loong Boat Racing”, or “the Year of Loong”.

Second, we must clarify the differences between dragon and loong and justify the retranslation through television, newspapers, internet and seminars, etc.

Third, to invite more westerners to participate in Chinese loong dancing in festivals. Chinese people in foreign countries have already performed loong dancing outside Chinatown and some foreigners perform loong dancing with Chinese people themselves.

Fourth, to make “loong dancing” an event in Asian Games and Olympic Games.

Last, Confucius colleges in other nations explain loong culture to their students. Performances and presentations organized by China Year in foreign nations should promote the retranslation, loong culture, Chinese people’s love of harmony and peace.

5. Conclusion

From the above arguments, the differences between dragon and loong should have been made clear. We should not abandon loong as the national emblem of China, what we should do is to correct the mistranslation and let western people know gradually the differences between the two and finally understand China, Chinese culture and China’s history. Loong should be a bridge to gap the cultural difference, not a cause of division or misunderstanding. Loong should be a spiritual tie linking all Chinese people across the globe and make Chinese people more united with each other culturally. We should stick to the icon as the symbol of China.

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