



A Mythical Animal Codification in *Wish Dragon* (2021)

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ABSTRACT

Dragons as a well-known mythology in China have been depicted in many films, one of which is *Wish Dragon* (2021). The depiction of dragons in the film is the aim of this research, namely to find out the codification or meaning of the dragons shown in the film. This study uses the theory of cultural identity by Stuart Hall (1989). The research method used is a qualitative descriptive method with data collection techniques using documentation techniques and then analyzed using analytical techniques by Ary et al. (2010). As a result, depictions of dragons in the film *Wish Dragon* are found in paintings, drawings, toys, carvings, main characters, traditional dances, and statues or ornaments. The depiction of a dragon on this object has its meaning based on what the creator wants to express against the background that the film wants to show. This also proves the use of dragons as a cultural identity that is still believed by Chinese people in their daily lives.



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1. INTRODUCTION

In Chinese culture, there are four sacred animals, namely, Lóng (dragon), Qílín (unicorn), Feng Huang (phoenix), and guī (tortoise). Because the role of mythological animals is considered important as part of noble culture, these mythical animals are widely present in works of art. As an object that is often used in works of art, these animals also have meaning. Mirkes and Sergeeva (2011: 1795) in their research on the codification of ornaments on Krasnoyarsk Street, said that an ornament carries a set of meanings and signs from a culture that belongs to the ornament. They also say that disclosing the codified meaning of a particular object will make it possible to understand the cultural code. A cultural code is an information encoded in a certain form to identify a culture. For the Chinese people, the dragon is a spiritual being that gets the highest respect and is considered the most powerful creature. Revealing the codification of a dragon as a mythical animal in a work of art makes it possible to understand the meaning, purpose, and reason behind the dragon's existence.

The dragon is a mythical animal in Chinese mythology and a symbol of wealth and prosperity. Yang Jingrong's definition of the dragon (in Wen, 2012) is a creature that has a long body, a large mouth, and horns. It is a mysterious and unpredictable divine animal that does not exist in the real world. The image of the dragon appears in many forms and is used by people for various purposes, and is still used by all classes of traditional Chinese society in all aspects of daily life. This is popular culture as folk culture, a people's culture that serves the people. Folk art develops from the bottom. It is a spontaneous, native expression of the people, shaped by themselves to suit their own needs, rather than benefiting from high culture. Popular culture is a culture that originates from "the people". It objected to any approach that suggested this was something imposed on "the people" from above. According to this definition, the term can only be used to denote the "authentic" culture of "the people" (Storey 2015: 9).

Williams in Storey (2015), suggests that culture can be used to refer to 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity'. In other words, the culture here means the texts and practices whose

principal function is to signify, produce, or be the occasion for the production of meaning. In China, the dragon is depicted as wisdom, strength, and good luck. There are lots of temples and places of worship in China that present visual dragons as their aesthetic elements, both in 2 dimensions and 3 dimensions.

Previous studies have also examined the Chinese Dragon in Chinese art. According to Zaman (2022), Chinese imperial clothing or dresses are also filled with dragon visualization, especially during the *Qing* dynasty. Zaman said that the dragon is a symbol of wisdom, strength, and luck in Chinese culture. The importance of dragons in Chinese mythology and culture makes the visualization of dragons always appear in various aspects of Chinese society's life. Kustedja et al. (2013) in their research on the meaning of dragon icons as the main element of traditional Chinese architecture said that dragon symbols and icons can survive to this day because they are supported by the concept of dragons that can always provide luck as well as the concept of dragons that can be freely interpreted by the community according to the needs, intentions and cultural references owned by each user.

In China, the dragon has become a cultural identity. According to Hall (1989), Cultural identity is an evolving concept that refers to how people understand and express their cultural group. It includes the values, beliefs, practices, and customs that individuals and groups use to define themselves and their place in society. The use of dragons in Chinese culture has made dragons a popular culture. Popular culture creates mass-produced items that are widely consumed. In this modern era, many dragons have been popularized in films. Like a small dragon named Mushu from the film *Mulan* (1998) who is present as Mulan's protector.

Another film with a Chinese background that has a dragon is *Wish Dragon*. *Wish Dragon* (2021) was released theatrically in China on January 15, 2021, and on *Netflix* internationally on June 11, 2021. This movie is a computer-animated fantasy comedy film written and directed by *Chris Appelhans* and produced by *Sony Pictures Animation* and *Tencent Picture*. Well-known actors such as *Jackie Chan* are also producers and voice actors in the Chinese version of the film. This movie has been nominated for several awards such as the *Annie Awards* (2022) in the category of Outstanding Achievement for Character Animation in an Animated Feature, *Golden Rooster Awards* (2021) in the category of Best Animated Feature, and *International Film Music Critics Award (IFMCA)* (2022) in the category of Best Original Score for an Animated Film. The film also received a rating of 7.2/10 on *IMDb* and 4.7/5 on *Google*.

Wish Dragon is a movie with a strong Chinese cultural background that contains a dragon as a main character, researcher are interested in analyzing dragons in Chinese culture contained in the *Wish Dragon* movie. Not only in the character but Chinese dragons can also be found in decorations, as well as in paintings or drawings. In its use, the dragon usually has its meaning for each work that the creator of the work wants to express. This is what attracts researcher to examine the codification of dragons in *Wish Dragon* movie. In this research, codification means the process of assigning meaning to certain objects, symbols, or character that contain Chinese dragons. Using the theory of cultural identity by Stuart Hall (1989) this research focuses on analyzing how the Chinese dragon is codified in the *Wish Dragon* movie.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative descriptive research methods. This research was conducted by describing the data then the description of the data was developed by interpretation. In this research, the primary data is the movie itself, namely *Wish Dragon* (2021) and the secondary data is a journal, articles, books, and the internet that explain the theory, the dragon in Chinese culture, and previous studies. For the data collection technique, the researcher uses the documentation technique. Documentation is used to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under research (Ary et al., 2010:442). The researcher as an instrument can immediately analyze the data obtained. In this research, researchers use the triangulation method for the data validity. The triangulation method involves evidence from different sources to corroborate and clarify perspectives (Creswell 2014:251). For the data analysis technique, the researcher uses Ary (2010). According to Ary et al. (2010:481), the approaches to qualitative data analysis are described in a few stages, first, familiarizing and organizing to help the researcher to more easily understand the data, second is coding, Coding is the process of creating concepts from raw data, at this stage, the researcher identifies and categorizes the codification of dragons found in the *Wish Dragon* movie, and the third is interpreting and representing, The researcher will explain the codification of dragon by combining theory with the data and the data were represented by picture and the description of the scene captured from *Wish Dragon* movie.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The elaboration of the analysis aims to prove the phenomenon of dragons that are codified in the scenes of *Wish Dragon*. It is the description of any scenes available showing the dragon. The data provided is visual which is captured in the screenshots to refer to the important data followed by paraphrases to bring events around the captured screenshot. The analysis will be the next part of this chapter which uses the theory of cultural identity by Stuart Hall (1989), the Chinese dragon is a symbol of Chinese culture and identity, and its representation in cinema can be seen as a reflection of how Chinese identity is constructed and represented in popular culture. After the finding is gotten, the following part is a discussion based on the finding.

3.1. Data Display and Analysis

The Chinese dragon is a symbol that has been codified into Chinese culture for over a thousand years. The dragon has been associated with power, strength, courage, and good luck and it is often depicted in art, literature, and folklore as a spiritual guardian or divine entity. The meaning and significance of dragons in Chinese culture have evolved, and they continue to be an important part of Chinese cultural heritage and identity.

In the *Wish Dragon* film, dragons are codified in several forms such as drawings and paintings, carvings, toys, one of the main characters in this film, Chinese traditional dance, and statues or ornaments on the roof. Just as the meaning of dragon in Chinese culture is vast and varied, the dragon in this film also has its meaning. The data are as follows.

3.1.1. Drawing and Painting

Drawing and painting intend to the creation by drawing and crafting. Drawing means creating pictures with writing equipment, while painting refers to the creation by painting tools. The data show below.



Picture 2.1 Din and Li Na showing their drawing to each other (00:02:00 – 00:02:38)

In this scene, Din and Li Na, who were still kindergarten students at that time, got an assignment from the teacher to write the word "dragon", but instead of writing the word, Din and Li Na drew a dragon which made them removed from class. As shown in picture 2.1 when Din and Li Na are showing each other a picture of their dragon. Din and Li Na, who at that time did not know each other, became close after finding out that they both liked dragons.

Another piece of evidence showing the dragon is on the scroll in the painted figure as the data,



Picture 2.2 Dragon painting on Mr. Wang's paper scroll (00:24:16 – 00:24:18)

This scene talks about Mr. Wang, Li Na's father, who accidentally shows a scroll of paper about the legend of the teapot containing the Wish Dragon that can grant the owner's wishes when Mr. Wang is talking to the 3

people who are in cahoots with Mr. Wang. At that time Mr. Wang's company was almost bankrupt and he needed a wish dragon to save his company and ordered 3 people to look for a teapot without telling them the contents and use of the teapot. Until the first search, the 3 villains found the existence of the teapot in Din's hand. The attempt by 3 people sent by Mr. Wang to take the teapot failed because Din begged Long to master kung fu.

3.1.2. Toy

The dragon is codified in toys that involve children's circumstances. Children who like a figure will usually also be interested in having a toy like their favorite figure. It is the figure in a toy as the motive of a kite:



Picture 2.3. A kite made by Din and Li Na (00:04:51 – 00:05:33)

This picture tells about Din and Li Na, who have been very close after their introduction at school, who are finishing the kite they made, in picture 2.3. The dragon-shaped kite is dominated by pink and yellow colors that at first glance look like Long Zhu, the wish dragon. After the kite was over, they immediately flew it and played together.

3.1.3. Carving/ Crafting

In general, ceramic crafts, or the data found below is a teapot, that has carvings or pictures on each side to beautify a work. In this film, dragons can also be found in carvings on teapots owned by Din.



Picture 2.4 A teapot containing Long, the wish dragon (00:13:17 – 00: 13:22)

This picture talks about adult Din who is studying with the teapot he got from God. When he grew up, Din did a part-time job as a food courier at a restaurant. While delivering the last order to a bald old man, who has a white beard and wears an undershirt and green shorts who claims that he is a God. Instead of paying, the man gave Din a green teapot with a dragon carving and 3 circles on the side. Din, who was running out of time, accepted the teapot and left.

3.1.4. Character

Apart from objects, dragons are also found as one of the main character named Long Zhu, a pink and purple dragon that has soft fur, talk to the owner of the teapot, fly, and has 4 legs.



Picture 2.5 The first time Long meet Din (00:18:10 – 00:21:30)

The picture tells about Long and Din who just found out that the teapot he got had a dragon in it while Din was on the roof to see the billboard with the model of Li Na. Din initially doubted whether he was daydreaming. He had time to think whether he was dead but Long convinced Din that he was still alive. Long made a brief introduction to Din that he is a wish dragon and the owner of the teapot could grant 3 wishes to Long..

3.1.5. Chinese traditional dance (Lion dance and Dragon dance)

Dragon figures are also found in traditional Chinese dance with costumes that resemble lions and dragons, a Chinese culture that is commonly displayed during Chinese New Year.



Picture 2.6 Long turn into Liong (00:57:30 – 01:00:25)

This scene tells about Din and Li Na who are chased by 3 men of Mr. Wang who intended to steal Din's teapot when Din and Li Na were eating at a restaurant. Din and Li Na immediately walked out of the restaurant but the outside looked crowded with Lion Dance complete with musical instruments and also people who watched the show. Because of being chased by 3 people, Din asked Long to do something, and Long changes into a costume that resembles a lion dance costume but in the form of a pink dragon as shown in picture 2.6. Din and Li Na fought until they finally flew with Long's power and managed to escape.

3.1.6. Statues or Ornament

Many buildings in China use dragon-shaped ornaments, statues, or decorations placed on buildings for decoration or hopes that are still believed by the Chinese people to this day. Below, it describes the data.



Picture 2.7 Dumpling Restaurant of Mr. Wang and Din's mother (01:28:05 – 01:28:10)

This picture is the closing scene, where Mr. Wang, who went bankrupt, had the idea to open a dumpling restaurant after tasting dishes from Din's mother, and they worked together to run the restaurant. Long, who had completed his task, granted Din's 3 wishes and returned to the teapot after saying goodbye to Din and Din handed over the teapot to the god who at the beginning of the film gave the teapot to Din. Din gave the teapot unconsciously; he only saw an old man who turned out to be the god walking around on a bicycle behind him

pulling a cart full of used goods and putting the teapot on the cart. In picture 2.7 it can be seen a restaurant owned by Mr. Wang and Din's mother who use a pink dragon statue like Long above the entrance of the restaurant.

Those data reveal the analysis as follows. The image of a dragon is codified in many tools. Drawing, painting, toy, carving, dances, statues or ornaments, and one of the main characters show similar representation in shape. It is long, has a mustache and beard, and is hairy (in some objects it is described as having scales), has 4 legs, and can fly. The visualization goes along with Liu Yu Jing's description of a dragon (Yoswara et al., 2011) such as a head like a cow's head, a snake's body, fish scales, a mane like a horse, and a goat's beard. The appearance is like a fantasy. It is what Chinese people think about. It is such a myth. He also notes dragon is a myth that lives in the soul of Chinese society for generations as a guide as well as a way of life in socializing. Further, this shape is tightly captured by society from an early age both in an abstract and a material way such as in imagination and visual signs. The choice of the dragon is by reason. First, the dragon is a symbol of the element of good luck. Second, the dragon is believed to serve as a bridge between humans and the spirit world. related to religion, culture, and art in designs. The embodiment of art is made up of ideas, shapes, styles, and also belief in mythology.

The dragon depicted in paintings and carvings in this movie has the meaning behind it as follows. A dragon as in the painting in figure 2.2 depicts the history of the wish dragon in a teapot that can grant the owner's wishes. In figure 2.4 the dragon seen in the carving on the teapot means that the teapot is the teapot described in the painting in figure 2.2 where the teapot contains a dragon that can grant the teapot owner's wish and in figure 2.5 it shows the dragon as one of the characters in this film when Long Zhu first meets Din, it shows that the dragon paintings and carvings in figures 2.2 and 2.4 are real and it is proven that a dragon that can grant the teapot owner's wish exists.

The dragon dance costume in Figure 2.6 codifies the Chinese cultural background regarding the lion and dragon dance culture which are usually performed during the Chinese New Year to bring happiness and drive away evil spirits. The last data in Figure 2.7 shows a dragon statue in a restaurant owned by the family of Mr. Wang and Din's mother. It means wherever dragons are codified there exists a system of belief. Dragon is believed as a hope of good luck. It is supported by Yoswara et al. (2011) that the concept of luck in every ornament is a sign of the existence of the belief. In this film, the restaurant has just started its career and prepares for its first day of opening by putting on a dragon ornament that resembles a pink Long holding a bowl of dumpling soup. It gives a meaning of hope and good luck to the business they are running. This shows that the dragon is a cultural identity inherent in Chinese society. As Hall (1989) notes cultural identity refers to a sense of belonging to an individual or a particular cultural group that involves various factors such as history, language, religion, customs, and traditions.

It is important to pin Chinese history regarding a dragon based on Hall's (1989) physical characteristics. The dragon that appears at this present time are mostly relics of the *Ming* and *Qing* dynasties. It is like a snake, has a beard on the left and right sides of its mouth, scales at the bottom of the neck, and pearls in its grip or mouth as a source of power and wisdom. In the Song dynasty, there was a rule to follow when drawing a dragon, namely the nine "jiushi" characters. A painting master named *Luo Yuan* described the elements of dragon formation. It is deer-horned, camel-headed, with rabbit eyes, snake-like neck, clam-like belly, fish-like scales, claws like eagles, palms like tigers, and ears like cows. At the beginning of the *Song* dynasty, *Zhon Gyu* described a dragon with a head like a cow, a mouth like a donkey, eyes like a shrimp, antlers like a deer, ears like elephants, scales like fish, shapes like people, stomachs like snakes, and legs like male phoenixes (Yoswara et al., 2011: 19).

Meanwhile, the existence of a dragon is found in literature. Two people from the *Song* dynasty and one from the *Ming* dynasty provided a benchmark for the visualization of dragons made of bones from prehistoric fossils and literary works in the form of poetry. This fact shapes the dragon in the Chinese imagination as the indigenous codified dragon. It means a codification belongs to only Chinese people which will differ from other cultures. Even, a variety of dragons appears among tribes and dynasties inhabiting the inside and outside regions of China. This is because of the influence of local culture and foreign culture that entered at that time (Yoswara et al., 2011:20).

Thus, the researcher comes to a finding. The image of the dragon appears for many various purposes. It is used by all classes of Chinese society in all aspects of daily life by royal and common people in both high culture and popular culture. The shaping of a dragon is influenced by the king of certain dynasties. Yet, the shaping dragon from high rank classes society meets the imagination of lower rank which is such as a spontaneous and native expression to suit their own needs. It objected to any approach that suggested the shaping of a dragon imposed on

"the people" from above (the ruler class) (Storey, 2015). A dragon belonging to whatsoever class is the identity of China. Hall (1989) underlines that cultural identity comes from somewhere and has a history, this is built through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. This is the finding.

Based on the research finding, this is a cultural identity of Chinese people which is confirmed by the use of a dragon in both, physical and spiritual works. Talking about identity, Hall (1989) explains that there are 2 perspectives on cultural identity, namely, identity as being and identity as becoming.

From the perspective of identity as being, cultural identity is seen as a unit that is shared or is a basic form that exists within many people who have a common history and ancestry. It is a history passing through time across dynasties in China codifying dragons in daily life. Meanwhile, the second point of view of identity as becoming explains that cultural identity continues to change and undergo transformation. It is found, the depiction of the dragon from the *Xia* dynasty proves that a codification of a dragon has exceeded 40 kinds (Yoswara et al., 2011).

Codification is typically associated with the development of cultural norms, rules, and values and it often involves the creation of a shared understanding of what certain things mean or how they should be used. The dragon is described as a symbol of a cosmic master and an essential element of agricultural societies. The Chinese dragon is a symbol of the Chinese race itself. It is considered religious and functions to bridge the human world and the spirit world (Yoswara et al., 2011:18-19). It is a myth. As Jung (in Segal, 1999) said that myth is encrypted symbolic rather than literal and the symbol is used to convey the meaning, and to interpret myth it is necessary to recognize the motives of the myth as a symbol.

Chinese dragon mythology will continue to be told from generation to generation. Jung (in Segal, 1999) said that myths originated in one society and spread to other places. Adults will contextualize children to dragon culture (Ranjan & Chang, 2010:75) as Din and Li Na figure out by drawing and making dragon-shaped kites. Myth not only conveys a visualization of the process but also brings back the experience of the myth. Retelling the myth of the Chinese dragon can make this myth come to life and be remembered again. (Hall, 1989).

The mythology of Chinese dragons that are strongly contextualized into material culture, show up in art for more than 25,000 years such as vases in the reign of *Chia Ching* (1532-1455). It is decorated with five dragons with imperial claws in the middle of ocean waves. While wine jars colored with dragon patterns, a dragon is popular during the dynasty *Ming* (Ranjan & Chang, 2010:26). In addition to carvings, ornaments, or dragon statues on the roof which are the barrier between sky and earth is a dimension that unites the world and heaven. As in figure 2.7, the dragon is the intermediary between the earthly and heavenly realms (Yoswara et al., 2011:25).

4. CONCLUSION

Dragon as a Chinese mythological creature that is believed to be a creature that brings good luck, wisdom, and goodness is a Chinese cultural identity. Since ancient times, dragons have been used in various ways, such as in paintings, sculptures, and carvings. In its distribution, people in ancient times often told of dragons in poetry, paintings, as well as proverbs. Currently, many dragons have entered the world of cinema both as characters and codified objects.

In the *Wish Dragon* movie, there are 5 objects and 1 dragon-shaped character. The codification of dragons on these objects means that dragons are used by some people to tell a story or history from the presence of dragon figures on these objects. Like the painting in figure 2.2 which tells about a dragon in a teapot that can grant the owner's wish. Meanwhile, the dragon character in *Wish Dragon* shows that dragons are not just myths but real creatures that exist according to their depictions in paintings.

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