

Thousands Years of Evolution of the Dragon Robe

Wang, Yu-Ching

President, the Chinese Textiles and Clothing Association

The origin of dragon motif

The dragon robe of emperor in ancient time has the dragon motif embroidered or woven on it. The dragon on the dress has two capes, four feet with five claws on each and scales on its body. It is said that the dragon can change the size of its body, dive into the water and make waves above the water. It can also fly at the sky. The air it exhales becomes clouds soon, which will give rise to the rain. It is said that there is a dragon palace under the sea, which is the dwelling of the Sea Dragon King. These legends are really fantastic. People even design the dragon snake robe for officials of higher ranks. The dragon snake is an imagery animal of the kind similar to the dragon. Each foot of it has only four claws.

The earliest Chinese character representing dragon so far is those carved on the animal bones and tortoise shells 3700 years ago. Recently, the archeology teams in the Mainland China have excavated ancient relics with dragon decorations on it or in dragon shapes. The jade pieces of dragon shape (A) excavated from the inner Mangolia and the Liaoning area are beautifully carved. The scientific test shows that these jade pieces are probably the works between 6500 B.C. and 4000 B.C. In the excavation site, a dragon shape decoration on the ground was arranged with shells and stones (C) This is quite possible the offering for the death. According to the scientific test, the dragon shape decoration found in Liaoning is probably works of 8000 years ago (B) The dragon motif in that stage is very similar to current motif of dragon. We, therefore, can say that the prototype of dragon was formed much earlier. Some scholars even consider that this ancient dragon pattern must have relation to the totem of some tribe at that time. But, so far, we have not found any direct evidence to support it. According to the crop fossil excavated, Mr. Zhou Chong-fa considers that the decoration of dragon is relevant to the agriculture need of abundant rain. This is similar to the legend of Sea Dragon King. ("The Origin of Dragon" *Bulletin of the National Museum of History Vol. 10 No.2* (National Museum of History, 2000 Feb))

The dragon robe and the dragon snake robe

When and where were the dragon robe and its deriving created? There is no document on any relevant literatures. According to the excavation mentioned previously, the origin of dragon robes must have close relation with them. The "Kun3 dress" (D), a ceremonial costume of emperors and kings 3000 to 4000 years ago, is decorated with dragon motif. The dragon motif on the "Kun3

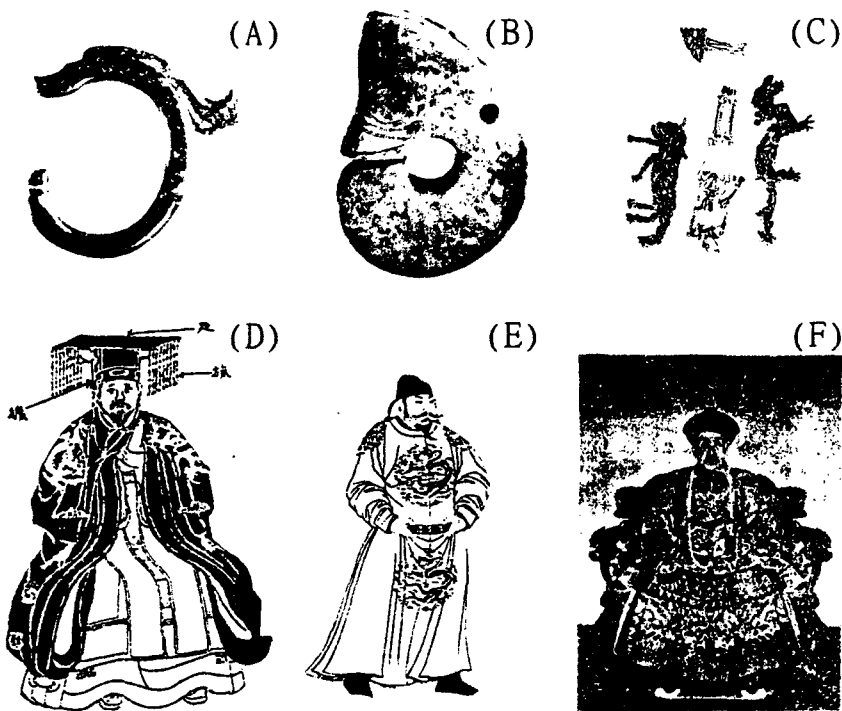
dress” is quite possibly derived from the jade dragon and the dragon shape decoration on the ground. The custom among the ruling class of wearing dragon motif costume has lasted for thousands of years and was continued until 1912 A. D. The dragon robe must be relevant to the design of the “Kun3 dress”. The twelve decorative motifs that appear on the “ Kun3 dress” are the sun, the moon, the stars, the dragon, the mountain, and others. The numbers of combination decreases according to the official rank of the wearer. The lower the official rank of the wearer, the fewer the types of motif it has. Officials of the lowest rank wear only one type of motif (*Zhou Li*) The dragon here is a symbol for being “ever-changing and adaptable”. People even consider it to represent the sovereignty of the emperor.

The earliest documentation of the dragon robe found in the relics and historical archives is the portrait of the emperor Kao Zu of the Tang dynasty collected by the National Palace Museum. On the portrait, the emperor wears a red robe with a yellow dragon motif. Another example is the portrait of the emperor Tai Zong, the son of the emperor Kao Zu. On this portrait, the emperor wears a yellow robe with a blue dragon motif. (E) The historical archive *Sung Shi* shows that in the early period of the Sung dynasty “Kun3 dress” with dragon motif was worn. In the Qing dynasty, the emperor and his queen wore dragon robes. This is the ancient history of the dragon robe.(F)(*Qing Shih*)

Another kind of dragon snake robe is also one of the origins of the dragon robe. The earliest example of this is the robe worn by officials of higher rank. The motif on the robe is the dragon of four claws, which is the dragon snake. (*Yuan Dian Zhang*) In the Ming Dynasty, the emperor Cheng Zu permitted his servant to wear four-claw snake dragon robe. This was because the emperor Cheng Zu obtained his sovereign with the assistance of the servants of the royal court. Officials of higher rank in the Qing dynasty also wore the dragon snake robe. This custom of wearing the dragon snake robe was also prompted after 1912 A.D.

Conclusion

From the description above, we have learned the ancient history of the dragon robe. The earliest one so far discovered is the jade dragon and dragon shape decoration on the ground from 8000 years ago. About 3000 to 4000 years ago, the dragon motif of the “Kun3 dress” was created on the basis of a jade dragon and a dragon-shaped decoration on the ground. During Tang dynasty of the 7th century, the idea of the dragon robe was formed. And at the beginning of the 15th century, the idea of the dragon snake robe was developed. This tradition of wearing dragon robe and dragon snake robe was continued until 1912 A. D.



- (A) The jade pieces of dragon shape excavated from the inner Mangolia and the Liaoning area.
- (B) The jade pieces of dragon shape excavated from the Liaoning area.
- (C) The dragon shape decoration on the ground was arranged with shells and stones, Puyang county, Honan Province, 3500 B.C.
- (D) The "Kun3 dress".
- (E) The Dragon Robe in the Tang Dynasty.
- (F) The "Chau-Fu" in the Qing Dynasty