Huizong and the Imperial Dragon: Exploring the Material Culture of Imperial Sovereignty

Patricia Ebrey*
Department of History
University of Washington

Abstract

This article examines the case of the Song emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1125) in order to explore the dragon as an imperial image in China. Huizong put images of dragons on the bells and cauldrons he had cast, paper he had printed, and stones he had inscribed. His paintings catalogue singled out those paintings of dragons and fish as a distinct category, something no earlier classification of paintings had done. His antiquities catalogue included numerous discussions of dragon imagery on ancient objects.

Huizong’s two “double dragon” seals are given close attention, as seals are a material object with close ties to emperorship from early times. Huizong’s double-dragon seals were in no sense conventional for his time and place. First, they do not depict words or characters, but are pictures. Yet the pictures seem to resemble characters at first glance—they are made out of connected, curved lines. In addition, there is the question of why there are two dragons rather than one, despite the fact that the emperor was a singular individual, the “one man” of classical tradition. Two possible sources for Huizong’s innovation in the design of his double dragon seals are considered in this article: his collection of antiquity rubbings and his interest in Daoist talismans.

These seals encourage us to think about the material culture of imperial sovereignty in a new way. What made the emperor an emperor was a set of practices and conventions that did not change each time a new ruler acceded to the throne. To work, they had to be timeless. Most of the dragon imagery connected to the throne represents the office of the emperor. Yet emperors were at the same time individual men, with personal habits, preferences, talents, and quirks. By Song times, personal seals were a common means of expressing individual identity among literati. Huizong found a way to take the dragon—the symbol of his office—and have it also function as a symbol of himself. This suggests that even with an institution as dominating as the imperial one, there was still room for

* The author’s email address: ebrey@u.washington.edu
more private, creative uses of material and visual culture. For Huizong, the image of the
dragon played a part both in making the throne seem remote, linked to the authority of
antiquity, and in making it approachable, linked to popular culture.

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institution, seals

Historians of China have as yet made little use of material and visual culture in
their analyses of China’s cultural development, leading to a view of Chinese culture
that is disproportionately verbal and intellectual. By contrast, for European history,
there is a long tradition of drawing from the history of art, architecture, and material
culture to provide rich portraits of the culture of an age.¹ One reason historians of
China have not followed European historians’ lead is undoubtedly that less survives of
ancient and medieval Chinese cities, palaces, and monuments. But other types of mate-
rial evidence do survive, and there are rich textual sources that can be mined to recon-
struct many of the material and visual dimensions of Chinese culture.

A richer, more nuanced understanding of Chinese history is possible when we
acknowledge that Chinese culture did not consist solely of words, but also of images,
spaces, colors, objects, spectacles, and performances, all carrying a welter of mean-
ings. Much of the time, of course, there is a complementary relationship between
words and material things, with words used when they are most effective, but things,
sounds, movements used when words alone do not suffice. This is not always the case,
however. If all that the visual and material did was reinforce concepts and ideas
already conveyed in books, it would not be necessary to take the time and make the
effort to reconstruct what was happening visually, as it would not add much to our
understanding of the culture of the time. Elements of material and visual culture, in
other words, are especially interesting when they seem in tension with the established
understandings or to contest principles strongly asserted in widely circulated texts.
Thus, we always want to ask whether and in what ways the verbal and the visual rein-
force each other, fill in gaps left by the other, do things that are hard to do in the other,
or work at cross purposes to each other.

Chinese rulership is a subject that indisputably had important material dimen-
sions. The imperial institution was constituted not just of ancient ideas about the Son

¹ I have in mind classics by scholars like Ruskin, Burckhardt, and Huizinga, to contemporary
works, such as Simon Scharma’s *Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Knopf Publishers, 1987).
See also Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New
of Heaven, textual practices governing the submission of memorials and issuance of edicts, and accumulated traditions of prerogatives and obligations. Also worth scrutiny are the accumulated practices that demonstrated imperial dominance, majesty, and splendor. Imperial rituals may be known today through texts but at the time words were just one element: the experience of participating or observing was shaped as much by music, color, and movement. Palace compounds created spaces that shaped how officials interacted with their sovereign and how the sovereign was seen by larger publics. Emperors exploited their ability to overwhelm, building palaces and gardens of huge size, collecting thousands of palace women, parading through the streets with twenty thousand honor guards. Yet the palace precincts themselves were not generally open to view, and even high officials rarely got to see the palace women or the treasures stored in palace warehouses. Both the openly displayed and the carefully concealed sides of the material underpinnings of imperial majesty deserve to be investigated in depth.

In earlier essays, I have examined several elements in the visual and material culture of the Song throne, such as the processions through the capital when the emperor left the palace, the ritual use of painted and sculpted portraits of imperial ancestors, the display of imperial calligraphy on stone stelae, and the interplay between private and imperial art collecting. In this paper, I am slicing into the larger subject at a different angle, looking at one of the symbols most closely associated with the throne—the dragon. When and where did the throne employ the dragon? What form did imperial dragons take?

It must be admitted that the dragon was a very complex image. By Song times dragon (long 龍) imagery already had a long history, one that involved many different strands that over time became tangled. The dragon was a mutable creature par excel-


lence; it was associated with both the sky and with bodies of water; it evoked both the yin of water and the yang of the ruler. In the *Yijing*, the dragon is associated with the Great Man 大人, which by extension was taken to mean the man of moral courage and later also the emperor. The *Li ji*, *Yi li*, and other classical texts refer to dragons as decoration for the clothing, carriages, and flags of rulers and nobles.

Dragons appear in the *Li sao* 離騷 drawing carriages in the sky and carrying aloft various deities. From then on, dragons were associated with gods and immortality. The Queen Mother of the West 西王母 had a carriage drawn by nine-colored dragons and was sometimes depicted with a dragon by her side. The *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 refers often to immortals flying off on dragons.

The dragon as the deity of water was also of ancient origin. People prayed to the dragon during droughts, or conducted ceremonies to coerce it into providing rain.

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constellations led to identifying the green dragon with the east and opposing it to the white tiger of the west, the vermilion bird of the south, and the black tortoise of the north. The yellow dragon was identified as an auspicious sign early on, and pictures of yellow dragons began appearing among other auspicious things in the Han period (fig. 1).

A later addition to dragon imagery was the dragon of Buddhist origin, the nāga, which began as an Indian water god. In the Buddhist tradition, nāgas could represent...