



Dragons and Wolves: Mythical Symbols of Authority, Strategy and Empire in China and the Turkic World

Ejderhalar ve Kurtlar: Çin ve Türk Dünyasında Otorite, Strateji ve İmparatorluğun Mitik Sembolleri

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Abstract

This article examines how the dragon in China and the wolf in the Turkic world functioned as political and strategic symbols during the nineteenth century, a period marked by reform, foreign pressure, military adaptation, and changing ideas of sovereignty. Rather than treating these figures as decorative remnants of folklore, the article approaches them as instruments of mythostrategy: Symbolic resources through which rulers, elites, and communities explained authority, mobilized loyalty, and translated inherited beliefs into practical forms of governance.

The Chinese dragon is analyzed in relation to the Mandate of Heaven, imperial ritual, bureaucratic hierarchy, and Qing efforts to preserve cosmic legitimacy while

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adopting selective Western military and administrative practices. The Turkic wolf is discussed through Asena, kut, the wolf-headed banner, the Ergenekon narrative, and steppe traditions that linked leadership to ancestry, mobility, collective survival, and martial skill. The comparison also follows these symbols into warfare, showing how dragon imagery supported defensive order and centralized command, while wolf imagery shaped ideals of agility, raid tactics, psychological pressure, and frontier solidarity.

In the modern era, the wolf's public role was partly constrained by sedentarization, Islamization, and imperial administration, whereas the dragon remained central to late Qing court culture and diplomatic representation. The article concludes that both symbols survived modernization not by remaining unchanged, but by being repeatedly reinterpreted as flexible sources of legitimacy, identity, and strategic imagination.

Keywords: *dragon, wolf, Chinese history, Turkic world, folklore*

Öz

Bu makale, Çin’de ejderha ve Türk dünyasında kurt figürlerinin 19. yüzyılda yönetişim, kimlik ve askerî yapı üzerindeki güçlü sembolik rollerini incelemektedir. Önceki yüzyıllardan kalma arkeolojik buluntular, bu motiflerin tarihsel derinliğine işaret etmekteyse de, makalenin odağı esas olarak geniş kapsamlı reformların, teknolojik yeniliklerin ve dış baskıların yaşandığı 19. yüzyıldır. Karşılaştırmalı tarih yöntemi temelinde gerçekleştirilen analiz, kozmik veya soy temelli referansların devlet politikalarını ve toplumsal düzeydeki otorite algısını ne ölçüde yönlendirdiğini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, resmî fermanlar, sözlü anlatılar ve yerel ritüeller, ejderha ve kurt gibi sembollerin iç ve dış baskıların yoğun olduğu ortamlarda dahi uyum sağlama becerisine sahip olduğunu göstermektedir.

Söz konusu semboller, bir yandan ahlaki söylemlerle stratejik planlamayı bütünleştirirken, diğer yandan topluluk içi dayanışmayı besleyen mitik bir çerçeveye sunmuştur. Ele alınan bulgular, efsanevi imgelerin siyasal söylemdeki kalıcılığını vurgulayarak, sembolik mirasın hızla değişen toplumsal koşullar altında meşruiyeti nasıl pekiştirebileceğini ya da yeniden tanımlanabileceğini göstermektedir. Örneğin, Osmanlı/Türk dünyasında kurt figürü, 19. yüzyılın sonunda da kimlik ve askerî mobilizasyonun bir unsuru olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür; aynı şekilde, Qing Hanedanı’nda ejderha, reform girişimlerine rağmen saray ve bürokrasi nezdinde göksel bir meşruiyetin temsilcisi olmayı sürdürmüştür. Bu süreçte, modernleşme ve yabancı etkilerle harmanlanan geleneksel motifler, toplulukların kolektif hafızasını güçlendirecek şekilde yeniden yorumlanmıştır.

Sonuç olarak, 19. yüzyılda hem Çin’de hem de Türk dünyasında ejderha ve kurt sembollerinin, güçlü tarihsel kökenlerini koruyarak reform ve modernleşme hareketlerine uyum sağlayacak biçimde dönüşebildiği ortaya konulmaktadır. Böylelikle geleneksel inançlar tamamen terk edilmek yerine, yeni yönetsel pratiklerle bütünleşmiş ve toplumsal meşruiyet arayışlarına ivme kazandırmıştır. Bu durum, mitik öğelerin hızlı değişim dönemlerinde dahi stratejik ve ideolojik değerini koruduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *ejderha, kurt, Çin tarihi, Türk Dünyası, folklor*

Introduction

Nineteenth-century transformations posed unique challenges to states and communities that had long relied on mythic narratives to solidify authority and collective identity. Although earlier artifacts—from jade pendants to ancient battle standards—demonstrate the deep historical roots of such motifs, the dragon in Qing China and the wolf in the broader Turkic world emerged with renewed urgency during this period. They bridged folklore, governance, and military strategy, appearing in rituals, public discourse, and state policy to reflect cosmological or ancestral foundations through which rulers sought respect and loyalty. Yet the dynamic environment of the 19th century—marked by administrative centralization, external pressures, and varying degrees of modernization—demanded a reevaluation of how mythological references functioned amid evolving legal frameworks and political ambitions.

The most compelling aspect of this relationship lies in the tension between continuity and change. While dragons had traditionally been associated with divine endorsement in imperial China, and wolves offered lineage-based legitimacy among Turkic polities, new ideas of sovereignty, reform, and technological advancement emerged in the 19th century. Diplomatic engagements, internal uprisings, and the proliferation of novel economic structures added further complexity, prompting elites and local leaders to decide whether mythic iconography should be preserved, adapted, or sidelined. Nonetheless, these symbols remained pivotal for mobilizing communities, shaping strategic decisions, and reinforcing moral claims in domestic and international arenas.

This article addresses how dragons and wolves shaped political and social landscapes during a century of significant flux. A comparative historical approach underpins the analysis, drawing on insights from folklore studies, strategic culture, and the history of ideas. Although various polities in East and Central Asia differed in institutional forms and administrative capabilities, mythic symbols exhibited recurring functions: they maintained cultural cohesion, guided narratives of legitimacy, and influenced the structuring of military doctrines. By highlighting parallels and divergences in China and the Turkic sphere, the discussion underscores the extent to which these emblems simultaneously anchored longstanding hierarchies and stimulated innovative responses to reform or crisis.

Methodologically, the article relies on a broad reading of historical sources, including official edicts, epic traditions, and accounts of ritual practices. Emphasis is placed on how mythic imagery intersected with administrative realities, from imperial courts to frontier communities. The research questions revolve around clarifying the roles that dragons and wolves performed as instruments of governance, transcending mere literary or artistic representation to become embedded in political and strategic calculations. Neither region appears monolithic: China encompassed multiple internal factions and external threats, while Turkic societies included both sedentary and nomadic populations, each with its own interpretations of ancestral heritage. Bringing these variations to light demonstrates the capacity of mythic narratives to adapt within different social and administrative structures.

The article is organized into four main sections. The first section explores the mythological foundations of power in each region, focusing on the roots of dragon and wolf symbolism and their initial resonance in political imagination. The second section addresses how these motifs informed constructions of authority and legitimacy, revealing distinct mechanisms through which leaders harnessed cosmic or genealogical references. Strategic thought and warfare form the core of the third section, illustrating ways that dragons and wolves influenced everything from fortification strategies to hit-and-run tactics. Finally, the fourth section examines the modern-era transformation of these symbols, considering how sedentarization, religious shifts, and interactions with Western powers altered or reinforced dragon and wolf imagery by the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

At the conclusion of these analyses, broader implications are drawn regarding the interplay between tradition and adaptability. Rather than framing dragons and wolves as inert vestiges of an older era, the discussion demonstrates their ongoing relevance in negotiating social cohesion and state legitimacy amid dramatic upheavals. Modernization did not uniformly displace myth; instead, it provided new contexts in which dragons and wolves could be reassessed and repurposed. Examining these emblematic figures thus offers insight into how mythological references operate as dynamic agents of cultural continuity, shaping governance practices while accommodating pressures that range from administrative reform to global economic competition. Through this lens, the 19th century emerges not merely as a period of ruptures and realignments, but also as a time in which ancestral imagery remained vital to both conceptualizing and directing political transformation.

1. Mythological foundations of power

Before examining specific symbols like the dragon and the wolf, it is essential to establish the inherent belief power of myths. Myths are not merely traditional tales; they recount the actions of divine beings or mythical ancestors, establishing them as sacred truths that provide exemplary models for human behavior. This shared belief system generates a profound socio-political force—one that can forge a common consciousness and direct collective action more effectively than sheer military might (İnayet 2018: 41). The deliberate mobilization of this mythological power to legitimize political systems, integrate diverse communities, or influence strategic and economic decisions is conceptualized as ‘mythostrategy’ (İnayet 2018: 41-42). Relying on this mythostrategic foundation, mythological narratives have often functioned as pivotal frameworks for legitimizing authority, guiding social cohesion, and articulating collective identities. In many parts of Asia, symbols rooted in cosmological and genealogical traditions shaped how rulers and communities conceived of power.

Mythological narratives have often functioned as pivotal frameworks for legitimizing authority, guiding social cohesion, and articulating collective identities. In many parts of Asia, symbols rooted in cosmological and genealogical traditions shaped how rulers and communities conceived of power. By the 19th century, dragons in China and wolves in the Turkic domain stood out as distinctive emblems that combined centuries of folklore,

religious beliefs, and historical memory. Although the two contexts diverged in language, governance, and sociopolitical organization, parallels emerged in the ways these mythic images intertwined with political discourse, military structures, and popular consciousness.

1.1. The dragon in Chinese political and literary culture



Figure 1 “Knotted Dragon Pendant” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 3rd century BCE)



Figure 2. “Bronze Dragon-type Fibula” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 8th century BCE)

These ancient artifacts illustrate the dragon’s extraordinary versatility, traversing both time and geography in forms that range from a coiled jade pendant to a stylized bronze fibula. Although they predate the formal imperial ideologies of later eras, each piece reflects a fascination with serpentine power and a readiness to invoke draconic imagery for symbolic or protective purposes. Their presence in disparate cultural contexts foreshadows the more cohesive and state-driven appropriation of the dragon motif in China, where it ultimately became entwined with the “Mandate of Heaven.” The discussion now turns to how this emblem evolved within Chinese court traditions, laying the groundwork for the far-reaching political significance it would hold by the 19th century.

The dragon has long been associated with the “Mandate of Heaven,” a principle asserting that rightful governance rests on cosmic approval and moral virtue (Zhang, 2012: 41). This notion transcended mundane rule by embedding imperial authority within a larger ethical and spiritual cosmos. During earlier dynasties, dragon motifs adorned robes, seals, and architectural elements, broadcasting the ruler’s exalted status as the “Son of Heaven” (Li, 2009: 112). By the late Qing period, however, a combination of domestic rebellions and foreign incursions pressured state institutions to adapt while still preserving symbolic cohesion (Wang, 2017: 56). The dragon thus served as both a unifying emblem and a medium through which the court sought to demonstrate its capacity for reform.

Some literati and officials interpreted the dragon’s imagery through moral philosophy, arguing that alignment with cosmic order required balanced governance and ethical conduct. Bureaucratic handbooks emphasized the necessity of maintaining harmony between the imperial center and peripheral regions, often invoking dragon symbolism

to reinforce hierarchical relationships (Chen, 2005: 19). Although new administrative regulations, including revised tax codes or foreign-inspired military tactics, shaped day-to-day governance, imperial decrees continued to reference the dragon as a legitimizing agent. Reform-minded advisors sometimes tempered the celestial aspect of dragon narratives, instead highlighting their connotations of adaptability and protection. Others retained a more traditional interpretation, underscoring a sacred connection that could unify diverse ethnic and regional groups under a single moral authority (Chang, 2015: 47–48).

Varying literary genres also contributed to the evolution of dragon imagery. Some popular tales linked dragons with natural forces, suggesting that the emperor's capacity to harness these forces indicated righteous rule (Zhou, 2013: 77). Over time, official writings and local folklore influenced each other, resulting in a multifaceted dragon concept that remained integral to the state's identity. Even in regions experiencing intense modernization pressures, public pageantry incorporated dragon symbols to evoke loyalty and resilience. Thus, despite mounting challenges to Qing governance, the dragon retained enough cultural potency to bridge reform efforts with ancestral continuities.

1.2. The wolf as a totemic symbol in Turkic leadership and folklore

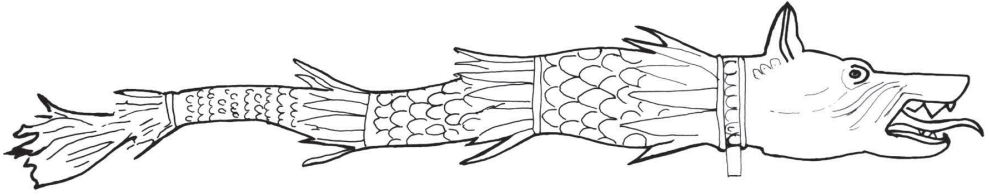


Figure 3. “Draco” (Dacian war banner) with a wolf-headed form (Collins, 2014: 204)

On Figure 3, this depiction of the so-called Draco banner, featuring a wolf's head and a serpentine tail, highlights the ancient practice of merging lupine iconography with other mythic elements to project martial power. As detailed by Andrew Collins (2014: 204), the Dacians and other groups in late antiquity may have employed this standard to instill fear in enemies or invoke protective cosmic forces. Although its precise origin remains debated, the emphasis on a wolf's head illustrates the deep cultural resonance of the wolf motif long before the emergence of distinctly Turkic polities.

In the broader context of Turkic leadership and folklore, this composite banner underscores how the wolf emblem transcended territorial and ethnic boundaries, forging a shared symbolic language of martial valor and spiritual potency. The motif not only reinforced group cohesion but also foreshadowed later narratives that linked the wolf with genealogical myths and heroic lineages. The following figure further explores how these enduring themes found expression in different media, continuing to shape symbolic identities across Central Asia and beyond.



Figure 4. Parthian-era coin featuring a wolf figure (Çoruhlu, 2024: 114)

On Figure 4, Parthian-era coin, the wolf motif appears in profile, accompanied by astral symbols suggestive of lunar or stellar connotations. As interpreted in the original source, the design may have functioned as a protective amulet or a political emblem, underscoring how ancient societies in the region fused cosmic and lupine imagery to convey power. While the precise cultural affiliations of such artifacts can spark debate—whether tied to Persians, early Turkic groups, or broader steppe influences—the underlying message remains consistent: the wolf stands as a guardian and a herald of martial prowess (Çoruhlu, 2024: 114).

This synthesis of mythic and dynastic elements demonstrates how the wolf symbol served as an adaptable vehicle for legitimizing authority or invoking ancestral roots. Even if distant in chronology from the 19th-century focus of this article, the motif's enduring presence invites comparisons with later Turkic polities that would similarly harness the wolf's imagery in state narratives and military doctrine. The following discussion transitions to these more modern developments, examining how wolf symbolism persisted through centuries of social and political transformation.

In contrast to the celestial undertones of the Chinese dragon, wolf imagery among Turkic groups derived its power from genealogical myths, nomadic traditions, and epics celebrating heroic ancestors. The legend of Asena, which portrays the Turkic people as descendants of a she-wolf, encapsulated themes of mobility, survival, and martial prowess (Roux, 1982: 44). In foundational Turkish scholarship, the wolf is recognized not merely as a genealogical origin but as an institutional symbol of statehood. Bahaeddin Ögel emphasizes that during the Göktürk period, the wolf transitioned from a primitive totem into a sacred emblem of the state (Ögel 1971: 40). This was most notably institutionalized through the 'wolf-headed banner', which served as a tangible representation of sovereignty and divine endorsement, traditionally erected in front of the ruler's tent (Taşağıl 2003: 86). Over centuries, tribal confederations adapted wolf symbolism to legitimize new lineages or consolidate existing

polities, weaving it into social norms and communal rituals (Golden, 2002: 65). By the 19th century, however, sedentarization and increasing contact with centralized empires required fresh interpretations of these narratives (Balci, 2016: 93).

Some elites deliberately employed wolf references in diplomatic or military contexts to sustain morale and assert continuity with ancestral heritage. Oral poets extolled the wolf's fierce independence, reminding audiences that collective identity and loyalty could be upheld even amid shifting alliances or modernization pressures. At the same time, administrative reforms—ranging from tax collection to religious realignments—could clash with the local autonomy historically nurtured by wolf-centric myths. In certain regions, intellectuals sought to integrate wolf symbolism into emergent nationalist discourses, framing it as a rallying point for cultural revival or political consolidation (Acar, 2018: 120–121). Elsewhere, it maintained a more localized resonance, guiding communal decision-making without necessarily aligning with broader state reforms.

Not all governance structures embraced wolf iconography with equal enthusiasm. Some leaders equated nomadic warfare traditions with a perceived lack of bureaucratic discipline, suggesting that continued reliance on martial legends might hinder systematic state-building. Nonetheless, the resilience embodied by wolf mythology still provided emotional and symbolic support during critical moments of transition. Campaigns against external threats or negotiations with powerful neighbors often drew upon narratives that portrayed the wolf as a guardian of steppe freedom. Even where modernization agendas took precedence, references to a shared ancestral totem facilitated communal solidarity in times of upheaval. Consequently, the wolf's adaptability paralleled that of the dragon, albeit through different cultural mechanisms shaped by lineage-based legitimacy and a nomadic historical backdrop.

Dragons and wolves each carried distinct connotations—divine sanction in one realm, ancestral unity in another—yet both served as potent mythological foundations for governance, warfare, and social identity. Throughout the 19th century, rapidly shifting political and technological contexts tested the enduring relevance of these symbols. In China, evolving interpretations of the Mandate of Heaven coexisted with administrative innovations. In the Turkic sphere, kinship-based beliefs intertwined with centralizing reforms and religious transformations. While modernization, external intervention, and internal strife prompted debates on how best to retain or reshape mythic narratives, neither dragons nor wolves disappeared from the sociopolitical landscape.

The next section explores how these symbols intersected with questions of legitimacy and political authority, highlighting the mechanisms by which mythic imagery was mobilized to sustain or challenge existing hierarchies in a century of profound change.

2. Myth, legitimacy, and political authority

Discussions of political authority in 19th-century Asia often relied on long-established mythic structures to justify leadership claims and moral governance. Dragons and wolves, rooted in contrasting cosmologies, nonetheless performed analogous functions in Chinese and Turkic domains, bridging spiritual or genealogical narratives with pragmatic state imperatives.

Their symbolic resonance permeated titles, ceremonies, and legal codes, underscoring a confluence between inherited imagery and the evolving needs of administrative centralization or reform. In some cases, references to mythic creatures legitimized expansions of power; in others, they functioned as checks on arbitrary rule by insisting on continuity with revered ancestral or cosmic standards.

2.1. Imperial symbolism and the construction of authority

Imperial symbolism in the Chinese context revolved around the notion that the ruler embodied a celestial mandate, thereby representing an axis between heaven and earth (Xie, 2010: 28). Public rituals, including enthronement ceremonies and seasonal offerings, repeatedly invoked dragon imagery to reinforce the sanctity of the emperor's position (Zhong, 2011: 84). These events were not mere spectacles; they conveyed political ideals of moral uprightness and paternal responsibility. In practical terms, appeals to divine sanction often justified decisions on legal reform, taxation, and military deployment, since the emperor was presumed to embody a universal moral order (Lin, 2014: 110).

Legitimacy in Turkic polities drew more heavily on lineage-based principles, yet the sense of a leader as a divinely protected or ancestrally ordained figure remained vital (Aydemir, 2018: 56). This ancestrally ordained authority was intrinsically linked to the ideology of universal sovereignty, often conceptualized as the ideal of world domination. As Saadettin Gömeç highlights, Turkic rulers perceived themselves as a chosen entity entrusted by the Sky God to establish cosmic order and spread justice 'from where the sun rises to where it sets' (Gömeç 2024: 871). This imperial mission is vividly reflected in the *Ergenekon* epic—where the wolf serves as the ultimate savior and strategic guide—symbolizing the expansion of Turkic power until there was no place left where the Turkic arrow did not reach (Gömeç 2024: 871). Within this ideological framework, the ancestral wolf was not only a symbol of lineage but the ultimate compass for an imperial mission. Consequently, expanding the empire was heavily justified through these mythological motives, portraying strategic military conquests as a divine duty to elevate the state's global position and ensure the prosperity of its subjects (Gömeç 2024: 871).

Wolf symbolism underscored communal heritage, suggesting that khans or beys who aligned their policies with the ethos of the steppe retained the moral high ground (Golden, 2002: 88). The political power, conceptualized as 'kut' (divine fortune and state power), was believed to be bestowed directly by the Sky God, meaning the possessor of 'kut' was the absolute ruler of the state (Gömeç 2023: 865). Foundational studies by Abdülkadir İnan also demonstrate that in early Turkic and shamanic traditions, a leader's or shaman's vital life force could be spiritually linked to a protective ancestral spirit or an animal companion like a wolf (İnan 1986: 73). Thus, the spiritual authority of early Turkic leaders was deeply intertwined with heavenly mandates and the idea that governance required both physical might and mythical protection. References to heroic ancestors, frequently featured in oral recitations, underscored the leader's obligation to uphold kin-centered values. As states became more sedentary and new administrative frameworks were introduced, mythic lineage

links helped rulers claim continuity with the revered past, bolstering loyalty among tribal confederations and frontier outposts (Roux, 1982: 52).

Varying degrees of centralization shaped how mythic authority was projected. Qing officials at times emphasized the dragon as a unifying symbol, bridging distinct ethnic groups under a singular cosmological umbrella (Zhang, 2012: 44). This unifying approach perfectly illustrates the application of ‘mythostrategy’ in statecraft. As Alimcan İnayet observes, Chinese central authorities systematically employed mythic ancestors, heroes, and symbols to construct a national identity and ensure territorial integrity. By establishing ancestor veneration as a dominant ideology, the central kingdom compelled diverse ethnic groups to spiritually submit to the empire out of respect for these shared mythic figures, effectively transforming the realm into a vast assimilation basin (İnayet 2018: 51). In this context, symbols like the dragon did not merely represent abstract cosmic power, but served as highly functional strategic tools to absorb and integrate peripheral communities into the imperial core.

In contrast, some Turkic realms navigated the delicate balance between clan autonomy and overarching leadership by leveraging wolf narratives to foster unity against external threats. When 19th-century reforms demanded bureaucratic codifications, these reforms sometimes clashed with earlier decentralizing tendencies, prompting debates over how much of the mythic framework should remain embedded in lawmaking or diplomatic negotiation (Alp, 2015: 32).

Despite such tensions, imperial symbolism retained considerable resilience. Occasional failures of leadership were explained in terms of lost moral authority or a breach of the mythical covenant, rather than attributing issues solely to technological or economic shortcomings. The existence of a mythic template for governance created an elastic space in which new ideas, such as foreign-inspired military drills or revised conscription systems, could be molded into longstanding cosmological narratives. Whether the narrative highlighted the dragon’s adaptability or the wolf’s ancestral guardianship, the outcome involved framing administrative changes within a broader moral or genealogical continuum (Chang, 2015: 61).

2.2. Mythological legacies in ruler titles and governance structures

Mythological legacies found concrete expression in the official titles and governance practices of both Chinese and Turkic polities. Imperial edicts issued under the Qing frequently invoked references to the dragon’s protective power, weaving it into proclamations on border defense, tributary relations, and internal regulation (Li, 2009: 113). The vocabulary of rulership thus fused practical mandates—such as collecting taxes or mobilizing troops—with an overarching narrative of cosmic harmony. In Sino-Tibetan areas or Mongolian frontiers, emphasis on the dragon served as a unifying emblem, although local traditions often retained distinct mythic patterns related to their own genealogical lore (Zhao, 2018: 79).

In Turkic domains, ruler titles like “Khan,” “Bey,” or terms referencing the wolf myth signaled a commitment to communal well-being and martial valor (Balci, 2016:

95). Certain decrees explicitly cited ancestral heritage to justify expansions of authority or the reorganization of tribal alliances (Acar, 2018: 125). Mythic heritage was also directly translated into military and administrative organization. For instance, in the Göktürk Empire, the elite royal guards protecting the ruler were officially titled ‘börü’ (wolf), referred to as ‘Fuli’ in Chinese chronicles. This title was not merely decorative but served as an institutional reminder of their mythical ancestral origins and a testament to their unyielding loyalty (Taşağıl 2003: 114). Governing councils or military assemblies sometimes opened with ritualistic acknowledgments of shared wolf lineage, anchoring collective decisions in a storied past. Although the increasing influence of Islamic institutions and parallel sedentarization processes introduced new religious or legal norms, local rulership structures continued to draw on heroic epics to frame debates about resource allocation, alliance formation, and conflict resolution.

The 19th century also witnessed reinterpretations of these symbolic titles as states engaged with European diplomatic protocols and modern conceptions of sovereignty (Wang, 2017: 58). Official correspondences occasionally fused mythic references with newly adopted terminologies, demonstrating an adaptive blend of tradition and innovation. Some leaders sought to demonstrate familiarity with international legal norms while reaffirming a mythic mandate to govern, effectively projecting an image of cultural integrity and political acumen. In certain cases, symbolically charged ruler titles were translated or paraphrased for foreign envoys, prompting intriguing cross-cultural exchanges about the significance of myth in legitimizing power (Yilmaz, 2019: 141–142).

Governance structures thus merged ancient narratives with administrative procedures designed to stabilize large populations and complex economies. In China, local magistrates coordinated with central authorities through a hierarchical system that ultimately traced legitimacy to the dragon throne. Turkic polities employed a patchwork of tribal confederations, religious networks, and emerging bureaucracies, tied together by evocative references to wolf ancestors. Both frameworks experienced internal and external pressures: from peasant unrest, rival elites, and colonial-style encroachments, to cross-regional trade demands. Mythological legacies offered a flexible vocabulary for negotiating these pressures, enabling leaders to justify autonomy, centralization, or reform according to the demands of a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape (Zhou, 2013: 80).

One notable tension emerged when contradictory policies required rationalization under the same mythic umbrella. For instance, campaigns aimed at subduing rebellious factions might rely on dragon or wolf symbolism to rally troops, even if the official rhetoric simultaneously promoted conciliatory or assimilationist measures (Lin, 2014: 112). Likewise, certain edicts championed uniform legal codes while emphasizing the sacred right of local communities to preserve ancestral customs. Mythic references in such texts mitigated potential conflicts by framing contradictory goals—modernizing law vs. respecting traditions—as complementary facets of a broader cosmic or genealogical mandate. This capacity to reconcile dissonant policies underscores the enduring influence of mythical legacies in shaping governance structures well into the late 19th century.

3. Strategic thought and warfare

War and strategy in the 19th century did not emerge in a vacuum of purely rational or technological impulses. Cultural traditions, mythic symbols, and inherited modes of conflict all shaped how military campaigns were conceived, organized, and justified (Baykara, 2019: 67). In both China and the Turkic world, the dragon and the wolf did more than furnish rulers with static icons of authority; these symbols influenced tactical approaches, morale-building measures, and the overarching frameworks through which adversaries were depicted. Examining dragon- and wolf-centered warfare reveals how mythic narratives intersected with shifting military doctrines and the introduction of Western weaponry or organizational methods. Moreover, the manner in which armies or tribal confederations employed these symbols illuminates underlying assumptions about discipline, mobility, and state legitimacy under conditions of turmoil and reform.

The 19th century witnessed a profound reevaluation of strategic principles on a global scale, driven partly by industrial advances and partly by the emergence of new political ideologies (James, 2010: 5). Yet in East and Central Asia, established mythic imagery remained an active player in military planning. Dragons underscored bureaucratic rigor and hierarchical coordination, whereas wolves underscored agility, nomadic resilience, and psychological impact. Such distinctions influenced the design of fortifications, cavalry tactics, and diplomatic negotiations. Whether referencing a cosmic throne or an ancestral lineage, these mythic symbols offered intangible motivators that supplemented logistical capabilities and weaponry. Commanders thus encountered an amalgam of historical tradition and adaptive experimentation, seeking to reconcile deep-seated beliefs with the necessity of confronting modern firepower, naval incursions, and evolving forms of warfare (Köprülü, 2021: 116).

3.1. Dragon warfare: Defensive strategies and bureaucratic command in China

Chinese warfare doctrines by the 19th century, while shaped by Sun Tzu's earlier principles and the broader canon of military treatises, had also incorporated centuries of imperial ritual practice (Guo, 2015: 30). The dragon—aligned with Confucian ideals of orderly governance—reinforced a preference for structured defense, methodical troop deployment, and centralized coordination. Even though border garrisons varied in composition and discipline, the official discourse often underscored the emperor's role as a celestial guardian, implying that the faithful execution of orders safeguarded not just territories but the cosmic balance itself (Lin, 2014: 114). Defensive walls, maritime patrols, and internal security arrangements thus gained legitimacy through a cosmological lens, rendering the army an extension of the imperial mandate.

Reformist voices in the Qing administration introduced selective Western artillery, updated logistical systems, and specialized training units (Wang, 2017: 60). Yet those reforms did not negate dragon symbolism. Instead, certain officials fused new tactical knowledge—such as rifled muskets or steam-powered ships—with arguments that extolled the emperor's ongoing cosmic authority (Zhang, 2012: 46). Public proclamations likened foreign threats to mythical chaos, which diligent officers could counter by remaining faithful

to the moral order embodied by the dragon. Morale-boosting strategies sometimes included elaborate ceremonies in which banners and emblems evoked the protective attributes of imperial dragons (Chung, 2020: 91). Even as the Opium Wars exposed significant deficits in Qing naval and coastal capabilities, official rhetoric persisted in framing defense efforts as necessary actions to uphold universal harmony.

A parallel emphasis on bureaucratic command structures was evident in how the Qing court reorganized provincial armies and placed them under loyal governors or generals (Liu, 2018: 74). The hierarchical chain of command ostensibly mirrored the cosmic hierarchy implied by dragon lore. While pragmatic aims (tax collection, conscription, provisioning) guided policy, the language of imperial decrees kept invoking an overarching symbolic unity. This convergence allowed the Qing state to present modernization drives, such as adopting Western-style shipbuilding or foreign advisers, as extensions of an enduring celestial framework. The result was a defensive doctrine combining entrenched hierarchical governance with sporadic incorporations of global military science, all filtered through the lens of maintaining dragon-centered equilibrium (Zhao, 2018: 81).

3.2. Wolf warfare: mobility, hit-and-run tactics, and psychological warfare

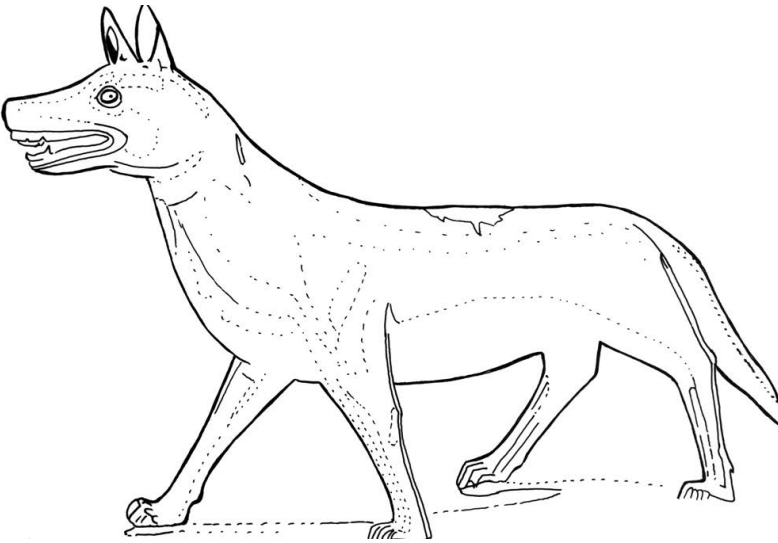


Figure 5. Late 18th–19th century gilded copper wolf statue (Choijin-Lama Temple Museum)

This gilded wolf statue, as shown on Figure 5, dated to the late 18th or 19th century and housed in the Choijin-Lama Temple Museum, exemplifies how wolf imagery transcended purely nomadic connotations and continued to evolve in a religious or ritual context. According to analyses in the original source, the statue's dynamic posture and open jaws evoke both protective and combative qualities, reflecting a synthesis of older Turkic-Mongol traditions with Buddhist influences. Such a portrayal underlines the wolf's enduring association with

vigilance and martial valor, even as steppe societies adapted to changing spiritual currents. In the broader framework of 19th-century Turkic warfare, this figure illustrates how mythic symbols supported not only tactical practices but also psychological and cultural dimensions of conflict. The subsequent discussion further examines how these symbolic elements shaped actual military engagements in an era of rapid political transformation (Çoruhlu, 2024: 112).

In contrast, Turkic warfare traditions often revolved around swift cavalry raids, feigned retreats, and a deep familiarity with steppe geography (Ateş, 2017: 39). The wolf's symbolic power rested on its embodiment of mobility, collective cunning, and a willingness to exploit psychological advantages against larger or more sedentary foes. The wolf goes beyond mere physical ferocity; it inherently represents wisdom, strategic planning, and communal salvation during times of crisis. This tactical identity is vividly captured in the *Ergenekon* epic, where the wolf acts as a master of spatial strategy. By guiding the encircled Turks out of impassable mountains, the wolf motif became inextricably linked with military maneuvering, technological revitalization—such as iron-melting—and strategic wisdom (Taşağıl 2015: 180). By the 19th century, some Turkic entities had incorporated European firearms and administrative reforms, but the underlying ethos still highlighted the wolf's agile and fiercely independent spirit (Ünal, 2019: 22). Leaders who successfully invoked ancestral wolf narratives could rally tribal confederations and local militias, uniting them under the promise of protecting kin-based communities and safeguarding freedom of movement across the steppes.

Military engagements under this paradigm prioritized surprise attacks and encirclement strategies. Oral epics frequently depicted wolves as persistent hunters that identified an enemy's vulnerabilities and exploited them with speed and precision (Togan, 2005: 18). Although certain khanates or beyliks adopted more standardized infantry or artillery regiments in line with international trends, wolf symbolism persisted in shaping tactical discourse. Commanders often framed their campaigns as continuations of ancestral mandates, reinforcing discipline not through complex hierarchies but through shared cultural narratives (Kumuk, 2021: 93). This fluid organization sometimes proved difficult to sustain when faced with well-armed external powers or internal demands for stable taxation and administration. Nonetheless, wolf-centered warfare allowed for flexible coalitions that adapted to shifting alliances and occasional sedentarization policies (Onar, 2015: 127).

Psychological warfare also drew upon wolf imagery. Opponents often viewed swift raids as emblematic of a predatory spirit, creating a climate of uncertainty that undermined enemy morale (Yusufoğlu, 2018: 45). Feigned withdrawals or nighttime assaults leveraged deep-rooted stories in which wolves outwit stronger creatures through cunning rather than brute force. This cultural dimension of warfare influenced how diplomatic negotiations unfolded, since wolf symbolism conveyed both a warning and an invitation to respect tribal autonomy. Even modernizing Turkic elites who aimed to introduce European-style officer academies found value in preserving some aspects of wolf mythos, especially for bolstering unity in frontier or semi-nomadic zones. Thus, a duality emerged: while cannons and rifles increasingly determined outcomes on the battlefield, references to an ancestral totem sustained social coherence and the belief in a rightful cause.

4. The transformation of mythical symbols in the modern era

Modernizing impulses and external pressures accelerated major changes in political, economic, and social structures across 19th-century Asia. Dragons and wolves, long revered as mythic emblems of legitimacy and strategic thinking, did not vanish in this rapidly evolving environment. Instead, these symbols adapted to the shifting demands of new governance models, religious transformations, and cultural exchanges. As empirical sciences and industrial technologies penetrated traditional societies, both the celestial and ancestral aspects of dragons and wolves underwent reinterpretations. Their “modern” incarnations often reflected global influences, yet they remained deeply anchored in local memory and ritual practice (Kasaba, 2021: 101).

4.1. The decline of the wolf: Sedentarization and Islamization in the Turkic world

Turkic communities experienced significant changes in their sociopolitical organization during the 19th century, driven by agricultural intensification, the spread of Islamic institutions, and interactions with centralized empires such as the Ottoman or Russian domains (Yalın, 2018: 73). The wolf, traditionally celebrated in steppe epics for its fierce independence and genealogical significance, faced a more constrained symbolic role as tribal confederations settled into permanent villages or towns. Leadership structures also shifted. Sedentarization often required firmer administrative oversight, taxation systems, and religious hierarchies that sometimes conflicted with the looser kinship networks historically associated with wolf mythology (Aydın, 2020: 54).

A parallel expansion of Islamic practices in Central Asia and parts of Anatolia introduced new normative frameworks that reframed older shamanic or totemic beliefs. Religious scholars occasionally discouraged overt references to wolf ancestry, emphasizing instead a unified Islamic identity binding diverse Turkic groups (Ersoy, 2017: 19). However, many local leaders found value in retaining certain wolf motifs as reminders of communal solidarity, especially in frontier regions where imperial or modern state institutions held weaker sway. Epic narrations performed during festivals continued to extol wolf lineages, reinforcing local pride and serving as a soft counterbalance to sedentarizing reforms (Balkır, 2016: 89).

The economic realignments that accompanied sedentarization frequently introduced tensions over land ownership and resource distribution, prompting new forms of protest or negotiation (Masurov, 2019: 33). In some instances, the wolf’s legendary adaptability and cunning were invoked to justify local autonomy or resistance to heavy-handed administrative edicts. Nevertheless, mounting social stratification, the rise of professional clergy, and the incorporation of tribal lands into larger politico-religious entities contributed to a gradual “taming” of the wolf image in official discourse (Acar, 2018: 128). By the turn of the 20th century, wolf symbolism still resonated in oral traditions but had become less central to formal governance narratives, signaling a partial decline in its earlier omnipresence.

4.2. The dragon's survival: The Qing dynasty and 19th-century reinforcements



Figure 6. “Dragon Robe” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, late 19th century)
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.)

As shown on the Figure 6, This late 19th-century dragon robe demonstrates how imperial symbolism persisted in Qing sartorial culture despite mounting internal and external pressures. According to the original museum record, its intricate design—featuring vibrant dragon motifs swirling amid cloud and wave patterns—signifies the emperor’s role as cosmic mediator and guardian of dynastic legitimacy. Even as Western encroachment and internal dissent threatened traditional rule, garments such as this robe underscored a commitment to celestial imagery in court life, reflecting a strategic fusion of heritage and adaptive governance. The following discussion explores how these visual expressions of continuity intersected with the broader transformations that marked the final decades of the Qing Dynasty.

The Qing Dynasty confronted a different set of challenges, particularly from Western imperial powers and a series of internal rebellions (Rong, 2015: 140). Despite repeated shocks—such as the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and demands for treaty port concessions—Qing emperors maintained dragon symbolism as a core component of official doctrine. Even “Self-Strengthening” initiatives that embraced foreign weaponry or organizational models did not discard the celestial identity of the emperor; rather, they wove new knowledge into a framework that continued to depict the imperial court as guardian of cosmic order (He, 2020: 62).

Dragon imagery persisted in palace architecture, ritual dress, and diplomatic protocols. Envoys who visited Beijing frequently encountered elaborate displays connecting the emperor with dragon motifs, suggesting that foreign diplomacy remained subsumed under a moral order presented as timeless, albeit now partially attuned to global realpolitik (Moore, 2016: 210). In many respects, 19th-century emperors found it expedient to recast the dragon as a

symbol of resilience and adaptive governance. Edicts on modern shipbuilding, new arsenals, or updated educational curricula echoed this stance by positing that the emperor's "divine" oversight was sufficiently flexible to incorporate Western innovations (Fu, 2020: 47).

The push-and-pull dynamic of internal strife and Western encroachment forced the Qing to engage in cycles of modernization that sometimes conflicted with entrenched Confucian norms (Lin, 2014: 116). Nevertheless, the dragon's associations with moral rectitude and heaven-sanctioned leadership proved durable enough to rally segments of society behind imperial restoration projects. By the end of the century, the imperial court's reliance on dragon symbolism had morphed into a more defensive posture, aiming to shield dynastic rule against growing nationalist sentiments and calls for republicanism that began emerging among reformist intellectuals (Wu, 2019: 29). Although these stirrings would blossom further in the early 20th century, the dragon remained a powerful emblem of continuity and legitimacy, even as the Qing apparatus showed signs of fragmentation.

4.3. Sino Turkic encounters at the turn of the 20th century

Cross-cultural perceptions of dragons and wolves became more prominent as Chinese and Turkic societies interacted through diplomatic channels, trade missions, and even shared apprehensions about Western expansion (Yan, 2018: 84). Ottoman envoys stationed in Beijing commented on the lavish displays of dragon motifs, comparing them with certain dynastic ceremonies in Istanbul that invoked a blend of Islamic and historical imagery (Tekin, 2021: 41). Conversely, Qing travelers who passed through Central Asia or Ottoman territories occasionally recorded observations about the continued veneration of wolf legends, though they often perceived such traditions as local curiosities tied to steppe heritage (Shen, 2017: 66).

Increasingly, both sides recognized that myths and symbols could serve diplomatic and propagandistic functions in an era characterized by shifting alliances and the presence of European powers (Karabacak, 2020: 12). A few collaborative undertakings—such as limited trade pacts or cultural exchanges—saw officials framing their negotiations with references to mutual respect for each other's ancestral or cosmological legacies. While these gestures remained relatively modest compared to broader global developments, they suggest an awareness that dragon and wolf imagery transcended purely local usage (Van de Berg, 2013: 90). In some intellectual circles, discussions arose about whether Sino-Turkic collaboration might foster a broader "Eastern solidarity" against colonial pressure, an idea that later evolved into more explicit pan-Asian or pan-Turkic discourses in the early 20th century (Güneş, 2021: 34).

Nationalist and reformist ideologies nonetheless complicated these mythic references. Chinese modernizers who advocated constitutional monarchy or republican governance debated whether the dragon sufficiently aligned with contemporary notions of citizenship (Liang, 2019: 28). Meanwhile, Turkic thinkers grappling with Ottoman decline or Russian encroachments questioned how wolf motifs could integrate with modern statehood and secular legal frameworks (Arslan, 2020: 131). By the turn of the 20th century, both empires faced renewed challenges that redefined the place of mythic symbols in official rhetoric.

Despite this fluidity, dragons and wolves retained enough historical weight to remain potent carriers of cultural identity, accessible for appropriation by reformers, revolutionaries, or traditional elites seeking to rally support or protect existing hierarchies.

Conclusion

Political orders and cultural identities in 19th-century Asia were shaped by multiple factors, including administrative reforms, external pressures, religious evolutions, and scientific advancements. Yet underlying these transformations, powerful mythic symbols continued to command respect and offer interpretive frameworks for legitimacy, warfare, and governance. In China, the dragon embodied an imperial ethos that merged moral authority with expansive territorial claims, providing a cosmological rationale for both ceremonial and practical aspects of statecraft. In the Turkic world, the wolf carried forward genealogical traditions, epic narratives, and collective memories rooted in nomadic heritage, reinforcing notions of kinship-based leadership and resilient frontier communities.

These symbols were never static. Their adaptability became clear as rulers in each region grappled with the twin challenges of modernization and foreign intrusion. When new military technologies and diplomatic conventions appeared on the scene, dragons and wolves did not recede into irrelevance. Rather, they were reinterpreted in light of emerging administrative hierarchies and reconfigured social contracts. Reform-minded advisers in Chinese imperial courts argued for fusing dragon symbolism with Western technological expertise, positing that celestial mandate and industrial progress could coexist. Turkic elites navigating sedentarization and religious consolidation often cited wolf imagery to preserve local autonomy or communal pride, even as they adapted to new taxation regimes and international alliances.

Such mythic references were not mere relics of a vanishing past. Dragons and wolves facilitated moral cohesion by linking contemporary aspirations to ancestral or cosmological precedents. Ceremonies, edicts, and public discourses regularly invoked these icons, weaving them into dialogues on justice, fiscal policy, and military discipline. Whether in urban centers or peripheral zones, mythic motifs bridged pre-modern lineages with the future-oriented rhetoric of progress. This interplay not only maintained a measure of continuity in the face of widespread uncertainty, but it also introduced flexibility into seemingly rigid systems. Dragons could symbolize both Confucian orthodoxy and pragmatic adaptation, while wolves could represent lineage freedom alongside selective acceptance of administrative reforms.

Nevertheless, the limits of mythic authority became increasingly evident as the century drew to a close. Popular discontent, rival nationalisms, and rising secular ideologies opened the door to new critiques of cosmic or genealogical rulership. Intellectual movements called for constitutions, legal equality, or republican models that questioned inherited hierarchies sanctified by dragons or wolves. Changing economic structures also eroded older social arrangements, diminishing the protective aura that mythic references once conferred. Even so, these symbols persisted in collective memories, manifesting in local ceremonies, epic recitations, or even nascent nationalist ideologies that sought to harness their emotive

potential.

From a broader historiographical standpoint, dragons and wolves illuminate how mythic imagery can reinforce state formation and strategic cultures, yet also transform in tandem with political realignments. They highlight the capacity of deeply rooted narratives to accommodate technological innovations, foreign knowledge, or administrative centralization without losing their essential cultural resonance. They likewise demonstrate that modern histories do not simply overwrite ancient beliefs; rather, older cosmologies can metamorphose, aligning with evolving demands or fueling resistance to perceived threats.

Future scholarship could analyze the enduring legacies of these mythic symbols in 20th-century nation-building or contemporary popular culture, exploring whether they remain potent references in collective memory or have been replaced by newer, ideologically driven constructs. Dragons and wolves, in this light, form part of a living repertoire that continues to inform identity debates, aesthetic expressions, and political rhetoric. By bridging archaic heritage with modern exigencies, they represent not static relics but resilient cultural signposts, inviting ongoing reflection on how myth intersects with power in societies experiencing profound transitions.

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