

# [***Happy New Year of the Dragon - or should that be 'Loong'?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BBM-7CV1-DY7V-G001-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Hong Kong (CNN) &#8212; Every Lunar New Year, China ushers in a new zodiac sign from a cycle of 12 auspicious animals.

This year, it's the Year of the Dragon, or more accurately, the "Year of the Loong," says Chinese state media, using its preferred term for the mythical beast.

"Loong" has been used in the past to describe dragons, but this year it's been popularly embraced as the preferred translation of the Mandarin word for a creature long revered in Chinese culture.

The word dragon, state media says, is heavily associated with the Western image of a vicious and fire-breathing beast, unrepresentative of the wise and peaceful folkloric creature many in China know and love.

The Chinese "loong" conjures positivity, nobleness and fortune and therefore should be distinguished linguistically from its Western cousin, state media argues.

Chinese media has dedicated coverage and airtime to promote the new nomenclature over the past week or so, though both "dragon" and "loong" are being used interchangeably in English-language reports.

The push comes as Chinese leader Xi Jinping in recent years has urged the country to assert [*more "cultural confidence"*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/05/china/olympics-beijing-subway-station-name-mic-intl-hnk/index.html) - part of his bid to raise China's international stature. Amid rising nationalism, Western books, movies, and other forms of perceived influence have been viewed with increasing suspicion.

Some Chinese revelers have embraced the "loong" terminology, sending each other blessings of "loong" during the Lunar New Year - including, mostly notably, a top official from Hong Kong.

"We are all here to welcome the Year of the 'Loong'," said the city's Chief Executive John Lee at a tourism event last week that further ignited discussion about whether to use the word dragon, or the term apparently preferred by Beijing.

What does a 'loong' look like?

Just like their Western counterparts, "loongs" have sharp claws and fangs. But unlike the rough, scaly skin of some mythical Western depictions, they have elongated bodies and often shiny golden scales.

A long silky mane runs down their backs, as depicted in most Chinese paintings and sculptures, and they glide effortlessly through the sky despite having no wings.

Their eyes, round and benevolent, are believed to be the window to their soul, as the Chinese saying goes "painting the pupils when drawing dragons," meaning the image of a dragon is incomplete without the finishing touch of the eyes.

Western dragons come in many forms and shapes, from the most fearsome Smaug from The Hobbit to the cuddly version in Pete's Dragon, a 1977 Disney film that featured Elliott, a large green cartoon dragon.

But in a recent article, China's official state news agency Xinhua said: "Western dragons are often described as giant reptiles with wings."

"It is much harder to liken Chinese dragons to any existing animal," it added.

Bradford Lee Eden, a scholar in fantasy writing and Dean of Library Services at Valparaiso University, Indiana, said the popular image of the Western dragon can be traced back to ancient literature and tales, elements of which have carried over to modern-day pop culture productions such as Game of Thrones.

"Traits associated with Western dragons include aggressiveness, love of gold and treasure, greedy, destroyers, and generally enemies of mankind," said Eden, the founding editor of Journal of Tolkien Research.

Fierce Western dragons may have been based on evolutionary theories related to mankind's inner fears, he said, which "resulted in an amalgam creature that could fly, breath fire, cause fear and panic by its presence, and chase on the ground."

Meanwhile, Eastern dragons are generally seen as more contemplative, thoughtful, helpful, and lucky than their Western counterparts, said Eden.

Why are dragons so central to the Chinese culture?

Eden noted that the Chinese "loong" is also seen as the guardian of Chinese emperors, who wore golden "dragon robes" and sat on their "dragon throne."

Royal palaces were adorned with paintings and carvings of dragons, decorations that can also be found in temples and shrines across the country.

Ancient Chinese also viewed themselves as the "descendants of the dragon," the same phrase used in a popular song released in the 1970s that's still sung today as a patriotic tribute to Han ethnicity.

Some couples try to ensure their children are born in the Year of the Dragon, a symbol of prosperity and vigor, often resulting in a bump in the country's birth rate.

The dragon also plays an integral part of the Chinese language, often symbolizing vitality.

For example, "dragon horse vitality" - or "long ma jing shen" in Mandarin - is a blessing people exchange during Chinese New Year to wish each other a life full of vigor.

Is there a need to tell 'loongs' from Western dragons?

Many on Chinese social media Weibo supported the use of the term.

"It's a good thing because the west has demonized China and then put the name of one of their evil objects on our mascot, which is nothing short of being civilized," one influential user, who has 1.8 million followers, wrote in a post liked by 4,000 others on Weibo.

But the accurate translation should have been "Long" - with a single "o" - based on China's standard romanization, Professor Victor Mair, who specializes in Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out in his blog recently.

"Transcribing long into English 'loong' would cause more problems and confusion than translating it as 'dragon'," he wrote.

Mair also suggested the move to use "loong" appears to be driven more by ***politics*** than language.

He noted that "some patriotic and political sources in the Sinosphere" have been peddling the concept that the Western dragon is fearful.

But he said he doesn't believe that, "since the typical Chinese dragon has horns, claws, fangs, gaping whiskered maw, glaring eyes, snake-like body with scales, [and is] not a creature you'd like to meet in the middle of the night."

Eden, from Valparaiso University, said evil dragons exist in Eastern culture just as there are benevolent dragons in the West.

Their portrayal depends on who's telling the story - and the message they want to convey about their society, he said.

"I think that this emphasis comes from nationalistic and cultural developments that arise from cultures, modern-day nations, and peoples wanting to distinguish themselves and their cultures and ideas from others, in this particular case, to focus on the differences between Eastern and Western society," he said.

By Chris Lau, CNN

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