

# **THE DRAGON OF CHINA**



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BY CHURCHILL RIPLEY

# THE DRAGON OF CHINA.

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**NOTHING** could be more indicative of the genuine intention of the revolutionists in China to bring about entirely different political conditions from those that have been in existence for centuries than the fact that they have abolished the dragon from their flag.

The dragon has adorned the standards and banners of the



AN ANCIENT FOUR- CLAWED DRAGON. [1]

Chinese from the earliest times. The dragon represents not only the present dynasty but the throne of China and has from the most remote period. The dragon has always been a Chinese emblem used as extensively by the native Ming and other dynasties as by the present Ching dynasty, therefore much more than the regaining of native Chinese control is indicated by the discarding of the dragon. Nothing could more clearly bespeak complete and absolute change

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of the Chinese mind itself than the adoption of a new design for the standard.

The revolutionists are evidently determined not only to regain for the Chinese that which has been wrested from them by the Manchus but to create a new China by subduing the "dragon force," or imperialism itself.

Great reverence for this "dragon force" has existed through centuries and seems to underlie all Chinese thought. The emperor has always been spoken of as having the "great dragon face," wearing

the "great dragon robe," and as sitting on the "great



EMPEROR of HIA DYNASTY, 2000B.C.  
Illustration from an ancient Chinese book.

dragon throne." and his voice has ever been called the "dragon's voice."

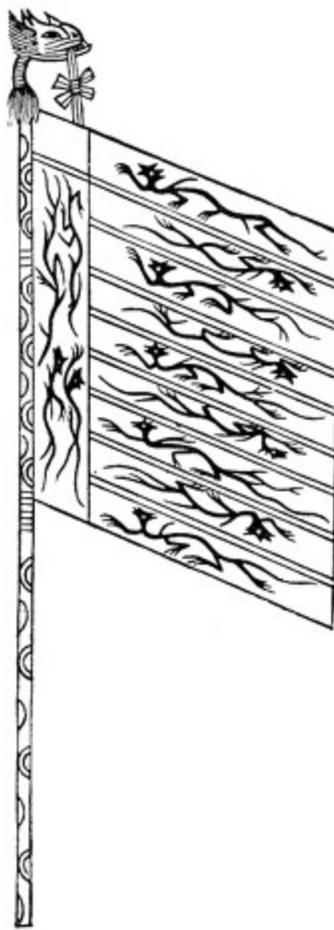
It is therefore not surprising that any protest against existing conditions should be signaled by the giving up of that which is emblematic of imperial power.

The significance of the dragon is realized by any one acquainted with the arts of the Chinese empire. The dragon winds itself about the costliest porcelains and is woven in gold and silver threads in fabrics designed for the emperor, for palace, temple and personal use.

The dragons that adorn art objects differ. Some are represented with three claws, some with four claws and others with five

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claws on each of their four feet or paws. Whatever liberties are taken without permission with the dragon form in art it is supposed and claimed that the dragon with five claws is used only for the emperor and those to whom he gives the right to use it.



EARLY STANDARD.

Showing the three-clawed dragon of archaic form.

Opinions differ in regard to the time when the five clawed dragon became the imperial emblem.[\[2\]](#)  
Some most learned and

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thoughtful students, sinologues of world-wide reputation, hold that the imperial dragon had four claws during the Ming dynasty and three claws before that time. Those making this statement fail to say in which dynasty the dragon was first used as imperial emblem.

A personal visit to the Ming tombs for the purpose of noting the number of claws on imperial sculptures, and a close examination of sculpture and carving of the Ming and earlier dynasties, enforces the conviction that whatever other dragon form has appeared in art, the five-clawed dragon has been the imperial emblem for the past six hundred years at least.



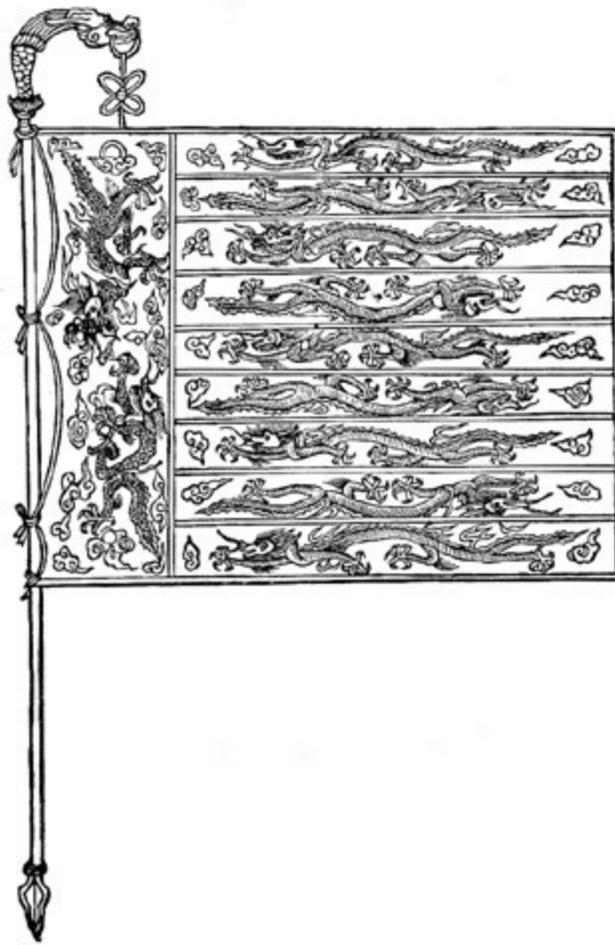
TILE FROM IMPERIAL PALACE, NANKING.  
14th century. Shows dragon with five claws.

The eave tiles of the old imperial palace in Nanking, the home of the early Ming emperors, were decorated with the five clawed or imperial dragon. This emblem, so says the Chinese chronicler, "cannot be borne by any one outside of the imperial service under penalty of death."

Whether the same restrictions governed the use of the five-clawed dragon prior to the Ming dynasty cannot be stated with any degree of accuracy at the present moment, simply because those

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best fitted to search the Chinese records and classics for information on the subject have not been sufficiently interested to look into the matter. It is certain that vast numbers of objects existed which have been described and illustrated in early books of the empire,



IMPERIAL STANDARD.  
Illustration from the '*Rh Ya*.

as decorated with five-clawed dragons; but it does not seem equally certain that only the five-clawed dragon was reserved for imperial use. On the contrary, if many of the old traditions are not apocryphal we must accept the fact that dragons with four claws were represented as being driven by the emperors of early dynasties, and

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upon coins and very early standards of the empire the three-clawed dragon figures as imperial emblem.

In illustrations taken from the *Rh Ya* the five-clawed dragon is found on imperial banners used prior to the Christian era, and at the same time a less fully developed Saurian appears with only three claws.

Were it the intent of the leaders of the present disturbance in China merely to regain for the Chinese a native dynasty, a design from one of the native Chinese standards of the past centuries might have been adopted. The attack is more far reaching and demands the discontinuance of imperial power.

[1] The illustrations in this article are from Gould's *Mythical Monsters* (London, 1886)

[2] While the classics are available to students who are anxious to know about the mythical dragon, it is to *art books* that collectors look for information about art objects. The writers of those books differ in their statements.

Chester Holcomb who catalogued the George A. Hearn collection says that the imperial symbol during Sung and previous dynasties was represented with three claws; during Ming with four, during Ching (present) with five.

Jacquemart (out of date but held to by collectors, based on Stanislas Julien) says: "Imperial dragon is armed with five claws," but gives no date.

Marryat states: "Chinese carry back the origin of dragon as imperial standard to Fuh-hi, 2962 B. C.," but he does not mention claws.

Mayer in his *Chinese Reader's Handbook* mentions "imperial dragon with five claws," but does not state time.

Bushel makes the statement: "The claws, originally three in number on each foot, were afterwards increased to four or five, the last number being restricted to the imperial dragon of last and previous dynasties, as brocaded on imperial robes and painted on porcelain made for the use of the palace."

Doolittle: "The emperor appropriates to himself the use of the true dragon, the one which has five claws on each of its four feet," (not stating when).

Hippisley: "The dragon intimately associated with the emperor is always depicted with five talons on each claw, and it is he alone, properly speaking, who can use such a device upon his property; the dragon borne by princes of the blood has but four talons on each claw."

Dr. Joseph Edkins in 1902 in a personal letter to the author wrote: "The present dynasty was the first to add a fifth claw to the imperial dragon. Before that there were four."