

Comparing Chinese and Central and Eastern European Dragon Cultures: Toward the International Communication of Chinese Loong Culture

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Abstract

Addressing the long-standing misreading of Chinese *Loong* in Western countries as a result of its translation as *dragon*, this study adopts symbolic interactionism as its theoretical framework and employs a questionnaire survey, using Romania as a representative case of Central and Eastern Europe, to examine the cultural differences between Chinese and Central and Eastern European traditions and their implications for the international communication of Chinese *Loong* culture. The findings show that Chinese participants hold significantly more positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong* than do Central and Eastern European participants; the negative impressions associated with local dragon traditions among Central and Eastern European respondents tend to transfer to their evaluations of Chinese *Loong*; and acceptance of the term *Loong* and intercultural empathy both demonstrate a robust positive correlation with positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong*, making them key predictors of positive cross-cultural perceptions. On this basis, the study proposes strategies, including the gradual promotion of *Loong*, respect for cultural differences, and multi-channel digital communication, with the aim of shifting the communication of Chinese *Loong* culture in Central and Eastern Europe from misreading to empathy.

Keywords

Chinese *Loong* culture, intercultural communication, symbolic interactionism, Romania, *Loong* translation

1. Introduction

As one of the most recognizable spiritual totems of the Chinese nation, Loong culture carries a rich cultural legacy. Yet a seemingly simple translation issue has long placed this symbol in a state of persistent misreading. The translation dilemma of Chinese Loong concerns not only linguistic translation but also the differences and reconstruction of meaning as cultural symbols circulate internationally. In the Chinese context, Loong embodies auspiciousness, authority, and harmony; in the English-speaking world, by contrast, the dragon has often been identified as an embodiment of Satan, a greedy and evil monster that must be slain by the hero [1].

This semantic and symbolic mismatch has repeatedly created difficulties for the international communication of Chinese Loong. In the selection of the mascots for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, for example, Loong, once the most favored candidate, was ultimately not selected precisely because the dragon carries different connotations in Chinese and Western cultures [2]. In his interpretation of symbolic

interactionism, [3] argues that the meaning of a symbol is neither intrinsic to the object itself nor a purely subjective psychological addition; rather, it is constructed through action, interpretation, and negotiation in social interaction. Accordingly, when the same symbol is endowed with sharply different meanings by different cultural communities, intercultural misunderstanding arises.

In recent years, some positive changes have also emerged. In 2024, the Oxford English Dictionary included the Chinese dragon as an independent entry for the first time, explicitly distinguishing it from the evil connotations of the Western dragon as a symbol of auspiciousness and power [4]. Nevertheless, some Western media still employ the negative metaphorical frame of the dragon in reporting on China, associating China's image with the figure of a fire-breathing monster.

To date, no study has specifically examined how people in Central and Eastern Europe actually perceive Chinese *Loong*. Existing research lacks empirical evidence on the communicative effect of the new translation, *Loong*, and has not incorporated local dragon cultures into a comparative framework for intercultural analysis. It is against this practical background that the present study focuses on Central and Eastern European countries, taking Romania as a case, while extending attention to neighboring countries. Through a questionnaire survey, this paper investigates the relationships among audience perception differences, mechanisms of misreading, the effect of translation intervention, the mediating role of empathy, and the efficacy of communication channels in the intercultural communication of Chinese *Loong* culture to Romania.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Differences Between *Loong* and Dragon

Scholars have already offered substantial discussions of the cultural connotative differences between *Loong* and dragon. [1] systematically summarizes the multiple meanings of Chinese *Loong*, including the symbol of nature, auspiciousness, talent and virtue, authority, and harmony, while noting that in Christian culture dragon has been shaped as an embodiment of Satan and a symbol of evil and greed. [5] traces the long evolution of Chinese *Loong* from the proto-*Loong* of the Fuxi era to the fixed image of the three sections and nine resemblances in the Song dynasty. In Western scholarship, [6] examines the mythic and cultic traditions of the *drakōn* in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds; [7], through an analysis of dragon images in medieval Germanic literature, argues that the dragon functions in medieval narratives as a purely evil force whose narrative role is to be eliminated by the hero; and [8] explains, from the four dimensions of medieval natural history, religion, literature, and folklore, the cultural positioning of the Western dragon as a “monster that must be overcome.” [9] advances the discussion to the level of international politics by tracing images of dragons in Western cartoons: the demonization of the dragon in the West, he argues, is not merely a translation problem but a consequence of China's declining international status since the nineteenth century, thereby showing that the international communication of *Loong* is closely connected with national strength and the construction of discursive power. At the level of translation, [2] advocates using *Loong* to sever negative associations, whereas [10] recommends the compromise term Chinese dragon.

These studies have examined cultural differences in depth from the perspectives of cultural connotation, image evolution, historical politics, and translation strategy. However, existing studies are methodologically inclined toward historical textual research and textual analysis and thus lack empirical investigation of the actual perceptual states of ordinary audiences from different cultural backgrounds. At the level of translation, discussions of naming have tended to focus on linguistic equivalence, without systematically linking acceptance of translations to the psychological mechanisms of intercultural audiences and the effectiveness of communication channels.

Because the cultural connotations of Chinese and Western dragon cultures differ significantly, and because audiences' views of the dragon in intercultural communication are easily influenced by their own cultural backgrounds, Hypothesis 1 is proposed:

H1: *Chinese respondents have significantly more positive perceptions of Chinese Loong than do Central and Eastern European respondents.*

Because negative images in local dragon culture may transfer to evaluations of foreign dragon symbols, Hypothesis 2 is proposed:

H2: *Among Central and Eastern European respondents, negative perceptions of Romanian local dragons are significantly and negatively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese Loong.*

2.2 Local Dragon Culture in Romania

Romanian dragon culture is a branch of Western dragon culture and is, therefore, to some extent, representative. To understand the communicative difficulties facing Chinese Loong in Romania, it is necessary to examine local dragon culture within its specific cultural context. Lušić (2024) systematically reviews three major dragon-like figures in Romanian mythology: the balaur, a multi-headed, poisonous dragon; the zmeu, an anthropomorphic dragon-like being; and the zburător, a flying spirit. All three are represented as negative or conquered figures. From the perspective of narrative motifs, [11] analyzes the pattern of “the hero slaying the zmeu on the bridge” and points out that the zmeu is an “evil other” that must be conquered. [12], from a semantic perspective, confirms that zmeu carries a clearly negative connotation in Romanian culture.

These studies reveal that Romanian local culture lacks the concept of an auspicious dragon. From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, when *Loong* enters this context under the name *dragon*, it is readily incorporated into a negative cognitive frame. Nevertheless, existing findings are largely based on media texts and folk literature, lacking first-hand data on ordinary people’s perceptions and offering no empirical test of whether the negative local image of the dragon in Central and Eastern Europe transfers to perceptions of *Loong*.

Because the new translation *Loong* can help sever the negative semantic associations of dragon and reconstruct symbolic meaning, Hypothesis 3 is proposed:

H3: *Among Central and Eastern European respondents, acceptance of the term Loong is significantly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese Loong.*

Because intercultural empathy helps audiences understand the *Loong* symbol from the perspective of the other culture and thereby facilitates meaning acceptance, Hypothesis 4 is proposed:

H4: *Participants’ intercultural empathy is significantly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese Loong.*

Because more frequent exposure to communication channels can deepen cultural understanding and help Central and Eastern European audiences improve their perceptions of the *Loong* symbol, Hypothesis 5 is proposed:

H5: *Among Central and Eastern European respondents, exposure frequency to communication channels is significantly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese Loong.*

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Object and Method

3.1.1 Research Object

The research object of this study comprises two levels: first, the cultural symbol of *Loong* (Chinese dragon) as the subject of communication; and second, the image of Romanian local dragon culture, which belongs to the broader Western cultural tradition, as the cognitive reference system for the receiving audience.

Loong is one of the most representative totems of Chinese civilization and carries multiple cultural connotations, including auspiciousness, power, and harmony [1]. However, because it has long been translated as dragon, it has frequently been misread in intercultural communication. Romanian dragon culture derives from the broader Western cultural tradition while retaining distinctive local features. Its representative figures include the balaur, the zmeu, and the zburător, all of which are portrayed as evil creatures that must be defeated by heroes [11, 12].

3.1.2 Research Method

This study used a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was divided into Chinese and Central and Eastern European versions to measure audience perceptions of Chinese Loong and local dragons, acceptance of the

term Loong, and intercultural empathy [13]. The Central and Eastern European version was based on Romania and extended to other neighboring countries.

3.2 Research Design

This study measured audience perceptions of Chinese Loong and local dragons, acceptance of the translation Loong, and intercultural empathy using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was compiled in two versions: a Chinese version and a Central and Eastern European version. The two versions were kept consistent in their core dimensions and used a five-point Likert scale, drawing on established questionnaire practices [14]. The questionnaire was distributed and collected online through Wenjuanxing, a widely used professional online survey platform in China. The Chinese version targeted mainland Chinese audiences and was distributed through social platforms such as WeChat and QQ. The Central and Eastern European version, presented bilingually in Romanian and English, was targeted through the following channels: Romanian cultural exchange participants who had come to China, Romanian international students in China, Chinese students on exchange in Romania, and Romanian-language majors at Chinese universities. A total of 96 valid Chinese questionnaires and 59 valid Central and Eastern European questionnaires were collected. After data collection, SPSS was used to conduct reliability tests, descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and correlation analyses.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Questionnaire Results

4.1.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 96 valid questionnaires were collected for the Chinese version, and 59 for the Central and Eastern European version. In the Chinese sample, men accounted for 28.13% and women for 70.83%; respondents aged 18-24 accounted for 57.29%, those aged 25-34 for 16.67%, and those aged 35 or above for 26.04%; respondents with a bachelor's degree or above accounted for 88.54%. In the Central and Eastern European sample, respondents who had long resided in Romania and Moldova accounted for 45.76%, those living in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, accounted for 45.76%, and the remaining 8.48% were short-term exchange participants in China or other respondents with knowledge of Central and Eastern European countries. Young respondents aged 18-34 accounted for 42.37%, and those who reported that they "somewhat understood" Chinese culture or had a higher level of understanding accounted for 59.32%. The sample included groups with different ages, educational levels, occupations, and cultural-contact backgrounds, broadly matching the composition of the study's target population.

4.1.2 Reliability Analysis

Reliability tests were conducted on the core scales in both questionnaire versions. The results show that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .781 for the Chinese version and .966 for the Central and Eastern European version. For each subscale, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged between .7 and .9, indicating good reliability. The questionnaire, therefore, demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and could be used for further analysis.

4.1.3 Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the core variables in both questionnaire versions. The results show that Chinese audiences rated most dimensions of the Chinese *Loong* image above 4 points, with an overall mean of 4.07, while their ratings of the Western dragon image mostly ranged between 2 and 3.5 points, with an overall mean of 2.74. Central and Eastern European audiences rated most dimensions of the Chinese *Loong* image between 3.5 and 4 points, with an overall mean of 3.61, while their ratings of the Western dragon image mostly ranged between 2.5 and 3.7 points, with an overall mean of 3.44. These results indicate that Chinese respondents generally evaluated Chinese *Loong* positively, whereas Central and Eastern European respondents showed relatively clear negative perceptions of local dragon images. Chinese respondents' positive evaluations of the Chinese *Loong* were clearly higher than those of Romanian respondents, while their

negative perceptions of the Western dragon image were clearly higher than those of Central and Eastern European audiences. These specific differences are further tested in the subsequent hypothesis testing.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1 Core Hypothesis Testing

This section statistically tests research hypotheses H1 through H5 in sequence.

An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the rating differences between Chinese and Central and Eastern European respondents across evaluative dimensions of Chinese *Loong* and local dragons. The results show that the total score for positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong* in the Chinese group ($M = 38.96$, $SD = 5.29$) was significantly higher than that in the Central and Eastern European group ($M = 24.05$, $SD = 5.55$), and the difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.699$, $df = 82.807$, $p < .001$). Chinese respondents' ratings of Chinese *Loong* in dimensions such as auspiciousness, majesty, and wisdom were significantly higher than those of Central and Eastern European respondents ($p < .001$). H1 was therefore fully supported.

Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant negative correlation between negative perceptions of local dragons and positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong* ($r = -.182$, $p < .05$). In other words, the deeper respondents' negative impressions of local dragons were, the lower their evaluations of Chinese *Loong* tended to be. This finding supported H2.

Acceptance of *Loong* ($r = .817$, $p < .001$) and intercultural empathy ($r = .850$, $p < .001$) were both strongly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong*. Exposure frequency to communication channels ($r = .180$, $p < .05$) was significantly but weakly positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong*. These results supported H3, H4, and H5.

4.2.2 Analysis of Multiple-choice Questions

Cultural Contact Channels. Q26, which measured cultural contact channels, was analyzed separately for the two versions of the questionnaire. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to examine whether the proportions of selections across options in this multiple-choice item were evenly distributed. The data show that the goodness-of-fit test for this item in the Chinese questionnaire was significant ($\chi^2 = 121.878$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$), indicating substantial differences among the option selection proportions. These differences can be compared more specifically through response rates or prevalence rates. Specifically, the response and prevalence rates were notably higher for five options: books/literary works, films/television dramas/animation, social media, festive activities such as dragon dancing and dragon-boat racing, and museums/cultural exhibitions. In the Central and Eastern European version, the goodness-of-fit test for this item was not significant ($\chi^2 = 16.667$, $df = 10$, $p = .082$), indicating that the selection proportions across options were relatively even and showed no significant differences.

Analysis of Current Communication Difficulties. Q32, which measured difficulties in communicating *Loong* culture, was analyzed separately for the two questionnaire versions. In the Chinese version, the goodness-of-fit test for this item was significant ($\chi^2 = 92.711$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$), and differences can be compared more specifically through response rates or prevalence rates. Specifically, three options showed notably higher response and prevalence rates: translation problems, namely the negative associations with the dragon; cultural differences, namely foreigners' difficulty in understanding the connotations of Chinese *Loong*; and a lack of outstanding cultural communication works. In the Central and Eastern European version, the goodness-of-fit test for this item was also significant ($\chi^2 = 18.280$, $df = 5$, $p < .01$), and differences can likewise be compared through response rates or prevalence rates. Specifically, two options showed notably higher response and prevalence rates: cultural differences, namely foreigners' difficulty in understanding the connotations of Chinese *Loong*, and overly monotonous modes of communication.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Local Negative Impressions Lead to the Transfer of Misreading

The results show that Chinese respondents' total score for positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong* was significantly higher than that of Central and Eastern European respondents ($M_{Chinese} = 38.96$, $M_{CEE} = 24.05$, p

< .001). Further analysis indicates that the stronger respondents' negative impressions of Romanian local dragons were, the lower their evaluations of Chinese *Loong* became ($r = -.182, p < .05$). This suggests that the local cultural image of the dragon as "evil and to be conquered" constitutes a negative filter through which Chinese *Loong* is understood, leading to the transfer of misreading among Central and Eastern European audiences.

5.2 Acceptance of *Loong* and Intercultural Empathy Are Core Measures for Improving Perception

The analysis shows that acceptance of *Loong* ($r = .817, p < .001$) and intercultural empathy ($r = .850, p < .001$) were both very strongly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong*. This indicates that adopting the new translation *Loong* and encouraging audiences to understand *Loong* from an empathetic perspective are the two most effective pathways for correcting misreading. On official occasions, academic exchanges, and cultural exhibitions, the *Chinese dragon* and *Loong* should be used in parallel to help audiences gradually become familiar with the new term. In digital content that gathers younger audiences, such as games, films, and television, and social media, *Loong* should be used preferentially, leveraging popular culture to promote audience acceptance. A short video series explaining the translation should also be produced. At the same time, bilingual popular-science materials should be distributed through Confucius Institutes, cultural festivals, and other channels so that audiences can voluntarily adopt the term after understanding its rationale.

5.3 Central and Eastern European Audiences Face a Prominent Problem of Monotonous Communication Modes

Exposure frequency to communication channels was significantly and positively correlated with positive perceptions of Chinese *Loong* ($r = .180, p < .05$). The multiple-choice analysis shows that, in the Central and Eastern European questionnaire, the selection proportions for cultural contact channels were evenly distributed, indicating that local audiences encounter Chinese *Loong* culture through diverse channels such as books, films and television, games, social media, and festive activities, without any particularly concentrated channel. This study proposes a strategy for multi-channel integrated communication, with special emphasis on digital communication. It recommends supporting the overseas circulation of high-quality games featuring *Loong* imagery, such as the *Loong* imagery in *Black Myth: Wukong*, and using interactive experiences to enable players to engage with positive Chinese *Loong* settings through entertainment [15]. It also recommends launching short-video series on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube to compare Chinese *Loong* culture with local dragon cultures in Central and Eastern Europe and vividly explain their differences, as well as cooperating with local digital content creators to expand reach through secondary creation.

5.4 Differences in Perceptions of Communication Difficulties

The empirical results show that Chinese audiences regard translation problems, cultural differences, and the lack of outstanding works as the primary communication difficulties, whereas Central and Eastern European audiences emphasize cultural differences and monotonous communication modes. Communication strategies should therefore respect cultural differences and seek common ground within differences. Strategically, it is necessary to avoid negating the other side's dragon culture and instead follow the principle of "seeking common ground while preserving differences": first acknowledging the uniqueness of Romanian local dragons and their legitimate place in local culture, and then pointing out that Chinese *Loong* is likewise closely connected with nature, thereby reducing audiences' psychological reactance [16].

6. Discussion

Through a questionnaire survey, this study systematically examined differences in perceptions of Chinese *Loong* culture among Chinese and Central and Eastern European audiences, the causes of misreading, and pathways of empathetic communication. The study finds that Chinese and Central and Eastern European audiences differ significantly in their perceptions of Chinese *Loong*, and that a negative impression from local dragon culture leads to the transfer of misreading. Acceptance of the translation and intercultural empathy play key roles in improving perception. Exposure frequency to communication channels is effective, but Central

and Eastern European audiences have diverse contact channels, the problem of monotonous communication modes is prominent, and Chinese and Romanian audiences differ in their perceptions of communication difficulties. Based on these findings, the study proposes three strategies: gradually promoting the translation of *Loong*, respecting cultural differences, and identifying points of entry through shared meanings, and building a digital, multi-channel, integrated communication approach. These strategies aim to move the communication of Chinese *Loong* culture in Central and Eastern Europe from misreading toward empathy. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a cross-sectional design. Future research may expand the sample size and country coverage, conduct longitudinal tracking studies, and further test the long-term communication effects of the term *Loong* across different media. In sum, this study provides empirical evidence and strategic reference for the precise communication of Chinese *Loong* culture in Central and Eastern Europe, while also offering a research approach that can inform studies of the intercultural communication of other Chinese cultural symbols.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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