

## THE MARK OF THE DRAGON

Within a single Heaven (天 *Tiān*), the ideal image of 'nature' in the complexity of its essence and being, the Earth takes form (土 *Tǔ*), the realm of human activity and action, the space of doing and knowing. Described, following the ideal model of the circular 'nine plains' of heaven, as a square space divided into nine internal territories, themselves square and equivalent. Delimited and 'organized' like a 'cultivated field', to channel and interpret in the best possible way the energies and fruits of nature.

At the heart and essence of this 'cultivated field', highest expression and model of harmony and civilization, at the centre of the Earth, geographically and symbolically, lies the 'middle country' *Zhōngguó* (中國 / 中国), the name with which China has defined itself since ancient times.

Ideally, the 'country' has a square form and is divided, symbolically and administratively, into 'nine internal regions', likewise square and equivalent. In the central region (the 'middle region' of the 'middle country') stands the capital city, the quintessential three-dimensional symbol of an 'artificial construction' elaborated in harmony with the intimate and profound dimension of nature, and integrated without conflict into the outward manifestation of natural space.

Organized on a square plan, the capital city is divided into 'nine internal districts', square and equivalent.

At the centre of the central district rises the palace of the sovereign (王 *Wáng*), whose task is to maintain the constant relationship between Heaven and Earth, administering the 'government' of the country and of civilization.

The 'government of harmony between nature and culture', radiating from the centre outward.

Associated since antiquity with the symbolic role and figure of the sovereign, the dragon becomes, beginning in the 漢 *Hàn* period (206/202 BCE-220 CE), a true imperial emblem, symbol of balance, authority, and power. A central theme in the arts of the court, depicted on garments and objects reserved for high officials and the sovereign, used in official documents and ceremonial occasions as a mark of sovereign and dynastic legitimacy, invoked in ritual contexts as a source of harmony and prosperity.

Dragon figures appear as identifying motifs in funerary assemblages and in the decoration of tombs of the imperial family, high officials, and dignitaries from the 漢 *Hàn* period through the last dynasty, 清 *Qīng* (1644-1912).

They are found as decorative motifs with symbolic value up to the contemporary era in the architecture of palaces, throne halls, and ceremonial complexes, on friezes, pediments, roof tiles, gutters, columns, carved brackets, ceilings, and floors, emphasizing the presence and protection of the sovereign's authority and integrating the symbol into the very structure of political space.

They recur in the decoration of the ceramic art of the 元 *Yuán* (1260/1279-1368), 明 *Míng* (1368-1644), and 清 *Qīng* periods, as symbol and mark of the products and principal styles of the imperial manufactories.

Ubiquitous in the 明 *Míng* and 清 *Qīng* periods on formal and ceremonial court objects as emblems and symbols of status, they appear on garments worn by emperors, empresses, and high-ranking officials, as well as in official portraits of the imperial family.

On these garments, dragon motifs adhere meticulously to the dress code detailed in the 大明會典 / 大明會典 *Dà míng huì diǎn* ("Collected Statutes of the *Míng* Dynasty"), in the sections dedicated to rites, ceremonies, and court organization (a dress code also adopted during the 清 *Qīng* period, demonstrating the continuity and symbolic importance of these themes in the representation of imperial power).

In dress, as in formal and ceremonial objects, dragon images and emblems with 'five claws' are reserved exclusively for the emperor, 'four claws' for members of the court and the highest-ranking officials, 'three claws' for senior officials.

A 'visual hierarchy' and 'normative distinctions' defining social and political status through ceremonial costume, finding a classical form of display in the composition of the 'Nine-Dragon Walls' (九龍壁 / 九龙壁 *Jiǔlóngbì*), typical of the 明 *Míng* and 清 *Qīng* periods, placed near major imperial palaces or in ceremonial spaces of the capital city, these walls depict nine dragons (a number with strong symbolic value, referring to the 'nine plains of heaven' and the 'nine territories of earth') with five claws (another number of strong symbolic significance, referring to the 'five cardinal orientations', the five natural elements-agents', the 'five fundamental colours, sounds, or flavours'), that express strength, vitality, and power dancing in cosmic space among coiling clouds (symbol of 氣 / 气 *Qì* as 'life-giving energy'), moving waters, and solid mountains (symbol of the 'active principle' 陰 / 阴 *Yīn* and of the 'active principle' 陽 / 阳 *Yáng* of nature).