

Projection 1



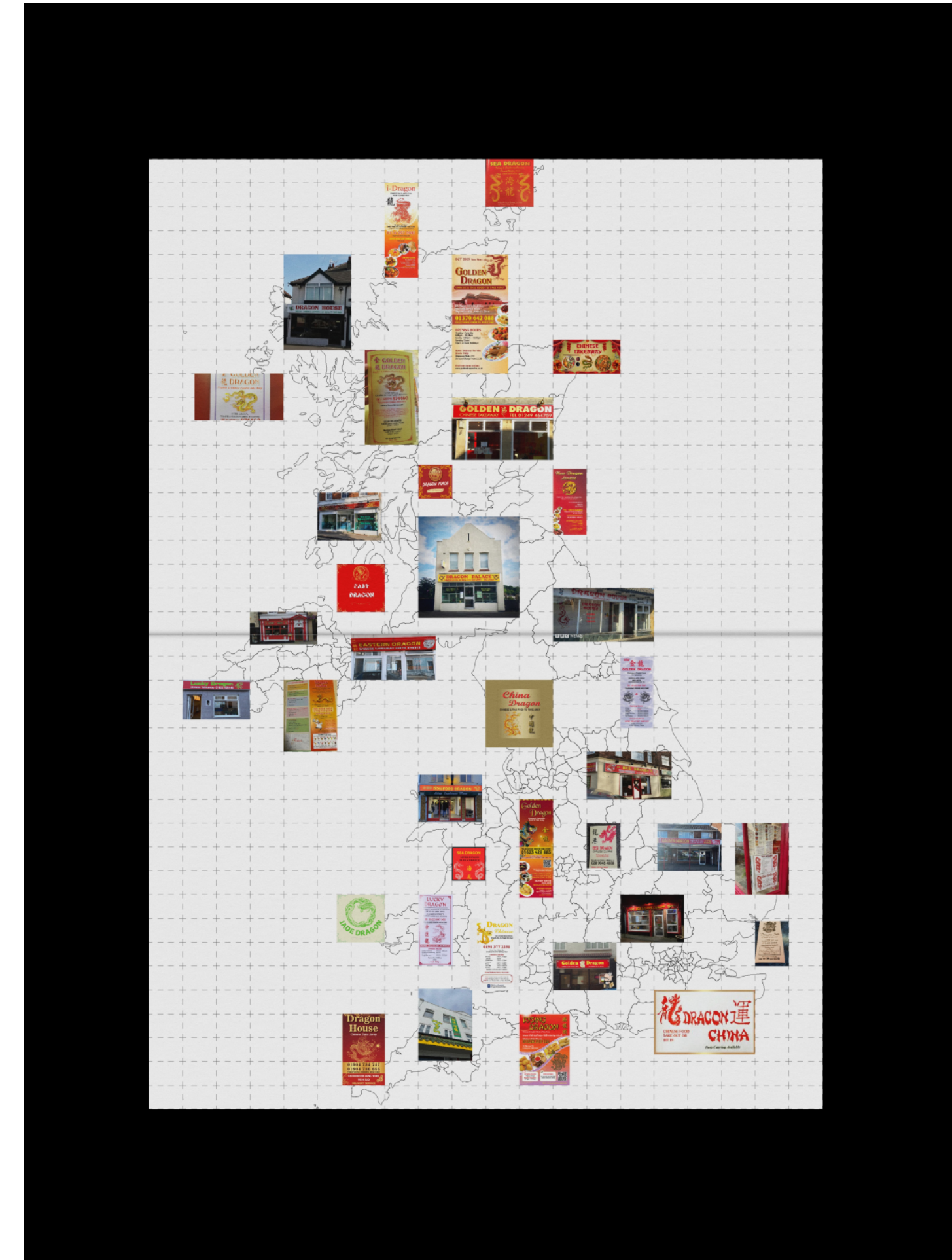
Reflection



Projection 2

Morphological Study of the Dragon as a Symbol

In overseas commercial contexts, the Chinese dragon is frequently used in logos and promotional imagery as a quick signifier of “Chineseness” — a compressed visual shorthand.





Morphological Study of the Dragon as a Symbol

In overseas commercial contexts, the Chinese dragon is frequently used in logos and promotional imagery as a quick signifier of “Chineseness” — a compressed visual shorthand.

Historical Research:

Why did the dragon become a visual symbol of China?

Why do Chinese business use dragon in their shop signs and promotional imagery?

Why did the dragon become a visual symbol of China?

Why do so many Chinese businesses use dragons in their shop signs and promotional imagery?






In many overseas Chinese communities, the dragon has long been used as a commercial sign and decorative motif to represent “China.” Yet this visual convention did not originate within China itself. Instead, it was produced through encounters between China and the outside world in the nineteenth century.

In today’s visual culture, the dragon is widely seen as a symbol of China. Yet before the twentieth century, such an idea would have been almost unimaginable to Chinese people. Within the traditional political order, the dragon was an imperial emblem reserved exclusively for the emperor. Ordinary people could neither use it nor claim it as a marker of their own identity or goods. To represent an entire country through the dragon would have been considered an act of transgression.

After the Opium War, China’s maritime trade with Western powers expanded rapidly. International maritime practice required ships to fly national flags to indicate their nationality. Lacking such a flag, the Qing government was compelled to introduce a triangular yellow dragon flag on its naval vessels in 1862. At first this flag was not a national flag, nor was it widely used within China. However, through diplomatic visits, port ceremonies, and international events, it gradually came to be understood by other nations as representing China. It was not until 1888 that the Qing court officially confirmed the dragon flag as the national flag.

Long before the Qing government formally recognised the dragon flag as a national symbol, overseas Chinese merchants had already recognised its value as a visual sign. Some merchants selling Chinese goods began to display dragon flags in shops, exhibition halls, and trading venues to indicate the origin of their products and attract customers. In overseas contexts, the flag originally used by naval vessels thus took on a new function, transforming from an official emblem into a commercial sign.

At that time in China, the dragon flag remained an imperial emblem that ordinary people could not freely use. Overseas, however, it became one of the most stable visual identifiers of Chinese commercial and community spaces. Even after the fall of the Qing dynasty, this symbol continued to appear in many overseas Chinese communities and commercial spaces, and it persists in various forms to this day.



- 1 Triangular Yellow Dragon Flag made of yellow bunting, used by the Qing dynasty, 1872.
- 2 Cartoon titled “Keeping Account,” published in the American magazine Puck, 1905. The triangular dragon flag appears on the wall alongside the Stars and Stripes and is used as a national flag.
- 3 Yellow Dragon Flag, national flag of the Qing Empire.
- 4 Postcard of the Daboo Fook and Hanking Company building in San Francisco, with a triangular Yellow Dragon Flag displayed on the rooftop, 1904.
- 5 Yokohama Chinatown during the Meiji period, with dragon flags and the Japanese rising sun flag displayed side by side. From 750 Years of Yokohama Chinatown, Yokohama Port Opening Memorial Hall.

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Theoretical Framework:

Orientalism

How the West constructs and represents the “East” through simplified and often stereotypical images.

Self-Orientalism

The process by which oriental subjects adopt and reproduce these visual codes in order to be recognised, understood, and accepted.

This ongoing negotiation and repetition reinforces and intensifies a simplified and stereotypical image from within.

Semiotics and Mythologies

Signifier: A visual form composed of features from multiple animals.

Signified: A mythical creature.

Mythologies (Roland Barthes)

New Signifier: The sign “dragon” as a whole.

New Signified: “Chineseness” or Chinese identity

Ideological critique → *Form*

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Projection 2

Morphological Study

From the collected dragon imagery and logos, most representations are highly detailed and rooted in traditional forms.

I began to explore whether the dragon could be abstracted — moving away from stereotypical visual conventions.

Through parametric and rule-based generation, I experimented with constructing alternative forms of the dragon.



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1. Curvature as a Structural Constant

By comparing collected dragon images, I found that regardless of variations in detail — head, limbs, or ornamentation — the body consistently remains curved.

I therefore analysed the curvature of the body, extracted parameters, and used coding (p5.js) to generate forms.

2. Recognition Under Low Resolution

Even when images are blurred, dragons can still be recognised.

I tested this by reducing image resolution into grids, identifying thresholds of recognition, and reconstructing the image using simple geometric forms.

3. Key Features: Head and Dorsal Elements

The dragon's head and dorsal features (e.g. spikes or fins) play a key role in recognition. They also indicate directionality within the image.

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Audience Engagement Reflection

I brought the experiment back into the commercial context, engaging in conversations and testing with businesses that use the dragon as a visual identity.



Site A
Dragon Inn Club
Chinese restaurant
16-18 Upper Tachbrook St, Pimlico, London SW1V 1SH



Site B
Chasing Dragon
Chinese Takeaway
123 High St, London NW10 4T

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Audience Engagement Reflection

I brought the experiment back into the commercial context, engaging in conversations and testing with businesses that use the dragon as a visual identity.

1. Abstracted forms are often misread, and recognition occurs to varying degrees across individuals, revealing its instability. It tends to rely on features such as the head and spikes, yet these are expressive and difficult to parameterise.
2. Participants prioritised whether the image could be quickly recognised as “Chinese”, rather than questioning stereotypes or exploring alternative visual possibilities. This suggests limited practical demand for such generative tools.
3. The idea of a generative tool assumes the possibility of a “more appropriate” or “neutral” alternative — a premise that is inherently paradoxical.
4. The visual experiments were based on subjective formal analysis, indicating the need to incorporate multiple perspectives and forms of perception.

These reflections shift the project from generating forms to examining how recognition is collectively constructed.

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Projection 2

Morphological Study of the Dragon as a Symbol

The Dragon as a Construct of Perception

The dragon is not recognised because of its inherent meaning, but because people share a common impression of what a dragon looks like.

Its meaning is not fixed or owned by a single culture, but is produced through ongoing cross-cultural recognition.

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Projection 2

The Dragon as a Construct of Perception

This phase will explore how the dragon is constructed through shared perception, rather than defined by a fixed image.

Instead of generating forms myself, I developed a participatory booklet that invites others to recall, describe, and redraw a dragon.

Through a series of drawing tasks under different conditions, the project investigates which visual elements remain essential for recognition.

The final outcome will assemble fragments from participants' drawings into a composite dragon, revealing how recognition is collectively constructed.