



## Exploring Chinese and Celtic Dragon Motifs for the Lunar New Year

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SAN FRANCISCO Dragon motifs in Chinese and Celtic traditions are plentiful and powerful, and San Francisco is blessed to have vibrant communities of both Chinese and Irish who love sharing their respective heritage and culture. The “Keepers of the Steps Program”, an Irish dance history program at the United Irish Cultural Center of San Francisco is delighted to share some detailed images of dragon motifs found on various Irish Dance costumes in their collection (from a cross section of eras) as the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations get underway—ushering in the Year of the Dragon.

Lunar New Year is the beginning of the new year based on the lunar calendar or lunisolar calendar. The lunar calendars follows the lunar phase while lunisolar calendars follow both the lunar phase and the time of the solar year.

In Chinese culture, the majestic and powerful Dragon holds a significant place as an auspicious and extraordinary creature, unparalleled in talent and excellence. It symbolizes power, nobility, honor, luck, and success. The Celtic dragon has long been a symbol of power, strength, and

magic in Celtic art, history, and jewelry. In Celtic mythology, dragons were believed to be powerful, intelligent creatures with the ability to shape shift and breathe fire.

Long an inspiration for many the motifs and design compositions that adorn Irish Dance costumes, the *Book of Kells* is a 9th century illuminated masterpiece that is housed in the Old Library at Trinity College Dublin. It is a rich and fascinating manuscript chock full of symbolism which continues to inspire artists to this day. First and foremost a depiction of the four Gospels, the manuscript cleverly uses symbolism to tell the story of Christianity through decorative illustrations. Many of these images are of animals, including snakes, peacocks, lions, hares, and mice. These figures are used to communicate a deeper meaning to the reader about the Christian faith. There are also images of serpents and dragons and other mythical creatures—often intertwined drawing the viewer in for a closer look. For example, the front page of the Gospel of Luke, has this Celtic Dragon on the lower left corner. Such depictions give some insight into the artist’s penchant for the mythical and the depth of imagination.

According to Chinese culture, “gifted with innate courage, tenacity, and intelligence, Dragons are usually enthusiastic and confident. They are not afraid of challenges, and willing to take risks. They strive to break away from traditional norms and pave the way for a brighter future.” As Irish Dance historians, we appreciate this description as these attributes resonate with our exploration of Irish dance and what it means to be a champion dancer. No wonder dragons continue to be visible in the wide variety of motifs seen in the competitive world of Irish Dance.

It is said that people who are born in the year of the dragon are seen as ambitious, confident and adventurous. I wonder how many Irish dancers (past, present, or future) were born in the year of the dragon (Years of the Dragon include 2036, 2024, 2012, 2000, 1988, 1976, 1964, 1952, 1940 . . . .)!