

# **A Diachronic Study of Dragon Lexemes in Mandarin Chinese: Lexical Change and Semantic Development \***

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*Intergrams* 8.1 (2007):

<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/081/081-hsieh.pdf>

## **Abstract**

This paper aims at exploring the origins, lexical changes, and meanings of dragon lexemes in Mandarin Chinese. The dragon is a mythical animal. Dragon lexemes are generated from legends, literary works, and quotations from celebrities and media. They either describe the character of the referent, the dragon, or the records of ancient customs, or are results of language contact. Dragon lexemes underwent lexical changes in both meaning broadening and semantic shift. Chinese wish for the capability to fly, and they long for luck and value interpersonal relations. These desires are all written with dragon lexemes. The lexical item *long* 龍 (dragon) now is not only a semantic unit denoting ‘positive, super, strong/strengthen, best person, holy’, but also serves as a popular phonetic representation that stands for the phonological unit [+liquids] + [–front vowels] + [+nasal C.]. As a result, *long* has developed this way: semantic element > phonetic element > morphological unit > syntactic marker, all triggered by social change and a new Mandarin structure.

**Keywords:** mythical animal, animal metaphors, lexical change, grammaticalization

## 1. Introduction

The dragon plays a dramatically important role for the Chinese. It is a mythical creature, but it has represented the Chinese for thousands of years. Scholars have speculated variously about the source of this mystical creature: animal speculation says that it is stereotyped from animals like snakes, crocodiles, horses, and crickets; plant speculation argues that it is the image of pines and cypresses; nature speculation claims that its source was clouds, lightning, and rainbows; and totem speculation declares it that was our ancestors' totem (Wang 2001:151). The Chinese character for *dragon*, *long* 龍, appears in *Jiaguwenbian* 甲骨文編 (*Compilation of Oracle Bone Inscriptions*){1} *Oracle Bone Inscriptions*. The 36 *long* ideograms collected in *Oracle Bone Inscriptions* look similar to curling bodies with no feet and either with or without horns. Du (1966:156) asserts that the character is the moon in snake form, representing the idea of the moon and a snake. According to *Erya* 爾雅 (*A Concordance to the Erya*){2} the original dragon has “the antlers of a deer, the head of a camel, the eyes of a hare, the neck of a snake, the abdomen of a crustacean, the squamas of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the paws of a tiger, and the ears of an ox.” It flies and moves with ease on land and in water. And it is variable, as in *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 (*Elucidations of the Signs and Explications of the Graphs*){3} which states that “Dragon can be unclear and can be clear, can be small and can be huge, can be short and can be long.”

A *long* lexeme{4} is defined in this study as any Mandarin Chinese expression that encodes *long* 龍, regardless of whether the *long* refers to the mythical animal or has other metaphorical meanings, for the purpose of revealing the broad extension of *long* 龍 in Mandarin Chinese. The *long* lexemes in this study are fixed expressions like idioms, frozen collocations, grammatically ill-formed collocations, proverbs, routinized formulae, and similes (Moon 1998) that contain the lexical item *long* 龍 (dragon).” We collected 310 dragon lexemes from written and spoken Mandarin Chinese. They are observed first from their origins, i.e., where the lexemes are generated from *Ciyuan* 辭源 (*A Dictionary of Chinese Etymology*){5} and *Daluban Ciyuan* 大陸版辭源 (*A Dictionary of Chinese Etymology, Mainland Edition*){6} are adopted for this purpose. After the lexical change is examined, the study focuses on the semantic development of *long*, *long* lexemes, and the Chinese values that they convey.

## 2. Origins of Dragon Lexemes

In searching for the source or derivation of words or lexemes, one may easily fall into the trap of folk etymology after losing the analogy, i.e., the folk etymological tracing. De Saussure (1959:173) reminds us, in the *Course in General Linguistics*, that

“... folk etymology, can hardly be distinguished from analogy ... the only apparent difference is that analogical constructions are rational while folk etymology works somewhat haphazardly.” The origins of the dragon lexemes are sometimes vague and need careful research. The following discusses the generation and derivation of dragon lexemes. "Generation" refers to the dragon lexemes that can be found in Chinese literature or modern media. "Derivation" refers to those derived from past or present events and cultural activities.

## 2.1 Generation

The Chinese dragon was created to be used as an icon, whereas the western dragon was created to be used as a negative role model{7} because of adopting the image of dragon in the Bible, such as in Revelation 12:9 “The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan.” Dragon lexemes in Mandarin Chinese that date back earlier are mostly abstracts of legends. For example, when a *jiao<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 蛟龍 needs water, it can call the clouds and rain, then fly to the sky; thus we have *jiao<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup> de<sup>2</sup>shui<sup>3</sup>* 蛟龍得水 (a talent gets time and power) {8}. *Long<sup>2</sup>wang<sup>2</sup>* 龍王 is mythically the god who is in charge of the water and rain {9}, *long<sup>2</sup>gong<sup>1</sup>* 龍宮 is the palace in which the *long<sup>2</sup>wang<sup>2</sup>* lives {10}, and *long<sup>2</sup>nu<sup>3</sup>* 龍女 is his daughter {11}.

Later occurrences of dragon lexemes are taken from written literature such as poems, novels, or the Sutra. For instance, we find *long<sup>2</sup>sun<sup>1</sup>* 龍孫 (the offspring of a king) in *Wentinyunshiji* 溫庭筠詩集 (*The Collected Poems of Wen Tinyun*), 龍骨車 (mill wheel) in *Jiannanshigao* 劍南詩稿 (*The Poetry of Jiannan*), and *long<sup>2</sup>tan<sup>2</sup>* 龍潭 (dragon’s pond – a dangerous place) in *Litaibaishi* 李太白詩 (*The Poems of Li Bai*). *Sheng<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>huo<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>* 生龍活虎 (live-dragon-live-tiger – doughty as a dragon and lively as a tiger; full of vim and vigour) is excerpted from the novel *Xinshiyinyuanzhuang* 醒世姻緣傳 (*The Story of a Marital Fate to Awaken the World*), Chap. 18, and *long<sup>2</sup>tan<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>ku<sup>1</sup>* 龍潭虎窟 (dragon-lake-tiger-hole –the dragon’s lake and the tiger’s den; places of extreme danger) is quoted from Chap. 58, *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳 (*Outlaws of the Marsh*). *Long<sup>2</sup>sheng<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup> feng<sup>4</sup>sheng<sup>1</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>* 龍生龍 鳳生鳳 (dragon-bear-dragon phoenix-bear-phoenix – dragons give birth to dragons, phoenixes to phoenixes; like father like son) is found in the *Zhongzhumiaochanshifasi* 中竺妙禪師法嗣 chapter of *Xuchuandenglu* 續傳燈錄, and *hu<sup>3</sup>tou<sup>2</sup>she<sup>3</sup>wei<sup>3</sup>* 龍頭蛇尾 (tiger-head-mouse-tail – to start doing something with vigor but fail to see it through; impressive in the beginning but disappointing in the end) in *Jingdechuandenglu* 景德傳燈錄.

Many modern dragon lexemes are found in the media, for example, the Bruce Lee movie *meng<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>guo<sup>4</sup>jiang<sup>1</sup>* 猛龍過江 (*The Way of the Dragon*) (strongmen) made in

Hong Kong in 1971, and the Taiwanese television show *long<sup>2</sup>xiong<sup>1</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>di<sup>4</sup>* 龍兄虎弟 (dragon-the elder brother and tiger-the younger brother) (capable and vital brothers) with its popular hosts the brothers Chang Fei and Fei Yu-ching come from the entertainment sector. In addition, the Four Dragons in Asia *ya<sup>3</sup>zhou<sup>1</sup>si<sup>4</sup>xiao<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 亞洲四小龍, which refers to the economic strength of Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Singapore, comes from the financial sector.

## 2.2 Derivation

The lexical derivations of dragon lexemes are unlike those of other animal lexemes. According to Hsieh (2004, 2006b), animal lexemes and expressions are derived from an animal's appearance, habitat, and relation to people. For example, many animal lexemes describe the appearance, e.g., *ying<sup>1</sup>gou<sup>1</sup>bi<sup>2</sup>* 鷹鉤鼻 (hawk-hook-nose – aquiline nose) and *yu<sup>2</sup>du<sup>4</sup>bai<sup>2</sup>* 魚肚白 (fish-belly-white – the whitish color of a fish's belly; gray dawn), or the character of the referents, e.g., *gou<sup>3</sup>ji<sup>2</sup>tiao<sup>4</sup>qiang<sup>2</sup>* 狗急跳牆 (dog-rush-jump-wall – a cornered beast will do something desperate), and *ji<sup>2</sup>ru<sup>2</sup>re<sup>4</sup>guo<sup>1</sup>shang<sup>4</sup>de<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>3</sup>yi<sup>3</sup>* 急如熱鍋上的螞蟻 (hot-pot-on-of-ant – as restless as ants on a hot pan). Dragon lexemes mention body parts but have no description, e.g., *long<sup>2</sup>yan<sup>3</sup>* 龍眼 (dragon-eye – longan), or draw attention only to the dragon's movement, as in *long<sup>2</sup>xing<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>bu<sup>4</sup>* 龍行虎步 (dragon-walk-tiger-pace – a great warrior's firm strides are like the dragon's and the tiger's), and *long<sup>2</sup>fei<sup>1</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>wu<sup>3</sup>* 龍飛鳳舞 (dragon-fly-phenix-dance – like dragons flying and phoenixes dancing; lively and vigorous flourishes in calligraphy). A mythical creature has no determined appearance; thus, it offers the speaker and listener space for their imaginations to fill in the missing details on their own.

Dragon lexemes can also be derived from (a) the relics of customs, (b) the records of historical events, (c) extensions of jargon or technological terms, or (d) borrowings from language contact. For example,

(a). The relics of customs: *Long<sup>2</sup>chuan<sup>2</sup>* 龍船 (dragon boat) is a long, narrow boat. Sometimes it is trimmed with dragon patterns. Such boats sail on the fifth of May (of the Chinese lunar calendar), in imitation of a vain attempt to save the patriot and poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (340-278 B.C.) from drowning. *Wu<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>wu<sup>3</sup>shi<sup>1</sup>* 舞龍舞獅 (dragon and lion dance) is a two-man team dancing inside a paper lion seen in Chinese festivals.

(b). Records of historical events: *Ye<sup>4</sup>gong<sup>1</sup>hao<sup>4</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 葉公好龍 (Yegong-favor-dragon) refers to Lord Ye 葉公 (Chunqiu Dynasty, 770-476 B.C.), who loved dragons and decorated his house with various kinds of dragon carvings and pictures but was afraid to see a live dragon. This saying is now used to mean professed love of what one really fears. *Tu<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>ji<sup>4</sup>* 屠龍技 (slaughter-dragon-skill) records the story that Zhu Ping-man

朱泚漫 sacrificed two years and all his property to learn the skill of dragon slaughter. But once he had learned, he had no opportunity to put it into practice {12} and thus refers to an impressive but impractical technique. *Long<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>bang<sup>3</sup>* 龍虎榜 (dragon-tiger-name list) reports the famous writers Han Yu, Li Guan, Li Wei, etc. (Tang Dynasty, 618-906 A.D.), all of who passed an important examination and whose names were announced on the name list.

(c). Technological terms: *Pao<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>tao<sup>4</sup>* 跑龍套 (run-dragon-garment) originally was classic Chinese opera jargon that referred to the extra actors needed to make the entrance of the general more impressive: the larger the entourage, the higher the status of such prominent people. Today it also refers to an unimportant role in a play or a task with minimal meaning. *Bian<sup>4</sup>si<sup>4</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 變色龍 was merely a biological term for a chameleon, but now its meaning has been extended metaphorically to include ‘make-believe’.

(d). Borrowings: *Sha<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 沙龍 is directly borrowed from English *salon*, and indirectly from French *salon* (*sha<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 沙龍 > English *salon* > French *salon*). *Ni<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 尼龍 is borrowed from English *nylon*. *Zhua<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 抓龍 is a loan word from Taiwanese meaning *massage*, and *bao<sup>3</sup>li<sup>4</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 保麗龍 is from English *styrofoam*.

No matter how the *long* lexemes are generated or whence they are derived, they are constantly used in written literature, cultural activities, and daily-life conversations. Inevitable linguistic changes, therefore, are found in the frequent use of *long* lexemes.

### 3. Lexical Change

Different ways of derivation generate different lexical changes. While the *long* lexemes that generated from the relics of customs, records of historical events, and technological terms are either broadened in meaning, or disappear, those borrowed from other languages can give new meanings for the lexical item *long*.

A lot of *long* lexemes have become archaic phrases found only in literature and are not used except in historical contexts, e.g., *long<sup>2</sup>yang<sup>2</sup>* 龍洋 was the silver coin cast during the Qing dynasty that is no longer legal tender, but it is seen in *Yanling-zhonghuakuqianbizhi* 延陵中華古錢幣制 (*Nummus Chinensis Antiquus Ngiana*) in print. *Long<sup>2</sup>shu<sup>1</sup>* 龍書 is an old calligraphy style that can be appreciated in *Puliji* 甫里集 (*The work of Lu Gui-meng*) {13}. *Long<sup>2</sup>xu<sup>1</sup>you<sup>3</sup>* 龍鬚友 refers to a pen found only in *Yunxianzaji* 雲仙雜記 (*The Immortals of the Clouds*) {14}.

Many dragon lexemes remain, but their meanings have changed. First, broadening or semantic extensions: the referents of the lexemes increase, for example, *long<sup>2</sup>zi<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>sun<sup>1</sup>* 龍子龍孫 from ‘the offspring of a king’ to ‘Chinese people.’ *Long<sup>2</sup>chuan<sup>2</sup>* 龍船 originally referred only to the boats used to save Qu Yuan 屈原, but

now it also refers to any boats sailing in the dragon boat festival. *Long<sup>2</sup>di<sup>3</sup>* 龍邸 was once only a king's palace, but now it includes all luxurious houses or villas. *Pao<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>tao<sup>4</sup>* 跑龍套 (run-dragon-garment) refers not only to the extras in classic Chinese operas but also to any unimportant role or task. The lexemes that are the relics of customs, the records of historical events, and borrowings from technological terms tend to initiate semantic extensions since the lexemes are continually used in various situations of daily life.

On the other hand, the meaning of lexemes can be narrowed; for example, *long<sup>2</sup>gu<sup>3</sup>* 龍骨 has several meanings: *water wheel, the central mast of a sailboat, and vertebra*. Recently, however, it is often used to refer only to vertebrae, because water wheels are rarely used nowadays and boats are no longer the common mode of public transportation they once were. In our collected data, examples of meaning broadening are seen more than meaning reduction. As Cipollone and Vasishth (1998:335) pointed out: historically speaking, semantic reductions are relatively less common than extensions of meaning.

Moreover, there are dragon innovations in modern Mandarin Chinese or loan words as mentioned above, such as *shang<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>xiang<sup>4</sup>tiao<sup>2</sup>chong<sup>2</sup> xia<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>xiang<sup>4</sup>tiao<sup>2</sup> long<sup>2</sup>* 上課像條蟲，下課像條龍 (in the class like a worm, after the class like a dragon – previously cowardly, later heroic; in the moment weak, later great). The borrowings result from language contact initiating a change of *long* 龍, which was originally only a semantic unit. This will be further discussed in the next section.

## 4. Semantic Development

We have presented various sources of *long* lexemes. This section delves into the semantic development of the lexemes, namely, the semantic concepts that they represent and the Chinese values they express. The important semantic unit *long* has developed into a phonetic element, and further a syntactic marker in the current trend of language contact.

### 4.1 The concepts of dragon (*long*)

*Long* is a polysemous word in Mandarin Chinese and expresses a variety of concepts for Chinese speakers. Semantically, *dragon* is a lexical item that represents nature (sky, earth, water, fire), divinity, king, and remarkable men and objects, as in the following examples:

- (1) dragon: nature (sky, earth, water, fire)

*huo<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 火龍 (raging fire); *di<sup>4</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 地龍 (earthworm); *long<sup>2</sup>pan<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>ju<sup>4</sup>* 龍蟠虎踞 (a terrain of strategic importance); *long<sup>2</sup>juan<sup>3</sup>feng<sup>1</sup>* 龍捲風 (cyclone, twister, tornado)

(2) dragon: king, divinity

*hai<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>wang<sup>2</sup>* 海龍王 (Dragon King of the seas); *long<sup>2</sup>zhong<sup>3</sup>* 龍種 (royal descendants, progeny); *cong<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 從龍 (follow one destined to become emperor); *long<sup>2</sup>xin<sup>1</sup>da<sup>4</sup>yue<sup>4</sup>* 龍心大悅 (His Majesty was greatly pleased); *long<sup>2</sup>pao<sup>2</sup>* 龍袍 (imperial robe)

(3) dragon: remarkable men

*meng<sup>3</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>gui<sup>1</sup>shan<sup>1</sup> jiao<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>ru<sup>4</sup>hai<sup>3</sup>* 猛虎歸山 蛟龍入海; *yun<sup>2</sup>qi<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>xiang<sup>1</sup>* 雲起龍驤 (the rise of great heroes); *yi<sup>4</sup>tiao<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 一條龍 (a remarkable man); *ren<sup>2</sup>zhong<sup>1</sup>zhi<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 人中之龍 (the dragon among men); *huo<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>huo<sup>2</sup>xian<sup>4</sup>* 活龍活現 (vivid);

(4) dragon: remarkable creature/objects

*long<sup>2</sup>sheng<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>sheng<sup>1</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>* 龍生龍 鳳生鳳 (compliment to having unusual sons and daughters); *diao<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 雕龍 (masterly in rhetoric); *long<sup>2</sup>ju<sup>1</sup>* 龍駒 (a spirited horse); *long<sup>2</sup>quan<sup>2</sup>* 龍泉 (name of sword); *long<sup>2</sup>jing<sup>3</sup>* 龍井 (name of famous tea)

As a matter of fact, there are many meteorological and astronomical terms that have adopted *long*, *long* implies the concept of nature—sky, earth, water and fire. As a bound morpheme used to describe the head of the lexeme, *dragon* represents this group of adjectives “remarkable, valuable, important, strong, powerful, super”, all positive. The above (1)-(4) are all examples of this kind. It reaches all dimensions: big, deep, wide, high, and far {15}.

*Long* is one of the favorite options in naming objects. It creates a semantic ambiguity; conveys a neutral and yet a positive denotation to the object names. For example, *long<sup>2</sup>tou<sup>2</sup>* 龍頭 (dragon-head – tap; cock; handlebar [of a bicycle]), *huo<sup>3</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 火龍 (fire-dragon – fiery dragon; a procession of lanterns or torches; an air channel from a brick kitchen stove to a chimney), *long<sup>2</sup>yan<sup>3</sup>* 龍眼 (dragon-eye – longan), *long<sup>2</sup>jing<sup>3</sup>* 龍井 (dragon-well – a famous green tea produced in the city Hangzhou; Dragon Well tea), and *long<sup>2</sup>chuan<sup>2</sup>* 龍船 (dragon boat). When *long* is adopted in personal names, it expresses all the unspoken positive expectations of the parents.

Lexical meaning usually changes from concrete to abstract (Aitchison 1991, Traugott 1995:32). However, the lexemes that contain *long* develop in a different way: from abstract (a mystical animal) to concrete (king, great men), from super (myth, king) to good (great men, great objects), and from holy (god, king) to ordinary (men, objects).

The observation that lexemes containing *long* develop differently from usual meaning change is neither absurd nor unique. Recent loanwords from Japanese provide examples of this kind. The “*yu<sup>4</sup>* 御” in *yu<sup>4</sup>bian<sup>4</sup>dang<sup>1</sup>* 御便當 (royal meal box – a great meal box) or *yu<sup>4</sup>fan<sup>4</sup>tuan<sup>2</sup>* 御飯糰 (royal-rice-dumpling/roll – a great rice and vegetable roll) means “great, excellent,” no more “imperial or loyal” as it used to mean in, for

example, *yu<sup>4</sup>lin<sup>2</sup>jun<sup>1</sup>* 御林軍 (palace guards) and *yu<sup>4</sup>hua<sup>1</sup>yuan<sup>2</sup>* 御花園 (imperial garden). The “*yu<sup>4</sup>* 御” has been re-applied and modernized for common food following social change (the end of the imperial dynasties) and, according to Hsieh (2006a:68), showing “a signal of the changing social structure”. Hence, this seemingly exceptional meaning change is presumably a common rule of meaning change for a specific group of lexemes whose meanings have positive connotations.

#### 4.2 From a semantic unit to a syntactic marker

Extensive language contact resulted in the above mentioned English *nylon* and Taiwanese *massage* to be translated and represented as *ni<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 尼龍 and *zhua<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 抓龍, respectively, where the *longs* represent the sounds /lün/ as in *salon* 沙龍, /lʌn/ as in *nylon* 耐龍, or /liæö/ in Taiwanese *lialiaëö* (*massage*) 抓龍. Homonyms play a key role for loanwords. *Long* is not only a semantic unit denoting ‘positive, super’, but it also serves as a popular phonetic representation for the phonological unit [+liquid] + [–front vowel] + [+nasal consonant]. The schematic summary is: semantic unit > phonetic element. This is a new tendency for many Chinese characters when borrowing words from other languages by the way of transliteration. Transliteration pushes grammaticalization. As Yao (1992:343) stated, the word endings -lon and -ron of textile goods are usually translated and represented by the Chinese character 龍, such as Orlon 奧龍, Teijen Tetoron 帝人帝特龍, Tetoron 特多龍, Exlan 愛絲龍, Vonnell 毛麗龍, etc. *Long* 龍 has become a root to represent textile goods. In other words, *long* 龍 follows the development: semantic unit > phonetic element > morphological unit.

Semantically, transliteration favors lexemes with positive semantic denotations. On the other hand, a Chinese affix is usually needed for categorizing the semantic type of the borrowing, e.g., *ji<sup>2</sup>pu<sup>3</sup>che<sup>1</sup>* 吉普車 (jeep-car – jeep) and *dien<sup>4</sup>shi<sup>4</sup>ji<sup>1</sup>* 電視機 (television-machine – television). The *che* 車 and *ji* 機 are added, respectively, to indicate that the former is a kind of car and the latter is a type of machine. The *long* 龍 in, for example, Vonnell 毛麗龍, in which appears no segment that phonic sounds like *long*, was adopted to show this characteristic of Chinese morphology. In other words, *long* 龍 is undergoing the development: semantic element > phonetic element > morphological unit > syntactic marker. As a result, *long* 龍 underwent a grammaticalization {16}, such as in *ni<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 尼龍 and *mao<sup>2</sup>li<sup>4</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 毛麗龍, in which *long* lost its semantic meaning and serves as a function word: a quasi-affix. This change was triggered by social change and a new Mandarin morphosyntactic development.

#### 4.3 Dragon lexemes and Chinese values



After discussing the lexical item *long*, let us now further discuss *long* lexemes. The meanings that the *long* lexemes convey are mostly positive. They are used as a **jest**, e.g., *shang<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>yi<sup>4</sup>tiao<sup>2</sup>chong<sup>2</sup> xia<sup>4</sup>ke<sup>4</sup>yi<sup>4</sup>tiao<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>* 上課一條蟲 下課一條龍 (in-class-like-a-worm after-class-like-a-dragon) or as a  **blessing**, e.g., *long<sup>2</sup>teng<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>yue<sup>4</sup>* 龍騰虎躍 (dragons rising and tigers leaping – a scene of bustling activity), *cheng<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>kuai<sup>4</sup>xu<sup>4</sup>* 乘龍快婿 (fly-dragon-son-in-law – a handsome or lucky son-in-law; proud or handsome son-in-law), and *long<sup>2</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>cheng<sup>2</sup>xiang<sup>2</sup>* 龍鳳呈祥 (dragon-phoenix-present-peace – prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix; in extremely good fortune). They are also used as **praise**, e.g., *long<sup>2</sup>pan<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>ju<sup>4</sup>* 龍蟠虎踞 (like a dragon that coils and a tiger that crouches – impressive terrain), *huo<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>huo<sup>2</sup>xian<sup>4</sup>* 活龍活現 (live-dragon-live-show – tone it up with color and life; vividly), and *long<sup>2</sup>ma<sup>3</sup>jing<sup>1</sup>shen<sup>2</sup>* 龍馬精神 (dragon-horse-spirit – aged but vigorous; old but strong). Animal metaphors that adopt the names of “real” animals, however, are often applied as **abuse**. For example, *wu<sup>1</sup>ya<sup>1</sup>zui<sup>3</sup>* 烏鴉嘴 (crow-mouth – one who likes to say bad omen), *fei<sup>2</sup>zhu<sup>1</sup>* 肥豬 (fat-pig – a fat person), *zhang<sup>1</sup>tou<sup>2</sup>shu<sup>3</sup>mu<sup>4</sup>* 獐頭鼠目 (buck-head-mouse-eye – with the head of a buck and the eyes of a rat; repulsively ugly and sly-looking), *chun<sup>3</sup>lü<sup>2</sup>* 蠢驢 (stupid-donkey – an idiot), *ru<sup>2</sup>lang<sup>2</sup>si<sup>4</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>* 如狼似虎 (like-fox-like-tiger – as ferocious as wolves and tigers; like cruel beasts of prey), and *cai<sup>4</sup>niao<sup>3</sup>* 菜鳥 (vegetable-bird – inexperienced person), etc. *Long* lexemes utter our wishes and fill in the semantic gaps that other animal lexemes cannot express.

The wishes carried by *long* lexemes explore the values of the Chinese people. Lexemes like *long<sup>2</sup>teng<sup>2</sup>hu<sup>3</sup>yue<sup>4</sup>* 龍騰虎躍 (dragons rising and tigers leaping – a scene of bustling activity) and *cheng<sup>2</sup>long<sup>2</sup>kuai<sup>4</sup>xu<sup>4</sup>* 乘龍快婿 (fly-dragon-son-in-law – a handsome or lucky son-in-law; proud or handsome son-in-law) are blessings used to express one’s concern and good wishes to another person. On the one hand, Chinese believe in supernatural power and objects and think that they have mighty power, flying ability, and beauty. They wish to gain blessings from mystical creatures to make their fortunes and realize their desires. The dragon is one of the so-called *siling* 四靈 (four wonder animals; four lucky symbols) and is head of them. It therefore has been the Chinese totem and divine symbol and hope throughout history. On the other hand, Mandarin Chinese speakers use a variety of blessings in terms of dragon to express wishes to families and friends to show their concern and caring. This reveals that interpersonal relations are strongly emphasized in Mandarin-speaking society. Sociologists (Weakland 1950:361-370, King 1981:413-428) support this view in their research on Chinese culture and social relations.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, no one has ever seen a dragon. People of different cultures have created similar mythical animals (though in different ways) for a variety of reasons. People need both positive and negative role models in their societies. The mythical dragon, a fantasy can be as made as perfect as desired, was created and chosen as a positive role model in Chinese society and negative one in Western society. These conflicting mythical entities have different physical appearances and characteristics; one is almost sacred and the other is evil.

The character *long* 龍 ‘dragon’ represents the idea of the moon and a snake, and *long* lexemes are developed from legends, adopted from literature, mass media, or historical records. The meaning of a lexeme usually changes from concrete to abstract. However, the *long* lexeme develops in a different way: abstract > concrete, and high > low (i.e. super > good, holy > ordinary). Nevertheless, I assume this is a general rule of meaning change for a particular group of lexemes, as indicated above. The linguistic development of the *long* lexeme is: semantic element > phonetic element > morphological unit > syntactic marker. This was triggered by social change and a new Mandarin structure. The social implications of *dragon* lexemes show both the value that Chinese people place on interpersonal relations, and the influence of globalization (e.g., language contact) on Mandarin.

*Long* lexemes have undergone some lexical changes and acquired semantic innovations over time, as many other lexemes have. Despite the *long* lexemes’ marked changes, however, *dragon* has remained in a dramatic and essential position in Mandarin Chinese and in the Chinese mind.

## Notes

\* The research reported here as part of the results of the project on *Cognitive Semantic Explorations of Life-form Fixed Expressions in Mandarin Chinese, German and English* would have been impossible without the support of grant NSC 95-2411-H-006-032 from the National Science Council, Taiwan.

1. Vols. 11, 14, 15, Zhongguo Shehuikexueyuan (2004).
2. Lau and Chen (1995).
3. Xu (1992).
4. “Lexeme” and “lexical item” are used here instead of “morpheme”, “word”, etc. to avoid the debate on the terminology of a minimal semantic distinctive unit in Chinese. See Taylor and Taylor (1995), Shei (2005), etc. for a detailed discussion on related terminology.
5. Shangwu Yinshuguan (1970).
6. Daluban Ciyuan Xiudingzu (1989).
7. Such as the following English and German dragon lexemes indicate: *A dragon lady* is a powerful and

intimidating woman, and both a *Drachenbrut* (dragon-brood) and a *Drachensaat* (dragon-sow) are wicked progeny.

8. See Chap. Xingshi, Guanzi 管子 (*Master Guan*) and Vol. 73, Weishu 魏書 (*The History of Wei*).
9. See Huayan Jing 華嚴經 (*Canon of Huayan*).
10. See Fahua Jing 法華經 (*Canon of Fahua*).
11. See Facao Jing 法草經 (*Canon of Facao*).
12. See Chap. Lieyukou, Zhuangzi 莊子 (*Master Zhuang*).
13. Lu Gui-meng was a writer in the late Tang Dynasty.
14. Work written by Feng Zhi 馮贛 in the Tang Dynasty.
15. *Feng* 鳳 is the female counterpart of *long* and also carries the same positive meaning, e.g., *long<sup>2</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>pei<sup>4</sup>* 龍鳳配 (dragon-phoenix-match – union of a dragon and a phoenix) and *pan<sup>1</sup>long<sup>2</sup>fu<sup>4</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>* 攀龍附鳳 (stick-dragon-attach-phoenix – play up to people of power and influence; put oneself under the patronage of a bigwig). *Feng* 鳳 is male when in compounds with *huang* 凰 or *luan* 鸞 such as in *feng<sup>4</sup>qiu<sup>2</sup>huang<sup>2</sup>* 鳳求凰 (the male chasing after the female) and *luan<sup>2</sup>feng<sup>4</sup>he<sup>2</sup>ming<sup>2</sup>* 鸞鳳和鳴 (female phoenix-male phoenix-harmonious-sing – a happy, harmonious marriage).
16. For a discussion about how language contact pushes the grammaticalization of the Chinese lexicon, see Shih (2000:49-).

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