Chinese Dragon Names

Michael Carr¹
Otaru University of Commerce

Borrowings/loans of Asian dragon names are an unsolved "Chinese puzzle" in comparative linguistics. Despite consensus that 'dragon' loanwords are widespread, debate continues over transfer loan dates and directions. Chinese is crucially important because it has one of the oldest and largest 'dragon' lexical fields in any language. The purpose of this paper is collating Chinese dragon names in order to create a database for future etymological studies.

1 INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the scope §1.1, sources §1.2, and linguistics §1.3 of the present study.² The major part analyzes over one hundred Chinese draconyms divided into seven sections: Rain-Dragons §2, Flying-Dragons §3, Snake------------------

1. The author's sincere appreciation goes to Tollef Ás, Lew Ballard, Paul Benedict, Jim Chamberlain, South Coblin, John Emelin, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Christoph Harbsmeier, Jane Hazen, Axel Schuessler, Shimomura Isao, Wada Kan, and Yan Yunxiang for suggesting improvements upon earlier versions of this paper.

2. N.B.: The following abbreviations are used: "" = semantic meanings, """" = literal meanings (or quotes), → and ← = semantic changes, > and < = phonological changes, ~ = alternate names, pronunciations, or graphs. Two special terms are employed: the neologism draconym 'dragon name' and Brown's (1979) portmanteau wug (< worm + bug) meaning the class of 'insects, worms, spiders, and smaller reptiles'. Wug is used as the English name for the Chinese logographic radical 虫 (Carr 1983) found in many 'dragon' (e.g., 蟲 § 6.1) graphs.
Dragons §4, Wug-Dragons §5, Crocodile-Dragons §6, Hill-Dragons §7, and Miscellaneous Dragons §8. These arbitrary groupings were made for presentational reasons, and other taxonomies (cf. Diény 1987) are possible; for instance, zhūpólóng 豬婆龍 "pig woman dragon" 'gavial' §6.4 is listed as a crocodile-dragon zoologically, but is considered a rain-dragon mythologically. Subsections are organized by similarities, e.g., §3.5–7 have 飛 'flying' names; and some, e.g., §3.9, include several synonyms or related words. Section 9 summarizes the Chinese 'dragon' lexical field, discusses universalities of draconym borrowings, and gives examples for utilizing the Sinitic data.

§1.1 Scope has been narrowed to draconyms attested in Han dynasty texts (v. §1.2) dating from the beginning of the Common Era. The original intent was to compile an exhaustive wordlist of Chinese dragon names that would be useful for comparativists; something on the order of the INDEX. However, an unexpectedly large semantic field was discovered, and the paper grew to more than twice its present length. "There are numerous dragons," Ball (1903:220) warned, "too numerous to enter even into a succinct account of them in the space of a short article."

For purposes of brevity, the range of this study generally excludes three sets: descriptive compounds not referring to mythic creatures (e.g., qiánlóng 潛龍 "submerged/hidden dragon" → 'concealed talent'), names for different colored dragons (e.g., qīnglóng 青龍 "blue-green dragon," cānglóng 蒼龍 "green dragon," etc.), and later foreign imports.\(^3\) Even though such figurative,

---

3. For instance, the (c. AD 1590) Wuzazu 五雜祖 (Visser 1913:101) lists nine ornamental dragons peculiar to Buddhist art:

The [pūlāo 蒲牢 "cattail pen"], dragons which like to cry, are represented on the tops of bells, serving as handles. The [sīniú 四牛 "four cows"], which like music, are used to adorn musical instruments. The [chīwēn 蛋吻 "sneer lips"], which like swallowing, are placed on both ends of the ridgepoles of roofs (to swallow all evil influences). The [zhāofēng 嘖風 "ridiculous wind"], lion-like beasts which like precipices [cf. §3.4], are placed on the four corners of roofs. The [yāhūa 睚𧓢 "corner of eye movement"],
chromatic, and imported draconyms are subsumed within the Chinese 'dragon' lexical field; for present purposes, they are excluded.

Finding Chinese dragon etymons involved several steps. First, the literature in the field (esp. works by Li, Yan, Hino, Mori, de Visser, Schiffeler, and Diény) was surveyed for prominent names. These draconyms were researched in dictionaries (e.g., Table 1), which led to additional synonyms. And when loci classici were checked, their indexes and commentaries revealed even more dragon names.

Yan (1988) divides previous studies into five fields, Chinese dragons as: foreign loanwords, dinosaurs, spirits, water gods, and totems. This paper will facilitate the first, presenting a linguistic digest of names. It presumes no knowledge of Chinese, explains terms, cites translations (including the contextual terminus a quo for each draconym), and notes additional references. For those who can read Chinese, logographs and original sources are given.4

which like to kill, serve as ornaments of sword-grips. The [bìxì 赤蜃], which have the shape of the [chīlóng 龍 §7.1], and are fond of literature, are represented on the sides of grave-monuments. The [bìhān 亜門], which like litigation, are placed over prison gates (in order to keep guard). The [suānní 龜], which like to sit down, are represented upon the bases of Buddhist idols (under the Buddhas' or Bodhisattvas' feet). The [bàxià 霸下 "hegemon below"], finally, big tortoises which like to carry heavy objects, are placed under grave-monuments.

A few salient draconyms from these excepted groups are listed, e.g., hēilóng 黑龍 "black dragon" §2.2 or Nāgā §4.7.

4. The initial citation of a Chinese text gives dates, logographs, and edition used (chosen in correspondence with standard sinological indexes). Classical sources are cited by title, and depending upon the edition, either page or juàn 卷 "chapter; section" (A = 上 1st and B = 下 2nd parts) and page (a = recto and b = verso) or line. Reference to a commentary is cited by author, juàn, and page. Modern sources (listed under REFERENCES) are cited by author, year, and page.
§1.2 Sources for early Chinese dragon names are primarily Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) texts rather than Zhou dynasty (1050?–221 BC) classics. This is true not only for dragons, but for mythical creatures in general. Pre-Han sources mention a few draconyms (e.g., 龍 §2.1), but for most early Chinese mythology, "All that we have are casual references and tantalizing fragments," explains Bodde (1961:376), "widely scattered among texts of diverse date and ideological orientation." The following three Han sources are especially relevant to dragons.

The Chuci 楚辭 "Elegies [from the State] of Chu" is an anthology of southern poems, the oldest of which are attributed to ("the father of Chinese poetry" Liu 1966:24) Qu Yuan (340?–278? BC). Liu Xiang (77–6 BC) edited this text and Wang Yi (AD 89?–158) wrote its first commentary. Many Chuci dragon descriptions are fabulously poetic, e.g.: They lined [T (cf. §7.1)蠡象] water monsters up to join them in the dance: How their bodies [Ψ λ §8.2] coiled and writhed in undulating motion! Gracefully the [鬳 P §2.2] woman-rainbow made circles round them; Phoenixes soared up and hovered overhead. (四部備要 ed. 5/10a, Hawkes 1985:198)

The Huainanzi 淮南子 is a philosophical miscellany compiled by Liu An (179?–122 BC), Prince of Huainan.5 Xu Shen (AD 55–144), also the editor of the Shuowenjiezi, v. Table 1) and Gao Yu (fl. AD 205) wrote the earliest extant Huainanzi commentaries. The Huainanzi frequently mentions several draconyms together, e.g., Fuxi and Nügua §8.9:

...rode the [雷車 cf. §2.4] thunder chariot, using [應龍 §2.4] winged dragons as the inner pair and [青蛇 §8.2] green dragons as the outer pair. ... preceded by [白 T §7.1] white serpents and followed by [奔蛇 §3.1] speeding snakes. (四部叢刊 ed. 6/7a, Le Blanc 1985:161–2)

5. Since the southern state of Chu 楚 is associated with the Chuci and Huainanzi, it would be worthwhile to study the linguistic/cultural geo-history of dragon borrowings (cf. Chamberlain’s work on Tai reptilian names); e.g., crocodiles §6.3 are native to South China.