



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

The evolution of the dragon in China: A discourse analysis perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical narrative of the mythical dragon in China from ancient times to the present. This process is explained with Foucault's Concept of "Power" and Fairclough's "Critical Discourse Analysis". Examining the extensive process that produces the "Dragon" discourse reveals the implications of discourse practices and the artfulness of people in power who create knowledge and truth related to the dragon. It can be concluded that the reasons for producing the dragon discourse are to strengthen the rulers' power and establish order in society. The ancient discourse of the dragon deity is linked to the righteous "leadership" entrusted to the rulers in the feudal era of China. Thus, reproducing the discourse "descendants of the dragon" has become easily acceptable from the past to the modern era to give the Chinese a sense of belonging, commitment, and pride in their nation. The significant correlation between the mass media, state-owned media, and political institutions in China plays a pivotal role in conveying the dragon discourse in the current context.

KEYWORDS: Chinese people, discursive power, identity, dragon discourse, descendants of the dragon

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1. Introduction

Despite the vibrant tapestry of distinct national symbols representing minority tribes in China, the Chinese government has actively promoted the idea of the Chinese dragon as a common ancestor for all ethnic groups within the country, including those in the diaspora. This intriguing phenomenon prompts us to explore how expressions such as “the Dragon Heirs” and “the Dragon Descendants” foster a sense of unity among the diverse Chinese population.

The notion of “the Chinese dragon” symbolises a collective understanding among the Chinese people, celebrating a shared national identity that brings them together. As this powerful cultural icon continues to thrive through generations, it offers a compelling avenue for exploration. This study aims to dive into the narrative of “The Dragon” using discourse analysis, unravelling the motivations behind its strategic use by China’s leadership to cultivate national unity and solidarity among its people.

2. Literature Review

In tribal cultures, totemic beliefs are extremely significant since they serve as spiritual pillars and cultural identity indicators. Goswami (2018) asserts that these beliefs influence the structures of society, with many tribes embracing distinctive totems that represent their cultural and spiritual values. The dragon is a traditional totem in China, representing a figure of great cultural and historical importance. In Chinese civilization, the dragon has become a worldwide symbol whose influence has spanned time and space. Holl (2022) emphasises the pervasive cultural impact of dragons, as evidenced by archaeological discoveries of dragon-like motifs that span millennia and regions, cementing their place in Chinese heritage.

He (1990) highlights that during the Palaeolithic period, China had a robust totemism culture similar to the West, though no evidence has been found. While totemism declined in the Neolithic period (Sleeboom, 2002), significant discoveries were made at the Chahai (查海) site in Fuxin City (阜新), Liaoning Province (辽宁省). Archaeologists found a barrel-shaped jar resembling a snake-bitten toad and pottery shards with dragon patterns dating back over 8,000 years (Dongbei Xinhuanet, 2024). Most notably, they uncovered a 19.7-meter-long stone pile dragon at the site, recognised as the earliest and largest dragon image in China, referred to as “the first dragon in China” (Dongbei Xinhuanet, 2024). This shows the unique persistence of Chinese totemism over time (Sleeboom, 2002). These artefacts vividly illustrate the key features of the Chinese dragon—its head, neck, body, scales, tail, and claws—highlighting the origins of dragon worship (Dongbei Xinhuanet, 2024). In this practice, people revered totems as symbols of collective identity. Totems serve as tools for integration, unifying social systems and bringing together diverse elements into a cohesive whole (Han et al., 2012). Furthermore, dragon worship was strategically employed by rulers in primitive societies to bolster their authority.

The origins of Chinese civilisation are intricately tied to dragon mythology, with historical accounts weaving dragons into the foundation of China’s cultural and national identity (Li, 2004; Yan et al., 2018). Yandi (炎帝), a revered tribal leader, was born through a telepathic connection between his mother and a dragon. Along with Huangdi (黄帝), Yandi unified early tribes and established the bedrock of Chinese civilisation (Asif & Ali, 2019). Modern Chinese people often trace their lineage to these legendary figures and the mythical dragon, fostering unity and pride (He, 2012; Qin & Zhang, 2019).

Dragons, however, are not static symbols. In an increasingly complex and multicultural society, their meanings and interpretations evolve. Ranjan and Zhou (2011) argue that analysing the symbolic practices surrounding dragons requires a nuanced understanding of these transformations. For instance, while ancient interpretations often linked dragons to divine authority and natural forces, contemporary views incorporate modern aspirations such as resilience and national pride.

He (2012) effectively categorises key aspects that deserve attention and consideration. The Dragon discourse is divided into three domains: religious, political, and artistic, each revealing unique facets of the dragon’s multifaceted symbolism. The spiritual domain links the dragon to water and rain deities, highlighting its essential role in agricultural societies. On the other hand, the political domain legitimises rulers by associating them with divine authority, portraying them as chosen figures with a mandate to govern. Finally, the artistic domain showcases the dragon in literature, sculpture, and folklore, emphasising its creative and symbolic significance across centuries.

Through these domains, the dragon emerges as a mythical creature and a dynamic force shaping societal

and political structures. Over generations, Chinese ancestors blended characteristics of familiar animals into the dragon's image, crafting a composite symbol that encapsulates shared cultural identity and values (Zhou & Li, 2023). This transformative process has endowed the dragon with attributes such as strength, auspiciousness, and nobility (Chen, 2002; Wang, 2023).

The dragon's role as a unifying symbol gained renewed scholarly attention during the economic reforms of the 1980s (Wang, 2023). Wen Yiduo (闻一多), a prominent poet and cultural scholar, proposed the "dragon-is-totem" hypothesis in 1948 (Wang, 2020). He argued that the dragon evolved as a composite of various tribal totems, representing a synthesis of diverse cultural elements in ancient China. This interpretation has inspired extensive research into the dragon's historical significance and role in unifying ancient tribes through shared mythology (Meccarelli, 2001). Hu (1987) argued that the dragon and phoenix represent significant symbols of the imperial dynasty, reflecting deep societal meaning. They are models for analysing family structures and exploring relationships between rulers and ministers, Yin and Yang (阴阳), and the governed and their rulers (Sleeboom, 2002).

The dragon also transformed from a symbol of imperial authority into a broader emblem of cultural and national pride. Periods of significant political and economic change—such as the early 20th century and post-reform era—saw the dragon reimagined to align with modern values and global aspirations (Liu, 2015; Meccarelli, 2001). At events like the Beijing Olympics, the dragon has been celebrated as a representation of Chinese confidence and resilience, symbolising the country's ascent on the global stage (Yuan & Sun, 2021).

The dragon's persistence as a cultural and political symbol illustrates its unparalleled centrality to Chinese identity (Xiaoli, 2015). From its mythical origins rooted in the cosmos and nature to its modern role as a global emblem, the dragon adapts to societal needs while retaining its essence as a unifying force. This ability to evolve underscores its strength as a symbol that bridges tradition and modernity.

As a symbol, the dragon consolidates authority and influences societal values and identity. Conducting further research into the symbolic and discursive significance of the dragon is essential for enhancing our understanding. By exploring the dragon through critical discourse analysis, we can uncover how it serves both as a cultural totem and a political tool, providing valuable insights into China's rich history and evolving aspirations.

3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

This article collected information from documents, including books, journal articles, and theses in Thai, Chinese, and English. Data analysis was done in conjunction with Foucault's theory of power and Fairclough's concept of critical discourse analysis, which was then presented in analytical form.

3.1 Foucault's Concept of "Power"

Karlberg (2005) asserts that the core principle of discourse theory is that our thoughts and language about an issue directly influence our actions and behaviours. Discourse, a concept adopted by many postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault, establishes and maintains power dynamics, contributing to a social hierarchy that benefits dominant individuals or groups (Boonmee, 2013). It relies on explicit rules and authoritative facts, connecting shared rules and power created through social practices (Reed, 2013; Zhao, 2016).

Discourse within a community is generated and organized to emphasize its importance, involving three key systems: 1) The exclusion mechanism, which prevents certain groups from participating. 2) The control system that sets boundaries on communication topics and language. 3) The principle of rarefaction, where a few individuals dominate the conversation, limiting others' participation (Foucault, 2019).

Foucault (cited by Cussen, 2002) presents a thought-provoking definition of power. First, power is immanent; it is not a concrete entity. Second, while our choices are made as free agents, they are influenced by non-subjective forces. Third, power is linked to resistance, as it always invites opposition. Fourth, force relations influence and coerce us, although we can still make independent decisions. Additionally, power is dynamic and flexible, functioning to "generate" truth through authority, as seen in figures like monarchs, priests, or scholars (Kaewthep, 2013).

Foucault focused on the mechanisms and effects of power, mainly through discursive power, which refers to knowledge that operates via discourse (Boonmee, 2013). This type of power shapes how conceptual

frameworks, symbolic representations, and linguistic norms influence individuals' abilities to manipulate others or acquire new capabilities (Reed, 2013, p. 203).

Discursive actions evolve over time and cannot fully capture complex entities simultaneously. According to Reed (2013), discursive power has three key components:

1. "Power facts" form the basis of authority for those who uphold or challenge social structures, allowing them to influence perceptions of reality.
2. Language operates under its own norms and requires guidelines for resource allocation.
3. Social practice links power facts with accepted rules, essential for forming discourse.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a research approach that analyses how social power abuse, domination, and inequality are expressed, maintained, and challenged through language and communication in social and political settings (Van Dijk, 1995). An essential aspect of critical discourse analysis is explicitly recognising one's societal function (Van Dijk, 2010). Fairclough (2013) examined the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and its association with several concepts such as "discourse, power, ideology, social practice, race, discrimination, hegemony, dominance, and common sense." The core assumption of CDA is that realism is composed of multiple levels (Gölbaşı, 2017). Language does not directly depict social realism; instead, it is one of the constituent elements that contribute to the formation of social realism (Fairclough, 1989, p. 37). According to critical realism, social reality is shaped by language, but material limitations and possibilities limit this. Material practices exist independently from discursive activities. According to Fairclough (1989:37), discourse can influence social structure, ensuring its persistence and transformation. The social structure not only shapes discourse but is also shaped by discourse (Newman, 2020).

Fairclough (2013) devised a comprehensive framework for examining discourse, which involves integrating three distinct forms of analysis: analysing language texts (spoken or written), analysing discourse practices (the processes of producing, distributing, and consuming texts), and analysing discursive events as manifestations of socio-cultural practices. Specifically, he integrates analysis at both the micro and macro levels (Van Dijk, 1995). At the micro-level, the analyst examines several elements of textual/linguistic analysis, such as syntactic analyses, utilisation of metaphors, and employment of rhetorical techniques; power, dominance, and inequality among social groupings are concepts that are often associated with a macro-level examination (Van Dijk, 1995).

4. Findings

Data analysis of the research documents has pointed out the dragon as the power symbol, which has changed over time depending on how additional meanings are attached to the dragon from the earliest period to present-day China, as presented below.

4.1 The Birth of Dragons from "Appearance less" to "Appearance"

Scholars recognise the dragon as a key symbol of Chinese civilisation, despite it being a legendary creature that does not exist in reality (Ji, 2019). Identity in discussions about the dragon includes its visual representation and symbolic significance. Although the past shapes the dragon's image, it holds authenticity when considering its practical implications. This aligns with Foucault's view that truth is determined by governing rules rather than inherent qualities (Reed, 2013). He argues that genuine sight does not exist, and the power of communication ultimately lies in establishing identity for individuals and entities, turning concepts into reality (Boonmee, 2013). In central China, the powerful Xia tribe (夏) or Huaxia (华夏) (known as the predecessor of the Han ethnic group) identified with the dragon totem (Su, 1994; Wang, 2015). As the Xia expanded, other tribes joined, enhancing the totem's significance. Later, the conquering Shang tribe (商) admired Xia culture and integrated the dragon totem with their own phoenix totem, creating a blend of symbols (Hu, 1987; Sun & Kun, 2023). The image of the totem believed initially in by other peoples was gradually absorbed and enriched into the image of the dragon (Chen, 2021; Wang, 2020), so the dragon's characteristics became more complex and powerful. This confirmed that the production and circulation of discourses are simultaneously mechanisms of social power

(Foucault, 2009). The powerful tribe that reveres dragons in China tries to gain the respect of other tribes by emphasising a shared totem.

The Chinese dragon's transformation from an "appearanceless" creature to a significant symbol of "truth" is rooted in discourse practices that reflect collective identity among the Chinese. Elements from various revered animals, including tigers and birds, have been integrated into the dragon's image over generations (Pang, 2007; Sautman, 2012). Archaeological findings suggest that early dragons combined real animals, marking an evolution in their depiction (Shang, 2017; Su, 1994). This intricate process involved creating distinct dragon forms, especially during the Shang dynasty when dragons were used in religious ceremonies, gaining features like antlers (Wang, 2018). The ruler class blended dragon and phoenix motifs during the Zhou dynasty, symbolising political power transitions (Hu, 1987). By the Zhan Guo period (战国时期), dragons were viewed as demi-gods, embodying connections between Yin and Yang (Chen, 2021; Lin & Duarte, 2017).

During the Spring, Autumn, and Warring States periods (春秋战国), the Chinese dragon transitioned from an abstract concept to a tangible representation. The newly deified representation of the Chinese dragon, which did not exist in reality, became increasingly unique to people of that era. The antiquities discovered during that period, namely the bodies of Chinese dragons, were frequently adorned with smile designs (Zhang, 2023), suggesting that these dragons were believed to possess the divine duty of ensuring favourable weather and enhancing agricultural productivity (Chen, 2021).

The Chinese dragon has undergone fascinating adaptations over the years, particularly by those in positions of power. This transformation reveals much about the interplay between discourse and authority. In this context, the influence of dominant groups is often woven into the fabric of societal habits, norms, and traditions, which serve to reinforce their control (Cussen, 2002).

The Chinese dragon is not just a mythical creature but a powerful symbol woven into the fabric of cultural identity and unity among tribes. Revered as the god of wind and weather in the ancient era of China (Li, 2024), the dragon played a vital role in the agricultural lifestyle of its people. As dynasties blossomed, especially during the Qin and Han periods, the dragon evolved into an emblem of authority and legitimacy, reflecting the intricate relationship between this legendary beast and the governance of Chinese society.

Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇), the renowned founder of the Qin Dynasty, boldly claimed descent from a dragon (Yan et al., 2018; Yuan, 2020). This connection enhanced the ruler's influence, enabling him to shape reality and reinforce his power through striking dragon imagery. During this period, representations of dragons spanned three realms—heaven, earth, and humanity—each capturing a distinct aspect of their significance (Ranjan & Zhou, 2011; Wang, 2023).

In the Han Dynasty, the serpentine dragon took on new dimensions, becoming closely tied to Liu Bang (刘邦). He masterfully redefined local beliefs, intertwining the image of the red snake with good fortune and his rise to political power (Weng, 2024). This transformation is vividly illustrated in the captivating tale "Red Snake Conquers White Snake" (Qin & Zhang, 2019), showcasing the dragon's enduring legacy in Chinese culture and society.

The fascinating evolution of the Chinese dragon as a symbol represents not just power and authority, but the rich tapestry of beliefs and identities that have shaped China throughout its history.

4.2 The Spread of the Dragon Discourse in Chinese Feudal Society

The primary prerequisite for discursive power is the capacity to communicate with individuals effectively (Boonmee, 2013). Distribution channels play a crucial role in influencing the communication and dissemination of information about the Chinese dragons. The dragon's discourse gained more significant influence in society by documenting its stories in numerous famous books, diligent intellectual study, and oral literature. For this reason, the dragon discourse was generally accepted by individuals in China.

Evidence from ancient texts suggests that before China unified under the Qin dynasty, various tribes worshipped symbolic animals, notably the "snake," which is considered the origin of the dragon revered by the Chinese (Cartwright, 2017). Notable archaeologist Wen Yiduo pointed out that the snake symbolised Chinese ancestors, including figures like Huángdì (黄帝), Chīyóu (蚩尤), and Gōnggong (共工) (Li, 2004).

In "Historical Records" 《史记》¹, written by the famous historian Sima Qian (司马迁), it is noted

¹ "The Records of the Historian" is the first comprehensive history in Chinese historiography, documenting over 3,000 years of history from the era of the legendary Yellow Emperor (黄帝) in ancient times to the fourth year of the Han Wudi (汉武帝) Dynasty.

that after Huang Di defeated the Chi You and Yan Di tribes, he gathered military correspondence called “Hé Fú” (合符) to establish political power and amalgamated tribal symbols into the dragon (Weng, 2024; Zhang, 2015). This dragon symbolised Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han dynasty, as he consolidated power and associated authority with the dragon. The text also illustrates how Liu Bang used dragon symbolism to maintain control. Additionally, the “Old Tang Dynasty Book” (旧唐书) recounts myths of dragons celebrating the birth of Emperor Tang Taizong (唐太宗) and Emperor Tang Xuanzong (唐玄宗) witnessing a dragon during a hunt, (Liu, 2015; Yuan, 2019), highlighting the dragon’s importance as a symbol of imperial power .

The “Yijing” 《易经》² and “Shujing” 《书经》³ describe the dragon as a rainwater god from the Huángdì era (Zhang, 2015). Meanwhile, “The Book of Mountains and Seas” 《山海经》⁴ features a deity with a dragon’s body and a human face associated with thunder (Xu, 2013). Linguist Xu Shan (徐山) noted similarities between the words for “dragon” (龍), “electricity” (电), and “thunder” (雷) (Zhang, 2015). The word “dragon” structure further symbolises rain flowing from its mouth (Yuan & Sun, 2021).

The notion of being “heirs of the dragon” traces its roots to the legend of Fúxī (伏羲) and Nǚwā (女娲), revered as the mythical ancestors of the Chinese people. Documented in texts like *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》⁵, this tale passed down orally through folk songs and stories during feudal times, cemented its place in the cultural consciousness (Weng, 2024). Wen Yiduo (闻一多), a renowned poet and scholar, chronicled this legend in *Fúxī Kǎo* 《伏羲考》, suggesting that Nǚwā herself venerated the dragon as a totemic figure (Xu, 2006; Lanjan & Zhou, 2011). Archaeological discoveries, such as paintings depicting a man and woman with interwoven serpent-like tails, further reinforce this mythological connection (Duo, 2017; Li, 2004). The dragon, thus, became a unifying emblem, a metaphorical thread binding Chinese identity.

Several important ancient Chinese documents detail the story of the dragon. Most of these documents were written by intellectuals and emperors of that’s era, targeting a literate elite audience. In these documents, dragons symbolize leaders or deities that are revered by the people. This suggests that the discourse surrounding dragons is intended to empower leaders and give them legitimacy to govern the country. This perspective aligns with Foucault’s concept that those who create knowledge often hold power in society. Additionally, this discourse excludes ordinary people from the process of knowledge creation.

As the dragon evolved from a figure of myth into a powerful symbol of imperial authority, its imagery became a tightly guarded secret of the ruling elite. In the days before the Tang Dynasty, dragon motifs were accessible to all social classes, reflecting a shared cultural symbol (Wang, 2018). But everything changed under Emperor Tang Xuanzong (唐玄宗), who imposed formal restrictions that confined dragon-patterned fabrics to the imperial family alone (Lin & Duarte, 2017; Han et al., 2012). This exclusivity was further codified in the Qing Dynasty’s *Da-Qing-Hui-Dian* 《大清会典》, which meticulously detailed how dragon imagery could be used within the hierarchies of society (Jie, 2021). Five-clawed dragons were the exclusive domain of emperors and crown princes, while lesser officials found themselves limited to designs featuring only three or four claws (Chen, 2002; Wang, 2023). In this way, the dragon emerged as the supreme emblem of sovereignty, power, and imperial dominance. These stories illustrate how the symbolic representation of dragons reinforced existing power dynamics and created a clear demarcation between the ruling elite and the rest of society. Within the fabric of feudal China, the ruling class wielded the dragon as a potent symbol to assert their control and solidify social structures, shaping the very identity of an empire.

Furthermore, the Chinese dragon has thrived in folklore and legends, extending beyond its political implications. Narratives and melodies have spread its legacy, embedding it into the fabric of daily life. Folk tales such as “Li Fish Jumping Over the Dragon Gate” symbolise social mobility, offering hope that even ordinary people can rise to nobility (Xiaoli, 2015). Similarly, the myth of Liu Bang, the first Han emperor born of his mother and a red dragon, imparts a celestial quality to his reign (Zhang, 2023).

Through these stories, the dragon has evolved from its mythical origins into a symbol of aspiration, identity, and cultural pride. It demonstrates the lasting power of storytelling in shaping traditions and uniting

2 “The Book of Changes” is an ancient classic that expounds the changes of heaven and earth in all things.

3 “The Book of Books” is a historical document from ancient China that recounts past events.

4 “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” is an ancient encyclopedia providing insight into ancient social life.

5 “Huainanzi” is a philosophical work compiled by Liu An (刘安), the king of Huainan during the Western Han Dynasty, with contributions from his disciples who collected historical materials.

people through shared values and beliefs. Karlberg (2005) argued that all discourses result from historical processes. It is beneficial to recognise that individuals do not speak and act in isolation; rather, their historically and socially constructed speech interacts with one another through these individuals (Karlberg, 2005). From this perspective, the concept of dragons in Chinese feudal society can be understood as a product of historical and social practices. Throughout history, various groups and individuals in Chinese society, such as scholars, kings, and ordinary people, have shaped and disseminated the discourse surrounding dragons. Furthermore, the discourse about dragons has been communicated through multiple channels, including oral literature, historical texts, folklore, and academic publications.

4.3 The Dragons Amidst the Transition of the Era

The dragon has long been a part of China's cultural imagination, but its status as a national symbol conveys a story of power, resistance, and identity. The dragon becomes more than just a mythical creature when viewed through the perspective of Michel Foucault's theory of power, which holds that influence flows through society's numerous networks rather than being centralised.

China served as a battlefield for rival empires in the 19th century. The Qing dynasty was forced to adjust to new international standards due to its internal conflicts and the demands of Western colonization (Chen, 2021). China aimed to preserve its sovereignty, while Western nations set the norms of engagement. The dragon represented maritime power and national pride during this turbulent time. The Qing adopted a naval flag with the Chinese dragon around 1862 due to continuous maritime conflicts with Britain over trade routes and sovereignty (Chen, 2021). This flag, however, was a hesitant recognition of Western-style national iconography without fully committing to the process; it was more of a reactive than a revolutionary declaration (Zhang, 2015). A fragmented and unsettled national identity was represented in the dragon, which by 1868 had become the emblem of Qing China's delegation abroad. However, its impact was diminished by inconsistent designs (Chen, 2021). In 1919, the significance of the Chinese dragon experienced a profound transformation during the May Fourth Movement. No longer a symbol of imperial authority, the dragon emerged as a powerful emblem for a nation resisting feudalism and foreign domination. In the aftermath of the Paris Treaty's betrayal, which facilitated Japan's seizure of Shandong Province, Chinese intellectuals reinterpreted the dragon as a symbol of national pride (Zhang, 2023). Students from Peking University organized protests, adopting the term "dragon heirs" to foster unity among a fragmented populace (Jie, 2021). This pivotal moment transcended mere resistance to imperialism; it catalyzed a cultural revolution. Movements advocating for democracy, scientific advancement, and literary reform drew upon the dragon's symbolism to evoke a collective sense of destiny within the Chinese populace (Ma & Xu, 2014).

After World War II and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the nation's relationship with the dragon evolved significantly. By the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping's open-door policies, China emerged from isolation and confronted questions of identity: Who are we? How do we fit into a global society? (Sun & Kun, 2023). The dragon regained prominence, symbolising a revival of historical pride through songs like "Descendants of the Dragon" (Ji, 2015). The phrase "dragon descendants" united a nation eager to reclaim its heritage while securing its place on the world stage (Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, archaeological efforts aimed to uncover the "original" Chinese dragon (Li, 2004), emphasising a return to roots for modern identity.

From a feudal emblem to a national symbol, the dragon reflects the changing needs of Chinese society. Its story illustrates Foucault's idea that power lies in the dynamic interplay of discourse and adaptation. Ultimately, the dragon bridges the past and present, representing a nation's struggles and triumphs, and it has a timeless message: We are descendants of the dragon, resilient and ever-changing.

An important turning point in history—the United States' decision to recognize Beijing over Taipei in late 1978—led to the production of "Descendants of the Dragon" (An & Tian, 2018). This change was more than just a diplomatic strategy; it was part of a larger Cold War power struggle in which Russia and the United States used strategic international relations to dominate (Ji, 2015). According to Cheng (2019), this shift caused a severe identity crisis and significantly impacted Taiwan's reputation abroad. Since the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan in 1949, they have fiercely maintained that they embody the true essence of Chinese culture and serve as the rightful government (Jie, 2021). To them, the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses a significant threat

to their heritage due to its rejection of Confucian values (Yuan, 2019). As such, the Nationalists firmly believe that the heart of authentic Chinese culture beats only in Taiwan (Xinjian, 2011).

The sense of betrayal by America ignited a powerful wave of anger and confusion among Taiwanese university students (Yuan, 2019). In response, they with passion rallied around the song “Descendants of the Dragon,” using it as a compelling anthem for justice and solidarity (Yuan, 2019). This song became an expression of their feelings and a potent tool for asserting their discursive power in public spaces. Aligning with Foucault’s (1980) idea that communication holds remarkable strength, Through their voices, they empowered themselves and their communities to challenge entrenched power systems and create new, alternative discourses that reflect their experiences and goals.

A notable example is a 22-year-old university student and singer Hou Dejian (侯德建), who wrote the song “Descendants of the Dragon” in response to his dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy, which undermines Taiwan and seeks to isolate it from the global community (Han, 18 June, 2023). The song was created to stimulate contemplation among individuals regarding racialised identity, contributing to public conversation and making it accessible to the general population. The following are samples from the lyrics of this song:

“In the Ancient East there is a Dragon, her name is China, in the Ancient East there is a people, they are all of the descendants of the Dragon; I grew up under the claw of the dragon after I grew up I become an heir of the dragon, black eyes, black hair, yellow skin, forever and ever an heir of the dragon” (Cheng, 2019)

The analysis shines a light on the significance of the dragon symbol in Chinese culture, suggesting that everyone raised in China is seen as an heir to this powerful emblem. The phrase “black eyes, black hair, yellow skin” defines Chinese identity (Weng, 2024). Following the Tiananmen Square protests, Hou encountered Uyghur student Wu’erkaixi, who gained recognition for his courageous hunger strike (Jie, 2021). In a bold move, Hou requested the removal of the phrase “two blacks and one yellow” from the song’s lyrics, arguing that it unfairly stereotyped non-Han Chinese individuals (Ji, 2015). However, authorities dismissed his request, worried it might alienate the Han population and reduce the song’s popularity (Xinjian, 2011). This dragon discourse encapsulates the way the government creates “knowledge” to shape public perception rather than reflect an absolute “truth.” It highlights the struggle between cultural identity and the desire for acceptance in a diverse society. The term “dragon” holds great significance in the song, symbolising a revered deity that protects the Chinese people and their homeland (Zhang, 2023). This concept is specifically for individuals of Chinese descent and for him, unlike other countries with real animal totems, the dragon is exclusively a product of Chinese imagination (Qin & Zhang, 2019).

In 2011, before performing “Descendant of the Dragon” alongside a Taiwanese singer at the Bird’s Nest Stadium in Beijing, Hou conveyed to the audience that the accurate portion of the lyrics “surrounded by the appeasers’ swords” should be “surrounded by the Westerner’s swords” (Cheng, 2019). The term “Westerner swords” was employed in contemporary China to evoke anti-Western nationalist sentiment rather than serving as a reminder of Western countries’ abandonment of Nationalist Taiwan (Qin & Zhang, 2019). China’s growing international discursive power, fueled by its economic might in the twenty-first century, undoubtedly influences the change of specific lyrics presented to the audience.

The lyrics were altered once more During a Hong Kong concert to support the students involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Xinjian, 2011). Firstly, in the phrase “surrounded on all sides by the dictators’ swords” (四面楚歌是独裁的剑), substitute “dictators” (獨裁) for “appeasers” (姑息). Secondly, the phrase “black hair, black eyes, yellow skin” (黑眼睛黑头发黄皮肤) was substituted with “Whether you are willing or not” (不管你自己愿不愿意) to more appropriately reflect that not all Chinese individuals exhibit these physical traits (Tinna, 1985; Cheng, 2019). The dragon symbolises the core of Chinese identity, reinforced by the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers, which are culturally significant for many Taiwanese who have not visited mainland China (Zhang, 2023). The phrase “heirs of the dragon” fosters a sense of patriotism and a desire in Taiwan to reclaim the mainland. As a result, artists from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan often use music to reinterpret national history and identity (Stock, 2013).

“Descendants of the Dragon” became prominent during the 1985 Spring Festival Gala on CCTV,

performed by Daniel K. Wong under PRC government direction (Xinjian, 2011). The song aimed to unite Chinese nationals and gained political significance with Hou Dejian's performances at the 1988 Gala and during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (Ji, 2015). President Xi Jinping often states that "all Chinese individuals are descendants of the dragon," reinforcing this narrative (Renminwang, 2017). However, Hou has criticised the PRC's appropriation of the song, claiming it has lost its original meaning (Zhang, 2023). While its popularity has waned among supporters of Taiwan's independence, it remains a patriotic anthem in China (Ji, 2015; Xinjian, 2011) and symbolises ethnic connection for Chinese communities abroad (Wang, 2018), often featured in state media to promote patriotism and loyalty.

Dragon imagery is prominently featured in cultural events such as dragon dances and boat competitions, particularly during Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival. In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes good fortune, prosperity, longevity, and joy (Li, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Many believe it to be the most favourable zodiac sign, associating children born in dragon years with intelligence and charisma (Zhou, 2023). While the dragon is viewed as a positive symbol in China, it is often linked to rapid economic growth in Western contexts (Zhou & Li, 2023). This difference highlights varying cultural perceptions of dragons.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Perceptions, concepts, beliefs, and knowledge held by individuals in society are neither derived from deliberate contemplation or the solidification of ideas nor solely based on rational or logical reasons (Salma, 2018). These results stem from a set of discourse requirements the individual has chosen and followed.

Discourse shapes and influences stances and beliefs. Perceptions, convictions, and understanding of interpreting these things as we previously comprehended them are determined by their significance rather than our identity (Foucault, 2019). Therefore, perceptions and understanding of the interpretation of individuals in society about the concept of a "dragon" is contingent upon the specific discourse on dragons that the individual apprehends. Consequently, examining the "dragon" as a form of discourse is crucial. The dragon, regarded as a "discourse," is an organised framework consisting of rules and procedures that provide a certain sense of identity and significance. Such an approach enables us to perceive "knowledge" solely as a subjective viewpoint rather than an absolute fact. The primary objective of analysing the "dragon" discourse is to illustrate the process of acquiring or establishing control over a collection of discourses until they assume the role of the dominant discourse. The analysis process consisted of textural analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The prevailing narrative of dragons suggests the existence of explicit procedures. What is the level of complexity, and how did it originate? Highlighting the cleverness of authority and control that hides under the concept of "knowledge" and "truth" regarding dragons, along with the tangible consequences of that communication.

From the discourse analysis perspective, the narratives surrounding dragons in ancient China and feudal society illustrate an effort by individuals to be connections between these mythical creatures and the authority of rulers. These dragon narratives, shaped by influential segments of society—including the ruling class, intellectuals, and governmental institutions—were disseminated to the public to reinforce power structures.

In contemporary contexts, the phrase "descendant of the dragon" has become closely associated with politics articulated by various figures. This evolution corresponds to the theoretical framework proposed by Fairclough, who, in his earlier work (1989, p. 37), posited that discourse can influence social structures while simultaneously, social structures influence discourse (Newman, 2020).

Foucault's concept of "Power" provides an important framework for understanding this relationship, stating that the production of knowledge represented to improve power can, paradoxically, produce outcomes for individuals or organizations (Boonmee, 2013). The discussion surrounding "Descendants of the Dragon" highlights this phenomenon.

The operation of dragon discourse tries to connect with the great power given to these legendary beings, distinguished by their complexity and nuance. These narratives are constantly reproduced in many contexts and are still important in domestic and international domains today. The dragon discourse emphasizes its cultural relevance and demonstrates the continual interplay between myth, authority, and the social struggle for power throughout history.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Pairin Srisinthon was responsible for conceptualising the project and making research plans, including writing the introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion, and conclusion and submitting the paper for publication consideration to a journal.

Anchalee Chayanuvat wrote some parts of the literature review and proofed the paper.

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