Chinese GRUE: on the original meaning and evolution of qīng 青

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Una delle peculiarità del vocabolario dei colori in lingua cinese è la rappresentazione di diverse parti dello spettro tramite un unico termine – qīng 青, che denota non solo la categoria composita verde-azzurro, ma si estende anche verso l’area macro scura dello spazio del colore.

Qīng è uno dei cinque colori canonici in Cina. Sebbene svolga una doppia funzione nella formazione delle parole – in qualità di radicale in cromonimi derivati in wenyan e come morfema in composizione con lessemi dei colori in cinese mandarino standard – non rappresenta uno dei termini di colore basici nella lingua cinese contemporanea, in quanto esistono termini distinti, psicologicamente salienti, per indicare il verde, l’azzurro e il nero.

Questo articolo si concentra sull’analisi semantica di tutti i significati esistenti del termine qīng, determina la sequenza temporale della loro comparsa e avanza ipotesi sui motivi del loro sincretismo.

One of the peculiarities of Chinese colour vocabulary is that the composite qīng 青 category not only denotes green-blue continuum, but also extends into the macro-black area of a colour space. Qīng is one of the five canonical colours in China. Although it has a binary word formation function – as a radical in derived colour lexemes in wenyan and as a morpheme in compounds in Modern Standard Mandarin – it is not a basic colour term in contemporary Chinese, there are separate psychologically salient terms for ‘green’, ‘blue’ and ‘black’.

The paper aims to provide semantic analysis of all the existing meanings of the polysemantic qīng, determines the sequence of their emergence and puts forward a hypothesis about the reasons for their syncretism.

Keywords: colour naming, grue, macro-category, qing, colour categorisation

1. Introduction

Physiologically, a typical healthy human eye is able to distinguish and perceive anywhere between twenty thousand1 and ten million2 colours. However, languages differ greatly in the way in which the gamut of colours is partitioned into lexical categories. For instance, French has no equivalent of the English ‘brown’; it needs to be translated either with brun or with marron or even sometimes with jaune – which we usually think of as meaning ‘yellow’ – depending on the shade it refers to and the range of objects it applies to3. An English speaker would use the word ‘blue’, while a Russian speaker would split it into two distinct basic colour terms (BCT)4, sinij (синий) and goluboj (голубой) specifying dark and light blue respectively and considering them separate colours. Ndembu, one of the languages of the Congo region, possesses primary...
terms only for three colours: white, red and black; terms for other colours are either derivatives or consist of descriptive and metaphorical phrases, as in the case of green, which gets expressed as the ‘water of sweet potato leaves’. Colours which we would distinguish from white, red and black are, in Ndembu, linguistically identified with them. Blue cloth, for example, is described as black cloth, and yellow or orange objects are lumped together as ‘red’. Moreover, in some societies, there is no word corresponding to the English ‘colour’ and they do not contain any abstract colour terms (CT) at all. They might instead use equine CT, as per Shelta, a language spoken by Irish nomadic people, or cattle CT, as the Mursi (Ethiopian transhumant cattle herd- ers) do. In other words, each language, from the point of view of another language, may be arbitrary in classifying colours; what becomes expressed by a single colour word in one language may be characterised by a series of colour words in another.

A BCT may be simple, representing a single hue or a single fundamental category (e.g. English ‘red’ for red), or it may be composite, also known as an extended or macro-colour term, representing the union of two or more fundamental categories. The phenomenon of composite CTs is explained by peculiarities in the internal structures of relevant languages and by the unique cultural characteristics of the respective societies. However, it is not that ethno-linguistic communities using a macro-colour category cannot visually distinguish between the two or more hues, ‘they just regard them as two varieties of the same colour, as one merges into the other and the community finds no compelling reason to regard them as fundamentally different’.

Several types of macro-categories known in languages are denoted by only one BCT: ‘warm-light’ and ‘dark-cool’, as in the case of the Dugum Dani of Indonesian New Guinea; or a separate yellow + green category, widely used among languages in the Pacific Northwest; or have no boundary between green and blue. The latter macro-category is often called ‘grue’, a modern construct out of the English for ‘green’ and ‘blue’. Macro-categories are often multiply

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8 Hue is the chromatic element to colours such as red, green and blue.
9 Small capitals hereinafter indicate colour concepts or categories.
10 The full classification also includes the third type, the so-called derived terms, representing the mixture of two fundamental categories (e.g. English pink for red + white or brown for black + yellow), P. Kay – C.K. McDaniel, *The Linguistic Significance of the Meanings of Basic Colour Terms*, “Language”, 54, 1978, 3, pp. 610-646, p. 633.
focused\(^{14}\). Focal grue selections have often proved to be bimodal, chosen from both the focal blue and focal green regions, but grue has never been found to be focused in the intermediate blue-green region\(^{15}\). The grue category exists in some old and modern Semitic languages\(^{16}\), in Sanskrit\(^{17}\), in some Austronesian, Apachean, Aztec-Tanoan, Eskimo\(^{18}\), in Turkic\(^{19}\), in Celtic\(^{20}\), and even in some dialects of Italian\(^{21}\). Its Chinese equivalent is \textit{qīng} 青, which is expressed in the standard combinations \textit{qīng tiān} 青天 [blue sky] and \textit{qīng căo} 青草 [green grass].

2. \textit{Green}

I deploy three different kinds of evidence in favour of the fact that \textit{qīng} primarily stands for \textit{green}. First, is the etymological analysis of the character \textit{per se}, written in Old Chinese as 初 (HDZD, 4046). Yuē Zhāi explains that the lower part of the character is a drawing of a well-shaft constructed for obtaining a mineral pigment, which is expressed by a dot in the middle, while the upper part represents a plant\(^{22}\). Needham, quoting Kalgren, says that this depicts a plant of some kind, very possibly indigo\(^{23}\) with its juice being collected in a pan\(^{24}\). Thus, we have the syssemantic-category (Chin. \textit{huìyì} 会意)\(^{25}\) character that expresses the

\(^{14}\) Focus (focal colour) is the area of a colour which is considered the best and most typical example of that colour.

\(^{15}\) P. Kay – C.K. McDaniel, \textit{The Linguistic Significance of the Meanings of Basic Colour Terms}, p. 630.


\(^{18}\) B. Berlin – P. Kay, \textit{Basic colour terms: their universality and evolution}, pp. 74-78.


\(^{22}\) Yuē Zhāi 约斋, \textit{Zì yuán} 字源 [Etymology of Chinese characters], Shànghăi shūdiàn 1986, p. 121.

\(^{23}\) As is commonly known, China is the birthplace of sericulture. The earliest excavated silk is a group of ribbons, threads and woven fragments dyed red, dated to 3000 BC, Ye Yun – L.G. Salmon – G.R. Cass, \textit{The ozone fading of traditional Chinese plant dyes}, “Journal of the American Institute for Conservation”, 39, 2000, 2, pp. 245-257. The dominant materials used for textile dyeing were plant dyes. Chinese literary sources state that indigo was one of the oldest dyes, known as early as during the legendary Xià 夏 Dynasty (ca. 21st – ca. 16th cent. BC) and mainly obtained from the indigo plant \textit{Polygonum tinctorium} (Chin. liăolán 蓼藍), Xú Cháo-huá 徐朝华, \textit{Xi “qīng” zuòwéi yánsècí de nèihán jí qí yănbiàn 析“青”作为颜色词的内涵及其演变 [Colour lexeme ‘qīng’: analysis of its meaning and evolution], “Nánkāi dàxué xuébào” 南开大学学报, 6, 1988, 19, pp. 33-39, p. 35.


\(^{25}\) Lit. ‘joint meanings’: a type of Chinese characters whose meaning is indicated by the combined meanings of their constituent parts. Also known as ‘associative’. For more on this category, see W. Behr, \textit{Homosomatic...
idea of a pigment (of biological or mineral origin), which has the colour of plants. Yuē Zhāi believes that qīng meant shíqīng [stone qīng], that is, the azurite mineral. Xú Cháohuá hypothesises that qīng primarily denotes not just azurite alone, but the aggregate of two minerals: azurite and malachite.

The second piece of evidence stems from the phonological reconstruction of qīng by William Baxter, who points out that qīng was once very close to the lexeme shēng [live, bear, be born, produce, fresh] phonologically, morphologically, and almost surely etymologically. Moreover, he compares qīng with the Tibeto-Burman root *sriŋ [live, alive, green, raw]. The fact that the Tibeto-Burman cognate also means 'green' in some languages makes it quite plausible that a similar semantic development of English 'green' and 'grass', and of German grün and gras from the same Old German root *gro- [grow] is quite parallel.

The third basis of evidence is of archaeological origin. Chêng Tê-k’un studied a group of fifteen vessels t’u-lu, colour-containers assigned to the late Shāng–Western Zhōu period (ca. 1300-771 BC). Most of these containers are made of bronze (some of pottery, one jade and three marble). They vary from cuboid to round and triangular in shape. Each of them has three to five tubular receptacles for the pigments and a hole in the centre for a mixing saucer. In five out of these fifteen containers (four made of bronze and one made of pottery), residues of pigment were found in the bottom of the tubes, and these have been identified as white, black, red, green and yellow powders with none of them containing blue pigment. The contents from one of them underwent spectroscopic analysis, and the green substance was identified as a copper compound; a pigment derivable from a number of materials such as malachite. This fact proves that the Shāng people did know of the existence of a green (but not yet a blue) pigment; furthermore, this also makes qīng, originally denoting the aggregate of azurite and malachite, quite plausible as both are basic copper carbonates, the sources of copper. Except for its vibrant green colour, the chemical formula of malachite is similar to that of azurite. Azurite is found in shades of deep, intense blue and is less abundant in nature than malachite. Both minerals frequently occur together, to the extent that the name ‘azur-malachite’ has been used for intimate combinations.


Yuē Zhāi 约斋, Zì yuán 字源 [Etymology of Chinese characters], p. 121.


The name t’u-lu (圖盧) was taken from an inscription on one of the containers.


logically, azurite is the parent and malachite a weathered form of the original blue deposit. However, azurite is less stable, and if hydrated or exposed to a moist atmosphere, gradually gets converted to malachite. Coarsely ground azurite produces dark blue, while the finely ground pigment is pale and weak and has a greenish undertone.

Archaeological discoveries in the final third of the past century confirmed that the beginning of China’s Bronze Age can be traced back to the third millennium BC. By the Late Shāng era (ca. 1300–1046 BC), the Bronze Age culture was spread widely over northern, central and eastern China. Bronze manufacturing technology requires mining of copper and tin deposits, and malachite was most probably the principal source of copper. Repeatedly reported findings of malachite – the largest single piece weighed 18.8 kg – in ancient copper mines at Yinxi, an ancient capital of Shāng, prove that the Shāng people were familiar with natural deposits of this copper ore. Interestingly, the term for bronze in Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) is qīngtóng 青銅 [qing + copper: grue copper].

Both malachite and azurite appear in Old, Middle and Modern Chinese texts under several names in which qīng is always a root morpheme:

**Malachite:**
- kōngqīng 空青 = hollow + qīng [nodular grue] in Ji Ni-zī 计倪子 (4th cent. BC), Shēnmǒng běncǎo jīng 神農本草經 (2nd–1st cent. BC), Shì Yào Ēryá 石葯爾雅 (806 AD), Běncǎo gāngmù 本曹綱目 (1596), Sāncái Túhuì 三才圖會 (1609);
- zēngqīng 曾青 = augment + qīng [laminar grue] in Ji Ni-zī, Shēnmǒng běncǎo jīng, Shì Yào Ēryá, Běncǎo gāngmù, Sāncái Túhuì;
- luǒqīng 結青 = MSM BCT for green + qīng in Shēnmǒng běncǎo jīng, Shì Yào Ēryá.

In Modern Chinese, malachite is mostly called tónglu 銅綠 [copper + BCT for green] or shílu 石綠 [stone + BCT for green], as in Běncǎo gāngmù (1596); in MSM the term for malachite is kŏngquèshí 孔雀石 [peacock stone].

**Azurite:**
- báiqīng 白青 = MSM BCT for white + qīng [pale grue] in Shān Hăi Jīng 山海経 (8th-1st cent. BC), Shēnmǒng běncǎo jīng, Shì Yào Ēryá, Běncǎo gāngmù;
- fūqīng 膚青 = superficial + qīng in Ji Ni-zī, Míng Yī Bié Lù 名醫別錄 and Běncǎo jīng jí zhù 本草集注 (495 AD);

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36 Modern Standard Mandarin refers to contemporary Chinese (from the 20th century onwards); Old Chinese: 11th cent. BC – 1st cent. AD; Modern Chinese: 12th-20th centuries.
37 For more references to Old and Middle Chinese texts, please consult table 95 in J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*. 
• biănqīng 扁青 = flat + qīng in: Shénnóng bĕncăo jīng, Sāncái Túhuì.

In Modern Chinese, azurite is often denoted as shíqīng 石青 [stone + qīng], while the MSM term for it is lántóngkuàng 藍銅礦 [BCT for blue + copper ore] or lán kŏngquèshí 藍孔雀石 [BCT for blue + peacock stone] meaning 'blue malachite'.

Although the green pigment was known in ancient China and the form of the character qīng is found in Shāng oracle bone inscriptions (Chin. jiăgŭwén 甲骨文), it was never applied as a CT. As for early bronze inscriptions (Chin. jīnwén 金文), the Hànŷ Đâ Zìdiăn provides a form of this character (HDZD, 4046) written in the inscription of the lid of Wú fāng yí 吳方彝, a ritual vessel dated 898 BC, but qīng is used here as a name. Another example we found from early bronze inscriptions is on the Pú hé匍盉 pot, a relatively recently discovered object, assigned to the later period of the reign of King Mu 穆王 (c. 956–918 BC), where qīng is clearly a name and most probably also a toponym, and need not have been a CT. In the inscription of the Shĭ Qiáng pán 史牆盤, a bronze basin from the King Gong 共王/恭王 (c. 917/15–900 BC) period we read: "qīng yōu 青幽高祖", where many scholars have read the qīng as a loan character for jìng 靜 [silent], and translated the phrase as "the silent and secluded ancestors" and expressed praise. Wáng Tao, instead, suggests that qīng 青, used together with yōu 幽, is best understood as the extended meaning of the CT 'dark-green', referring to the sky or heaven where the ancestors lived.

Oracle bone inscriptions from the late Shāng period (ca. 1300-1046 BC) comprise the earliest Chinese collection of graphs indisputably regarded as a fully developed writing system. These divinatory inscriptions were carved primarily on the scapulae of oxen or sheep and on turtle shells, W.G. Boltz, The origin and early development of the Chinese writing system, p. 31. 


Wáng Lóngzhèng 王龙正, Pú hé mingwén bù shì kāng zài lán tiàoqǐn lì 孟TRIES铭文补释并论铭聘礼 [Supplementary decipherment of the inscription on the Pu he pot and restudy of Tiaopin etiquette], "Kăogŭ xuébào" 考古学报, 2007, 4, pp. 405-422, pp. 405-408.

Sec. Lī Xuéqín 李学勤, Lùn Shĭ Qiáng pán jí qí yìyì 论史墙盘及其意义 [The bronze p'an-basin made by the court historian Ch'iang and its significance], "Kăogŭ xuébào" 考古学报, 1978, 2, pp. 149-158, p. 153; Tăng Lán 唐兰, Liànhèn Xi Zhōu Wēi shì jīzhǔ jiàocáng tóngqìqún de zhòngyì yìyì 联合晚期微史家族窖藏铜器群的重要意义 [The significance of bronzes found in a cellar of the Wei (an official historian) family of Western Chou Dynasty], "Wénwù" 文物, 1978, 3, pp. 19-24, p. 22; Pān Fēng 潘峰, Shi 'qīng' 青 [Let us figure 'qing' out], "Hànzi wénhuà" 汉字文化, 2006, 1, pp. 41-44, p. 43.

Qū Xiģuì 渠锡圭, Shĭ Qiáng pán ming jiěshì 史墙盘铭解释 [Interpretation of the inscriptions on the Shi Qiăng pàn basin], "Wénwù" 文物, 1978, 3, pp. 25-32, p. 32.
The word occurs only once in the Shūjīng «書經» [Classic of Documents]⁴⁵, in the Yǔ gòng «禹贡» [Tribute of Yu] section, which is agreed to be quite late⁴⁶ and probably composed in the 3rd century BC. The application of qīng 青 in the Shījīng «詩經» [Book of Odes]⁴⁷ is fairly complicated. While clearly endowed with the meaning ‘green’ when describing the colour of bamboo and leaves, it seems to have the meaning ‘green or blue’ in four places: applied to a collar (ode 91.1), girdle-gems (91.2), earplugs of an uncertain material, probably silk (98.2) and flies (219.1, 2, 3). However, another meaning is 'luxuriant', where commentators say it should be read as jīng 菁 and also written slightly differently:菁.

Most probably, the character qīng 青 originally represented the word later written as jīng 菁⁴⁸. As qīng was a cognate of shēng 生 [live, produce, fresh] («釋名·釋采帛», quoted from HDZD, 4046), cited earlier. The Shuōwén jiězì «說文解字» [Analytical Dictionary of Characters]⁵⁰ defines it as a ‘colour of the east’, i.e. in accordance with the five-agent theory⁵¹, and that the whole character expresses the idea of ‘wood generating fire’, where the upper part stands for mù 木 [wood], the agent of the east, while the lower part represents dān 丹 [cinnabar]⁵², which is naturally red, just like fire, the agent of the south⁵³. Therefore, in addition to being syssemantic, qīng also appears to belong to the phonosemantic (Chin. xíngshēng 形声)⁵⁴.

⁴⁵ The Classic of Documents is a collection of speeches made by rulers and important politicians from mythical times to the middle of the Western Zhōu (1046-771 BC) period.
⁴⁷ The Book of Odes, the oldest collection of Chinese poetry dating ca. 800-500 BC.
⁴⁹ Lit. Explaining simple and analysing compound [characters], a glossary dictionary compiled by Lü Xi 劉熙 at the end of the Eastern Han 漢 Dynasty (25-220 AD).
⁵⁰ Lit. Explaining simple and analysing compound [characters], a dictionary of graphic etymology, the predecessor of Chinese dictionaries and encyclopaedias, completed by Xu Shèn 許慎 in 100 AD.
⁵¹ The ancient wŭ xíng 五行 ‘five agents’ (five elements) assumed complex and cosmic interrelationships among the five agents (metal, wood, fire, water and earth), the five directions, the five colours, the five seasons, the five internal organs of the body, the five notes on the musical scale, etc.
⁵³ Shuōwén 10, 青部 (Explaining simple and analysing compound [characters]), p. 684.
⁵⁴ Lit. ‘form and sound’; this type of character consists of a semantic determiner broadly indicating the meaning of a character (also known as ‘radical’) and a morphological constituent (also known as ‘phonetic’). For a more detailed explanation of the xíngshēng category, refer to W. Behr, Homosomatic juxtaposition and the question of syssemantic characters, pp. 293-294.
category, where 丹 是 the semantic determiner and 生 是 the morphonological constituent.

3. Blue

When used in the context of sky, 蓝 is interchangeable with 苍, another term for grue, phonologically very close to 蓝, with the difference of a main vowel only. Even though the Shuo wen jiexi glosses it as the 'colour of grass', in twelve cases out of the fifteen instances in the Shi jing, it serves to describe the sky’s colour; in two of the remaining instances, it is applied to reeds and rushes (ode 129.1) before finally a fly (ode 96.1). 蓝 and 苍 are also used interchangeably for describing the colour of the sky in later texts such as the Liji «禮記» and the Zhuangzi «莊子». We may therefore relatively safely assert that 苍 was a referential synonym of 蓝, as firstly, the colour of grass was often described as 蓝, and secondly, although not totally identical in usage, 蓝 and 苍 were exchangeable in many contexts. I furthermore intend to devote a separate paper to 苍 and other synonyms of 蓝.

However, we first see the meaning of ’blue’ in this lexeme in the following passage from the Xunzi «荀子»: "青取之於藍而青於藍" («荀子·勸學», quoted from HDZD, 4046). The Shuo wen jiexi glosses 藍 – BCT for blue in MSM – as a ’herb used for dyeing [things] blue’, so the phrase becomes translated as: “Blue is obtained from the indigo plant, but is more blue than the indigo plant”.

4. Macro-black

One of the characteristics of the Chinese grue is that it denotes not only cool primaries, but also extends into the macro-black area. The reason for this syncretism is the subjective factor. Liu refers to the Comments to the Li Qi 禮器 section of the Liji «禮記» by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (a famous scholar in the Eastern Han 漢 Dynasty, 25-220 AD) and the further explanation by Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (a scholar of the Tang 唐 Dynasty, 618–907 AD). Both comments are devoted to the famous historical incident described in the Shi ji

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56 Shuo wen 2, 中部 (Explaining simple and analysing compound [characters]), p. 124.
57 The Book of Rites, an encyclopaedia of ritual matters written during the late Warring States 戰國 (475-221 BC) and Western Han 漢 (206 BC–8 AD) periods.
59 The Confucian treatise written by Xun Kuang 荀况 (trad. 313-238 BC).
60 Shuo wen 2, 中部 (Explaining simple and analysing compound [characters]), p. 72.
61 Fig. ‘The student becomes better than the teacher’.
62 Liu Yunqun 刘云泉, Yuyande sei'ai meti 语言的色彩美 [Beauty of language in colours], Anhui jiaoyu chuban she, Hefei 1990.
Qín Èrshì 秦二世 had a chancellor Zhào Gāo 赵高 who one day decided to rebel, but was unsure whether the ministers would follow him in this action. Thus he first set a test: he brought a deer and presented it to Qín Èrshì calling it a horse. Qín Èrshì laughed and said: “You must be wrong to call a deer a horse!” Then the emperor questioned those around him. Some remained silent, while some, hoping to ingratiate themselves with Zhào Gāo, said it was a horse, and others said it was a deer. “He [Zhào Gāo] also called qīng 青 black (hēi 黑), and black (hēi 黑) yellow (huáng 黄), as in the case with a deer and a horse.” The end of the story was that Zhào Gāo secretly arranged for all those who said it was a deer to be brought before the law. Thereafter, the ministers were all afraid of Zhào Gāo and became obedient to him. Hence, the meaning ‘black’ of the CT qīng 青 is nothing more than the despotism of Chancellor Zhào Gāo.

The idea of forcing the lexeme qīng upon an artificial acquiring of the meaning ‘black’ does not look flawless. The story of a deer called a horse is indeed described in the Shǐ jì 史記 by Sīmá Qiān 司馬遷, but is limited to that. The historian does not say that Zhào Gāo ordered people to call qīng ‘black’ and to name ‘black’ as ‘yellow’, so it is unclear why Kŏng Yĭngdá 孔颖达 refers to Sīmá Qiān. But what might cause this mismatch? This most likely stems from the fact that the parable was passed down orally and therefore varied in content. It is generally acknowledged that the creative activities of the Hàn historiographers and commentators inspired the formation of the quasi-history. The story of a deer called a horse was told to illustrate the lack of principles and cowardice of the emperor’s retinue. Commentators may feasibly have deployed qīng to mean ‘black’ as an additional fact testifying to the tyranny and substitution of notions in order to make the story more persuasive.

The polysemy of qīng cannot be considered artificial or, moreover, imposed. Linguistic syncretism of the terms for green, blue and black colours is not only known in Chinese. The same phenomenon exists in the African Shona language, where the term citema covers not only most blues and some bluish greens, but also black; in Welsh, there is a CT glas, which can refer to blue, but also to certain shades of green and grey. In Old Russian scripts of the 11th-12th centuries, the term for dark-blue sinij was also polysemous and in some texts took on the meaning ‘dark’ and even ‘black’, e.g. sinij kak saža [as sinij as soot]; and sinec (from the same root *sin’), a euphemism for the Devil because of his dark appear-

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63 A famous universal history of Early China written by Sīmá Qiān 司馬遷 (completed ca. 90 BC, during the Western Hàn Dynasty).
64 Lit. ‘Second Emperor of the Qín 秦 Dynasty’ (personal name Húhài 胡亥), who reigned from 210 to 207 BC.
65 From this incident derived a famous idiom: ‘calling a deer a horse’ (Chin. zhǐ lù wéi ma 指鹿為馬), meaning ‘to deliberately misrepresent’.
66 Liú Yúnquán 刘云泉, 言语的色彩美 [Beauty of language in colours], p. 39.
67 See, for example, R.V. Vyatkin – V.S. Taskin, Syma Cjan’ – Istoričeskie zapiski (Ši czi) [Sima Qian – Historical Records (Shi ji)], Vol 2., Vostočnaja literatura, Moskva 2003, pp. 94-95.
68 Ibi, p. 368.
Already in the late 1880s, Geiger insisted that etymologically many terms for 'blue' originally signified 'green' and that an even larger proportion signified 'black'.

As for the explanation of the polysemy of qīng by Chinese linguists, they refer to no practical need for its splitting, because "black is au fond present in indigo; on the other hand, black somehow becomes streaked with green or blue".

5. Why is qīng polysemous?

As we see, the Chinese sources either avoid the etymological problem of the 'black' or 'dark' meaning of this lexeme, or suggest the only and quite unpersuasive explanation: some kind of despotism of Qin's chancellor Zhào Gāo. However, the unavoidable question is: why does Sīmă Qiān tell the parable about a deer and a horse and does not mention the colour substitute? And even if such a substitution occurred, then why did qīng keep the meaning 'black', whereas the substitution of bēi 'black' with 'yellow' did not remain? It is quite possible that the meaning of this wordplay – if, of course, it happened at all – was specifically intriguing to accompany the preparation of the revolt led by Zhào Gāo, who was, incidentally, very educated and intelligent, and participated in the script stabilisation movement and the design of the small seal script (Chin. xiăozhuàn 小篆) during the reign of Qin Shīhuáng 秦始皇. This wordplay most probably served as some code or slogan understandable only by trusted co-conspirators. However, rather than this historical puzzle, what might be the linguistic reasons for the acquiring of the meaning 'black' by the lexeme qīng? I would propose here the following two explanations:

1. qīng 青 was primarily applied to denote dark/black only in a certain dialect area during the Warring States Period, while the meaning 'grue' was a lexical norm of the standard language during that same period. The political unification of the empire in 221 BC under the auspices of the Qin could favour the interference of some dialect meanings into the standard language;

2. the syncretism of qīng 青 has an intralinguistic origin. It seems plausible that at a certain stage in the development of the colour lexicon, it signified cool primaries (blue/green/black) with the hyper-meaning 'dark'. At a later stage, the general meaning split but in some combinations the reflex of the previous unity remained.

It is, however, quite difficult to define the time when this general meaning split happened. Chinese etymological dictionaries in the relevant entries illustrate it either by Kŏng Yingdá's comments or by the rare usage by poets for describing the colour of hair and eyes.

73 Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, Hányǔde yánsècí (dàgāng) [Chinese colour names (syllabas)], "Yányuán jiàoxué yú yánjiū" 语言教学与研究, 1991, 3, pp. 63-80, p. 72.
74 Lit. 'First Emperor of Qin 秦 Dynasty', the founder of the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC) who unified China in 221 BC after the long-lasting Warring States Period.
For example, in Li Bái’s 李白 (701-762 AD) poem we find qīngsī 青絲 [black silk]³⁴, in Dù Fù’s 杜甫 (712-770 AD) there is qīngyăn 青眼 [black eyes]³⁶, and in Yàn Jídào’s 燕幾道 (c. 1030-c. 1106 AD) it says liăng bìn qīng 兩鬓青 [the hair on his temples is black]³⁷. The first and third examples are metaphors, whereas the second one derives from the colloquial expression qīngbáiyăn 青白眼 [qīng + white + eye]. This expression is said to have originated with the poet Ruăn Jí 魏籍 (210-263 AD), a member of a coterie of eccentric intellectuals referred to as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (Chin. Zhúlín Qī Xiàn 竹林七賢). As the Jìn shū «晉書» (Book of Jin)³⁹ relates, Ruăn Jí revealed his mood by purposefully making his eyes “white” or “black”, i.e. he would look people whom he liked directly in the eyes, letting them see the pupils of his eyes; however, upon encountering someone who displeased him, he would flash a glance towards the sky, exposing the whites of his eyes to express his displeasure. From qīngbáiyăn 青白眼 [qīng + white + eye] evolved the synonymous qīngyăn 青眼 [qīng + eye], qīnglài 青睐 [qīng + glance] and qīngmōu 青眸 [qīng + eye pupil], meaning ‘looking straight in someone’s eyes’, and chuăiqīng 垂青 [care + qīng], meaning ‘showing appreciation for someone, looking upon someone with favour’. All these expressions signify ‘approval’, ‘pleasure’, ‘benevolence’, ‘consideration and respect’, whereas báiyăn 白眼 [white + eye] ‘looking askance (showing the whites of one’s eyes)’ conveys the meanings like ‘contempt’, ‘disdain’, ‘disapproval’ or ‘anger’. According to Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, “since Ruăn Jí was neither blue-eyed, nor green-eyed, qīng in this case clearly signifies black”. Instead of being that categorical about the colour of Ruăn Jí’s eyes, I would rather suggest that qīngyăn 青眼 [qīng eyes] – báiyăn 白眼 [white eyes] implies the opposite ‘presence – absence of pupils in the centre of the eyes’; yet qīng should be translated as ‘dark’ (not ‘black’) when it describes the colour of the eyes.

As for the metaphor qīngsī 青絲 [the black silk], used by Li Bái for the description of hair⁴⁰, it is not accidental. Since the Hán Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) the meaning ‘black/dark’ of the lexeme qīng has been used for the description of blue-black dyed textiles⁴¹. This is probably related to the use of azurite, shíqīng 石青 [stone qīng], the mineral mentioned earlier. The dye extracted from azurite can have different shades, up to the very deep, almost black blue. It seems plausible that the binominal qīngyī 青衣 (lit. [dark clothing])

³⁴ Tiăng Shī Sànghăi Shòu, 122 («將進酒»).
³⁵ «短歌行», quoted from Xù 1988, 36.
³⁶ Sīng Cí Sănghăi Shòu, 54 («生查子»).
³⁷ Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, Hânyŭde yánsècí (dàgāng) 汉语的颜色词 (大纲) [Chinese colour names (syllabus)], p. 70.
³⁸ An official historical text covering the history of the Jìn Dynasty from 265 AD to 420 AD (compiled in 648 during the Tâng Dynasty).
³⁹ Xû Cháohuá 徐朝华, Xi “qīng” zuòwéi yánsècí de nèihán jí qí yănbiàn 析“青”作为颜色词的内涵及其演变 [Colour lexeme ‘qing’: analysis of its meaning and evolution], p. 36.
⁴⁰ Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, Hânyŭde yánsècí (dăgāng) 汉语的颜色词 (大纲) [Chinese colour names (syllabus)], p. 70.
⁴¹ Xû Cháohuá 徐朝华, Xi “qīng” zuòwéi yánsècí de nèihán jí qí yănbiàn 析“青”作为颜色词的内涵及其演变 [Colour lexeme ‘qing’: analysis of its meaning and evolution], p. 39.
is derived from the denotation of azurite. This is also confirmed by the fact that when L.P. Syčëv and V.L. Syčëv describe the clothing of Hóng Lóu Mèng’s “紅樓夢” [Dream of the Red Chamber]

84 main character, young nobleman Jiă Băoyù 賈寶玉, they refer to the Qiánlóng 乾隆 emperor’s 1759 edict

85 which assigned wearing the jacket guà (褂) over the robe páo (袍) as an essential part of official formal clothing, and the jacket guà must be exclusively of the deep blue shìqīng 石青 (as an analogy of the mineral’s name the fabric was dyed with) colour

86. There might be another explanation for the metaphorisation of the binominal qīngsī 青絲 [black silk], which is due to its meaning ‘hair in youth,’ where qīng means ‘young,’ and in this case we deal with the connotative meaning of this CT. In this respect, it is interesting to see the synonymy of qīng – exclusively when it describes the colour of the hair – with lǜ 綠, a BCT for green in MSM. In MSM, this meaning remains in the bookish binominals such as lǜyún 綠雲 [dark/black clouds] (fig. about hair of a beauty) and lǜbìn 綠鬓 [black hair on the temples]. Since green is the colour of spring and youth, someone’s hair in his/her young years is described symbolically via qīng 青 or lǜ 綠.

The polysemy of qīng also spreads the derived lexemes with qīng as a semantic determiner:

- tīn = 靛 = 天: [sky in Daoist texts] (HDZD, 4049);
- sè: [reddish-blue] (chìqīng 赤青, red + qīng) (HDZD, 4049);
- hù: [pigment similar to azurite] (shíqīng 石青) (HDZD, 4049);
- chēng = 瞻 = 瞻: [straight look in someone’s eyes] (HDZD, 4047) (cf. mentioned above qīnglái 青睐, qīngmóu 青眸, qīngyăn 青眼).

6. How to translate expressions containing qīng

For Chinese speakers, the polysemy of qīng青 does not create any confusion, as usually they do not question what colour it means in one or another word combination. To foreigners, they recommend memorising the metaphorical expressions containing this lexeme. In this respect, the following hints may be suggested:

1. When it describes objects pigmented by nature, qīng 青 indicates green (qīngwā 青蛙 [frog], qīngtāi 青苔 [moss], qīng jiāo 青椒 [green pepper], dòu qīng 豆青 [pea green colour]), except for:
   a. the colour of the sky and the colour of the skin (because of cold, anger, fear or vascular collapse), where it indicates blue:
      - qīng xiāo 青霄 = qīng míng 青冥: [blue sky].

84 Dream of the Red Chamber, written by Cáo Xuěqín 曹雪芹 (1715-1763), is generally considered the greatest of all Chinese novels.

85 They mean a massive work entitled Huángcháo lĭqĭ túshì «皇朝禮器圖式» Illustrated Precedents for the Ritual Paraphernalia of the Imperial Court, which provided a comprehensive, illustrated inventory of all court items, including the strict codes of dress required of court officials.

qīng tiān 青天: [blue sky] → [clear sky] (semantic extension) → fig. about justice or upright and honourable official, “who sees things clearly, without any mist or fog”

qīng yún 青雲: [clear sky], [high altitude reaching the clouds] (from the Hàn Dynasty onwards) → fig. [great official career or literary rank]

qīngzhōng 青肿: [bruise]

mìngqīng 面青: [bluish (unhealthy) complexion]

liànsè qì dé fāqīng 脸色气得发青 [face turned blue with anger]

b. the colour of plumage and scales (of non-multicoloured species); in these cases it usually refers to dark/grey/greyish-black:

qīngyú 青魚 = hēihuàn 黑鲩 (MSM BCT for black + carp): Mylopharyngodon piceus, black carp (Cīhái, 3153, 3298)

qīngquè 青雀 = sānghù 桑扈: Eophona personata, Japanese Grosbeak, a finch grey in colour with a black head (Cīhái, 3153, 1504)

2. When it describes artificially pigmented objects or dyed textiles, qīng may refer either to blue or to black. The meaning depends on: a) the historical time frame, b) whether the text is written in báihuà (白話) or in wényán (文言), and c) in combination with which CT is applied:

a. if the text is written in wényán, and qīng is used in opposition to chì 赤 [red], hēi 黑 [black], huáng 黄 [yellow], bái 白 [white] or other CTs of a different hue, then qīng indicates blue, whereas if it is accompanied by lán 藍 – BCT for blue in MSM – qīng usually denotes very dark shades of blue, bordering on black;

b. if the text is in báihuà, prior to the Yuan 元 (1279-1368) – Ming 明 (1368-1644) period, qīng always refers to blue, whereas, after the Ming Dynasty, it acquires the meaning ‘dark/black’.

Observe the meanings of qīng in the following etnoeidems:

qīngjīn 青衿: lit. [blue collars], fig. about scholars and intellectuals, from the scholars’ dark-blue dress of classical times (already seen in the Shijing);

qīngyī 青衣: [dark clothes], but with some nuances:

1. from the end of the Eastern Hàn Dynasty to the Táng Dynasty, it referred to the
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robes of servants, which were made of coarse dark blue fabric\(^{90}\);

2. from the Ming Dynasty onwards, figurative generic name for someone of humble status, regardless of clothing colour (which, however, was still made of coarse fabric and dyed either blue-black or black)\(^{91}\);

3. also known as 黑衫 (MSM BCT for black + robe) [black clothing] in Chinese opera (Cǐhăi, 3152), and refers to a role type for women, young or middle aged, who have been raised to behave within the social norm. The name of the role comes from a black robe that women in this role often wear when their fortunes have turned for the worse. The characters are empresses and noble women, filial daughters, faithful wives, or lovers in distress\(^{92}\). Depending on the social status of the character, a robe is made either of black silk or of coarse black fabric\(^{93}\).

It is interesting to note that the principle of ‘originally containing the pigment in se’ versus ‘painted over’ is also reflected in ceramics terminology:

- **qīngcí 青瓷 (qīng + ceramics):** the class of ceramics widely known as celadon\(^{94}\), but the more accurate term is ‘greenware’ (glazed with a smooth grey-green appearance as a result of the iron within the glaze being fired in a reducing atmosphere)\(^{95}\). Some of these ceramics, however, hardly deserve being called green (some are bluish-green, some are greyish-green), but definitely not blue;

- **qīnghuā 青花 (qīng + flowers):** lit. [blue flowers], blue-and-white porcelain (also known as ‘underglaze blue’), the most admired type of Chinese ceramics, fully mastered during the Yuán Dynasty. The decoration was applied in cobalt-blue pigment directly to the ceramic body and then covered with transparent glaze\(^{96}\). Cobalt oxide was originally imported from Central or West Asian countries\(^{97}\) and acquired the name 回回青 [Mohamettan qīng], i.e. [Muslim blue]. The drawing is free and bold, yet delicate, the blue varying from almost pure ultramarine to a dull, greyish colour with a tendency to clot and turn black where it runs thickest\(^{98}\).

\(^{90}\) Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, *Hànyŭde yánsècí (dàgāng)* [Chinese colour names (syllabus)], p. 71.

\(^{91}\) Xú Cháohuá 徐朝华, *Xī "qīng" zuòwéi yánsècí de nèihán jí qí yănbiàn 析“青”作为颜色词的内涵及其演变* [Colour lexeme ‘qīng’: analysis of its meaning and evolution], p. 39.


\(^{93}\) Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, *Hànyŭde yánsècí (dàgāng)* [Chinese colour names (syllabus)], p. 71.


7. Conclusion

In contemporary Chinese, 青 is not a basic colour term; there are separate, 'psycho-
logically salient' terms for green (绿), blue (蓝) and black (黑). However, 
青 has not faded away; on the contrary, it still very much remains in use: it forms com-
 pound terms with other colour lexemes and also often deployed in its figurative meaning
of 'young'.

Nevertheless, even native speakers are sometimes unable to define what colour 青
refers to in some contexts. Chinese linguists acknowledge that dictionaries are not always
able to give thorough explanations\(^9\). To interpret its meaning, one has to rely heavily –
and, in fact, exclusively – on when, within which historical time frame, where and under
what circumstances this colour term is applied.

\(^9\) Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常, Hán yǔ de yánsècí (大纲) [Chinese colour names (syl-
labus)], pp. 71-72.