

# Literature Review on *Dragonwings*

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**Abstract:** With the help of the achievements on *Dragonwings* (1975) in the last three decades from the foreign and domestic scholars, this article is supposed to clarify the specific perspectives of these researches, such aspects as culture, history, image shaping, narratology, identity etc., pointing out that there are some biased points influenced by the subjective thinking of some researchers. Besides, this article points out the three research points for the future: to deepen the study on the issue of identity, not only from the perspective of inter-culture, but inter-society, inter-psychology, etc. ; to regard this novel as a children's book and to analyze it from the perspective of children literature's theory; to study the drama of *Dragonwings* and to do the comparative study between the fiction edition and drama one.

**Keywords:** Laurence Yep; *Dragonwings*; Review; Children's Literature

## 1. Introduction

Laurence Yep (1948), Chinese American author of more than 60 novels and one of children's literature's leading Asian American writers. Yep has written realistic fiction and a fantasy series (beginning with *Dragon of the Lost Sea*, 1982), but is especially acclaimed for his historical novels. Among them, *Dragonwings*, a historical fantasy wins him a lot of honors, including Newbery Honor Book for 1976 (American Library Association), 1995 Phoenix Award from the Children's Literature Association, Carter G. Woodson Award (the National Council for the Social Studies), Notable Children's books of 1971-1975 (American Literary Association), Best of the Best Children's Books, 1966-1978 (School Library Journal), etc.. Besides, in 1991, *Dragonwings* has been dramatized by Berkeley Repertory Theater, which marks Yep's striking achievements in the field of literature and meanwhile indicates the novel *Dragonwings* in particular, representing his powerful voice for the marginalized Chinese-Americans is worthy of rereading and researching. However, as a versatile contemporary Chinese-American writer, Laurence Yep has not gained enough attention from abroad and home. As for the research of *Dragonwings*, there can be found ten articles and five thesis from EBSCO and CNKI. Apart from them, Laurence Yep himself's article "Writing *Dragonwings*" can be found in the book *Presenting Laurence*, in which there is also an article analyzing *Dragonwings* in chapter two. The search for identity by members of two cultural traditions, the need for tolerance by others, the coat of dream and the importance of family are key themes in this book. In the recent three decades, clarified by the research approaches, there are mainly five aspects, containing cultural identity study, post-colonialism study, historical study, narrative study and Chinese images study. Besides, there is an overview study upon *Dragonwings* from Zhou Hui last year. The following is to make an overview at abroad and home in the recent decades enlightened by Zhou and done some complement of it.

## 2. Studies on *Dragonwings* Abroad

Since *Dragonwings* has been awarded with 1995 Phoenix Award from the Children's Literature Association, awarded for a book published 20 years earlier whose value is enduring, it attracts more critics' attention in the west. They have viewed it from the perspective of bicultural identity, historical rewriting, narrative strategies.

Most of the articles explore how the outsiders are confronted with the acculturation and identity construction. Cai Mingshui (1992) is the first one who explains what is acculturation, illustrating the three elements in the process of acculturation and points out acculturation is the way out of the dilemma between bicultural world. Different from Cai who discusses the three aspects of acculturation including place, past, and people, Baghban, Marcia (1997) narrows down the point only on the protagonist Moon Shadow's bicultural situation, explains how to find the pieces of self-identity, and concludes that the connection between the white American reader and the Chinese character; between the Chinese-

American author and writing reflects a common humanity to readers coming of age or not, bicultural or not, attempting to find themselves, their personal identity in the pieces of their particular puzzles. Similarly to Baghban LaFaye, Alexandria (1999) through the perspective of cross-culture, has described that *Dragonwings* can be viewed as Chinese-American quest for self-definition and it draw upon the social and literary heritage of Chinese Americans to create literary celebrations of biculturalism. These articles have revealed the outsiders' cultural conflict and identity crisis, and altogether, have put out the resolution to such dilemma is the balance between the two cultures in order to reconstruct self-identity, which has deconstructed the western binary distinction, between the Chinatown and the outside western world, between the white and the non-white people. This argument is profound and forceful but as for the people in such between world dilemma, cultural identity crisis is just one aspect of identity crisis, which is not absolute and can not be overemphasized. The issues of historical, economic, political and other factors can not be ignored either.

As the research on *Dragonwings* deepens, Roc ó G. Davis (2004) has argued the representing of the hidden history's impact on the construction of self-identity. On the one hand, the representative of the lost history helps Asian Americans self-aware and self-fashion; and meanwhile, reflecting the past is meaningful to the present, functioning as a growth-inducing engagement of the self with an other. Besides, Davis has analyzed the discursive strategy in *Dragonwings*, centering on father-son dyad narration, the implied readers as well as the real ones in familiarization and focalization, and the insider perspective resorting to concrete historical materials, to uncover the hidden history in the past. Actually, earlier than Davis, Leona W. Fisher (2002) has tracked Yep's strategy with applying of narratological reading: from the radically destabilizing child's focalization and linguistic defamiliarization, through the gradual reconciliation of perspective in the embedded imagery and adult dialogue, to an eventual understanding across cultural difference. As to cultural difference, similar to the former, Fisher still stresses the importance of deconstructing the western binary distinction between the eastern and western, not assimilation but coalition-across-differences. And meanwhile, Fisher sublimates the argument to a philosophically universal issue on subjectivity and interaction which are edifices continually under construction. In this way, the "universality" in *Dragonwings* represents, and this point corresponds with Marcia Baghban's reference to common humanity.

As discussed above, it can be seen that little research has been done on *Dragonwings*. Such issues as cultural identity, historical reconstruction, narrative perspective, lead western scholars to see through this novel. These researches on *Dragonwings* are enlightening in the following aspects. Firstly, the study of the bicultural issues is command of destructing the binary distinction mindset and open up eyes to the world, where one culture is just a part of it. Secondly, most of the scholars take culture and history as their stances. Actually, these are not deficient. For one thing, there are more can be explored, such as the importance of family, the balance between reality and dream, etc. For the other, some systematically theoretical guidance for the analysis of *Dragonwings* is also urgent. Lastly, with regard to the research of identity, the articles above mainly center on the discussion of the connection between self and culture or history with the conclusion that the recalling of history and balancing of the two cultures help self-awareness, but little mention the minor aspects, such as the psychological anxiety as outsiders, the connection between self and family, other social relationships and even ego, to show one's subjectivity. That is to say, the former studies regard self-identity as their ending rather than starts with "self".

### 3. Studies on *Dragonwings* At Home

Compared with foreign theoretical researches, domestic scholars have also contributed a lot to the relevant academic fields but they are later than the western critics for almost one decade, starting with Meng Xianhua's thesis (2002). Similar to the western cultural and historical studies, the national exploration also focuses on such elements.

Cultural studies on *Dragonwings* at home starts with Meng Xianhua (2002). Taking the metaphorical meaning of the word "bridge" to connect different cultural elements between the Chinese and the western culture, with close reading on the text and the method of comparison, Meng discusses why and how Yep has built a cultural bridge between the two different cultures. Based on the former studies abroad, Meng explains that the cause to build the "bridge" is out of the necessity of a harmonious and balanced world, on the practical trend of globalization or the construction of human community with a shared future, and on the possibility of the commonality of human behaviors from different cultures in spite of any radical differences. Meng points out what the bridge is understanding and integration, to be tolerant of differences. Finally Meng concludes several specific cultural strategies to deal with different cultural communications for the relationship between China and America. Cultural fusion and cultural exchange

is possible, this strategy liberates people with new knowledge from the limitations of stereotyped thoughts on the “others” culture. The textual material in this thesis is pretty detailed and rich and the whole logic is also clarified, from the introduction of the cultural bridge builder to why and how he builds this bridge and finally to interpret what the bridge is. However, this thesis tends to be a little bit subjective for it is mainly focused on textual analysis lacking a relatively well-developed theoretical guidance, which enriches the argument and enforces the thesis’ depth, authority and academic value.

Chen Jiaxiu (2004) observes Meng’s blemish and interpret cultural impact in *Dragonwings* from the perspective of Edward W. Said’s Orientalism. Chen employs the post-colonial point of view by Said to argue that although Laurence Yep has successfully created more complicated characters and personalities of Chinese-Americans, his bi-cultural background made his works appear American White people’s sense of superiority unconsciously. However, as Laurence Yep dealt with the problems of Eastern vs. Western cultural conflicts in his books, he has expressed the beliefs in harmony, trust, respect and interdependence. In some degree, Chen’s pointing out Yep’s superiority identified with the white make sense, but with this binary distinction mindset to prescribe Yep’s writing motivation also has simplified the author and the white. Chen herself also realizes this point and in the year of 2011, she wrote another article. In this article, the critical method of orientalism has been replaced by historical and textual analysis. Chen recognizes Yep’s objectivity and only to focus on his desire for the ideal of dynamic culture as well as cultural harmony.

As for the point of post-colonialism, it is not unique to Chen, Zhou Hui (2020) also via this perspective probes into the essential causes of the characters’ identity anxiety and solves their belongingness of identity confusion in *Dragonwings*. Zhou holds that her article is a good reference for those people who are confusing about their cultural identity under the circumstance of globalization and provides the basis for them to recover their identity confidence and to find a way out of the perplexity. In the whole, the article is a little bit general. Only as for the theory post-colonialism, an universal system including many sub-theories put forward by different theorists, it is not easy to interpret a work clearly with different perspectives in an article and perhaps it would be better to choose some certain perspective from this compound theory system. As for this point, Chen’s selection of one point in the complex system of post-colonialism is worthy of learning from. In addition, Zhou at the first explores the causes of characters’ identity anxiety, which is novel at home study while she even does not clarify what their identity anxiety is. This neglect weakens the convincing of the following argument and disorders the logic of the whole structure. Finally, Zhou’s reference of the solution to overcome the dilemma of identity confusion is without a focus on any character or situation, is too much away from the novel *Dragonwings* itself. Compared to Chen Jiaxiu and Zhou Hui, Rong Xinxia (2011) in her thesis combines the imagology of comparative literature with Orientalism intends to expose writer’s paradoxical psychology and desirable ideal for equal communication among human beings on the basis of Yep’s *Golden Mountain Chronicles* in which *Dragonwings* is analyzed as a part of research materials. She argues that on the one hand, Yep shows his submission to Orientalism and that on the other hand, Yep is subversive against Orientalism. As for the reasons under such conflicted psychology, Rong analyzed specifically from the perspective of history, culture and economy and centering on the reconstruction of Chinese American images because stereotype of Asians in Anglo-Saxon literature exactly reflects American Orientalism. This analysis of Yep’s portrayal of Chinese images with good sides and bad sides answers and corresponds with Chen’s point of Yep’s impartial standing.

With regard to Chinese images study, Chen xiuli (2011&2013) also puts her research interests on Chinese cultures and Chinese images in *Golden Mountain Chronicles* with the imagology of comparative literature. After she analyzed Chinese women images in Yep’s series novels in 2011, she expands her research area to Chinese images in her thesis after two years. In *Dragonwings* Chinese women image represented by Moon Shadow’s mother who is nameless and obedient to the patriarchy, which reveals the Chinese tradition for the women as someone’s wife, mother only without her independent self. This is only a piece of the iceberg of Chinese traditional culture and Chen Jiaxiu wildly quests how such traditional Chinese cultures as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Chinese customs, and Chinatown, affect Yep’s depiction of Chinese images. Then, she further categorizes several types of characters such as native Chinese teenagers, heroic father images, loving father Images, traditional mother images for analysis, after which she draws a high compliment that *Golden Mountain Chronicles*, in fact, not only could be regarded as the process of exploration of Chinese culture, but the process that Yep examines the images of Chinese and searches for his cultural identity. Actually, this novel has been loved by the teenagers, adults from all over the world, and from this aspect, it shows not only Yep’s own cultural identity searching but everyone can find himself momentarily.

Except for studies on culture and image study in *Dragonwings*, the theme reclaiming the lost history

has also been explored by Li Sheng (2003), who intends to explore how the novel manages to represent that part of American history--the history of the early Chinese immigrants--in the form of historical fiction and thus reclaims the lost history. Li's selection of the work and perspective at that time the year of 2003, is novel and significant at home, filling into the gap in the research area of American Chinese literature, that is, studying the genre of young adult literature from historical view and analyzing the causes and meanings of the lost history. The statistics Li provides in the thesis also shows the objectivity and authenticity of his argument materials. However, his discussing the topic of young adult literature and historical novel together as his originality, should have been supported by more evidence from the text and theory. There only a brief explanation why Laurence Yep writes in this way, which is not adequate. Meanwhile, this thesis seems to lack of a fundamental theatrical basis, which influence the depth of this thesis research.

With regard to the domestic reviews above, it can be found that not until the beginning of 21 century, the studies on *Dragonwings* has been attached to the domestic scholars. The research on it is from the superficial analyses to deep cultural and historical connotations. Meanwhile, the research also tends to be more systematic and objective with the use of the new literary critical approaches, such as the imagology of comparative literature, Orientalism, trauma theory, feminist criticism etc. However, the domestic studies on *Dragonwings* mainly are consisted in the master theses rather than papers or articles. This shows that this work has not been much attached by the senior professors in this area. Compared to the foreign studies on *Dragonwings*, domestic counterparts emphasize the external causes exploring the culture and history behind Chinese stereotypes but lack self-critical awareness and ignore a profound exploration into the construction of self identity.

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on the reviews above, I totally agree with Zhou Hui's (2020) research outlook of *Dragonwings* on the following four aspects: to establish an objective awareness of cultural criticism; to broaden the horizons of inter-cultural and interdisciplinary research; to summarize Yep's writing characteristics and rules on character portraying in a comparative perspective; to focus on the domestic translation and dissemination upon *Dragonwings*. These perspectives help me to narrow down some topics as the following.

Firstly, as for Zhou's point to broaden the horizons of inter-cultural and interdisciplinary research, it is necessary to clear what kind of interdisciplinary that is accessible. Considering the prior foreign studies on the issue of identity in *Dragonwings*, this topic has only been talked from the cultural criticism. Identity, actually is not only constructed by culture, but influenced by society, psychology, etc. Therefore, the topic of identity can be studied not only from the perspective of inter-culture, but inter-society, inter-psychology, etc.

Secondly, due to the author Laurence's identity as a Chinese American, this novel has been usually interpreted from the racial perspectives, like the uses of the post-colonial critical approaches. However, this novel also is a children's book, which has been ignored mostly. Therefore, regarding this novel as a children's book and to analyze it from the perspective of children literature's theory is pretty valuable.

Thirdly, concerning that *Dragonwings* has been adapted into drama, but the study on this is rare. Therefore, the research on the drama of *Dragonwings* should been put into importance. Further, the comparative study between the fiction edition and drama one is also worthy of exploring.

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