

# An Overview of Studies in *Dragonwings*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Based on the achievements upon *Dragonwings*(1975)in the last thirty years from foreign and domestic academic fields, this article presents a comprehensive review of the relevant research from such aspects as culture, history, image shaping, narratology etc., pointing out that there are some biased opinions from subjective interpretations which need to be probed into. Therefore, the following four aspects are proposed to be carried out in the future: 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*.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Dragonwings, Review, Chinese american literature*

## 1. Introduction

Laurence Yep, one of the most highly acclaimed Chinese American authors in contemporary American children's literature, has written more than 60 novels so far. His *Dragonwings*, American Library Association Notable Book (1975), *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year (1975), Newbery Honor Book(1975), Children's Book Award, International Reading Association (1976), *Boston Globe/Horn Book* Award Honor Book (1977), Lewis Carroll Shelf Award (1979), and New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age (1980, 1981, 1982), which marks his striking achievement in the field of Chinese American literature and American children's literature. In 1991, *Dragonwings* has been dramatized by Berkeley Repertory Theater. In 2005, he has been honored with Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for his outstanding contribution to American children's literature. Among all of his literary works, *Dragonwings*, in particular, represents his powerful voice mediating over the past history, mirroring the current and messaging to the future. His unique significance to Chinese American literary creation lies in that it reveals the stress upon the marginalized Chinese Americans from the mainstream of American society, voicing for "the silenced" Chinese Americans. Therefore, this article intends to make an overview of studies upon *Dragonwings* at home and abroad in the recent three decades.

## 2. Studies on *Dragonwings* Abroad

Ever since *Dragonwings* was published in 1975, attentions have been paid to this novel from some outstanding critics in the west so that they could be categorized as follows according to their own unique perspectives and extraordinary viewpoints.

Based on previous studies in the multicultural literary field, Cai Mingshui (1992) finds that a multicultural literary work may go against its original creation "if it perpetuates stereotypes, expresses racial prejudices, or reflects extreme views of assimilationism or pluralism." (ibid, p.107) Therefore, she takes *Dragonwings* as a good example elucidating what the ethnic literature supposed to be by analyzing the impacts of Chinese American's acculturation upon three significant aspects, including place, past as well as people. She points out that the process of acculturation, a mutually beneficial fortress without wall for discovering each other, not merely enables those stereotypes imposed on Chinese immigrants being caught between worlds to be undone, but, more importantly, directs a way out of between-world dilemma for all dual racial and cultural heritage. The above understanding is profound; however, the problem is also apparent that the overemphasis on the idealized impacts of acculturation is apt to ignore other factors such as policy, economy, and laws which may weaken the real effects of acculturation.

Attempting to explore Moon Shadow's physical and emotional dilemma from the perspective of both Chinese and American cultures, Dr. Marcia Baghban (1997) argues that by presenting what Moon Shadow, a Chinese boy, thought, felt and saw in unfamiliar America, plots of *Dragonwings* not merely enable non-Chinese readers to comprehend how they "are perceived" when they are regarded as "the unknown entity", but also arouse their empathy with Moon Shadow. Meanwhile, a large proportion of her article elaborates the ways how

Yep maintains reader's empathy within Moon Shadow's experiences between Chinese and American culture. Therefore, She comes to a conclusion that both Chinese and American cultures involved in *Dragonwings* reflects the common humanity upon the Chinese and the Americans trying to figure out the confusion in ethnicity and personal identity and get back to who they are, in which, however, few specific elaborations have mentioned. It can be seen that although it deals with detailed analyses of the cultural characteristics in *Dragonwings*, its standpoint starts with Western racial superiority to examine Eastern and western cultures, which, to some extent, enlightens both western and Chinese scholars to further explore the ways how Yep constructs their cultural identity in an impartial stance while facing cultural dilemmas and how Chinese Americans deal with cultural anxiety.

Cai Mingshui(1992) comments that *Dragonwings* employs "the first-person narrator achieving an effect of immediacy and intimacy," showing the narrative perspective is also one of the key points in the narration of this novel. (117) It is not hard to sense that the child's first-person point of view, especially in young adult literature, has been playing a significant role in inviting children readers to respond positively to the protagonist's judgments. Concerning the narrative perspective in *Dragonwings*, the most representative critical voice comes from Leona W. Fisher (2002), a professor from Georgetown University, who holds that although such a naïve narrative perspective also has a little bit risk of misreading the author's creative stance, the child narrator Moon Shadow's point of view serves to encourage white readers to switch thinking mode in the history, ethnicity or class of unfamiliar culture. With the multiple analysis of the destabilizing force between child's focalization and linguistic defamiliarization, she points out the narrative point of view allows the potential sense "either of inherited guilt or of resentment and anger for the white reader" from historically hostile and defamiliarized racial environment generating the effect of subverting dominant historical accounts and constructing the persuasive counterparts against those misconceptions and misperceptions imposed on Chinese by Americans; Due to individual courage and willingness recognizing and accepting those shocking cultural differences that cannot vanish or be denied occupies a decisive position in human being's existence and survival, as a result, she summarizes that both "Yep and his readers' subjectivity and transcultural interaction" are in the course of continuous construction. (ibid, p.175)

Regarding the discursive strategies within *Dragonwings*, Rocío G. Davis (2004), the associate professor of American and postcolonial literature at the University of Navarre in Spain, centers upon 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, examining the verifiable truths lied in the past, uncovering the historically erased parts in the official version, challenging the hypocritically western democracy in historical inscriptions, emphasizing the necessity and possibility of historical reinterpretation. In the meantime, he underlines that history had the same meanings as fictions as representations of discourse which not merely reconstructs a framework of voicing the existence and complexity of previously overlooked Chinese at the turn of century, but goes beyond a closed system by critically reviewing the past in order to inspire a fresh "self-awareness" and "self-fashioning" in Chinese American children. (ibid, p.405) It can be seen that Rocío G. Davis has shifted her attention from the previous focus upon the literal meaning of the text to a deeper study exploring the social and historical ideology behind the text as well as the connotation of the writer's creation, which has greatly expanded its research horizon.

As discussed above, it can be perceived that little research has been done on *Dragonwings*. Such issues as culture, narrative perspective, and discursive strategies lead western scholars to see through parts of contemporary literary and social problems, however, there are still many deficiencies.

First of all, criticisms on *Dragonwings* are mostly objective and fair; yet there are also parts of negative misjudgments, which would cause academic debates lose its significance as well as academic value, and thus become less rigorous. Therefore, how to get out of the binary mindset is an urgent problem to be addressed at present.

Besides, most of western scholars take history as the cut-in spot in their research, which, objectively, means the complexity of historical materials brought certain difficulties to the research due to the authenticity of those official historical accounts concerning Chinese Americans.

Last but not least, *Dragonwings* is still looking forward to being reevaluated with more profound theoretical guidance, waiting for multi-dimensional comprehensions and views upon Yep's literary world.

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

Compared with foreign theoretical researches, domestic scholars have also contributed a lot to the relevant academic fields.

Actually, a few comments are made about *Dragonwings* at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zhang Ziqing (Ziqing Zhang, 1992) comments that Laurence Yep, a new generation of Chinese American novelists, tries to present American society and Chinese psychology in the foreign country by the observation from Moon Shadow, the protagonist of *Dragonwings*, so as to rectify the stereotype of Chinese people distorted by the modern media at that period.

A consensus among many critics is that Yep's uniqueness on employing cultural elements, in fact, is the core of his novel. Meng Xianhua (孟宪华, 2002) discusses the way how Yep had built a cultural "bridge" between Chinese and American cultures by analyzing Chinese stereotypes, aiming to present the necessity of reconstructing history as well as recovering the lost Chinese culture in the mainstream of American society. She holds the view that cultural misunderstandings and prejudices are the causes leading to an unbalanced world between Chinese and Americans; therefore, it is apparent that understanding and tolerance play crucial roles in integrating a balanced and harmonious world. She finally concludes several specific cultural strategies to deal with different cultural communications with the purpose of looking into a brighter future for the relationship between China and America. From her interpretation, it is obviously perceived that various cultural elements inserted in Chinese and American cultures lay the foundation for Yep's creation, which not merely leads readers to experience the diversities and complexities of Chinese and American cultures, but also liberates both American and Chinese readers from the limitations of stereotyped thoughts on the "others" culture. Her paper, however, tended to be a little bit subjective for it is mainly focused on textual analysis lacking a relatively well-developed theoretical guidance, which has its specific and indispensable significance and functions in academic papers.

Besides, Chen Jiayu (陈佳秀, 2011) also contributes a lot to research on *Dragonwings and Dragon's Gate* with doubts such as how China, a cultural symbol, is interpreted, and what kind of Chinese nationality and cultural connotation does Yep present for readers. Meanwhile, its interpretation with specific historical and cultural backgrounds not only broadens the horizon for readers to objectively learn about the history at that period, but also enables them to have a deeper and more objective understanding concerning Chinese nationality dissimilated in western society. As far as she is concerned, although Yep, growing up in a white setting which might have an effect on his unconscious inclination to Orientalism, has great difficulties in embodying Chinese characters and cultures of the period of Later Qing, it is Yep's objective bicultural portrait based on historical materials that expresses the hope that both Chinese and American readers, on the one hand, are supposed to possess an equal attitude toward other cultures; on the other, eastern and western culture should tend to reach an ideal state of integration. No matter from those detailed historical materials or her logical arguments, the article is nearly flawless. However, if bicultural background studies on shaping Yep's cultural anxiety and its resulting development of writing style could be further expanded, the demonstration that he is an exemplary author objectively dedicating to writing about the real Chinese will be more convincing.

Except for studies on culture in *Dragonwings*, the theme reclaiming the lost history has also been explored by Li Sheng (李盛, 2003). He briefly analyzes the social and historical background at that period for Chinese immigration to the United States with the conclusion that *Dragonwings* is an artistic representation of the lost history whose causes derive from "racial discrimination" and "the Caucasian superiority education of the children of Chinese immigrants." (ibid, p.16- p.17) Then he interprets several fictional devices Yep uses such as "narrative perspective, characters and setting, narrative thread and historical facts" in representing the loss of history, whose, he argues, contributions lay in not merely leaving a realistic picture of history and past experience for the Americans of Chinese descents with a better self-identification, but urging America, an ostensibly multi-ethnic nation embracing immigrant cultures, to come to terms with the history, so that, to a certain degree, those traditional stereotypes rooted in the mainstream of American culture are to be torn down. (ibid, p.19) Similar to one of the limitations in Meng's thesis, his study also seems slightly inadequate for lacking a fundamental theoretical basis. Moreover, the causes of the "lost history" are only ascribed to "racial discrimination" and "the Caucasian superiority education", which, in my opinion, is a one-sided interpretation, waiting to be further explored and perfected. Besides, he also fails to further explore *Dragonwings* from the historical perspective; in fact, it can be found that it is not so much an expression of historical theme as an implication or an image of history, revealing the experience of cultural identity of Chinese Americans and expressing a particular epiphany upon cultural identity which not only belongs to Chinese Americans but all minorities as well.

In addition, domestic scholars also place their focus on shaping Chinese images. It is well-known that one of the striking aspects of *Dragonwings* is the representation of Chinese characters, which is the main creative intention in Yep's writing. Chen Jiayu (陈佳秀, 2004) also conducts systematic researches on the Chinese images produced in *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate*. Based on such basic concepts from Said's Orientalism as "Self", "Others", hegemonic discourse, she claims that, although Yep presents relative stereoscopic Chinese

images, he is still unconsciously under the shadow of white superiority. Even so, she points out it is unfair to criticize the creative intention of Yep lies in pleasing American society according to those Orientalized Chinese characters and to attribute Yep's writing unconsciousness to his bicultural background. She deems that from his meticulous writing upon eastern and western cultures Yep expresses his underlying message in eliminating the "egocentric consciousness" and expecting the harmony between ethnics. (ibid, p.161) Both the political and economic factors are taken into consideration to accuse of western colonial ambitions, yet its reflection on the shortage of our own culture is relatively weak so that it indirectly implies the necessity of an introspective perspective for Chinese scholars.

Compared to Chen Jiaxiu, Rong Xinxia(Xinxia Rong, 2011) combines the imagology of comparative literature with Orientalism with the intention of exposing "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, not merely finding Yep's ambivalence, "submission and subversion against American Orientalism", but investigating the underlying causes, which provides and inspires a new perspective for readers as well. (ibid, p.I) She argues that Yep shows his catering to Orientalism by highlighting the contrast between Chinese immigrants who "were narrow-minded and full of prejudice" and the white landlady Whitlaw and Robin who "were well-educated, kind-hearted and tolerant". (ibid, p.21) Though a few Chinese immigrants were limned as savage, narrow-minded or prejudiced, their good sides are also presented in *Dragonwings*. Therefore, in my opinion, it foreshadows Yep's impartial standpoint that though different races differ in many aspects, such differences are neither superior nor inferior to each other. In general, it can be seen that the study integrated with systematical and criticism upon how the author's hidden ideological implication and mental processes reflect in the novel, in a certain sense, undoubtedly possesses progressive significance; however, it has to be admitted that Rong does not totally get rid of the defect of echoing what others say with respect to the ambivalence of Yep's writing attitude.

Based on the previous research achievements, Chen xiuli(Chen xiuli, 2013)also puts her research interests on Chinese cultures and Chinese images in *Golden Mountain Chronicles* with the imagology of comparative literature. In the perspective of Chinese cultures, She argues that affected by such traditional Chinese cultures as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Chinese customs, and Chinatown, Yep not only reflects his attitude upon Chinese cultures from rejection to acceptance, and finally to integration, but also shows the lost Chinese cultures. From the perspective of Chinese images, She argues that "stereotypes of racial minorities are a record of prejudices" resulting in stimulating Yep's conscious writing of eliminating the traditional ideology with dualistic antinomy on Chinese in America. (ibid, p.31) 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." (ibid, p.49) However, it is far more of a process searching for whole minorities' cultural identity instead of just Yep's own personal pursuit, which seems to me to be slightly limited. Given its research points, her paper successfully further subdivides the essence of Chinese American images; while in terms of detailed analyses the construction of Chinese cultures and Chinese images has not been dug deep enough, which also shows she is slightly subjective, and that there still remains a long way to go about how Chinese immigrants felicitously regard their dual cultural identity, and how to rebalance it.

In light of the domestic reviews above, it can be found that not so much importance has been attached to *Dragonwings* in systematic research since the 1990s. At the beginning of the new era, domestic researches, compared with the previous period, are presenting an incremental tendency, with a shift from superficial analyses to deep cultural connotations. New research perspectives such as the imagology of comparative literature, Orientalism, have also been excavated and came into use. These all contribute to the studies upon *Dragonwings* with impressive results. It is especially worth pointing out that domestic researches mainly consist in theses and dissertations, exploring the cultures, Chinese images, and history. Unlike foreign studies, domestic counterparts emphasize the external causes behind Chinese stereotypes but lack self-critical awareness and ignore a profound exploration into the construction of cultural identity with practical or possible solutions for contemporary racial issues. Although as a Chinese American writer, Yep's novels obviously contain a universality brimming with historical senses as well as humanistic concerns, which also leaves a broad space for further studies.

#### 4. Research Outlook

So far foreign and domestic experts have made unremitting efforts in researching *Dragonwings*. Based on the reviews above, it can be suggested that more researches are supposed to be made upon *Dragonwings* in the following four aspects.

On the one hand, considering the comprehensive development of foreign and domestic researches upon *Dragonwings*, it is not hard to sense the fixed mode of self-cultural superiority closes the space for mutual learning and exchanges. Hence, it is essential to establish an objective awareness of cultural criticism for both foreign and domestic experts. Only based on an impartial standpoint can we inspect and innovate our own critical consciousness in the course of voicing for “the silenced” Chinese Americans.

On the other hand, it is necessary to broaden the horizons of research. A few academic papers are of high quality with partially overlapped researching contents. Therefore, inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary research is waiting for being explored.

In addition, current studies only focus on analyzing images in *Dragonwings*, but there are few studies comparing them with characters in other Chinese American works of the same period. Although Chinese American characters have a lot in common, different authors with different writing intentions and styles tend to shape various figures with distinct personalities. Therefore, Yep’s characteristics and rules on character portrayal promise more innovations which wait for being explored.

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