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A Postcolonial Study on the Cultural Predicaments in *Dragonwings*

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Abstract

Dragonwings, the first Chinese American novel written by Laurence Yep, wins *Newbery Honor Book* in 1976. In light of the domestic and foreign research findings, it can be found that not so much importance has been attached to analyzing Moon Shadow's cultural predicaments in *Dragonwings*. Based on the post-colonialism, this paper is to focus on systematically analyzing the influencing factors on Moon Shadow's cultural predicaments in America and providing inspirations for those who are confusing about their cultural predicaments under the circumstance of globalization.

Key words: *Dragonwings*; Cultural predicaments; Post-colonialism

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INTRODUCTION

Laurence Yep, one of the highly acclaimed Chinese American authors in contemporary American children's literature, has written more than 50 novels for readers so far. He published *Dragonwings*, the first Chinese American novel written by Yep winning Newbery Honor Book, in 1975. In 1991, *Dragonwings* has been dramatized by Berkeley Repertory Theater. He is a contemporary Chinese American writer with a keen sense of postcolonial and national awareness. Most of his literary works are

closely related with his life experience, contextualizing in Sino-American intercultural background, performing and exploring such topics as regional differences, cultural divergences and so on. Born in San Francisco, Yep grew up in the neighborhood, a mix of white, Hispanic, black, and Asian working-class families. To the boys and girls in the neighborhood, he represented all Asians. Although being seen as an Asian outsider, Yep thought he was just as American. (Lawrence, 2004, p.19) Therefore, his stories often cast the protagonist as an "outsider" to mainstream culture, from which it is obviously seen the cultural predicaments resulted from the exclusion in the mainstream society. Among all of his literary works, *Dragonwings*, in particular, focuses on the marginalized Chinese's cultural predicaments in the mainstream society, exhibiting Yep's longing and pursuit for an ideal paradise with inclusiveness, equality, harmony in diversity, representing his powerful voice mediating the past history, mirroring the current and messaging to the future. Narrating from the perspective of an innocent Chinese child Moon Shadow, Yep reflects the cultural confusion and anxiety of marginalized Chinese to readers, from which it can be easily seen that his thoughts falls in line with post-colonialist theory.

Dealing with the relationship between post-colonialist theory and literature, it starts with *Black Skin, White Masks* wrote by Frantz Fanon in 1952; Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, marks the prevalence of post-colonialism in western academia. Post-colonialist theory is a new critical school of the literary theory developed by Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. It concentrates on multi-cultural background in differences, and explores how the unequal relationship between center and edge is transferred into the field of culture. It also examines literature as part of cultural hegemony with the purpose of exploring the relationship between the western "Self" and the Orientalized "Other", then criticizing the intention of colonial expansion by cultural

hegemony occupying the realm of weak cultural ideology. Its nature is to “disclose and purge ingrained imperialist and colonialist ideology by analyzing (in a broad sense) the texts which hide latent West-centrism.” (Sheng, 2011, p.67) As a result, to some extent, it not merely reflects the oppressive nature of colonialism and imperialist exploitation, but speaks for the vulnerable group laboring in marginal and adverse circumstances.

Therefore, this article attempts to interpret Yep’s *Dragonwings* from the perspective of post-colonialism, probing into the causes behind Chinese immigrants’ cultural predicaments in the text and inspiring those readers who got lost in foreign cultures at present.

REGIONAL PREDICAMENTS

Regional predicaments often deprive immigrants of a sense of direction and prevent them from putting down roots anywhere. The present and the future have been impaired by their displacements, and their absence from their original countries gives them nothing but pain (Ha, 2008, p.63). After the eighth birthday Moon Shadow, Hand Clap brings a letter from Moon Shadow’s Father Windrider, from which Windrider states that Moon shadow is old enough to move to America and to reunite with him. The argument among Hand Clap, mother, and grandmother concerning whether Moon Shadow is to stay or not, and Moon Shadow’s ambivalent emotions characterized by psychological complexity delicately unfold a typically growing sense of nervousness from a native Chinese who knows very little about America. After hearing the letter grandmother cries out that her husband had died in America, her son also lives in America all year round and now she is about to lose her only grandson. (Yep, 1975, p.11) It can be seen that immigrating to America means Families have to be ripped apart at that time, which is also the most unacceptable blow in life for traditional Chinese women who value family integrity and take the family as the center. Moon Shadow’s mother, in a state of uncertainty, not only wants Moon Shadow to go to America for better education and development but worries that the locals will bully him (Yep, p.11). Facing the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Moon Shadow honestly confesses his predicaments,

I was afraid of the Gold Mountain and yet my father, who lived there, wanted me to join him. I only knew that there was a certain rightness in life — the feeling you got when you did something the way you knew you should. I owed it to Father to obey him in everything—even if it meant going to such a fearful place as the Golden Mountain (America). (Yep, p.12)

Although Moon Shadow is afraid of the fearful America, the deep affection for his father gives him the courage to reunite, and thus temporarily suppress the fear rooted in his heart upon moving to another country.

However, what greets Moon Shadow is not the golden

paradise propagated by Hand Clap, but the deep-rooted racial discrimination and prejudice when setting foot on Angel Island in America. Racial discrimination resulting from yellow skin, black eyes and the survival pressure has been forced Chinese immigrants to struggle in the racial whirlpool of America. Facing the entry predicaments in America, “the recent change in immigration laws and the measure of turning away over twenty thousand of Tang men seem to cut down on the number of Tang people living on the Gold Mountain” (Yep, p.19), he has to be added with another layer of psychological burden.

After landing Angel Island, the first checkpoint for early Chinese immigrants to entry into America, Moon Shadow has to be scrutinized, trapped, denied and deprived of human rights in facing immigration officials. When he sets foot on the land of America, those white officials keep the Moon Shadow in a two-story-high warehouse for a week before Moon Shadow being interrogated. Moon Shadow is kept at the bottom of the warehouse, where he lives in extremely appalling conditions: sleeping and eating off the floors, no way to bathe, and nasty smell from the sewage and the bilge of the bay. The white officials spend an hour looking at a bunch of record of his father and then ask Moon Shadow a series of nonsensical questions concerning his village and kinsman. The white officials even try to trap him so that they could prove Moon Shadow’s identity is fake, but they fail. Finally, the white officials violently strip Moon Shadow naked, take his measurements, poke him all around and record all the information on a sheet of paper (Yep, p.15). Readers being familiar with the history of Chinese immigrants will be keenly aware that this description is very similar to the historical experience of Chinese Americans being insulted on Angel Island. Some Chinese immigrants even ironically call Angel Island as “the gate of hell”. (Ying, 2006, p.29) It is visible that the inhuman treatment Chinese immigrants have to suffer in Angel Island. As soon as Moon Shadow sets foot on America, he is imprisoned like voiceless animals waiting hopelessly for their fate in the slaughterhouse. Those inhuman treatments torture his helpless heart. Moon Shadow controlled by the whites has to endure grief in silence.

Moon Shadow gets his first close look at the land of the America when he is finally released. “Demons’ houses look so grotesque and were cubic without courtyard inside,” which impresses Moon Shadow that the whites seem to “dislike fresh air and to like to be confined in the trunk.” (Yep, p.16) Their houses have almost no ornamentation and are painted in drab colors. This is the first day that the Moon Shadow is released. However, it can be seen that he does not possess a little bit expectation and prospect for starting a new life in America from his words and phrases; instead, it is full of pessimism. He even “feels sorry for the demons who live in them,

for they live like prisoners without knowing they are in a prison”(Yep, p.16) from which Moon Shadow’s predicaments between reality and future in America is manifested.

Isolated from the motherland and suddenly pushed into an unfamiliar environment, Moon Shadow is inevitably caught in a confusing and wandering mood. The heterogeneity between two distinct cultures exerts, to some degree, a certain impacts on Moon Shadow, and then the sense of belonging becomes so uncertain that he is forced to enter into regional predicaments. In regional predicaments he has to rediscover himself, which brings about such self-contradictory mentality as “I am... I am not...”, suffering from a sense of loss and anxiety. However, as an “outsider”, it is obviously to be seen that there is a sharp inequality of power between the Occident and the Orient behind the anxiety. Said argues that power is the symbol of the unbalanced relationship and capacity between the ruler and the ruled, wealth and privilege (Said, 1979, p.35). It is the embodiment of dominating and being dominated in the text that showing us the confirmation of the domineering Occident and the underprivileged Orient, however, which is based on unequal cultural exploitation.

LANGUAGE PREDICAMENTS

As a medium of cultural communication, language plays a significant role in foreign countries. Language is not only a need for survival but also a symbol of power and identity. If one decides to immigrate to another country, he or she would go through the process of language conversion. The first step that Chinese immigrants take root in a foreign country is based on their ability to communicate effectively in the native language. However, Moon Shadow, who has never received English language training, is at a loss between the two languages and cultures for Chinese becomes a language “Other” rejected by mainstream language in America.

Life in America is busy and full, however, Moon Shadow cannot go to school in the daytime like the children of demons on account of the fact that the whites officials forbid Chinese to go to school with the white children so that Moon Shadow has to go to a special school, poorly equipped and poorly staffed, the whites officials set in the Chinatown, to learn Chinese classical culture. In order to make up for the English gap, and to help the Moon Shadow adapt to and integrate into the American environment as soon as possible, Bright Star and Windrider use the English they have mastered to talk with Moon Shadow. They even try to read for and discuss the newspapers and magazines with Moon Shadow. But these whites’ newspapers and magazines could only be brought from friends and relatives who worked in the foreign demons’ mansions. In spite of making lots of efforts, Moon Shadow still suffers from anxiety and

depression produced by language barriers. Moon Shadow argues “it is hard to understand demons’ language composed of twenty-six letters of their alphabet, which keeps on rearranging in the most confusing patterns.” (Yep, 1975, p.64)

Meanwhile, readers cannot help but suspect what is the purpose behind the America authorities’ deliberate obstruction that they manage to forbid Chinese to learn English. Based on the interpretation of knowledge and power put forward by Foucault, Said further points out that there is a relationship of power, domination, and hegemony between the Occident and the Orient. (Said, p.8) Said also links the whites’ dominance with discourse, and reveals that the whites intend to have a degree of control over the Orientals by limiting their knowledge or discourse with the purpose of realizing their racial superiority. Therefore, power and discourse are inextricably tied. On the one hand, power is hidden in the discourse while it dominates the discourse; on the other, power is derived from discourse; it plays the role of domination and being dominated, as well as oppression and being oppressed on the vulnerable minorities in certain social contexts.

If the whites’ violence imposed on Moon Shadow could be regarded as an effective restriction on the scope of Chinese immigrants’ living space, language is the solid cage that restricts his spirit. Moon Shadow is only confined in some safe areas of Chinatown. Language barriers further prevent him from communicating effectively with the mainstream society. He is compelled to live in a narrow living space and spiritual space and is subjected to double physical and mental oppression. His mother tongue and original Chinese identity are trampled and discriminated against by the mainstream culture in America, which not merely kills his basic human rights to learn English, but reveals his language predicaments as well. In the face of the powerful mainstream culture, Moon Shadow becomes the “Other” in language. He is forced to isolate from mother tongue and to be excluded for learning English, which means his right to speak will be deprived of, and being compelled to submit to the rule of the mainstream society. When facing the pain of “being silenced”, he is unable to pour out the double torture on the physical and mental with words. As a result, the vulnerable Moon Shadow who is at the margin of the society is incapable of locating himself. Therefore, he inevitably falls into the language predicaments and then further generates language anxiety.

Said points out in *Orientalism*: the Occident imagines the Orient as “the Other” in the post-colonial process of culture; By maliciously constructing and distorting the image of the “Other”, the discourse power of the “Other” has been deprived by the Occident so that the Oriental has long been in a state of being silenced, being sidelined, and being defined as the barbarian, treacherous, stupid,

superstitious and unreasonable one with the purpose of elevating its own image and highlighting its racial superiority (Said, p.49). In the second chapter, Moon Shadow gives such a description to the Chinese men living in the Gold Mountain,

Men gathered outside on the sidewalk, hands behind their backs, walking from here to there, talking in loud, excited voices. The demons who thought the Tang people (Chinese) were always quiet must have never heard us shout in our own houses. (Yep, p.24)

From the description by Moon Shadow, it can be figured out that there is a general prejudiced stereotype against Chinese in the mainstream society — Chinese are quiet. In the whites' eyes, it seems that Chinese are voiceless; however, the fact lies in the root that there is a great disparity between Chinese and the whites in voicing (Jiang, 2005, p.239). Therefore, here Chinese's "quietness", in fact, reflects the real state of Chinese immigrants' voiceless discourse in America. The "Other" isolated by the mainstream language cannot speak for themselves for they are excluded by and located on the edge of the mainstream society. Chinese immigrants being bound by the mainstream ideology of America are subject to the colonial discourse dominated by the whites, and thus are compelled to be in a state of quietness controlled by white culture.

Later, Moon Shadow and Windrider have to move out of Chinatown and live in the white community Polk Street in order to avoid the retaliation for the death of a Chinese compatriot mistakenly killed by Windrider. When Windrider and Moon Shadow take the first visit in the white landlady, Miss. Whitlaw, they see a unique stained-glass window with a dragon painted on it. Then, Miss Whitlaw introduces "dragon is a wicked animal that breathes fire and goes about eating up people and destroying towns. St. George killed many of them." (Yep, p.139) However, Moon Shadow is shocked by the idea concerning the dragon distorted and absolutely demonized by the white Americans, which is completely reversed from the interpretation on the Chinese dragon. It seems that the Chinese culture distorted by the whites' prejudice to be the barbaric, malicious, horrific, and unreasonable one. However, due to the suppression of language barriers, "being silenced" Moon Shadow is unable to defend Chinese culture distorted by mainstream culture. In *Orientalism*, Said points out that the western "self" tend to refer to the eastern "Other" as savages; however, when such a kind of discourse is combined with the power, there is a terrible oppressions upon the "Other" (Zhao, 2009, p.51). Therefore, when the arrogant Occident disparages the "being silenced" Orientals as barbaric "Others", the combination of its own discourse with social powerful mechanism will produce a controlling behavior that has a terrible attack on "Other", and make the "Other" gradually numb and adapt to its powerful rule.

From the language predicaments mentioned above, it can be found that the unequal relationship of dominating and being dominated between the Occident and the Orient inevitably leads to the loss of the discourse power of the Orient. What's worse, Chinese culture is belittled as the "Others" with barbaric, evil and uncivilized characters in western prejudices.

CONCLUSION

Living in America, Chinese immigrants are maliciously excluded by the mainstream society as well as suppressed, and marginalized by the mainstream ideology, thus forming a deep-rooted and sharp contrasting racial hierarchy paradigm upon the Chinese "Other". Under the authority of the Occident, the Orient is "a little girl dressed and made up by people", and then the image of the submissive Orient gradually solidifies in the eyes of the Occident (Li & Luo, 2015, p.56).

Laurence Yep not merely vividly represents the cultural predicaments of Moon Shadow as the marginalized Chinese "Other" in America, but also encourages the marginalized Chinese minorities to see through the unequal relationship between the Occident and the Orient, which results in the silenced "Other". Meanwhile, by presenting Moon Shadow and Windrider, with the spirit of intercommunication, empathy thinking, mutual understanding and respect, successfully carries the cultural negotiation with the whites Miss Whitlaw and Robin, Yep offers an ideal example for all of us to smooth cultural misunderstandings and earn appreciation and respect from the whites, Miss Whitlaw and Robin, by cultural sharing. As a consequence, the cheerful scene that the Chinese, Moon Shadow and Windrider, as well as the whites, Miss Whitlaw and Robin have a picnic together at the beach and fly the glider manifests the possibility of cultural negotiation in cultural predicaments. To some extent, the representation on cultural negotiation inspires us, especially for those who are caught in their cultural predicaments under the circumstance of globalization, it is "a way of creatively defining the discrepancies between different cultures" (Ren, 2008, p.54) in cultural predicaments.

Viewed from above, therefore, it can be seen that immigration is inevitably bring about such cultural predicaments as regional predicaments, language predicaments. Therefore, the immigrants in the relocation and displacement need to negotiate to deal with cultural predicaments.

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