

Original Paper

Interpretation of the Emotional World of Chinese Children

Images in *Jade Peony*

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Abstract

The first novel Jade Peony by Chinese-Canadian writer Wayson Choy mainly relates the experience about a family of three generations lived in Canada through those three Chinese children's perspectives. Under the influence of dual culture, the growth of these Chinese Canadian children is accompanied by confusion and pain. This article will explore the emotional world behind these children's images and reveal how they choose to survive and merge in the conflicts of different cultures.

Keywords

child image, emotional world, reconstruction

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Author's Work

Wayson Choy is an outstanding Chinese Canadian writer, known as "Canada's most gifted storyteller" who got Trillium Award and the Governor's Literary Award nomination, and in 2005 was awarded the "Canadian Medal". *Jade Peony* as his first novel, has been a great success since the publication in 1995. *Jade Peony* marked the rapid rise of Canadian Chinese English literature since the 1990s.

Jade Peony taking the Great Depression in North America and World War II as the background, describes a Chinese family of three generations who experience the hardships of life from the perspective of three Chinese children in Vancouver. The article consists of three parts. In the first part, daughter Liang describes her experience of treating Uncle Wang as an uncle monkey and becoming friends with him under the influence of the story of the Chinese Monkey King told by her mother-in-law; the second part is told by the adopted son Jung whose story of helping Dai Kew take care of the turtle and learning boxing from Yuen; the third part is the youngest son Lung describing what he sees and feels in his home and school life. In the conflict between the two cultural backgrounds,

they are immersed in the pros and cons of Chinese traditional culture and Canadian culture. How to choose between the two is the biggest puzzle in their emotional world.

1.2 Review of Previous Studies

The data checked are mainly from CNKI, including 12 journals and 6 dissertations. From the perspective of time distribution, domestic scholars' research on *Jade Peony* was mainly concentrated from 2001 to 2015, showing an upward trend. It can be seen that the globalized 21st century culture is also gradually merging. The research topics can be roughly divided into the following categories: 1). From the perspective of post-colonial criticism, some scholars interpret the Chinese-Canadian identity in the novel, and resolve the dual opposition between Chinese and Western cultures, such as *The Appeal of Identity* by Zhou Xiaowen (2005), and Wang Ling (2012) analyzing *The Root of Jade Peony in Different Soils---from the Perspective of Postcolonial*; 2). From the perspective of cultural studies, some analyze Chinese and Western cultural characteristics, reflecting cultural hybridity and diversity, such as Dong Yan and Liu Aiqin (2013) co-wrote *The Hybridity of Chinese Traditional Cultural Elements in Jade Peony*; 3). Some reveal hidden stories of ethnic Chinese family history from the perspective of historic, showing the strong desire to solve the identity confusion; 4). Some even discuss the rejection and acceptance of Chinese cultural discourse in Canada from the perspective of Foucault's right discourse theory.

Scholars have studied the theme of *Jade Peony* from different methods and perspectives. The Chinese cultural images in the novel are colorful, such as jade peony, Chinese medicine, moon, feng shui, ghosts and so on. This paper will be based on the previous analysis of Chinese cultural phenomenon, focusing on the Chinese Children image, presenting a detailed analysis of their emotional world, and revealing how they choose in the conflict in the dual culture to survive.

2. Image of Chinese Children

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of children images: one refers to the "image of children", which appears in a single text repetitively, and plays an instructive effect on the theme of the novel; the other is the image of children between different texts, that is to say, in different works of the same writer or different works of different writers and the existence of these children is similar in this or that aspect. As a literary formation of novelists' works, it recurs or commonly occurs between texts. A certain type of transformation, a certain symbolic or metaphorical meaning, and the appearance of a certain role constitute the image of a child in the text.

In Wayson Choy's work *Jade Peony*, there is such a group of similar children. They are all Chinese who grew up in Canada and are the product of the collision between Chinese culture and Canadian culture. They have encountered all kinds of confusion and setbacks in the pursuit of emotional balance. They have the maturity and sensitivity beyond this age, and experience the difficulties of emotional craving. Wayson Choy's description of the survival dilemma of these marginal individuals has turned into a deep thinking about the collisions between different cultures, reflecting the individual's pursuit

of self-identity and the fusion of cultures. As a prominent image in Wayson Choy's works, children embody the characteristics of freedom and creation, generation and transcendence. They continue to surpass their own limitations and find a way of their own in the emotional world. Thus, the following will specifically interpret the emotional world behind the three images of Chinese children in the novel *Jade Peony*.

2.1 The Identity Crisis of Liang's Emotional World

Liang is the daughter of the second wife of this Chinese family after immigrating to Canada. She grew up in Canada and knew a lot of Chinese stories from her grandmother. Under the influence of Chinese and Western cultures, she is actively looking for a sense of identity and reconstruct her own emotional world. Liang is the only girl in the family, struggling to explore her identity value and family status amidst the impact of Chinese traditional culture and Canadian culture. Under the influence of Chinese traditional culture "Patriarchal", Liang is little to be concerned about the object and love, and she is repeatedly called by her grandmother as "mo yung girl". She has seen and heard a lot of those tragic fate of the girl's growth in China, and therefore she feels a little lucky to be in Canada. Meanwhile she has doubts in her heart when she hears all kinds of discrimination and ostracism faced by those Chinese in Canada. She was born with the traditional Chinese culture of the family. Under the impact of the Canadian culture and ideas, she sometimes couldn't understand the thoughts and behaviors of the adults in the family. She could not even tolerate the stale traditional Chinese culture. Deep down in her heart, she strongly appeals to explore her identity in the cracks of dual culture.

The first chapter begins with the sentence, "Grandmother, or Poh-Poh, was going to our family Tong Association Temple on Pender Street to pray for a boy", which shows her grandmother's longing for a boy. The conception of "Patriarchal" in traditional Chinese is perfectly embodied in her grandmother, as the author continues to write, "Girls were often left to fend for themselves in the street." The tragic situation of girls in China can be seen. As the oldest person in the family, the grandmother represents the deep-rooted position of Chinese traditional culture, as in the text "she...became the arbitrator of the old wans." She asked the children to call the second wife as stepmother, even her own daughter Liang and his biological son Lung. Liang naturally cannot understand the bitterness and helplessness behind this title. As she grew older, Liang learned about the "Golden Mountain Dream" of her father and heard about the discrimination and exclusion that Chinese people encountered in Canada, as the text reads, "they had been deserted by the railroad companies and betrayed by the many labour contractors...China men were shoved aside, threatened, forgotten." For these unbearable experiences, the sensitive Liang also questioned Canada. She sympathized with the Chinese compatriots and could not understand these behaviors. At the same time, the story of the Chinese Monkey King told by her grandmother has been deeply imprinted in Liang's mind. She regarded Old Wong as the Monkey King in the story. When she first saw Uncle Wang, she felt "Here was the Monkey King" when everyone opposed her. She also had confusion in her heart, "I admit I was still not entirely sure and I kept arguing with myself...how could Monkey be just a man?", presenting that she couldn't understand or penetrate the behavior of the adult

world. She stared at Uncle Wang uncontrollably, and silently believed that he was the Monkey Man. “I said to the soft eyes. ‘A for real Monkey Man’.” From Liang’s performance on the Monkey Man, we can see that Chinese traditional culture influence her very much, and every bit of the Chinese story was lingering in her heart.

When Liang was nine years old, her grandma refused to teach her “womanly skills”. The grandma said: “Job too good for *mo yung* girl.” This was also something she can’t understand. She felt that her existence so humble, and she wanted to learn. At this time her sensitive heart was shouting, “I’m not *mo yung*, Poh—Poh,” she protested, “even though I am a girl!” She wanted to prove her worth and proved that she was not a useless existence. She hated grandma’s Chinese style, she said, “This is Canada.” The following continued, “I hated the Old One: Grandmother never let me get on with my movie—star daydreams...” Liang felt her grandma’s behavior very disgusting. She is now in Canada, and those so-called behaviors that run counter to traditional Chinese culture are possible here. She no longer agrees, and she wants to escape, “If Poh—Poh was going to launch into the story” of “the old days, the old ways, I wanted to escape.” For her grandma, the grandson is the focus. The Chinese concept of “patriotism of sons over daughters” deeply occupies the grandma’s inner world, and as a granddaughter Liang naturally became an insignificant existence, as written in the text “My baby brother was her chief concern; I was a distraction, a nuisance...”. Liang raised questions more than once. She cannot accept the humble status of a traditional Chinese woman. As the text, “I bet no one carried me around like that when i was three, except to pass me along to someone else...I cried on my own.” No one will treat her like the youngest grandson. She can only heal herself strongly. “Why not? A beautiful girl—child from a poor family is even more useless than an ugly one from a rich family...” She reminded herself again and again in her heart, “I’m not ugly, I thought to myself, I’m not useless...and I danced.” In mainstream Canadian culture, she can do what she wants. She can freely chase celebrities and learn to dance.

At the end of this part, Uncle Wang’s return to his homeland gave Liang a certain understanding and recognition of Chinese culture, which is the idea of “returning to the roots of fallen leaves” in Chinese culture strongly recognized by Liang after seeing the unfortunate experience of the Chinese in Canada. When saying goodbye to Uncle Wang, they could not cross the line, “We were not allowed to go past the customs landing and departure gates.” The Canada’s restrictions on China were everywhere. After Uncle Wang left, Liang finally understood his good intentions of choosing to return to China. As written in the text, “Monkey Man had gone into the Customs House with all the other passengers....for I understand how bones must come to rest where they must belong.”

Even though her grandmother’s Chinese traditional culture was once unacceptable to Liang, she questioned her identity value and family status. Canadian culture also left her at a loss, unable to weigh the pros and cons for a long time. In the collision of the two cultures, she gradually dissipated her self-crisis identity. Finally, in the cultural blending, she realized her value, gained self-confidence, and bravely pursued her dreams. The chaos in her emotional world has also been lifted by the day.

2.2 *The Identity Construction of Jung's Emotional World*

Jung is the second child of this Chinese family who immigrated to Canada for adoption. As the second son in the family, he is not as confused about the construction of his identity as Liang. He accepts Chinese culture (such as the tortoise means good luck). He learns the native Canadian culture (such as boxing) with an open mind, understands the two cultures, and grows up with children's curiosity and play. He observes everything happening around him with rational eyes, constructing his own multiple identities.

Jung, who has lost his parents, gradually integrates into a new family and gradually forgets his parents. Compared to Yuen's experience in the article, he feels that he is very lucky. His family regards him as their own son, and he has found his own place, as written in the article, "In a year, that sweater fitted me. Time did pass, just as the Tong official had said it would. I belong." When he was young, he had his second identity—the second brother in the family. As he grows older, Jung realizes another identity of himself from the mouth of his grandmother and his own experience, that is, he is the moon, representing the *yin*, which means the identity of the female. When he first heard that his grandmother said he was the moon, Jung protested that he was the sun. At that time, he did not understand the *yin* and *yang*, as the text said, "Jung—Sun is the moon," Poh—Poh said... "Mrs. Lim knew the moon was the *yin* principle, the female...". It was not until Jung and Yuen were playing together and boxing together that "Frank Yuen is the sun" was discovered by the elders. He finally realized the true meaning of *yin* and *yang*, "I remembered thinking... I am the moon...the Old One's words followed me all the way along the snow—dusted streets of Chinatown." Jung accepted his identity as the moon and accepted the Chinese saying that the moon represents women and the sun represents men. He dare to face himself and construct his own identity bravely.

Jung took good care of a turtle for Lao Kwei. He was a little scared at the beginning. After listening to her mother-in-law, "...turtle very good fortune. Long life." That is to say, in Chinese culture, turtles bring good luck. He instantly developed a good impression on the tortoise. The first thing after school every day he did was to take care of the turtle. In the thoughts of his companions, he also gave it the Canadian name King George, "It's not a Chinese turtle...it's got to have a—you know—British or Canadian name". It can be seen here that Jung not only accepts the meaning of the tortoise in Chinese culture, but also regards it as a part of Canadian life. To give it the Canadian name is to reconstruct the identity of the tortoise. Jung integrates dual cultures, resolves conflicts among them, and finds a suitable way to survive. At the age of 12, Jung learned Western boxing, "I joined the junior boxing section and paid my fifteen cents each week for lessons." He readily accepted what he was interested in and actively absorbed the essence of Western culture. In addition, after witnessing the tragic experience of Old Yuen, the grandmother sighed, "'Tears...tears save us from damnation.' It was another one of Poh—Poh's old sayings." His father expressed disapproval, and wrote the following, "'Just old poetry', father said, when I told him about the tears." Father had repeatedly opposed some actions and words of his grandma. Jung stood by without saying right or wrong, because he knew tears can't change Old

Yuen's tragic fate in the slightest, which was mentioned as follows, "Tears or not, Old Yuen's bad luck was irreversible." Jung learned to look at all kinds of things happening around him rationally. He knew how to choose between Chinese and Western cultures and absorb the essence of both to complete the process of self-knowledge and identity construction.

Affected by the dual culture, Jung successfully constructed the third space of his own emotional world, integrating Chinese traditional culture and Canadian local culture, and more rationally aware of the irreversibility of self-growth than children of the same age. Sensitively, he learned to seek his own identity, actively dissolve cultural opposition, merge the two sides, and rebuild his own identity.

2.3 The Cultural Reconstruction of Lung's Emotional World

Lung is the youngest child in the family. He was called "mo no" by Stepmother due to lung disease. He was loved by his grandma, who spent the longest time with her and was most deeply influenced by Chinese culture. At the same time, the mainstream Canadian culture is not to be removed in his eyes. He is fascinated by what is happening around him, observing the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, thinking about how to survive in cultural conflicts, and how to reconstruct the third of culture and resolve the confusion of the emotional world of marginal individuals.

At the beginning, Lung was influenced by his father and Canadian culture, and he believed that simplicity is the best. However, in terms of China's complicated interpersonal relationships and appellations, he didn't understand what the so-called simplicity is. Why are Chinese appellations so complicated? In contrast, the Canadian appellation is much simpler, as the text says, "The Chinese rankings for acquaintances and relatives were overwhelming..." For every one term in English, like "First Cousin" or "Aunt", there were "ten Chinese terms." It can be seen from this that Lung did not understand or approve of Chinese culture. He often wanted to make things simple as his father suggested, but the result tended to only get worse, as mentioned later in the article, "The "money buying relationship" incident: "Paper money could buy paper relatives. But whose papers were connected to whose relatives? My head pounded." Jung's choice of this culture was that he agreed with Canada and did not accept Chinese culture. Fortunately that he was not born in China, he chose Canadian mainstream culture in terms of title, "To my child's mind, the matter was simple". In English, I would have been secure with "Uncle", "Sir" or even "Mister", "three basic choices instead of ten dozen Chinese brain-twisters." Simplicity was the best choice in Lung's eyes, so he agreed with the concise Western appellation. In addition, Lung did not have any good feelings about Chinese at first, and even refused to learn Chinese and only learn English, as the text reads, "English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quicksand..." In his eyes, the two languages existed in different ways. At that time, Jung did not accept Chinese characters, "I'm going to speak and write only English!" He thought English was more suitable for him and could express his meaning. Sometimes he even wished himself to be white, "I sometimes wished that my skin would turn white, my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue..." He hated Chinese, because he did not understand Chinese culture, and he resisted Chinese language, thinking Chinese

sounds stupid, “I hated the Toisan words, the complex of village dialects that would trip up my tongue.” Based on this, Lung couldn’t help but question his identity, as the text reads, “‘Am I Chinese or Canadian?’ I asked Stepmother.” Is he Canadian or Chinese? Because he was born in Canada, the blood of the Chinese was flowing in his body, but he did not understand the bits and pieces of Chinese culture in his head, as written below, “But born—in—Canada child, like myself, could betray one. For we were mo no children. Children with no old China history in our brains.” Those people were not in China since they were young, and they could not empathize with Chinese traditions. The Chinese adults in Chinatown also expressed concern for this generation of us. “All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born ‘neither this nor that,’ neither Chinese nor Canadian...” This generation of children was neither purely Canadian nor typical Chinese. They were in a dual culture wandering in the fringe zone as to how to construct their own identity and reconstruct the third-space culture in their emotional world.

As he grew older, Lung gradually learned some Chinese culture and accepted them from the Chinese stories told by his grandmother, “‘Different roots, different flowers,’ Grandma said, ‘Different brains.’” The grandma told him that the roots of different cultures have different cultures and ideas. From her grandma, Lung learned to look at different cultures wisely. In the process of receiving education in school, Lung saw the discrimination and exclusion of Chinese people in Canada. Canada advocates that everyone was equal in receiving education. However, Chinese people were subject to various restrictions on the choice of profession. “Education, in whatever language, was respected...only Canadian citizens could qualify as professionals...” Lung finally understood that Canadian culture was not perfect. Later, after the death of his grandma, his lung disease got better, and he gradually accepted Chinese culture and went to Chinese school for classes, “I might even start Chinese School.” He learned the Chinese language, no longer rejected Chinese, and no longer deliberately resisted Chinese culture. He and his grandma often stayed together, listening to the traditional Chinese stories and grandma’s knowledge and experience, gradually integrating into Chinese culture and entering the mother-in-law’s world, as described in the text, “...and some of the things he taught her she had absorbed and passed on to me through her stories and games.” He gradually understood Chinese culture, learned how to make wind chimes with his grandmother, picking up discarded bottles and jars, not afraid of being laughed at, and even admired the ingenuity of the nurse, as the text reads, “I became lost in the magic of her tasks...this part always amazed me...”. However, by contrast, other people in the family didn’t understand the grandma’s behavior very well. They thought it was stupid and ashamed, as the text describes the father’s psychology to his grandma’s behavior, “How could he dare tell the Old One, his aging mother, that what was appropriate in a poor village in China was shameful here?” His father was gradually westernized and did not accept her grandma’s behaviors, and even the cute toys and wind chimes made by the grandma were dismissed by everyone. But under the influence of her grandma, Lung deeply understood her behavior, so he was willing to be with her and did what they thought was meaningful, “Grandma and I rushed precariously over the blackened beams to pick out the

stained glass that glittered in the sunlight.” Lung reflected his acceptance of Chinese culture, showing a new experience and understanding of the Chinese culture.

In the conflicts between Chinese traditional culture and Canadian culture, Lung was lost and did not understand his cultural identity. As he grew older, he finally learned to understand and inherit Chinese culture. At the same time, he also accepted the mainstream Canadian culture, merged the two and completed his own cultural reconstruction.

3. Conclusion

The first novel *Jade Peony* by Chinese Canadian writer Wayson Choy reflects a strong sense of ethnicity and multiculturalism, and represents the fusion of Chinese culture and Canadian culture. The analysis of the emotional world behind the images of Chinese Canadian children reveals how they choose to survive and merge in the conflicts of different cultures. In the clash of dual cultures, the racial boundaries are gradually broken and the Chinese Canadian children complete the reconstruction of their identity and culture in their emotional world.

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