

Reimagining Chinese American Identity: Postcolonial Perspectives on Cultural Negotiation and Transformation in Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings*

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Abstract. The Chinese immigrant and Chinese American communities have faced a long history of stigmatisation and misrepresentation due to racial bias and discrimination. This article explores the transformative growth narrative of the child protagonist in Laurence Yep's novel *Dragonwings*, set against the backdrop of historical anti-Asian sentiment in the early 1900s. By adopting Said's "imaginative geography" and Bhabha's "third space" as analytical perspectives, the study aims to shed light on how the child protagonist's growth challenges passive Chinese stereotypes and confronts deeply ingrained adversities within the Asian American diaspora by offering an active anti-Oriental perspective. We argue that the transformative journey of the protagonist, Moon Shadow, contests racial biases and cultural boundaries, contributing to a reflective perspective that liberates writers of colour from complicit interrogations. The analysis underlines the transgressive aesthetic within the Chinese American diaspora, showcasing *Dragonwings* as a quintessential postcolonial bildungsroman that embraces compromise and accommodation in self-formation. Furthermore, the exploration of the child protagonist's growth in the context of historical realist narrative and the postcolonial lens emphasises the transgressive enjoyment that subverts established norms and identities. The study thus acknowledges the resilience and agency exhibited by the characters in the face of adversity and by understanding the emancipatory potential of growth narratives, it contributes to the broader theme of overcoming adversity and embracing change in the context of language and culture in Asia.

Keywords and phrases: Chinese American bildungsroman, postcolonial context, transgressive aesthetics, racial adversities, Laurence Yep

Introduction

The Chinese immigrant and Chinese American communities have long been subjected to a legacy of stigmatisation and misrepresentation, stemming from historical anti-Asian prejudices and discrimination. From the portrayal of Dr Fu Manchu as the inscrutable Yellow Peril to the baseless labelling of Chinese Americans as virus carriers during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, racial bias has persistently shaped their experiences (Eng and Han 2019; Okihiro 2014; Ratuva 2022). During the turn of the 20th century, sociopolitical influences converged to create a perfect storm for discrimination against Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. This period witnessed the convergence of “Chinese exclusion” policies and USA imperialism, which aimed to establish clear boundaries between citizens and aliens while also separating Western civilisation from Eastern cultures (Lew-Williams 2018, 171). White writers played a significant role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes that depicted Asians as a perceived threat to Western society (Adams 2008, 32–33). These stereotypes further fuelled prejudice and discrimination against Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans.

In response to these deeply ingrained adversities, Chinese American authors turned to historical realist writings as a medium to voice their experiences and protest against their marginalisation within the diasporic history (Zhou and Najmi 2011). However, while these historical realist narratives conveyed genuine experiences, they also faced criticism for inadvertently “discipline[ing] the Asian American subject” and rendering it “easily legible to a white reading audience gained traction” (Lee 2019, 220). Such representations were accused of “legitimiz[ing] histories too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented in mainstream literary realism” (Sheffer 2019, 268). Furthermore, the realm of Asian American children’s literature has often suffered from misrepresentations, as cultural productions tend to gravitate towards a narrow, celebrated cohort of stories, neglecting the diverse experiences of the Asian diaspora (Dahlen 2019). This narrow portrayal has had a significant impact on the physical and mental well-being of Asian American children, as they have been burdened by long-lasting stereotypes fabricated in sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Chen, Chang and Shih 2021; Cruz 2022).

This article aims to address the gap in critical attention towards ethnic children’s growth in Asian American children’s literature, specifically in the context of the Chinese American bildungsroman, against the backdrop of the postcolonial context of the Asian American diaspora. By delving into the child protagonist’s growth in Laurence Yep’s novel, *Dragonwings* (1975), we seek to shed light on the ways in which Chinese/Chinese American stereotypes were constructed in the fraught

postcolonial environment of the 1900s. Moreover, we intend to explore how the child protagonist's growth facilitates a reflective perspective in challenging these stereotypes, thus liberating the authorship from the accusation of perpetuating established misrepresentations. We argue that by strategically linking itself with Orientalised representations, the child protagonist's growth serves as a means to address the interrogation of literary complicity and the perpetuation of Chinese misrepresentations. This alternative perspective on historical realist articulations allows for a more profound aesthetic understanding of the growth narrative in the Chinese American diaspora, highlighting the themes of transpacific transgression and cultural transgression.

Laurence Yep, the first Asian American honoured with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal in 2005 for his contributions to children's literature, has been a vocal critic of the misrepresentation of Chinese characters in popular imaginations (Yep 1975, 317). His novel *Dragonwings* was crafted against the anti-Asian backdrop of 1903, narrating the growth journey of the child protagonist Moon Shadow, an 8-year-old Chinese boy. The plot of *Dragonwings* takes a transgressive trajectory as the child protagonist breaks away from his homeland, crossing borders and settling among the Whites, thus challenging cultural boundaries. The transformative process of Moon Shadow's growth, as he ventures into the white American community develops reflective insights, provides a compelling avenue for exploration using theoretical frameworks such as Said's "imaginative geography" and Bhabha's "third space". We argue that the novel serves as a powerful critique of misrepresentations and offers a nuanced portrayal of Chinese characters within a historical context.

Said's concept of imaginative geography refers to the arbitrary Oriental stereotypes constructed by Westerners based on geographical distinctions. It allows us to delve into the ambivalent subjectivity of the Oriental, which is objectified through these geographical divisions. By doing so, we can reexamine assumptions that go beyond the confines of traditional master-slave binary dialectics (Mishra 2020, 12–13). The relevance of imaginative geography lies in its potential to challenge universal narratives that obscure historical and contemporary forms of domination (Morefield 2018; Pourgharib, Hamkhiyal and Asl 2022). The third space, as articulated by Bhabha (2004), is intimately tied to Moon Shadow's growth and his encounters with different cultures. The concept refers to a liminal space characterised by cultural differences where hybrid subjectivity interacts with agency, cultural negotiation and translation. This view subverts established signifiers rooted in an originary past (Bhabha 2004, 1–2). Moon Shadow's experience within this third space proves invaluable in providing a realm beyond conventional boundaries that enables the production of complex figures of difference and identity.

Drawing upon Said's imaginative geography and Bhabha's third space, we seek to shed light on how the child protagonist's growth in *Dragonwings* confronts passive Chinese stereotypes and opens up possibilities for active anti-Orientalism within the context of historical anti-Asian sentiment. Furthermore, this analysis offers a lens to understand the distinctive aesthetic dimension of Chinese American diaspora, showcasing *Dragonwings* as a quintessential postcolonial bildungsroman that embraces compromise and accommodation in the self-formation process (Hoagland 2019). Exploring the subject renewal in the third space can help to liberate ethnic subjectivity's agency and reconsider the innovative practice of the Chinese American bildungsroman, transcending its traditional historical realist mode.

The discussion of *Dragonwings* and the significance of the child protagonist's growth in historical anti-Asian times are crucial in fostering contemporary readers' identification with a protagonist whose shifting identities across geographical and cultural boundaries mirror their own experiences. Moreover, the study acknowledges the generative role of Asian American literature and expands the scope of growth narrative within the context of Chinese American diaspora in Asian American children's literature, contributing to the ongoing discourse on Asian Americans' diverse voices (Nadkarni 2021). The exploration of aesthetic concerns in this study helps recognise the transformative potential of Asian American literature, making it more inclusive and representative of the Asian diaspora (Thoma 2021). By addressing the challenges in language and culture faced by Asians in the region, this study aims to illuminate the resilience and agency exhibited by the characters in the face of adversity, offering valuable insights to readers and researchers alike.

Literature Review

The landscape of Asian American literature has been characterised by a focus on human struggles, both for and against subjectivity and a reimagining of historical relationships (Shomura 2020). Despite these innovations, issues related to race and stereotypes persist in American ethnic children's literature, particularly evident in the patterns rooted in Orientalism and Chinoiserie that perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans (Gilton 2020; Pourgharib, Asl and Esmaili 2023; TuSmith 2002). As the field of Asian American children's literature has expanded to include a diverse range of genres, from bilingual texts to fantasy and autobiography (Cutter 2002; Manuel and Davis 2006), there remains a notable gap in the examination of the literary genre of the bildungsroman within this context.

Several Asian American critics have expressed varying views on the genre of the Asian American bildungsroman (Yoon 2014). While some recognise the potential complicity of historical realist texts with Orientalist histories, others emphasise the genre's power in re-imagining American subject formation (Chu 2014; Davis 2005; Hariharan and Mathew 2020; Lim 2021; Lowe 1996; Rong 2011). However, these critical analyses have predominantly focused on broader Asian American historical associations, overlooking the specific context of the Chinese American bildungsroman.

In the broader literary landscape, there has been increasing scholarly interest in the bildungsroman genre (Frow, Hardie and Smith 2020, 1905). Still, only a few essays have explored the relationship between the bildungsroman and Asian American literary texts (Ng 2020). This omission reflects a lack of attention to the peripheral position of the Chinese American bildungsroman, creating a research gap that this essay aims to address by examining Yep's *Dragonwings*, an award-winning Chinese American bildungsroman set in the context of historical exclusionary adversities faced by Chinese Americans in the 1900s.

Moreover, previous scholarship on *Dragonwings* has produced a range of interpretations, focusing on representations of racism in Chinese American history and the novel's bicultural identity, among other aspects (Alkan 2020; Cho 2019; Davis 2005; Fisher 2002; LaFaye 1999; Marcia 1997; Meng 2002). Some critics commend the novel for its historical realism and ability to shed light on past inequalities, while others explore the cultural differences reflected in the narrative. However, these analyses have not fully explored the emancipatory role of the child protagonist's growth in the novel.

Drawing on existing scholarship, this essay posits that the child protagonist's growth in *Dragonwings* can be divided into two phases: the early developmental stage that demonstrates the construction of the Oriental subject amid border crossing and cultural differences and the late process of growth characterised by agency in the liminal space of oppression and assimilation (Golban 2018). To analyse the complexities and ambivalence of Orientalised representations in *Dragonwings*, Said's concept of imaginative geography serves as a fitting analytical framework. Additionally, Bhabha's third space concept illuminates the transformative potential of the child protagonist's agency as a hybrid subject within self-reflexive changes (Pourgharib, Hamkhiyal and Asl 2022).

Despite the growing interest in Asian American literature, particularly in postcolonial contexts, there remains a dearth of research on Asian American children's literature, its impact on readers and its role in shaping understandings

of the Asian diaspora (Dahlen 2019, 17). The present study addresses this gap by delving into the emancipatory capacity of the child protagonist's growth, providing valuable insights into the aesthetics and ideologies of the Chinese American diasporic experience.

The literature review highlights the research problem centred around the emancipatory growth of the child protagonist in Yep's *Dragonwings*. The existing scholarship has explored various aspects of the novel, but its examination of the Chinese American bildungsroman remains peripheral. By adopting Said's imaginative geography and Bhabha's third space as analytical perspectives, this essay aims to contribute to the broader theme of overcoming adversity and embracing change in the context of language and culture in Asia. Through this examination, the study will uncover the emancipatory potential of the child protagonist's growth and its significance within the Asian American literary landscape.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs a theoretical framework grounded in the ideas of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha to explore the growth narrative and its emancipatory role in Yep's *Dragonwings*, a Chinese American bildungsroman set in the 1900s. Drawing on the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of growth is defined as not only biophysically embodied change but also epistemological and ontological change, interconnected with social surroundings such as history, culture and politics (Trites 2014). Scholars have recognised the significance of individual growth in the bildungsroman genre, which re-inscribes subjectivity and challenges historical representations and the status quo (Bakhtin 1986; Boes 2012; Moretti 1987; Asl 2022). In particular, the present study focuses on ethnic children's growth as a strategic tool to shed new light on historically misrepresented Orientals and reposition the aesthetic within Chinese American diaspora.

Central to the analysis is Said's notion of imaginative geography, where the Oriental Other, in this case, the Chinese child protagonist, is a set of fictional stereotypes arbitrarily fabricated by the Occidental mind on the basis of geographical divisions. Outlined in the imaginative geography, the production of the Oriental stereotypes is characterised by "exotic", "mysterious", "profound" features and "notions of Asian inscrutability" (Said 2003, 52). Said points out the fact that the Oriental suppositions in geographical distinctions function with social, ethnic and cultural distinctions. This leads to ontological and epistemological distinctions that perpetuate racial binaries. The concept of imaginative geography thus contributes to recognising alternative mode of ambivalent being in the binary oppositions that "[t]he Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'... [and] the

European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 2003, 54). In imaginative geography, the perpetuation of racial binaries is entwined with oppressive power dynamics. This means that “the Orient was viewed [as the objects] ...framed by...the criminal court, the prison...for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing” (Said 2003, 41). The child protagonist in *Dragonwings* is initially positioned as an Oriental Other in the early developmental stage, subject to these stereotypes and exclusionary contexts. Said’s concept of imaginative geography is helpful in providing a framework to explore the complexities of Chinese/Chinese American stereotypes and their construction in the narrative.

However, Bhabha’s perspective introduces a more nuanced understanding of racial stereotypes as ambivalent figures with transformative potential. In his view, the racial stereotype in the differences oscillates between what is known and what must be repeated, challenging the logics of synchronicity and evolution (Nurfarah Hadira and Asl, 2021; Pourgharib and Asl 2022). Such oscillation facilitates individual growth with self-reflective changes on previous determinants. The child protagonist’s growth in the liminal space of differences, or the third space, becomes an emancipatory tool that disrupts established boundaries and offers the possibility of moving beyond racial exclusions. In the third space, the subversive meaning of individual development is entangled with “hybridity” which “is the name of this displacement of value...caus[ing] the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative” (Bhabha 2004, 162). This means the “ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject” propels “a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (Bhabha 2004, 162). Furthermore, the third space functions as “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” (Bhabha 2004, 55), enabling the child protagonist to reinterpret cultural signs and cultural differences. At this point, the altered perceptions of cultural differences offer an important lens to perceive individual development in self-identification and reconfiguring the relationship with others. This results in a redistribution of new hybrid and transitional identities, emancipating the subject from past constraints and progressing towards a liberated future (Asl 2020; 2023). Given the possibility of “otherness” liberating from the “difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity”, Bhabha (2004, 96) highlights “a transgression of these limits from the space of that otherness”. His insight into transgression points to “the intervening space ‘beyond’” in which “a sense of the new...resonates with an aesthetic”, an aesthetic that bears “a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence...the combination of found material and satiric wit... from both sides of the border” (Bhabha 2004, 10–11).

The theoretical framework thus facilitates an examination of the child protagonist’s growth with agency as a means of anti-Orientalism and subversion of racial

stereotypes. By viewing growth through the postcolonial lens of Said and Bhabha, the study explores the historical realist narration in the bildungsroman genre and the innovative perspectives of writers of colour, freeing them from complicit interrogations. Moreover, the theoretical framework allows for an appreciation of the transgressive enjoyment found in the child protagonist's growth as it challenges and goes beyond the limits of established norms and identities.

An Ambivalent Oriental Subject Split within the Imaginative Geography

The growth narrative of the child protagonist, Moon Shadow, in Yep's novel *Dragonwings* offers a tangible view of the Chinese American diasporic history at the turn of the 20th century. As Moon Shadow embarks on his journey of separating from his homeland and crossing borders to live in Chinatown and later the white American community, he emerges as an ambivalent but intriguing Oriental subject. This ambivalence is characterised by both his experience of racial oppression as an outsider and his racial biases towards the white Americans. Such complexity gives rise to divergent interpretations of Moon Shadow's subjectivity, which creatively exposes the tangible sense of racial presuppositions and misunderstandings within the geographical divisions.

Firstly, prior to gaining entry into the Golden Mountain, which refers to San Francisco in the United States, Moon Shadow is subjected to racialisation as an Oriental outsider who potentially poses health risks from across the Pacific (Yep 1975, 15). Consequently, he is subjected to surveillance, interrogation and scrutiny within an immigrant detention centre. He is forcibly confined within the constraints of a two-storey warehouse for an entire week before being allowed to be questioned. This portrayal sends a clear message that Moon Shadow passively endures absolute control (Yep 1975, 15). These instances of detention life provide a brief glimpse into the inhumane conditions endured by nonhuman entities within the sociopolitical context of Chinese exclusion. The poor hygiene within the facility is exemplified by "the sewage and bilge of the bay", while the physically harsh confinement forces Moon Shadow to sleep and eat off the floors with no means of bathing (Yep 1975). These conditions highlight how racialisation has facilitated white Americans' dominance over Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, Moon Shadow's experience includes being forcibly stripped naked and subjected to invasive measurements. He is objectified as "a new bunch of papers" documented by American officials (Yep 1975, 15–16). His passive submission to the dominance of white Americans evokes historical realist memories of Chinese American diasporic scenes. This portrayal emphasises the lack of agency experienced by Chinese individuals and their transformation from personal beings into official statements (Said 2003, 157).

The narrative of Moon Shadow's border crossing into Chinatown serves as a powerful illustration of the pervasive racial bias that characterises white American society, extending beyond the confines of immigrant detention centres. Moon Shadow's arrival in Chinatown immediately exposes him to suspicion and exclusion as an "Oriental intruder" who is perceived as a threat to white Americans' job opportunities (Yep 1975, 36). This prejudiced response can be understood within the framework articulated by Said (2003, 56), who argues that Asia is often constructed as an "other" world that exists solely through the European imagination. The construction of such binary oppositions serves to reinforce white Americans' dominance and perpetuate the notion of Western racial superiority, thereby fuelling anti-Chinese sentiments. Moon Shadow's sense of disorientation in the face of the white Americans' hostility is vividly depicted through imagery such as "howling, sweating, red-and-white faces" and the sound of a glass window shattering (Yep 1975, 37–38). These scenes not only highlight racial privilege but also underscore the power dynamics at play. Consequently, Moon Shadow finds himself compelled into silence as a survival strategy, aligning with what Yep (1975, 38) refers to as "the virtues of the Stranger to be silent...to be invisible". This pressure to remain silent further reinforces the objectification mechanism inherent in racial binaries and underscores how cultural otherness is marginalised within Western society. Moreover, Moon Shadow's experience of being prohibited from attending school with white American children emphasises how spaces are designated for specific racial groups. This emphasis on segregation highlights how Western societies isolate and marginalise cultural otherness while actively engaging in meaning-making processes that silence those who do not conform to dominant norms.

The hegemonic dominance and cultural isolation of white Americans in this particular context contribute significantly to the perpetuation of stereotypical misconceptions regarding the Chinese Other. These misconceptions, as pointed out by Said, are rooted in ontological and epistemological frameworks that portray the Chinese as irrational and inscrutable inferiors. This becomes particularly evident when Moon Shadow, the protagonist, is misunderstood by Robin, a white American girl. Moon Shadow faces constant bullying from white boys who consistently lie in wait against a wall to attack him with trash. This hostile environment instils fear in Moon Shadow, preventing him from crossing over to the water pump located in the backyard. Consequently, Moon Shadow must hastily dash out to the water pump each day to complete his dishwashing duties. He frantically primes the handle of the water pump before quickly returning to the shed where he resides, often spilling half of the water along the way. Robin's interrogation of Moon Shadow further highlights her profound misunderstanding of his situation. She questions why he is afraid of using the pump and dismisses

his fear as foolishness. Additionally, she generalises her perception by asking if all “Chinamen” are similarly “crazy” like him (Yep 1975, 154). Robin’s use of rhetorical questions laden with derogatory terms exposes her lack of understanding and reinforces Orientalist notions that render the Oriental Other inscrutable within Western consciousness. This interaction between Robin and Moon Shadow serves as a poignant illustration of how misunderstandings rooted in cultural isolation can perpetuate stereotypes about marginalised groups. Robin’s choice of words reveals her ignorance and reinforces preconceived notions about Chinese individuals held within Western society. It underscores how dominant cultures often fail to comprehend or empathise with those they perceive as different or inferior, thus perpetuating harmful stereotypes and maintaining power imbalances between cultures.

On the contrary, Moon Shadow, being an Oriental subject with preconceived racial biases about American culture and its people, presents a similar logic of presupposed construction through geographical divisions. Prior to his border crossing from the Pacific, Moon Shadow envisions the Golden Mountain as an exotic place adorned with “the glittering mound of gold” and perceives white sailors as “tiger demons—special tigers with magical powers” (Yep 1975, 13–14). This perspective mirrors the Orientalists’ mindset towards the Orient, as revealed by Said (2003, 52), where “‘the Oriental’ [is identified as] ...an amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asiatic...with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound”. Upon arriving at the Golden Mountain, which he perceives as a mere “brown smudge on the horizon”, Moon Shadow experiences a disconcerting moment of displacement and emotional turmoil (Yep 1975, 14). Following his release from the immigrant detention centre, his sense of being lost in the “boxlike” houses along the street intersects with his troubled imagination in which white Americans live like “prisoners...in a prison” (Yep 1975, 16). Moon Shadow’s perception of America as an exotic and mysterious place reflects a stereotypical Orientalist view that romanticises and mystifies foreign cultures. This perspective is rooted in preconceived notions and biases that shape his understanding of American society. Furthermore, Moon Shadow’s initial disorientation upon arrival highlights his struggle to reconcile his expectations with reality.

The Orientalist binary between the Orient and the Occident becomes increasingly evident when Moon Shadow transitions from Chinatown to the white American community. Prior to his initial encounter with Miss Whitlaw, his white landlady, Moon Shadow envisions her as a racial Other, employing geographical divisions to depict her as exotic and demon-like. He describes her in fantastical terms,

I had expected her to be ten feet tall with blue skin and to have a face covered with warts and ear lobes that hung all the way down to her knees so that her ear lobes would bounce off the knees when she walked. And she might have a potbelly shiny as a mirror and big sacs of flesh for breasts and maybe she would only be wearing a loin cloth. (Yep 1975, 130)

This portrayal of Miss Whitlaw highlights the Orientalist tendency to construct the Other as an object of fascination and fear. Moon Shadow's preconceived notions reflect the prevailing stereotypes perpetuated by Western societies about non-Western cultures. These stereotypes often depict Eastern individuals as exotic and primitive beings who are vastly different from their Western counterparts. We argue that by emphasising these stark contrasts between the Orient and the Occident through Moon Shadow's perception of Miss Whitlaw, Yep underscores the power dynamics at play in intercultural encounters. This binary reinforces notions of Western superiority while simultaneously marginalising and dehumanising non-Western individuals.

When Miss Whitlaw extends an invitation to Moon Shadow to taste gingerbread and milk, two American foods he has never encountered before, he envisions them as something uncivilised, describing them as resembling “dung” and “cow urine” with an “awful, greasy taste” (Yep 1975, 133). This portrayal of fabricated knowledge about racial Others as inferior is reflected in Moon Shadow's visual and gustatory preconceptions, which are shaped by geographical divisions. It implies that Moon Shadow, as a Chinese Other in the minds of white Americans, is analogous to the white Americans themselves and their perception of American foods – both are products of imaginative ideas rooted in geographical divisions. However, it is important to note that the construction of racial Others within this imaginative geography is complex and not always stable. As a result, we witness Moon Shadow vacillating between his preconceived biases and the reality he encounters.

Upon meeting Miss Whitlaw for the first time, Moon Shadow's impression of her differs from what he had previously imagined. He compares her smile to that of a deity known as the Listener or She Who Hears Prayers – a figure who refuses release from the cycle of lives until all her brothers and sisters are freed from sin. Furthermore, when he looks into her eyes, he notices a friendly twinkle that makes her appear even less threatening. Miss Whitlaw, as he observes:

Had a smile like the Listener, She Who Hears Prayers, who refused release from the cycle of lives until all her brothers and sisters too could

be freed from sin...I looked at her eyes and saw a friendly twinkle in them that made her seem even less threatening. (Yep 1975, 130–131)

In this passage, Moon Shadow's initial assumptions about Miss Whitlaw based on his preconceived notions are challenged by his actual experience with her. This highlights the fluidity and complexity of racial otherness within the imaginative geography constructed by both Moon Shadow and white Americans. It suggests that these preconceptions are not fixed or absolute but subject to change when confronted with real-life interactions and experiences.

Moon Shadow's initial encounter with gingerbread and milk serves as a turning point in his perception of American culture. After hesitantly tasting the unfamiliar treat, Moon Shadow's preconceived notions are swiftly corrected, leading him to exclaim that the flavour was "heavenly" and eagerly devouring one piece after another (Yep 1975, 134). This momentary indulgence in a new culinary experience allows Moon Shadow to develop a more nuanced understanding of the white American world he finds himself in. The subsequent visit to Miss Whitlaw's house provides Moon Shadow with an opportunity to further immerse himself in the customs and traditions of white Americans. Through this encounter, he gains a heightened awareness of racial differences and begins to perceive the otherness associated with his own Chinese heritage. However, it is important to acknowledge that cultural disparities persist even within their communication about dragons. While Miss Whitlaw views dragons as malevolent creatures that breathe fire and wreak havoc on towns, Moon Shadow is appalled by her distorted portrayal, as for him dragons symbolise power and wisdom (Yep 1975, 139). In this passage, Yep highlights the complex interplay between cultural perspectives and individual experiences. Moon Shadow's evolving understanding of American culture is not only shaped by his direct encounters but also by his contrasting interpretations of mythical creatures like dragons. This divergence underscores the inherent differences between cultures and emphasizes the need for open-mindedness and empathy when navigating these disparities.

Moon Shadow's encounter with Miss Whitlaw in Laurence Yep's novel drives him into a state of ambivalent vacillation, as he grapples with the whimsical bewilderment over her identity. This is evident when he asks his father, Windrider, "Do you think the demoness [Miss Whitlaw] is the ghost of a Tang woman?" (Yep 1975, 143). This ambiguous bewilderment strategically portrays the white American as an ambivalent racial Other, either a white demon or the ghost of a Tang woman. It poses thought-provoking reflections on the misrepresentation of the Oriental Other. As Said (2003, 59) argues, "the Orient...vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in—or fear of—

novelty”. This vacillation highlights the complex and ambivalent construction of the Oriental Other. Bhabha (2004, 95) further remarks that “ambivalence, central to the stereotype...ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures”. In this context, Moon Shadow’s ambivalence does not merely reproduce the Oriental Other; rather, it suggests new possibilities for change. When we consider how cultural otherness serves as carriers and catalysts for change on an ambivalent ground, Moon Shadow’s growth resonates more with Bhabha’s theories about individual transformation within the third space – a liminal space of cultural differences. In this third space, Moon Shadow navigates between his Chinese heritage and his experiences in America. His ambivalence becomes a source of potential transformation and opens up new avenues for understanding cultural differences.

The Oriental Subject Changing in the Third Space

Yep’s growth narrative of the child protagonist Moon Shadow also offers a profound exploration of the Oriental subject’s transformation within the third space of cultural differences. Moon Shadow’s journey from his homeland to San Francisco prompts encounters with cultural otherness, leading to shifts in his subjectivity. These changes in his outlook and agency not only challenge preconceived notions about the Chinese Other but also transcend the limitations of traditional representations in the Chinese American diaspora. Through a transgressive aesthetic that combines stereotypical materials and satirical ambivalence, the novel portrays Moon Shadow’s emancipatory growth and reflects the experiences of Chinese American diaspora in the early 1900s.

Moon Shadow’s engagement with cultural otherness begins when he carries a packet of Chinese jasmine tea adorned with a golden dragon to his second visit with Miss Whitlaw. Contrasting American coffee with Chinese jasmine tea, Moon Shadow clarifies that the latter requires no cream or sugar when brewed. Furthermore, he enlightens Miss Whitlaw about the positive attributes of dragons, explaining their role in bringing rain for crops (Yep 1975, 149). This interaction highlights Moon Shadow’s agency, as cultural differences mobilise him to challenge prevailing stereotypes and promote authentic knowledge. Miss Whitlaw’s willingness to listen to him, despite her initial doubts, exemplifies the transformative potential of the third space in prompting self-reflection and epistemological shifts (Yep 1975, 148–149). His changes suggest the following potentiality of re-interpreting his subjectivity in the third space of cultural differences.

As the narrative progresses, Moon Shadow’s personal growth becomes evident through his developing friendships with white Americans. In an effort to bridge

the cultural gap, Moon Shadow shares his knowledge of aeronautical jargon with Robin by sketching the Dragonwings glider model. In return, Robin introduces him to English slang and figures of speech. Under the guidance and encouragement of Miss Whitlaw, Moon Shadow gradually becomes capable of writing short paragraphs in English, using them to introduce Chinese dragons and the Pearl River from his hometown. This exchange of cultural knowledge and language demonstrates Moon Shadow's ability to transcend cultural boundaries, highlighting the permeable nature of the geographical divide between Oriental outsiders and local citizens.

Moon Shadow's growth in engaging with cultural differences is exemplified by his realisation that he is also being educated by Miss Whitlaw. He reflects on this epiphany by stating, "while I had set out to reeducate the demoness about dragons, she was educating me in the demonic language" (Yep 1975, 164). This signifies Moon Shadow's growth within the third space of cultural differences as he challenges and disentangles himself from the dominant rhetoric that portrays him as a threatening invader. Furthermore, Moon Shadow's personal growth is intertwined with hybridity within this third space. This is particularly evident when he musters up the courage to stand up against racist violence. One Sunday, while Moon Shadow and Robin are outside flying their glider model, they encounter Jack and other white American boys who immediately stop playing upon seeing Moon Shadow. They begin taunting him with derogatory remarks such as "Ching Chong". However, instead of remaining silent or succumbing to their bullying tactics, Moon Shadow confidently asserts himself by saying "I no like that song" (Yep 1975, 183). When Jack responds dismissively and tries to insult him further by calling him stupid, Moon Shadow fearlessly retorts, "Everyone knows that" (Yep 1975, 183).

In this instance, Moon Shadow responds with fluency instead of struggling to find the right words in English. Moon Shadow then expresses a desire to retaliate against Jack, but to his surprise, Jack sits down in the dirt with blood streaming from his nose. The other white American boys, who had been yelling excitedly, fall silent. Moon Shadow's fists resonate with the bricks held by the boisterous white racists, as depicted in the earlier discussion of the anti-Chinese frenzy. This inversion of power dynamics can be seen as "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 2004, 122). His ambivalent response, represented by his fists, not only signifies the Oriental being mocked but also reveals his agency and desire to resist, thus exposing a more subversive undertone in his personal growth. As Bhabha (2004) argues, this "'otherness' is at once an object of desire and derision", which not only highlights "the boundaries of colonial discourse"

but also enables a transgression of these limits from within that space of otherness. Moon Shadow's position as a hybrid subject split along power lines allows for his *bildung* and self-worth to flourish. He comes to realise that he no longer needs to rely on charms for protection against demons and can handle any situation using his "fists...brain...and feet" (Yep 1975, 185). In this sense, his growth challenges and resists the passive racial positioning imposed on Chinese/Chinese Americans as silent individuals.

The earthquake depicted in this novel serves as a fictionalised representation of the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The author vividly describes the impact of the earthquake, stating that "[w]ood and stone and brick and the very earth became fluid like" (Yep 1975, 197). This catastrophic event forces both the healthy and injured individuals to seek refuge in a tent located in Golden Gate Park. Consequently, this earthquake highlights the blurring of boundaries between home and world, as well as the merging of private and public spheres (Bhabha 2004, 13).

By associating the fluid-like space with the sanctuary-like tent, Moon Shadow's personal growth becomes even more apparent within "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha 2004, 13). Initially, when sharing dinner in the tent, members of the Chinese laundry company struggle to comprehend what the Whitlows are expressing without Moon Shadow's translation. As a cultural translator, Moon Shadow constantly shuttles between two distinct languages and cultures, bridging cultural negotiations between different racial communities.

This intercultural dynamic allows for harmonious coexistence between white Americans and Chinese individuals within Moon Shadow's experiences. Through this process, we witness his growth surpassing cultural boundaries within what Bhabha refers to as the third space of cultural differences. This space is characterised by "the negotiation of incommensurable differences [that] creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (Bhabha 2004, 235).

Ultimately, at the conclusion of this novel, Moon Shadow undergoes an epiphany after traversing transpacific and cultural transgressions within the Golden Mountain. This transformative journey signifies his ability to navigate and transcend the challenges posed by cultural differences and geographical distances. As he describes:

I had found my mountain of gold, after all and it had not been nuggets but people who had made it up: people like the Company and the Whitlaws. I had not realized until I had left it that I had been on the mountain of gold all that time. And somehow, being on our hillside, I felt above it all now—somehow freer and purer. (Yep 1975, 268)

The protagonist's epiphany signifies a heightened self-awareness, allowing him to transcend the limitations of his previous thinking, which was shaped by an imaginative geography. This newfound awareness enables him to liberate himself and envision a future that combines elements of both his Chinese heritage and white American culture. His transformation is indicative of personal growth and the power of transgression. Although his ambivalent representations are influenced by racial biases and stereotypes, they serve as a more authentic portrayal of the struggles, oppression, desire for agency and potential for emancipation experienced by Chinese Americans.

The aesthetic employed in this narrative draws upon the concept of the third space, where hybridity, cultural negotiation and translation operate on both sides. This aesthetic is exemplified by the trajectory of the protagonist's growth in transgression, as discussed by Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture*. The fluidity displayed in this transgressive aesthetic reflects the diverse nature of Chinese American identity within a culturally heterogeneous society. The protagonist's journey not only involves overcoming racial exclusionary adversities but also represents a departure from misrepresentations that perpetuate ethnic exclusivity among Chinese Americans. The author embraces an alternative formal innovation within the Chinese American bildungsroman genre while challenging naturalised portrayals that limit creative expression.

On the contrary, the trajectory of his emancipatory development significantly evokes the transgressive experiences of Chinese American diaspora in the 1900s, revealing its foundation of historical realist innovation. The transgressive aesthetic encompasses a fusion of the conventional stereotypical elements associated with Chinese Americans and the satirically ambivalent Chinese Other. This aesthetic encapsulates an artistic cleverness that enriches the author's rearticulation of Chinese American diasporic adversities within a historical realist framework, enabling readers to engage with a visually appealing and easily accessible reflection on multiple levels. It is crucial to emphasise that this transgressive aesthetic offers numerous symbiotic possibilities within the context of Chinese American diaspora. As the child protagonist navigates through adversity and embraces change in the third space, a coexistence between otherness and hybridity emerges. This coexistence not only bridges the gap between history and future but also reconciles tradition with innovation.

Conclusions

This essay conducted a critical analysis of Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings*, drawing on the theories of Edward Said's imaginative geography and Homi Bhabha's third space, as well as recent critiques of the Asian American bildungsroman. We argued that the growth of the child protagonist in *Dragonwings* reflects the tension between popular Orientalised representations and emancipatory changes in transpacific transgression and cultural transgression. The findings revealed that the growth of the child protagonist can be understood in two stages.

The first stage explored how the child protagonist's growth during early development exemplifies the complex construction of the Oriental subject as an ambivalent Chinese stereotype within a context of border crossing and cultural differences in the Chinese American diaspora. Moon Shadow's journey involves encounters with racial oppression, bias and misunderstandings within the context of a deeply divided and discriminatory society. In this regard, the novel highlights the impact of racialisation on Chinese immigrants, the construction of Orientalist stereotypes and the complexities of cultural otherness within the imaginative geography. The study found that Moon Shadow's growth in the novel highlights the complexities of racial otherness and challenges prevailing Orientalist views, offering potential for transformation and understanding cultural differences in the liminal third space. The discussion emphasised that this construction occurs within an authentic exclusionary framework.

The second stage examined how there is a possibility for anti-Orientalism in the child protagonist's growth during later stages. This growth takes place within Bhabha's third space, which allows for a reflexive re-evaluation of the child protagonist's development as a means to free the authorship from perpetuating established Chinese misrepresentations. It is shown that Moon Shadow's evolving friendships with white Americans and cultural exchange not only demonstrate the permeability of geographical and cultural boundaries but also challenge passive racial positioning and empower him with agency. In this manner, the narrative highlights the power of empathy and the potential for change in the face of prejudice. In addition, the findings emphasised that the novel's transgressive aesthetic combines stereotypical elements with satirical ambivalence, offering a profound reflection on Chinese American diaspora experiences in the early 1900s. It is concluded that Moon Shadow's transformative journey signifies a harmonious coexistence between otherness and hybridity, transcending cultural limitations and envisioning a future that embraces both his Chinese heritage and white American culture. Therefore, the present study demonstrated that the child protagonist's growth also provides an opportunity to better understand transgressive aesthetics

within the Chinese American diaspora. Specifically, it speaks to historical realist phenomena such as transpacific transgression and cultural transgression. Throughout the essay, we argued that through his growth, the child protagonist captures a transgressive aesthetic that offers multiple symbiotic possibilities within this diaspora. Overcoming adversity and embracing change in Bhabha's, his growth becomes a vehicle for exploring these possibilities.

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