

## Exploration of the Poetic Features 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, whose poetic language and rich food symbols and cultural images add the deep meaning of the work, cross the national boundaries and promote the combination of Chinese-Canadian cultures. It represents the poetic charm of Chinese-Canadian English literature.

### Keywords

Poetic features; food symbols; cultural images.

### 1. Introduction

#### 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 conflicts between the two cultural backgrounds, they are immersed in the pros and cons of Chinese traditional culture and Canadian culture. The author employs the poetic language and rich symbols and images to add the deep sense of the work and reveal the cultural combination and beauty of literature.

#### 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 made some researches on the theme of *Jade Peony* from different methods and perspectives. The Chinese cultures 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 poetic features from the aspects of language, food symbols and images in the novel, and then revealing the poetic charm of Chinese-Canadian English literature.

## 2. The Meaning and Origination of Poetic Features

From the perspective of etymology, the word "poetic" originated from an Italian scholar Vico's work *Science Nuova* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, known as the poetic thinking, which was regarded as the initial wisdom by the primitive men who have no rational ability but with strong sensibility and vivid imagination. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger interpreted poetry as the primitive creativity from the perspective phenomenology. Their initial and poetic thinking is equal to the saying "poetry, is also temperament." in ancient Chinese literature *The Book of Rites*, expressing the musical and ritual ideas during the Warring States Period. Professor Lin Xuelin from Taiwan further interpreted it as heuristic thinking in her paper *Teaching Design and Achievement Analysis of New Poetry under the Guidance of Heuristic Thinking* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revealing the disciplines of metre and rhyme are closely related with poetry and poetic thinking. Another Chinese classic book *Aesthetics of Literature and Art* explained that poetry is an important genre of litterateur with intense sense of rhythm and musical language constructing the beautiful poetry images and carrying the poets' emotions. In the same way, the famous scholar Wen Yiduo also stated that poetry can inspire emotions because of its rhythm and imagination in his book *Aesthetics*. Therefore, based on their interpretation of poetics, the rhythm, imagination, image and emotions are commonly considered as some major features of poetics. The essence of poetry is an perceptual representation of logos, which transforms the abstract and invisible objects into the higher spiritual realm through the poets' subjective creativity and description. Thus, the article will explore the poetic features of the Chinese-Canadian novel *Jade Peony* from the aspects of poetic language, food symbols and cultural images, revealing the deep meaning of the work and indicating the poetic charms in literature.

## 3. Analysis of the Poetic Features in Jade Peony

Poetic, as an essential part of art, has been integrated and reflected in various development stages in literature. The lyrical factors and the beauty of rhythm have been carried in poems and novels. As for the Chinese-Canadian novel *Jade Peony*, the poetic features are represented from the aspects of language, symbols and images, expressing the national emotions and providing a new way of thinking and viewing the Chinese-Canadian cultures.

### 1. The Poetic Language

In the novel *Jade Peony*, the poetic language mainly presented on the pronunciation and rhythm. As the text reads, "Girls were often left to fend for themselves in the streets, so she was lucky to have any family interested in her fate."(*Jade Peony*: 5), five repeated consonants "f" in this sentence sounds like a song with beats, and another two words "streets" and "fate" presents the end rhyme, together showing the musical beauty and the girls' miserable destiny. In the following part, "The two boys were waving toy swords around, swinging them in turn."(*Jade Peony*: 6), alliteration is used with the sound /w/, reading rhythmically and pleasingly, creating a relaxed and joyful atmosphere. Next sentence, "Europe and Germany were at war. Britain was

at war. The Chinese were forever at war with the Japanese invaders.” (Jade Peony: 34), contains the rhetorical devices of parallelism, demonstrating Poh-Poh’s attitude towards international conditions. The following contents, “I also play-acting for myself, imagining a world where I belonged, dressed perfectly, behaved beyond reproach, and was loved, always loved...” (Jade Peony: 38), which also uses the parallelism, alliteration and repetition, revealing the intense inner voice of Jook-Liang to be a useful and unique girl. The rhetorical devices of parallelism and repetition are further employed in the next sentence, “I forgot I still had on my taffeta dress; I forgot to ask Wong Suk how he liked the way the dress danced when I danced; I forgot to cry and shout his name and urge him...” (Jade Peony: 80), which shows the heroine’s helplessness and grudge, unwilling to tear herself away from Wong Suk. Another rhetorical device of simile has been used in the sentence, “English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quick sand.” (Jade Peony: 150), Sek-Ling makes a comparison between English and Chinese, responsively like road signs and quick sand, which is very vivid and reveals Sek-Lung’s tendency towards English.

In short, these poetic language provides the readability, adds the meaning of the text and shows the characters’ emotions., further presenting the charm and beauty of the novel *Jade Peony*.

## 2. The Food Symbols

Symbols are another features of poetic with their contained meanings and emotions. This part will focus on the food symbols in *Jade Peony* to analyze the deep senses and feelings of these characters. For example, the content in the text, “Father had splurged on groceries: a bare long-necked chicken’s head, freshly skilled, hung out of the bag he had carried home. Poh-Poh also unwrapped a fresh fish.” (Jade Peony: 11), which offers the most common food chicken and fish as if they are in China, presenting their Chinese features. And next sentence, “Grandmother and I were waiting for the rice pot to finish cooking.” (Jade Peony: 14), showing the Chinese cooking methods which pay attention to the appearance, smell and taste. It also demonstrates the characters’ desire and love for Chinese food. The following sentence further represents the difference between Chinese and Western food, “I drank all my soup...Father had taught us to sip our soup slowly, noiselessly, in the Western way.” (Jade Peony: 21). The table manners are different, especially for drinking soup. In China, the sound can be made, while in Canada it’s not polite. Father reminded the children not to make sound, which reflects they gradually accept the way of Canada and know how to live and feed themselves in a foreign country. The same can be presented in this part, “Wong-Sin ate every piece of stir-fried celery, bean cake, carrot, bok choy, eggplant, pork, fish and twice-cooked chicken offered to him, and ate, into his third brimming bowl of rice.” (Jade Peony: 22). Through what they eat, the feelings of miss and yearning for China can be seen. At the same time, they dine both the Chinese and Canadian food; they have combined these two dietary customs; they have adapted themselves in this country, working out the cultural conflicts.

## 3. The Descriptive Images

Images are the center of poetic features, which combines the subjective emotions with the objective objects indicating some deep meanings and aesthetic characteristics. Images can inspire readers’ imagination and offer them the sense of integration and appreciation, making the text full of poetic beauty. In *Jade Peony*, the images of Monkey king, luck money, turtle, moon, jade peony and ghosts are described specifically.

Monkey king is the representative of Chinese ancient story, carrying the spirit of bravery to pursuit the true self and rebel the unfair hegemony, who is liked by Jook-Liang struggling to find her own identification. And the next image is luck money as the text writes, “Luck money was awarded on birthdays or maybe when a report card was all A’s.” (Jade Peony: 59), which means good luck for Chinese in some special ceremonies, containing the character’s beautiful wishes. Here the luck money is given on birthdays and excellent performance in class to express

their joy and encouragement. The following part “Still, turtle very good fortune. Long life.” (Jade Peony: 79) shows that turtle is raised by the adopted son Jung who like the turtle vary much and gradually understands his identification under the influence of the turtle. It’s a Chinese turtle, and it’s also the Canadian turtle, which means long life in China, good luck in Canada. Through the meaning of turtle, Jung realized his identity and true self, which can be further indicated in the next sentence, “ ‘Jung-Sum is the moon,’ Poh-Poh said. Mrs. Lim knew the moon was the YIN principle, the female.” (Jade Peony: 88) reveals the meaning of moon representing the Yin aspect in China, showing that Jung-Sum has the characters of female because of his behavior and inner heart. At first, he did not accept this saying from his Grandmother. After the experience happened between him and Frank, the characters of female come into his mind and he gradually understood himself. As for his grandmother who can be regarded as the representative of Chinese culture, she has told a lot of Chinese stories to her grandchildren and invested them with many Chinese thoughts and customs. Jade Peony is one of the thing that Grandmother carried with until her death revealing her longings for China as the text described, “wind chimes...made of bits of string and the precious jade peony, a carved stone the size of a large coin, knotted with red silk to hang like a pendant from the center, like the clapper of a sacred bell.” (Jade Peony: 165). The appearance of Jade Peony demonstrates the Chinese characters, especially the red colour showing the good fortune of Grandmother who believes that it is the colour of spirit. The jade peony was given by a young acrobat who taught Grandmother how to juggle, which carries Grandmother’s memories of Chinese culture and shows her deep miss towards China. The spirit and miss of Grandmother are also contained in the sayings of ghost, such as the sentence, “Grandma had taught me that the spirits and ghosts were everywhere because the Chinese were such an ancient people...” (Jade Peony: 178), which indicates that the stories of ghosts in China are credible and they are the beliefs for Chinese to some extent, inspiring them to move forward, offering the directions of life and helping them to realize themselves.

All in all, these images carry the character’s emotions and provide vivid pictures towards readers, inspiring the resonance and imagination, representing the aesthetic of the text.

#### 4. Conclusion

The poetic language and food symbols and images described in *Jade Peony* add the deep sense of the text, carry the characters’ complicated emotions and unlimited longings for China. These poetic features cross the national boundaries and promote the combination of Chinese-Canadian cultures, revealing the charm and aesthetic of literature.

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