

Representations of Chinese dragons in British picturebooks set in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The dragon is a widely recognised figure in children's literature from around the world: from its Christian origins and association to hellfire, to European folktales depicting it as the guardian of treasure, the dragon in the West is an ambivalent symbol long associated with anger, cooperation, protection, and greed. When it comes to the role of the dragon in European and North American children's literature, the 20th century witnessed dramatic changes, partly due to its rise in popularity within the fantasy genre: from then on, children's books in western countries tended to soften and satirize the dragon, which started appearing in publications targeted to all age groups, from young readers to teenagers, and beyond. Compared to its European and North American counterparts, the Chinese dragon is an even more multifaceted figure. For more than 4,000 years, East Asian myth and folklore have told tales of good and evil dragons, dragons that control the weather, and shape-shifting dragon-lords, among which is the Chinese dragon, a highly regarded mythological creature with strong ties to nature, representing immortality and ancestral wisdom. These positive associations influenced the portrayal of Chinese dragons in children's literature, both nationally and abroad: this paper will examine how British picturebooks set in Hong Kong (and published in the years following the SAR's handover to China) represented the Chinese dragon, a presence that remained "softened" while retaining its mythological attributes – namely, the Chinese dragon's widely documented historical associations to nature, reimagined as a response to contemporary ecological, and political, concerns.

Keywords: Children's Literature Studies; Postcolonial Studies; Anglo Portuguese Studies; Comparative Literature; Mythology.