



DRAGONWINGS

ANALYSIS

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- In the afterword, Laurence Yep describes the actual historical events that inspired *Dragonwings*: there are newspaper accounts of a young Chinese man named Fung Joe Guey who flew an airplane into the hills of Oakland, California, in 1909. He was able to fly for less than a half hour before an issue with a propeller caused the plane to go down. Little other information about this man—who improved on the aeronautical plans of the Wright brothers—exists, which is reflective of much of Chinese American history around the turn of the twentieth century. The experiences of the majority of Chinese people who assimilated into American society during this period has been lost, their individual stories shrouded in fog.

This book, then, seeks to examine the conflicts and struggles Chinese immigrants faced when they sought their American dreams. White America often met them with cruelty and intimidation, and Chinese Americans survived by drawing on the power of family and community. When Moon Shadow and Windrider decide to leave the relative safety of the Company, Uncle Bright Star is adamant that they are making a mistake and that once out on their own, they might find the power of the White “demons” overwhelming. The distrust between the two cultures is clear, and there seems little hope that Moon Shadow will find friendship or support outside his family.

Yet hope is a powerful thing, and even after Black Dog robs Moon Shadow and Windrider of their entire savings, Moon Shadow acknowledges that “There was some beauty to life after all, even if it was only the beauty of hope.” When Moon Shadow leaves the Company with his father in order to build the airplane, he finds friendship in the most unlikely of places: a confident redheaded girl named Robin and her aunt, Miss Whitlaw. This duo proves to Moon Shadow that the demons are not an entirely bad group of people. He enjoys his conversations with Miss Whitlaw and increasingly turns to her for support.

These friendships surpass physical proximity. After the earthquake and fire, Moon Shadow and his father keep in touch with Miss Whitlaw and Robin, and near the end of the novel, when she believes they are in need of help, Miss Whitlaw wastes no time using her resources to find her friends so that she can offer assistance.

Although not a focus of the book, the physical absence of Moon Shadow's mother also casts a light on the plight of many Chinese women who were abandoned during this era as their husbands left China to find work in the United States. Although many Chinese immigrants originally came to America during the California Gold Rush, later generations came for other jobs and had to compete with other immigrant groups for work. Their plans were generally to work hard in America so that they could return to China wealthier than before or to finance their families' lives in China through their work overseas. However, this placed a burden on the women left behind, as Moon Shadow's family demonstrates.

Mother doesn't seem to have much of a voice in her family's affairs, and it would certainly have been difficult to be left pregnant and alone while her husband embarked for America in search of a better life. When Hand Clap returns to China to retrieve Moon Shadow, Mother tells him that her son doesn't want to go yet, wishing to cling to her only child for as long as possible. Again, her wishes are minimized by the men in her life, and when her son tells her that he wishes to join his father in America, she is left alone for years. The majority of Chinese immigrants during this period were men; Chinese women were thus left at home and became responsible for maintaining their own and any remaining family members' needs, economically and otherwise, independent of their husbands' assistance.

Because the story is told from the perspective of a young child (later a teenager) who is not native to America and has no experience with the culture he encounters, readers are able to empathize with his struggle to maintain his sense of Chinese culture and his progress in assimilating into the American culture in a way that will benefit both him and his family. He provides his age in both Chinese and American terms. He stands up to Jack, who had ridiculed his English grammar. He finds a close friend in a "demon" White girl and is later nearly killed by a member of his own family. Moon Shadow learns that the world is complex and cannot be easily analyzed along cultural lines.

The text brings a depth to explorations of both cultural diversity and the history which has shaped the United States. Chinese Americans are the largest Asian American ethnic group, totaling over four million people today. However, the history of their early struggles in America is not well documented and has too often been subject to stereotypes, which the author notes he tries to dispel through the book.

In *Dragonwings*, Yep presents a hopeful vision of a world in which dreams of a better life unite people across racial, cultural, gender, and social divides.