

---



---

International Academic Conference of  
Montreal (IACM) 2005,  
2005.9.28-10.8-Montreal Canada<sup>1</sup>

---



---

## A Bridge Between Two Worlds: a Cultural Interpretation of *Dragonwings*<sup>1</sup>

### UN PONT ENTRE DEUX MONDES:

### UNE INTERPRÉTATION CULTURELLE DE DRAGON-AILES

Zhang Ying<sup>2</sup>      Meng Xianhua<sup>3</sup>      Mo Yumei<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** Living in the dual worlds of his life as a Chinese American and in places such as Chinatown, Laurence Yep felt that he was culturally alienated and that he did not have a culture of his own. With the driving wish to find out about Chinese culture—his culture, he finished his best known novel *Dragonwings* after six years of research on Chinese culture.

Based on the true story of Fung Joe Guey, a Chinese American who built and flew an airplane in the Oakland hills in 1909, *Dragonwings* tells the story of Moon Shadow, who comes to San Francisco to join his unknown father, Windrider, who cherishes the dream of flying. To pursue the dream, Moon Shadow and his father have to move out of Chinatown. After enduring a sea of misunderstanding, cruelty and poverty, Windrider finally realizes his flying dream with the support and aid of his beloved son and his fellowmen, as well as his American friends.

Trying to show the process from misinterpretation and misunderstanding to mutual understanding and the possibilities of cultural exchange and cultural fusion between two different cultures, we will discuss how the Chinese culture is rediscovered by a Chinese American and how cultural misunderstanding leads to an unbalanced world and how tolerance and understanding restore the world into a harmonious one. This paper attempts to demonstrate, through the analysis of *Dragonwings*, the author's exploration of Chinese culture, cultural exchange and human nature transcending cultural differences.

**Key words:** *Dragonwings*, Laurence Yep, cultural exchange

**Abstrait:** En vivant dans le monde dual de sa vie comme Américain chinois et aux endroits comme la Cité chinoise, Laurence Yep trouve qu'il était aliéné culturellement et qu'il n'avait pas de culture de sa ville. Avec l'espoir violent à découvrir la culture chinoise----sa culture, il a achevé son roman bien connu *Dragon-ailes* après une recherche de six années sur la culture chinoise.

Basé sur l'histoire vraie de Fung Joe Guey, un Américain Chinois qui a fabriqué et manié un avion dans les Montagnes Oakland en 1909, *Dragon-ailes* raconte le conte de Ombre de lune, qui vient à San Francisco pour rejoindre son père inconnu, Windrider, qui a le rêve de voler. Poursuivant le rêve, Ombre Lunaire et son père sont obligés de bouger de la Cité chinoise. Après avoir enduré une mer d'incompréhension, de cruauté et de pauvreté, Windrider a finalement réalisé son rêve de voler avec l'aide de son fils et ses compagnons, ainsi que ses amis américains.

Essayant de montrer le processus de malinterprétation et de incompréhension à compréhension mutuelle et les possibilités d'échange et de fusion culturels entre deux cultures différentes, nous discuterons comment la culture chinoise est redécouverte par un Américain chinois et comment

---

<sup>1</sup> With grants from "the tenth five-year" plan on social sciences, Jilin Province, China(No.2003089).

<sup>2</sup> Foreign Languages College, Northeast Normal University, China.

<sup>3</sup> Teachers' College, Qingdao University, China.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Languages College Qingdao University of Science and Technology, China.

\* Received 16 March 2005; accepted 27 March 2005

l'incompréhension culturelle conduit à un monde inégal et comment la tolérance et la compréhension reconstruisent le monde à celui d'harmonique. Ce papier tente de démontrer, à travers l'analyse de *Dragon-ailes*, l'exploration de l'auteur de la culture chinoise, de l'échange culturel et des différences transcendantales naturelles de la nature humaine.

**Mots clefs:** *Dragon-ailes*, Laurence Yep, échange culturel

In the American literary world, Laurence Yep is known not only as a predominant writer of children's literature, but also as one of the most important Chinese American writers. As a successful writer, Laurence Yep has been entitled "a literary bridge builder" to bridge the gap between East and West and plead for tolerance in people's interactions and "some of his bridges connect his readers with Chinese traditions, folklore, history, thought and experience" (Berger, 1994, 724). Yep's confrontation with multiculturalism makes him a bridge builder. The general theme in his dragon series, which includes *Dragonwings* (1975), *Dragon of the lost Sea* (1982) and *Dragon's Gate* (1993), reveals "Laurence Yep's spirit—the spirit of a man who is concerned about those of varying backgrounds finding a common ground, but who is concerned, too, with more individual issues such as personal identity and the meaning of home." (Johnson-Feeling, 1975, 7) Living in the multicultural atmosphere, Yep certainly has realized the importance of having a right attitude towards this issue. "To Laurence Yep, multiculturalism is an honorable concept – more than a fad, he says, and more like a tide. His willingness to confront what he calls his Chineseness, through his books, helps Chinese- and Asian-American young people confront this issue themselves." (Johnson-Feeling, 1995, 11) Moreover, the greatness of his works also lies in the potentiality to show non-Asian young people how to approach their own and others' cultures. The creation of *Dragonwings* is just out of such a consideration.

Reading between and beyond the lines, we can discern that *Dragonwings* is far more than a mere historical novel. It is also an artistically produced model showing the process and possibilities of cultural exchange and cultural fusion between two different cultures, that strong bonds of friendships can be developed between people of different races, and that the process from misunderstanding and misinterpretation to mutual understanding, as well as how cultural misunderstanding leads to an unbalanced world and how tolerance and understanding restore the world into a harmonious one. His writing has the potential to help Asian Americans and other ethnic Americans to approach and understand the issue of ethnic and cultural identities vicariously, especially in our present multicultural atmosphere. "Rather than appealing to one specific group, his work has qualities that have universal appeal. The insights Yep gained as an outsider flavor his writings. Bridging different cultures, readers are able to enjoy the stories Yep waves, while looking through a window to greater understandings of the worlds of differences and similarities that co-exist in life" (Berger, 1994, 725).

## 1. CHINESE CULTURE: A REDISCOVERED WORLD

American historian Michael Kammen, in his book *Mystic Chords of Memory*, holds that "[immigrants] came to escape the past, but once they were settled there they contributed to a kind of ethnic American syllogism: the first generation zealously preserves; the second generation zealously forgets; the third generation zealously rediscovers." (Nilsen and Donelson, 1993, 251) Laurence Yep belongs to the third generation of Chinese Americans, the generation, in light of Michael Kammen, who "zealously rediscovers". He lived in a predominantly African American community, but he commuted through Chinatown to go to St. Mary's Grammar School. Never speaking Chinese with his family members, he "resented being put into the dummies' class and forced to learn a 'foreign language' (Chinese)" (Johnson-Feeling, 1995, 44.), when St. Mary's was transformed from a "regular" school into a Chinese school. Living in the supposedly mainstream society, he knew little about Chinese traditional culture. As for the traditionally sacred Spring Festival his only concern was that he could shoot off firecrackers on that day. In his autobiography *The Lost Sea* he mentions his experience when watching a cartoon show in which the protagonist entered into a conflict with Chinese laundrymen: he made high, sing-song noises to show his support to the protagonist and his fury to the Chinese laundrymen, and his horrified mother said to him, "You're Chinese, stop that!" (Johnson-Feeling, 1995, 10) Some critics comment that his action shows that he had been so deeply merged into the American mainstream culture that he could not readily recognize images of his own ethnic community.

Facing the challenge of fitting-in and of juggling his heritage and his identity with participation in the mainstream, his feelings changed with the progress of his age for he strongly felt that he did not have a culture of his own. "The third generation, my generation, grew up in households in which little or no Chinese was spoken and Chinese myths and legends were looked upon largely as a source of embarrassment. But now let me try to explain what it's like to grow up within a group that has tried collectively to forget the past and ignore any differences between themselves and others. I found that I was truly like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—without form, without shape. It was as if all the features on my face had been erased and I was simply a blank mirror reflecting other people's hopes and fears." (Yep, 1995, 103)

This feeling became stronger after he became a writer. "I found that the Chinese-Americans had been a faceless crowd for most writers." (Yep, 1995, 103) Then he began his six years' research in the libraries of different cities to search for all kinds of historical materials and information so as to recover his cultural identity as a Chinese American that was lost in the mainstream American culture, and to reappear the history of Chinese Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Dragonwings*, published in 1975, was named a Newbery Honor Book, and was chosen as a Notable Children's Book of 1975 by the American Library Association. It was a New York Times Outstanding Book in 1975. It is also the book that earned for its author the International Reading Association Children's Book Award. Based on the true story of Fung Joe Guey, a Chinese American who built and flew an airplane in the Oakland hills in 1909, *Dragonwings* tells the story of Moon Shadow, who comes to San Francisco to join his unknown father, Windrider, who cherishes the dream of flying. To pursue the dream, Moon Shadow and his father have to move out of Chinatown. After enduring a sea of misunderstanding, cruelty and poverty, Windrider finally realizes his flying dream with the support and aid of his beloved son and his fellowmen, as well as his American friends.

The first impression readers can get after reading the novel is an encyclopedia-like picture of Chinese customs and traditional culture with detailed description of respective celebrations. The important persons mentioned include Confucius, the great ancient philosopher; "Lee the White, the Drunken Genius" and great poet. Events referred to include the Peach Orchard Vow, the conquest of the Middle Kingdom by the Manchus, Ridding the Manchus to Restore the Ming dynasty and the Boxer Rebellion. The myths and legends include Jade Emperor, the Lord of Heaven and Earth; the Dragon King; the dragon palace; the Monkey King, who conquered Heaven and was born of a stone egg; the stove king, "the Chinese saint of kitchen"; the door guardian; the cowherd; the spinning Maid; the Magpie bridge; the Lord of east wind; the Judges of the Dead and the Listener, She who Hears Prayers. There are also folk customs and beliefs which are very popular and most of which are still observed such as burning incense; praying in the temple; enshrining and worshiping the statue of the Buddha-to-be; making offerings to the dead; putting the pictures of the door guardians on the doors; casting protective Stone lions before doors; practicing Chinese handwriting; believing in the former life; the next life; the blessing of the Old Ones and the good wind and water vibrations; the celebration of New Year and the Feast of Pure Brightness. Mah-jongg and abacus are also parts of Chinese culture. There are also descriptions of the timing system based on Chinese lunar calendar; the Chinese age-counting system; the Chinese method of naming with family name, personal name,

coming-of-age name, nickname and pen name; the order of writing name with family name before personal name; Chinese characters differentiating from a language that only uses twenty-six symbols; Chinese food which is not characterized by bread and milk. It is difficult to imagine the person who used to call Chinese "a foreign language" as the author of such an "encyclopedia" of Chinese traditional culture. However, such an encyclopedia of Chinese culture is only the surface part of what Laurence Yep has rediscovered.

Laurence Yep, in his novel, is also attempting to find the connotation of Chinese traditional culture; collectivism, for instance, upheld by most Chinese, has been reflected to the utmost. The laundry named "the Company of the Peach Orchard Vow" is a big family where people help one another in times of difficulty and trouble. "We were brothers: strangers in a strange land who had banded for mutual help and protection." (49) Almost all the members of the Company meet Moon Shadow and give him all kinds of presents when he first sets his foot in San Francisco. After the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, people from all over America, even those who journey by foot and by wagon when they cannot afford to buy a train ticket, come to help to reconstruct Chinatown and they begin to work as soon as they have finished their tea. So it can be safely said that the reconstruction of Chinatown is the demonstration of collective power. Towards the end of the novel it is still the Company that helps Windrider realize his flying dream when his flying trial is at a deadlock because of economic reasons. Windrider's flying trial is the most convincing example to show the difference between "one chopstick" and "a bunch of chopsticks", which exemplifies the Chinese collective spirit. Confucian doctrines and filial duty have been demonstrated by an eight-year-old boy. He believes one should obey his father even it means danger or death. "I owed it to Father to obey him in everything— even if it meant going to a fearful place as the Golden Mountain" (10). The process of discovering Chinese traditional culture and cultural spirit is just the process in which Laurence Yep finds his long-lost Chinese cultural identity.

## 2. MISUNDERSTANDING: AN UNBALANCED WORLD

Our thoughts and feelings are not necessarily shared by or with the other people and can therefore lead to misunderstanding because even the same words or things can connote different meanings to different people as each individual is a composite of different experiences, beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations and people tend to make a lot of assumptions based on their own experiences and background. With misunderstanding, people tend to misjudge and mistreat those who are different. The result is very often

prejudice that means the attitude or set of attitude that drives discrimination.

Chinese Americans' experience in America is not always pleasant: Moon Shadow's grandfather is killed by the whites when he tries to keep his queue (his long plait) which is his very life as a Chinese; during the earthquakes, Chinese Americans are driven out of safe places by white soldiers; white children throw stones at Moon Shadow and his father when they deliver clothes to their customers; and there are also white children who sing humiliating songs to Chinese Americans and so on. Of course, at the very beginning, Moon Shadow's view toward America is also biased, because human minds tend to jump to conclusions and to act on them based upon a minimal amount of sensory input. That is why, in Moon Shadow's heart, America is "the demon land" and he is frightened by Americans, or to be more proper, he is full of xenophobia, "especially of all the sailors, for they were so tall and big and hairy I thought that they were Tiger demons — special tigers with magical powers." (10) As for his landlady Miss Whitlaw, "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 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." (101) His image of Robin, the niece of Miss Whitlaw, is also naturally distorted, "with her flaming red hair, she seemed like a true fox demoness who would delight in tricking humans." (120) Moreover, the milk and ginger-bread specially prepared for the first visit of Moon Shadow and his father is not food at all, in Moon Shadow's eyes: the milk looks like cow urine, with an awful and greasy taste, whereas the ginger-bread seems like dung, which will surely change a person into a toad or something else after being eaten.

All the above-mentioned animosities result from misunderstanding. The reasons of misunderstanding originate from "misreading" of cultures. The so-called "misreading", according to the definition stipulated by Mr. Yue Daiyun (Yue, 1997, 1), refers to the practice that it is hard for people, when getting in touch with other cultures, to cast off their own cultural traditions and mode of thinking and that they tend to understand others according to what they are familiar with. Mr. Teng Shouyao (Yue, 1997, 97-98) has his own original view on misreading. He defines misreading as entering another culture with "extremely conceited" prejudice, which will certainly distort that culture—because one always tries to have a trial of superiority with it, tries to remake it, to conquer it and to defeat it; the result is always contrary to the wishes, either distancing it or misunderstanding it. With either way a wall has been built between the two cultures. If this invisible and insubstantial wall is formed between two cultures, the consequence will be either misunderstanding or closing the country to the international communities; or, more seriously, cultural conservatism or cultural racism. The

reasons for the appearance of a cultural wall lie in two aspects. For one thing, every culture has its own unique history in its formation. So each culture is so independent with a self-reliant system that it is exclusive to an extent. For the other, the development of a culture is also determined by historical, ethnical, and regional factors; thus the development of cultures is unbalanced and the unbalance of cultures results in an unbalanced world.

One example is different views towards dragons. The dragon, the emblem of the Chinese people, is the symbol of the Chinese nation in the eyes of Chinese. "Dragon, the most glorious animal in China, is the symbol of the emperor and enjoys all the best things." (Lin, 1995, 309) The dragon can bring rain to crops when it flies through the air from its dwelling in the deep sea. To Chinese, dragons are hospitable, intelligent and powerful and are the friends of humans with the ability to change their size and shape flexibly. To Americans, "[it's] a very wicked animal that breathes fire and goes about eating up people and destroying towns. St. George killed many of them." (107-108) It is a terrible animal in Western culture. In Geraldine McCaughrean's *Saint George and the Dragon*, the dragon is described as follows: "its red mouth gasped as it panted in the hot sun. Its ragged teeth bulged through rolled green lips. And awake or sleep, its lidless eyes stared and its claws stretched and withdrew, stretched and withdrew in the waterside mud. Its foul breath hung in a green haze. Its father was Evil, its mother Darkness and its name was Wickedness." (Hourihau, 1997, 116) So there is a totally different attitude towards dragons. That is why Moon Shadow and his father come to the conclusion that, after hearing Miss Whitlaw's description of dragons, "[you] know how the demons are, they turn everything upside down and get everything the wrong way." (111)

Any doubt can be erased that cultural differences do exist, but cultural differences should not become the obstacles for human communication. Misunderstanding can be eliminated if more tolerance and understanding is accorded.

### 3. UNDERSTANDING: A BRIDGE TO BALANCE AND HARMONY

Unlike misreading, "understanding," means entering another culture with an equal and communicative consciousness. It means knowing there is a new culture before getting in touch with it and being eager to see it, to know about it, and learn from it; but because of the isolation caused by language, geographical and political factors, one has to overcome the obstacles by returning to his "human nature" first, and then to face the "original" of another culture with his "human nature". (Teng, 1996, 97-98) A balanced and harmonious relationship between human beings cannot be built up

with the existence of misunderstanding. Real cultural dialogue and cultural exchange can become reality only when people can drop their prejudices. Cultural dialogue is to break through limits, especially to deconstruct the binary opposition between mainstream and margin. This is also the method used by the author to achieve cultural dialogue.

In *Dragonwings*, Yep adeptly expresses the opinion that in culture there is no classification of mainstream and margin and all cultures are on an equal position through the use of language. Anyone who has finished reading *Dragonwings* will remember that the author is always using “Middle Kingdom” to express the concept of “China” and “the Golden Mountain” replaces “San Francisco”. Readers can also notice that “the text in italics represents English, Chinese is the norm, and English is the foreign language. At the very least, this can force young readers to reconsider some of the assumptions about society and about the world that they might take for granted. More specifically, they are forced to realize that their experiences are not always shared experiences.” (Johnson-Feeling, 1995, 44)

When more tolerance and understanding is given to another culture, people will find that the cultural wall is not indestructible and a balanced and harmonious world is not too difficult to obtain. For instance, Moon Shadow drinks the milk out of politeness and manages not to make a face though he does not like the awful and greasy taste. Spending more time with Miss Whitlaw, Moon Shadow begins “to realize that despite her demonic appearance and dress and speech and customs, there was a gentle strength, a sweet loving patience coupled with an iron-hard core of what she thought was right and proper.” (110-111) Moon Shadow feels attached to her also because she does not discriminate against Chinese and treats him as an equal: “Another thing to say for the demoness was her genuine interest in learning about people as people. Where some idiot like myself would have been smug and patronizing, the demoness really wanted to learn. And like Father, she was not afraid to talk to me like an equal.” (116) At last Moon Shadow breaks her habit of putting cream and sugar into everything and finds that she is open-minded and much more open to suggestion than he is. When Moon Shadow tries to educate her about dragons in China, he finds that she is so eager to know, and to know it as an equal culture. She does not adhere to her original opinion stubbornly when Moon Shadow tells her that most dragons are good and only the outlaw may do some harm, and she perceives a new understanding of dragons though all the dragons she has read about have not been very pleasant animals. Finally she says, “perhaps the truth of the dragon lies somewhere in between the American and the Chinese versions. He is neither all-bad nor all-good, neither all-destructive nor all-kind. He is a creature particularly in tune with Nature, and so, like Nature, he can be very, very kind or very, very terrible. If you love him, you will accept what he is. Otherwise he will destroy you.” (132-133)

New knowledge and understanding will come into being if people can give up their overweening attitude and treat other cultures equally and the original prejudice will be abandoned with this new knowledge and understanding. So by the end of the story, Miss Whitlaw and her niece have become great friends of Moon Shadow and his Chinese extended family and they experience the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Even Mr. Alger doesn't hesitate to put his prejudice aside when he realizes that Windrider can really repair his car and refuses to accept any money though at the beginning he does not believe him at all, “[the] demon stopped and studied Father as you might look at a dog that had suddenly said he was going to the opera.” Then he continues to self-criticize, “well, I'll be damned” (57). Realizing his mistake, he gives a card to Windrider and tells him that he can use honest handymen like him. Later he really keeps his promise and provides a job for Windrider. New knowledge and understanding between humans is like a bridge to a balanced and harmonious relationship and such a bridge will definitely lead to human integration.

#### 4. INTEGRATION AND FUSION: A BALANCED WORLD

It is a generally acknowledged fact that there are cultural conflicts and cultural misunderstanding between different cultures. So the crux of the matter is what attitude should be taken to cultural conflicts and cultural misunderstanding. Should we measure, apply mechanically and explain another culture with the standards of the “host” culture or treat other customs and beliefs with a tolerance and understanding? The former will lead to the impasse of cultural dialogue, whereas the latter can result in equal communication between different cultures. Only when human beings, the carriers of cultures, become equal, can the universal man emerge. Alain Rey, in his article “*From Cultural Diversity to Human Universality*” holds that “ [the] universalism based on historical facts is no more than a hallucination; a rational universalism should be based on other foundations. The rational one should be like this: there exists the common human nature though radical differences appear when it is represented in time and space, in society and in culture.” He also points out “to achieve the goal of human universality, a cross-cultural criterion should be established and those colonial, exclusive, unequal and artificial classification of races should be destroyed.” (Rey, 1997,25)

Alain Rey is right in that there exists a common human nature that gives rise to certain physiological and psychological needs in spite of the difference in physical appearance and his idea can also be seen in *Dragonwings*. Windrider and Miss Whitlaw, for instance, behave very bravely and calmly in the Earthquake. They manage to save dozens of lives when

others are trying to take flight, like panic-stricken birds. We can see from their behavior that human nature is good, be he or she a Chinese or an American. We can also see the common pursuit of human beings, flying, for example. Daedalus in Greek legend, Chun, the ninth legendary emperor of China, King Lear's father in the Twelfth century English tales all are pursuers of flying. In *Dragonwings*, in their letter, one of the Wrights brothers says, "My brother and I are always happy to meet another flying enthusiast, our brotherhood is too small to lose any of us." (131) So the Wrights and Windrider are closely related by their common dream of flying despite of their different cultural backgrounds.

In fact common languages can be sought out among people even if they do not speak the same utterable language, in music and in mathematics, physics and chemistry, for instance. That is exactly what Laurence Yep is trying to convey through the mouth of Windrider when he has repaired Mr. Alger's car in spite of the latter's disbelief. "He was surprised when I fixed his carriage. Machines aren't all bad. Some of them may be the true magic. We might not be able to speak too well with the demons, but in machines there's a language common to us all. You don't have to worry about your accent when you're talking about numbers and diagrams" (58).

There is also commonality of human behaviors from different cultures in spite of any radical differences they may have in all sorts of ways. "Miss Whitlaw brought a bottle of brandy, the universal gift that is cherished in all cultures" (183) to thank her Chinese friends. Apart from wine, there are other things people from different cultures share; for instance, after Moon Shadow defeats Jack; head of a group of American children who sing insulting songs to him, and Jack manages to appeal to Moon Shadow for a reconciliation. Moon Shadow realizes that these demons are like the Tang boys he knew at home "[you] only had to punch out the biggest and toughest of the bunch and the others would accept you." (145) The dialogue between Miss Whitlaw and the Father and Son is also very symbolic.

"Are the sunsets like this in China?" Miss Whitlaw asked.

"Yes, just as lovely. Must be lovely all round the world." (139)

A beautiful sunset is definitely not the only thing shared by the entire world; the commonality of human beings must be more than that.

Thus, we can enter a higher realm transcending cultural differences as long as we can "destroy those colonial, exclusive, unequal and artificial classification of races." People from different cultures can love and help each other and cooperate well if such a realm is reached. The making of *Dragonwings* is the result of cooperation between different cultures. When Moon Shadow asks the Wrights, who also try to fly at that time, for tables and diagrams to build the airplane, the Wrights mail what he needs immediately. In the

following years they write to each other frequently and learn from one another. And interestingly enough, the first letter to the Wrights is also the outcome of cooperation between Moon Shadow and Miss Whitlaw. Without her help, Moon Shadow, knowing nothing about the American posting system and only learning the rudiments of English, can never get his letter to the Wrights, let alone get help from them. The flying of *Dragonwings* is also the aftermath of cooperation. Miss Whitlaw, who always concerns herself with the progress of flying, informs Chinatown in time when she knows the money for both the flight and rent has been grabbed by Black Dog, the son of Uncle Bright Star. At last Windrider successfully flies with the help of his countrymen. So, the realization of Windrider's flying dream is the outcome of joined efforts of different people from different cultural backgrounds.

The writing process of *Dragonwings* is not only the process in which Laurence Yep searches for his cultural identity; it is more the process of the exploration of cultural exchange transcending cultural differences. When Chinese and Americans remained complacently immersed in the deep swamps of ignorance of each other—when Americans were taken for demons and Chinese were viewed as uncivilized as "rat eaters, low wage laborers intent on crushing White labor and infesting Americans with disease" (Wang, 8), how can dialogue and communication be carried out? With the Chinese immigrants lacking understanding of the White culture and the White people not understanding the Chinese, Moon Shadow endured a sea of unpleasant experience. But with the increase of knowledge and understanding of each other, dialogue and communication, through which people can better understand each other, develop quality relationships, manage their conflicts and create an environment of morality and peace, supersede hostility and friendship has been developed. So the process of creating *Dragonwings* shows the possibility of cultural exchange and cultural fusion between two different cultures and how cultural misunderstanding finally gives way to understanding.

Although cultural communication does not always run smoothly, it has a time-honored tradition and cultural communication has contributed greatly to cultural progress and development. "The British philosopher Bertrand Russell, in a 1922 essay comparing Chinese and western culture, wrote that exchange between cultures in the past have proven many times milestones in the development of human civilization. Greece copied from Egypt, and Rome borrowed from Greece. Arabia referred back to the Roman Empire, and the medieval Europe in turn imitated Arabia, while Renaissance Europe followed the Byzantine Empire. European culture, in the course of its own development, absorbed all kinds of cultural traditions, it also greatly enriched the content of its own culture. Cultures 'develop side by side, yet do each other no harm, and 'progress together and are not in

conflict with each other' (Yue, 1997, 54).

Cultural exchange and cultural fusion has been proved possible and the function of cultural exchange has turned out to be of great significance. Then how different cultures should be approached? The first requisite is that, one should realize that just like races, there are no "inferior" or "superior" cultures; neither is there "mainstream" nor "margin". Each culture has its own unique history and reasons for existence. Cultural differences are universally existent. The right attitude to other cultures is to incorporate things of diverse nature based on respect and understanding and never try to tell which is better or which is right. There are also countless links among cultures with certain universality and supplementality, which is the basis of cultural dialogue and cultural exchange. Of course, understanding is not identical with identification and each culture should keep its uniqueness, divergence, and regionality. Cultural exchanges and cultural integration should not take their distinctive national features as a sacrifice. So the idealistic state should be keeping national characteristics, exchanging culture equally and then establishing a harmonious relationship among people. This is of especially vital importance in the age of economic globalization.

With respect to foreign cultures, understanding and tolerance are of the two great significant approaches and need to be encouraged. Understanding has two fundamental aspects: for one thing, it means the desire to understand the foreign other, to appropriate and integrate it into the familiar. In understanding other cultures, knowing more about the target culture is very important. Knowing does not mean showing theirs as similar to ours. We still need to understand and respect the differences between us. For the other, understanding also means preserving the foreign as foreign. It is not advisable to convert or to influence the other cultures seeing they are different from the host culture. Understanding alone is not enough. Cultural tolerance is also very important for inter-communications. Knowing every culture has the reason for existence, we should tolerate those cultures even if those seem absurd or immoral or difficult to understand. In a word, understanding does not mean agreeing, rather it means a more tolerant attitude.

Last but not least, *Dragonwings* was created with children as the main reading audience, first of all for the convenience of writing: "I had grown up as a child in the 1950s so that my sense of reality was an American one. Now I had to grow up again, but this time in the 1900s, developing a Chinese sense of reality.... So when I chose to describe things from the viewpoint of an eight-year-old Chinese boy. It was more than simply choosing a narrative device; it was close to the process of discovery I myself was experiencing in writing the story." (Yep, 1975, 104-105) At the very same time, the author is showing how a minority child feels growing up in the beginning – in the face of pervasive ignorance of and antipathy towards each other—which has provided an important channel for children to see how social values, ways of life, patterns of thinking and beliefs are transmitted. Moon Shadow's experience can help other children appreciate the idiosyncrasies of other ethnic groups, eliminate cultural ethnocentrism and develop multiple perspectives. Its function is universal since a piece of good literature can transcend time, place, and language and help readers to learn the story of the hero which takes place in a specific historical background. Furthermore, children can still learn that all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, kindness beneath the surface difference of color, culture, or ethnicity.

Viewing through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy, the author also expresses his expectations and his hope to the children today and in the future, hoping from childhood on they can be multicultural-minded and have more understanding and tolerance of other cultures so that a more harmonious human family could be created through the common efforts of people from varying cultures.

With the increase of cultural consciousness and the advent of the new cultural awakening, many ethnic people have finished their cultivation of racial pride and are very proud of their cultural heritage. They can appreciate other cultures, while at the same time, maintain their cultural distinctiveness and determine to hold on to their cultural heritage. Together they contribute to the rich diversity of American culture and world culture.

## REFERENCES

- Alleen P. Nilsen & Kenneh L. Donelson, *Literature For Today's Young Adult* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)[M], Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.
- Comparative Literature During the Transitional Period' [J], *Study and Exploration*, 1996(5), 99-104.
- Creative Print and Design (Wales), Ebbw Vale, Great Britain, 1997, 116.
- Yue Daiyun. *Unicorn and Dragon –In Search of Cultural Misreading*[C], Beijing University Press, 1997.
- Hourihau, Margery. *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*[M].
- Johnson-Feeling, Dianne. *Presenting Laurence Yep* [M] New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Lin Yutang. *The Chinese People*[M]. Xuelin Press, 1995.

Yang Hongchen. 'The Purport and Strategy of Cultural Dialogue—The Orientation and Choice of Yep, Laurence. *Dragonwings* [Z] New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

#### **THE AUTHORS**

**Zhang Ying**, Foreign Languages College, Northeast Normal University, P. R. China

**Meng Xianhua**, Teachers' College, Qingdao University, 266071, P. R. China

**Mo Yumei**, Foreign Languages College Qingdao University of Science and Technology, P. R. China