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**Study Guide**

for

**Dragonwings**

by Laurence Yep



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# Meet Laurence Yep



*I wanted to show that Chinese Americans are human beings upon whom America has had a unique effect. I have tried to do this by seeing America through the eyes of a recently arrived Chinese boy, and by presenting the struggles of his father in following his dream.*

—Laurence Yep, in the Afterword to *Dragonwings*

As a boy, Laurence Yep was exposed to many different cultures, but he did not feel he could call any one of them his own. His parents were of Chinese heritage, though both grew up in the United States, and his father owned a grocery store in an African American neighborhood in San Francisco. It was in this neighborhood that Laurence grew up, but he did not feel part of the community. He says that he felt as if he were the neighborhood's "all-purpose Asian," even though he did not even speak Chinese. Yep was not exposed to the culture of mainstream white America until he entered high school.

Yep's experiences as a youth made him feel like an outsider. Although most people would consider that feeling to be disadvantageous, he believes it helped him as a writer. Yep says:

*Probably the reason that much of my writing has found its way to a teenage audience is that*

*I'm always pursuing the theme of being an outsider—an alien—and many teenagers feel they're aliens.*

Actually, Yep did not intend to become a writer. But when a high school English teacher told Yep that to get an A in the course he would have to have a story accepted by a national magazine, Yep was struck by the "submission bug." Nonetheless, he did not sell a story to a magazine until he was in college. For his first published piece, a science fiction story, he was paid a penny a word.

Yep's first novel, *Sweetwater*, was published in 1973. The science fiction story takes place on a planet named Harmony, where a young man is one of a group of relocated aliens. The group struggles to find a place among the rich colonists from Earth and the native people of the planet. Racial tension, jealousy, money, and social position divide the groups.

In 1975 Yep's second novel, *Dragonwings*, was published. This novel established Yep as a powerful voice for Chinese Americans. His own father, a kite maker, was the model for the character of Windrider. Yep sees his book as "a way of stepping into the shoes of members of my family." But his efforts as a writer are not just about family, or even about how people find their place in the world. As Yep says:

*When I wrote of the aeroplane called 'Dragonwings,' I was actually dealing with the reach of our imagination . . . that power in each of us to grasp with the mind and heart what we cannot immediately grasp with the hand.*

Laurence Yep has written many other books and articles and has received numerous awards. He is now a writer in residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He lives with his wife, Joanne Ryder, also a writer, in Sunnyvale, California, near San Francisco.

# Introducing the Novel

*It was an important moment in my life. Perhaps the most important. I had never seen my father, though I had often tried to picture him from Mother's and Grandmother's descriptions. His letters were certainly warm enough, filled with his worries about us and his longing to be back home. But a man cannot be a father in a letter.*

—Moon Shadow, in *Dragonwings*

Young Moon Shadow faces a difficult choice as he is given an opportunity to meet his father for the first time. Moon Shadow's cousin, Hand Clap, has returned to China from the United States to visit family and friends. He has brought with him a letter from Moon Shadow's father, who is now in San Francisco. Moon Shadow's father wants his son to travel to the United States with Hand Clap and join him in the "Land of the Golden Mountain."

Moon Shadow is hesitant to leave his mother and grandmother in China for a new life in America. He has been told of the "demons"—white people—in the United States who killed his grandfather. The white people forbid Chinese men to bring their families to the United States. The "demons" harass and beat Chinese people without cause, though they most often spare the children, for even "the demons have some principles."

But Moon Shadow knows there are things one must do: "There was a certain rightness in life—the feeling you got when you did something the way you knew you should."

So begins the journey of a young boy to meet the father he does not know in a world of which he knows little. In the United States, Moon Shadow is an outsider learning his way around a strange place with strange customs, a strange language, and strange people. The new world is not always a gentle or wholesome one. Drugs are there as well as

danger and violence. The boy is not totally alone, however. Other Chinese immigrants are there too. Through them, readers learn about the traditional culture of Chinese immigrants. Literary critic Marla Dinchak writes:

*Chinese folklore, myths, and legends are interwoven so readers not only sympathize with Moon Shadow and the other Chinese, but understand more of their culture and traditions. That is true of most of Yep's work, for he not only tells a story but bridges a cultural gap.*

Moon Shadow's father also is there to guide his son, but the father has a dream of his own—he dreams of building a flying machine. His secret dream will coincide with one of the most important events in history.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

*Dragonwings* begins in southern China in 1903. Most of the novel takes place in San Francisco, California, from 1903 to 1910. In 1850 only a few hundred Chinese lived in California. Two years later, 10 percent of the population was Chinese. Today, the densely populated Chinatown area of San Francisco, home to the Tang community of Moon Shadow and his father, is one of the largest Chinese communities outside Asia.

Many people came to California because of the jobs associated with the California Gold Rush. Life was not easy. Most newcomers took simple labor jobs, but as gold rush fever faded and jobs became scarce, feelings of ill will toward the Chinese soon followed.

The United States had long discriminated against Asian immigrants. In fact, the first law in American history restricting immigration was directed against Asians. Passed in 1862, the law forbade American ships to transport Chinese people to the United States. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited the

entry of any Chinese immigrants into the United States. Until 1936, Asians were required, by law, to attend separate schools. The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until the middle of World War II.

Many of the men who had come to work in the United States after 1850 formed “bachelor societies” because they were unable to

bring their families. The men sent money back to their families in China, where there was little work. When women were able to join their husbands, Asian American families often adapted to American customs and lost touch with their traditions. In *Dragonwings* Laurence Yep has tried to give readers a sense of what these traditions and customs were like.

### Did You Know?

More people speak some form of Chinese as their native language than any other language in the world. The major forms of Chinese are often called dialects, but they are really separate languages. Although the languages are related, speakers of one “dialect” have difficulty understanding speakers of another.

Mandarin is the most widely spoken language in China. It is spoken in northern, central, and western China. Wu, Min, Kan, Hakka, Hsiang, and Cantonese, or Yüeh, are spoken in the southeastern part of the country.

Efforts have been made to standardize Mandarin Chinese. These efforts have resulted in what is called Modern Standard Chinese, one of the official languages of the United Nations.

In the 1950s, the People’s Republic of China gave official standing to a new form of English-type spelling called *Pinyin*. All correspondence from China is now in Pinyin, and many governments, encyclopedias, and scholars use this form. Pinyin was not created to replace traditional Chinese characters, but to help teach pronunciation and create a single spelling for the names of persons and places.

# Before You Read

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 1–4

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Think about a time when you were some place new and didn't know your way around or the customs that people there followed. What was the experience like? What did you do?

#### **Journal**

Describe how it feels to be a stranger in a strange place.

#### **Setting a Purpose**

As you read Chapters 1–4, watch for ways in which Moon Shadow responds to his new world.

### BACKGROUND

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#### **Chinatown in San Francisco**

Today, Chinatown spreads over more than twenty blocks of Nob Hill in San Francisco, California. Established around the time of the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco's Chinatown is one of the largest and oldest Chinese settlements outside Asia. When gold was discovered in 1848 at Sutter's Mill, near California's Sacramento River, thousands of Chinese immigrated to the United States. Concerned that the large influx of immigrants would cause employment problems, the San Francisco City Council passed anti-Chinese ordinances in 1870. These ordinances limited housing and employment opportunities for Chinese immigrants. In 1882 Congress passed the first of several Chinese Exclusion Acts. These acts further restricted housing and employment opportunities for Chinese immigrants. As a result of the ordinances and the act, the Chinese American population of San Francisco decreased. Chinese immigrants suffered further misfortune when the earthquake and fires that devastated San Francisco in 1906 destroyed most of Chinatown. The area was rebuilt and, to appease the anti-Chinese city officials, the "new" Chinatown featured a unique East-meets-West architectural design. In 1943 the Exclusion Acts were repealed, and Chinese immigrants were allowed to become American citizens. Today, Chinatown is the second most popular tourist attraction in San Francisco after the Golden Gate Bridge. Its streets are filled with small shops and restaurants that reflect the Chinese culture.

#### **Did You Know?**

The Chinese calendar uses twelve animals as symbols for years. Each year is assigned one of these animals in an order based on ancient Chinese tradition. After twelve years, the cycle begins again. For example, the Western years 2000 and 2012 are both the Year of the Dragon. Each animal represents certain characteristics such as intelligence, leadership, independence, and imagination. Someone born in the Year of the Dragon is said to be full of life, enthusiastic, and very popular.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**amiably** [ā' mē ə blē] *adv.* good-naturedly

**dubiously** [dōō' bē əs lē] *adv.* doubtfully

**dynasty** [dī' nəs tē] *n.* succession of family rulers

**heirlooms** [ār' lōōms'] *n.* treasured family possessions

**insolent** [in' sələnt] *adj.* disrespectful; rude

**intuitive** [in tōō' ə tiv] *adj.* instinctive; by hunch

# Active Reading

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 1-4

When Moon Shadow comes to America, he meets new people in the Company. To keep track of these characters, use the following chart. For each character you encounter, make a note of his personality or appearance.

Character	Distinguishing Traits
Hand Clap	Exaggerates; good humor
Uncle Bright Star	
White Deer	
Lefty	
Black Dog	

# Responding

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 1–4

### Personal Response

What was the most surprising thing about this section of *Dragonwings*?

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What was your reaction to Moon Shadow's attitude toward Americans?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why isn't Moon Shadow's entire family in the United States?

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2. What is a "softskin"? Why might the Dragon King view "softskins" as being inferior?

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3. What trouble does Black Dog get into? What problems might be behind some of his troubles?

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# Responding

## *Dragonwings*, Chapters 1–4

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. In your opinion, why might Laurence Yep have put all English speech in italic print?

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5. Why does Moon Shadow refer to white people as “demons”? Do you think Moon Shadow will still feel this way after he has spent some time in the United States?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Description

The “Land of the Golden Mountain” turns out to be different from what Moon Shadow expected. Imagine that you are Moon Shadow and are trying to prepare a young person from another country for what he or she will find in the United States. Write one or two paragraphs describing America as it appears to Moon Shadow.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

In the **Focus Activity**, you recalled your own feelings of being a stranger. Now compare your feelings with those that other members of your group recorded. Find places in this section of *Dragonwings* in which Moon Shadow feels similar to or different from the feelings your group members identified. How does relating your own experiences to those of Moon Shadow help you understand how he feels?

##### Learning for Life

A *pecking order* is a social organization having definite levels of rank. In Chapter 2, Laurence Yep discusses the pecking order within the Company. Answer the following questions in small groups and then present your findings to the class: What was the pecking order of the company? Who was at the top of the pecking order and what did the others think of him? Where did the other members of the Company fall in the pecking order? In your life, or in the world around you, where might you find a pecking order? Who or what decides what the pecking order will be?



*Save your work for your portfolio.*



# Before You Read

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 5–8

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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How do you get to know someone? One day you are complete strangers, and after some time passes, you know a person well. How does this happen?

#### List Ideas

With a partner, make a list of steps that people often go through as they get acquainted.

#### Setting a Purpose

As you read, watch for ways in which Moon Shadow and his father become familiar with new people and things.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Opium Wars

Opium is a dangerous drug produced from the juice of the unripe opium poppy. Opium and the other drugs that are made from the opium poppy plant—morphine, codeine, and heroin—are highly addictive.

Opium was used for medicinal purposes as far back as A.D. 100. Toward the middle of the 1600s, people began smoking opium in China. Many became addicted. By the 1700s, China's rulers recognized the problems caused by opium. They began to take actions to stop cultivation of the plant and to prohibit opium trade with the Western countries.

In the mid-1800s, the opium trade caused two wars between China and Great Britain. The Opium Wars, as they were known, began when the Chinese government attempted to stop the illegal importation of opium into China by the British. China lost both wars. The Chinese government was forced to sign a treaty that gave Hong Kong to the British and opened several Chinese ports to British residence and trade. The importation of opium was legalized.

#### Did You Know?

Although Moon Shadow struggles to learn the English alphabet, writing in Chinese is far more complex than writing in English. There is no alphabet as we know it. Instead, there are about 40,000 characters that represent a word or part of a word. Of these 40,000 characters, about 10,000 of them are commonly used. Someone writing Chinese needs to know at least 2,000 characters to communicate.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**abacus** [ab'ə kəs] *n.* a tool for adding and subtracting

**amulets** [am'yə lits] *n.* good luck charms

**antiquated** [an'tə kwā'tid] *adj.* old; out-of-date

**benevolence** [bə nev'ə ləns] *n.* kindness; generosity

**ironically** [ī ron'i kəl lē] *adv.* with double meaning; sarcastically

**patronizing** [pā'trə nīz'ing] *adj.* snobbish; haughty

**schematics** [skē mat'iks] *n.* diagrams; plans

**tainted** [tān'tid] *adj.* poisoned; disgraced

**vehemently** [vē'ə mənt lē] *adv.* fiercely

# Active Reading

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 5–8

In the **Focus Activity**, you considered the steps that people take as they get to know each other. Now compare your ideas to what happens between Moon Shadow and the Whitlaws. As you read this section, keep track of events that bridge the gap between strangers and cultures. Note at least five more things that bring the people closer.



Moon Shadow

The Whitlaws

1. Miss Whitlaw offers cookies.
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

# Responding

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 5–8

### Personal Response

What were your thoughts as the relationship between Moon Shadow and his father and the Whitlaws deepened into friendship?

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How do you think this friendship might affect Moon Shadow?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why must Moon Shadow and his father leave the Company?

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2. How does Moon Shadow react to Miss Whitlaw's stained-glass window? How does his reaction lead to understanding?

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3. How does Miss Whitlaw help Windrider come closer to achieving his dream?

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# Responding

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 5–8

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. How does Yep make the Whitlaws seem different from other “demons”?

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5. Does the growing friendship between Moon Shadow and his father and the Whitlaws seem true to life? Why or why not?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Themes

A **theme** is a main idea of a novel, or a message about life that the novel conveys. Novels may have more than one theme. Themes are rarely stated directly. They are developed throughout the novel, and it is up to the reader to identify them. Do you recognize a theme in the growing friendship between Moon Shadow and his father? Write an explanation of what this theme might be. Use details from the story to show how the author conveys the theme.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

Getting to know people can provide unexpected—and sometimes comic—moments. As Moon Shadow learns things about the “demon” culture, some amusing exchanges occur. In your group, share what you thought were the funniest parts of this new friendship. Look closely at the words Yep chooses in his description. Then explain your findings to others in your class.

##### Learning for Life

Moon Shadow’s letter to the Wright brothers might seem rather presumptuous. After all, Moon Shadow is a complete stranger to the brothers, and they do not need to fulfill his request. However, as the saying goes, you’ll never know if you don’t ask. From whom would you like to request information for a project or get an answer to a question? Choose a person or organization, and write a letter in which you request some specific piece of information. Share your responses with the class.



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# Before You Read

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 9–12

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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What is the test of a new relationship? How do you know when you've really become friends with someone?

#### Quickwrite

Write a short paragraph that defines the meaning of friendship.

#### Setting a Purpose

As you read Chapters 9–12, notice how different characters prove their friendship.

### BACKGROUND

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#### The Wright Stuff

In 1903 two small-town bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, stunned the world. Orville and Wilbur Wright, who designed and made bicycles, became interested in flight after reading about glider experiments. One day Wilbur was watching buzzards fly and noticed that they must tilt, as well as steer and climb, to use air efficiently.

When the Wrights built their first glider in 1899, it could do all these things. Control wires could “warp” the wings to change shape and thus bank to regain control if necessary. Between 1900 and 1902, the Wrights built three experimental gliders. Then they designed propellers and a light-weight engine for a powered airplane.

On December 17, 1903, the Wrights' flyer, powered by a gasoline engine, took off with Orville at the controls. The flight lasted twelve seconds. A later flight that day lasted fifty-nine seconds, and an age-old dream to fly was realized.

#### Did You Know?

Many people—including the U.S. Army—refused to believe the Wrights had flown. Although the Wrights quickly offered their flyer to the army, it took six years to get a contract signed.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**abominable** [ə bom' ə nə bəl] *adj.* hateful; vile

**desolate** [des' ə lit] *adj.* lonely; ruined

**indifferent** [in dif' ə r ə nt] *adj.* uncaring; apathetic

**indignant** [in dig' nə nt] *adj.* outraged

**monopolize** [mə nɒp' ə lī z' ] *v.* to take over; to control

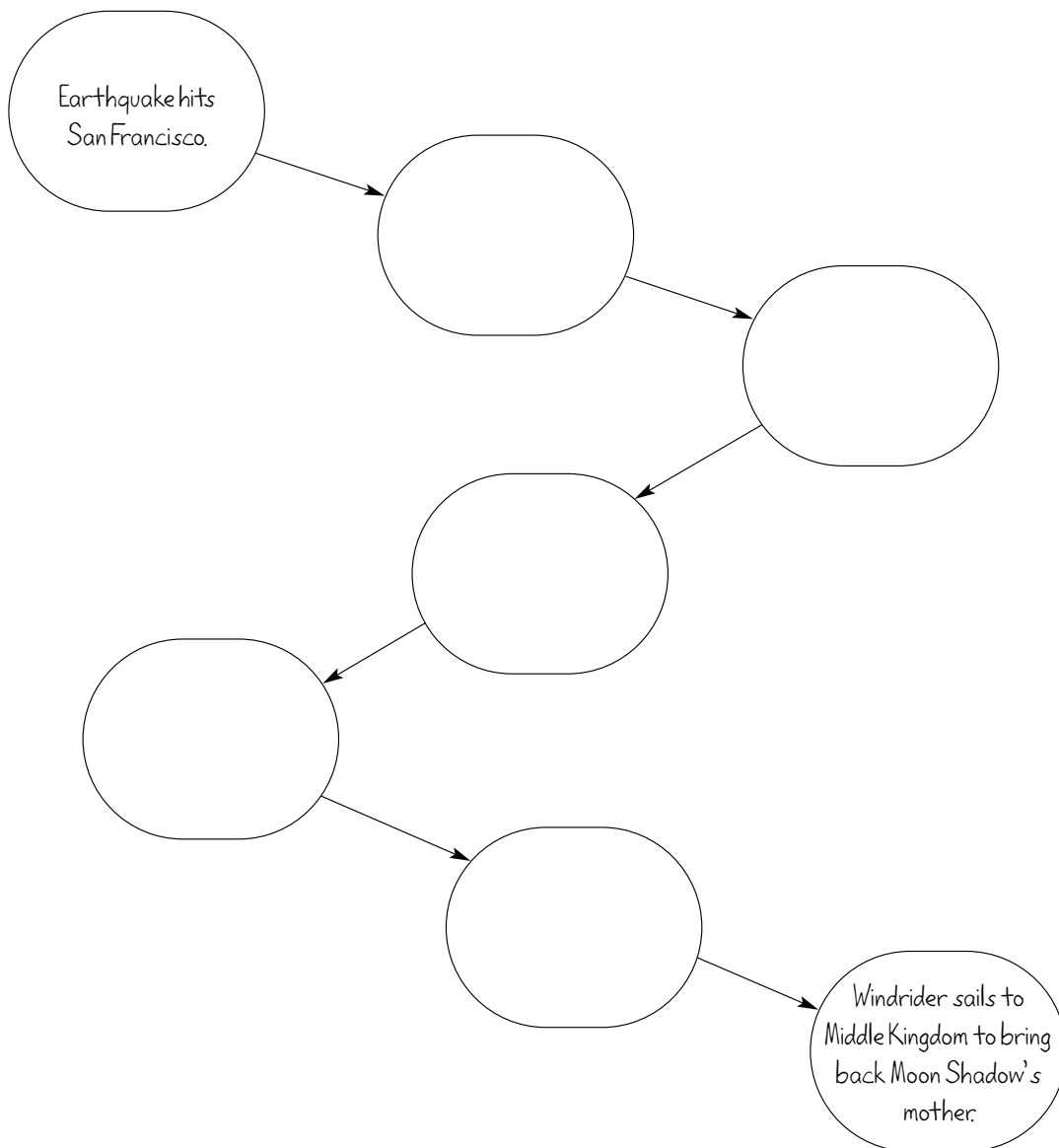
**tendrils** [ten' drə ls] *n.* strands; plantlike shoots

**venerable** [ven' ə r ə bəl] *adj.* aged; worthy of reverence

# Active Reading

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 9–12

As *Dragonwings* moves toward its conclusion, Moon Shadow gets closer to being reunited with his mother. As you read the final section, record the chain of events that leads to Windrider's being able to bring his wife, Moon Shadow's mother, to the United States. Think of events such as the earthquake and its effects on bringing the Whitlaws and the Company together. Add circles to the chain as needed.



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# Responding

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 9–12

### Personal Response

Describe what you thought as you read about *Dragonwings* rolling down the hillside. Were you surprised by what happened next? Why or why not?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. What major event changes the lives of all the characters?

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2. How does the Company keep itself from being moved permanently out of the city?

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3. What conflict does Black Dog cause in this section?

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# Responding

## *Dragonwings* Chapters 9–12

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. Have you ever experienced an emergency? How do you think you would react to a major event like that faced by the characters?

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5. Were you satisfied with the response of Moon Shadow's father to the flight? Is this his last flight? How do you know?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Rising to a Climax

What is the **climax** of *Dragonwings*? Write two or three paragraphs about the point at which the major conflicts come to a head. Then identify the rising action, or the events that led to the climax.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

In the **Focus Activity**, you defined *friendship*. Share your definition with others in your group. Together, skim *Dragonwings* to find examples of times when the characters in the novel display friendship as your group defines it.

##### Internet Connection

Use an Internet search engine to find out more about the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and earthquakes in general. How often has the Bay Area experienced earthquakes? Print out Web pages that have photographs, diagrams, or newspaper accounts, and create an educational display for the classroom bulletin board.



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# Responding

## *Dragonwings*

### **Personal Response**

What did you learn about Chinese culture and American history as you read *Dragonwings*?

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### **Writing About the Novel**

As a result of his experiences, Moon Shadow changes and matures. Identify which events change him, and describe what you think he learns from the events. Refer to specific examples from the book.

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# Writing *Dragonwings*

Laurence Yep

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Where do writers get their inspiration?

### Background

In this article, Laurence Yep talks about writing his award-winning novel. The process, he says, required him to draw from his past. His goal was to replace some of the existing stereotypes of Chinese immigrants with real-life, fully realized characters. The process of writing enabled Yep to look at life in a new and different way.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Who is Fung Joe Guey? What did Yep find out about him?

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2. Why did Yep find it difficult to re-create the past of Chinese Americans? What do you think he meant by “developing a Chinese sense of reality”?

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3. **Making Connections** How did identifying his audience help Yep to write *Dragonwings*?

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## Creative Writing

Imagine that you are going to write a novel set in your community. What kind of research would you need to do to make your novel accurate? Whom in your community would you interview to get background material? Describe some of the challenges in writing a novel based on real people and places. Write a short description of the novel you would write. Include a description of the people and places in your community that you might use.

# from Chinese Kites

Wang Hongxun

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

How do kites fly?

### Background

In *Chinese Kites* author Wang Hongxun presents a fascinating overview of the history of flight, from ancient kites to modern airplanes.

## Responding to the Reading

1. According to the reading, what are the two main ways in which Chinese kites are constructed? Briefly describe each type of kite.

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2. Why do Chinese kite makers so often decorate their kites with pictures of dragons? What does the dragon represent?

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3. How did kite design influence the construction of the first airplanes?

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3. **Making Connections** How might a knowledge of kite design have helped the characters in *Dragonwings* build their airplanes?

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## Internet Connection

With a partner, make a list of questions about flight that you would like answered. Then surf the Internet to find answers to your questions. Use the information to present a brief oral report to your class. Try to include visual aids in your presentation.



# Some Personal Recollections

Gerstle Mack

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Recall a movie or TV show you have seen about a natural disaster. How did the characters cope with the losses they suffered?

### Background

In 1906 an earthquake and resulting fire devastated San Francisco. Like Moon Shadow, Gerstle Mack was a young boy when the disaster struck. As you read about Mack's experience, think about how it might have differed from Moon Shadow's experience.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Sum up the results of the earthquake and fire in San Francisco.

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2. How did the fires caused by the earthquake affect Gerstle's father's business?

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3. **Making Connections** How does Gerstle Mack's experience compare with Moon Shadow's experience?

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## Geology Connection

Using an encyclopedia, the Internet, or any other source, create a simple diagram that shows how earthquakes occur.

# Success at Kill Devil Hills

Becky Welch

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Have you ever flown in an airplane? What were your thoughts as the airplane left the ground?

### Background

The moment of truth finally came for Orville and Wilbur Wright on a windy day in 1903. The Wright brothers put their flying machine to the test on the sand dunes of Kill Devil Hills in North Carolina.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Describe some of the difficulties the Wright brothers had to overcome before they could actually fly their machine.

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2. Why did the Wright brothers refuse to allow the telegraph operator to tell their story to the Norfolk newspaper?

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3. **Making Connections** Someone once said, "It is a rough road that leads to the heights of greatness." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How might this statement apply to Windrider and the Wright brothers?

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## Learning for Life

Think of someone you admire. The person can be someone you have read about, heard about, or know. Imagine that your local newspaper has asked you to write an article about this person. Create a list of five to ten interview questions that you would ask her or him.

# from The Case of the Goblin Pearls

Laurence Yep

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

How much do you know about your favorite relative? Do you think that relative has any life experiences that you do not know about?

### Background

In this first of his series of Chinatown mysteries, Laurence Yep introduces us to Auntie Tiger Lil and her niece and soon-to-be sidekick, Lily. Together they will solve the case of the missing pearls. Soon after their first meeting, Lily begins to discover the value of her own cultural heritage.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Who is Auntie Tiger Lil and what does she do for a living? What is your first impression of Auntie?

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2. What is Lily's relationship with Linda Chin? Why does Lily refer to Linda as a J.O.J.?

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3. What is it about Auntie's past that allows her to relate to Linda? At the end of the reading, what is Linda able to learn about her own heritage?

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4. **Making Connections** Compare and contrast the relationship of Auntie and Lily with the relationship of Windrider and Moon Shadow.

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## Performing

In small groups, compare and contrast the characters of Moon Shadow, Lily, and Linda. Then create a dialogue in which they share their own perception of the United States and of their Chinese heritage. Take turns playing the role of each character.