

Brother to Brother

A Shadow Puppet Play by Susan Casler

Geomancy, the ancient non-scientific Chinese study of Earth's surface to predict the future, is built upon beliefs about dragons. Prominent aspects of the physical world such as rivers, mountains and fault lines were explained as parts of dragons. (Sanders, p. 49)

The play is an interpretation of the cause of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake based on geomancy. It can be used as a way to show an Asian perspective of events in *Dragonwings* by Laurence Yep. The play attempts to address one of the universal themes in *Dragonwings* identified when two characters are looking at constellations in the sky and identifying them as either Chinese or Western constellations: People look at the same things but see many truths. (Yep)

No characters, events or settings in this play are taken from other works of literature except two sets of brothers, Dragon King and Gaoliang, both from Chinese mythology, the historically accurate Wright brothers, and the actual San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. All other characters, events, and setting details are imaginary.

For our shadow puppet stage, we use an overhead projector.

Introduction:

In December, 1903, the Wright brothers made the first known motorized or self-sustained flying craft capable of transporting a human. But it was not the first flight. Humans had used the kite, invented in China, also known as the Middle Kingdom, about 3700 years ago, as an aid in battles. (Chungen, p. 4) Of course, dragons, who rules all bodies of water, also ruled the skies and flew at will. While dragons from Western culture terrify humans, dragons from Chinese culture have more complex relationships with humans: awesome, terrifying, protecting, rewarding, and more.

Cast – to be introduced prior to the shadow puppet play, with the person performing as the puppet.

***Ming, a young child

***Ming's Father

*Dragon King, ruler of all dragons, powerful, with a sense of humor, curiosity, and desire to add to the harmony of his domain. He is a fearless leader with a vision for the future and a sense of responsibility for his actions and the actions of his dragons.

*Dragon King's brother, Gaoliang, is a renegade dragon, filled with anger. Even the Dragon King treats Gaoliang carefully.

***Dragon Queen, married to the Dragon King. She wants to preserve the culture of the dragons.

***Dragon Princess, open-minded.

** Dragon Counselor/Zhang, main support of the Dragon King. He works for harmony within the dragon kingdom and beyond.

** Wilbur Wright – attributed with his brother as the first to construct and succeed with motorized flight in December, 2003.

** Orville Wright – attributed with his brother as the first to construct and succeed with motorized flight in December, 2003.

Astericks indicate size of role: * = major role; ** = important role; *** = minor role.

Scene 1 – Festival of Kites

(Music soars and crashes mimicking the ups and downs of the kites. Many kites are flying in the sky. It is the Festival of Kites.)

Ming: Let me try, Father! Ching? Please? (Ming holds a kite.)

Ming's father: Let it go now!

(Ming's kite begins to soar in the air.)

Father: Here comes my kite!

(The kites fly and Ming and Father slip away from the stage.)

Dragon King: Ming's kite is fit for a king. I will choose Ming's kite for my team! His will fly longer and higher than anyone's!

Gaoliang: I will choose Ming's father's kite. His will fly longer and higher!

(Only the dragons' heads remain visible on the stage as they puff to direct their kites. The kites whoosh to the left and right as the dragons puff to make theirs the champion.)

Dragon King: Gaoliang, your twisted blast of hot air will not force my kite down!

Gaoliang: Me? What did I do?

Dragon King: You are using volcano vapors! Volcano vapors will burn up the kites!

Gaoliang: The Father's kite is made of sturdy bamboo.

Dragon King: But Ming's is silk! Once again, you are cheating to win. (Just then, Ming's kite bursts into flames! The kite spirals down and out of control.)

Ming: Father, help me!

Father: Let me have the string! (He cuts the string and the kite zooms upward from the fire's heat.)

Dragon King: I will blow the burning kite away so that Ming is not hurt!

Gaoliang: Dragon King, you care too much about mere softskins! Let them toughen up with a little fire!

Dragon King: Brother, they are mere humans and not immortal as we are! Their skin has no beautiful scales to protect it!

Gaoliang: Since you care more about softskins than about winning, you lose. My kite wins! Pay up! You owe me another fire pool!

Dragon King, sighing: I will give you the fire pool under Golden Mountain. But an honorable dragon would not use volcano vapors in a kite championship!

Gaoliang: Ha, ha, ha! Honor is to the winner!

Dragon King: Gaoliang, you win this time, but I will challenge you again! (They exit the scene.)

Ming: What happened?

Father: We must leave quickly. I have never seen anything like it. Perhaps we have angered the dragons with our kites. (Father lets his kite go.)

Ming: Father, your kite! The strongest, most beautiful ---

Gaoliang: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Now it will really be my kite! My brother will lose his next challenge, too! (Gaoliang snatches the kite from the sky.)

Father: Watch out! There are meteors falling!

Dragon King: Gaoliang, stop knocking the stars from the sky! Take your kite and your new fire pool. Stop causing destruction!

Gaoliang: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

(A magical cloud of dragons' breath covers the stage while music plays.)

Scene 2 – The Wrights Fly to the Middle Kingdom (China)

(It is 1906, 3 years after the Wright brothers have flown for the first time. The scene takes place on a Chinese beach.)

All dragons parade in as the Dragon King's wise counselor dragon announces them:

The Queen Dragon. (She enters, stops, bows.) Hail, Dragon King.

The Prince Gaoliang Dragon. (He enters, stops, bows.) Hail, Dragon King.

The Princess Dragon. (She enters. stops, bows.) Hail, Dragon King.

The Dragon Counselor. (He enters. stops, bows.) Hail, Dragon King.

Dragon King: I have called all dragons together. We must decide what to do about a new creature. I traveled far from the Middle Kingdom. I flew over the second great ocean and saw a new kind of kite, more like a dragonfly. (An old bi-plane appears in the sky.) This creature seems part kite, part dragon, and part softskin.

Queen Dragon: What is its purpose? Can we live in harmony with it, my husband, Dragon King?

Dragon King: We must examine it; all dragons must discuss this new creature!

Dragon Queen: Let us watch the creature land.

(The dragons exit the stage. The plane lands. Orville and Wilbur Wright step out.)

Orville Wright: I'm not sure how I got here, but I had the best ride of my life!

Wilbur Wright: What a tail wind!

Dragon King: The softskin doesn't know how true that is! I SWISHED my tail and formed a wind that blew them many of days from their home!

Dragon Queen: You are so clever, Dragon King!

Orville Wright, amazed: Wilbur? Wilbur!! How did you get here? Last I saw, you were turning the propeller.

Wilbur Wright: I turned the prop and then a gust of wind flipped me onto a wing, I grabbed onto it, and the next thing I knew we were too high for me to let go.

Orville Wright: Sure, sure. You always said you wanted to ride on a wing. I'm glad you're safe. Now we better check our aeroplane.

Wilbur Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The propeller is good.

Orville Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The wings are secure.

Wilbur Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The engine runs fine.

Orville Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The canvas is not torn.

Wilbur Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The fuel tank is nearly full.

Orville Wright: Hmmm (Pause) The landing gear is perfect. (Pause)

Wilbur Wright: The dragon is fine ----DRAGON!!! AAAAaaaaahhh! (He collapses.)

Orville Wright: Dragon? What dragon?? Wh—Wh—What a DRAGON!!! (He collapses.)

Dragon King: I didn't exactly let them see me before. Quick. Dragon Counselor, give them a broth so they will forget they saw me.

Dragon Counsellor: I will turn myself into a softskin so they will not be afraid. All dragons, become invisible, but stay near!

(A magical cloud of dragons' breath covers the stage while music plays.)

Scene 3 The Wrights Explain Their Plane

(Wilbur and Orville Wright awaken to see the Dragon Counselor disguised as a 13 year old child named Wei Ni near their plane.)

Wilbur Wright: Look, Orville! We must have landed near San Francisco. Here is a child who may be Chinese! (Turning to the child) Hello!

Wei Ni: Hello.

Orville: How close are we to Chinatown?

Wei Ni: Chinatown?

Wilbur: In San Francisco. Where your family lives?

Wei Ni: Oh, where my family lives – We are very, very close! (The dragons laugh off stage.)

Orville (taking out a compass): You know, it seems to me if we are on a Californian beach, the ocean would be --- West (he pauses and turns West or left) over the water, not East (he pauses and turns right), like -- like in China!!!... but that's impossible! Ha, ha, HA – I must have bumped my head to have such an idea! China!

Wei Ni: I like this machine. What is it? Why does it fly? Why do you fly?

Wilbur: This is an aeroplane – a machine that can fly through the air.

Orville: It has a fire-breathing engine that keeps it in the sky.

Wei Ni, speaking aside to the dragons offstage: You are right, Dragon King, this aeroplane is part dragon, but it is the Western type that breathes fire, not clouds.

Wilbur: And why do we fly? Well, it may seem crazy but we fly because people said we couldn't do it.

Orville: And once we did it, we loved the sky!

Wilbur: It's the greatest feeling in the world to just take some wood and fabric –

Orville: And soar up into the air –

Wilbur: And fly!

Wei Ni: Aren't you afraid? You have only soft skin to protect your body.

Orville: No.

Wilbur: Well, maybe when we started.

Orville: Or maybe when the engine cuts out.

Wilbur: Or maybe when we crash.

Orville: It even worth being afraid sometimes, just to fly!

Wilbur: We were born to make planes and fly!

Wei Ni: So you do this for – for – fun?

Orville: Fun and adventure and ---

Wilbur: Joy and brotherly competition and ---

Orville: Planning together and sharing success in the sky --

Wilbur: Daring each other but still being best friends --

Orville: And brothers --

Wilbur: And exploring the sky. Soon we may fly important letters –

Orville: Right in the cockpit. Or deliver medicine –

Wilbur: Or strap sick people right on the wing like I did! Well, maybe not sick people –

Orville: Passengers!

Wibur: Thrill-seekers!

Orville: Our plane can do a lot of good for folks – someday.

Wilbur: So we have to get back.

Orville: Together.

Wei Ni: I'll help you. I'll get my family.

(The cloud of dragon breath covers all.)

Scene 4 The Dragons Decide

Dragon King: We must decide if the Wright brothers' aeroplane, really just a big kite, not a living dragon, should stay in the sky.

Dragon Queen: We must have harmony in the sky. The Wright brothers don't even know about us. How can we know if they will live in harmony with us?

Gaoliang: The softskins are too tender. They will crash with the least breeze and dragons will be blamed for all their failures.

Dragon Princess: But the softskins don't know us. And they love flying the way I love flying!

Dragon Counselor: There is a way to find out if we can have harmony with the softskins. We will give them a test.

Gaoliang: What kind of test?

Dragon Counselor: What kind of test do you want, Gaoliang?

Gaoliang: (Saying quietly) Let me see if I can knock them from the sky. (Louder) This is the perfect chance for the kite flying re-match our Dragon King wishes. The Dragon King will have the softskins. They must fly higher and longer than a kite that I will choose. If the softskins win in their kite, or aeroplane, or whatever they call it, they can use part of the sky.

Dragon Counselor: And if they lose?

Gaoliang: If my kite flies higher and longer, we can banish aeroplanes from the sky forever. We will be protecting softskins from horrible deaths, anyway. Maybe you want to do that now, Dragon King, since you care so much about softskins.

Dragon King: Anyone who loves flying the way a dragon loves flying must be given a chance.

Dragon Queen: The softskins must prove they are worthy.

Dragon King: Let the test begin.

Dragon Counselor: Come, family! I promised the softskins that we would help them.

(The cloud of dragon breath covers all.)

Scene 5: Can the Wright Brothers Survive Gaoliang's Test?

Wei Ni and all the dragons appear disguised as softskins.

Wei Ni: Here is my family to help you. They will help you get your aeroplane to a safe spot if you will just show them how the engine works.

Orville: I don't like the sound of that, Wilbur.

Wilbur: What harm can it do? I'll turn the propeller.

Orville: Right this way, folks. We won't be taking off so you can stand in front of the plane. Start the engine, Wilbur!

(As Wilbur starts the engine, the dragons disguised as softskins hurry to the back of the plane and begin pushing it. It slides down the hill and takes off, as Orville jumps onto the wing and holds on for dear life.)

Goaliang: Here is the best bamboo kite of all time! (His kite rises next to the plane.)

Dragon King: I'll swish my tail again to give them a strong lifting wind. (Both the plane and kite rise and seem to dance in harmony in the sky to beautiful Chinese music.)

Goaliang: Here comes the volcano vapors! (He fans ashes and cinders and small flames into the sky. They land on the wing where Wilbur is clinging. He uses one hand to clear away the sparks.)

Dragon King: Use only what is in the sky!

Goaliang: Volcano vapors are in the sky! (He flicks more toward the plane, but the Dragon King blows them away. Orville sees the sparks and flies side to side to avoid them.)

Goaling: Now for typhoon winds! (He sends spirals of wind directly at the aeroplane.)

Orville: The engine has stalled! I know you can't hear me, Orville, with all this wind, but I can't do any more. I'm going to glide. (For many tense moments, the plane careens about the sky, dashing close then far from Gaoliang's kite.)

Wilbur: I know you're trying, Wilbur!

Dragon King: It is my turn for a spin! I will flick the propeller with my tail until the engine starts again. (The Dragon King grunts and twists the plane's propeller with the tip of his tail. The plane rises again as the engine starts! Orville grabs the kite before it is nearly hit by the propeller.)

Dragon Queen and Princess: Hurrah for Wilbur and Orville!

Gaoliang: No fair! When will they have to depend on a dragon for help in the air?

Dragon King: Whenever they need me!

Gaoliang: Let's see them get over this! A blast of freezing rain that will turn instantly to ice! (The ice lands on the plane and it begins to sink, taking the kite with it.)

Orville: I'll fly lower to get the warm air currents to melt the ice. (The plane flies lower and the ice drops off the plane and the kite.)

Dragon Counselor: The test is over. (The plane and kite are still flying but go out of sight.) The Wright brothers did not fly higher or longer than the bamboo kite.

Gaoliang: I won again!

Dragon Counselor: Hear me! I will announce the winner. But height and length of time were not the only tests. The Wright brothers flew like true dragons. They stayed strong through dangers. They helped the kite when it would have been frozen and fallen. The winner is not Gaoliang, nor the Dragon King. I declare the winner to be --- the Wright brothers.

All dragons except Gaoliang: Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Dragon King: I do not care that I am not declared winner. The Wright brothers are true dragon brothers. Here is another tail wind to send the Wright brothers home! (The plane reappears with the kite still attached and then both fly away and disappear.)

Gaoliang turning red with rage: True brothers??? They stole my kite! You rigged this match! I will seek revenge!

Dragon King: Seek harmony, brother Gaoliang. Neither of us won, but neither of us lost. You and I should be harmonious brothers like Wilbur and Orville.

Gaoliang: Never! I will never allow those brothers or any others to fly! Never!

(The cloud of dragon breath covers all.)

Scene 5: Gaoliang's Revenge

Gaoliang: I will dive into my fire pool under Golden Mountain! I will gather all the fire from the burning Earth's guts to feed my anger! (Gaoliang dives into the fire pool with such force that magma splashes, the Earth begins to rumble and drums beat to show the shaking of the earth.)

On the streets of San Francisco.

A crowd of people: It's an earthquake! Earthquake! Earthquake!

The Dragon King, flying behind the Wright brothers: Oh, no, brother Gaoliang! You are destroying so many softskins! Come out of the fire pool and seek calmness! (The destruction continues with drumbeats sounding.)

Gaoliang who can no longer be seen: I have dived so deeply into the fire pool I have become one with the deepest rocks of the Earth. I will only see the sky again when these rocks rise up to become mountains.

Dragon King: I will shake the Earth to free you, brother.

Gaoliang: You will only trap yourself and might harm more softskins.

Dragon King: Do you finally care about what happens to softskins?

Gaoliang: I am learning from you and the Wright brothers. Goodbye, brother. I may see you again in the sky someday when my anger is burnt out.

Dragon King: Burn it out now!

Gaoliang: I cannot. I have all the anger of the inner Earth in me! (The Earthquake's aftershock occurs. The softskins cry out.) I know my way is wrong. I hope to have a new life as a better dragon someday.

Dragon King: I will create a good structure for the people of this city. I will use the deepest Earth rocks for it. The softskins will think it is their idea but it will be a model for how to connect people of the East and West in harmony. A little step. I must plan carefully. But someday, brother Gaoliang, instead of being beneath Golden Mountain, you will be a Golden Bridge, like our harmonious Chinese gates guarding each entrance to each city.

Gaoliang: A Golden Gate Bridge?

Dragon King: A gateway of peace. Goodbye, brother. I have much work to do to repair your damage to the softskins.

Dragon Counselor: And many years later, such a bridge was built – a golden gate bridge, the color of Gaoliang's scales, fiery orange-red. Some see the bridge as red and some as golden. People look at the same things but see many truths. The bridge links the East and West in an undulating form that some say is the most beautiful bridge in the world. And others say it is the most beautiful and useful of all dragons.

The End. (Music)

Finale

Full cast takes a bow with his or her shadow puppet. Each is named with his/her puppet part and each takes an individual bow. Props, lighting, and camera crew also take bows.

Works Cited and Related Readings

Chungen, Liu. Chinese Kites. Foreign Language Press, Beijing. 2001.

Stories of Chinese Wisdom. Foreign Language Press, Beijing, 2007.

Sanders, Tao Tao Liu. *Dragons, Gods and Spirits*. Peter Bedrick Books, New York. 1980.

Yep, Laurence. *Dragonwings and Related Readings*. McDougal Littell, Boston, 200?. This is part of McDougal Littell's Literature Connections series which includes a novel and about five or six related readings to extend understanding of the novel. The 'related readings' poem "Crazy Boys" featuring the Wright brothers gives a humorous view to the many obstacles they overcame. *Dragonwings* by Yep is an excellent book to teach to older adolescent readers in middle school. It is rich with Chinese culture and also problems of assimilation by Chinese immigrants into a xenophobic 19th century American culture. With current issues of immigration, the novel can be used across the curriculum and be a starting point for discussions about problems that still exist in American culture.