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Conversations with Yep and Soentpiet **Negotiating between cultures: Establishing a multicultural identity through writing and illustrating**

LAURENCE YEP, AUTHOR

Laurence Yep has written for young people in a variety of genres. His numerous works include science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, contemporary fiction, poetry, plays, and folktales. He began his writing career at age eighteen while he was a student at Marquette University. His first published story appeared in a science fiction magazine and paid him a penny a word. Since then, he has garnered an impressive list of awards for his writings, including the IRA's Children's Book Award for *Dragonwings* and two Newbery Honor Awards for *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate*. In his autobiography, *The Lost Garden*, he writes, "All those years I had been trying to solve puzzles when the biggest puzzle had been myself" (Yep, 1996, p. 102). A third generation Chinese American, Yep spent his childhood in San Francisco. There he "experienced at least two different San Franciscos" (Johnson-Feelings, 1995, p. 9).

Outside of Chinatown, his parents owned and operated a mom and pop grocery store and the family lived in the apartment over the store. The neighborhood was predominantly African American. He attended St. Mary's Grammar School, near Chinatown, which had been a mission to convert Chinese Americans into Christianity (Yep, 1996, p.52). The older members of his family were not Christians, and the only connection he had with

their traditional celebrations was the firecrackers that he could shoot off at New Year's. His immediate family did not speak Chinese at home. He was resentful when St. Mary's was transformed from a "regular" school into a Chinese School and he was forced to learn Chinese, which was to him a foreign language.

Though he may not have thought of himself as Chinese, other children clearly saw him as Asian.

I remember a group of children who came down the block, both black and white. They were pretending to be soldiers in World War II. Suddenly they began making me a target, assuming that I was Japanese. Saul came along and chased them off; but I realized that I was the neighborhood's all-purpose Asian ... It made me feel like an outsider more than ever in my own neighborhood (Yep, 1996, 38).

Those who taunted him were not educated enough to know or to care that there are different Asian cultures. At the same time, Yep was so much a part of American culture that he did not readily recognize the distorted images of his own ethnic community. In another instance, he recalled watching a cartoon in which the protagonist had a conflict with Chinese laundry men. The characters clad in black pajamas with exaggerated slanted eyes did not seem real, "I remember putting my fingers