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# Dragonwings




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GOLDEN MOUNTAIN  
CHRONICLES: 1903

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*To my mother and father,  
to whom I owe a debt  
that would last through several lives*



Thirty years ago, I began writing stories about one family, the Youngs of Three Willows Village, and their many friends. In those pages, I tried to chronicle their ongoing love affair with the Land of the Golden Mountain, or America—a love that has lasted over one hundred fifty years.

The first Youngs came to the Golden Mountain because they had no choice: It was the only way for their families in China to survive (*The Serpent's Children* and *Mountain Light*). However, their children realized that the Golden Mountain was—despite hardship and death—their destiny (*Dragon's Gate*). And so the third generation was actually born upon the Golden Mountain, sinking their roots inextricably into American soil—despite the attempts of hostile American mobs to tear up those roots (*The Traitor*).

The Youngs and their friends stayed even when the many rural Chinatowns that had once covered the West were destroyed and Chinese America itself had shrunk to a few small enclaves in cities like San Francisco. However, that didn't stop a new generation from immersing itself in American thought and technology in order to achieve its dreams (*Dragonwings*).

More than everything else, the Youngs and their friends were adaptable, even organizing their own

professional basketball team to leave San Francisco's Chinatown and barnstorm across the country (*The Red Warrior*). However, some went too far and became so American that they lost track of the Chinese part of their identity and had to discover it again (*Child of the Owl*). And they changed once more when they discovered that the attitudes that had enabled them to survive over a hundred years of hardships and dangers no longer worked (*Sea Glass*).

Ultimately, the latest generation—which is only half-Chinese—faces the greatest challenge, for it has to redefine what it is to be a Chinese American (*Thief of Hearts*).

It has been my privilege to write about seven generations of the Young family and their friends, and how they have transformed the Golden Mountain and been transformed in turn. These books represent my version of Chinese America—in its tears and its laughter, its hungers and its fears, and in all its hopes and dreams.





Ch'ien, the first hexagram of the *Book of Changes*

"The dragon takes wing through the sky.  
Superior people bestir themselves to action."

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## CHAPTER | I



### The Land of the Demons

(February–March, 1903)

Ever since I can remember, I had wanted to know about the Land of the Golden Mountain, but my mother had never wanted to talk about it. All I knew was that a few months before I was born, my father had left our home in the Middle Kingdom, or *China*, as the white demons call it, and traveled over the sea to work in the demon land. There was plenty of money to be made among the demons, but it was also dangerous. My own grandfather had been lynched about thirty years before by a mob of white demons almost the moment he had set foot on their shores.

Mother usually said she was too busy to answer my questions. It was a fact that she was overworked, for Grandmother was too old to help her with the heavy work, and she had to try to do both her own work and



Father's on our small farm. The rice had to be grown from seeds, and the seedlings transplanted to the paddies, and the paddies tended and harvested. Besides this, she always had to keep one eye on our very active pig to keep him from rooting in our small vegetable patch. She also had to watch our three chickens, who loved to wander away from our farm.

Any time I brought up the subject of the Golden Mountain, Mother suddenly found something going wrong on our farm. Maybe some seedlings had not been planted into their underwater beds properly, or perhaps our pig was eating the wrong kind of garbage, or maybe one of our chickens was dirtying our doorway. She always had some good excuse for not talking about the Golden Mountain. I knew she was afraid of the place, because every chance we got, she would take me into the small temple in our village and we would pray for Father's safety, though she would never tell me what she was afraid of. It was a small satisfaction to her that our prayers had worked so far. Mother was never stingy about burning incense for Father.

I was curious about the Land of the Golden Mountain mainly because my father was there. I had, of course, never seen my father. And we could not go to live with him for two reasons. For one thing, the

white demons would not let wives join their husbands on the Golden Mountain because they did not want us settling there permanently. And for another thing, our own clans discouraged wives from leaving because it would mean an end to the money the husbands sent home to their families—money which was then spent in the Middle Kingdom. The result was that the wives stayed in the villages, seeing their husbands every five years or so if they were lucky—though sometimes there were longer separations, as with Mother and Father.

We had heavy debts to pay off, including the cost of Father's ticket. And Mother and Grandmother had decided to invest the money Father sent to us in buying more land and livestock. At any rate, there was no money to spare for Father's visit back home. But my mother never complained about the hard work or the loneliness. As she said, we were the people of the Tang, by which she meant we were a tough, hardy, patient race. (We did not call ourselves *Chinese*, but the people of the Tang, after that famous dynasty that had helped settle our area some eleven hundred years ago. It would be the same as if an *English* demon called himself a man of the *Tudors*, the dynasty of *Henry VIII* and of *Elizabeth I*—though demon names sound so drab compared to ours.)



But sometimes Mother's patience wore thin. It usually happened when we walked over to the small side room in the Temple, where classes were also held. Like many other people, Mother and Grandmother could neither read nor write; but for a small fee, the village schoolmaster would read one of Father's weekly letters to us or write a letter at our dictation. In the evening after dinner, we would join the line of people who had a husband or brothers or sons overseas. There we would wait until it was our turn to go inside the Temple, and Mother would nervously turn the letter over and over again in her hands until Grandmother would tell her she was going to wear out the letter before we could read it.

To tell the truth, I knew as little about my father as I knew about the Land of the Golden Mountain. But Mother made sure that I knew at least one important thing about him: He was a maker of the most marvelous kites. Everyone in the village said he was a master of his craft, and his kites were often treasured by their owners like family heirlooms. As soon as I was big enough to hold the string, Mother took me out to the hill near our village where we could fly one of Father's kites. Just the two of us would go.

But you won't appreciate my father's skill if you



think flying a kite—any kind of a kite—is just putting a bunch of paper and sticks up into the air. I remember the first time we went to fly a kite. There was nothing like the thrill when my kite first leaped up out of Mother's hands into the air. Then she showed me how to pull and tug and guide the kite into the winds. And when the winds caught the kite, it shot upward. She told me then how the string in my hand was like a leash and the kite was like a hound that I had sent hunting, to flush a sunbeam or a stray phoenix out of the clouds.

But then she warned me that I had to stay alert, because sometimes the winds would try to tear the kite from my hand and I would have to hold on; or maybe the winds would try to drop my kite so it would smash to the ground. In that case, I would have to hurry up and reel in the slack and pull and steer the kite back into the winds until, just to get rid of the nuisance, the winds would take my kite where I wanted it to go.

I failed miserably the first times I tried to fly the kite, but Mother would not let me give up; and eventually I got quick enough and strong enough and smart enough so that my kite would be flying far overhead—so far away that I would lose sight of the string I had attached to the kite, and the kite would seem to

be some colored patch of rainbow that was following me about. And then Mother would say that she was sure the kite was flying so high that the Jade Emperor, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, could admire my kite from his palace window. That was what flying a kite was all about.

And of course, Father's kites were the most truly balanced and the strongest and yet the most beautiful. In fact, his kites practically flew themselves. At first Mother only let me use Father's ordinary kites. He had made some special kites just before he left, when he knew my mother was pregnant; but Mother said I could not fly those kites until I was older and wiser—that is, when I turned eight. (The Tang people count the first nine months the mother carries the baby as the baby's first year. By demon reckoning, I was only seven.) I can't say who was prouder, my mother or I, when I finally managed to fly Father's special kites.

One was a sharply climbing swallow kite that was hard to get up, but there was nothing as fast as the swallow once it was up. The swallow swooped down with the slightest flick of the wrist or soared skyward with the tiniest jerk of the string. There was a large, long caterpillar kite, too, that took even longer to get up than the swallow, but once it was in the sky, it would



stay forever, crawling back and forth over the clouds.

But the best thing about flying any of the kites was what it did for Mother. She would throw off all her cares and become young again, running with me or taking a turn at flying the kite. She would chatter on about the things that she and Father used to do when they were young, for they had both grown up here. She taught me everything that Father had ever shown her about flying kites. She said that one of the first things he would want to see when he returned home for a visit was how well I could fly them. But even at these moments, Mother would never speak of the Golden Mountain.

But I felt that since I was now eight and had mastered the hardest of Father's kites to fly, I was also old enough to get some answers. Mother still would not talk about the Golden Mountain, and in fact got mad at me. Grandmother felt sorry for me then, and she tried to tell me, among other things, why we called *America* the Land of the Golden Mountain. "It's because there's a big mountain there," she said. "The mountain's a thousand miles high and three thousand miles wide, and all a man has to do is wait until the sun warms the mountain and then scoop the gold into big buckets."



I squirmed on the bench. "Then why doesn't Father go get the gold instead of washing clothes?"

Grandmother shook her head. "It's because of the demons, you see. They roam the mountain up and down, and they beat up any of our men who try to get the gold. The demons use clubs as big as trees, and they kick them and do worse things. But if you do the work they tell you to do, then they let you take a little pinch of gold."

"Is that what happened to Grandfather? Did the demons catch him when he was trying to sneak some of the gold into his pockets?"

Grandmother sighed. She had been married to Grandfather only a year before he had left to make his fortune. "Perhaps, but," she added meaningfully, "the demons would just as soon beat up the Tang people for no good reason."

I nodded in understanding when Grandmother spoke of senseless beatings, for I had seen some of the other "guests" who had returned. There was Crook Arm, whose left arm dangled down uselessly by his side with two of his fingers missing. And there were other men whose backs were stooped, their fingers gnarled and their faces worn and tired as old masks (I did not know at the time that this was simply all from

a life of hard work; I thought that torture had done this to them). Many of them had the lung disease—*tuberculosis* was the demon word—and they hacked and spat constantly. Bit by bit they coughed up their broken lungs. Everyone in the village knew they had not long to live. Still more returned in their coffins, a silent testimony to the harshness of their demon “hosts.”

I did not realize that I would find out at firsthand about the Golden Mountain. One day, shortly after my ninth birthday (or eighth, as the demons count such things) we had a visitor, our cousin Hand Clap. He was in his fifties and lively as a cricket. He was a cousin because we had the same family name of Lee, though we had never seen him before. He said he had worked in the same store with my father and Uncle Bright Star overseas. Hand Clap obviously enjoyed the respect we gave him. Over tea, he told us he had decided to go back to the Land of the Golden Mountain and work a few more years while he still could. As he said, his two unmarried daughters were so ugly that they needed big dowries. But we knew he was going back for another reason.

Things had not remained the same in his village as he remembered them. You would say something



about a family or a village in the district, and he would say that was nothing and compare it to something bigger or better that he had seen in his youth. The silk was finer, the air cleaner, the rice sweeter, the fields more fertile, the girls prettier, the boys stronger when he was a young man. And then, too, when he spoke of his home life, he said there were too many women around and too much fussing. Though he had been married since he was sixteen, he had spent nearly thirty years of his marriage apart from his wife. On the other hand, his face lit up whenever he spoke of the good things about living on the Golden Mountain—for the Tang people had learned to have their own good times there.

Mother, of course, asked Hand Clap to take a small gift over to Father.

"I think I've come for a much bigger gift," he said, and handed us a letter from my father. "Make sure that it's your husband's hand," he said.

Mother nodded. Grandmother grunted that it was her son's writing all right. Then Hand Clap picked up the letter and began to read it.

In his letter, my father said that he and Uncle Bright Star thought it was time for me to cross the sea. I don't remember too much of what happened after



that. I think that Mother said I was too young and Grandmother shouted that she had already lost a husband to the demons. Then her son had left her, and now she was about to lose her only grandson. Through all of this, Hand Clap sat unperturbed.

I sat bolt upright in my chair as Hand Clap spoke. "His father wants him to come over now with me. He'll learn the demon tongue better when he's young."

"But the demons will beat Moon Shadow," Mother protested.

"They don't do that so much anymore." Hand Clap carefully wiped his sticky fingers on his tunic sleeve. "And they wouldn't do it to a child. Even the demons have some principles."

Grandmother leaned forward on her cane. "And what if there are some lawless ones? They might not know any better and beat him."

"Not while I and the Company are around," Hand Clap said. "And there are always the fighting brotherhoods."

"Big talk," Grandmother grunted. "You're like the blind man who catches sparrows and calls them phoenixes."

"And besides," Mother insisted, "Shadow doesn't want to go yet."



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 of him. 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.

Mother had talked quite a bit about him and so had Grandmother; but that, too, was not the same. They were speaking about a young man who had lived in the Middle Kingdom, not a man who had endured the hardships and loneliness of living in the demon land. I knew he made kites; but as marvelous as his kites were, he and I could not spend the rest of our lives flying kites. I was afraid of the Golden Mountain, and yet my father, who lived there, wanted me to join him. I only knew that there was a certain rightness in life—the feeling you got when you did something the way you knew you should. I owed it to Father to obey him in everything—even if it meant going to such a fearful place as the Golden Mountain. And really, how really frightening could it be if Hand Clap wanted to go back? I turned to Mother and Grandmother. "I want to go," I said.

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And that was that. I won't go through the tearful good-byes, or the boat ride on the river to Canton, the port city, or the first few days on the demon boat. I was young and I was homesick and I was frightened—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. Perhaps I should explain here that the Tang word for demon can mean many kinds of supernatural beings. A demon can be the ghost of a dead person, but he can also be a supernatural creature who can use his great powers for good as well as for evil, just like the dragons. It is much trickier to deal with a demon of the Middle Kingdom than an *American devil*, because you always know that the *American devil* means you harm.

I was frightened, and Hand Clap did nothing to ease my fear. One fellow passenger remembered a story about demon sailors who had fattened up their Tang passengers. The Tang people had thought it was a good deal till they were marched off the boat into a butcher's shop. And then Hand Clap said that was nothing, and went on to talk about a ship of tiger demons who plied their trade between Canton and Hell, delivering the Tang men for work there. Hand Clap cared little about the truth, and loved to let his



imagination run wild. He told us about how the sailors had slept upside down on top of their heads with knives between their teeth, and so on.

So I could not understand his excitement when we neared the land of the demons. To my disappointment, I only saw a brown smudge on the horizon—as the Middle Kingdom had looked from a distance. There was no glittering mound of gold to be seen. And then Hand Clap took me below to the hold to rehearse my story for the customs demons. It was the one bit of practical advice I ever got from Hand Clap. When I came to the customs demons, I was to say I was eight, in the demon fashion, instead of nine as I truly was. I was to use my name in the wrong order, putting my family name after my personal name as the demons did. Otherwise the demons would write down the last word they heard, so that I would be called *Mister Shadow* instead of *Mister Lee*. If I made any of those mistakes, I might not be allowed to land as the son of my father.

There was reason to worry, too, for just a few years ago, the demons had broken their own laws and turned away over twenty thousand of their former guests who had expected to be readmitted. This figure does not even reflect the large number of Tang men who could



not get into the country for the first time. The demons, it seemed, were determined to cut down on the number of Tang people living on the Golden Mountain.

The demons kept us locked inside a long, two-story warehouse for a week before it was our turn to be questioned. I don't like to think about it too much. We were kept on the bottom story, where we slept and ate off the floors. All the time, we smelled the sewage and the bilge of the bay—besides which there was no way to bathe there, so after the long boat voyage, we were rather a fragrant group on our own.

Finally, though, when the demons called me for questioning, I found they already had a big bunch of papers on my father. Inside it was the record of his first interview, which ran for some one hundred and fifty pages. They spent an hour looking at it and then asking me questions about my village and kinsmen. They tried to trip me up so they could prove I was not my father's son, but they did not succeed.

Finally even the demons had to admit that I was who I claimed to be. Then they made me strip naked and took my measurements and poked me all around, and they wrote down all that information on a sheet of paper so that if I ever left their country, no one could sneak back in my place. They put that sheet into a new



bunch of papers, which were on me. They also added the notes of our interview to that pile.

I only got my first close look at the land of the Golden Mountain when Hand Clap and I were finally released and we stood together before the open doorway leading out of the warehouse where all the immigrants were taken. I saw plenty of hills, but not one golden one. And all the demon houses looked so strange. They were boxlike in shape, with no courtyards inside them, as if the demons hated fresh air but liked being shut up in something like a trunk. The houses had almost no ornamentation and were painted in dull colors—when they were painted at all. The little boxlike houses seemed so drab to me that I even felt sorry for the demons who lived in them, for they lived like prisoners without knowing they were in a prison.

Hand Clap had already sent word to Father by a friend who had been ahead of us in line and who had been released the day before, so we knew Father and the others would be waiting. I saw all the Tang men standing at the foot of the pier before the warehouse. I clutched my wooden box to my chest. It was about the length of my arm and about a third that in width; and it had a cunning metal clasp with a ring at the end.

I would hook my finger into the ring and pull it up and the lid would open almost noiselessly. This was for my valuables. I played with the catch now nervously, studying the men.

They were all dressed alike, in either denim jackets or the big, black loose cotton tunics that reached to their hips and had wide, winglike sleeves. They also wore heavy blue demon trousers of denim. Some of them wore the cotton slipperlike shoes of the Tang men, while others wore demon boots. They all wore demon hats, with the crowns pushed up full and high and the brims down flat. I found myself wondering which of them were really Tang men and which might be demons in disguise.

Hand Clap waved toward one knot of men. "That's Uncle Bright Star." Hand Clap pointed at a fat, old man. He pointed out the rest of our Company. I heard him say that they must not have brought the wagon because of the crowds down here and the long wait for us. "And that tall man there," Hand Clap finished, looking at me, "that's your father."

I started to run. The others said hello as I went past them but I ignored them. I held my box so tightly against my chest that it hurt to breathe. Then I looked up at the tall man who stood over me. He was nearly



five foot eight, which was tall for a Tang man in those days. He had a long, sharp face with almost elfin eyes.

He was my father and yet he was a stranger to me. I had never seen him.

I thought to myself, How can we ever speak to one another? He's as strange to me as a demon.

And then my father smiled. "Hello, boy," he said. He knelt down on the pier and held out his arms. "I've waited a long time to do this. Too long."

And I dropped my box and ran into his arms. I had arrived.