

Dragonwings

By Laurence Yep

Chapter One

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.