



Dragonwings

by Laurence Yep (248 pages)

Laurence Yep's Newbery Honor book offers insights into the lives of Chinese-Americans in early 20th century California. The story begins as eight-year-old Moon Shadow Lee journeys across the Pacific to join his proud and clever father at the family-owned laundry in San Francisco. The boy recounts their problems with prejudice, as well as the kindness of uncles and cousins. Father and son must leave the protection of the family to move out of Chinatown, but they find refuge with a generous and friendly landlady. Once they have successfully established a repair business, they turn their attention to making a flying machine. Yep draws heavily on his own heritage, but also includes figures such as Teddy Roosevelt and the Wright Brothers, and historic events such as the San Francisco Earthquake. The result is a heartwarming story set in a familiar time and place, but told from a new perspective.

THE LAND OF THE 1 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.

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 sting 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

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 dis-

couraged 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

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 first hand 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 daugh-

ters 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.

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.