

The Red Pencil

World-building in Historical Fiction

CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Albert A. Dalia's Dream of the Dragon Pool: A Daoist Quest.



World-building, often associated with fantasy and science fiction, may also apply to historical fiction, for novelists recreate places that no longer exist. Aside from knowing what that world physically looked like, we research religions, traditions, and daily life so our characters realistically fit the time period in which they live. To do this we “sweat the small stuff” as Elizabeth Crook puts it.¹ We immerse ourselves in the period so that when we write our tale, we weave into it the details that “create a sense of background ‘texture’”² that whisks the reader back to whatever place and time the story concerns. The earlier we place our story, the more difficult that becomes, but Albert Dalia succeeds in recreating 8th-century China during the Tang dynasty in *Dream of the Dragon Pool*.³

This story centers on Li Bo⁴, a poet who “wrote a good deal about drinking, about encountering Daoist immortals, whom he insisted he had met personally, and basically his own activities as a knight errant . . . where he supposedly went about with a sword in hand righting wrongs throughout the Chinese empire.”⁵ Dalia admits that there are “large missing sections from Li Bo’s recorded life . . . after an execution order was commuted to death exile . . . to a far southwestern region of China, and he did travel up the Yangtze visiting friends on his way to exile. By the time he reached Mt. Wu, the order was rescinded and he returned to central China.” While there are no accounts of this journey through the Three Gorges, Albert did find “a 12th century travel diary of a Chinese official who took the same trip.”⁶

Dream of the Dragon Pool is set during this odyssey, which includes a visit to the Dream Temple, where Li Bo hopes to recapture his creative muse. There he dreams of an old woman who gives him a quest to complete.

“Remember, you are the source and final answer to your questions,” she says as she reaches down and raises a sword in its scabbard. It looks rather ordinary. She is handing it to me.

“Here, take this. Hold on to it and protect it, for this sword will guide you to the answer you seek. Forsake it and all will be lost. But I must have something in exchange for it.”

I have nothing with me. Furthermore, what do I want with a sword? Will I be called upon to defend myself with this weapon? I already have a weapon. See here, up my sleeve and under my left forearm, a long dagger, finest Damascus steel from Persia . . .

“I will take your fan in return for this sword,” she smiled and raised her finger. My fan has flown out of my waistband and into her hand! Hey, that has the Emperor’s calligraphy on it, a special gift to me for . . . I have only that from my years at Court and now even this token is gone.

“If you succeed, you will get it back at the proper time. This sword is no mere piece of iron like that thing strapped to your forearm. It is the famed Dragon Pool Sword. But heed my words well: Though you now possess it, only a pure heart can control it.”

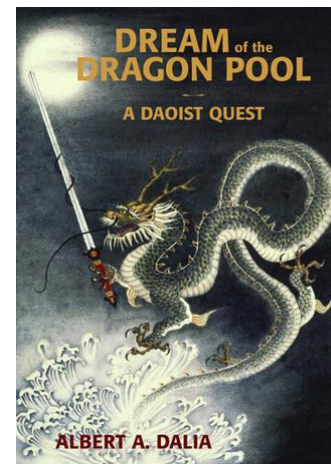
But don’t you understand, I came here for answers, not weapons? My life has been a failure and I am near the end of it, condemned to death in a foreign

place. It is not death that I fear. It is not knowing my own worth. I am here to seek that answer. She is gone . . . only the mist lingers – perhaps, this is the answer . . .

This early draft incorporates little of Chinese traditions, with the exceptions of the old woman and the sword. The old woman isn't who she appears to be. "Chinese tales like to have the gods or spirits show up in unlikely guises to test the sincerity of the adept." She takes his fan "to prove . . . she had indeed given him the sword because in her 'true' form she would not resemble the old hag he had initially met. Also, she was trying to show him that his most prized possession – a fan signed by the emperor – was only a mere token to 'The Perfected.'"

"Swords are key symbols in Chinese history and mythology . . . They are power symbols. The Dragon Pool Sword is a *jian* – a double-edged straight sword – the sword a 'gentleman' wields . . ." At the time Dalia named this sword, he was bicycling "to a mountain pond in Taiwan when [he] realized that dragons live in the bottom of such ponds, and so was born the idea of the Dragon Pool Sword." He thought it an original name until he did some research and discovered that legends tell of such a weapon. "Then I discovered that the name engraved on the sword my Tai Chi teacher in Beijing helped me purchase was 'The Dragon Pool Sword.'"

How did Dalia go about weaving Chinese traditions into his story? Immersion in the culture and history was something he had already done. "[T]he Vietnam War got me to notice China and it was my interest in Buddhism that got me to study China. I became and remain fascinated with *Chan* (Japanese, *Zen*) Buddhism. My masters degrees and Ph.D. all focus on the history of that school of Chinese Buddhism. But to get there, my professors made me first take on Chinese and Japanese history!" He also lived in a Chinese Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, taught writing at two universities, and "studied with a string of Buddhist and martial arts masters in Taiwan, Beijing, and Honolulu . . ." But it was "a wonderful former literary agent who, to better understand what I had written, brought in an advisor steeped in the fantasy genre. . . . [S]he urged my agent to get me to tell more about the origins of the Dragon Pool Sword." He heeded that advice.



The old woman reaches down and picks up a sword in its scabbard, "Good. This is the famous Dragon Pool Sword. Your quest is to deliver it to the Rain Goddess on this twelve-peaked mountain where we are meeting. I must, however, warn you, that in addition to those residents from both the Yin and Yang realms who will seek the sword once it reappears in the Yang realm, this task is also fraught with unseen dangers. The Dragon Pool Sword embodies immense power; only the purest hearts are capable of wielding it."

And if I fail?

"Ha, you are not so sure of yourself! If you fail, not only will you never attain Immortality, you will live to see this dynasty collapse and untold suffering visited on the inhabitants of this empire. For if pure evil gains the sword, a thousand years of suffering will visit this land. Do you still accept this quest?" She held out the sheathed sword.

As I no longer possess my poetic vision, I stand before the sword crippled in spirit. At least if I go away without the sword, only I am doomed and the rest of humanity is assured a future.

"Do not underestimate the power of your verse, Poet. It has reached Heaven and Heaven is assured a future.

Like a line of new verse spontaneously flashing into my mind, my hand reaches out for the sword and grasps it. But she does not let it go.

"Before I can release the Dragon Pool Sword, you must know its origins, for this is no mere scrap of iron formed by human sinew and bone, cooled by blood or other putrid liquid, and scraped sharp. The

Dragon Pool Sword is the material emanation of an adept whose cultivation is so pure, so refined that you may only know her name once you have proved yourself equal to this quest.”

I am awe-struck that such an instrument be entrusted to me.

“You will be struck dumb when you hear how this great adept refined her human form into that of a perfected astral being. Listen closely, Li Bo, few humans have had the privilege to know the history of the Dragon Pool Sword. The adept who formed the sword had desired from birth to attain the refinement of the Perfected. She hid among distant mountains, advancing in the various purifications, gradually mastering the art of ingesting light and drinking auroras.”

Breathing light! Can this be?

“Ha! How little you know, Li Bo. The teachings of the Upper Clarity Heavens are beyond those of the gross world, where the refinement of breath is the highest practice. In the Upper Heavens, light is the substance of refinement. The Perfected have mastered the techniques of refining themselves into pure beings of light, astral light – they ingest sun, moon, and starlight. And so our adept continued her quest, until the Sage Lords of the Upper Heavens took notice of her shining white jade form and arrived on earth to further instruct her. They provided her with the teachings, talismans, secret names, and seals that would allow her to travel into the Heavens. Her goal was to gain audience with the Sage Lord of the Grand Pivot.”

My eyes are being drawn upward, as if I were taking this trip with the adept. Look! Directly above this spot, the diamond lights of the Dipper’s seven stars, and at the handle’s end the radiant Pole Star, the Grand Pivot! As I rise, the starlight is changing. I can hear it! A heavenly melody; and smell it: such a fragrance! I am bathed in a purple glow. Light flows into my mouth.

“Yes, Li Bo, the goal of her quest is to have her accomplishment, her transformation into a star being, confirmed by the Sage Lord who resides in the Grand Pivot, around which the universe turns. As the handle of the Dipper sweeps through space, the four seasons change, Yin and Yang cycle, and the Elemental Forces of earth, fire, metal, wood, and water pass through their transformations. Good and evil are distinguished by the sweep of the Dipper’s handle as it dispenses happiness and hardship.”

Can such a force be mastered by mere mortals?

“Mortals have within them the potential of the Perfected. Our adept knew this, and armed with her cultivation and teachings from the Sage Lords, mounted the Heavens and approached the Dipper seeking audiences with its nine star lords.”

Nine? But there are only seven . . .

“To mortal eyes on earth, there are only seven stars; but to the refined vision of the Perfected, they see the two secret soul stars that orbit the Dipper and protect it. However, our adept must first confront the Nine Empresses of the Great Yin, the female star beings who protect the Dipper with a field of black Yin light. If the adept does not have the proper dragon talismans, tiger insignias, special incantations, mystic seals, and adequate levels of attainment, these star ladies will imprison the mortal adept and make her lose her reason by exposing her to the paradoxes of a universe in reverse.”

I am approaching the Dipper! Below me lies the earth!

“Have no fear, Li Bo, our adept’s cultivation is well grounded, and she is welcomed by the nine ladies and escorted to each of the star palaces of the nine Dipper stars. She meets with their Sage Lords and receives further instructions. Finally, she stands at Heaven’s Gate ready to make the jump to the Heavenly Pivot and the audience with the Sage Lord of the Pole Star.”

Before me looms a great glowing gate, bathed in the most radiant purple starlight. Around me is the black void of space.

*“She is met by the Sage Lord’s attendants and ushered into his most august presence. They commune and her attainment as one of the Perfected is confirmed, upon which, a splendid beam of purple starlight issues forth from her forehead and shoots down to Mount Mao, the earthly home of the Upper Clarity teachings. There it burrows deep into the mountain summit, where a glowing stone is later brought to the surface. On that night, the stars of the Dipper do not shine forth. On the radiant stone are the words, **Dragon Pool Sword**, and within it lay this sword that I now release to you.”*

A blinding purple light has surged throughout my body; the universe pivots around me!

“To seal our exchange, I must have something in return.”

I have nothing. She is smiling and raises her finger.

I will take your fan in return for this sword.

My fan flies out of my waistband and into her hand!

Ai-yah! that has the Emperor’s calligraphy on it, a special gift to me....I have only that from my years at Court and now even this token is gone!

“You still do not understand what you have been granted. Perhaps the quest will advance your understanding. Nevertheless, you will not need a silly fan if you fail. Heed my words well: Though you now possess the Dragon Pool Sword, only a pure heart can use it.”

Surely, she can see the future. Will I succeed? What if I change my mind? Perhaps I have been too hasty . . . And this pure heart she speaks about? She is gone . . . only the mist, which now has a purple tinge to it, lingers . . .

The published passage incorporates a wealth of Chinese traditions. The Upper Clarity Heavens is “a heavenly level found in the teachings of Supreme (or Upper) Clarity Daoism” around the 5th century A.D. The Sage Lords are “the mythical founders of Chinese culture”, while the Grand Pivot “is the North Star . . . The Daoists believe that the stars are homes of the celestial spirits. These heavenly patterns and spirits enjoyed a mirror reflection in our minds and meditators would ‘pace the void’ [or] walk among the stars in their meditations. Thus the Lord of the Grand Pivot is the spirit of the North or Pole Star. The Big Dipper was an important constellation in Daoist religion, in Chinese religion in general and an ancient symbol. The Daoists claimed . . . there were actually nine stars in the Dipper.” The Nine Empresses of the Great Yin “are the female star deities that protect and surround the Dipper casting a sacred darkness that throws the adept into a totally upside-down situation – in other words, one more test for the adept to overcome in their cultivation of the Way.”

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Albert as a writer is that his story isn’t told in a traditional Western style. An adaptation “of a Chinese literary genre,” *wuxia* is “a traditional Chinese storytelling form defined by two basic elements: *wu* and *xia*. *Wu* pertains to all things martial, such as weapons (especially the sword as a symbol of nobility and valor), fighting techniques, and martial culture. *Xia* is usually translated as ‘chivalric hero.’ *Xia* refers to those men and women who acted in a subjective, heroic manner to right injustice. Their sense/code/ethic of chivalry involved the following values: altruism, justice/appropriateness, individual freedom, personal loyalty, honour and fame, generosity and contempt for wealth, and reciprocity.

“This genre normally focuses on action (especially the action of the human form) and adventure and takes place in an imaginary world of these heroes known as the *jiang-hu* (literally, ‘rivers and lakes’; also ‘cultural-imaginary world’) which has been defined as ‘the self-contained and historically sanctioned world of martial arts.’ It is a world that accepts the fantastic as normal at certain levels of skillful physical and mental attainment.”

In answer to a question I posed about spicing a historical novel with traditions and fantasy, Albert wrote, “China’s traditions give me a big leg up on the fantasy, since its culture is so rich in what we call ‘fantasy.’ And since it is a major part of medieval Chinese life – even now in contemporary China – it is already combined – IF you know how to understand it!”⁷

Once you venture within the pages of *The Dragon Pool Sword*, you enter another world in the distant past that is far different from our world today. Perhaps Li Bo explains it best:

I’ve been asked the reason for dwelling in blue-green mountains.

I laugh without answering, heart at ease.

In the mountains, peach blossoms on flowing waters – mysteriously vanish.

There is another Reality – not of the human realm.

For those who would like to learn more about *wuxia*, Li Bo, and the Tang dynasty, Albert invites you to visit his blogs: <http://thedragongateinn.com/pblog/>, for a discussion of *wuxia* literary history, and <http://writers-tao.blogspot.com/>, for his views on fiction writing and the *wuxia* genre. To learn more about him and to read an excerpt of *Dream of the Dragon Pool: A Daoist Quest* visit www.aadalia.com. His “wonderful artist wife,” Jinghua Gao Dalia, created the novel’s cover art and the painting on his website. If you’d like to learn more about her artwork, please visit www.brushmagic.blogspot.com.

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Crook. “Seven Rules for Writing Historical Fiction,” (Elizabeth Crook), http://www.elizabethcrookbooks.com/articles/historical_fiction.htm (accessed 15 July 2009).
2. Sue Peabody. “Reading and Writing Historical Fiction,” (Sue Peabody, Ph.D.), <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/histfict.html> (accessed 15 July 2009).
3. Viviane Crystal reviewed this book in the May 2007 issue of *Historical Novels Review*.
4. Variant spellings of this poet’s name are Li Po and Li Bai. As Albert Dalia explains, “There are two basic romanizations for Chinese in scholarly use today: the traditional Wade-Giles Romanization (Li Po), which is rapidly fading from use, and the style officially adopted by the People’s Republic of China, Pinyin (Li Bo and Li Bai). The difference between Li Bo and Li Bai is the former is the more classical pronunciation of the same characters and the latter is the more common/colloquial pronunciation. I prefer the more classical pronunciation as it gives a little more authentic feel to the name, even though Tang Chinese pronunciation was different than present day pronunciation.”
5. Paul Rouzer. “Li Bo’s Poetic Style,” (Asian Topics), <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/eacp/asiasite/topics/index.html?topic=LiBo+subtopic=Style> (accessed 15 July 2009). Dr. Rouzer is an assistant professor of Chinese Literature at Columbia University and a friend of Albert Dalia’s.
6. Albert A. Dalia, “Conjuring the Other: Chinese Heroic Fiction,” (Octavia, her domain), <http://www.octavia.net/text/albertdalia.htm> (accessed 15 July 2009).
7. The fantasy elements that appear in the book can also be described as what is often called China’s Otherworld, a place where spirits, ghosts, and gods are an integral part of daily life.