

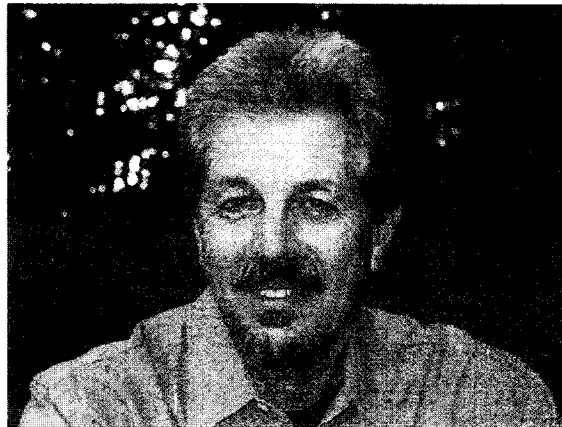
THE RED PENCIL

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 Bo,⁴ 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 Mr. Wu, the order was rescinded and he returned to central China.” While there are no accounts of this journey through the Three Gorges, Dalia 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

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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."

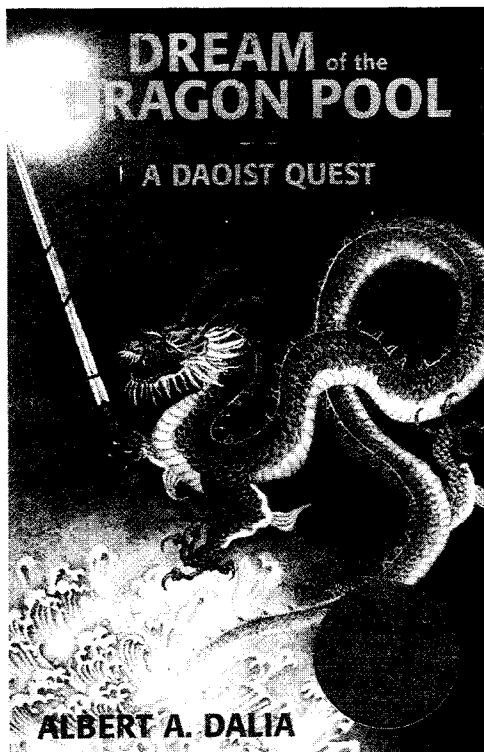
But don't you understand, I came here for answers, not weapons? My life has been a failure and I am near the end of it, condemned to death in a foreign place. It is not death that I fear. It is not knowing my own worth. I am here to seek that answer. She is gone . . . only the mist lingers – perhaps, 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

