



The Village of Ku-fu

I shall clasp my hands together and bow to the corners of the world.

My surname is Lu and my personal name is Yu, but I am not to be confused with the eminent author of *The Classic of Tea*. My family is quite undistinguished, and since I am the tenth of my father's sons and rather strong I am usually referred to as Number Ten Ox. My father died when I was eight. A year later my mother followed him to the Yellow Springs Beneath the Earth, and since then I have lived with Uncle Nung and Auntie Hua in the village of Ku-fu in the valley of Cho. We take great pride in our landmarks. Until recently we also took great pride in two gentlemen who were such perfect specimens that people used to come from miles around just to stare at them, so perhaps I should begin a description of my village with a couple of classics.

When Pawnbroker Fang approached Ma the Grub with the idea of joining forces he opened negotiations by presenting Ma's wife with the picture of a small fish drawn on a piece of cheap paper. Ma's wife accepted the magnificent gift, and in return she extended her right hand and made a circle with the thumb and forefinger. At that point, the door crashed open and Ma the Grub charged inside and screamed: "Woman, would you ruin me? *Half* of a pie would have been enough!"

That may not be literally true, but the abbot of our monastery always said that fable has strong shoulders that carry far more truth than fact can.

Pawnbroker Fang's ability to guess the lowest possible amount that person would accept for a pawned item was so unerring that I had concluded it was supernatural, but then the abbot took me aside and explained that Fang wasn't guessing at all. There was always some smooth shiny object lying on top of his desk in the front room of Ma the Grub's warehouse, and it was used as a mirror that would reflect the eyes of the victim.

"Cheap, very cheap," Fang would sneer, turning the object in his hands. "No more than two hundred cash."



His eyes would drop to the shiny object and if the pupils of the reflected eyes constricted too sharply he would try again.

“Well, the workmanship isn’t too bad, in a crude peasant fashion. Make it two-fifty.”

The reflected pupils would dilate, but perhaps not quite far enough.

“It is the anniversary of my poor wife’s untimely demise, the thought of which always destroys my business judgment,” Fang would whimper, in a voice clotted with tears. “Three hundred cash, but not one penny more!”

Actually, no money would change hands because ours is a barter economy. The victim would take a credit slip through the door to the warehouse, and Ma the Grub would stare at it in disbelief and scream out to Fang. “Madman! Your lunatic generosity will drive us into bankruptcy! Who will feed your starving brats when we are reduced to tattered cloaks and begging bowls?” Then he would honor the credit slip with goods that had been marked up by 600 percent.

Pawnbroker Fang was a widower with two children, a pretty little daughter we called Fang’s Fawn and a younger son that we called Fang’s Flea. Ma the Grub was childless, and when his wife ran off with a rug peddler his household expenses were cut in half and his happiness was doubled. The happiest time of all for the team of Ma and Fang was our annual silk harvest, because silkworm eggs could only be purchased with money and they had all the money. Ma the Grub would buy the eggs and hand them out to each family in exchange for IOUs that were to be redeemed with silk, and since Pawnbroker Fang was the only qualified appraiser of silk for miles around they were able to take two-thirds of our crop to Peking and return with bulging bags of coins, which they buried in their gardens on moonless midnights.

The abbot used to say that the emotional health of a village depended upon having a man whom everyone loved to hate, and Heaven had blessed us with two of them.

Our landmarks are our lake and our wall, and both of them are the result of the superstition and mythology of ancient times. When our ancestors arrived in the valley of Cho they examined the terrain with the greatest of care, and we honestly believe that no village in the world has been better planned than the village of Ku-fu. Our ancestors laid it out so that it would be sheltered from the Black Tortoise, a beast of the very worst character, whose direction is north and whose element is water and whose season is winter. It is open to the Red Bird of the south and the element of fire and the season of summer. And the eastern hills where the Blue Dragon lives, with the element of wood and the hopeful season of spring, are stronger than the hills to the west, which is the home of the White Tiger, metal and the melancholy season of autumn.

Considerable thought was given to the shape of the village, on the grounds that a man who built a village like a fish while a neighboring village was built like a hook



was begging for disaster. The finished shape was the outline of a unicorn, a gentle and law-abiding creature with no natural enemies whatsoever. But it appeared that something had gone wrong because one day there was a low snorting sort of a noise and the earth heaved, and several cottages collapsed and a great crack appeared the soil. Our ancestors examined their village from every possible angle, and the flaw was discovered when one of them climbed to the top of the tallest tree on the eastern hills and gazed down. By a foolish oversight the last five rice paddies had been arranged so that they formed the wings and body of a huge hungry horsefly that had settled upon the tender flank of the unicorn, so of course the unicorn had kicked up its heels. The paddies were altered into the shape of a bandage, and Ku-fu was never again disturbed by upheavals.

They made sure that there would be no straight roads or rivers that might draw good influences away, and as a further precaution they dammed up the end of a narrow little valley and channeled rivulets down the sides of the hills, and thus produced a small lake that would capture and hold good influences that might otherwise trickle away to other villages. They had no aesthetic intent whatsoever. The beauty of our lake was an accident of superstition, but the result was such that when the great poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju passed through on a walking trip five hundred years ago he paused at the little lake and was inspired to write to a friend:

*The waters are loud with fish and turtles,
A multitude of living things.
Wild geese and swans, graylags, bustards,
Cranes and mallards,
Loons and spoonbills,
Flock and settle on the waters,
Drifting lightly over the surface,
Buffeted by the wind,
Bobbing and dipping with the waves,
Sporting among the weedy banks,
Gobbling the reeds and duckweed,
Pecking at water chestnuts and lotuses.*

It is like that today, and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju was not there in the season to see the masses of wildflowers, or the tiny dappled deer that come to drink and then vanish like puffs of smoke.

Our wall landmark is far more famous. It is only fair to point out that there are many different stories concerning the origin of Dragon's Pillow, but we in Ku-fu like to think that our version is the only correct one.





Many centuries ago there was a general who was ordered to build one of the defensive walls that were to be linked into the Great Wall, and one night he dreamed that he had been summoned to Heaven to present his plan for the wall to the August Personage of Jade. At his subsequent trial for treason he gave a vivid account of the trip.

He had dreamed that he had been inside a giant lotus, and the leaves had slowly opened to form a doorway, and he had stepped out upon the emerald grass of Heaven. The sky was sapphire, and a path made from pearls lay near his feet. A willow tree lifted a branch and pointed it like a finger, and the general followed the path to the River of Flowers, which was cascading down the Cliff of the Great Awakening. The concubines of the Emperor of Heaven were bathing in the Pool of Blissful Fragrances, laughing and splashing in a rainbow of rose petals, and they were so beautiful that the general found it hard to tear himself away. But duty called, so he followed the path as it climbed seven terraces where the leaves on the trees were made from precious stones, which rang musically when the breeze touched them, and where birds of bright plumage sang with divine voices of the Five Virtues and Excellent Doctrines. The path continued around the lush orchards where the Queen Mother Wang grew the Peaches of Immortality, and when the general made the last turn around the orchards he found himself directly in front of the palace of the Emperor of Heaven.

Flunkies were waiting for him. They ushered him into the audience chamber, and after the three obeisances and nine kowtows he was allowed to rise and approach the throne. The August Personage of Jade was seated with his hands crossed upon the Imperial Book of Etiquette, which lay upon his lap. He wore a flat hat rather like a board, from which dangled thirteen pendants of colored pearls upon red strings, and his black silk robe rippled with red and yellow dragons. The general bowed and humbly presented his plan for the wall.

Behind the throne stood T'ien-kou, the Celestial Dog, whose teeth had chewed mountains in half, and beside the Celestial Dog stood Ehr-lang, who is unquestionably the greatest of all warriors because he had been able to battle the stupendous Stone Monkey to a standstill. (The Monkey symbolizes intellect.) The two bodyguards appeared to be glaring at the general. He hastily lowered his eyes, and he saw that the symbol of the emperor's predecessor, the Heavenly Master of the First Origin, was stamped upon the left arm of the throne, and on the right arm was the symbol for the emperor's eventual successor, the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door. The general was so overcome by a dizzying sense of timelessness in which there was no means of measurement and comparison that he felt quite sick to his stomach. He was afraid that he was going to disgrace himself by throwing up, but in the nick of time he saw that his plan, neatly rolled back into a scroll and retied, was extended before his lowered eyes. He took it and dropped to his knees and awaited divine censure or praise, but none was forthcoming. The August Personage of Jade



silently signaled the end of the interview. The general crawled backward, banging his head against the floor, and at the doorway he was seized by the flunkies, who marched him outside and across a couple of miles of meadow. Then they picked him up and dumped him into the Great River of Stars.

Oddly enough, the general testified, he had not been frightened at all. It was the rainy season in Heaven, and billions of brilliant stars were bouncing over raging waves that roared like a trillion tigers, but the general sank quite peacefully into the water. He drifted down farther and farther, and then he fell right through the bottom, and the glittering light of the Great River receded rapidly in the distance as he plunged head over heels toward earth. He landed smack in the middle of his bed, just as his servant entered to wake him for breakfast.

It was some time before he could gather enough courage to open his plan, and when he did he discovered that the Emperor of Heaven—or somebody—had moved the wall 122 miles to the south, which placed it in the middle of the valley of Cho, where it could serve no useful purpose whatsoever.

What was he to do? He could not possibly defy the mandate of Heaven, so he ordered his men to build a wall that led nowhere and connected to nothing, and that was why the general was arrested and brought before the Emperor of China on the charge of treason. When he told his tale the charge of treason was tossed out of court. Instead the general was sentenced to death for being drunk on duty, and desperation produced one of the loveliest excuses in history. That wall, the general said firmly, had been perfectly placed, but one night a dragon leaned against it and fell asleep, and in the morning it was discovered that the bulk of the beast had shoved the wall into its current ludicrous position.

Word of Dragon's Pillow swept through the delighted court, where the general had clever and unscrupulous friends. They began their campaign to save his neck by bribing the emperor's favorite soothsayer.

"O Son of Heaven," the fellow screeched, "I have consulted the Trigrams, and for reasons known only to the August Personage of Jade that strange stretch of wall is the most important of all fortifications! So important it is that it cannot be guarded by mortal men, but only by the spirits of ten thousand soldiers who must be buried alive in the foundations!"

The emperor was quite humane, as emperors go, and he begged the soothsayer to try again and see if there might not have been some mistake. After pocketing another bribe the soothsayer came up with a different interpretation.

"O Son of Heaven, the Trigrams clearly state that *wan* must be buried alive in the foundations, but while *wan* can mean ten thousand, it is also a common family name!" he bellowed. "The solution is obvious, for what is the life of one insignificant soldier compared to the most important wall in China?"

