



# DAUGHTERS OF THE RED LAND

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A Novel by

Yan Li

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by

Yan Li



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*To the women of China*

~ ~ ~

I wish to express my sincere thanks to  
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Their genuine friendship encouraged me  
to finish the writing of this book.

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# 1

## *Hometown and Grandmother's Mystery*

IT WAS ON AN EARLY SUMMER MORNING WHEN I LEARNED that Evergreen had died. Heart attack. My mother's voice on the phone sounded calm; obviously she had prepared herself well before she made this cross-ocean long distance call.

I looked out the kitchen window. The rising sun was beaming through the dense leaves of the firs lining one side of the large drained fountain. The bronze statue by the fountain was clearly visible in the sunshine. The tulips, lilies and some other unknown flowers were blooming loudly along the mosaic walk in the western garden. Further away by the pond, a couple of Canadian geese with their newborns were looking for food on the lawn. The world seemed as colourful and vital as usual. It was hard to believe that death could occur on a beautiful day like this.

I felt weak, though I hadn't done any work yet. I decided to go back to my bedroom upstairs. I passed by Mrs. Thompson's room. It was deadly quiet. She must be drunk again. Yes, she must be. I remembered that she didn't ask for coffee at supper yesterday. That was a signal that she was starting another tour with Vodka. At this moment, I didn't care if she stayed in bed longer. I did need to be alone for a while.

I fumbled in my suitcase and took out a cloth bag. Inside there were a few books and a letter. They had accompanied me from China to Canada,

and from place to place, as I travelled in this country. The paper of the letter had worn through the years. Before it was unfolded, the squared words, which I had already learned by heart, emerged once again in my mind.

“...For as long as twenty-eight years, fate had prevented us from seeing each other and all I could do was try to picture you — what you looked like, what kind of person you were, and what your life had been like — in my imagination. The cruel fact was that, even before you came into this world, I had known too well that you were going to travel the roughest and bumpiest road life had to offer, yet there was no way that I could help you...

“Our meeting in Beijing in the summer of 1984 was the first time I had seen you since you were born. As I sat on the bushy hill of the Imperial Palace and listened to you recalling such a miserable life so equably, I wasn't surprised at all, though my heart was bleeding and my soul sobbing...

“...I have tried hard to keep my promise not to contact you. But it is such unbearable torture, I cannot endure it any more. Please forgive me, my dear child! Can you understand how much I want to see you again? Can you understand a father's feeling? Over the years I was always haunted by the fear that the first time we met each other would also be the last time I would see you...”

This was the only letter from Evergreen, the man whom I should call ‘father’ but never have. I was born a very indecisive person. I had been hesitating for years over whether to satisfy his wish by writing him or phoning him and calling him ‘father’.

I sometimes puzzled over the question: Can I really regard him as my father? Perhaps I should, since he was the man who gave me life. But to link the affectionate word, ‘father’, with this man seemed extremely awkward and uncomfortable to me. We had never seen each other until I was twenty-eight years old and, for quite a long period before that, I didn't even know of his existence!

On the other hand, I could not regard him totally as a stranger and

ignore him, for this man suddenly emerged as an ominous shadow in my life when I was thirteen years old, and had since secretly tortured my inner world.

I never replied to his letter. First of all, I was not sure about what I should call him, if I were to write. Secondly, my decisions took serious account of my mother's attitude. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, though her everlasting hatred towards this man seemed hard to understand. In all those years, I couldn't, and never wanted to, start any serious discussion with her about him. Both of us were clear that even a subtle touching upon this issue would open the wound and arouse waves of emotion in our over-sensitive nerves. Human souls are the most complicated creations.

Now that this man was gone forever to another world, the thorny question seemed finally solved and I did not have to worry my head over the issue any more. Yes, he had gone, like air, like dust, traceless — yet everywhere. But the sky is still very blue and the sun shines brightly as usual. He didn't leave anything behind him, except a few books and an untouchable daughter. I gazed at the books. These were the only things he left to the world, books he had composed with blood and tears. Books remain. But people will all die eventually. As he had predicted, the first time we saw each other had become the last time, forever. I felt sad. But there were no tears in my eyes — they had dried up a long time ago. Perhaps I had become numb, or perhaps I had become more reasonable — anyway, I was surprised that for the first time in my life I was able to think about this man without being disturbed emotionally.

Why had it taken me so long to decide whether to write him or not? There would be no address to mail a letter to him now, even if I did want to write! I started to wonder: Would I have had a different soul if my life had not been created by Evergreen, but by someone else? Was his wrongdoing really responsible for my mother's unhappy life, as she always claimed? Was it fair to blame him for what had happened in the past few decades? Or should someone else be blamed? If so, who? All of a sudden, I was overwhelmed by the impulse to write something.

I rushed downstairs, my heart beating fast with the excitement of this new idea. Passing through the spacious sitting room, I entered the library. It was quiet as usual. I sat in front of the big carved table by the window and looked around. Against the walls, bookshelves stood one on top of the



other from the floor to the ceiling. Hard-covered books, many of which seemed to be from a couple of centuries ago, were neatly laid on the shelves. The thick carpet, the hard wood furniture, the dark leather couch and chairs, the portrait of a man in a wig, the large terrestrial globe, the opened encyclopedia on a stand, everything in this room, even the cold remains of the logs in the fireplace, created a dignified atmosphere. The only thing modern and therefore somewhat inharmonious was the IBM computer on top of the table.

I had put the computer there six months ago when I moved into this house. The novelty of a new environment had already disappeared from my eyes. But at this moment, everything in this elegant room looked foreign and strange, whereas all the things I was familiar with were somewhere unreachable. My mind became vacant; the impulse to write vanished. "Who am I? Why am I in this big house, the residence of a rich Canadian woman?" I questioned myself. My mind was still clear, of course. "I am a journalist — oh, no, a housekeeper now, from China, an ancient land on the other side of the globe..."

\* \* \*

EVERYONE HAS A HOMETOWN WHERE ONE SPENT ONE'S childhood. The earliest memories, sweet or bitter, leave a remote and blurred impression, with twinkles of clarity here and there like shining stars in the night sky.

To the Chinese, a hometown is not necessarily the place where you were born, but the place where your paternal ancestors have lived for generations. Where was my hometown, then? This question came to me one day in my eighth year, as I was filling out my school registration forms. I asked my mother. Her face turned stern. It took her quite a while before she answered: "Well, you may write down Han Zhong as your hometown."

This struck me as curious because Han Zhong was the place where Laolao (the Chinese for maternal grandma) had been living. I was just about to pursue the matter when I noticed my mother was staring at me with a rather confusing expression in her eye. Sadness? Regret? Resentment? Or determination...? Her eyes fixed on me, but somehow I felt she was looking at somebody else. I felt nervous and swallowed my question.

When I was six, I visited Laolao's home with my mother. Han Zhong left a strong impression on me, for the idyllic, picturesque small city formed a sharp contrast to the much more modernized metropolitan Beijing where I lived.

Han Zhong in Chinese means the centre of the Han State. It is true that the city is right in the centre of China and had once served as the capital city for an ancient state. In the early 1960s, there were no trains in this area. As the passenger bus moved slowly over the skyhigh Mount Qinling, you could see the remaining trails of the plank road, built more than two thousand years ago, running along the face of the cliff.

Mountain peasants squeezed onto the bus all the way. Their faces were tanned by year-round sunshine and their clothes were soaked with the strong smell of tobacco, soil and sweat. Carried on their backs were fully loaded baskets and gunnysacks of loquats — a sweet, juicy, apricot-like fruit — tobacco, and hand-made straw sandals, all to be exchanged for cooking oil and salt in town.

Out of the mountains, the swift-flowing Han River led us into a large basin. Through the thin mist of the early morning, we could see old, dark wooden houses among rice fields. Palm and banana trees appeared here and there around the houses. Their broad green leaves looked fresh and lively.

The square city wall of Han Zhong was more than ten metres high. Laolao's home was in the southern part of the city, on one side of a busy street laid with large pieces of slabstones which had worn out with the centuries gone by. It was said that when my grandfather was alive, the family was one of the few rich ones in the city. They had two residences then, one in the suburbs and one in town. The suburban one was their major residence, with nine connected courtyards. It was described as the most grandiose house in this area decades ago. I had no basis for imagining how grandiose it was, though, as during the Land Reform Movement in 1950, the suburban residence had been confiscated by the local government and reassigned to twenty-three poor families.

But I did see their residence in town. It was a squared courtyard, consisting of three wings with more than a dozen rooms and a very large garden at the back. When I saw it in 1961, it was no longer in its original condition, but merely a crowded yard. This residence was only partly confiscated in the Land Reform Movement. Five of the rooms in the major house were

kept for Laolao and the rest were redistributed. The house facing the street was allotted to three families. The side wing was assigned to another, while one side of the major house was occupied by a family with seven children.

I stayed in Laolao's home for a month. Life there was simple and idyllic. I remember getting up early in the morning, breathing fresh air soaked with the aroma of the oleander flowers blooming in front of the broad corridor, and watching magpies fly around the tall roof of the old house singing happily. Pushing back the heavy wooden door at the corner of the front courtyard, I would find my favourite playground, the backyard.

The backyard used to be a garden years ago. Now it was overgrown with weeds. There were a few neglected banana bushes and palm trees by the wall. An old well stayed lonely in the corner of the garden with thick moss covering its stone edge, visited occasionally by sparrows jumping on top of the heavy, rusted hand winch. Laolao warned me not to come close to the well for fear a ghost might catch me. "It has been abandoned for years..." she told me. I crawled cautiously to the edge of the mysterious well one day and peered inside, only to find my own image in the deep dark water.

A fairly large pond with ducks and white clouds floating in the green water extended along the garden's farther edge. Mrs. Wang, Laolao's neighbour, a strongly-built middle aged woman, was fetching water from the pond with a long-handled pail and watering the vegetables she had planted beside the pond. She picked up some green leaves from a vine-like plant and passed them to me. I brought them back to the large kitchen house in the front yard where Laolao made delicious soup with them.

Early in the morning Laolao usually took me with her to a pastry store on the other side of the street where she would buy a few deep-fried, sweet, soft and sticky rice cakes for our breakfast.

The store was a family business. The wooden doors and the inside walls looked greasy and dark from years of smoke, cooking oil, and burning fuels. In one corner of the large room was a huge iron pot with boiling oil inside. A girl about ten years old was pushing and pulling hard on the bellows connected to the stove and adding logs of wood to the fire occasionally. Her delicate face was reddened by the fire and her thin hair looked rather untidy. The men, women, and children of the family, all sweaty, were each holding a wooden club with which they vigorously beat a large mound of dough on a big board. The sounds of their blows, rat-tat, rat-tat,

could be heard from distances away down the street. Laolao explained that the more they beat the dough, the stickier and tastier the cakes would be.

There was a bazaar in the small city. Laolao had taken me there once. In the eastern part of the city was the Ancient Han King Palace built on a high terrace. It was first built more than two thousand years ago. The carved beams and the painted rafters of the richly ornamented tower in the centre overlooked the crowded residence houses and busy market streets surrounding its foot. The bronze mini bells hanging on the upturned eaves sent out a pleasant metallic sound in the gentle breeze. Outside of the palace wall, numerous pedlars with foods and crafts were lining up in crowds. Laolao bought a branch of crippled dates for me, a strange fruit in the shape of a twisted twig, light-brown-coloured and rather sweet. On our way home, Laolao took me to a few historical sites such as the Horse Feeding Pool, where the cavalry of the Han State were fed water before fighting, and the Authorizing Platform, where the Han emperor appointed his marshal two thousand years ago. Laolao talked with enthusiasm about legendary stories linked with these places. But I was too young then and showed little interest.

The relationship between Laolao and her neighbours seemed to be smooth and friendly. Now and then there were creaking sounds coming from the stone-laid streets. Vegetable pedlars were passing by the gate with their one-wheeled carts on their way to the market in the centre of the city. The families living at the front wing would shout loudly towards the back house where Laolao stayed: "Grandma, here comes the tofu cart! Don't you want to buy some for your guests?" or "Grandma, the bean sprout cart is passing!"

A few times during a day, I would hear a woman's loud voice from the other side of Laolao's house: "Grandma, what's the time now?"

It was the wife of Old Wang. The Wangs were one of the poorest families in the city. Their poverty seemed to be long-term, what with seven children to be raised and the husband an alcoholic. There was hardly any furniture in their room and they could not even afford to buy a clock. When the skinny, red-eyed husband returned home drunk at night, he would beat up his wife and children, creating pandemonium in the house. The din of the children's screaming and the wife's sobbing, with the man's roaring topping them both, often woke us up at midnight and sent Laolao scampering over to help them calm down.

One night, my dream was once more broken by the horrible and husky bellow of the alcoholic. "...I'll kill you... kill you all! ...You damned big eaters! ...You pigs make me penniless!"

Laolao sighed and got up. As she fumbled with her shoes in the darkness, she murmured in a low voice to herself, "Old Wang... drunk again..."

\* \* \*

LAOLAO LEFT THE WORLD IN EARLY 1988, ON THE EVE OF the lunar New Year's Day, as firecrackers created a deafening sound and lit up the night sky. She passed away silently in her own room in the old house when everyone else was occupied preparing the new year's feast.

Her funeral, though, was a noisy one and attracted the attention of streets of people. Uncle Honesty, Laolao's only son, a high school teacher, came back to Han Zhong to organize a traditional funeral rite, for many years forbidden.

As Uncle Honesty held up a tile pot over his head and then crashed it hard on the ground in front of the old house, the heavy black coffin was raised up and a group of trumpets started to shrill the mournful funeral music all at once. Dozens of weeping men, women and children, all dressed in white, were standing on a big truck. Following behind it were three other trucks carrying hundreds of floral wreaths, elegiac couplets, effigies, houses, and furniture made with colourful papers.

The funeral procession moving slowly along the street immediately attracted attention and the narrow street was soon crowded with zealous on-lookers. Uncle Honesty walked at the very front, holding Laolao's portrait in his arms. He was no longer young, his once handsome face now shrivelled like the shell of a walnut. He was careful to put on a serious look and keep his back as straight as possible. He also pricked up his ears so as not to miss any comments from the on-lookers.

"What a grand scene! We haven't seen this for years!"

"My funeral, more's the pity, may never be as splendid as this one!"

The remarks from a few envious senior citizens greatly gratified Uncle Honesty. The route of the parade was carefully chosen. According to plan, Uncle Honesty led the procession to the family's suburban residence, confiscated decades ago. The noise created by the mourners reached a crescendo as

they circled around the big yard, presently home for twenty-three families.

When the colour photos recording the funeral proceedings reached Beijing a month later, Uncle Honesty didn't conceal his pride. "I made the funeral rite very nice looking..." he wrote.

My mother was not pleased. "He was clearly using the event as an opportunity to show off. However nice it may be, a grand funeral is only display for the living, not for the dead!" she commented coldly. "Besides his vanity, he was daring enough to provoke the local government by parading on the confiscated property! Didn't he ever think that they may regard his action as contempt for communist rule?"

I didn't care much about my mother's comment. My sorrow for losing Laolao was loud and long. While I am writing this story and recalling all I know about her life, Laolao is sleeping forever in the bamboo covered green hills along the bank of the quiet Han River, on the other side of the globe.

No one ever told me the complete story about Laolao. And, when she was alive, she was always careful not to utter a single word about life in her youth.

But I could sense something unusual must have taken place in her past. I could not forget, during my last visit to my hometown before I came to Canada, the elusive smile from an eighty-year-old distant relative when he murmured, his toothless mouth moving slowly, "Your grandma, oh... indeed... has tasted... life... and the world..." A gleam of mysterious light in his dim old eyes aroused my curiosity. But barely had I opened my mouth to say something than a sharp glance from Uncle Honesty silenced his gossip immediately. The old man's wrinkled lips then tightly wrapped around his foot-long bamboo pipe and his small eyes never fell on me again.

Now with Laolao and most of her contemporaries gone from the world, it is even harder to know what really happened. In fact, the legend concerning Laolao and her family has long faded from the memory of the present dwellers in the small city. I managed to piece it together, however, from several relatives' reluctant and conservative accounts.

Born in the late nineteenth century to a tailor's family, Laolao was the second one of the three daughters who were all described as bright and beautiful — fruits dewdrop-fresh on the tree. Laolao was considered the loveliest of the three, with her unusual fair complexion and a pair of vivacious large black eyes.

It was hard to imagine that Laolao had been pretty when she was young, for the impression I had of Laolao was of any typical old Chinese woman, clad in an old fashioned, plain coloured garment buttoned on the right, with her sparse grey hair coiled on the back of her head and a pair of small bound feet about four inches long — foot binding having been a compulsory practice for women in the old times.

Rumour had it that, in her late teens, Laolao's name had been well known in this small city. Her fair skin and beautiful features were radiant. Her small feet, which had been tightly bound since she was six years old and had caused her numerous painful days and nights, now won her fame, as they were smaller than those of girls who had started the binding at a later age. She couldn't read or write. That was fine, since the tradition prized illiteracy as a womanly virtue.

The tailor's store was frequently visited by all the well known matchmakers in town. The tailor always smiled ambiguously at these eloquent visitors. He had made up his mind to make a great fortune from his valuable daughters. He had already married his first daughter off to a wealthy merchant the year before. Now it was his second daughter's turn. He knew her worth and he knew he had to be picky; he certainly was not afraid of irritating any of these zestful matchmakers.

The shrewd man never anticipated, however, that the civil war prevailing in China after the overthrow of the last emperor in 1911 would quickly upset the peaceful but sluggish life in the small city.

It was a hot windless summer day. The blazing sun in the middle of the sky forced all street dogs to hide in the shade of deep, old-style doorways. The clear clapping of horse hoofs passing through the slabstone laid streets caught the attention of many people who stretched their necks from behind the doors despite the hot air. A wartime officer who might have been stationed in town or been just passing through with his troops, chanced to glimpse a figure with an impressively pretty face by the wooden door of the tailor's store. It was a girl in a pale green garment, wearing her hair in bangs. She met the man's daring gaze and quickly turned inside the crimson-painted door, her waist-long black braided hair swaying down her slender back. Struck dumb for a few seconds, the strongly-built, dark faced man got off the back of his horse and went straight into the store.

The tailor was lying in a bamboo deck chair and waving a cattail-leaf fan.



His hands trembled and the fan dropped on the floor at the sight of a man coming in with a pistol in his belt. The deal was promptly made. Shining silver dollars piled up on the square table. Though the amount was far from the tailor's expectation, he was too scared to argue, what with a whole bunch of armed men waiting outside.

A few days later, Laolao was taken away from her hometown with the departing troops, leaving behind her the townspeople gloating over the tailor's unexpected loss.

Whether Laolao was happy and had ever grown to love the strong-built officer would remain a riddle forever. The officer was killed in a battle months after his troops left Han Zhong.

Laolao had hardly had a chance to collect herself to face the reality of her husband's death before she was shocked by even more horrifying news. The family of the dead officer were secretly planning to sell the young woman to a brothel. Their conspiracy was leaked, somehow, by a sympathetic relative, so that when the traders arrived, Laolao had already disappeared.

She had to travel more than a thousand miles to get back to her hometown. It is hard to imagine how difficult and terrifying it must have been for a young woman with tiny bound feet, not knowing how to read and write, to survive such a trip alone in the early twentieth century when warlords were fiercely fighting one another in most areas throughout China. Besides, transportation at that time was incredibly poor, with no railway or highways reaching that mountain area surrounded with dense primeval forests and rapid rivers.

But return she did. On a winter evening when the chilly wind made the bronze bells on the eaves of the Ancient Han King Palace tinkle, someone noticed Laolao's gaunt pallid figure soundlessly materializing at the corner of a street.

Precisely how she had survived the escape and the arduous journey remains a mystery to this day. No one knew exactly what had happened and no one was willing to talk about it. Laolao's mind remained clear until her last moment; still, she had never revealed anything to anybody. I had the impression that she would feel deeply hurt by any attempt to touch upon this topic, too.

The reason, I guess, related to her marital history, which she, as well as



her relatives, regarded as shameful. According to the old tradition, a chaste woman should serve only one man in her life. If only Laolao had remained a widow after the officer's death, her first marriage might not have been a shame but instead, a source of pride to herself and her relatives as well. There was no lack of stories in old China eulogizing young girls who decided to 'stay with the tombstone' all their lives when their fiancés died before the wedding. They were honoured as 'models of chastity' in order to encourage other girls to follow suit.

However, not long after her return, Laolao was married off by the tailor to my grandfather.

My grandfather, a man with a pockmarked face and a tall slender figure, was then in his sixties. Smart and ambitious, he was one of the few very rich men in the city. His wife had just died. Three of his four daughters had already married. The only pity for the old man was that he had no son, which meant no heir. So my grandfather wanted to marry a young woman to have a son.

There were plenty of people eager to become his in-laws. Rumour had it that my grandfather favoured a certain girl who enjoyed the reputation of being both gentle and submissive, and was so described by the matchmakers. My grandfather asked the matchmakers to arrange it so that he could secretly have a look at the woman before he would finally agree to the marriage. The matchmakers became wary, for the girl was ugly-looking enough to shut the eyes of any groom-to-be, young or old, with her small eyes like two narrow slits on a rough pig-skinned face, so it was said.

"What can we do, God!" The matchmakers were in a panic. They had been paid well by the girl's parents to arrange this marriage. Then one of the matchmakers had the idea of letting Laolao, not the old maid, be seen by my grandfather. "Once the marriage contract is signed, he will not be able to break the agreement, whatever he discovers later!" said the crafty conniving creature.

The tailor was bribed to arrange for his daughter to appear at the next country fair. As scheduled, before lunch time that day, my grandfather and the matchmaker arrived at an exquisitely decorated tea house located in the shopping centre. There were only a few customers inside. A blind man sitting by a corner was playing a lonely tune on er hu, a two-string musical instrument. My grandfather seated himself at a table by the window.