



Though *Dragonkeeper* is a fantasy book, it is set in a historical era in China. The Han Dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE. During those years 25 different Emperors ruled. *Dragonkeeper* is set in 141 BC, the year that the Emperor Jingdi died and his young son Wudi took over as Emperor.

So the book is set about 2300 years ago and 8000 kms away. It seemed like a good idea when I thought it up, but then I had to find out what China was like way back then. Though the character of the young emperor, Liu Che, is based on a real person, I made up the story and set the book in an imaginary China where dragons were alive. I like to call it a historical fantasy. However, as with my other historical books, I wanted the detail to be as historically accurate as possible.

From the Library

When I wrote about ancient Egypt, I could find lots of books and websites to tell me about life back then. With Han Dynasty China, the task wasn't so easy. I found only a few books at the library. There may be lots of books in Chinese, but they wouldn't be much good to me. Though I can speak a little Chinese and recognise a few simple characters, I can't read Chinese books.

I read the available books, and that helped me with some of the detail. I found out that both Chinese men and women wore similar clothing—a garment a bit like a wrap-around dressing gown, sometimes with trousers underneath. I found out a little about what people ate and how growing food was what most people did for a living. But I was still finding it hard to picture what Han Dynasty China looked like.

From the Earth

When I was researching ancient Egypt, there were many archaeology books to refer to as well. The Egyptians built their temples and palaces out of solid stone, so the ruins of many of these buildings were still standing. I couldn't afford to go to Egypt to look at them, but there were lots of books in the library with lovely glossy photographs. And the ancient Egyptians had covered the walls of their buildings with paintings and writing, so there was lots of information in these ruins.

In Han Dynasty China, all buildings—even palaces—were built out of wood. Over time they burnt down or the wood rotted and they disappeared entirely. There is not a single Han Dynasty building left in the whole of China.

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Walker Books Australia
Ph +61 2 9517 9577
Fax +61 2 9517 9997
Locked Bag 22
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042
For enquiries please contact Leonie Jordan:
Leonie.Jordan@walkerbooks.com.au
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Fortunately, just like in ancient Egypt, in ancient China important people were buried in tombs underground. And the ancient Chinese believed that they had to supply their dead Emperors and relatives with the things they would need after death. People in ancient China believed that people had two souls. When they died, one soul would ascend to the clouds and, hopefully, live peacefully with the immortals. The other one stayed in or around the grave. So inside the tombs they placed clothes, furniture, food and other things for this soul to live. They believed that if they didn't keep the souls of their ancestors happy, these dead spirits or ghosts would get angry and bring them bad luck.

Most people have seen pictures of the Terracotta Warriors. This is a whole army of soldiers made out of clay buried near the tomb of an earlier Emperor. People believed that the statues would turn into real soldiers in the afterlife and serve the Emperor just like a real army.

Archaeologists have been burrowing under the surface of Egypt since the early 1800s so there are lots of known tombs. China has been closed to Westerners for a lot of its history and there has not been as much archaeological research there. I found information about two tombs that were made in the Han Dynasty.

Underground Art

One tomb is called the Mawangdui Tomb. It is the tomb of a rich woman called Lady Dai who died around 168 BCE. The tomb contained furniture, fabric, ornaments, bowls and food for the lady's earthly 'ghost' to use. I got a lot of information about what people ate in the Han Dynasty from books about this tomb. There was also a lovely silk hanging. The paintings on it told the story of how this woman would find her way to heaven. It depicts heaven as a place above the clouds guarded by celestial beasts including dragons.

Now these dragons didn't look the same as the wide-eyed and slightly ferocious Chinese dragons that we usually see in pictures. In fact they had red smiley mouths, big brown eyes and little wings. I liked the friendly look of these dragons and decided that if that was how people in the Han dynasty imagined dragons to look, that was how my dragon would look.

Until this tomb was excavated in 1972, there were no surviving paintings from the Han Dynasty, so this painting is very special.



Fortunately for me there is a big collection of Chinese books in the Melbourne University Library. Although I can't read them, I can look at the pictures! And I discovered there were quite a few books there with pictures of items from Han Dynasty tombs.

The other Han tomb I found some information about was the tomb of Jingdi—that's the emperor at the start of Dragonkeeper. While I was doing the research for this book, an exhibition came from China to Sydney. It contained some of the goods from the Terracotta Warriors tomb and also some from Jingdi. I was very excited about the prospect of seeing some things from the time of 'my' emperor so I drove to Sydney. It was very inspirational to see things that were made in the time I was writing about, so long ago. One of the statues I saw was of a kneeling servant girl. This helped me picture what my main character, Ping, looked like.

Bamboo Books

As well as everyday objects there were also books in these tombs (to give the ghost something to read, I suppose). The Chinese invented paper during the late Han Dynasty, but at the time of these tombs, books were written on thin strips of bamboo (the Chinese used to write vertically, that is up and down from the top of the page to the bottom, not across like we do). They tied the bamboo strips together so that they lay side by side. To close the book they rolled it up and tied it with string. These are called Bamboo books. Quite a few ancient Chinese books have survived and some of them have been translated into English. Once again the Melbourne University library came to the rescue and I found copies of the translations there. I got the idea about pickling the dead dragon from a brief story in one of these ancient books. I also found inspiration for the dragon's words of wisdom in these books.



Getting it Right

When you write a historical story, you have to be careful not to mention things that hadn't yet been invented or foods that hadn't yet been introduced to that area. Along the way, I discovered that there were no tomatoes or grapes in China in the Han Dynasty.

Some of the things that seem typically Chinese to us today weren't around in the Han Dynasty. For instance there were no temples because Buddhism wasn't introduced to China until the very end of the Han Dynasty. Most people didn't eat rice and drink tea. These things were used in the south of China during the Han Dynasty, but didn't spread around China till much later.

As well as paper, Chinese scholars invented other important things during the Han Dynasty such as the wheelbarrow, stirrups for riding horses and a device called a seismograph, which detected earthquakes hundreds of miles away. Some of these things didn't reach the West for hundreds of years.

After reading *Dragonkeeper*, I hope that you find this period of Chinese history as fascinating as I do.

Student Activities

1. The Chinese had a very advanced society in the Han Dynasty. See if you can find some information about life in other parts of the world at the same time. What was life like in Greece and Britain for instance?

The whole class could work on this project.
2. Pick an illustration from a history book in the library (from any historical time you like) and think of a story you could write about that picture. Make a list of all the things you would have to find out about the time and the place to tell the story. For example what would people eat? How did they dress? How did they travel around?

Work in groups.
3. I think the friendly Han Dynasty dragon is my ideal dragon. What's your ideal dragon? Does it have wings? Is it ferocious and fire-breathing? What colour is it? Draw a picture of it.

4. Find out more information about one of the things that was invented in ancient China.