

Editor's Note: Supplemental resources included with the book as well as available online at the author's website (<http://eleanormccalliecooper.com/resources/>) are republished here including a timeline, author's note, questions for class discussion, and a letter the author received from her cousin Nini after World War II ended. Additional resources for the book may be found at the author's website.



DRAGONFLY DREAMS

BY ELEANOR MCCALLIE COOPER

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2021 ROYAL DRAGONFLY BOOK AWARD HISTORICAL FICTION HONORABLE MENTION AND WINNER OF THE PINNACLE BOOK ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FOR YOUNG ADULT HISTORICAL FICTION OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BOOK ENTREPRENEURS

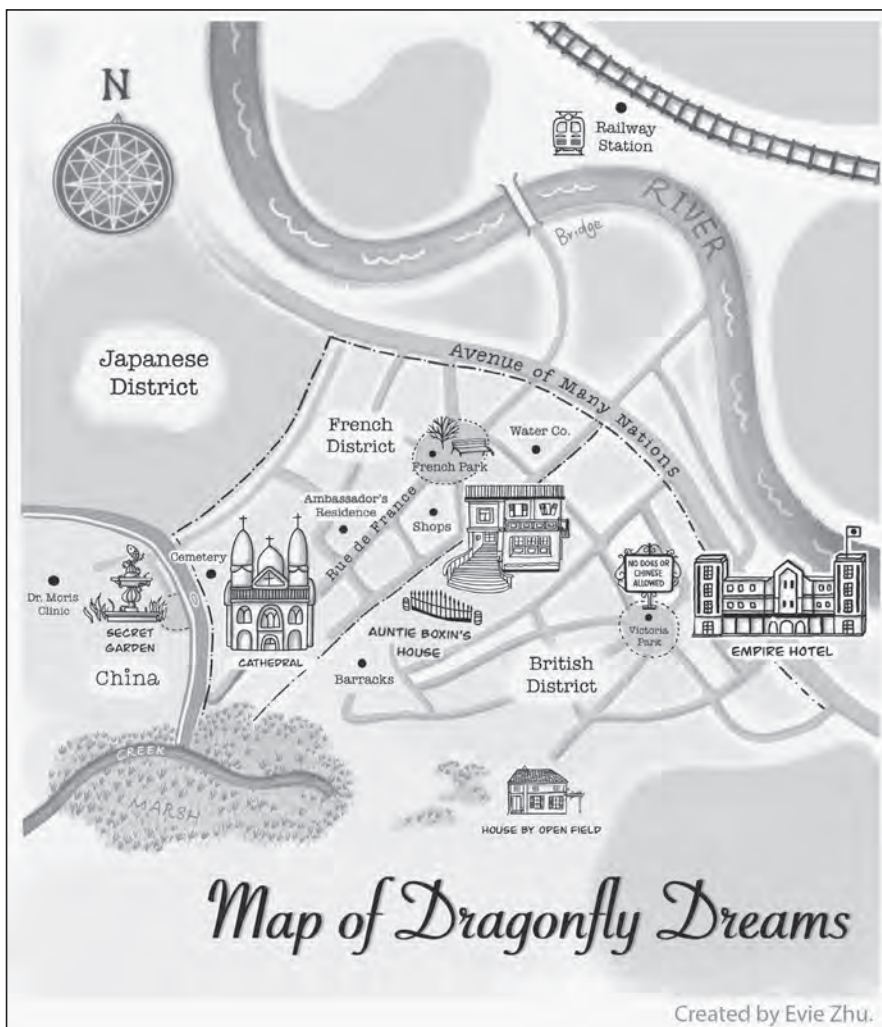
Reviewed by Anne Prescott

D*ragonfly Dreams* chronicles the life of the Liu family in Tianjin, China, in the early 1940s, a time and place in history often overlooked by Americans. Appropriate for middle school grades and above, the captivating story is a vehicle for learning about China, and it can also be used to teach about the challenges and joys experienced by young people during times of conflict.

This story is based on the life of an actual family living in a foreign settlement in Tianjin prior to and during the Japanese occupation in 1941–1945, and is told through the eyes of Nini, who is ten years old when the story begins. Author Eleanor McCallie Cooper (Nini's cousin in real life) skillfully weaves together Chinese history and culture with the daily life experiences of Nini and her family: Da (Liu Fu Chi, “F. C.”), the US-educated Chinese father; Ma (Grace McCallie Divine Liu), the American mother from Chattanooga, Tennessee; Julia (Ju-lan, nicknamed Nini), the US-born oldest child; Ellen (Mei-mei), the middle child; and William (Weilin), the baby of the family.

The author primarily explores the impact of war on the Euro-American community in Tianjin (and by extension in China), the Liu family, and Nini (and by extension children like her). The author has carefully crafted fictional characters of diverse backgrounds and nationalities to present a well-rounded picture of the various communities in Tianjin during those years. Through Nini's friend Chiyoko, whose father is a Japanese doctor and whose mother is Chinese, we get a glimpse of the struggles of a family with ties to both the colonizers and the colonized. The hardships faced by the Euro-American community are expressed through the Irish piano tuner, Nini's British classmates, the family doctor, and the American director of the YMCA married to a Chinese woman. Auntie Boxin, a widowed Korean woman, who is not an enemy of the Japanese, is present throughout the story and plays a critical role in the family's survival. Sun and Amah, the family's household employees, provide assistance to the family at key moments in the story. Finally, Mr. Yasemoto, the boss for the Japanese organization that takes over Da's company, launches the family into their initial upheaval.

Americans and Europeans were encouraged to return home after December 1941, but like Ma, some decided to remain in China. For many, it was the only home they had ever known. Among the challenges the Euro-American community faced were compulsory registration,



This map can be found in the book and the online resources on the author's website at <https://tinyurl.com/2nbe6xr5>.

Pearl Harbor is the catalyst which sends the family into their uncertain future, and Da explains the Japanese occupation to Nini in the historical context of Pearl Harbor, the Opium Wars, and the Boxer rebellion.

wearing armbands to visibly signify their status, and removal to internment camps. Through their stories, we learn the nuanced impact of the war and the Japanese occupation on the Euro-Americans who remained in Tianjin.

The camps, mentioned briefly in the story, are worthy of further exploration, perhaps in conjunction with the experiences of other wartime internees in similar camps in the twentieth century. To learn more about the camps in China, readers may want to consult the book *Ruth's Record: The Diary of an American in Japanese-Occupied Shanghai 1941-1945* by Ruth Hill Barr, which offers a view of life in a Japanese internment camp in China. An interview with Barr's daughter Betty about the family's experiences provides a glimpse into the material presented in the book (<https://tinyurl.com/2nf894jy>).

For the Liu family, Ma's status as an enemy is the origin of some of the obstacles they face. Because of his marriage to an American, as well as his unwillingness to do the bidding of the Japanese occupiers, Da loses his job, and with it the family's income and employer-provided comfortable housing. By the end of the story, the Liu family is effectively in hiding in a rural area near the city, where Ma is able to avoid the Japanese authorities. The family, like many in China, also faced housing crises, hunger, and illness. Nini and her siblings learn to scavenge for food, and the family explores traditional remedies for illnesses, although obtaining the ingredients for those proves to be only slightly easier than obtaining Western medical treatment. When Nini undertakes a treacherous visit to the city to obtain medicine for Mei-mei, who has typhoid, we learn a little about what life has been like for Chiyoko's Japanese father, Dr. Mori. His position as a medical professional brings with it the benefits of access to food and medicine, but their status as a mixed family has led to its own dilemmas of where they belong.

Many of the obstacles Nini confronts will resonate with children facing adversity and disappointment, whether due to war or other situations. From the beginning, Nini is faced with the challenge of identity: is she Chinese or American? Many classmates at her international school see her as Chinese and thus inferior. One schoolmate, who is also half-Chinese, considers himself to be superior to Nini because he has an American last name. Her friend Chiyoko, who is also half-Chinese, is her ally and best friend. For Nini, her status as American enemy manifests itself in the necessity for Da to destroy all letters from her beloved grandmother in Tennessee. Many children who have experienced pandemic isolation will be able to relate to the burden Nini feels being separated from Chiyoko, but she finds comfort in the dragonfly necklace Chiyoko gave her as a present on what turned out to be their last day of school.

Skillfully woven into the narrative are historical events. Pearl Harbor is the catalyst that sends the family into their uncertain future, and Da explains the Japanese occupation to Nini in the historical context of Pearl Harbor, the Opium Wars, and the Boxer Rebellion. *Dragonfly Dreams* includes a historical timeline specific to this story, but educators and students alike may find it useful to refer to *Asia for Educators'* timeline of Chinese history from 1900 to 1950, including the years of Japanese rule in Tianjin (<https://tinyurl.com/2jbdn85v>).

Both Chinese and Euro-American cultures are incorporated into the narrative. A favorite family object, a Monkey King figurine, surfaces in



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several key family struggles. Lunar New Year and Moon Festival celebrations are observed, and Nini reminisces about the prewar festivities as she and her family try to find meaningful ways to modify those celebrations, given the food shortages they face. References to Ma's piano, St. Patrick, the story of Hansel and Gretel, opera, and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* are expressions of the family's Western side. All these lend themselves to discussion about their roles in creating an identity for family members.

Dragonfly Dreams belongs on the shelves of all middle and high school libraries. Through Nini, readers can explore Chinese history and culture in the years 1941–1945, expanding their knowledge of the Pacific War and its impact on children. By extension, perhaps readers will begin to relate Nini's experiences to their own lives, the lives of their friends, and those of children in other war situations.

Additional Resources to Complement *Dragonfly Dreams*

Readers wishing to learn more about the historical and cultural topics included in *Dragonfly Dreams* should begin with McCallie Cooper's nonfiction work *Grace in China*, soon to be republished, about the life of Grace Liu, Nini's mother. This eye-opening account of Grace's commitment to her family provides information on Grace's life before and after the years in *Dragonfly Dreams* and is appropriate for high school students, as well as adults. A review of *Grace in China* appeared in *Education About Asia* in winter 2000.

Dragonfly Dreams contains a map of the areas described in the story, but geography teachers may want to supplement that with a historical map of Tianjin. <https://tinyurl.com/2vytauw7>

The Monkey King and the story *Journey to the West* are always popular with children and could be used effectively to draw students into the story. Here are two resources to begin learning more. Gray and Wang, "Journey to the West: A Platform for Learning about China Past and Present," *Education About Asia* 24, no. 1 (2019): <https://tinyurl.com/mpfmeyf6>; and Ostendorf, "Novel Adventures: Using the *Journey to the West* to Teach Tang China History and Culture," *Education About Asia* 25, no. 2 (2020): <https://tinyurl.com/y69ejutx>.

Although religion is not included in *Dragonfly Dreams*, teachers may be interested in expanding on Monkey to teach about religion. A good starting point is Johnson and Bradeen, "Using 'Monkey' to Teach Religions of China," *Education About Asia* 10, no. 2 (2005): <https://tinyurl.com/47dme4mz>. ♦

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Dragonfly Dreams



Eleanor McCallie Cooper.

Author's Note

D*ragonfly Dreams* is based on a true story. When I was just out of college and on my way to Japan to teach English, my Aunt Mary in California told me that her cousin Grace had married “a Chinaman” and moved to China with him years before. China was closed at the time I learned this, but I set my heart on finding her one day. But, as it turned out, she found me.

Grace McCallie Divine (1901–1979), went to New York City from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to study music in 1928. There she met and married Liu Fu Chi, “F. C.” (1904–1955), a Chinese engineer who had just graduated from Cornell University and taken a job at New York’s public works. They had a daughter named Ju Lan, whose

nickname was “Nini.” The Depression hit, and Mr. Liu returned to China to work for the water works in Tianjin. Grace and Ju Lan soon followed.

In 1937, the Japanese invaded mainland China, but European nations owned and governed territories in the coastal cities, called “concessions.” The Lius lived in the French Concession; therefore, at first they were protected from the turmoil of the Japanese invasion. They had two more children, a daughter in 1937 and a son in 1941.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, Japanese troops took control of the foreign concessions in China. The Americans and Europeans remaining there were forced to register as enemy aliens and, eventually, moved into internment camps.

Grace narrowly escaped internment and lived in hiding with the family until the war ended in August 1945. Her family back home did not know if Grace was alive until a Marine from Chattanooga, private Giles Brooks, found her, weighing barely eighty-six pounds, and sent word home that she had survived. Grace Liu and her family continued to live in China after the war. Her husband died of lung cancer in 1955. Grace Liu taught English at Nankai University where she was arrested during the Cultural Revolution and accused of being a spy and counter revolutionary. After President Nixon and Chairman Mao established diplomatic relations between the two countries, she wrote to her family in Tennessee and returned in 1974 with her son, William. She had lived in China for forty years.

I had a chance to live with Grace the last year of her life and become very close to her. Her son William worked at UC Berkeley. Grace began to write her memories. With a diagnosis of cancer, her two daughters came from China to help with her care. This is the way I came to know my remarkable Chinese cousins.

After Grace died in Berkeley in 1979, her two daughters returned to China where they both had families. William became the director of English language programs for Chinese interpreters at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.

The full story is told in two books: *Grace in China: An American Woman Beyond the Great Wall, 1934–1974* (Black Belt Press, 2000) and in *Grace: An American Woman in China, 1934–74* (Soho Press, 2003) by Eleanor McCallie Cooper and William Liu.

In *Dragonfly Dreams*, the family (Chinese father, American mother, and three children) and the historical dates and facts form the structure of the story, like an envelope; but the content of the story, the letter that goes inside the envelope, is fictional.

—Eleanor McCallie Cooper



F. C. Liu, holding his daughter Ju-lan (Nini), with their amah (nursemaid), Wang nai-nai, in Victoria Park, British Concession, Tianjin, China, 1935. Source: All photos are on the author’s website at <https://tinyurl.com/22zx4jf9>.



Passport picture of Grace McCallie Divine Liu with her three children, Ju-lan, William and Ellen, 1946. It was important for Americans with mixed-race children to be able to claim their children should they need to leave China. Grace never used this passport and did not return to the US until 1974 with her adult son William.

STUDY GUIDE: Questions for discussion

1. Why does Nini feel that the foreign girls at the international school treat her as if she was the foreigner in China?
2. It's easy to identify with Ma's confusion about how a small island nation could occupy a large country like China. Why do you think Japan waited until the bombing of Pearl Harbor to take over the foreign-controlled areas in China?
3. What do oranges and airplanes represent in Nini's imagination? What do snakes and frogs represent? Along this same line, why did Sun give a puppy to Mei-mei?
4. When Nini was quarantined with the whopping cough, she felt like all of China was quarantined from the rest of the world. Can you describe your feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Chiyoko is a fictional character but what do you think happened to her after the war ended?
6. In this story, there are many examples of the need for one person to forgive another person. Name those you can think of. Why is the theme of forgiveness important to war?
7. The principal at Nini's school blamed America for China's troubles and compared Americans to devils who wanted to "chop off children's heads." Nini knew this was not true, and yet she was still treated badly. Later she learned the word *propaganda*. How can you distinguish between what is true and what is propaganda in times of war or other crises?



A photographer in Tianjin, China, captured the two sides of Ju-lan Liu as a child, dressed as a Chinese girl, and dressed as an American girl.



The Liu family, 1945. From left: Ju-lan, Ellen, Grace, F. C. holding William. The photo was taken by Pvt. Giles Brooks, a US Marine from Chattanooga, Tennessee, who sent word to Grace's family that she and her family had survived.



View of British Concession, Tianjin, China, during the Japanese bombing of the city of Tianjin, 1937. The Japanese did not take over the British Concession until after the bombing of the US Naval fleet in Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Dragonfly Dreams Historical Timeline

1842	First Opium War. Britain defeats China, gains treaty ports, called "concessions" in key coastal cities in China
1858	Second Opium War. European nations gain greater control of territories in China
1895	First Sino-Japanese War. Power in Asia shifts to Japan. Japan occupies Korea in 1910
1900	Boxer Rebellion. Britain, France, Russia, Japan, Germany, Italy, Austria and the US, put down an anti-foreign rebellion in China, forcing China to pay indemnity.
1908	Indemnity Scholars. US returned the remainder of the Boxer indemnity payments (\$17 million) as scholarships for Chinese students to study in the US.
1937	Second Sino-Japanese War. Japan takes control of Chinese cities, except for the concessions under European control.*
1939	Germany invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany.
1940	Tripartite Pact between the Axis Powers: Germany, Italy and Japan
1941	Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, takes control of European concessions in China. US declares war on Japan. Nazi Germany declares war on US.
1942	Nazis deported Jews to concentration camps. Japan deported Westerners in China to internment camps.
1945	Germany surrenders May 1945. US burns Tokyo, drops atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrenders August 1945.**

*When Japan occupied China in 1937, Japanese troops did not move into these European-controlled concessions, waiting until after the start of war in Europe and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. After December 1941, the Europeans remaining in those territories were forced to register and were sent to internment camps until the end of the war.

**The occupation of China by Imperial Japan required enormous numbers of civilians to support the troops. Dr. Mori is a fictional character who represents one of those civilians.

Editor's Note: This primary source is presented as written including spelling errors and the presence of a derogatory epithet commonly used to describe Japanese during World War II. Instructors are encouraged to explain the context of the usage, modify, or not use the letter.



The three Liu children, William, Ju-lan, and Ellen, after the end of World War II. Ju-lan is holding their dog, Budgie. The photo was taken by US Marine Jimmy Lail from Chattanooga, 1946.

Post-war letter from Ju-lan (Nini), to her American cousin

May 1946

Dear Elinor,

Thank you so much for your nice letter. I enjoyed it very much.

Now I am going to answer your questions. No, I don't remember you, but ma has told me about you and our fighting over the chair many times. I must have been very rude.

I am 13 year old, but I don't know what grade I am in, because I went to the Tientsin American school till the 3rd grade. Then in 1940 there was no more American school. Then I went to a French convent school. I learned French, English, Arithmetic, and Drawing. Then in 1942 the Japs made us move to the British concession. The house we moved into was a 17 roomed house not counting the servant quarters. Then I went to a chinese school. I had never been to a chinese school before, so I went to the 2 grade. Now I am in the 6 grade. I am not in school now. I stoped in June 1945. I will go back next term. At that

time all the schools were so dirty and full of flies and in the winter there was no heat besides 90 percent of the children had T.B. 5 of my classmates have already died of it.

All we learned was Japanese propaganda. They told us that the Americans were trying to invade china and make all the chinese men into slaves. So Japan had sent her Army and Navy to help china because Japan like the chinese so much; and the Americans were so bad, oh dear, the Americans loved to cut off children's heads off and some of the Americans had two horns and oh yes the Japanese were our brothers. Oh they told such funny stories most of the stories sounded like fairy tales. We had to learn Japanese we all dint like it, so we all flunked in it, and the teacher dint care if we passed or not.

A chinese school is completely different from a foreign school. In China you don't read your lessons you sing them. We have to memorize all our lessons. I can memorize most of the books I have studied. I have not studied algebra yet, but we will have it next year. Besides arithmetic, I am learning how to use the chinese Abacus. When you use it you don't have to think. It is very convenient. My name in chinese looks like this. Ellen's means Lovely Lotus.

I don't think you have seen a real Jap. I have seen them kill two people. One was a old man he could not understand what the Jap was talking about then the Jap got so mad he pushed the old man against a electric barbed wire and the old man fell down dead. The other was a little girl about 8 years old. The Jap hit her right on the forehead she died also. It made me so angry I felt sick I wanted to pull his eyes out.

During the war there were lots of No. 8s. They have blown up many Jap factorys and Ammunition dumps. No. 8 means chinese guerillas.

I am 4 feet 11 1/2. You must be very tall. I have dark brown hair, dark brown chinese eyes, high cheek bones, a round face now you know what I look like.

My sister is 8 year old. My brother is 4 he will be 5 this May. I have a dog and a cat. Ma just bought me a pair of new shoes it cost \$1,600 CNC. Don't you think that is very expensive?

Ma has been in china so long and she still can't speak much chinese. Even some of the marines we know can speak better than ma can. She says chinese is the hardest language to learn. The way you speak it the way you write it are not the same.

Tientsin is noting to look at. Its just a mud hole. Peking and Pei To Ho are beautiful places. I don't know any foreign children because Ma says they are not nice people. All my friend are chinese.

I am glad you went to Florida and had a nice time. I hope everybody is well now. Hope you will write again.

With love,

Ju Lan Liu

P.S. Please excuse my spelling—it is horrible.