

Fiction Excerpt 1: The Wonderful Chuang Brocade

(a Chinese folktale)

For thousands of years, the people of China have been famous for the rich art in their silken brocades. The Chuang people of Kwangsi Province are especially well-known for their beautiful designs and pictures. Some of the Chuang people tell stories such as this one.

In this province, at the foot of high peaks, in a thatched cottage, lived an old widow with her three sons: Lemo, Letui, and Leju. The old mother was a most wonderful weaver of brocades, which merchants and folks bought from her to make vests, bedcovers, and blankets. Her sons were woodcutters.

One day the old mother went to sell a fine brocade she had made. In the merchant's shop hung a painting of wondrous beauty. It showed a village with a rich, tall palace with colorful gardens around it. Beautiful flowers and ripe vegetables were everywhere; ducks, chickens, and cows were all over. Never had she seen a more beautiful scene. Quickly she sold her brocade and bought the painting, forgetting the rice and other foods she needed.

At home she proudly showed the painting. "How happy I would be to live in that palace with its gardens," she said to her sons.

"That is a dream, *Ah-mee*," spoke Lemo, the oldest son.

"Maybe we will live in such a place in our next life," said Letui, her second son.

Then Leju, the youngest, said, "*Ah-mee*, you must weave a brocade just like the painting, and when you look at your work you will think you are living in the palace with those gardens."

"You are right, son," said the old mother, and she set to work at once.

Day in, day out, and nights as well, she worked at the wooden loom with silk threads, and the scenes of the painting grew in beauty on the brocade.

She never stopped working. Her old eyes hurt from the smoke of the pine-oil lamps, but she did not stop. After one year, tears filled her eyes, but instead of stopping, she put her tears into the brocade, using them to make a singing river and a shining pond full of fishes. After two years, drops of blood fell from her eyes onto the brocade. Out of these, she wove bright red flowers and a glowing sun.

The old, near-blind mother worked for three years until she finished putting the painting into the brocade. The sons were so proud of her work, they took it out of their dark hut and put it in front of the door where there was enough daylight to see and admire it. Everyone who saw it exclaimed, "What a wonderful Chuang brocade!"

All of a sudden a weird, whirring wind came along and . . . *whisht!* It picked up the brocade and carried it high, high up into the sky until the brocade disappeared.

The old mother fainted, everyone shouted . . . but the brocade was gone. The mother became very ill and no doctor could help her. She was forever crying for her brocade!

Seeing this, Lemo said, "Mother, stop grieving! I will find your beautiful brocade and bring it back to you."

"Go, son, and may good fortune go with you."

Lemo set out over mountains and across rivers. One day he came to a mountain pass, on one side of which stood a stone house. To the right was a stone horse, its mouth wide open, bent over an arbutus bush full of red berries.

At the door sat an old, white-headed woman.

"Who are you and where are you going, young man?" she asked Lemo.

He told her the tale of his mother's beautiful brocade—how hard and long she had worked at it, and how the wind had carried it away, and how very ill she had become.

"Young Lemo, I know all this. The winds of the mountains tell me many things. Your brocade is now in the Sun Mountain of the East with the beautiful fairies who live there. They saw the brocade and sent the wind for it. They are now copying your mother's beautiful work, and you can get it back only with the help of the stone horse. But the horse will help you only if you give him two of your teeth to replace the ones he is missing in his mouth, so that he can eat the berries from the arbutus bush. Then he will take you far and wide to the Sun Mountain in the East.

"On the way you will come to a mountain of leaping flames through which you must pass. You must do it in silence and without fear. If you cry out even once, you will turn into charcoal.

"Then you will come to a sea full of jagged ice with knife-cutting cold winds tearing at you, but you must not cry out or even shiver with cold. If you do, you will be crushed by the wild, tossing ice and buried in the icy water.

"If you go through these trials, you will get your mother's brocade."

Lemo was silent. His face turned blue with fear and he hung his head and thought for a long time. To lose his teeth and endure such terrible trials!

The old woman watched him. Then she said, "Son, your face tells your thoughts. It says: it is too much! But you tried, so here is a little iron box full of gold nuggets. Go back home and live well."

Lemo took the box and thanked her and left. But he was thinking hard. "If I go home I must share the gold with all my family! There will be little for me. . . . No! I will go to the city and live on my wealth!" So he turned his steps toward the big city.

The old mother waited and waited, pining for her beautiful brocade. "If only I could see it before I die," she cried continually.

Letui, her second son, said, "Mother, I will bring you your brocade," and he set off at once.

He, too, came to the stone house with the old lady and her stone horse, and she told him just what she had told Lemo.

Letui also thought and thought, and the old woman knew what was in his mind. "Son," she said, "I can tell you think the trials are too much for you, but you started bravely, so here is a little iron box with gold nuggets. Go back and live happily." But Letui thought the same as Lemo, so instead of going home, he, too, turned toward the city.

At home, the old mother waited, crying for her handiwork until her eyes gave out and she became completely blind!

Leju, the youngest son, said, "Mother, I will go on the road to find your beautiful brocade and bring it back to you. You will be with kind neighbors who will take care of you while I am away."

He bade her good cheer and left. Like his brothers, he came to the stone house with the stone horse and the old woman. She told him how he could get the brocade only with the help of the horse, and of the dangers he must face.

Instead of thinking long, as his brothers had, Leju gave two of his teeth to the horse and mounted it. The horse ate the berries and then went off swift as the wind. Horse and rider went through the burning mountain and the icy sea. But Leju sat firm on the horse, thinking only of helping his mother, and so he reached the Sun Mountain and the palace where the lovely fairies were busy copying *Ah-mee's* masterpiece.

Leju spoke to them, telling them of his mother's sickness and blindness, and of how she continued to cry for her lost brocade.

"We will finish copying your mother's wonderful work by tomorrow morning," said one of the fairies. "Then you can take it back to your *Ah-mee*."

They gave him delicious fruits to eat, and he fell asleep. During the night, the fairies hung a big glowing pearl on the rafter and wove by its light.

A fairy in a red dress finished first. She looked at her own work, and then at *Ah-mee's*. She sighed, "I am afraid mine is not nearly as fine. I wish I could live in the beautiful place that is on her brocade." She began weaving her own image near the fish pond that *Ah-mee* had woven.

Leju slept in the palace of the fairies, but the next morning, before the fairies arose, he took his mother's brocade, mounted the stone horse, and in a wink of time, they were back at the stone house where the white-haired woman sat waiting for him.

"Leju, your mother is very ill," she said. "Hurry back. The sight of her brocade will bring her health." Then she took the two teeth from the horse's mouth and put them back into Leju's mouth. Next, she put a pair of magic deerskin shoes on his feet and bade him good luck.

The shoes were like wings and took him swiftly to his home, where his mother was lying in bed, thin as a stick and barely alive.

"*Ah-mee!*" he shouted, "I have brought you your brocade. Here!"

No sooner did she touch it than she began to feel well again. Her eyes opened wide and once again she could see! She got up and took her beloved work out into the open sunshine, and then . . . a miracle happened! The embroidery on her brocade became a real place. Trees! Flowers! All were there before the rich palace, and by the fish pond stood a lovely maiden in a red dress.

Leju married the maiden, and the two lived happily all their lives.

One day, two beggars came to the village. They were Lemo and Letui. They had spent all their gold drinking, eating, and making merry in the city, and now they were dressed in rags and begging for food. When they saw the beautiful garden where *Ah-mee*, Leju, and his wife were walking and singing, they quietly slipped away, too ashamed to face their mother and brother.