

A large, stylized illustration of a dragon in shades of grey and black, winding across the page. The dragon's head is on the right, with its mouth open, showing teeth and a tongue. Its body is covered in scales and has a long, flowing tail. The dragon is set against a light grey background.

I
SEE MUN AND THE DRAGON

Translated by Wendy Chan

Edited by Laura Ng and John Minford

INTRODUCTION

This story was first published in several instalments in the now-defunct Hong Kong daily newspaper *Hong Kong Express*, in 1975. It was published in book form in Taiwan in 1979, and in 1988 was one of three Leung Ping-kwan (PK thereafter) stories published together in Hong Kong in the collection *Three Fish*.

The main character in the story, See Mun (in Cantonese, Shimen in Mandarin), literally 'Master Gate', who has such a touching relationship with a dragon in this tale, is in some ways a Chinese Everyman, as was Lu Xun's Ah Q in the 1920s.

The Chinese dragon has always been a fascinating creature, a complex embodiment of the timeless soul of China, a symbol of the power of the imagination, of the creative energy and transformative possibilities of the Tao. We must be careful not to ascribe to this benign creature any of the negative features of the Western dragon (the one that St George so heroically vanquished). The Chinese dragon could be almost any imaginary animal. To 'ride the dragon' is to travel on the wings of inspiration and perhaps become immortal. In the words of Richard Wilhelm, it is 'a creature of light, the positive and numinous symbol of the electrically charged, dynamic, arousing force that manifests itself in the thunderstorm.' To 'carve dragons' (as See Mun literally does in the story) was a metaphor for the art of writing. The greatest of all Chinese treatises on literature (written in the fifth century AD) calls itself *The Heart-and-Mind of the Written Word and the Carving of Dragons*. And this treatise itself refers back

to the most ancient of Chinese Classics, the oracular *Book of Changes*, which in the very first of its 64 tarot-like Hexagrams, named *Qian* ('Heaven' or 'The Creative'), repeatedly invokes the image of the dragon. In the judgment on the first of the six powerful *Yang* lines of this Hexagram, we read: 'The dragon lies hidden', *Draco Absconditus*; in the second line, 'The dragon is seen in the fields', *Draco in Campis*; in the fifth line, 'The dragon flies in Heaven', *Draco Volans in Coelo*.

This in many ways very modern dragon-tale by PK has deep roots in the Chinese literature of the remote past, harking back not only to the early shamanistic 'journeys through space' of the early *Songs of the South* ('I watered my dragon steeds at the Pool of Heaven'), but also to the many entertaining and quirky 'biographies' and 'pseudo-biographies' that have haunted the Chinese imagination and that ultimately stem from the *Historical Annals* of the great storyteller Sima Qian of the Han Dynasty. It thus stands in the long tradition of that deceptively casual literature of the curious and strange in which the Chinese *literati* have so excelled. PK himself (surely a latter-day Chinese *literatus*) prefaced his story with a direct quotation from an early work in this genre, *Lives of the Immortals*. The same mythical emperor Kongjia mentioned there is supposed to have had another dragon-keeper called Liu Lei, who served his sovereign a dish of minced dragon meat (after the dragon entrusted to his care had fallen ill and died). This Liu Lei story occurs in full in the very early classic, the *Zuo Commentary on the Spring and*

Autumn Annals, and was later repeated in the *Historical Annals*. PK uses it to preface his tale about See Mun.

Western influences are also apparent throughout—overtones of magical realism and surrealism, touches of St Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, of Swiftian and Orwellian satirical fable. From time to time, See Mun's labyrinthine Imperial Palace also calls to mind the dark gothic citadel in Mervyn Peake's grotesque fantasy *Gormenghast*, much of which was itself inspired by a childhood lived in China, in the dark northern port city of Tientsin.

PK himself wrote quite simply: 'In this, my first collection of stories, I drew on magical realism to explore the absurdity of Hong Kong.' But one cannot help seeing in it the larger absurdity of the Chinese state.

John Minford

Further Reading of Leung Ping-kwan's Fiction in English Translation

Islands and Continents, Short Stories by Leung Ping-kwan. Edited by John Minford, with Brian Holton and Agnes Chan. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.

Paper Cuts. Translated by Brian Holton. Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2015.

Shimen, or See Mun, was a disciple of Master Xiaofu. He lived on a diet of peach and plum blossom and had the power to summon fire at will. He once looked after a dragon belonging to Emperor Kongjia of the Xia Dynasty. He and his sovereign did not see eye to eye, and he was eventually put to death at the Emperor's orders, and his corpse buried out in the wilds. At daybreak, a fierce thunderstorm swept the land, and when the storm ceased, every plant on the hillside was seen to have been set on fire and scorched. The Emperor went to the temple and prayed. On his way home, he died.

From *Lives of the Immortals*

(uncertainly attributed to the scholar Liu Xiang, 77–6 BC, but more probably written sometime in the first centuries AD).

I

The shoes lay in a pile, like a small hill, in the corner of the room, its summit almost touching the ceiling. A fly spotted it, and buzzed its way there to sniff the shoes, alighting on them here and there. The shoes were of every imaginable colour, and they each had a different smell. Some of them looked like big slabs of slate, others more like small pebbles. Some even looked a bit like fat little dolls or frowning shrivelled up old men.

Suddenly this undulating hill of shoes started heaving and shaking. One more heave, and the fly buzzed away, fearing that a violent eruption might be imminent.

The hill heaved yet again, as if there was something inside trying to break its way out. The shoes at the top started sliding down and eventually the whole hill collapsed into a hollow like the crater of a volcano. And then suddenly a man's head emerged—this was See Mun.

'I'm *never* going to mend shoes again!' he cried.

He was talking to his sister who was at the other end of the room. She held her head firmly down and continued to concentrate on her weaving.

'From now on I'm going to look after *dragons!*' cried See Mun.

His sister's shuttle kept on moving up and down. The lengths of white gauze she was weaving grew longer and thicker. There was still no response from her, so See Mun started talking to himself, cursing the pile of odd-looking shoes and complaining about the endlessly boring work he had to undertake every day. When he'd exhausted himself with his complaints, he stretched an arm out of the window, picked a couple of peach flowers and popped them into his mouth.

'There's absolutely no reason why I should have to mend three hundred pairs of shoes first before I can be a dragon-keeper! My Master taught me about dragons, not shoes. I've already learned most of the dragon-keeping techniques, so why can't I just go and do it?' Even with a mouth full of flowers, he could produce a good grumble.

'Looking after dragons is more than a technique,' said his sister.

With these wise words, she lowered her head and carried on with her weaving.

See Mun didn't know what to say. He reached a hand out again through the window and plucked another flower.

II

See Mun rushed into the courtyard and proclaimed loudly: 'I've mended them all!'

This time his sister was standing there in front of a brick kiln, slowly inserting an assortment of small clay figures, human statuettes, animals and bottles, into the kiln, within which a fire was blazing. She closed the small iron door and the figures were seen no more.

See Mun repeated his proclamation, but she merely muttered 'Hmm' and went back into the house. She examined the mended shoes, looking over each pair carefully. Whenever she came across a pair that had been well mended, she nodded her head approvingly.

'I *must* follow my calling in life and be a dragon-keeper,' See Mun blurted out.

Still she said nothing, but continued her careful inspection of the shoes. It was as if suddenly they had now become her great passion in life. She spent the whole afternoon examining them. When she'd finished doing this, she went back out into

the courtyard and opened the iron door of the kiln, taking out the men, animals and bottles. They were now fully fired earthenware figures. One or two were burnt, and these she put to one side; the others she looked at one by one with great care. It was now as if earthenware figures had become her great passion in life.

See Mun sat there seething with rage and gnawing on whatever he could get his teeth into. Next to him was a peach tree. He finished off all the flowers, then starting tucking into the fruit, the leaves and branches, and finally began chewing on the trunk itself.

He had eaten his way through half the trunk, when his sister, as if performing some sort of magic trick, took a small brown bottle from within a hollow in what was left of the tree trunk, and extracted from it a crumpled piece of paper, which she handed to See Mun. He took it and straightening out all the creases, read what was written on it. There was an astonished expression on his face. 'Why,' he cried, 'this is a summons from the Palace!'

'Yes,' nodded his sister. 'They're looking for a dragon-keeper.'

'What about the one they had before?'

'He didn't know how to care for dragons properly. He steamed one, ate it and then ran away.'

III

See Mun was assigned an old man as a guide on his new quest. He soon found himself walking round and round the Palace

in circles, and as he did so he felt more and more as if he was being sucked into a labyrinth. He ran up one flight of steps, and down another, trudged his way from one official department to another, met one person after another.

He was standing in front of a desk for yet another job interview, and one of the three individuals sitting behind the desk began to question him closely about his previous work experience. Another asked if he'd brought a formal certificate with an official seal affixed to it. A third wanted to know whether he'd ever travelled beyond the borders of the Xia Empire.

When they learned that he'd once been a disciple of the great Master Xiaofu, they were both surprised and impressed.

See Mun expressed the forlorn hope that they would judge him on something other than his qualifications, his district of origin, or his Master's name and reputation. He suggested instead that a live dragon should be brought in. They shook their heads at this idea and told him they would inform him of the result of the interview within fourteen-and-three-quarter days.

Guided once more by the old man, See Mun wound his way slowly back to the outside world down long dimly lit corridors, with closed doors lining both sides. He couldn't help but wonder whether there were actually any people working behind them at all. From time to time scraps of conversation were audible, but they died away almost instantly.

All that could be heard now in the lonely corridors was the desultory conversation between See Mun and the old man as they trudged along.

'What kind of a man was the previous dragon-keeper?'

‘His name was Liu Lei. He studied with the Great Dragon Rearer . . .’

‘Goodness, a disciple of the Great Rearer himself!’

‘Not exactly,’ the old man corrected him. ‘The story goes that he only studied with the Great Master for a few days, and then succeeded in talking the official authorities into letting him come and work here.’

The silence was such that when the old man raised his voice even slightly, you could hear the echo resound in the corridor. He continued: ‘Liu didn’t know how to look after dragons at all! One of his male dragons died of neglect after a short while, so he told someone to mince it up and steam it, and then presented some of it to the Emperor as a rare delicacy. Later, when the authorities asked him to present the dragon itself, he knew he was in trouble. He was so frightened he ran away from the Palace taking his entire family with him.’

See Mun was appalled that anyone could treat a dragon in this way, and not love and cherish it.

As they were talking, they turned a corner and the old man stopped in front of a window. He pointed through it to a grey compound in the distance and informed See Mun that this was the dragon enclosure. In front of the compound hung a row of dark grey curtains. The whole scene was desolate in the extreme.

The original feeling of excitement in See Mun’s heart began to fade at once. As he looked at what lay before him, a new feeling of apprehension and foreboding took hold.