



# Story Guide

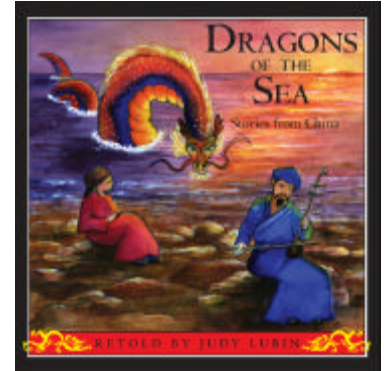
For

## Dragons of the Sea

Stories From China

Retold by Judy Lubin

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Story Guides are meant to be used by adults, and teens grades 6 and older, to help choose and use stories. They explain the hidden meaning and symbolism that I give to each of the stories when I tell them. The information in this guide is not meant to be shared with children. Children experience stories through their imaginations as a fun, engaging and concrete experience, nothing like the abstract and intellectual approach taken in the Story Guides. Telling children what we expect them to take from a story is akin to giving away the secret of a magic trick. We take away the fun and the magic! And remember, children relate best to stories when they have a chance to process them. Whenever possible, play the stories one at a time with play or quiet time in between.

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Chinese dragons are very different creatures from Western dragons. They are watery, rather than fiery; a sign of good luck, not bad; bringers rather than takers of fortune. But the biggest difference is that, unless you cross them, Chinese dragons are not a terror on the outside that must be fought and conquered. Instead, they are bearers of great fortune that we connect with on the inside. Put into Western terms, we can think of the Chinese dragon as a metaphor for our emotional side – powerfully constructive when you know how to work with it and powerfully destructive when you don't.

As with all of my Story Guides, the symbolism that I describe for each tale is only one way of looking at the story (and meant only for adults!). The purpose of the Story Guides is to show the depth of meaning that each tale offers and to give a glimpse of the particular meaning that I give to a story. This is particularly true with the stories described here. Because I am rendering Chinese tales with a Western ear, I may be hearing something in them that was not originally intended. Indeed, I have not yet heard a Chinese folklorist describe the dragon as a metaphor for our emotional lives (although, I've seen very little English language analysis from the Chinese perspective). To my ear, however, the emotional metaphors are clear. Because I have actively worked to deepen these metaphors, the symbolism that I describe here does lurk under the surface of my versions, even if not present in the originals.



My versions of these four tales metaphorically explore the relationship between our inner emotional lives and our behavior in the outside world. In these tales, we see that the right kind of behavior leads us to connect with the dragon. But we also see that connection with the inner world of the dragon brings material fortune in the outer world. From outer to inner and back to outer again.

While all of the tales show this pattern, each points out a different aspect of the relationship with our emotional lives. We see multiple ways to connect with the dragon – hard work from Seventh Sister; music from The Fiddler; kindness from the Pearl; and willingness to make amends from Lu. Seventh Sister teaches that we connect with the dragon when we take responsibility for our own work, and actually do the work that is ours to do – we cannot fool the dragon! Both the Pearl and Lu show us that (counter intuitively) we must think of others in order to connect deeply with our inner self. The Fiddler and Lu tell us that we must experience our feelings, especially our negative feelings, to reach our dragons.

The dragon stories also provide insight on gender stereotypes. Because Asian and Western thinking differs so markedly on certain gender issues, these stories can actually be used as powerful counter examples to Western gender stereotypes, even though they arise from a time and place in which, sadly, a woman's power was limited. In the western world, steel is a sign of strength. It is sturdy, rigid and unbending. Since men are associated with strength (in both cultures), men in Western cultures are seen as being strong in a rigid, unbending way. In China, by contrast, strength is characterized by bamboo, which bends under pressure instead of breaking. In China, men are also associated with strength, but it is strength through flexibility. A stereotypical Chinese woman shows weakness by her rigid, stubborn behavior. To Western ears, however, stereotypical Chinese women appear resolute and firm – as strong as Western men!

Another difference comes from the holistic nature of Asian culture, which recognizes emotions as a source of power, not weakness. In keeping with gender issues, dragons, which are seen as powerful creatures, are affiliated with other power sources in the society – men and emotions. Thus, we see in three out of the four stories a man marrying a dragon. Chinese culture sees these stories as examples of how the male side of ourselves will unite with the powerful male symbol of the dragon. In order for this uniting to occur, the powerful dragon character must be feminine – yin and yang must combine to make a whole. This is easily possible, because all entities contain both yin and yang, so a male character is easily seen as having a female aspect. The stories, then, associate the female characters with emotion in a manner that is somewhat similar to the association between women and emotions that we find in Western lore. The difference, however, is that emotions are affiliated with strength. Thus, the female characters in the Chinese dragon stories come across as strong and powerful to Western ears!

### **Seventh Sister and the Serpent Prince**

This story comes from the Yi people of Southern China. Memorized in poem form and recited at special ceremonies, the story truly represents the Yi version of the quintessential epic novel. It contains a full life cycle and covers all of the wisdom that one needs to live a good life. From the structure of the tale and the reverence that the Yi give to it, we can tell that this is a foundational story for them. It has elements that suggest that it is either part of or related to a Creation story. With a plot line akin to that of Noah's Arc or Gilgamesh, the world is destroyed by a great flood. The only remaining people form the beginnings of a new world. Because Seventh Sister and Serpent Prince are the only characters to have children, all succeeding generations must hark back to them – and to the dragon. The Yi people are telling themselves that the dragon – and the emotional side that

the dragon represents - is at the root of the tree of humanity. This view differs starkly from our modern day, Western worldview which relegates emotions to something lesser, something to get under control and out of the way of the intellect. But it is right in line with cutting edge Western thinking on this issue, which is beginning to re-assert emotion as the foundation of rationality.

The story begins with the Dragon King showing his son the world, which is a metaphor for bringing our emotions out into the world. Of course, Serpent Prince loves the world and wants to live in it fully. Emotions are meant to be experienced out in the world. Most are better when shared. Some, like love and compassion, only exist in the context of an "other". Even when private, all emotions must be experienced or "let out", or they will live dangerously corked up inside.

That the Dragon King becomes upset when his son behaves in a fully natural manner reminds us of our own role as parents. We are supposed to let our children grow into independent beings, but that doesn't mean we won't feel a sense of loss when we achieve our goal and wave good-bye as they head off on their own. The tears of the Dragon King are just as natural as Serpent's Prince's need to go.

They also represent the crisis that we often need to let our own emotions out. Serpent Prince, representing that part of our emotional life which is meant to go out in the world, wants to go where he belongs, but cannot because he does not have permission. He never gets official permission, but finds the opportunity to leave when the situation becomes a crisis. For better or worse, this is often how we let our emotions out. Because societal norms sometimes make us feel that we don't have permission to let them out, emotions may remain bottled up until they explode in a manner that appears destructive, but also brings the silver lining of a new beginning.

The way in which the Serpent Prince comes to the earth is also reminiscent of some Native American creation tales. In the Iroquois story, for example, the daughter of the Great Chief of the Heavens becomes sick and eventually falls through the sky when the inhabitants grow frustrated with her illness. Once out of the heavens, she creates land from the expanse of waters and brings the earth into being. While her fall from the heavens is treated as a tragedy, her presence on the earth is clearly necessary for the good of humankind. The same is true of Serpent Prince's departure from his father's palace. He leaves the magical lair of the dragon in tragedy, but once upon the earth, he builds humanity and works towards the good of the world. This plot sequence reminds us that growing up is bitter and sweet, both at the same time - and that story is an exceptionally good medium for paradox.

Seventh Sister, while impressed by Serpent Prince's work at healing the earth, does not forget the dragon's capacity for destruction. Emotions are a double edged sword - powerfully constructive when you know how to work with them and powerfully destructive when you don't. Her sisters do not have the courage necessary to wield this sword, but Seventh Sister does. First, however, she checks to make sure that Serpent Prince can use his emotions wisely, despite past events.

After the marriage, both Seventh Sister and Serpent Prince exhibit behaviors that the Chinese value highly and associate with a good life - they are hard working and dutiful. Because of this, their lives are filled with fortune and happiness. They show us that we can best manage our emotional lives with a good habit life.

But Eldest Sister returns to show us life is not without its trials and tribulations. She takes Seventh Sister's clothes, which is akin to modern day identity theft. She tries to become her sister by imitating her on the surface, but she never makes the inner changes that would allow her to have the same fortune and happiness as her hard working, emotionally wise sister. Through the whole story, Eldest Sister represents the emotion of envy - she wants what she doesn't deserve. In stories from all lands, the character that

represents envy – usually the witch in western stories – never gets a happy ending. This is because envy is not an emotion with a positive side. Contrast envy to anger. Plato tells us that there are times in which it is downright immoral NOT to become angry. Wrongdoing, irreverence, injustice should meet with anger, lest they continue unchecked. Envy, on the other hand, always leaves us unhappy and never serves a useful purpose. That is why Eldest Sister, representing envy, does not get a happy ending.

Serpent Prince does not, at first, notice the change in his wife. Emotions have memory; they are nostalgic. This is why we can stay with someone while they go through hard times. Once we develop a connection with someone, we will stand by them rain or shine.

Serpent Prince worries and throws himself so deeply into his habit life that he cannot stand back and listen for the solution. This is the downside of emotional memory. There is a fine line between staying with someone through the bad times and pretending that a problem does not exist. Serpent Prince, now that he has come onto the earth, falls into this all too human trap. And too, he has chosen not to take his father's path – the path of using destructive anger. Through his good work habits, he has learned to quell his anger. Overall, the story recommends this path, but still reminds us that it has consequences. When we need destructive anger to stop an injustice, it may not be so readily available.

He finally hears the call when he gets away from his regular routine. He hasn't broken from his dutiful habit life – he goes out to the woods in an effort to continue his chores – but he does step away from the problem and give himself some rest. Only then can he see clearly. Eldest Sister cannot fool him forever. After all, we can only claim the wealth of the dragon when we take responsibility for our own work, and for our own lives.

### **Lu Helps a Dragon**

Lu's story shows us another aspect of connecting with the dragon – the redemptive power of allowing ourselves to feel our remorse when we have made a mistake. At the beginning of the story, Lu fails due to a typical act of arrogance or hubris, falsely believing that the standard rules don't apply to him. But, rather than attempting to blame fault on someone else, he accepts his failure. He allows himself to feel the shame and disappointment that his actions begot. This puts him on a path that eventually leads him to the dragon.

But he doesn't go straight to the dragon. He gets there only after his horse is startled by a sparrow. In stories, sparrows, and other small ground loving songbirds, represent intuition. Birds are associated with the spirit because the bird's eye view is analogous to the broader perspective that the higher self has over one's life. Sparrows, however, are earthly birds and represent a very grounded sense of a broader perspective. That is, they represent intuition. His intuition tells him to travel so deeply into his remorse that he finds himself in a place he has never been before – the inner most reaches of his self where he will meet the dragon.

While he does meet the dragon quickly after experiencing remorse and following his intuition, he has a ways to go before he unites with her. His next step is to recognize the pain of others and to respond to that pain compassionately. Consciousness guru Harry Palmer sets forth an exercise that will lead to "enlightened justice", or successful recovery from a mistake. He suggests we move ourselves through the following steps: I did it (accept ownership); I'm sorry (allow yourself to feel remorse); I'll fix it (take action to make amends); forgive and let go.

When Lu accepts the responsibility of helping the Dragon Princess, he is moving from the "I'm sorry" stage and onto to the "I'll fix it" step. But, as is often the case with bigger picture problems, he can't see at that time how his actions to help the princess will help him

make amends for his own mistake. He is helping her only out of a sense that he will somehow make himself feel better – if only because he delays the time at which he will have to admit his mistake to his parents. But, by the end of the story, his compassion has brought him a personal benefit. The story is telling us that *any* compassionate action will move us towards fixing a mistake. If nothing else, it takes our focus off of our miserable selves and gets us moving in the right direction.

One of the first things that Lu encounters on his path to make amends is the Dragon King's brother, who represents unbridled emotion. In Chinese tales, dragons often represent a sort of "tough love". When met with the right kind of behavior, dragons will handsomely reward – the biggest reward being long lasting relationship with the dragon. But when they come across misbehavior, dragons will punish. The brother plays this role when he destroys his niece's husband for his errant behavior.

But the brother represents more than just simple, rational punishment for wrong doing. This dragon is not at all rationally motivated. Instead, he, himself, is acting in an errant manner. He is unable to control his anger and acts out of unjustifiable anger – as his brother says, "It is unwise to be angry with the heavens." He must be chained to a pillar.

If dragons are a metaphor for our emotional life, then we must allow for the appearance of this type of character – the destructive, raging, irrational fire that will destroy if unleashed. No meeting with our inner selves can avoid the very real presence of these deep, intense feelings. On most days, they can be kept in check – the equivalent of being tied to a pillar – but they are also available when we need them. And, indeed, the plot line does need them. The unleashing of the Princess's uncle has a beneficial effect. As I've mentioned before in this Story Guide, sometimes the moral high road not only allows us to express anger, but demands that we do. Anger is a very powerful tool against injustice. In this case, the uncle's anger puts a full stop to the oppression of the Dragon Princess.

At this point, the story line finally connects Lu's compassionate action to the righting of his previous wrong against his family, and we can see the bigger picture that even we, the listener, were not aware of at the start of Lu's path towards amends. Remember that the dragon princess represents our inner emotional side. When Lu made his mistake, he offended his family, but he also offended himself and his sense of integrity. He makes amends, first, by making amends with his own inner self – by returning to integrity. Once this is done, then he can easily make outer amends and address the wrong done to his family. The jewels almost fall into his pocket, once he has healed his inner connections. He unites with his inner self, and wins the happily ever after.

### **The Pearl That Shone By Night**

In this story, the deeper messages bloom much more readily up to the surface. Both outwardly and inwardly, the story is about the power of kindness and empathy. It teaches us that connection with our emotional life is dependent upon how we treat others. The older brother thinks only of himself, and in so doing, misses his opportunity for union with the dragon and all the good fortune that it implies. But the younger brother puts the good of others before his own needs and, in so doing, comes into relationship with the dragon and with his inner self.

In this story, the role of the dragon goes a bit deeper than a simple metaphor for our emotional side. Here, the dragon princess more closely symbolizes our sense of self. More subtle than a healthy emotional life, a strong sense of self is associated with an inner sense of peace, security and fullness. When we have a strong sense of self, we know who we are and we know how to make ourselves inwardly happy. We also have a full container for that self, which means that we understand the boundaries between self and other. Knowing where we stop and where others begin helps us to navigate the terrain of relationships.

Indeed, psychologist Madeline Levine (in *The Price of Privilege*) points out that only when we have a strong sense of self can we have mature, healthy relationships with others. In this state, we can also be in relationship with our self, because there is a self to be in relationship with.

First, let's look at what happens when this is missing. The older brother is not acting from a sense of self. Rather, he is acting from selfishness, which is very different. Selfishness begins with an empty feeling inside, a sense of scarcity, which we try to fill by acquiring outside elements – material goods or relationships in which we have the controlling hand. A similar condition is found in narcissism, which the older brother also exhibits. While we think of narcissism as always thinking of oneself, Levine reminds us that narcissism is actually a pre-occupation with how others see oneself. Narcissism and selfishness are problems of excessive *outer* focus. We try to fill the inner void with outer things.

Although a selfish person, like the older brother, has an excessive outer focus, he also has an inaccurate assessment of the outer world and its needs. He asks for food from a starving village without even seeming to notice the villagers' hunger. He demands a boat to meet his own goals without noticing that the villagers are facing a far greater need for the boat. So focused is he on gaining possession of the maiden, on filling his inner void with outer things, that he acts as if he is completely unaware of others and their problems. The problem is not actually that he doesn't notice the villagers, but rather that he only notices them in the context of how they can be a means to achieving his own goals. He wrongly views others as extensions of himself. Because of this, he cannot achieve compassion, which fundamentally requires that we understand the difference between self and other.

Without compassion, the older brother cannot unite with the dragon princess, which represents a uniting with one's inner self. The point here is clear: by preventing a relationship with others, selfishness prevents a relationship with oneself.

Contrast this with the character of the younger brother. Not only can the younger brother enter into a relationship with the dragon princess, but he can also enter into a healthy relationship with the villagers. Not blinded by the false belief that they are merely extensions of himself, the younger brother can see that the villagers are separate entities with separate goals. Thus, he can see their suffering. At the same time, he is aware of his own goals to obtain the pearl and marry the maiden. He is also aware that the situations are separate and that there is, at some level, a choice to be made between the meeting of these two goals.

But it is precisely this understanding of the difference between self and other that helps him to find the solution that meets both needs at once. The younger brother's solution depends on his ability to understand the difference between inner driven happiness and the drive to buy happiness with possessions. Because the younger brother is not defining his happiness in terms of material possessions, he can see that the pearl and his happiness are not the same thing. Instead, the pearl is one opportunity for earthly good fortune. He knows the strength that rests inside him and understands that the loss of one pearl, while disappointing, is something from which he can recover.

Unlike the older brother, who cannot see that things that look beautiful on the outside, like the pearl he takes, may not be beautiful on the inside, the younger brings a pearl that looks ugly and plain on the outside. But our sense of self, symbolized by the dragon princess, understands true, inner beauty. He impresses the princess, who knew all along he could do it, and wins the happy ending.

### **The Fiddler and the Princess**

The Fiddler and the Princess opens with a universal format found in stories from all over the world. Tanjin's father tells him to choose a path in life, but is disappointed with Tanjin's choice. Smugly noting that he cannot help his son on his son's chosen path, he sends the young man off by himself. This scenario may feel harsh, but it is actually nothing but a brusque summary of reality. We parents expect our children to walk their own path. There will come a time when we can no longer help them, when we can no longer walk with them, when they must stand alone and walk alone. Tanjin has chosen a path that quickly brings him into contact with his deepest emotional life – his soul life. When we recognize that he has chosen the soul's path, it is easy for us to see why a parent truly cannot walk alongside. Everyone must walk that path alone.

Of course, the most obvious point of departure for the solo journey is the start of adulthood, but Tanjin's plight is a metaphor for all of those times that a child takes a step towards independence – the start of school, the nine-year change, adolescence. That is why a first grader can hear this story, and hear the sadness and loneliness that Tanjin feels when he is kicked out, but not find it too unbearable, nor too unrealistic a situation.

When Tanjin feels and expresses his deep loneliness and sadness through his music, he comes into contact with the dragon. The metaphor here is clear. Music helps us to experience our emotions and so brings us into connection with our emotional lives.

The dragon, like the emotional side of ourselves, is never straightforward and easily labeled. The dragon is powerful, helpful and a source of fortune, but he is also greedy and needy. The Dragon King wants to keep Tanjin trapped within the depths of the sea. This is symbolic of the way that our deep emotions can trap us once we enter them. In a similar story, the Water of Life from Europe, our hero enters an enchanted castle that represents the soul life, but is told that he must leave within one day lest he become a stone statue. In the same fashion, Tanjin's success depends not only on his ability to meet his emotional life, but also on the ability to return to the outside world.

He does re-emerge from his inner life and brings with him the Dragon Princess, a symbol of the piece of the dragon that stays with him as a result of his courageous journey into the depths. On the land, the Dragon Princess brings him good fortune. Because she can extend the life of material goods, her household always has "enough". Symbolically, a connection with our emotional life helps us to feel content and satiated. We feel that we have "enough". We do not need to constantly run through vast quantities of expensive material goods, because our heart knows how to feel fulfillment. This is the quintessential cure for consumerism.

The Kahn recognizes the value of this, but does not fully understand how it comes about. He thinks that he can simply expropriate the Dragon Princess, the way some people think they can buy happiness at a store.

Although we cannot simply "take" this trait from someone else – we must earn it by taking our own journey - Tanjin is still right to be worried that the Kahn, and what he represents, will ruin his good fortune. If we view all of the characters of this story as a different aspect of one psyche, the Kahn represents arrogance, or unbridled ego. The Kahn's character appears in stories from all different lands. In Europe's The Water of Life, the two older brothers act similarly to the Kahn when they take the water of life from their brother, who has gone into the depths of his soul life to find it, and try to pass the water off as their own doing. The Kahn, like our ego, has not made the journey into the dragon's world, but thinks he can take credit for the rewards of the journey.

But the Kahn does not have an easy time at taking the Princess, because only the one who has actually made the journey truly understands its power. The Kahn sees only the narrow confines of the immediate problem at hand. He can play the game, but he can't stand back and place the game into its broader context. On the other hand, Tanjin and the

Dragon Princess can see the bigger picture and can out-game the game. They can do this primarily because they are able to put themselves into the shoes of the Kahn and ask what he will and won't see, what he will and won't become. Tanjin has also brought the capacity for empathy back with him from the depths.

Like our egos, the Kahn likes to be seen and is afraid of being ordinary. He is also afraid of coming to physical harm and of coming to an end. This is similar to the way in which our egos have a tendency to usurp our identities and to hold onto that identity as if it were our entire self. Tanjin exploits all of these flaws to expose the Kahn as unworthy of the gifts of the dragon.

The last two challenges put forth by the Kahn teach us even more about Tanjin's strength. The Kahn, not aligned with the dragon, does not know the meaning of "enough". He won't let go and keeps at Tanjin, well past the point of fairness. Because Tanjin does know how to feel satisfied and content and does know the meaning of enough, he knows that the extra contests are unfair. Yet, he rises to them because those who truly understand the meaning of enough also know that one must continue to rise to a challenge until the challenge is finished. Tanjin turns to the dragon to find the strength to continue.

The dragon gives him a horse with false appearances, exactly the thing to overcome a Kahn who cannot see past the surface. The dragon also gives Tanjin the ability to make the lake boil – symbolic of the ability to bring on a boiling rage so fierce that it ends his oppressor's hold on him. As mentioned earlier in this guide, there are times in which anger is the morally correct stance. The Kahn's unjust treatment of Tanjin deserves an angry response. Tanjin, however, is not lost to the boiling rage, because he can rise above it. Symbolically, our journey into the depths of our emotions gives us the ability to use anger to protect ourselves from oppression by another, but protects us from becoming lost in that anger. When we can rise above our emotions and choose them with an outsiders viewpoint – a witness conscious, to use the Asian term – we can use an emotion like a tool and will not be destroyed by the emotional strength that we yield.