

# Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia

---

Volume 11 | Number 1

Article 27

---

10-11-2021

## Dragon

Josh Stenberg

josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/paha>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stenberg, Josh (2021) "Dragon," *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 27.  
Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/paha/vol11/iss1/27>

This Special Section (Translated Work) is brought to you for free and open access by the Ateneo Journals at Archium Ateneo. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia by an authorized editor of Archium Ateneo.

*Cao Kou*

# DRAGON

Translated by Josh Stenberg

Those who know me—are they only in  
some green wood, or at some dark frontier?

—PU SONGLING (1640–1715)

**N**othing about my cousin Zhang Degui suggested any special talent.

My aunt stressed more than once in her later years that, when pregnant with Degui, she had had no special dreams, nor had anything else of special note occurred. Likewise, Mrs. Ding, the midwife, who had hauled him out of his mother's body, reported neither "crimson light filling the room" nor any "lingering special scent" at all. Quite the opposite, because this first (and only) birth had taken so long, and the labor had been so painful, my aunt had fallen asleep before she even glanced at the baby.

However, my aunt would add that, before going to sleep, she had heard Zhang's big rooster crowing: "You have to know that Degui was born after lunch, and that's not when roosters crow."

As far as I'm concerned, that's nothing unusual, for though of course crowing at sunrise is a rooster's professional duty, it's his custom and instinct to crow now and again when he's bored, too.

It is notable that, from first to last, my aunt had the nasty habit of making a big distinction between her maiden name and her family name, “I’ve filled my life with pain for you Zhangs” or some such phrase was always on her lips throughout the course of her unhappy marriage, especially in later years.

In other words, my aunt—a high-performance birthing machine if there ever was one (and if you had seen my aunt, with her big butt, big breasts, big voice, you’d know exactly what I mean)—was unfortunately living in the era of the “Best to just have one” birth-control policies. She and my uncle were both teachers in the village, and, in those years, someone working in the public sector wouldn’t dare risk the condemnation of the whole world and go rogue—they’d have lost their public position. My aunt always expressed great envy for my mother, a village woman, because before the order had come not to have any more children, she had had—without coming up for breath—my big brother, my sister, and me. Even if my legendary younger brother had been dragged by cadres to the hospital for induced labor (supposedly, they used a plastic pail full of water, and my brother even flopped around in the pail for a while like a noisy little fish) but as far as my aunt was concerned, having been allowed to keep the first three, my mother was still “breaking even.”

To come back to Degui: his unusual qualities did not become apparent until much later. We played together, we went to primary school together, we walked barefoot together a long way down the riverbank in the hot sun, we sneaked into vineyards and stole grapes—these memories of childhood still swirl in my head today. I remember that there were heaps of straw all over the banks (the farmers cut it and used it to fertilize the rice paddies), they scraped your feet up badly, and the path up ahead was packed with village critters like frogs and toads splashing in and out of the water.

And in the vineyard we were heading for they were expecting brats like us, sun-fried from head to toe, to sneak up from time to

time, for which purpose they kept a big wolfhound with a sonorous bark. In the bright glare of the sun and among the luxuriating vines, we couldn't see where the wolfhound was, or rather we thought of him as being everywhere, in the vineyard. Which is to say, it felt like it was the vineyard barking rather than the wolfhound.

The old man in the straw hat who guarded the vineyard would also scurry out when we least expected it, causing us to freeze like two deer. But, because we were not only close in age but also closely related, the two of us looked very similar; and, what's more, my aunt liked her own birth family best, and whenever she got Degui clothes, she would get me the same outfit. So the stunned old vineyard man always saw two boys who looked exactly the same, and he never knew which one to try and catch.

The wonder occurred in the summer of third grade.

The reason I remember it so clearly is that my aunt (she was our Chinese teacher) had already begun giving us writing homework. Primary school students had to start writing compositions in third grade, I'm not really sure why. I wrote a composition called "Treasures All Over," in which masterpiece I praised with deep emotion our family pig. I said, our pig is really wonderful, its meat can be eaten, its skin can be turned into shoes, its bristles can be turned into brushes, its intestines can be stuffed to make sausages, and even its bladder can be blown full of air and turned into a ball to kick around.

Degui's homonymous composition also concerned pigs and the content was pretty similar as well, but resulted in his mother reading him the riot act. What brought that on? My aunt's reasoning was that my family did indeed keep a pig, and that it would be cruelly slaughtered at the end of a year of feeding—but her home, which was to say Degui's home, was not classified as an agricultural family. Neither pigpen nor pigs had they.

I wanted to defend Degui, for though it was a fact that my family slaughtered a pig every year for New Year's, uncle and aunt would

always bring their son Degui to the house where his mother grew up to eat a meal of freshly slaughtered pig.

And even at ordinary times, Degui would come to play at my house and loved poking the pig in the rump with a stick. Which is to say, Degui's relationship to the pig was no more distant than my own. But because the truth of the matter was that my composition was the one that had drawn on Degui's for inspiration (he had finished writing his and shown it to me before I wrote my own), I chose to keep my mouth shut, opting instead to gloat.

Not long after the composition crisis, summer holidays began, and Degui, summer homework under his arm, would come sprinting under the burning sun to my home, where we feverishly did our writing assignments. We resembled one another not only in looks, even our ideas were astonishingly similar: we took the view that the sooner we finished our summer homework, the more grapes we could steal. So we could be seen fiercely writing out our summer homework, accompanied by the burning sun and the chirpings of the cicadas, sweat pouring from us, just like the farmers working at the same time in the fields and the rural workers at construction sites who would only begin to appear a decade or more afterwards.

Every now and then one of us would lift his head to look at the other, with the obvious purpose of seeing what we looked like and how we were getting on. We were truly and profoundly moved by our grappling with the summer homework. Ah, what good children we were. We couldn't help asking each other: Is this what's called a happy childhood?

Then there was a sudden change in the weather, it started getting windy, and in the east and also a bit to the north dark clouds began to gather. Usually, Degui and I would have joyfully run outside and up to the heights to revel in the wild wind and rain, and sometimes we even climbed the tall birches to try and summon down some lightning. But that day, Degui just cocked his head and

looked cautiously outside, revealing an expression the maturity of which was at serious odds with his age.

He then rolled up his notebook in some agitation (though not with any panic) and demanded to be allowed to go home. To me he provided the following explanation: the windows at home were all wide open and the clothes he would need after his shower were drying outside; if he didn't get home in time, the wind would smash the window glass and the long-dry clothes would be flung into the mud by the wind and rain. "When Teacher Cao"—which is how Degui liked to call his mother in front of anyone—"comes back home tonight and sees what's happened, you know what I'll be in for."

I showed understanding, since this sort of thing had happened more than once before, with "this sort of thing" covering both the sudden breaking of a storm while doing homework as well as Degui's reference to what he might "be in for."

Just as Degui had predicted, the storm had smashed almost all the windows of his home, the clothes not only drenched in mud, but his own blue track shorts (with four stripes, two on each side) whirled away by the wind and (at the time this text went to press) has yet to be found again.

But I was not an eyewitness to all this, and so my account relies on those of my uncle and aunt. According to them, when they got home, Degui had not yet come back. Although very angry, they had assumed that Degui was at my place as had been the case in the past, and so they relaxed a little. They even claimed to have seen a millstone buffeted in roiling water among the crisscrossing paddy trenches.

Once they had showered and changed into dry clothes, the storm had calmed a little, but Degui still had not returned. It was only after they started to clear away the glass shards and scrub the clothes clean again that Degui finally returned.

Covered in mud, Degui held something tightly clasped in his fist (only later did they understand that it was the binder holding

his summer homework, practically dissolved by rain). Even more alarmingly, Degui not only showed no signs of shame, but even failed to notice the disastrous state of his home, instead exhibiting a state of great excitement, his eyes aglow. With his small but filthy hands, he grabbed urgently at his parents, but they escaped him with practiced evasion, so that Degui had to return to the threshold and point out at the road he had come back on, “A dragon, there was a dragon, I saw a dragon!”

According to my aunt, she didn’t at first think there was anything wrong, and she just raised her hand to give her son a smack. She was roaring about the disastrous state of the home, blaming Degui without hesitation, before expressing the following sincere wish: “Too bad you didn’t get carried off in the flood.” My uncle, always kind, signaled with his eyes for his son to keep silent—son, it’s a really brutal situation, you should show your mature side, instead of shouting nonsense, do you even know what a dragon is?

According to the longstanding but silent understanding between father and son, Degui ought to have shut his mouth at the proper time, used the overflowing water in the barrel placed by his mother beneath the eaves to scrub the dirt off his body, and then change into dry clothes before sitting quietly at his desk with a book open at random, awaiting his mother’s next commands. This was also a family ceremony and a regime that had been fixed by many years of maternal dressings-down, scolding, and blows.

Unexpectedly, however, Degui apparently hadn’t felt the slap at all, and he continued to repeat the same sentence: “A dragon, there was a dragon, I saw a dragon!” My aunt was forced to add a few supplementary slaps.

But when Degui clung to my uncle, saying, “A dragon, there was a dragon, I saw a dragon!” he felt that a force was pulling Degui out into the storm and, at the same time, saw that at the corner of the word dragon, which is to say at the corner of his mouth, there was a

trace of blood. At this, my uncle's heart was filled not only with pity. He freed his arms and pushed down his son's violently trembling shoulders, and then felt his son's forehead—and just like someone feeling his son's forehead in a movie, my uncle pulled back his hand with an exaggerated gesture: “Aiya, you're burning up.”



Just like that, my dear cousin Zhang Degui fell into a fever for several days. Just as he was beginning to recover from this serious illness, he received the reward he deserved—a brand-new binder of summer homework.

It was around this time that the change in him began to become evident. Before, he would shamefacedly have received the homework with both hands and started writing from scratch, working overtime. Instead, he claimed that he had long since, more or less, completed the summer homework, and so if he really did have to write anything, he would only do the parts near the end that he hadn't finished before.

He even brought me into it, saying, Cao Kou can bear witness. That's true, I said, both of us did exactly the same amount.

I even made the lyrical remark that, had it not been for the big rainstorm, our summer homework would already have been completed, but it was obvious that my aunt was not going to entertain any such concession. As an outstanding village teacher, she had in many years never permitted the situation to arise that a student's homework had gone uncompleted. Furthermore, since Degui was her son, the principle of “discipline starts at home” applied.

But if I'm not mistaken Degui continued repeating, “Dragon, there was a dragon, I saw a dragon” even after he had recovered. My aunt treated this utterance as a provocation.

In the final account, I cannot be sure whether that summer homework was ever completed or not. I just remember our maths-and-history-and-natural-science teacher, my uncle, appearing promptly at his son's bedside to explain that there aren't any dragons anywhere in this world, that dragons were a mythological animal, composed of the body of the snake, the scales of a fish, the claws of a chicken, the horns of a sheep, and so on. No individual animal could look like that.

"But I saw it," Degui said.

"That was just a hallucination," my uncle said and, raising his head, saw himself in the mirror, and even nodded at himself.

"But I really saw it."

"Oh, go to sleep." All my uncle could do was get up, arrange the mosquito net for his son, and return to the room he shared with my aunt. My aunt saw him shaking his head.

While Degui was bedridden, my parents and I had once gone to see him. According to the custom, you weren't allowed to visit a sick person empty-handed. We were supposed to go in the morning, but my mum was worried because she only had seven eggs, which was not only very few but, worse, an unlucky number. So my mum decided to go in the afternoon, when the hen would have laid another egg.

I can remember even today how we broke off siesta early and dressed very properly and waited outside the chicken coop for the sight of the hen laying an egg. Probably because the hen was embarrassed and nervous, she laid much later than usual. When she had finally laid the egg, we wiped away the sweat like we had discharged some great burden, but without noticing the hen's ashamed expression.

So, when my father stretched out three fingers to snatch the egg, it came as a total surprise when the egg fell to pieces in his hands. The yolk seeped out, and that was the end of it. "The shell wasn't hard, it was a soft egg, I didn't squeeze it at all," my father hastened to explain. "You expect me to believe that?" my mother said, flying

into a fury. But when she stretched out her hand to check, she had to silently agree with my father. But her anger hadn't passed, so she aimed a kick at the hen, which somersaulted off to avoid her—so then she gave him a kick.

I want to add something about the egg, which is that I have no recollection of us eating our own eggs at home. My aunt was always giving us a little of this and that, so we had to give aunt the only thing that was worth anything from our place, and that was the eggs, so that when my aunt was bored, she could fry up egg-with-chives or egg-with-young-toon-leaves, or just fried egg. My point is that I could only ever eat our eggs at my aunt's place.



I was not consumed with curiosity about whether Degui had seen a dragon. My desires were focused on the seven eggs. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything amazing about the dragon Degui described; it sounded exactly like the ones you saw on TV or in pictures, which is to say, just as in my uncle's summary.

"What about the Monkey King? You didn't see him too, did you?" I said, my stomach rumbling with hunger.

"No. Just the dragon, just one. A black one, a black dragon."

"Where did you see it?" I thought I heard the sound of eggs cracking in the white ceramic bowl.

"Just right at Lotus Pond, as soon as I got there, it flew up out of the pond. Flew up into the sky, flew into the clouds."

Lotus Pond was a pond between our village and the primary school, and you could say that all of the ponds in our area were all given over to fish and shrimp, except for this one, which was filled with lotus. Even today I don't know why that is.

I can say for sure that I often went to Lotus Pond to pick lotus leaves, lotus flowers, lotus seedpods, and I had even dived in to pick

the roots, but I had never seen a dragon. Actually, I hadn't seen snakes, either. What I mean is that in my childhood I would often see snakes, water snakes and soil snakes and red-banded snakes, but I can't remember ever having seen any at Lotus Pond.

I had, however, once, in a straw nest on the banks of Lotus Pond, discovered a clutch of chicken eggs, but they weren't from our hens. Just then, our own hen's eggs were busy disseminating their fragrance from my auntie's iron wok.

Degui insisted that he had seen a dragon, which actually was all the same to me, since for my part I had had a dream that, like a kitchen knife dropped in water, I had sunk swaying to the bottom of the river. But since he kept insisting that I believe him, that he had seen a dragon, I felt like he was overdoing it.

To convince me that there was a dragon in the Lotus Pond, more than once he dragged me along to stake it out. We really did stake ourselves there, squatting motionless in the grass, because Degui was worried that our presence would make the black dragon too embarrassed to swim up and out. I need hardly say that dragons. I concentrated my attention on the grass itself. There were so many mosquitoes, not to mention toads, and as for the lush green grass, they were turning yellow. Fall was coming.

Degui evidently also noticed the problem and doubtfully asked me whether the dragon would only manifest on another day of such wind and rain? And now it was autumn, so should we come back next year?

To this I could only respond like a grown-up with a dissenting shake of the head, telling him: "If you really saw a dragon that day, I mean if you really did, then the dragon flew away, and what does that mean, fly away? That means it's not coming back."

You might feel the same way about this as I did then, namely, that my cousin Zhang Degui had run into some unknown misfortune

during the storm, making him later not quite normal, and the image of the “dragon” was then just a hallucination or an illusion (deploying an image derived from the TV adaptation of *Journey to the West*), or else he had concentrated all the strangeness of that day into a fictive supernatural creature.

Later, regardless of the occasion and without interruption, he would talk about his experience of seeing the dragon, which seemed to be evidence to the contrary. In any event, he was crazy, his brain had gone soft. Whether it was from the fever, or maybe from some lightning strike, nobody could say.

The doctor told Degui’s careworn parents that mental illnesses of this kind were far from rare and most likely had their origins in some distant ancestor (I’m told that my aunt’s husband’s sister was a halfwit, who died in the fighting of 1967), and acquired factors could be even more significant. The interplay of sun and cloud, light and shadow, hot and cold, fluctuations in natural phenomena—they might often and easily rout some individual’s intelligence. “Some kids get frightened by clothes hung out to dry on the balcony.”

His suggestion was to give the child warmth, to have heartfelt chats with him, to put less stress on him, to pay attention to dressing him cozily, to his nutrition, and hopefully he would get better.

My aunt and uncle evidently heeded the doctor’s advice, and lost all their former severity. This was especially true of my aunt, who in no time at all had become the model of motherly care. No longer did my aunt demand that Degui write his summer composition, and when winter vacation came, she didn’t make any demands at all about the meager contents of his composition book.

Degui still talked about the matter of the dragon. My aunt corrected him with patience and skill, or else she avoided the topic, thinking that if she could scour the idea of “dragon” from her son’s brain entirely, he would become the way he used to be—the way I still was.

“See, it was just like this.” Degui tugged something out of his book, a drawing he had made himself, showing a very lifelike dragon (assuming that a dragon can be like life).

It gave auntie a terrible fright, and she started weeping and sniveling. Like a farmer’s wife, she fell to the ground in a heap, and started bawling in desperation.

No one had any idea when or how Degui had learned to draw, without any teacher. In the days that followed, Degui not only filled his notebook with drawings of dragons, he even started drawing them on the walls of his house and actually scratched them illicitly on the blackboard for notices at school.

Some of them were chalk drawings, but most of them he drew with a shard of red brick. To start, the villagers clicked their tongues in wonder, but before long no one paid him any attention. “Look, the kid’s drawn another dragon.” They would exchange glances and walk away laughing, leaving Degui by himself drawing a dragon on a bridge or on a public bathroom wall.

My aunt’s desperation was entirely understandable. The dragons, which filled the whole village, announced to everyone: That son of hers and her useless husband had really gone crazy, or maybe he had always been crazy. Maybe he was born crazy.

Perhaps in order to conform to the identification that people had made of him as a madman, Degui quickly lost his ability as a student.

My aunt was forced to let him drop out of school and stay at home and was also compelled to seek out the connections that would allow my uncle to retire early in order to take care of his crazy son. Before too much longer, Degui even forgot how to talk. I’m told that the nephew of Mrs. Ding, the midwife, was a painter, and when she died, the nephew had come for the funeral and had seen the dragon drawings that covered the village. People had hoped that he would make some professional recommendations, but in the end, under the

pretext that he specialized in naked women and motionless fruits and porcelain, he was able to profess that he was entirely unable to judge when it came to dragons.

This left people to come to their own conclusions—namely, that Degui’s dragon drawings weren’t any good, either.

And something that really stuck in my memory was, one day, when I was in second year of junior middle school and riding my bike with great excitement from the home of the prettiest girl in my class to my own, I saw uncle and Degui by the water tower. Uncle’s hair had grown scant and his eyes blurry, a decrepit old man; but Degui had retained the figure and appearance of a boy.

Although he couldn’t speak, he smiled at me. The smile showed me that Degui’s teeth had all fallen out. His mouth was a pitch-black hole. I just mention this to convey my feeling at the water tower, for in those years we would still often go down to my aunt’s house, but strangely I had never really noticed the changes the father and son had been undergoing.

I guess it was at boarding school, in my final year, when I heard that Degui had died.

The university entrance exams lay directly before me, and I didn’t go home. And when I got the sad news that my uncle had died, I was busy being a boy virgin in bed with a girl virgin, sweatily acquiring sexual experience.

But my aunt lived until the first year of the village’s demolition. She had early-onset dementia, but as the beneficiary of one of the “five guarantees,” she had been sent to the old folks’ home, where no news reached her of the vigorous rebuilding of the village. Our hometown was set to undergo enormous changes: the vineyards would all be ripped out, the Lotus Pond drained, and an entirely new layout put in place, with new bridges and roads. The familiar old homes, meanwhile, would soon be renovated by the farmers into pretty Western-style houses.

So even if my aunt were suddenly to wake up from her dementia and break out from the old folks' home, trying to find her way home by memory, she could never find it. Her main discovery would be, What happened to all the dragons my son drew on your walls?

The following year my aunt died.

After I graduated from university, I didn't find any great job, but luckily my brother-in-law worked in government, and he sorted out a position for me there. Then I married a woman that I thought was pretty ugly and had a kid who has never seen a toad or frog.

In the last few years, they've been pulling down our village, and now it's a housing complex where you pay about twenty-five thousand per square meter. The year they knocked down the village, I went back in order to persuade the "nail" households to leave—someone who wouldn't move out, holding on to prevent the demolition—and it was when I discovered, to my astonishment, that my aunt's house hadn't changed at all.

The only difference was that it had been confiscated long before and so there could be no question of compensation. I went into their tattered old home, intending to grieve for this family that really had once existed and was now exactly as though it never had existed. The mess and filth inside meant that there was nowhere to tread safely, and so I just stood at the entrance for a few moments before leaving.

I suspect that what I really wanted was to turn right into Degui's room to see his bedside cabinet. Because I certainly remember opening the cabinet door and finding a dragon drawn on the inside of it. I don't know why I remember the place so clearly—I even know that the dragon's eyes were drawn with the red ballpoint that auntie used for her marking.

I have a strong suspicion that in the third grade I also passed by the Lotus Pond, and also saw a dragon, but I just went back home like nothing special had happened, and then grew up like nothing special had happened.

CAO KOU

Cao Kou was born on Nanjing's riparian island of Baguazhou, in 1977. He is trained as a schoolteacher, and his fiction and essays have earned him a large following over the last two decades. Book-length collections of his fiction have appeared in French and Swedish, and one in English is forthcoming.

JOSH STENBERG

josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au

Josh Stenberg is senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, having formerly taught at Nanjing University and Nanjing Normal University and worked for the Jiangsu Kunju Theatre. He is the translator of Su Tong's *Tattoo: Three Novellas* and *The Madwoman on the Bridge and Other Stories*, the editor of *Irina's Hat: New Short Stories from China*, and the author of *Minority Stages: Sino-Indonesian Performance and Public Display*.

