This book is for Carys Eloise – T.B.
With love to Mason – K.L.

The artwork in this book was created primarily using chalk pastel, ink and watercolour on paper with the occasional use of acrylic paint.

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# An Illustrated Treasury of Dragon Tales

Stories from Around the World

**Theresa Breslin** **Kate Leiper**

Floris Books

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# Héhuā and Her Golden Dragon-Boy

*In ancient Chinese culture the dragon is a legendary creature with divine powers. It is connected to the number nine, which, in Chinese, sounds like 'everlasting'. Worshipped as a god, the dragon brings good luck and wealth and can grant special favours, but only to those who are worthy of receiving them.*

*This story is a retelling of a very old folk tale linked to the famous Chinese Dragon Dance.*

---

Héhuā: *huh-**hwah*** Cūn Zhǎng: *sun-jong*

Long, long ago in a remote village in China there lived a girl called Héhuā.

Like the lotus flower after which she was named, Héhuā was bright to behold. Just as lotus flowers bloom in a variety of colours, so Héhuā liked to wear clothes in rose pink, pale yellow, lilac and white.

Héhuā had a thoughtful mind and a kind soul. Thus, when she grew up, more than one suitor wanted to marry her. Héhuā chose an older man who was poor but honourable.

They lived together in peace and joy, and, as the months went on, Héhuā hoped to have a baby.

"I wish I had a darling little child to care for and cuddle," she said to herself. "By day, I would carry my baby beside the river and point out the fish and the birds. At night, I would sing them to sleep under the silver moon." When she'd been married for nine hundred and ninety-nine days, Héhuā decided to ask the Dragon God to grant her wish.

From a piece of willow wood, she carved a tiny dragon statue to make a shrine for the Dragon God in her house. Every nine days Héhuā laid lotus blossoms there.

And it seemed to her that the tiny wooden dragon smiled in return.



Nine hundred and ninety-nine days later, Héhuā found that she was indeed going to have a baby. On the day that celebrates the Dragon God, Héhuā gave birth to a healthy boy.

Sadly, not long after this, Héhuā's husband passed away. At the shrine she prayed for her husband and asked the Dragon God to help guard her child and keep him from harm.

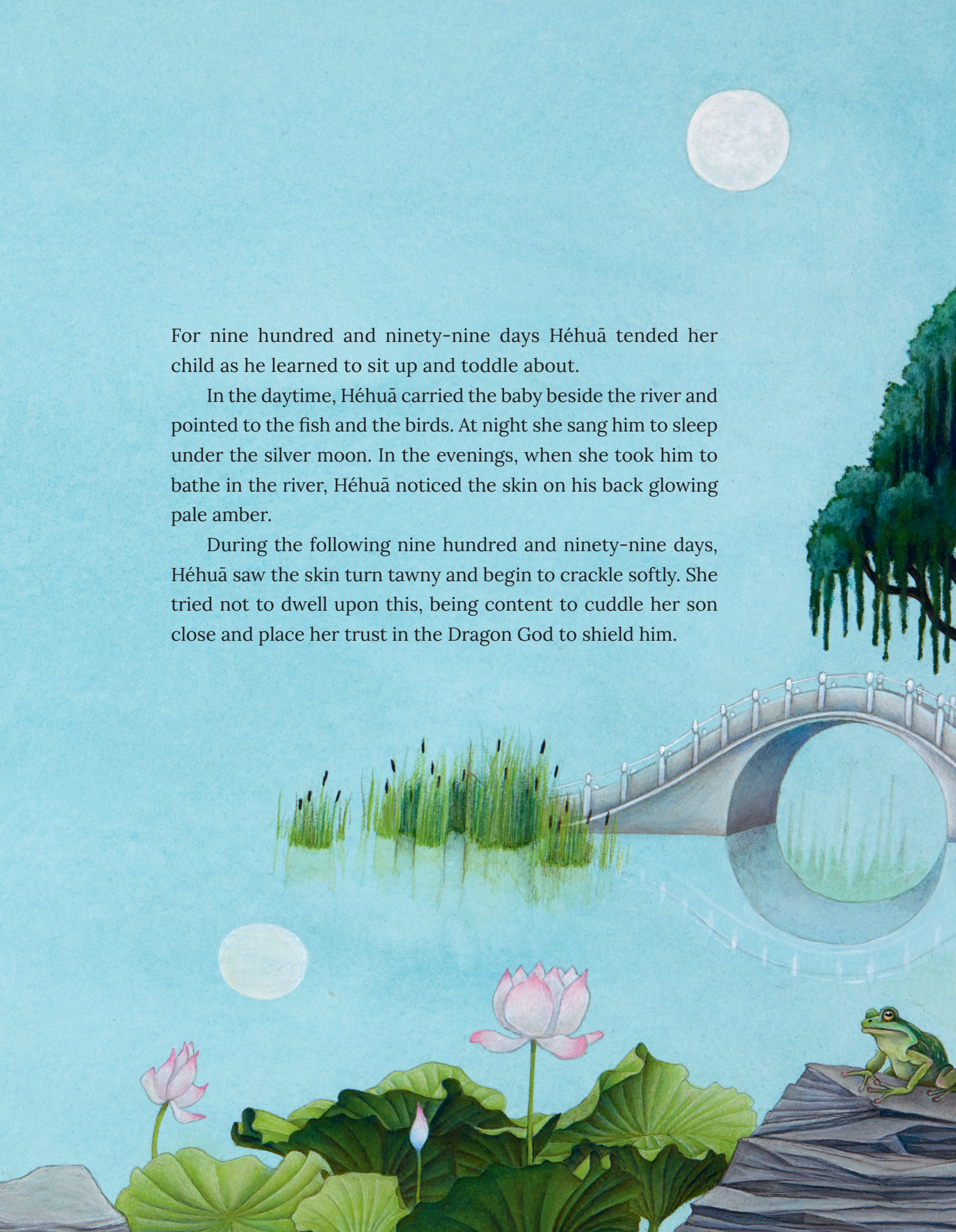
And it seemed to her that the tiny wooden dragon smiled in return.



For nine hundred and ninety-nine days Héhuā tended her child as he learned to sit up and toddle about.

In the daytime, Héhuā carried the baby beside the river and pointed to the fish and the birds. At night she sang him to sleep under the silver moon. In the evenings, when she took him to bathe in the river, Héhuā noticed the skin on his back glowing pale amber.

During the following nine hundred and ninety-nine days, Héhuā saw the skin turn tawny and begin to crackle softly. She tried not to dwell upon this, being content to cuddle her son close and place her trust in the Dragon God to shield him.



Over the next nine hundred and ninety-nine days, the child's tawny skin separated into what appeared to be tiny overlapping glittering leaves.

On his ninth birthday, Héhuā examined them carefully. Then she knelt down and gazed in wonderment.

Her son's back was covered in nine hundred and ninety-nine golden dragon scales!

Héhuā's first thought was how blessed she was. She had been gifted a son clearly favoured by the Dragon God. But Héhuā was sensible enough to know that this could make her child vulnerable. In particular, she thought of the village chief, the Cūn Zhǎng, who was cruel and greedy for money. He made the people pay heavy taxes, claiming they were for road mending and sewage disposal, but instead he bought sweetmeats and fancy clothes for himself.

So now, each evening, Héhuā waited until the riverbank was deserted before she went there. She and her son sheltered under a willow tree whose branches reached to the ground and overhung the water. Héhuā's neighbours believed her to be over-protective because she only had one child, and they merely smiled at her behaviour. However, the Cūn Zhǎng suspected that Héhuā was hiding something precious, and he began to keep watch on her.



And so it was that, after spying on the two of them for nine evenings, he caught sight of gold shining in the dusk.

"Aha!" the chief cried, tearing apart the curtain foliage of the willow tree. "Héhuā, I've found out your secret! You pretend to be poor, but you have a child of golden treasure!"

"No! No!" Héhuā cowered in fright. "I have done nothing wrong. This child was sent to me by the Dragon God."

"The Dragon God would not favour someone as humble as you in this way!" the Cūn Zhǎng scoffed. "Everyone knows how much you wanted a child. You must have stolen a baby! This golden boy is not yours." He stretched to take the child.

Héhuā screamed and, grabbing her son's hand, ran home to stand with him in front of the shrine of the Dragon God. "You know the truth of this matter," she whispered. "My son is my own. I did not steal him. Please help me!"

And it seemed to her that the tiny wooden dragon smiled in return.

At that moment, the door of the house crashed open and the Cūn Zhǎng towered in the threshold. He expected the woman and child to cringe before him. But Héhuā had drawn strength from her prayers, and she recalled that the lotus flower is a symbol of honour, and known for its fortitude. Héhuā resolved to be strong like the flower after which she was named, and she stepped in front of her child to protect him.



The Cūn Zhǎng pushed her roughly aside.

Suddenly a terrifying thunderclap rent the air, followed by a blinding burst of golden light as if the sun itself had crashed through the house roof.

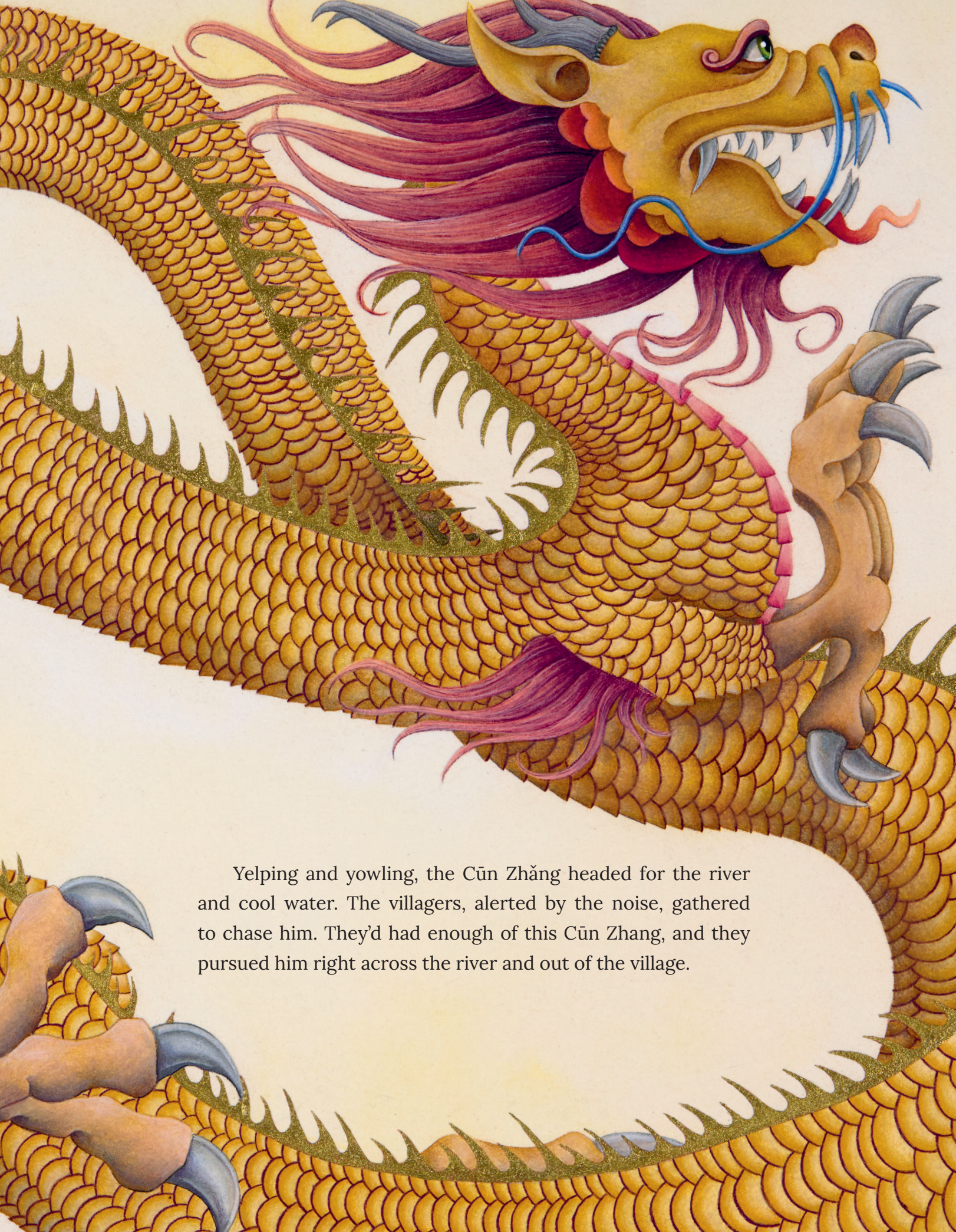
The Cūn Zhǎng dropped to his knees, eyes wide in disbelief.

Héhuā's child had transformed into an awesome dragon-boy, with claws and spiky swishing tail. Scales of burnished gold clad his whole body. Opening his mouth, he spat forth bright-blue sparks.

The Cūn Zhǎng turned and ran.

Then the dragon-boy shot a flicker of red-hot flame after the fleeing man to set alight the seat of his trousers.





Yelping and yowling, the Cūn Zhǎng headed for the river and cool water. The villagers, alerted by the noise, gathered to chase him. They'd had enough of this Cūn Zhang, and they pursued him right across the river and out of the village.

The people were pleased to be rid of the cruel chief. Knowing Héhuā to be both sensible and kind, they elected her as their new Cūn Zhǎng. They were also pleased to have the dragon-boy in their midst, for he was as kind and wise as his mother. On dull days, to help their crops grow, he would turn his back so that his nine-hundred and ninety-nine golden scales reflected the rays of the sun, giving heat and light.



*This story has been connected to the Dragon Dance performed in Chinese communities all over the world at Chinese New Year. Ancient tradition was that the long paper dragon held up by the dancers is chasing after a ball painted in the same lotus colours Héhuā loved to wear.*

*Chinese New Year, being a spring festival, is a renewal of hope, and a celebration of life and family – with the dragon as a symbol of strength and good fortune.*