

College Guild

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World Mythology

Unit 3 of 5

Chinese Mythology

When considering mythology, China is often overlooked. However, there are over 200 gods and goddesses from various belief structures worshiped throughout ancient China, and those are just the well-known ones. If you were to count all the gods and goddesses, the number would be well over a thousand! These deities were thought to have created the world we live in and are tasked with keeping it running, each with their own set of powers and responsibilities. With so many deities, Chinese mythology explores how almost everything operates. For example, there is a deity of brooms! However, most of these gods have more power than just sweeping; they can manipulate the sun, command the oceans, and even destroy Earth itself. This unit will focus on the 13 major figures of Chinese mythology.



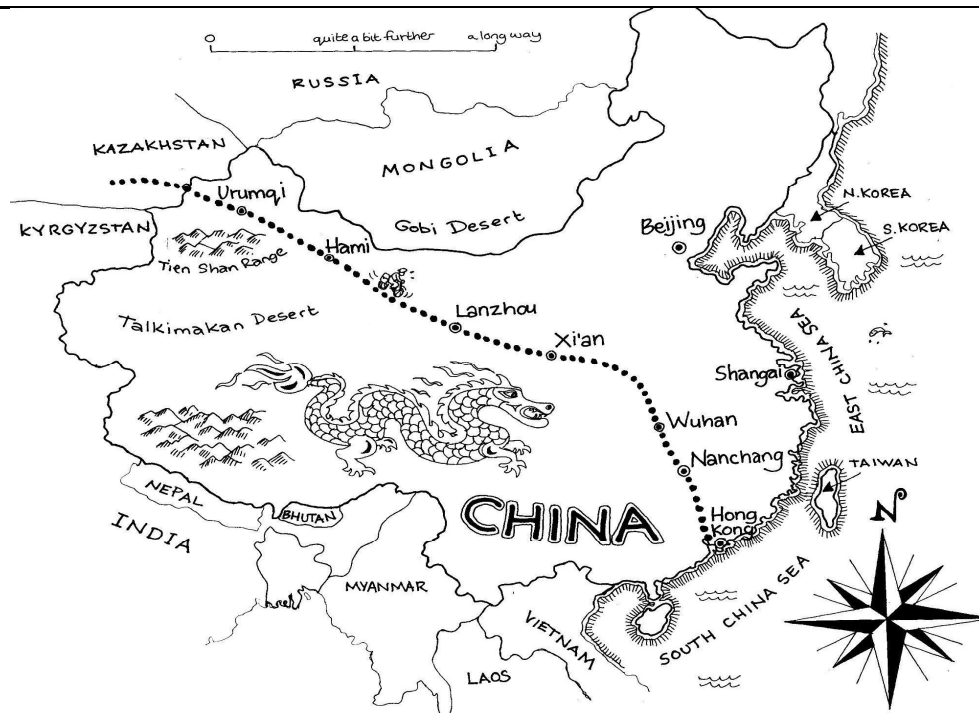
Zhongli Quan He Xiangyu Lu Dongbin Zhang Guo Lao Cao Guojiu Han Xiangzi



Lan Caihe Li Tai Guai Jade Emperor Cheng Huang Tudi Gong Dragon King Queen Mother of the West

Glossary of Terms:

1. **B.C.E.** - Common Era (CE) and Before the Common Era (BCE) are year notations for the Gregorian calendar, the world's most widely used calendar era. They are alternatives to the original Anno Domini (AD) and Before Christ (BC) notations. The terms are numerically equivalent and trace back to 1615.
2. **Buddhism** - a widespread Asian philosophy, founded by Siddhartha Gautama in northeastern India in the 5th century BC. It spread through Asia via **the Silk Road**.
3. **C.E.** - Common Era are year notations for the Gregorian calendar, the world's most widely used calendar era.
4. **Confucianism** - a system of philosophical and ethical teachings founded by Confucius and developed by Mencius.
5. **Deified** - Worshiped, regarded, or treated as a god.
6. **Eurasia** - Land area consisting of Europe and Asia.
7. **Patron** - A person who gives support to a person, organization, cause, or activity.
8. **Sentient** - able to perceive or feel things.
9. **Shrines** - a place regarded as holy because of its associations with a divinity or a sacred person or relic, marked by a building, statue, garden or other construction.
10. **Spirits** - The nonphysical part of a person which is the seat of emotions and character; the soul.
11. **Taoism** - A Chinese philosophy based on the writings of Lao-tzu (fl. 6th century BC), advocating humility and religious piety.
12. **Temples** - A building devoted to worship or regarded as the dwelling place of a god or gods or other objects of religious reverence.
13. **The Silk Road** - A network of **Eurasian** trade routes active from the second century BCE until the mid-15th century. Spanning over 6,400 kilometers, it played a central role in facilitating economic, cultural, political, and religious interactions between the East and West. Eurasia encompasses both Asia and Europe.



Origin of Chinese Mythology

Chinese mythology is a collection of cultural history, folktales, and religious traditions of the country of China, passed down for centuries in oral or written form. It comprises various aspects, including creation myths, legends, and other narratives related to the founding of Chinese culture and the Chinese state. Generally, Chinese mythology addresses moral issues and serves to educate people about their culture and values. Similar to many mythologies, some individuals believe it to be, at least in part, a factual record of history.

The earliest Chinese Civilization included the Xia (pronounced “shi-a”) Dynasty which existed from around 2100 **B.C.E.** until 1600 **B.C.E.** and is described in the ancient Records of the Grand Historians.

As a side note, the idea of "when" these myths were being created in a timeline allows for a math problem that is intriguing. How long ago was 2500 **B.C.E.**? ... Stay tuned; the answer is at the end of the unit.

1. Do you believe that there is any truth behind mythological tales? Explain.

Chinese myths are believed to have originated around the twelfth century **B.C.E.** and were orally transmitted for over one thousand years before being recorded in books such as Shui Jing Zhu and Shan Hai Jing. These early texts are the sources for the myths. There has been extensive interaction between Chinese mythology and the major belief systems of **Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism**. Elements of pre-existing mythology were incorporated into these belief systems, and some of the teachings and beliefs of these systems were also integrated into Chinese mythology.

2. How do you think the oral transmission of Chinese myths for over a thousand years impacted the richness and diversity of the stories compared to written records?

The Powerful Deities

Chinese gods were believed to have created the world and human beings, keeping the world and surrounding universe functioning. Each **deity** had his or her own special area of power and influence, and the most important were given their own **shrines** and **temples**. Additionally, **shrines** were also erected for local **spirits** and for noble men and women who became **deified** after death.

These **deities** lived in palaces and castles high above human beings in places like the Kunlun Mountains, Mount Tai, the Jade Mountain, and Mount Penglai, which was on the mystical island of the afterlife somewhere far out at sea. These sites are real geographical locations but are also heavily invoked in mythology. Even though they were far away, they were still connected to daily human life, watching over and keeping account of the good and bad deeds people did. Each **deity** had its own part to play in the lives of people and the operation of the world, from the most intimate moments to events of national importance such as a dynasty's collapse.

3. Deities in Chinese mythology reside far out at sea. Places like Mount Penglai were located on an imaginary island in the Eastern Sea according to Chinese mythology. Where do you believe is the ideal dwelling place for deities and why? Or, Sketch what you envision as the perfect home for deities.

The Beginning

A unique characteristic of Chinese culture is the relatively late appearance in Chinese literature of creation myths. Those that exist appear well after the foundation of **Confucianism**, **Taoism**, and folk religions. The stories exist in several often conflicting versions, with the creation of the first humans variously ascribed to Shangdi, Heaven, Nuwa, Pangu, and Yu Huang. **However, this unit will focus on the creation and storyline of Pangu.**



← Pangu creating the world.

Pangu (盤古), also known as Yin and Yang, appeared in literature around 200 C.E. and was the first **sentient** being and creator. In the beginning, there was nothing but formless chaos. Out of this chaos, an egg was born, which remained for 18,000 years and encapsulated Yin and Yang inside an egg. When the forces of Yin and Yang balanced, Pangu emerged from the egg and initiated the creation of the world.

4. Draw an image of Yin and Yang inside of an egg.

With a swing of his great ax, Pangu separated Yin and Yang. The heavy Yin sank to become the Earth, while the light Yang rose to

become the Heavens. Pangu stood between them and pushed up the sky. Assisted by a dragon, a unicorn, a phoenix, a tiger, and a tortoise, Pangu worked to shape and create the world. After eighteen thousand years, Pangu rested. His breath became the wind, his voice transformed into thunder, his left eye became the sun, and his right eye the moon. His body became the mountains and extremes of the world, his blood formed rivers, his muscles shaped fertile lands, his facial hair became the stars and Milky Way, his fur transformed into bushes and forests, his bones became valuable minerals, his bone marrow evolved into sacred diamonds, his sweat fell as rain, and the tiny creatures on his body, carried by the wind, turned into fleas scattered across the globe.



← Yin and Yang symbol

5. Write a paragraph or poem narrating the creation of the Earth and the Heavens from either the Yang, white part of the circle, or the Yin, the black part of the circle. Finally, explain why there might be a small circle of white/black on the opposite sides?

The Oldest and Greatest

The Dragon

The dragon, the oldest symbol of a deity in China, is prominently featured on pottery excavated from the Neolithic site of Banpo Village, dating from approximately 4500-3750 BCE (around 6500-5770 years ago). Originally considered as a harmonious blend of yin and yang energies, the dragon symbolized a wise and just balancing force. One notable dragon, Yinglong, held the titles of The Dragon King and the god of rain and waters. In his role as the god of the sea, he was known as Hong Shen and was regularly invoked by sailors and fishermen for protection. Farmers seeking rain for their crops also worshiped the dragon. Additionally, depictions show him in human form, a wise figure with the full sun behind his head, overseeing a boat filled with people.

6. How does being wise like the Dragon create balance? What is the benefit of being balanced?

Mother & Father

Nuwa and Fuxi served as the maternal and paternal deities of human beings. Nuwa, born at the beginning of creation, fixed the mistakes made at first so that everything was perfect. Constructing a palace that later influenced Chinese architecture, she resided there with her friend and brother, Fuxi, both portrayed as human-dragons with human heads and dragon bodies or human bodies to the waist and dragon legs and tails. Feeling lonely, Nuwa created human beings for companionship using the mud from the Yellow River. She breathed life into them, and they moved and lived. She continued to make more and more human beings, but it was tiring work, so she created marriage so they could reproduce themselves. The humans were alive but had no knowledge of anything, and so Fuxi gave them the gifts of fire, writing, how to get food from the sea, and all the other skills they would need to live. He also gave them the gifts of music, culture, and divination, enabling them to make good decisions by knowing the future.

7. Do you believe Nuwa and Fuxi provided humans with enough guidance? Explain.

8. List some survival skills humans may have needed. What skills do you see as necessary for living life?

9. How does being wise like the Dragon create balance? What is the benefit of being balanced in life? What can happen if there is an imbalance?



Queen Mother of the West - Xiwangmu

← Xiwangmu illustrated in two contrasting depictions as perceived by believers.

Nuwa held the title of queen of the immortal gods and **spirits**, particularly female **spirits** who lived in the mystical land of Xihua ("West Flower"). As the goddess of immortality, she is also known as Xiwangmu or Xi-Wang-Mu. She lived in a castle of gold in the Kunlun Mountains, surrounded by a sensitive moat that could cause even a single hair dropped upon it to sink. This moat protected her Imperial Peach Orchard, where the peaches' juice gave immortality.

10. Draw an image of Xiwangmu protecting her trees of immortality. If you really love to draw -

create an image of her gold castle, moat and Peach Orchard. If you really DON'T like to draw, write a poem about eating an Imperial Peach and how it would feel to become immortal.

Depictions of Xiwangmu vary, some portray her as a beautiful woman with sharp teeth and a leopard's tail, while others depict her as an elderly, less appealing figure with a hunched back, tiger's teeth, and a leopard's tail, depending on her mood. She rewarded devoted followers with eternal life but punished those who angered her. During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), her sect gained popularity, leading to the construction of government-sponsored **shrines**. Xiwangmu is the wife of Mugong, Lord of the **Spirits**, responsible for overseeing male **spirits** in the land of Donghua ("East Flower").

Humans and Deities

Caishen

Caishen, the god of wealth, was one of ancient China's most popular deities and continues to be revered today. Statues of Caishen (also known as Ts'ai Shen) can be seen in businesses run by Chinese merchants worldwide and in Chinese homes. His statue shows a wealthy man dressed in a silk robe and holding riches in both hands. Occasionally, he is accompanied by two attendants carrying bowls of gold. He was not just the god of material wealth but also of a rich life which meant a happy family and a secure, prosperous, and respectable job. Although generous to his followers, Caishen was wise and did not give out his wealth indiscriminately. People had to demonstrate their worthiness through hard work, regular prayers, and expressions of gratitude for his gifts. **Temples** and shrines to Caishen were probably the most numerous in ancient China.

13. Describe a time you worked hard, and it paid off. What was the pay off and how did it enrich your life?

Guanyin

Guanyin was the goddess of mercy and compassion who became the **patron** of sailors and fishermen. She was originally a deity in India known as Avalokitesvara, whose name means "one who gazes down upon the world and hears the cries of the people." She came to China from India through trade using **the Silk Road** during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E-220 C.E.). She was so compassionate that she was incarnated as the maiden Miaoshan to experience life as a human being and offer service to others.

14. When have you made a sacrifice to show compassion to another?

Miaoshan's father wanted her to marry a wealthy priest, but she refused to marry unless the marriage could end the sufferings caused by illness, aging, and death. When her father told her no marriage could end such things, she replied that a doctor could. However, her father disapproved of a husband with such a lowly occupation. Instead of marrying, Miaoshan was permitted to enter a temple, but her father ensured she was given all of the worst work. With the assistance of nearby animals responding to her kindness, she completed the work. Her father tried to burn the temple down, but Miaoshan put the fire out with her bare hands. Despite her resilience, her father had her executed. In hell, she released all the goodness within her, transforming it into paradise. Lord Yama, the king of the dead, sent her back to earth to prevent her from disrupting his realm. Afterwards, she lived on Fragrant Mountain, overseeing human beings. From her mountain home, she frequently observed people in distress at sea and rescued them, earning her the title of the **patron** goddess of sailors and fishermen. Miaoshan became one of the most revered deities in China, adored by both men and women.

15. Miaoshan's condition for marriage resulted in her death which ultimately resulted in her making paradise out of hell and being set free. Is that actually possible? What do you think?



Death/Underworld

← Chinese Underworld judges Yang

Yan Wang is the god of death and king in the afterlife. He is the greatest of all the Lords of Death who rule the underworld regions. Also known as Yang-Wang-Yeh, Lord Yama, and Lord Yama King, he presides over the judgment of souls and decides whether they will be punished for their crimes in life, go on to live with the gods, or be reincarnated.

16. Imagine meeting Yan Wang, the god of death, and having a dialogue about your life. In addition to punishment, a place among the gods, or reincarnation, what unique outcome or destiny do you think he might consider for your soul based on your life's journey?

In one famous story, a soldier named Commandant Yang, who had caused much suffering and misery in his life, died and appeared in the court of Yan Wang. Yan Wang asked him how he had built up so many sins on his soul in the short time he was on earth. Yang claimed he was innocent and had done nothing wrong. Yan Wang commanded the scrolls of Yang's life to be brought in where the date and time of his sins were read along with who was affected and how many had died because of Yang's selfishness. Yang was condemned by the Lord of Death, and a great hand appeared, snatched him up, and crushed him. It was said that one could escape punishment for one's sins on earth, but no one could escape justice in the court of Yan Wang.

17. Rewrite the story of Commandant Yang, in which he admits his sins on earth and is given a second chance through reincarnation.

Self-Reflection Exercise

- 1) Choose a god of Chinese Mythology that you feel similar to or relatable to, then explain why.
- 2) What have you learned about Chinese Mythology that surprised you?
- 3) How does Chinese Mythology apply to your own life?

Math Problem from page 1:

If we are in year 2022 subtract 2022 resulting in year 0. As 2500 BC is 2500 years before the year 0, add 2500 to 2022, which would give us 4522. Thus, 2500 BC was 4522 years ago! China is 4522 years old. The USA is 246 years old as of July 4th, 2022. Making China 20 times older than the USA.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Appendix
Chinese Mythology: Unit 3 of 5

Sources: <https://stjohnslis.libguides.com/c.php?g=987060&p=7145388>
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