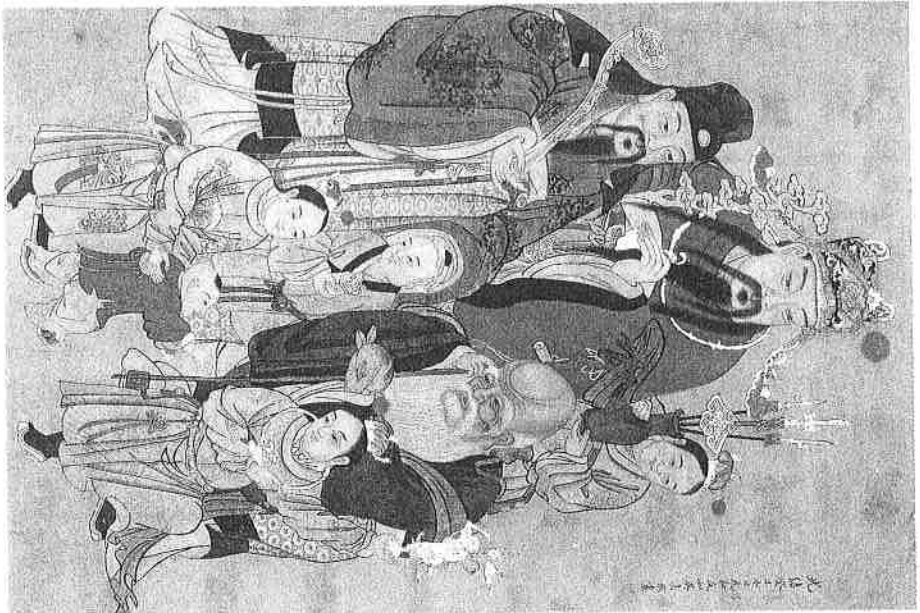


THE
CHINESE MYTHS
A GUIDE TO THE
GODS AND LEGENDS

TAO TAO LIU



1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

More than two thousand years ago, the Chinese told tales that rivalled in complexity the ones told almost contemporaneously in Greece. These legends speak to the core beliefs and concerns of an agrarian society based on the banks of the ever-shifting Yellow River. We meet heroes like Gun and Yu, who buttressed the land against floods on the scale of the biblical inundation, and Yi the Archer, who shot down nine of the ten suns that existed when the world was new, fending off wildfires and drought. One story tells how the creator goddess, Nuwa, crafted humankind from the yellow clay of the alluvial plain. These ancient stories, passed down over centuries in an age before writing, encapsulate beliefs that were developed in the philosophies of native Daoism and, later, Buddhism, imported from India. Despite this rich tradition, people in the west are far more familiar with the myths that have come down to us from the Greeks and Romans, and know almost nothing of the myths of China.

This is partly to do with the unfamiliarity of China to the western mind; the Chinese imagination has developed quite differently from that of the west over its long history. Even the concept of 'mythology' is fundamentally a western one, foreign to China, where it is translated as *shenhua*, 'words/talk on the subject of gods/deities'. It was introduced only at the beginning of the twentieth century from Europe, via Japan, along with other ideas then developing in

the humanities. The word *shenhua* was first used to refer to myths in the manner of the western tradition: stories from ancient times. For the purpose of this book, I take the meaning of *shenhua* to refer largely to the myths of China's 'classical era', found in sources that date mainly to between the sixth century BCE, during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, and the middle of the third century CE, the end of the Han dynasty. We shall also look at the myths of the 'imperial era', which lasted from the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty, until the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911. Over this period Chinese religion and beliefs became more fractured and much busier, with a proliferation of myths and gods worshipped for their particular efficacy as different challenges were faced. The Chinese idiom *bao fo jiao*, 'embracing the Buddha's foot', captures this sentiment: it is used to satirize people who do not express devotion to the Buddha until their hour of need.

Many of the mythological figures of the imperial era developed out of historical persons, and the importance of history is characteristic of this more recent mythology. For example, the genial general and military hero of the Three Kingdoms period, Guan Yu, was declared the God of War by the Wanli emperor of the Ming in 1594 in a mythicization of history. The annual Dragon Boat Festival held in the fifth month of the lunar calendar involves ceremonies placating the dragon gods of China's rivers as well as commemorating the upright official Qu Yuan of the Eastern Zhou period, who drowned himself in despair over his failure to influence a bad ruler.

Unlike the Greco-Roman myths, which have been shaped into canonical narratives by writers such as Homer, Hesiod and Ovid, those from China tend to be laconic, often appearing in contradictory arrangements that speak of different traditions. Many of the

The National Minorities

When we speak of 'the Chinese', we tend to mean the Han people. The Han were but one of many groups that lived in the area that we now call China in the first millennium BCE, and through military conquest came to dominate the land. Today they account for more than 95 per cent of the population, but there are fifty-five non-Han ethnic groups in China, numbering millions of people.

The Han culture was the most technologically advanced, and borrowed from many neighbouring peoples, a trait still true now. The Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) has come to be thought of as the beginning of the 'high culture' of China. Yet the Han writers drew on the myths of other ethnic groups, including, notably, those of the Miao and Yao people; these myths have changed little even over millennia, owing to their reliance on oral traditions (see p. 37).

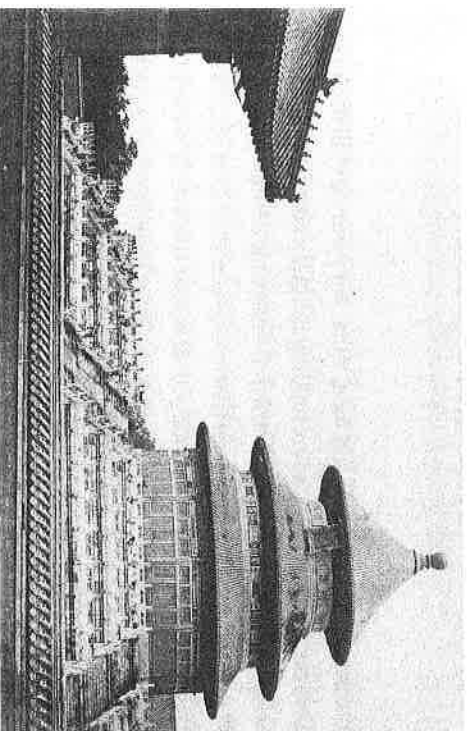
modern ethnic groups in China, such as the Miao, kept their strong oral traditions, either not having a written script or being less reliant on one. It is generally accepted now that tribal myths and legends had a part to play in the development of Chinese mythology, and nowadays we find that many myths among the so-called minorities, collected in the recent past, still bear a striking resemblance to the main myths of the Han dynasty.

It was only in the twentieth century that scholars first attempted a critical analysis of the *shenhua* of the classical era. Up to then, writers and historians had collected and preserved the ancient texts, building a corpus of authentic, original sources, but had not rigorously examined them, and indeed had often edited them to better align with the principles of Confucius' philosophy (see p. 20). But since the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911,

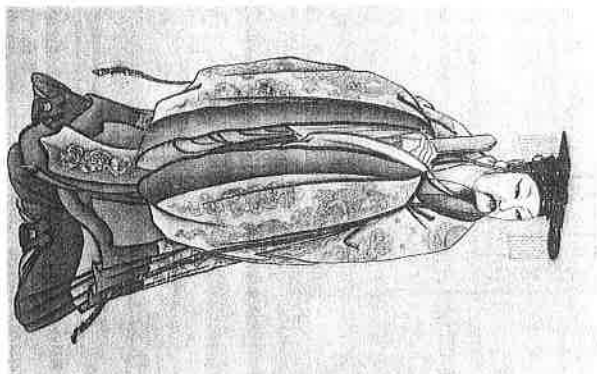
folklorists such as Gu Jiegang (1893–1980), one of the founders of the *Yigupai* ('Doubting Antiquity School'), have challenged the accounts of the Confucianist elite.

THE PLACE OF MYTH IN DAILY LIFE

The great myths of the classical era may preoccupy scholars, but the accumulation of myth and legend over thousands of years can be seen in the abundance of temples and places of worship throughout China and the development of annual cycles of ritual and observance, some followed countrywide, some strictly local. It was estimated that in Beijing alone between 1400 and 1900 there were some 2,500 temples, mainly Buddhist but also associated with the imperial cult,



The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests in the Temple of Heaven complex in Beijing, founded in the first half of the fifteenth century.



A Song-dynasty scroll painting of Yu, tamer of floods and founder of the Xia dynasty.

Daoism, Confucianism and local cults. They were all full of worshippers on a regular basis, some holding monthly fairs as well as regular festivals. Even in the small town of Shaoxing on the south shore of Hangzhou bay, there are currently thirteen Buddhist temples, one Daoist temple, and one strictly local shrine to a young woman who drowned in 151 CE trying to save her father's life, not to mention the nearby shrine at the tomb of the great Yu, tamer of floods. These represent a small proportion of the temples and shrines that would have existed in previous centuries.

The great Yu, founder of the semi-legendary Xia dynasty (c. 2070–1600 BCE), is a figure who achieved divine status for his hydrographic



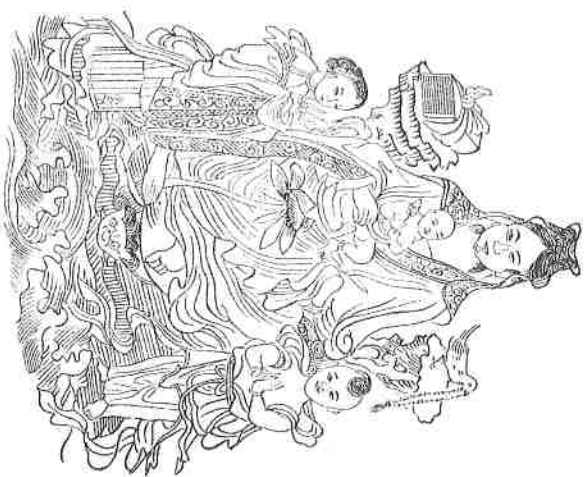
A thirteenth- or fourteenth-century woodblock print of the warrior god Guan Yu, deified hero of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

innovation, which not only saved lives but established the basis of agriculture through irrigation. He is not only worshipped as divine, in Shaoxing he also has a tomb, just as any mortal being would. His tomb was famously visited by the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, in 210 BCE and a stele (now lost) was erected to commemorate the event.

The most popular deities in Beijing were the warrior god Guandi and the Buddhist goddess Guanyin. Guandi derived from the historic figure Guan Yu (162–220), famous for his martial achievements and loyalty during the political turbulence of the end of the Han dynasty. His role in the conflict was mythologized in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the Great Classical Novels that is still

celebrated in traditional Chinese entertainments today. Held up for centuries as the pre-eminent martial hero, Guandi was declared a god in the Ming dynasty and his fierce, red-faced image was placed in many temples and shrines as a protection against evil spirits. He epitomizes the Chinese habit of deifying 'real' people, demonstrating the primary importance of history in the creation of mythology in the early imperial period.

The compassionate Bodhisattva Guanyin, whose full name means 'the one who sees and heeds the cries of the world', was an Indian Buddhist icon whose appearance and significance were transformed in China. Originally a male deity, depicted in Tang paintings from



Guanyin, goddess of compassion, who was adopted from Indian Buddhism.

Dunhuang with a thin moustache and beard, Guanyin gradually acquired more female attributes in China and was associated with salvation and the provision of children. In Ming-dynasty porcelain figurines, Guanyin has lost the moustache and often carries a small child in 'her' arms. She appears female although she is never depicted with the bound feet suffered by many (usually upper and middle class) Chinese women from the twelfth century onwards. The image of Guanyin is universal in Buddhist temples and is worshipped particularly by those desiring children.

THE ANNUAL CYCLE

There are fixed points in the lunar calendar, established by the Western Han Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), when people all over China share rituals in honour of particular deities or beliefs. China being originally an agrarian society, the main events occur in winter, when farming communities would have downed tools, but by the Han dynasty were sufficiently prosperous that agricultural surplus supported communal celebrations. Festivals gave rural populations a rare opportunity to come together, and troupes of actors and storytellers put on performances, undoubtedly the origin of many of the stories that have come down to us.

When the Republic of China adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1911, bringing the country in line with the empires of Europe, the traditional new year celebration became known as the Lunar New Year. It is also sometimes called the Spring Festival, as it coincides with the period in the old agricultural calendar when farmers would start to plough their fields and sow crops after the passing of winter.

On the third day of the first month of the year, Chinese families worship the God of Wealth both at home and in local temples. Caishen, God of Wealth, was said to have helped the Zhou defeat the Yin dynasty riding a black tiger, and was depicted in temples surrounded by attendants. Soon after comes *Yuanxiao*, the Lantern Festival, in which brightly coloured lanterns are carried through the dark streets for people to admire.

Early in the third month, on *Qingming* ('Bright and Clear'), the only festival without a fixed point in the lunar calendar, families go out to sweep, weed, and tidy ancestral graves. They make offerings to their ancestral spirits, sprinkling the graves with wine and laying food in front of them. After the spirits have had their opportunity to partake of the food, the family tuck in and have a picnic in the graveyard. This tradition began during the Song dynasty, when Confucian notions of filial piety became important.

The Buddha's birthday is celebrated on the eighth day of the fourth month, and *Duanwu*, the Dragon Boat Festival, follows on the fifth day of the fifth month. People race boats in the hopes that the dragons of the sky, who bring rain, will also make an appearance – a grave concern in an agricultural society. The fifth month also sees the celebration of Zhong Kui, the demon-slayer whose image is posted on doors to celebrate his destruction of centipedes, scorpions, toads, snakes and lizards. On the seventh of the seventh month is the Festival of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, when the two stars Altair and Vega are closest to the Milky Way and the two lovers (the cowherd and the weaver girl, living in the stars) can meet over a bridge formed by a flock of magpies. Traditionally girls float needles in bowls of water to see from the shadow cast whether they will become skilful embroiderers and thus easily find

a husband. The fifteenth day of the seventh month is the Festival of Hungry Ghosts, when offerings are made to the dead and paper boats with little lanterns in them are launched onto rivers and lakes to help save the souls of the dead.

On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, when the moon is at its roundest, mooncakes are eaten and given as gifts and debts are settled. This is known as the Mid-Autumn Festival, and is almost as popular as the Lunar New Year, and another occasion on which it is very important for families to come together.

Since the Qing dynasty, a number of public holidays were added to this annual cycle of festivals, usually on the day that matched the number of the month in the lunar calendar; for example, on the ninth day of the ninth month, known as the 'Double Ninth', on which people visit their ancestor's graves or climb hills to eat together and celebrate with chrysanthemum wine. The twelfth month sees preparations for the Lunar New Year, a public holiday lasting three days: houses are cleaned, images of demon-frightening gods pasted on front doors, and special meals prepared. The image of the Stove God in the kitchen is smeared with honey, either so that he will make a sweetly favourable report on the household on his annual visit to heaven, or to glue up his mouth and tongue to prevent him from saying anything that might cause the family ill will. The tradition of sitting up all night, *Shousui* ('Watching the Year Pass'), to greet the New Year is still observed.

Almost all of these celebrations contain a mixture of ancient and more recent mythology, of historical and mythical persons, and strong local variations (see Appendix).

MYTHS OF THE CLASSICAL ERA

Scholars, both Chinese and non-Chinese, of the present and recent past have done sterling work rebuilding the corpus of ancient myths of the classical era, which had been all but lost. Nevertheless, the yield is not large compared with those that have survived from the imperial era, and most of the ancient myths are fragmentary or laconic, so many of our sources refer to them only briefly, in the course of their discussions of other literary or philosophical subjects.

Many early writings no longer survive, since from the later Han, most texts were written on paper, which replaced the more durable bamboo slips of the earlier period. The earliest surviving 'books,' also printed on paper, date from the Song. The contents of earlier writings, where the complete text no longer survives, are often known only from references in compilations called *leishu*, which are gatherings of quotations from existing texts often arranged by subject. Compiled from about 300 CE throughout the imperial era, these compendia offer tantalizing references to lost works.

Nowadays China is seen as a unified whole, but during the majority of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE) it was essentially a confederation of city states. Each of these places would have had their own myths, which remained in circulation for as long as the rise and fall of the states, passed down the generations through the oral tradition. The lesser states were swallowed up by bigger ones until the Qin dynasty imposed its rule on the whole of the country in 221 BCE, thus beginning the imperial era, which lasted two thousand years, right up to the twentieth century.

Classical texts tell us that before the Zhou dynasty, there were the Xia and the Shang dynasties, but it is very difficult to separate fact

The Land

China is almost as large as continental Europe, and like Europe is host to a huge variety of not only languages and customs but also landscapes and climates. In the north lie the arid plains of the Yellow River, with its dry winters and hot summers; in the south, a thousand miles away, it is tropical. High mountains lie in the west, from where the two great rivers, the Yellow River and the Yangtze, flow eastward, discharging into the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea respectively.

from myth in these accounts. Euhemerization, named after the Greek mythographer Euhemerus, is a term for treating myths as ancient Greek history imperfectly remembered. If the Greeks can be said to have mythologized their history, the Chinese historicized their myths. It is to the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), which bridged both ancient and imperial China, that we look for the earliest of our written sources, as this period saw the rise and flourishing of the literati, or scribal class. The Han-dynasty scholar Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE), considered the father of Chinese historiography, started his *Shiji* ('Records of the Grand Historian') with reference to the myths of the Xia and Shang dynasties and attempted to historicize these ancient stories – a typically Confucian habit. Our problem, then, is twofold: we must endeavour to find sources that pre-date the Han, and we must carefully evaluate the extent to which we can trust the Han sources that are more readily available to us.

CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHY

The politician and philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) achieved great and enduring fame because what he said was simple to understand and follow. Confucius was a rationalist, but he was also agnostic, in the twenty-first century sense of the word. Although he did not believe in the gods that were passed down through the oral tradition, he was conscious of a godlike presence, and believed in what he called *tian*, 'heaven'. *Tian* stood for a moral code that must not be broken. It was like the word of God in the Christian way of thought.

Confucius believed that the Western Zhou had handed down the rules of morality. Furthermore, he believed that these rules constituted the ideal society; provided that kings and ministers followed the prevailing ethics of righteousness and benevolence. It was because leaders were not following these rules that the country was falling into decline. During the Spring and Autumn period when Confucius lived, there was a great deal of internecine warfare, with the larger states absorbing the smaller ones. As he saw it, until the country's rulers re-established the moral order and rituals that had existed in the Western Zhou before its demise – which was entirely due to the incompetence or laxity of its later kings – there was no hope for society. He called this the *tianming* ('mandate of heaven') conferred upon a moral ruler, who saw to it that his descendants would abide by the moral code until an immoral ruler 'lost' the mandate of heaven, at which point heaven would once again confer the mandate, starting a new dynasty. Confucius himself gave some encouragement to 'rebels' in his philosophy; provided that the 'rebel' was trying to restore what had been moral and proper before corruption had permeated the land.

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A Yuan-dynasty ink drawing of the philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE).

Confucius also placed high importance on the values of family and shared ancestry. In modern-day China, honouring ancestors is still important; it is not uncommon to encounter a shrine to the ancestors in family homes, usually placed in a room devoted to them. The festival of *Qingming* ('Bright and Clear'), often called Tomb-Sweeping Day, usually celebrated at the beginning of April, is attended by the whole family to commemorate the lives of departed relatives. Confucius' stress on the virtues of the rulers of the distant past and the importance of conservative rituals did not appeal to the rulers of his time, who were more concerned with the practicalities of interstate warfare.

Unable to persuade any ruler to follow his ideas in his lifetime, the rise of Confucius' popularity was gradual, beginning during the Warring States period in the Eastern Zhou dynasty (476–221 BCE).

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The Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety

Part of Confucius' emphasis on the importance of family lay in the concept of filial piety or devotion to parents. A very popular book, probably compiled during the Yuan dynasty, *Ershisi Xiao* ('Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety'), includes stories of gratitude and service to parents. It starts with the story of the legendary Emperor Shun, ill-treated by his step-mother and nearly killed by his father, but nevertheless exhibiting intense filial piety. He was chosen as a worthy successor by Emperor Yao, whose own son was not, in his opinion, good enough to serve. Thus, in Shun's case, filial piety was rewarded. The second exemplar was the Emperor Wen of the Han (r. 180–157 BCE), who cared for his mother during three years of illness. He never undressed so that he would be ready to serve her day and night and personally tasted all of her medicines to make sure they were safe. The other stories are also of 'real' historical persons: Wu Meng, who at the age of eight slept beside his parents' bed so that the mosquitoes would bite him rather than them; Wang Xiang, who lay naked on a frozen pond to catch the carp that his cruel stepmother loved to eat; and Wang Pu, whose mother was very frightened of thunder. After she died, if there was a thunderstorm, he would rush to her tomb to tell her not to be afraid. Other stories include: 'Carrying rice over long distances to feed his parents', 'Selling oneself into servitude to cover father's funeral expenses', 'Playing like a child to amuse elderly parents', 'Breast-feeding (toothless) mother-in-law', 'Cleaning the chamber-pot in person' and 'Tasting faeces causes despair', in which a son was advised to taste his sick father's faeces. If they were bitter-tasting then he was getting better, but they tasted sweet, which was very bad news. Apart from the story of Emperor Shun, in most cases there was no special reward for filial devotion, repaying parents for all they had done and bringing them happiness was enough.

Confucius' influence grew further with the rise of the scribal class in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), and his philosophy has remained dominant in China into the twentieth century. It is during the Han dynasty that our records of the ancient myths begin to divide. The written language lay in the hands of the Confucianist elite. The other form of language was the vernacular: the language people actually spoke. Confucius disliked fiction of any kind, even allegorical fiction, preferring history that told the real actions of real people over myths. His interest in history influenced his followers, and so they historicized many myths in the Han dynasty, moulding them to their way of thinking; for instance, turning the mythical figure of the Yellow Emperor (see p. 82) into a true, historic leader.

Confucianism might not have encouraged belief in gods, but did not proscribe their worship; it seems instead to have left such matters to individual consciences. The result was that the common

The Epic of Darkness

In 1982, an old farmer in Shennongjia, Hubei Province, gave the writer Hu Chongjun a rare manuscript recording the oral tradition of the region. Over the following years, Chongjun collected a number of other manuscripts – some incomplete, and each differing in some small way – from Shennongjia, a little-known, thinly populated mountainous area and UNESCO-recognized place of natural beauty; exactly the sort of place where the oral tradition persisted to within living memory. He compiled them into a new edition of the Tang-dynasty *Hei An Zhuàn* ('Epic of Darkness'). Because of its length, this tale was seldom performed except at funerals, hence its name. It tells the story of the founding of the world, along with other early myths.

people went on with their temple-building, telling their traditional stories about gods and other divinities and celebrating them in rituals and festivals, while Confucians, at least ostensibly, eschewed them. Since the greater part of the population did not know how to read and write, the tales of gods, ghosts and spirits – divinities of which Confucius would have disapproved – continued to be passed down in the oral tradition.

DAOISM

Daoism, an ancient philosophy peculiar to China, is hard to define. It differs from western religions, which tend to focus on one all-powerful god. Rather, Daoism bases itself on the natural world: it is the numinous; it is the things themselves before humans have got at them; it is like water, which given time will wear down the hardest of materials; it is the Yin and Yang, the opposing forces in every thing. Yang is the masculine principle of light and heat, positive and active, while Yin is the receptive, feminine principle of darkness and the cold. Neither can do without the other, just as shadows can be cast only where there is light.

The Yin and Yang combine with the Five Directions (north, south, east, west and centre) to make all the fundamentals of life. Yang characterizes the south and east – the sun, rising in the east, is referred to as the Great Yang – while Yin characterizes the west and north. The Five Directions, as well as their associated elements and colours, and the seasons were of immense importance in all aspects of life and death in China. Death and disease were associated with the north, from which the north wind brought epidemics, and winter; thus the dead were



Left: An ink drawing of the Lord of the East. Right: The God of the Eastern Sky. From a fourteenth-century album of eleven paintings relating to the *Nine Songs*.

interred facing towards the north. Clothes, ornaments, and offerings used in ritual practice had to conform to the appropriate colours. The emperor 'reigns facing the south' to receive the warmth and freshness of the sun, and his subjects face the north while in his presence.

The Five Directions and Five Elements

The number five has great symbolic value in Chinese thought, evoking a cross with its centre and thus expressing universality. Early Chinese mythic texts name five gods who each rule one of the Five Directions and one of the Five Elements (wood, fire, metal, water and earth) that encompass the whole world in traditional Chinese philosophy. According to the *Huainanzi* ('Writings of the Huainan'):

The east is wood. Its god is Taihao. His assistant is Goumang. Both hold the compasses and govern spring.... The south is fire. Its god is the Flame Emperor [Zhurong]. His assistant is Zhuming. They hold the beams of steelyard and govern summer.... The centre is earth. Its god is Huang Di [the Yellow Emperor]. His assistant is Houtu. They both hold the ropes and govern the four directions.... The west is metal. Its god is Shaohao. His assistant is Rushou. They hold the carpenters' square and govern autumn.... The north is water. Its god is Zhuanxu.

Houtu, the Earth God

Houtu is not clearly delineated in any of our sources and does not have the status traditionally attributed to the 'earth god' in the mythologies of other cultures. He is mentioned only as the ancestor of the minor god Kuafu (see p. 57) in the *Shan Haijing* ('Classic of Mountains and Seas'). According to the *Huainanzi*, he assists Huang Di and thus belongs to the centre. In a later annotation to the *Chu Ci* ('Songs of Chu'), he was the ruler of the netherworld, supported by a forbidding assistant called Tubo, who guarded the entrance.

In later traditions and popular religion Houtu was female, with many temples dedicated to her. At a temple in Wanrong County, Shaanxi Province, she is called 'Houtu, the sacred mother' and is portrayed wearing a crown and a skirt embroidered with phoenixes, symbols of royalty. Local records indicate that the temple dates back to the Han dynasty, and was visited by more than ten emperors up to the Song dynasty. Today pilgrims pray to the goddess for the usual things: a safe journey on the Yellow River, a good harvest, rain or children.

His assistant is Xuanning. They hold the weights of steelyards, and govern winter.

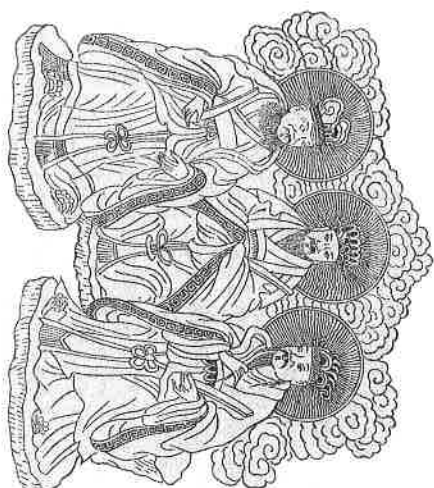
The names of the five gods associated with these directions and elements vary in different sources. However, Huang Di ('the Yellow Emperor') and his grandson Zhuanxu are always present. Colours, by association with the elements, are also by extension linked to different directions. The east belongs to wood, so its colour is green; south/fire is red; west/metal is white; north/water is black; and the centre/earth is yellow (appropriately governed by the Yellow Emperor).

LAOZI

Legend tells us that Laozi, a near contemporary of Confucius living in the sixth century BCE, was one of the progenitors of Daoism and author of the great *Daodejing* ('The Book of the Way and its Virtue'), which sets out of the fundamental philosophy of Daoist thought in poetic metaphors. (Scholars, on the other hand, have long told us that this book was written by many different hands, and some say that Laozi himself in fact lived during the Warring States period, in the fourth century BCE.) 'Laozi' is an honorific title meaning 'old master'; his actual surname is given as Li in various historical accounts. The Han-dynasty historian Sima Qian tells us that, after spending years as a recluse in the countryside, Laozi returned to the city of Luoyang where the gatekeeper, Yin Xi, recognized him as a great scholar and became his disciple. He is worshipped as Taishang Laojun ('the Great Old Lord') and one of the Three Pure Ones of Daoism, and even appears in the Ming-dynasty historical romance

The Three Pure Ones

The first of the Three Pure Ones, or Three Divine Teachers, is Yuanshi Tianzun ('the Original One, Respected of Heaven'), also known as the *Yuqing* ('Jade Pure One'). He was supposed to be the instructor to Laozi, who is himself the third, known as Taishang Laojun or the *Taiqing* ('Extreme Pure One'). The second, known as the *Shangqing* ('Upper Pure One'), is Taishang Daojun ('the Lord of the Dao'), who is supposed to know all that is known about the Dao. Each of these deities ruled over a heaven, and manifested one of the forms of *qi*, or celestial energy. They dominated early Daoist religion, making their presence felt before the appearance of the emperor, who was the highest man in the land, but they probably held these positions before the sorting into high or low was known to the Chinese as a feature of the imperial period.



The Taoist triad.

Xi You Ji ('Journey to the West'; see p. 169) as a member of the court of the Jade Emperor. In that tale he imprisons the famous Monkey, though without doing him any actual harm.

Despite its disputed authorship, the *Daode Jing* is one of the most important books of early Daoism. The other is the *Zhuangzi*, composed in the late Warring States period by Zhuangzi, after whom it was named. Zhuangzi built on Daoist philosophy, often using fragments of contemporary myths to make his point. He seldom tells the whole story when referring to these mythic episodes, presumably because he assumed his readers would already be familiar with them. This is one of the reasons that myths in the written sources come down to us in fragments.



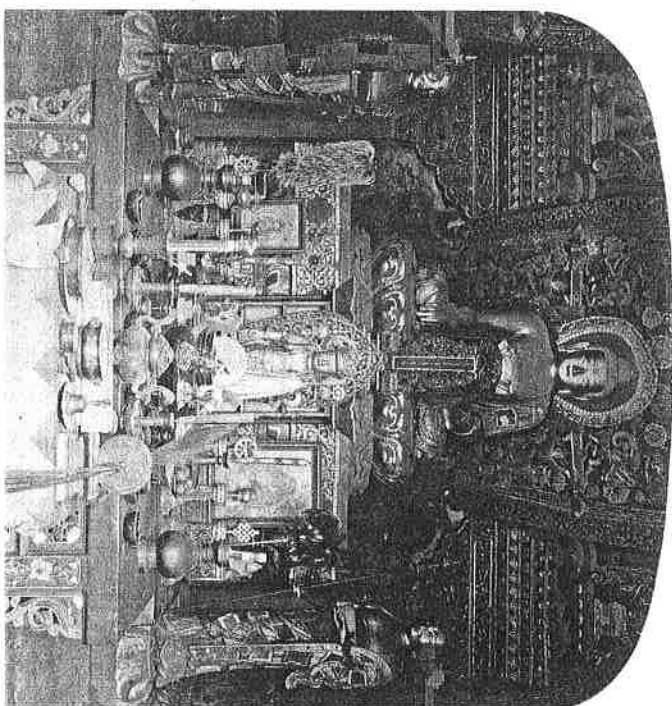
A tenth-century bronze sculpture of the Daoist philosopher Laozi, also known as Taishang Laojun ('the Great Old Lord').

BUDDHIST INFLUENCES

Buddhism arrived in China in approximately the first century CE, towards the end of the Han dynasty. In response to this new faith, Daoism took on more features of a pantheistic religion. It acknowledged the existence of the *numen*, or spirit, in natural things: animals; inanimate objects, such as trees; and humans. It was with the advent of Buddhism that Daoism became more recognizable as a religion; before, Daoism was simply what was 'supernatural' or supernatural. Yet Daoism proved itself protean, transforming to survive alongside the newly introduced religion. For instance, there had been no hint of monasticism in Daoism until the arrival of Buddhism, after which it began to produce its own brand.

Indeed, Buddhism may have gained its first foothold in China as a variant of Daoism. Many aspects of Buddhism echoed the native religion: they both taught the value of moral acts and meditation on the path to personal salvation. Daoism adapted new, foreign elements introduced by Buddhism to fit with the native tradition so that they became peculiarly Chinese, such as the image of Guanyin, goddess of compassion, which originated in Indian Buddhism (see p. 151). And while the Chinese myths had existed long before Buddhism began to take hold in the country, later it would influence greatly the development of a rich tradition of legends, a different manifestation of the Chinese imagination.

The ancient myths were not forgotten; they were told by ordinary people, passed from generation to generation, and were treated with the same reverence with which Christians regard the stories in the Old Testament of the Bible. And while Buddhists and Daoists built new temples according to their new religious dictates, many



The altar of a Buddhist temple in Shenyang.

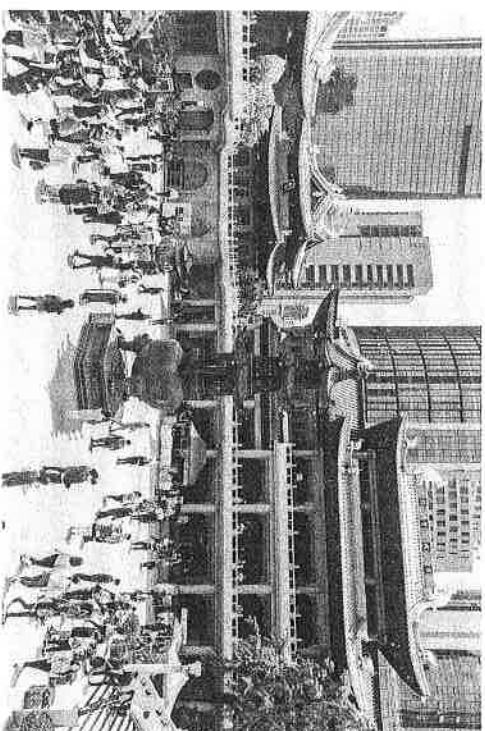
temples devoted to the old gods still survive. For instance, there are many shrines dedicated to the popular creator-god Pangu (see p. 50), including one on top of the mountain that bears his name in the Tongbai region of Henan Province, his supposed residence. On the third day of the third month of the lunar calendar, Mount Pangu hosts a huge festival that draws many pilgrims to this temple.

changed or usurped by the advent of a new class of men who relied on scientific methods to cure ailments.

Shamanism does not often appear in the written sources that describe the ancient myths of China, though in Chapter Six we will encounter one example in Sima Qian's description of the propitiation of the God of the Yellow River by Ximen Bao (see p. 134). His account is typical of the Confucianist tendency among the scribal class to downplay or disregard shamanistic elements, making them not particularly reliable sources on Shamanism.

RELIGION IN MODERN CHINA

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the introduction of western technologies made a huge difference to people living in the larger urban centres of China, and many of the popular beliefs and rituals associated with the old gods began to be looked down upon as 'superstitious practices'. In 1949, Mao Zedong led the Communist takeover of China, and in 1966 he launched the Cultural Revolution, which lasted for a decade. It was violent and destructive: many temples were denigrated as part of the 'old superstitions' and destroyed, and tales about traditional gods were forbidden – but not forgotten. After Mao's death in 1976, the proscription of the old faiths was relaxed, and temple fairs in rural communities were revived, where people brought their surplus goods for sale or barter. As the economy grew and private enterprises were no longer forbidden, people became wealthier and began donating to temples again. As a consequence, the temples have been rebuilt and the tales are being retold.



Tourists visiting the temple of Jing An in Shanghai. The temple was first built in 247 CE and was moved to its current location in 1216.

Temples have also benefited from the rise of globalization in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, becoming magnets for tourists intrigued by Chinese traditions and culture. Local branches of government have been quick to see the money-making possibilities of reconstructed temples and their renewed festivities, taking advantage of people's newfound desire to travel. Groups of tourists from across the world are regaled with the local version of myths and legends by government-funded tour guides. The visitors might not look like the old pilgrims, but as long as they buy incense and bow low, no one bothers to question their beliefs – they bring in good money.

By contrast to the anti-religious sentiment in twentieth-century mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan carried on much as they had done before. In Taiwan many temples function as community

WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

By the time that western missionaries arrived in China, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, they found themselves in the midst of a huge pantheon of 'popular beliefs', which they duly set down in their journals. To them there seemed to be no limit to the magic inherent in the Chinese worldview.

Missionaries and anthropologists also wrote about their encounters with shamanism. In fact, shamanistic practices give us our earliest evidence of writing in China, on so-called 'oracle bones';

which were used in divination ceremonies in the Shang dynasty. The Tungusic word *shaman* was adopted by nineteenth-century anthropologists, and their practices seem to mirror those of the *wu* in ancient China, who acted as healers and oracles, mediators between humans and the divine. In the Shang dynasty, it seems that the *wu* took great offices of state, interpreting the oracle bones that kings relied upon to judge the auspiciousness of their actions (see box below). However, the practice declined in the Zhou dynasty, perhaps owing to greater scepticism on the part of the followers of Confucius. Eventually even the *wu*'s role as healers was greatly

Divination and the Eight Trigrams

The art of predicting the future, or divination, goes back in China at least as far as the Shang dynasty, from which we find some of the earliest examples recorded on the so-called 'oracle bones'.

These were ox shoulder bones or turtle or tortoise shells inscribed – using symbols or 'characters' derived from early pictograms – with questions, usually related to the concerns of kings. Once heated, the bone would crack, and the resulting cracks or lines were interpreted by ritual specialists – the *wu* – to divine the answers to the inscribed questions. A text by the Han sceptic philosopher Wang Chong (27–100 CE) gives us one example of an inauspicious divination: 'When King Wu of the Zhou was about to attack King Zhou of the Shang, he had divination using stalks, but the result was negative. The diviner declared, "Very bad luck." The Great Lord pushed aside the stalks and trod on the tortoises, and said, "What do dried bones and dead plants know about fate!"'

Other methods of divination developed and manuals were written to help practitioners recognize the signs. Among these were *bagua* ('the Eight Trigrams') said to have been created by the god

Fuxi (see p. 76). Each trigram is made up of three lines – the Yin being a broken line, the Yang an unbroken line – and symbolizes an aspect of the world. For instance, the first trigram, 'Heaven' (*qian*), is made up of three unbroken lines; its

related symbolism includes the 'creative force', the 'father', the 'head' of the body, and the direction it represents is the 'northwest'. The second trigram, 'Earth' (*kun*), is made of three broken lines, and its related symbolism includes the 'receptive force', the 'mother', the 'belly' and the direction it represents is the 'southwest'. When the trigrams combine with each other, they make up the sixty-four Hexagrams, which are the basis of the *Yi Jing* or *I Ching* ('Book of Changes'). A variety of Daoist divination methods evolved, employing plant stalks, coins and dice thrown to form trigram patterns as set out in divination manuals such as the *Yi Jing*.



An oracle bone fragment from the Shang dynasty.

hubs as well as religious centres. Many western tourists are drawn to these ancient sanctuaries, and it is in such places that the gods and their altars – as described in the late imperial period by foreigners – can still be seen.

Since the ancient myths and stories have ceased to be a subject for opprobrium, many have found new life in television or cinema, often combining with science fiction or fantasy. These films, especially animated ones, are very popular. Myths are also referenced in the names of new scientific discoveries or technological endeavours. For instance, China's first Martian rover is named after the God of Fire, Zhurong, and the spacecrafts of China's lunar exploration programme are named 'Chang'e' after the lunar goddess herself. The first, Chang'e 1, was launched in 2007, and the most recent was Chang'e 5, China's first lunar sample-return mission, launched in 2020.

2

CHINA'S LITERARY TRADITIONS

The short-lived Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) was the first to unite the states of China, but it wasn't until the subsequent Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) came to power that the new imperial age truly began. Most of our earliest sources of the ancient myths were written during the Han period. When it comes to pre-Han sources, we are mainly left with the classics, such as the 'Five Classics' said to have been written by Confucius. The individual states were very local in content, so that *Chu Ci* ('Songs of Chu') represented only the songs of Chu. The earlier Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE), which we might call the 'real' ancient China, has left little in the way of written sources, because not many people could read or write.

AN ORAL TRADITION

The myths of the classical era were part of an oral tradition, common knowledge that was seldom written down. Few people in ancient China knew how to read or write, and so passing on stories by telling them through the generations was the only way to keep them alive. It is also possible that people had no fear of the myths disappearing, since everyone already knew them. Yet stories preserved by word of mouth have a way of changing, and what is common knowledge at one time may be forgotten. More than two thousand years have