

The Sage Kings

Contributed by Chris Cleary

The remains of Chinese mythology appear extremely meager, compared to the collections that have come down to us from the classical Mediterranean world. Down through the ages the Chinese literati paid little attention to folklore and popular beliefs. For example, archaeological finds reveal a whole corpus of striking paintings from the tombs of the Han Dynasty (c. 200 B.C. – 200 A.D.), which seem to have religious and mythological references, but there are no extant texts to give any clue as to what any of it means.

The canonical texts of Chinese civilization (put together 6th – 3rd centuries B.C.) are concerned with historical incidents and political principles, not personalized gods and supernatural events. The early mythical accounts of the beginnings of civilization—which apparently did exist, though we can't get a clear view of them—were taken to pieces by later generations of intellectuals to make ideological arguments. Consequently, early Chinese mythology is only known to us through a few scant fragments recorded in literary and philosophical texts.

The Chinese stories of the beginnings of civilization focus on a series of culture heroes known collectively as the Sage Kings. They are credited with the basic technological inventions and also with the creation of social structures and political norms. Throughout the later ages of despotic empire the Sage Kings were often invoked as paragons of leadership.

Fu Xi (also written Fu Hsi; pronounced “foo shee”) is first in the illustrious group. Han dynasty scholars dated his reign to the middle of the thirtieth century B.C. Today scholars call him a legendary chieftain. The story goes that Fu Xi taught “the black-haired people” (the proto-Chinese) how to hunt and fish and raise domestic animals. He also invented music and the calendar.

Fu Xi is also given credit for devising the “eight trigrams,” which are the basis for the sixty-four hexagrams that make up the kernel of most ancient Chinese text, the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing or I Ching)*. The legend goes that Fu Xi set out to make a thorough study of everything in heaven and on earth. At one point he observed a river dragon (some say an ancient tortoise) with strange markings on its back and from these he got the idea for the trigrams. He used combinations of lines to represent certain elemental forces: Heaven, Earth, Thunder, Wind, Water, Fire, Mountain, Lake. All sorts of systems of associations have been spun out from the trigrams ever since.

Nü Wa (sometimes written Nü Gua or Nü Guo) is the one female protagonist in these fragments of the early stories. Sometimes she is Fu Xi's sister, sometimes his wife. In the enigmatic Han Dynasty tomb paintings, Fu Xi and Nü Wa are shown as human figures from the waist up with intertwined snakes' tails and a child between them.

One story makes Nü Wa the creator of humankind. As she wandered the pristine earth, still devoid of people, Nü Wa felt lonely, so she mixed earth and water to fashion figures out of mud in her own likeness, and then brought them to life to keep her company.

The best-known story is called “Nü Wa Patches the Sky.” Two gods were fighting across heaven and earth. The defeated god, in anger, struck his head against a mountain and caused one of the pillars holding up the sky to collapse. The sky broke and cataclysms followed on earth: earthquakes, forest fires, floods welling up from the earth, rampages by ferocious animals against the human beings.

Nü Wa melted down various kinds of colored stones in a crucible, and patched the hole in the sky. She killed a giant tortoise and used its legs to prop up the fallen part of the sky. She put an end to the floods ravaging the earth and killed a dragon to overawe the beasts and put an end to their attacks on humans.

Shen Nong (also written Shen Nung; *shen* sounds like the English word *shun*, and the *o* in *nong* sounds like *oo* in *foot*) came after Fu Xi. He is said to have reigned for more than a hundred years, beginning in the 29th century B.C.

The name “Shen Nong” translates as “Spirit Farmer.” He was the inventor of agriculture and made the first plow. He founded the first market centers and showed the people how to trade with each other for mutual advantage. He made exhaustive studies of the plant world and discovered the medicinal properties of many herbs. In the later legends he is the discoverer of tea.

The Yellow Emperor (in Chinese: Huang Di, pronounced “hwahng dee”) arrived on the scene eight generations after Shen Nong. He came to power by defeating a corrupt king and winning the allegiance of all the powerful lords. He went on to reign for a hundred years. Many of the Yellow Emperor stories are about his wars with rival chieftains who tried to invade his territories.

The Yellow Emperor was seen in later generations as the paragon of a ruler choosing talented advisors, whatever their background. The advisors he employed are credited with many epoch-making achievements. They developed mathematics and astronomy and established the historical calendar based on a sixty-year cycle that was used throughout Chinese history. They invented a system of writing and promulgated a code of written laws. They invented the classical musical scales. They improved techniques of building and tool making and invented new measuring instruments. The Yellow Emperor’s wife Lei Zu devised the techniques of rearing silkworms and weaving cloth from silk.

The Yellow Emperor’s name is attached to the most ancient Chinese medical text, which presents discussions between the Emperor and his court physician on the diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

When the later Confucian political philosophers talked about the Sage Kings they always invoked Yao (rhymes with “wow”) and Shun (“shwoon,” with *oo* as in *foot*). Han dynasty scholars placed them in the 24th and 23rd centuries B.C.

The few phrases that summarize Yao’s reign focus on his work in building political cohesion. He strengthened the bonds between the clans and lineages, and created harmony among the villages and towns, so that “the black-haired people were satisfied and at peace.” He appointed people to study astronomy and calculate the calendar that regulated the seasonal activities of the population. The classical tag-line describing Yao’s political style says, “He extended virtue from himself to the world at large.”

Yao inherited the throne from his father and older brother but he is remembered above all for how he arranged for his power to be passed on. Knowing that his own son was unworthy of leadership, Yao selected a virtuous and talented common man to succeed him—this was Shun. Yao spent thirty years shaping Shun into a worthy successor, entrusting him with many difficult political tasks. Finally Yao abdicated in his favor and Shun became emperor.

Shun campaigned against “the barbarians” within his territories, people who did not follow a settled agricultural way of life, and expelled them to the remote borderlands of the realm. As a ruler he was known for promoting to positions of authority only people of integrity and simple conduct—fair-minded, public spirited, compassionate, wise, harmonious people.

One of the stories of Shun—told by a *real-politik* philosopher against him! —tells of his leadership style. There was a farming village troubled by land disputes. Shun went there to live among the people as a farmer and in a year the boundary conflicts ceased. There was a fishing village wracked by quarrels over fishing rights along the riverbank. Shun went there to live as a fisherman and in a year the quarreling ended and an orderly system of sharing was in place. There was a village of potters whose wares were misshapen. Shun went there and lived a year as a potter, and after that the pottery from the village was made correctly. Like Yao before him, Shun found that his own son was not qualified to rule, so he passed the throne to his best official, Yu (rhymes with French *vu*), often known as “Yu the Great.”

During the reign of Shun there was a disastrous flood over the land. Efforts to contain the floodwaters by building more dikes failed. Shun appointed Yu to control the flood, and Yu traveled constantly for thirteen years prevailing upon the local leaders to mobilize the people to cut channels to drain away the floodwaters. Yu was so dedicated to his mission, the story goes, that he had no time to spare to visit his family in those years, even though he passed by his home several times during his travels. When Yu died the people acclaimed his son as ruler, and this began the practice of hereditary succession. Yu is counted as the first ruler of the Xia Dynasty (also written “Hsia,” sounds like “she-yah,” and means ‘Summer’), the first dynasty in the traditional reckoning. The Xia Dynasty lasted from the 21st to 17th century B.C., with seventeen kings over fourteen generations.

To complete the picture of the Sage Kings, we have their antithesis—the tyrant, the self-aggrandizing ruler, the ruler obsessed with power. The Chinese would have so many to choose from. The classic figure here is Jie (also written Chieh, pronounced “je-yeh”), the last king of the dynasty founded by Yu the Great.

Jie, the story goes, was a highly intelligent man and very strong physically. He launched one war after another to force the neighboring rulers to pay tribute, or hand over famous beauties to him. He lived in a grandiose palace and dispatched his henchmen to all corners of the realm to bring back rare treasures and exceptionally beautiful girls. He spent his days feasting and wasted food on a grotesque scale. His abode was built so high that it became known as the Tottering Palace.

Jie’s advisors tried to warn him that he was wasting the people’s resources and endangering the realm, but he silenced them by terror. He declared that the whole world belonged to him and he was invincible. He staged arbitrary mutilations to demonstrate his authority. The people hated him and prayed for his downfall. This finally came at the hands of a righteous warlord who had put together a new coalition in a neighboring area and moved to attack him. Jie maintained his arrogant, self-deluded style right up until the day of his defeat. They say he took his court ladies to observe the final battle from a hilltop, saying it would be amusing, like watching a hunt.

References

The one good book in English on early China I could recommend is *Shang Civilization* by K.C. Chang, one of those rare books in which an archaeologist dares to put the whole story together. The Shang dynasty came after the tyrant in the story above, so it’s still prehistory, but hell bent.

Thomas Cleary has done the most accessible translations of the classic period Taoist material and Art of War stuff; he even did a set of excerpts from Confucius. So that might be the easiest way to get a picture of old China based on primary sources from those days.

The story fragments involving the Sage Kings are scattered through the Chinese classics, many of which have been translated into English in some manner or form.

Maybe look at anything done by James Legge back in the 19th century translating the books the Confucians of the Chinese Empire took as canonical. A lot of the stories of the Sage Kings are in the book Legge called the *Book of Documents* (Shang Shu). Confucius and particularly Mencius talked about the Sage Kings a lot, but within their own agendas—there are several translations of them, like D.C. Lau and Arthur Waley.