

Chinese myths

The mythology of China is rich and complex. Myths were orally passed down from one generation to the next and they did not appear in written form until much later. One of the earliest Chinese texts is the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan Hai jing*, 山海经), which is a fantastic geography of ancient China. The text preserves much ancient Chinese myth and folklore and was written by numerous authors during the Warring States period and then edited a number of times during the Han dynasty, c. 5th to 1st centuries BC to 1st century AD.

Compared to Greek mythology, the myths preserved in the *Shan Hai jing* are very short and fragmentary, which indicates that they are not complete. In fact, mythical passages were often intertwined by classical authors with their own writings. Sometimes ancient myths were treated as historical truths. Throughout the history of Chinese mythology, the most common recurring themes were the creation of the cosmos and human beings, nature, moral issues and ancestor worship. For example, the creation of the cosmos is usually attributed to a god named Pangu (盘古) who was the first living being and from whose dying body the world was created, while Nüwa (女娲) is said to be the creator of the human beings having formed them from yellow clay. Nature is also a topic of myths that deal with spirits and natural disasters. Existing myths or *shenhua*, 'sacred narratives', were incorporated into the Daoist belief system, which itself added further myths.

Gods, legendary rulers, ghosts or spirits in Chinese mythical stories are often associated with moral issues and ancestor worship. One such example are the *Three August Ones and Five Emperors* (*sanhuang wudi* 三皇五帝), which were legendary sage-rulers allegedly mainly active throughout the 3rd millennium BC. These heroic and moral rulers are generally credited with the invention of agriculture, irrigation and flood control among other things, which were so important to the livelihood in many parts of eastern China. They became the models to be followed by later kings and emperors. Their high moral character was glorified in Confucian teachings about humanity and righteousness.

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