

The myth of Hou Yi

The myth of Hou Yi resembles Heracles in Greek mythology, as both were archers who tried to shoot the sun. In the Chinese myth, there were ten suns in the sky that made the world so hot that nothing could grow. Hou Yi shot down nine of them with his bow and arrows and saved the earth.

The Greater Archer Yi Shoots Down Nine Suns

One day during the time of the sage king Yao-no one knew exactly how it came about-the ten suns suddenly refused to go on duty in an orderly fashion. All at once, all ten suns leaped out together and ran wildly through the sky, having great fun among themselves. This naturally brought an abundance of light to the earth, but it also brought great disaster.

The sun's brilliant rays scorched the earth and dried up all the grains that had been planted in the soil; rocks and metals were on the verge of melting, and people were so hot they could hardly breathe. Food became scarce and famine was widespread. As if this were not enough, monsters and fierce beasts came out of the forests and swamps, bringing even more suffering to humankind until finally the very survival of the species was threatened.

Di Jun and Xi He tired without success to persuade their sons to behave themselves while at the same time, King Yao was pleading to Di Jun to help deliver his people from their misery. Finally, Di Jun had to send the great archer, Yi, down to earth to slay the monsters and beasts and try to curb the misbehaviour of the suns. Di Jun gave Yi a red bow and a bag of white arrows with which to carry out his mission, and Yi left for earth accompanied by his wife Chang E.

The main source of Yao's worries and the people's misery was, of course, the ten suns. Everyone begged Yi to do something about them, Yi first pretended to shoot the suns, hoping that he might frighten them away. The suns, however, were not the least bit intimidated. This so angered Yi that he walked to the centre of a field, drew his bow to the fullest, aimed at one of the suns and with a swish, let an arrow fly up into the sky. A moment later, a ball of fire silently exploded in the air, flames darted in all directions and golden feathers came fluttering down to earth. Finally, a red bright object fell to the ground with a thud, and everyone rushed forward to discover a huge raven with three legs. This was a transformation of the spirit of the sun, of which there were now only nine left in the sky. Yi sent arrows flying into the sky one after another. Fire balls exploded, great sparks flew in all directions and feathers fluttered down in great profusion as the three legged ravens fell down one by one. King Yao, thinking

that one sun could still do great service for the people, asked Yi to leave the last sun unharmed.

Nine three-legged ravens had fallen to the ground. But where did all the fire balls go? It was said that they all fell into the vast ocean east of the sea to form a giant rock forty thousand *li* (about 13,000 miles) thick and forty thousand *li* in circumference. It was called “Wo Jiao” (The Fertile Scorch). Sea waters that dashed upon it would evaporate and disappear instantly. This is the main reason why, even though all the waters of all the rivers and streams empty into the sea, the sea never overflows.

➔ Jan and Yvonne Walls (Ed. And trans.), *Classical Chinese Myths*. Hongkong: Joint Publishing Co. 1984, pp. 68-69.