

## THE GODS OF EARLIEST CREATION

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### 1. The First World

The Chinese believed that our world was at first an indistinguishable part of the universe. Whether a god created the earth or earth created a god is not clear because both were instrumental in creating each other. First to appear was a mysterious egg containing the most ancient deity, Pan Gu. But when he broke the egg, he created new life, the earth, from his own body. And so, in commodious harmony, the ancient story suggests how the gods and the cosmos created each other. Although this story is so firmly fixed in the Chinese tradition that people use the idiom, "Since Pan Gu created heaven and earth" to say "since the beginning of time", the story was only first written down by Xu Zheng in the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220-265).

#### Pan Gu Opens up Heaven and Earth

Before the heavens and the earth were opened, the universe was all in darkness, a mass of confusion in the shape of a great egg. And there, in that egg, was the one called Pan Gu. He had been sleeping and growing in that egg for eighteen hundred thousand years.

One day he suddenly opened his eyes. He looked all around and saw nothing but terrible darkness. He could hardly breathe! A rage began to grow within him. "Why am I, Pan Gu, in such darkness? Why am I in this egg?"

He flung out his arms in anger and his hand touched a big axe; no one knows where it came from. He grabbed the axe and began to swing it from side to side wildly through the mass of confusion. Then suddenly, "Crash!" the sound of a thousand thunders echoed through the universe. The great egg cracked open!

Slowly then, and quietly, all lightness rose up to form the heavens

and all that was thick and heavy dropped down to form the earth.

When Pan Gu saw this he sighed deeply, and suddenly a thought filled his mind: "What if heaven and earth close up again?"

So he carefully stood and began to support the heavens with his head and hold down the earth under his feet. When he felt the heavens and earth growing, he grew too. Each day the heavens grew one zhang higher, and the earth one zhang lower. So Pan Gu grew too each day. For eighteen hundred thousand years he grew until the top of heaven was nine hundred thousand li away from earth. And then it was fixed. And there it stayed unchanging.

For all those eighteen hundred thousand years Pan Gu tirelessly supported the heavens. When he saw that the heavens and earth were finally fixed he breathed deeply one last time and wearily he lay down to die. And as he was dying his body slowly began to shift, sinking and rising into the many different parts of earth.

First his breath became the winds and the clouds and his voice turned into the thunders. His left eye became the sun and his right eye became the moon. His arms and legs and body grew up into mountain ranges. His blood spilled out into the rivers. His tendons and veins stretched into the valleys, and his muscles sank down and became rich soil. His hair turned into pearls and precious stones, and his teeth and bones became gems and metals. Even his sweat and tears fell softly as the rains all over the earth.

And so, from the body of Pan Gu, the world became very perfect.

#### THE CREATION OF HUMANITY

After Pan Gu, the first deities on earth were thought to be the goddess Nu Wa and the god Fu Xi. The philologist, Xu Shen (c. 58-147) defines Nu Wa in China's earliest dictionary as being "in charge of the breeding of all living things," and she tends popularly to be associated with marriage and fertility. Early stories tell how she creates humanity alone, but other variants suggest that Nu Wa was both wife and sister to Fu Xi and from their union people were created. The only surviving description of the Fu Xi story appears in a book called Du Yi Zhi in the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907) recorded by the poet Li Rong. But early murals from the Eastern Han Dynasty (A.D. 25-220) in Wuliang Temple (Jiaxiang county, Shandong province) depict Nu Wa and Fu Xi with human heads and torsos, their snake-like lower bodies intertwined, a child between them. We present only three versions here: the first is Nu Wa's creation alone; the second, based on Li Rong, is of Nu Wau and Fu Xi; and the last shows how the fairytale or folktale weaves many mythic elements into the longer tale. This last version is popular among minority groups in southwest China.

### Nu Wa Creates Humanity

On the earth created from the body of Pan Gu, gods began to appear. The first of them was the goddess Nu Wa, who had the head of a woman and the body of a snake and could change her shape seventy times in a single day.

When Nu Wa appeared on earth she began to walk through the quiet world, looking at everything. She was pleased by the world but as she wandered through the stillness the silence filled her body.

She came to a spring and she squatted down to listen to the waters tumbling over the pebbles. She saw some yellow soil and she picked up a handful and began to play, hoping to make the world a livelier place. First, she wet the earth. Then she squeezed it through her fingers. Then her hands molded a little creature like herself and when she placed it down beside the spring it began to laugh and laugh. Nu Wa liked the noise the little creature made and so she made another and another and she placed each one upon the earth and they all laughed together. They were different from the birds and animals and she called them her sons and daughters.

Nu Wa wanted to make many of these little creatures but she soon grew tired so she reached out and took a piece of vine from the mountainside and she dipped it into her damp yellow soil. With the vine she flipped out lumps of mud as quickly as she could and they all turned into human beings. Soon she had made people everywhere.

Later Taoist stories say that this is why people are different. They say that common people were just flipped into being with a piece of rattan, but special or superior people were formed by the hands of Nu Wa.

One day Nu Wa was sitting listening to the laughter of all those people she created and she thought, "When they die I will have to make more again."

She thought and thought and then she made some more men and women in halves and these ones she taught to love each other. And so it was that Nu Wa was the first matchmaker.

She invented marriage and the people began to call her goddess of marriage and offer sacrifices to her every year. In the second month of each lunar year they celebrated Tai Lao near a temple where all the young men and women met. At this time people could marry freely under the starry sky for all during the ceremony of Tai Lao no one would dare object to "the marriage made by the goddess."

Nu Wa's temples were built in the woods and on the streams. After a young couple were married they returned to Nu Wa to ask for a son or a daughter.

### The Creation of People from the Marriage of Nu Wa and Fu Xi

Long ago, after the world was newly made, there lived only a sister and her brother, Nu Wa and Fu Xi, atop Mount Kunlun. They lived there all alone since there were yet no people under the heaven. In the silence of the place they wanted to make other people, but being so close to the

gods, they hesitated. And so they sought a sign.

Separately they climbed up to the top of two different peaks where they made two fires of dry grass, pine needles and sticks. And they prayed to the heaven saying, "If the god permits us then the smoke of our two fires will mingle and rise into the sky. If not, the smoke will drift in different directions."

Then, looking at each other, they lit the fires and watched the smoke. Slowly, miraculously, the smoke from each fire drifted toward the other, mixing, rising and disappearing into the sky. And Nu Wa made a sweet-smelling straw fan to cover her face because she was shy, which is why brides often cover their faces. So it was that Fu Xi and Nu Wa lay together and created the first human beings.

### A Southwest Creation Story

In the south people cover the roofs of their homes with thick bark. This keeps out the heavy storm rains so frequent and so treacherous in the summer in southern regions.

Now once a man and his two children were warm and dry inside their home during a terrible thunderstorm. The children played quietly but as the rains drummed harder and harder the man knew that the Duke of Thunder himself must surely be nearby. So he carried his hunting spear in one hand and an iron cage in the other and he stood in his hut awaiting the wrath of the god. Suddenly there was a flash of lightning and a fearsome creature stood atop a bark roof. Sparks of fire shot from his eyes and he brandished an axe through the air; his wings stretched erect and fluttered, still fresh from flight.

It was the Duke of Thunder.

Despite his terror, the brave man thrust his spear and caught the god on the waist; before the Duke of Thunder could catch his balance, the man had thrust him into the iron trap, and carried him into the house.

The Duke of Thunder huddled in a corner of the cage and the man instructed his children,

"Watch the Duke of Thunder with care. Tomorrow we will eat him for dinner."

So the following morning the man prepared to go to market to buy things for his stew. He told the children,

"Stay close now and guard the Duke. Whatever you do, don't give him water."

With that the man went away. After awhile the Duke of Thunder, so pathetic and huddled in the corner against the bars, began to moan. The children did not know what was wrong with him. He groaned and opened and closed his mouth drily, finally pleading: "I'm so thirsty, please give me a drink."

The boy refused but as the Duke kept groaning the girl felt sorry for him. Finally the Duke slumped into the corner, his mouth hanging open as if dead. The little girl said, "Brother he's been in there a whole night and almost a day. I'll just give him a few drops from my brush."

And so they got the pot brush, dipped it in water and let a few drops fall on the parched lips. Suddenly the Duke sprang up, and, waving the

children away, he burst from his cage. The children trembled, but the god only plucked a tooth from his mouth and handed it to them, saying: "Plant this in your field. If disaster happens you may hide inside the fruit."

And, with a clap of thunder, he ascended into the sky.

Now the Duke of Thunder was known to send flood rains so when the father returned and heard all the children said he began to prepare. He built a strong iron ship and sent the children to plant the tooth. The tooth grew rapidly. In one day it gave a sprout, in the second a flower and by the third day there was a great calabash lying on a vine. The children took the gourd home and opened it to find thousands of tiny teeth inside. They dug them all out and found that the gourd was just big enough to crawl into.

On the evening of the third day the rains began. Winds whipped through the trees, water poured from the sky. Soon torrents rushed like wild horses over the land, covering the hills, encircling the mountains. And the fields lay under an endless sea.

The children climbed into their gourd and the man into his iron boat. As the flood waters rose higher and higher the man sailed his boat right into the gate of heaven itself and when he got there he pounded on the door: "Let me in! Let me in!" he called.

But the god of heaven didn't want mortals there so he commanded the god of waters to alleviate the flood. And the waters fell back so violently that the man in the iron boat crashed to the ground and died. But those children in the soft gourd just bounced on the earth and when they stopped rolling they jumped out to have a look.

They were all alone.

The flood had destroyed everything, all people, all the fields, and they were left alone on the earth. So that brother and sister began a new life and called themselves Fu Xi which means "gourd".

For a long time they lived quite happily, scaling the heavenly ladder, playing on heaven and earth. Then one day that brother wanted to sleep with his sister. Always she refused and ran away. One day she was running away, faster and faster around a tree when the boy had an idea. He turned. He faced in the other direction. His sister was still running as hard as she could, she ran right up against him and so it was they lay together.

Not too long after she gave birth to a ball of flesh. They found this creature very strange and so they chopped it into tiny pieces and put it into a bag. They began climbing the heavenly ladder with it, but about mid-way a sudden gust of wind blew the bag open and scattered all those pieces of flesh into the air. Falling to earth they became men and women. Those who fell on leaves were called Ye (leaf) and those who fell into the forest were called Mu (wood). So they named these places Ye and Mu. And so the world had men and women once more.

## THE COLLAPSE OF THE HEAVENS

After Pan Gu, Nu Wa, and Fu Xi, two other gods appeared on earth---the god of fire, Zhu Yong, and the god of water, Gong Gong. With them a new principle emerges in the stories: conflict. The earliest myths are concerned with creation, but as more gods appear, so too appear the first stories of war. These stories present an interesting contrast between creativity and destruction. Nu Wa creates people with her own hands, and later takes up a light tool to mold humanity; her creation is deliberate and delicate. Gong Gong, destroyer of the earth, rams down its supports with his own head in a fit of rage; a gross, uncontrolled behaviour which hurts him too. So Nu Wa puts back the sky once more. But the original tenuous perfection of the world is lost as battles are fought on Pan Gu's body and Nu Wa, the great gentle mother withdraws forever to the sky.

There was peace for many years on this first earth when suddenly, for a reason we don't remember, the first great disaster happened---Gong Gong, god of water, decided to wage war against Zhu Yong, god of fire.

Now Gong Gong was famed everywhere for his bad temper and cruelty. He had a snake's body with a human head and bright scarlet hair. His two closest officials were no less frightening. One advisor was the powerful and wicked Xiang Lu, out of whose green scaly body wove nine heads, each with dark shifting eyes. The other official was Fu You. No one knows what Fu You looked like, only that when he died he turned into a terrifying red bear.

Gong Gong also had a son who died on the day of winter solstice. When he died he changed into a terrifying ghost who wandered the earth afraid of nothing but red beans. So people used to make red bean porridge every winter solstice to frighten away this ghost, son of Gong Gong.

Finally, there was Gong Gong's youngest son called Xiu. He differed from the others. He had a good disposition and liked to travel from place to place by cart, foot, or ship, enjoying beautiful scenery and famous mountain look-outs. The people liked him and when he died they named him the god of travel. Traces of him are everywhere and when people used to give banquets for voyagers they honoured Xiu to wish the traveller safety.

No one really remembers how the battle between Gong Gong and Zhu Yong began. It is said simply that the god of water wanted to rule over the god of fire. Gong Gong led the attack on Zhu Yong from a magnificent cart drawn by two spirited dragons. His officials Fu Yon and Xiang Liu were close behind and then followed all the sea nymphs and underwater creatures. They were a terrible sight but these troops could not withstand the awful heat as they approached closer and closer to the god of fire. They began to melt and burn and finally they scattered in all directions. So it was that the god of water, who rises from the dark fearful depths was finally overcome by the bright dancing god of fire.

War is never fought without loss, no matter how glorious the victory. Gong Gong's ill-natured advisor, Fu You had leapt burning into the Huai Shui river never to be seen again. Gong Gong's eldest son was probably killed at the height of the battle, and, burning, he became a ghost roaming the earth and haunting people. The nine-headed monster, Xiang Liu fled in fear and hid in Mount Kunlun where he still may be, too ashamed to show himself to the world ever again.

But it was Gong Gong who caused the greatest disaster. Enraged as his troops scattered before the fierce flames, his hopes of domination crushed in the fiery battle, Gong Gong ran toward Mount Bu Chou, the single pillar which, in ancient times, supported the sky. With all his power he rammed his head against the mountains and the pillar cracked and fell in pieces, broken, cutting two great rifts deep in the earth.

For a single still moment all time stopped, as if holding its breath, and finally the sky collapsed and crashed down making chaos everywhere, leaving a howling gaping hole above. Then the world began to shift, the trees of the mountains caught fire, birds and beasts of prey seemed to scream in terror and flee from the forest. Floods burst from cracks in the ground, submerging the plains with filthy water and creating an endless sea. And the people did not know where to go and were threatened by constant floods and wild animals and they lived in perpetual terror. Their lives were a permanent encounter with death.

But what of Gong Gong himself? He had fallen over in a faint at the impact. He lay there for some time and when he came to, he stumbled away, not to appear again until the second disaster of the flood.

When Nu Wa now looked upon her children she was very distressed. She sighed and decided there was nothing to do but mend the sky with her own two hands.

She gathered pebbles and rocks of many different colors from all the rivers. She built a huge fire to refine these rocks and mixed her mortar. Then she began to fill up the gaping hole in the sky, pressing and smoothing plaster into the cracks. She looked up at her work and worried, "What if it falls again! I'll have to make sure it stays up!"

So she went and killed a giant turtle and she cut off his four legs and made them into heavenly pillars to prop up the four corners of the sky. So the sky became a great canopy over all the people and has never fallen down again.

During the time when the heavens collapsed, a black dragon had been terrorizing the central plain. Nu Wa decided to settle accounts. She went and killed that dragon and drove away all the scavenger birds and beasts of prey. She burnt the grasses of the plains and used the ashes to stop the flooding. Great was gentle Nu Wa who helped her children and salvaged the world from the terrible war between fire and water.

But even though the world was mended once again it was never the same. After Mount Bu Chu was knocked over, the sky shifted northeast and the sun, the moon, and all the stars tilted, turning westward. A great depression formed in the southeast and the waters from all the rivers and streams flowed down to create the boundless oceans.

With Nu Wa's work, slowly the earth awakened once again. Each season transformed harmoniously into the next and the people and animals lived together peacefully. They say at that time children could play with tigers and leopards, and mothers laid their babies in sweet-smelling birds' nests. Food was so plentiful that the people left it in the fields, taking only what they needed.

Nu Wa was pleased and she gave the people the sheng huang, a mouth organ made of a half-gourd and thirteen bamboo pipes that fanned out like the tail of a bird. So they honored Nu Wa by calling her "goddess of music". (In the southwest of China the Yao, Dong, and Miao peoples still play these instruments, especially at Spring Festival time.)

And so, after that first great war, there was once again peace on earth.

There are many legends about what happened to Nu Wa. Some say that she died and transformed into a thousand fairies. Others say she rode off to heaven in a thunder cart drawn by flying dragons. There she met the Supreme God and told him all she had done, but afterwards she retired into a life of seclusion and never spoke of her time on earth again.