



Chinese Bears in Antique Garb

*with introductory notes
added by the translator*

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Legendary Times
(c.2100–c.1600 BC)

The Queen Mother of the West, Yi the Archer and Chang'e



The Queen Mother of the West is a legendary being in Chinese mythology, supposed to dwell upon the Kunlun Mountains and to have been visited there by King Mu of Zhou. In her garden grow the famous peaches which ripen but once in 3,000 years and confer immortality upon those who eat them. Later tradition has given her a husband called the Royal Lord of the East.¹



Hou Yi, or simply 'Yi', is the famed heroic archer said to have rescued humans from imminent annihilation. He shot down nine (or in some texts ten) surplus suns which once rose together and scorched the earth. He was given the elixir of immortality by the Queen Mother of the West as a reward, but his wife, Chang'e, stole it and flew away to the moon. She would become the Goddess of the Moon.²

According to the ancient *Book of Hills and Seas*, 'The Queen Mother of the West is a half-goddess, half-beast mountain sprite dwelling in the Kunlun Mountains, with tiger teeth and a leopard tail, who is a good whistler.' Such was the depiction of the Queen Mother of the West during the Warring States period. Famous Chinese writers like Qu Yuan, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi all made mention of her. Xunzi went so far as to claim that she was the teacher of

¹ Based on Herbert Allen Giles, *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary* (Leyden: Brill, 1898), p. 272.

² Yang Lihui and An Deming, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 231-232.

Emperor Yu the Great. By the Han Dynasty she had begun to be portrayed in a rather lavish style, as a beautiful woman. According to this era, she used to meet King Mu of Zhou down by the Jasper Lake, where they would sing ritual songs to one another. By the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, she had come to represent Taoist immortality.

The reason why the Queen Mother of the West is so famous and venerated is because she is the goddess in charge of administering the elixir of life. The stone relief portraits found in Han Dynasty tombs depict her alongside immortal Taoist priests, and a special rabbit, which helped to pound up the elixir. Besides these, she had two other capable followers in tow: a three-legged bird and a nine-tailed fox. Despite the many changes to the way in which she was depicted over the centuries, one thing has remained the same, and by it she is easily identified. It is the distinctive crown she wears upon her head. This crown came to symbolise the divine authority of the Queen Mother of the West. Later, it became a fashion accessory for ordinary girls. It is round in the middle, with two triangles placed above and below the circle, pointing in towards one another. A pair of these is set suspended at either end of a horizontal rod, which together make a complete crown. There are gold, silver, jade, silk, and coloured paper crowns, as well as brocade and floral designs. During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, floral crowns were exchanged as lucky talismans on Humans' Day, celebrated on the seventh day of the first month each year. The crown I fashioned for my Queen Mother of the West is a pearl variation. She is wearing a short-sleeve coat over her robe.

The clothes and accessories 'worn' by the Queen Mother of the West in the Han relief portraits were drawn according to the contemporary trends of the Han Dynasty. Classical Chinese clothing stems from two main traditions: one involves a two-piece set that began in the Shang and Zhou

Dynasties made up of a shirt and a skirt. This later developed into a two-piece set comprising of a short jacket with a long robe underneath. The other main tradition stemmed from a one-piece: a shirt or blouse sewn on to a skirt. This started to gain popularity during the Warring States period (others say these one-pieces were already around in the Zhou Dynasty) and remained in fashion up until the Han Dynasty. The well-known long, unlined gowns for men, and the wrap-around dresses for women of later ages all developed down this line. Han Chinese clothing began with the shirt and skirt two-piece combination and was followed by many different kinds of one-pieces that appeared later. Every change in trend through the ages is actually attributable to the impact of foreign fashion on China.

As for Yi the Archer and his wife Chang'e, their story is one we all know well. I tailored a piece of leather for Yi to wear as a skirt. The name of his skirt comes from the early period. The sides of the skirt were not supposed to be sewn up. Chang'e is wearing a knife-pleat 'hundred fold' skirt, with a floaty chiffon wrap around her shoulders to give extra movement. Skirts in the Han Dynasty were a single piece of material wrapped around the waist like a tube.

Yi is carrying a bow and arrows. The arrows were stored on his back in a quiver called a *fu*, which were usually made out of bamboo or cane. One of these quivers could hold up to ten arrows. The arrows were bundled with the tips pointing downwards, and the feathers and shafts poking out of the top. By the Tang Dynasty, the name *fu* had changed to *hulu*, which by then referred to a pouch slung from a large belt worn around the waist. One *hulu* could hold thirty arrows. A *hulu* made from wild boar hide was used to sound out invading enemy troops. It was claimed that a scout who crouched down and rested his head on a *hulu* placed on the ground could detect sounds of movement up to thirty miles away.

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The Yellow Emperor and Leizu



The Yellow Emperor is one of the most famous of China's legendary rulers. He is said to have reigned 2698–2598 BC, and to have been miraculously conceived by his mother Fu Bao, who gave birth to him on the banks of the Ji River, from which he took his surname, Ji. His personal name was Youxiong, taken from that of his hereditary Principality; and also Xuanyuan, said by some to be the name of a village near which he dwelt, by others to refer to wheeled vehicles of which he was traditionally the inventor, as well as being the inventor of armour, ships, pottery, and other useful appliances. The close of his long reign was made glorious by the appearance of the phoenix and the mysteriously auspicious animal known as the *qilin* (commonly misrepresented in English as the 'Chinese Unicorn'), in token of his wise and humane administration. He died at the age of 111 years.

Xiling Shi, the Lady of Xiling (after her birthplace in Hubei Province) was a title given to Leizu, consort of the Yellow Emperor. She is said to have discovered and taught the art of rearing silkworms in the 27th century BC.³

The Yellow Emperor's surname was Gongsun. His given name was Xuanyuan; according to some this was because he was born on the hillock of Xuanyuan. As he grew up on the banks of the Ji River, he had another surname, Ji. The Yellow Emperor was the leader of the nomadic Youxiong clan and various other neighbouring tribes. His greatest achievement was to

³ Based on Giles, *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 338 and 270.

take an extremely clever woman called Leizu for his wife. Leizu was the daughter of the chief of the Xiling tribe, who lived nearby the present-day Xiling Gorge in Sichuan Province. She was obviously an exceptionally creative person. It was she who discovered that natural silk could be derived from the cocoons silkworms produce after eating mulberry leaves, and that silk could then be woven into fabric for making clothes. She was first adopted by the head of the clan as a daughter, and later became the head of the clan herself. The entire clan was occupied in raising silkworms, spinning silk, and weaving cloth, which brought prosperity and the ability to expand out across the Chengdu Plain. When we say that the Yellow Emperor 'took' Leizu as a wife, it actually means that he married into Leizu's family, since theirs was a matriarchal society.

For her to grasp the process of raising silk worms and reeling silk was a truly amazing feat. It was no less than the beginning of Chinese clothing culture, the point from which China was able to break away from barbarism. The entire history of clothing in China began with Leizu. Her technique for rinsing silk floss later contributed to the invention of paper and printing.

Women in ancient China were largely occupied picking mulberry leaves. The indispensable tool required for this task was not a regular basket, but a flat, bamboo carrier called a *long*. These were very attractive objects. The Han Dynasty ballad *The Mulberry Leaves by the Path* is about a woman called Luo Fu taking up one such container to go picking mulberry leaves:

*Fastened with black hair,
Cassia twigs for a handle ...*

The straps holding the *long* together were woven from strands of women's hair, and the handle was made from cassia twigs or branches. These 'cassia twigs' are actually what we now know as cinnamon bark, a kind of fragrant wood. In the ballad, cassia is used to represent Luo Fu's noble and unsullied character.

Leizu lived long, long ago in remote antiquity, and as such, she wouldn't have been as particular about her clothes as those who came after her. My Leizu bear is wearing a simple smock with an apron tied around it. She is fairly rich, as you can tell by looking at her necklace, which is made of cowry shells, the currency of her time.

When the Yellow Emperor took his people to live with him in Sichuan, he merged the Youxiong and Xiling tribes to form a single large clan. This represented the end of their nomadic existence: they had entered the Agricultural Era. The Yellow Emperor stayed in Chengdu for two years, where two sons were born to him. He then returned to the Central Plain and defeated Chiyou, the tyrannical leader of the Nine Li tribe. This victory united the rest of the disparate tribes in the region. Their social system changed from matriarchy to patriarchy. At that time, clothing started to become more fancy and dignified. Prior to the Yellow Emperor's unification of the tribes, there were no set styles when it came to clothes. I designed this outfit for him. The upper garment imitates the one-shoulder tunics popular in the Bronze Age, as found at the famous archaeological site at Sanxingdui in Sichuan. The thing joined to it is a bunch-pleat, or 'gathered' skirt. All the emperors of later ages, from the Song, to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties loved to wear these roomy gathered skirts.