

Gods of Death

IN WORLD MYTHOLOGY

Don Nardo



MYTHOLOGY AROUND THE WORLD



About the Author

Classical historian and award-winning author Don Nardo has written numerous acclaimed volumes about ancient civilizations and peoples. They include more than three dozen overviews of the mythologies of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Celts, Norse, Native Americans, and others. Nardo, who also composes and arranges orchestral music, lives with his wife, Christine, in Massachusetts.

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CHAPTER THREE

Chinese: Yan Wang and Meng Po

When most people in the United States and other Western nations hear the word *hell*, they think about the place of eternal punishment envisioned in the Christian faith. That extremely unpleasant realm is usually pictured as being subterranean (underground) and ruled by a fallen angel named Lucifer (or more often referred to as the devil). But that concept of hell is far from unique. The mythologies of many peoples of the past (and in some cases the present) feature very similar descriptions of where sinners go following death.

The ancient Chinese, for example, had a hell-like post-death destination known as Diyu. That word translates into English literally as “earth prison.” The general belief was that when a person died, a local deity, sometimes called a “city god,” took the person’s soul to a place of preliminary judgment, where detailed records of their entire life were kept. If the person had led an honest, decent life, the god sent him or her to the Bridge of Seven Treasures. There, other judges of the dead considered whether to allow that person to continue to heaven.

In contrast, if the person had been dishonest and a sinner, he or she ended up in the Ten Courts of Hell, one of the many different nicknames for Diyu. There, the person was judged again, this time by a different god. Diyu featured a maze of torture chambers in which fallen souls were punished. The torment they suffered was not eternal, as in the Christian hell, however. Instead, the idea was for the suffering to rehabilitate the sinner and eventually give her or him a chance at salvation. This concept is sometimes referred to as supernatural compensation. According to Reed College instructor Chris Lydgate:

The general idea of damnation as a “supernatural compensator” . . . is a recurring theme in many of the world’s religions. . . . [In addition to ancient and modern Christians], civilizations as diverse as the Greeks, the Maya, the Britons, and the Sumerians all subscribed to some form of post-mortem punishment. But for sheer diabolical ingenuity, it is hard to rival the traditional hell of China. With its labyrinthine [intricate] divisions and subdivisions [and] ghoulish extravagance, it resembles nothing so much as a monstrous bureaucracy run by [supernatural fiends].²³

A Death God with Many Names

Not only did the Chinese believe in a hell every bit as horrifying as the Christian one, they also had a fairly close equivalent of Lucifer. The Chinese god of death and the afterlife was Yan Wang, often also called Yanluo Wang, King Yan, and Lord Yama, among several other names. In the dim past, he was initially a Hindu deity from India. But when Buddhism, which started there, spread outward to other Asian regions, including China, Yan Wang’s image and cult evolved into that of the Chinese death god.

Yan Wang

The chief Chinese god of death and overseer of Diyu, the Chinese equivalent of hell



In ancient China, the belief was that the souls of deceased people deemed evildoers were temporarily condemned to suffer in the hell-like Diyu. There, they underwent various punishments—including being immersed in boiling water—which were ultimately designed to rehabilitate them.

Physically speaking, Yan supposedly had a frightening appearance. It included red skin, large bulging eyes, a long black beard, and a perpetual scowl. He also wore flowing Chinese-style robes and a judge's hat with "King" etched into its front.

Chinese artists depicted Yan not only with those personal traits but also accompanied by a small entourage of followers. Among them was a scribe who carried a magical book. It contained the birth and death dates of all humans, past, present, and future. Also regularly attending Yan were two assistants named Ox-Head and Horse-Face. Their task was to bring the souls of recently deceased humans before Yan so he could judge their fate.

According to some of the myths about Yan, those judgments always included various types of extremely unpleasant physical abuse. Although the sentences he handed out could vary from individual to individual, they followed general patterns. Thieves were usually crucified, for instance, as were arsonists; liars and certain other sinners were tossed off a tall bridge; and merchants who cheated their customers were hung on huge hooks. Also, the bodies of adulterers were sawed in half, and murderers were stabbed repeatedly.

Beware of Lying to King Yan

The chief orchestrator of these tortures—Yan Wang—appears in a number of myths, some fairly brief and others much longer and more complex. Among the shortest and also one of the oldest of these tales is one that explains why people needed to try not to get on his bad side. It tells how he felt that lying to his face was a particularly heinous offense and that the penalty for it was a swift

Was Yan Wang a Sinner Himself?

In the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the idea that God could commit a sin is totally unacceptable. In fact, that is also the case in most world religions and the mythologies associated with them. There are some exceptions, however, and one is that of the Chinese god Yan Wang, overseer of Diyu, the ancient Chinese version of hell. Some ancient accounts claim that, although he judged the souls of deceased humans for their various sins, he himself was not free from improper behavior. According to Chris Lydgate of Oregon's Reed College, Yan Wang was "a damned soul who must periodically undergo horrific retribution." It is somewhat unclear what his crimes were in the past. But at periodic intervals, "demons lay him flat on a metal bed and pour molten copper down his throat. Properly chastened, he then returns to his throne to mete out justice to earthly sinners."

death. In the story, one day Yan was sitting in his throne room with his assistants and per usual judging human souls. One by one they came before him and answered his questions, after which he decided how they would be punished.

At one point a former soldier stood before Yan. One of the god's assistants recited the man's sins, which included, among several other crimes, killing innocent women and children while attacking a city. Yan spoke up and asked the soldier how he was able to commit so many sins in only a few years. But instead of showing respect to his judge and answering truthfully to the best of his ability, the soldier chose to lie. He had never done anything wrong, he steadfastly claimed.

Hearing this, Yan told his assistants to produce a scroll showing the precise place, date, and time of each of the man's

Yan Wang, also called Yama, holds the so-called Wheel of Life, a magical artifact depicting various stages in earthly existence. There were different interpretations of the Wheel. The Buddhists, for example, believed that only those individuals who attained enlightenment could escape the Wheel and enter Nirvana, or heaven.



crimes. Filled with rage and becoming even redder in the face than normal, Yan berated the soldier and then signaled to the shadows nearby. Out came an immense hand encrusted with metal spikes. Suddenly moving into position directly above the soldier, it proceeded to pound him into a pile of broken bones and shredded flesh. One of Yan's assistants then told other souls waiting in line to beware of lying to the god of death, lest they suffer the same fate.

A Mother's Sins

Although Yan Wang was often stern and inflicted terrible tortures on many of the human souls he judged, he was not evil by nature. Rather, the Chinese generally saw him as a grim god who simply carried out a harsh but necessary duty. In fact, the entire system of hell and its painful punishment of sinners was widely seen as a needed way to help keep human beings from committing crimes. Yet as severe and scary as that system was, it featured a few loopholes that occasionally allowed lenient treatment and even forgiveness. This was proved by one of the best-known myths in which Yan Wang and the realm of the dead appear—the inspiring story of Mulien.

As the tale begins, the elderly father in a financially well-off family has died and left his fortune to his son, Lobu. Not long afterward, Lobu needed to go on a business trip, and before he left, he met with his mother, Chingti. Giving her a portion of the family money, he instructed her to use it not only to support herself, but also to fund worthy causes. If she met with any poor, starving monks, for example, she should feed them. It was the moral thing to do, he added.

After Lobu departed, however, Chingti largely ignored his advice. Indeed, she proceeded to commit one sinful act after another, beginning with eating meat, then viewed as improper in

Mulien

A Chinese monk who was so pious that the gods granted him the ability to travel between earth and heaven

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