



EXPLORING GODDESSES of World Mythology

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CHAPTER ONE

Mother Goddesses

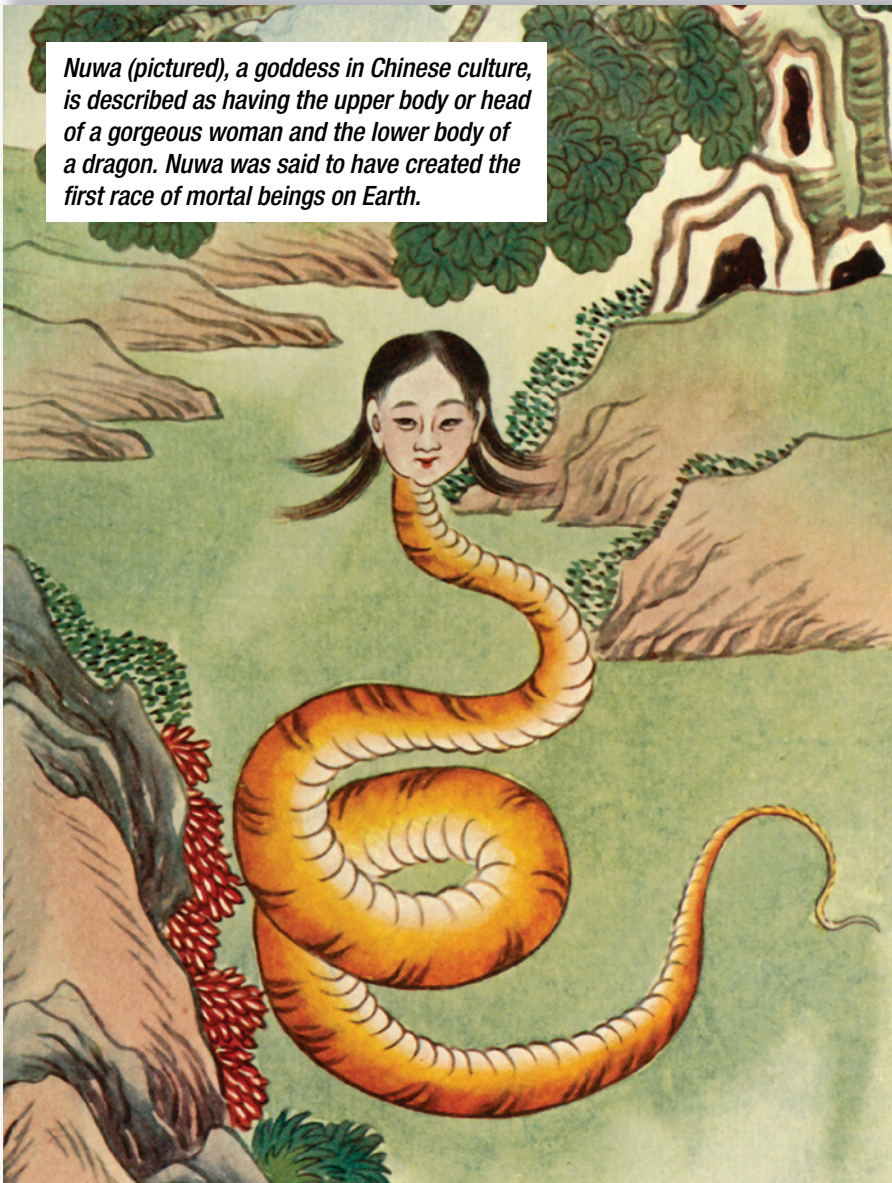
Long ago—according to surviving Chinese myths and folktales—something strange and extraordinary occurred in the sky over what is now China. In a manner that people today cannot explain, several mystical, immortal beings sprang into existence. One was Long Wang, the deity in charge of the ocean waters. Among the others were Xihe, god of the sun; Chang’e, the moon goddess; XieZhi, administrator of justice and fairness; Guanyin, the goddess of mercy and compassion; and Yan Wang, who oversaw death and its rituals.

These heavenly beings looked down on Earth’s surface—including the mountains, valleys, seas, and forests—that the very first divinity, Pangu, had only recently fashioned. The emerging deities marveled at how beautiful it all was. One of their number, named Nuwa, agreed that Pangu had done his job exceedingly well. And yet in her mind, there was something missing. Her motherly instincts suggested to her that what the new world lacked was a race of mortal beings who would be like children to her and other deities.

Nuwa took it upon herself to create those earthly mortals, which she called humans. The first consideration, she reasoned, was what form they should take. She herself had the upper body of what people today see as a gorgeous woman, with flowing hair and delicate skin. By contrast, her lower torso consisted of the overlapping scales, clawed feet, and long tail of a dragon. Partly because she thought her upper half was better looking than her lower half, she decided not to give her humans any dragon-like features.

After searching for the right substance to employ in fashioning her mortal children, the mother of humanity selected the luscious, yellow-colored clay lining the banks of the majestic Yellow River. When she had gathered enough of that nutrient-rich material, she knelt down and began lovingly molding the little beings one at a time. Soon, however, she realized that this would take too long. So as one modern Chinese myth teller writes, “She plucked a branch off a nearby willow, and with a dip and a swish, cast out countless silty splatters. As the droplets landed, each morphed into a little person that instantly pulsed to life.”³

Nuwa (pictured), a goddess in Chinese culture, is described as having the upper body or head of a gorgeous woman and the lower body of a dragon. Nuwa was said to have created the first race of mortal beings on Earth.



Having solved that initial problem, Nuwa noticed a second one. It was that her humans, being mortal, rather than undying like herself, would grow old and die. To make replacing those who passed away easier, she invented the process of sexual reproduction and the institution of marriage. This gave her little offspring the ability to reproduce themselves, ensuring the human race's survival over time. And in generation after generation, people remembered the great mother goddess and expressed their thanks to her in daily prayers.

A Symbol of Mothers Everywhere

The early Chinese were not the only ancient people who recognized a deity who fulfilled the role of mother of humanity, or of Earth itself, or both. In fact, the concept of Earth possessing female qualities and giving birth to nature or the human race was universal in ancient times. This is probably not surprising, says art historian Stella Karageorgi. Peoples of the past, she points out,

observed and witnessed the plants and animals being born on the earth's surface, multiplying and finally returning to her, only to come back again through regeneration. A cycle that is maintained steadfast: *birth, death, and re-birth*. Earth supports the whole ecosystem, the sky, the mountains, the trees, the seas and rivers, animals and humans; she nurtures and heals all. Ultimately all life depends on her, she is the force of creation and destruction.⁴

In addition, in some ancient cultures the mother goddess, sometimes called the Earth Mother, or Mother Earth, was viewed even more simply. In such cases she was seen as the embodiment, or symbol, of mothers, both past and present. Just as every person owed a debt to and in one way or another loved his or

Nuwa Saves Humanity

In her several important myths, the Chinese mother goddess Nuwa not only created the human race but also saved it from certain destruction. Not long after she birthed humanity, two other gods—Yan-di, the fire deity, and Gong-Gong, god of water—got into a terrible fistfight over a matter that no one remembers anymore. The battle raged over much of Earth's surface, causing earthquakes and other devastation. Yan-di emerged the victor. And in response, Gong-Gong, a sore loser, threw a tantrum. Yelling and thrashing about, he crashed himself into a mountain that served as a major pillar holding up the heavens. As the peak crumbled, the sky started to sag downward, touching off other disasters. Major rivers changed the direction of their flow, and landslides and floods took a heavy toll on the human population. It seemed like all people might be doomed. However, Nuwa took it upon herself to avert catastrophe. Hurrying to Earth's surface, she found the corpse of a monstrous turtle that had recently perished and yanked off its enormous legs. Swiftly, she used them to hold up the parts of the sky that had been collapsing. In that way she saved humanity, making future generations of people possible.

her mother, both individuals and society as a whole respected the local mother goddess.

This was certainly the way the ancient Egyptians saw their highly versatile deity Isis. Sister of Osiris, lord of the underworld, she was renowned for being the perfect wife, a protector of society and Egypt itself, and a wielder of powerful magic, which she always used for good. Overall, however, she was seen as a sort of universal mother. In *The Golden Ass*, a novel by the second-century-CE Roman writer Apuleius, she appears to a young man in a dream and tells him, "I am the mother of the world of nature, mistress of all the elements, first-born in this realm of time. I am the loftiest of deities, queen of departed spirits, foremost of heavenly dwellers, the single embodiment of all gods and goddesses. I order with my nod the luminous heights of heaven, [and] the whole world worships [me]."⁵

These words reflect the wide array of powers that people in that age thought Isis possessed. "From the average person to pharaoh," art historian Guillaume Deprez writes, as a strong mother figure "Isis helped with fertility, childbirth, love, healing,



The Egyptian goddess Isis (pictured) wielded powerful magic and was seen as a universal mother to the ancient Egyptians.

travel, and in due course, eternal life. No wonder that Isis gave hope to millions of Egyptians.”⁶ To those millions, moreover, can be added the millions of Greeks, Romans, and other Mediterranean peoples who came to embrace Isis in the last few centuries BCE and beyond.

Zeus's Grandmother

Well before they came to worship Isis, however, the Greeks recognized their own primeval Earth Mother goddess. Called Gaia, she was seen as both a spirit inhabiting the land beneath people's feet and the mother of all the gods. According to the seventh-century-BCE Greek epic poet Hesiod, at first only chaos existed. From it, he wrote, emerged a handful of vast, mystical spirits, among them Gaia. She soon mated with another of those spirits, Uranus, the personification of the heavens, and gave birth to several misshapen, monstrous creatures, including some with fifty heads and a hundred hands.

Gaia got better at producing offspring, however, for she eventually begot the first few members of a race of gods the Greeks called the Titans. They were physically perfect, powerful human-shaped beings described by Hesiod as “the august race of first-born gods, whom Earth [Gaia] bore to broad Heaven [Uranus], their progeny [children], givers of good things.”⁷

Later, the Titans fought and were defeated by a group of rebels among their own ranks. Led by Zeus, these insurgents became the second and stronger race of gods—the Olympians. As, in a sense, the Olympians' grandmother, thereafter Gaia remained a forceful divine presence in Greek religion and mythology. According to one ancient tale, she gave Apollo, god of prophecy, the extraordinary power of foreseeing later events. This allowed him to inspire the renowned oracle at Delphi, in central Greece, where people from across the known world came to see what might lie in their futures. Also, through the centuries respect for Gaia remained so strong that to swear something in her name was viewed as the most binding of all oaths.

Little Known Fact

The ancient Greeks referred to the huge and devastating battle between Gaia's children, the Titans, and her grandchildren—Zeus and his Olympians—as the Titanomachy, or War of the Titans.

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