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The role of the three sovereigns and five emperors in shaping Chinese civilization

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Abstract

This paper explores the foundational era of the "San Huang Wu Di" or "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" in ancient Chinese mythology, a pivotal period that underpins the cultural heritage and historical narratives of China. These demigods and exemplary leaders are credited with essential contributions to the development of Chinese civilization, including the inception of agriculture, medicine, governance, and technological innovations. By examining the latest research and historical texts, the paper delves into the lives and legacies of these figures, emphasizing their influence on modern Chinese identity and governance. The Three Sovereigns—Fuxi, Nuwa, and Shennong—are explored for their divine interventions and cultural advancements, while the Five Emperors—Huangdi, Zhuanxu, Ku, Yao, and Shun—are analyzed for their roles in establishing key societal structures and their enduring impact on governance and ethical paradigms. This investigation not only highlights the mythological significance of these figures but also connects their legendary attributes to tangible historical developments and cultural continuity in China.

Keywords: Ancient Chinese Mythology, Three Sovereigns, Five Emperors, San Huang Wu Di, Chinese Cultural Heritage

Introduction

The "San Huang Wu Di" (三皇五帝) or "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" represents a foundational era in Chinese mythology and cultural heritage. These figures are considered demigods and exemplary leaders who contributed significantly to the development of Chinese civilization. This paper examines the latest research on the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, utilizing contemporary sources to highlight their enduring legacy.

The "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" concept in ancient Chinese history is a framework representing human evolution and historical progression, focusing on the organization and development of different ethnic groups^[1]. The Three Sovereigns—Fuxi, Suiren, and Shennong—epitomize the early human activities such as fishing, hunting, fire-making, and farming. The Five Emperors, which include Huang Emperor, Zhuan Xu, Di, Yao, and Sun, represent distinct cultures and epochs in ancient China^[2]. Intriguingly, in the Fuzhou area, there was a practice of worshipping deities referred to as the Five Emperors, linked to pestilence and epidemic diseases, which offers an alternative perspective on the concept^[3]. Thus, the "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" serves as a historical lens through which the evolution of ethnic groups and cultural developments in ancient China can be understood.

The Three Sovereigns (三皇)

The Three Sovereigns are mythological figures often regarded as demigods or god-kings who used their divine knowledge to improve the lives of the people. The identities of the Three Sovereigns vary, but commonly accepted figures include:

Fuxi (伏羲)

Fuxi, a legendary figure in Chinese mythology, is credited with monumental contributions to human civilization, including the creation of humanity, and the introduction of essential survival skills such as hunting and cooking. He is also noted for developing the trigrams, which form the foundational elements of the I Ching^[4]. Furthermore, Fuxi's significant influence in the evolution of Chinese narrative is evident, particularly through his impact on the Fu genre, which played a crucial role in shaping prose narrative in subsequent

generations ^[5]. Additionally, Fuxi's influence permeates the realm of Taoism. Early adherents of Quanzhen Taoism, despite their initial criticisms of traditional practices associated with Fuxi, such as divination, paradoxically engaged in practices like breathing exercises and fasting, highlighting a complex interplay between ideological beliefs and practical actions ^[6]. This multifaceted exploration of Fuxi's contributions underscores his lasting impact on various dimensions of Chinese culture and thought, cementing his role in the cosmological and cultural evolution of early China.

Nuwa (女娲)

Nuwa, a central figure in Chinese mythology, is traditionally credited with the creation of humanity from clay and the mending of the celestial pillars, pivotal acts in the formation of the world. Nuwa is often depicted with a serpentine lower body, symbolizing her deep connections with nature and the creative force. Modern interpretations of Nuwa highlight her role as an emblem of feminine strength and creativity. These perspectives are part of a wider discussion on female empowerment and the preservation of cultural heritage, as demonstrated by studies on intangible cultural heritage, such as the unique Nüshu script from Jiangyong County, China ^[7].

Shennong (神农, Yandi)

Shennong, revered as the "Divine Farmer," is a pivotal figure in Chinese mythology, recognized for pioneering agriculture and herbal medicine. His extensive research into numerous herbs to discover their medicinal properties has profoundly influenced traditional Chinese medicine and sustainable agricultural methods ^[8, 9, 10]. His seminal work, "Shen Nong's Classic of Materia Medica," stands as a cornerstone in Chinese medical literature. This text emphasizes the benefits of long-term consumption of drugs to achieve cumulative effects, highlighting the judicious use of medicinal herbs for health enhancement ^[11].

The Five Emperors (五帝)

The Five Emperors are more historical and cultural heroes who are believed to have established essential aspects of Chinese civilization. The commonly accepted Five Emperors are:

Huangdi (黄帝, Yellow Emperor)

According to Chinese tradition, Huangdi, also known as the Yellow Emperor, is considered the half-brother of Yandi. Huangdi's mother, Fubao, was married to Shaodian, the monarch of the Youxiong Kingdom, a tribal state located in what is now Xinzheng, Henan Province. At his birth, Huangdi was named Gongsun. He later adopted the surname Ji after spending a significant amount of time near Jishui. He settled near Xuanyuan Hill, which is present-day Kaifeng, Henan Province, and thus came to be known as Xuanyuan-shi. Similarly, Yandi's mother, Nüden, was also married to Shaodian. Yandi was born near Jiangshui and consequently took the surname Jiang ^[12]. Huangdi, known to belong to the Xuanyuan clan, resided in the Ji River Basin and adopted Ji as his surname. Yandi, also revered as Shennong, lived in the Jiangshui Valley and assumed the surname Jiang ^[13].

According to Chinese tradition, the Yellow Emperor,

regarded as the progenitor of all Chinese people, is credited with pioneering numerous innovations including the compass, calendar, and significant advances in medicine and martial arts. His impact on the evolution of Chinese civilization is profound, with academics referring to him as the "god of jade huang" due to his association with jade huang artifacts ^[14]. The Yellow Emperor's legacy is also deeply connected with the foundational texts of Chinese medicine, especially acupuncture, which has undergone various phases of decline and revival over the centuries, culminating in the standardization of Traditional Chinese Medicine ^[15]. Furthermore, the Yellow Emperor is symbolically linked to the establishment of a collective national identity in China, epitomizing the national ancestor of the Chinese nation ^[16]. After the death of Huangdi, three prominent leaders, Yao, Shun, and Yu, emerged as heads of tribal alliances ^[22].

Zhuanxu (颛顼)

Zhuanxu, a grandson of the Yellow Emperor, significantly contributed to the advancement of the calendar system and the enhancement of governance structures in ancient China. The development of administrative terminology from the era of the slave dynasties to contemporary governance illustrates the profound impact of political systems on administrative management ^[17]. Furthermore, Zhu Xi, a distinguished Confucian thinker from the Song dynasty, advocated for effective governance and political responsibility, adhering to Confucian ideals. His work significantly influenced the emergence and establishment of Neo-Confucian political thought and practices ^[18, 19]. Zhuanxu's contributions fit within the larger historical narrative of political evolution in ancient China, marking a transition from hereditary enfeoffment to regional administrative systems, indicative of a move towards more organized bureaucratic and governance frameworks ^[20].

Emperor Ku (帝喾)

Emperor Ku, known also as Di Ku, is a celebrated figure in Chinese mythology and is counted among the ancient "Five Emperors," a revered group of sage-kings who governed before the formal establishment of historical dynasties. Traditional narratives portray Emperor Ku as a just and virtuous ruler, famed for his ethical leadership and adept administration. He is often attributed with initiating significant cultural and technological advancements, including the formulation of marriage laws and the enhancement of agricultural techniques ^[21].

Emperor Yao (尧)

Emperor Yao is renowned for his moral character and effective rule. He is remembered for his dedication to the welfare of his people and efforts in flood control. Modern analyses explore Emperor Yao's influence on Chinese moral and political philosophy (Huang 2023; Zhou 2023). Yao, growing older, began to consider the matter of succession and convened a meeting with tribal leaders to discuss it. Despite suggestions for his son Dan Zhu and Gong Gong, who was responsible for irrigation works, Yao rejected both due to concerns over their character. The search for a successor continued, and during another meeting, the tribal chiefs overwhelmingly supported Shun, praising his virtues and abilities. Observing Shun's exemplary conduct over time, Yao decided to abdicate in favor of Shun, a practice

known in Chinese history as "shan rang," where a ruler steps down for a more deserving individual. This process was typical in the era of clan communes, where leadership often transitioned to capable new leaders as old ones aged ^[22].

Emperor Shun (舜)

Chosen by Emperor Yao as his successor due to his filial piety and administrative skills, Emperor Shun is celebrated for his humility and governance. Shun, after taking power, proved his worth by working diligently and maintaining a frugal lifestyle, thus earning and retaining the people's trust. Upon Yao's passing, Shun even attempted to return leadership to Yao's son, Dan Zhu, but this was unpopular, and Shun was formally enthroned instead ^[22].

Conclusion

The "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" embody the synthesis of mythology and history, forming a cornerstone of Chinese cultural and historical consciousness. Through their legendary lives and governance, they have shaped the moral, social, and political fabric of ancient China, leaving a legacy that continues to influence contemporary Chinese thought and values. The narrative of these figures exemplifies the integration of divine leadership and human governance, illustrating the unique blend of mythological ideals with practical leadership. This study reaffirms the importance of mythological and historical figures in understanding the development of cultural identities and governance structures, suggesting a continued relevance in the study of cultural heritage and historical mythology. As China continues to look back on its ancient past, the principles and stories of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors provide not only a window into the origins of Chinese civilization but also enduring lessons on leadership and moral governance.

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