

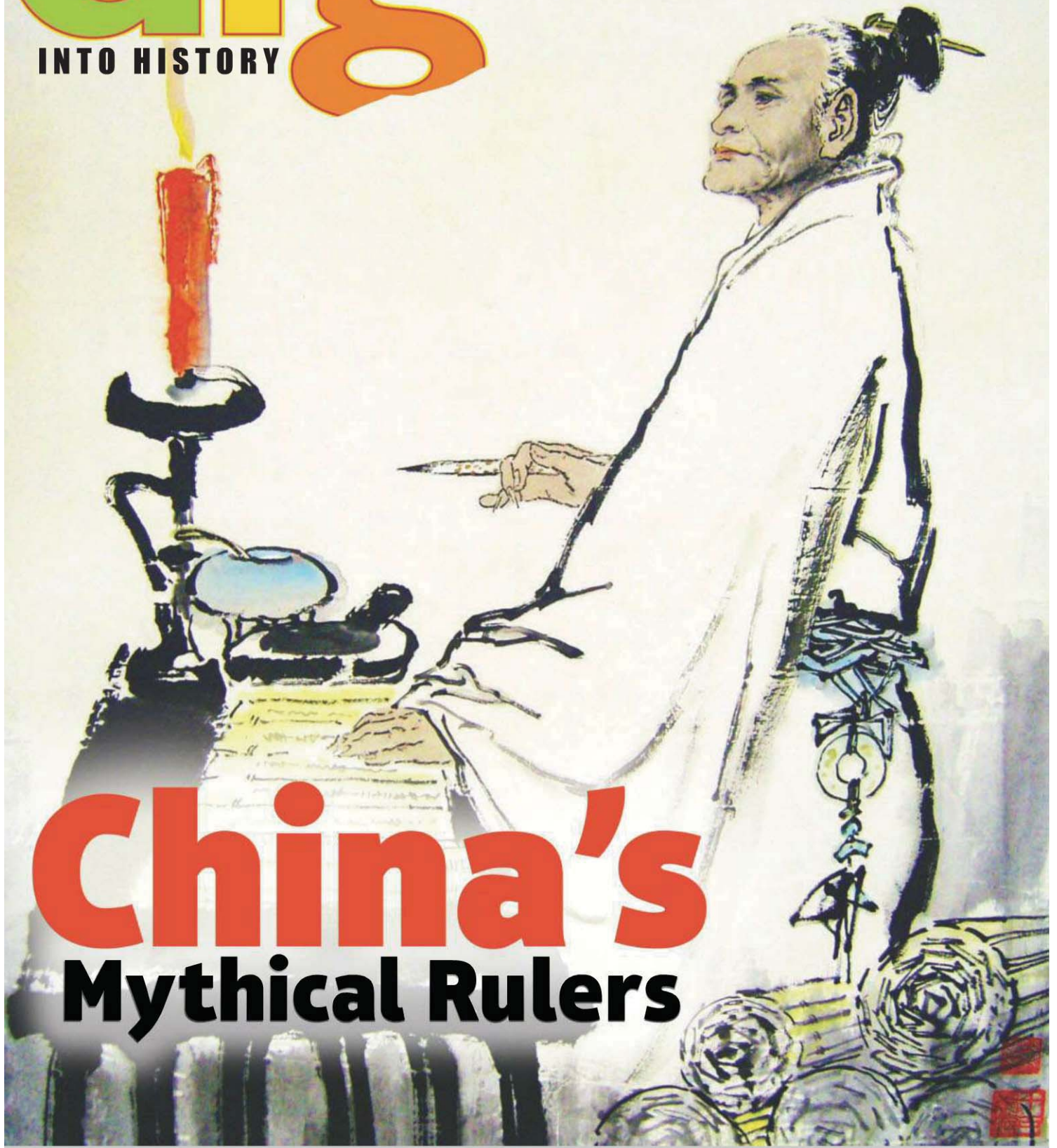
**THE WORLD**

**dig** <sup>TM</sup>

**INTO HISTORY**

## INTO HISTORY

# China's Mythical Rulers





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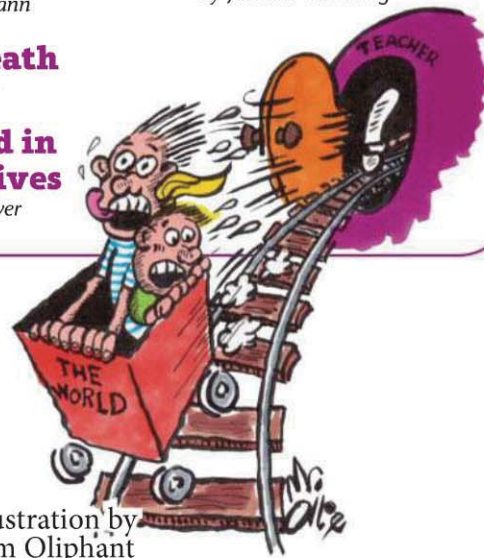


illustration by  
Tim Oliphant

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Teachers open the door,  
you enter by yourself.

—ancient Chinese proverb

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**EAGLE EYE**



We have hidden 4 eyes like the one above in this month's DIG issue (print and digital edition). See how fast you can find each—but, while you are looking, check out the articles in this issue.

And, don't take a peek at the answers on page 43 until you have found all four eagle eyes!



The background of the page features a light green, textured surface with faint, horizontal Chinese calligraphy in a cursive style. On the left side, there are stylized illustrations of flowers: a branch with small red blossoms and a larger, more detailed flower with orange and red petals and a white center. At the bottom left, there is a large, stylized green flower with a white center. The title 'The Sages' is written in a large, bold, black sans-serif font, with 'The' on the first line and 'Sages' on the second line. Below the title, the author's name 'by Patrick Wertmann' is written in a smaller, black sans-serif font.

# The Sages

by Patrick Wertmann

**Once upon a time....  
That is how all the  
great stories begin...**

**O**ur story is set in northern China 5,000 years ago, and it revolves around the country's five legendary emperors—Huangdi (or Yellow Emperor), Zhuangxi, Ku, Yao, and Shun. According to legend, they were all of great moral virtue and destined to lay the foundation of Chinese civilization. No written records have come down to us from the time they lived, but their stories were passed on orally from one generation to the next. As a result, many facts related to their lives remain hidden behind a veil of mystery.

Approximately 2,500 years later, at the time of the Han dynasty, all the different stories were compiled into one book by the renowned historian Sima Qian (**SEE ALSO PAGES 10–11**). The first chapter of his *Shiji* ("Records of the Grand Historian") is dedicated to these five **sages**. Originally known, perhaps, as the ancestors of different local clans, they were now presented in a chronological line as the rulers of a unified empire in the north of China.





## HUANGDI

The first of the Five Emperors was Huangdi, whose name literally translates as “Yellow Emperor,” with the color representing the earth, dragons, and the center. Every year around the fourth of April, thousands of people gather at his mausoleum during Tomb Sweeping Day—also known as the Qingming Festival. There, they pay homage to the contributions he made to the Chinese nation and culture.

Early Han-dynasty texts describe Huangdi as a deity in control of lightning and thunder. In art, he was represented in the shape of the constellation known as the Big Dipper. But, to Sima Qian, he was a real, historical person, who had been born about 2697 B.C. Huangdi’s exact origins, however, are unknown. It was thought that he was related to a tribe that once settled near the River Ji and that tribal members

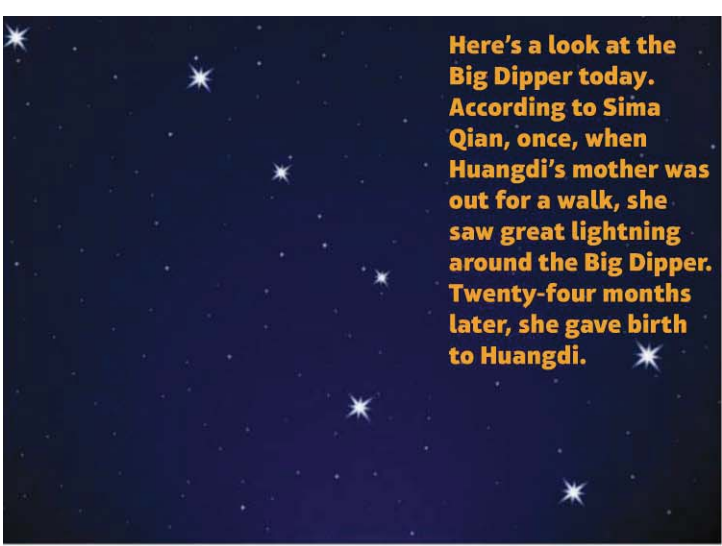
After reading the paragraphs about Emperor Huangdi below, which of his many accomplishments can you find in the illustration above?



**April 3, 2013: A resident leans her face against the tombstone of a deceased relative at a public cemetery a day ahead of the Qingming Festival. (See also page 19 [TOP].)**

**Sages** are people honored for their experience, judgment, and wisdom.





worshipped him as their ancestor. Legend says that his four wives bore him 25 sons, 14 of whom established their own clans. His first wife, Leizu, is credited with the invention of sericulture, or silk-making.

Given that China was often at war at this time, Huangdi quickly learned how to handle weapons and fight. Eventually, he managed to subdue those who opposed him and established a central government, claiming he had a “mandate from Heaven” (SEE PAGE 21). He put nobles from the different regions of his empire in charge, issued laws, and had an imperial palace built.

Under Huangdi, China experienced a period of social transformation and political stability. According to traditional accounts, Huangdi led his people into the Yellow River delta and there taught them to construct shelters, tame wild animals, grow crops, and build carts and boats. In time, they evolved from wandering hunters to

people living in permanent dwellings, engaged in farming.

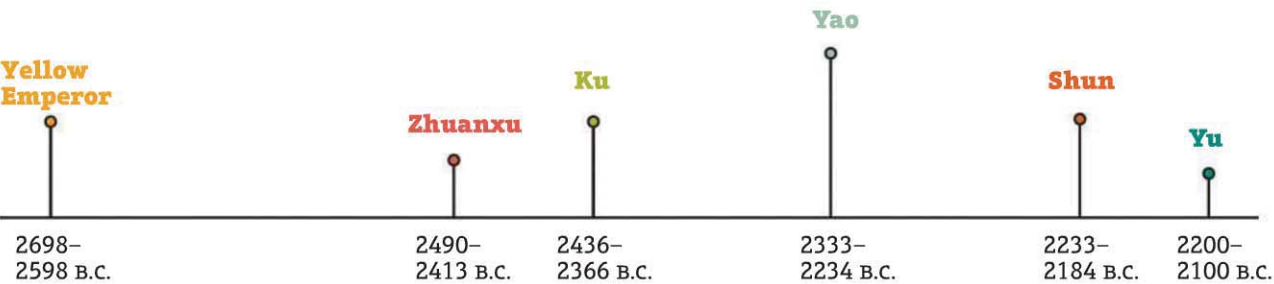
Among the most significant contributions credited to Huangdi and his ministers were the development of the Chinese writing system, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. Did you know that one of the earliest versions of soccer, the game called *cuji*, developed during his reign? Another of his inventions was the popular Chinese classical instrument known as the *guqin* (SEE PAGE 18). He also devised a technique for casting bronze tripods. According to the *Shiji*, a dragon appeared underneath one of the tripods that the emperor had made. After Huangdi mounted it, the dragon became the symbol of imperial power.

Such contributions led to Huangdi's being considered the father of the Chinese nation. Families throughout China trace their genealogy back to him and his descendants. Legend has it that Huangdi ruled for 100 years and that Zhuanxu, his nephew, followed him to the throne.

### ZHUANXU

According to another historical account titled *Bamboo Annals*, Zhuanxu succeeded Huangdi at the age of 20. While he had eight honorable sons, the *Shiji* notes that he considered none capable of following in his footsteps. Instead, Zhuanxu chose his cousin Ku as his successor, just before he

### Estimated reigns of the Five Emperors and Yu the Great:



顓帝

五官爰命萬物生遂  
神民不離天地以位



passed away in the 78th year of his rule. The sons of Zhuanxu were given a chance to prove their ability as ministers, but only during the reign of Shun, the fifth legendary emperor.

**Here's an old Chinese interpretation of Zhuanxu. How does it compare to the visual image the author drew of him in this article?**



帝喾高辛者黃帝之曾孫也



Here's an ancient Chinese artist's view of Emperor Ku. Do you think he captured Ku's personality? If yes, in what way? If no, what feature bothers you most?

Zhuanxu is credited with introducing a new calendar. However, apart from a few surviving references on paper made of long, narrow pieces of bamboo, we know little about this calendar. The sources say that it was adopted much later under the reign of Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.). According to this calendar, the New Year began with the 10th lunar month. Rulers of the later Han dynasty used it until it was replaced by another in 104 B.C.

## KU

Ku was the great-grandson of the Yellow Emperor. It is said that he had four sons by four different wives, each of whom later founded a dynasty. Ku became emperor in 2436 B.C. and remained in this position for 70 years. Legend has it that he inspected his empire during each season of the year, either by riding a dragon or a horse. Little is known about his contributions, although some consider him the father of music and musical instruments.

The *Bamboo Annals* informs us that Ku planned for his second son, Yao, to succeed him. These records also tell us that Ku's eldest son, Zhi, did not want to accept his father's wish. So, when Ku passed away in the 63rd year of his reign, Zhi seized power for himself. But his rule lasted only nine years. He was replaced by his brother Yao.

## YAO

The fourth of the five sages, Yao was 20 when he assumed his duties. He then ruled for 73 years. Among his contributions is the invention of the board game known as *Weiqi* or *Go*, apparently to exert a positive influence on his rebellious son Danzhu. Yao was also fond of astronomy. The *Shiji* reports that he assigned astronomers to observe celestial phenomena such as the sunrise, the sunset, and the rising of the stars, in order to create a new solar and lunar calendar that had 366 days per year.







**July 2012: Girls play guqins at the Youth Arts Festival in Eastern China.**

## Guqin

**A** seven-string musical instrument belonging to the zither family, the guqin has been called, since ancient times, the “instrument of the sages.” This name offers evidence of its connection to the legendary sages of China’s ancient past. In fact, it is the Yellow Emperor who is credited with its invention nearly 5,000 years ago. While modern scholars consider this a legend, ancient texts and archaeological finds help us trace the guqin’s history back almost 3,000 years.

## SHUN

How Shun, the last of the Five Emperors, ascended to the throne reminds us of a typical “rags to riches” story. His mother died when he was very young. His blind father remarried, and this wife gave birth to two children. Legend says that Shun was treated very badly by his stepmother and stepbrother. The two forced him to do hard work, gave him the worst food and clothes, and finally threw him out of the house when he was barely an adult. Still, Shun treated them with kindness and respect.

Meanwhile, Emperor Yao was searching for a suitable successor, since he considered his sons useless. When Yao heard about Shun, he decided to test him. Yao made Shun governor of a district and gave him two of his daughters as wives. Shun did well. He not only followed a humble and



**Is this how you pictured Emperor Shun? If not, why? If yes, why?**

simple life, but he also treated his people with great consideration. Shun’s stepmother and stepbrother were so furious about this success that they attempted to murder him. Again, Shun forgave them. Yao was now convinced that he had found the right person to lead the country. So he retired from ruling in favor of Shun.

Both Yao and Shun were glorified for their virtue by the sixth-century Chinese philosopher Confucius and his followers. Shun became the role model for modesty and filial piety. The concept of filial piety requires a person to be good to one’s parents, elders, and ancestors, to perform tasks as instructed, and to show love and respect. China’s rulers were bound to uphold this ideal. Still today, the reigns of Yao and Shun are considered the ideal for filial piety and good governance. According to Confucian thinking, a



ruler should not be measured by the wealth he brings to his country, but by the way he treats his people.

## THE SEARCH FOR 'TRUTH' CONTINUES

Apart from ancient folk stories and a few written records compiled in the first centuries B.C., little is known about the mythical emperors. As a result, in the early 20th century, scholars began to question the tales about Huangdi and his successors. Archaeologists were finding the remains of highly developed societies that had begun to take shape in the eighth millennium B.C. along China's Yangtze and Yellow rivers.

There were those who considered news of these finds a shameless attack against their glorious past. The five sages were so important to traditional scholars that these scholars even discussed the introduction of a new calendar that would begin with the year of Huangdi's birth. Had this been done, the current year 2015 would be 4712. This later date is the basis of the often-repeated phrase that China has a 5,000-year-long history.

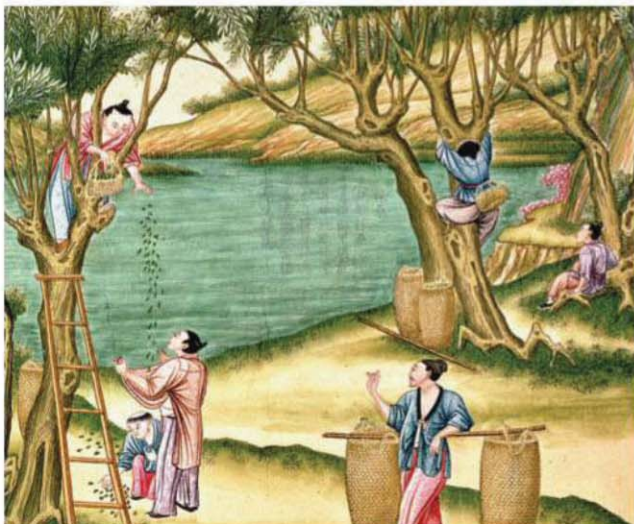
Today, both Chinese and international scholars believe that the Five Emperors were deities based



**It's April 5, 2015, and people in China's Shaanxi Province are taking part in the ceremony honoring Emperor Huangdi during the Qingming Festival.**

on local myths. Their stories were passed on orally throughout the country and the millennia. It is thought that the Chinese transformed the five into human-like beings sometime during the Warring States period (476–221 B.C.). Nevertheless, worshipping them as cultural heroes continues in China to the present-day. Daoist monks trace several of their basic principles to these rulers. Thus, as the saying goes, a grain of truth lies in all stories.

.....  
**Patrick Wertmann** works at the Beijing Branch Office of the German Archaeological Institute. He studied Chinese studies, Chinese language, and the history of East Asian arts.



**Collecting mulberries, the principal food of silkworms**

## The Discovery of Silk

**W**hen Leizu, the first consort of the Yellow Emperor, had tea underneath her mulberry tree, a silkworm cocoon fell into her cup. Once inside the hot water, a fine fiber began to dissolve from the cocoon, and it eventually stretched across the entire garden. Leizu immediately understood the value of this fiber. She realized that if the silk strands were twisted together to make a stronger thread, they could then be woven into valuable fabrics. To the Chinese, silk was undoubtedly one of the most important trade goods transported along the ancient Silk Road network. Chinese silk became so well-known in the ancient world that the Greeks and Romans called the people from China *Seres*, literally meaning the "people from the land of the silk."