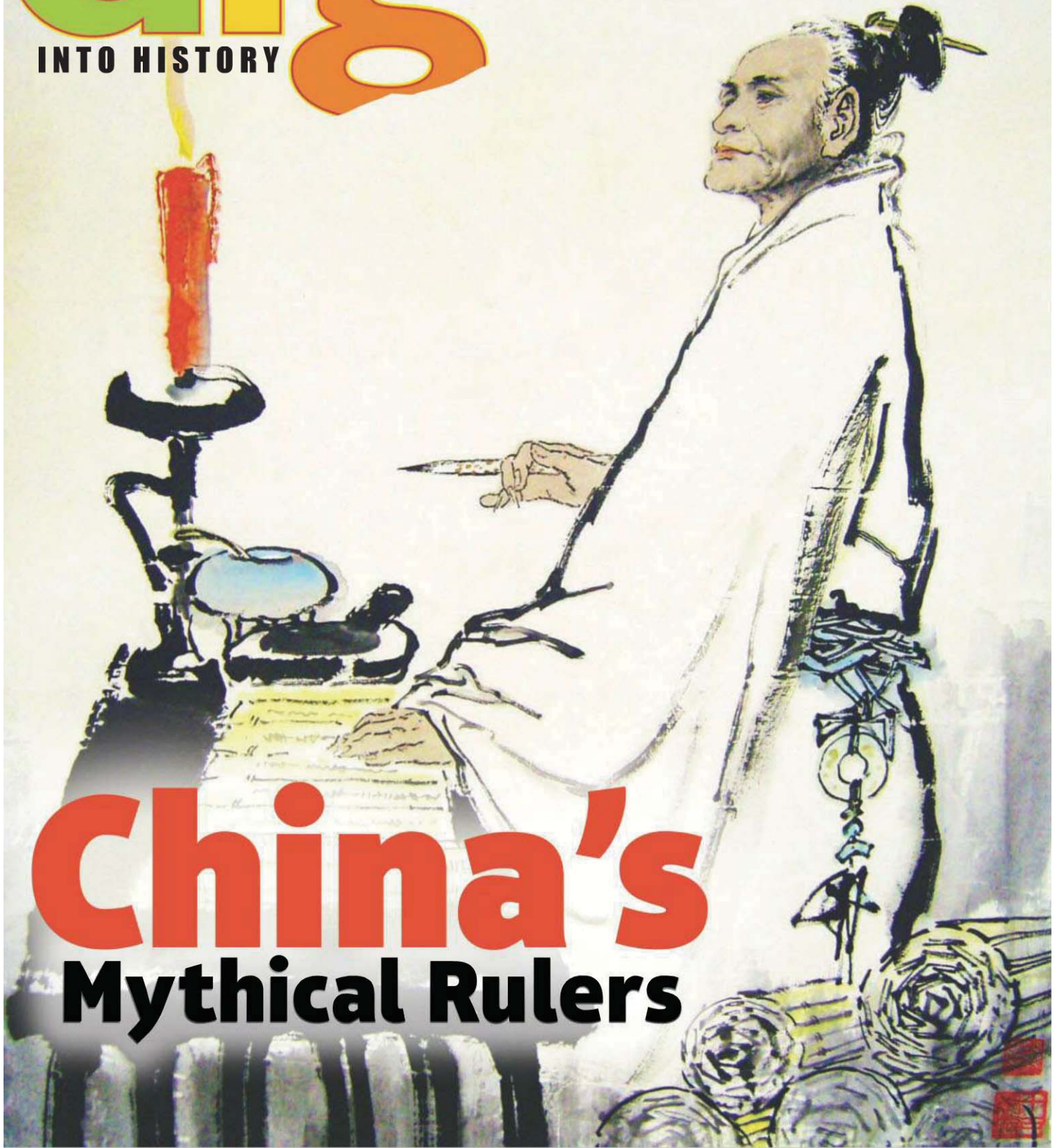


**dig**  
INTO HISTORY

TM

# China's Mythical Rulers





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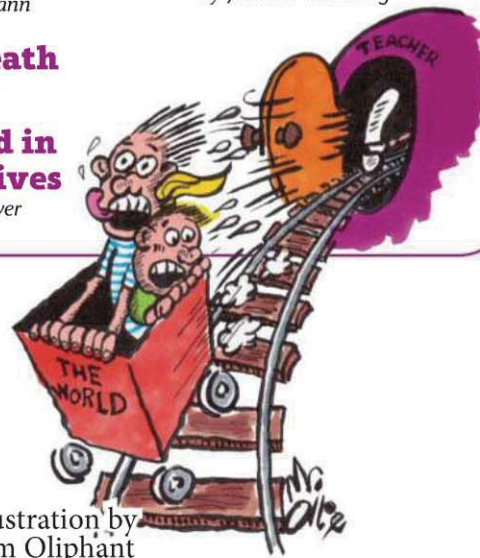


illustration by  
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Teachers open the door,  
you enter by yourself.  
—ancient Chinese proverb

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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!



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白

# Yu the Great

by Patrick Wertmann



Yu the Great  
rides a dragon  
as he attempts  
to control the  
flood waters.



**P**resent-day historians and archaeologists are convinced that the Five Emperors were originally mythical beings, who later were transformed into historical persons. The situation is slightly different, however, when it comes to the Xia dynasty, even though its past is still covered by a cloud of mist. The first ruler linked to its foundation is Yu the Great. Scholars believe that the Xia dynasty may have been a local state related to the Erlitou culture of central China in the first half of the second millennium B.C.

### **Not Included Among the Five, But...**

Although not included in the group of the legendary Five Emperors, Yu the Great is still celebrated in Chinese historical writing as one of the great cultural heroes. This fact is due, in large part, to his successful introduction of flood control. He was the eighth son of the Yellow Emperor (**SEE PAGES 12–14**) and lived approximately between 2200 and 2100 B.C.

As with the other legendary rulers, the reign of Yu precedes all known written records. The stories told about him were passed down from one generation to the next, mainly as part of oral tradition. The earliest recorded evidence about Yu was found on ritual bronze vessels from the Western Zhou period (ca. 1045–771 B.C.) These inscriptions typically cited the owner of the vessel and traced the owner's genealogy back to Yu the Great.

During the reigns of Yao and Shun (**SEE PAGES 12–19**), the country was plagued by devastating floods that destroyed the lives of many people. Finding a way to solve this problem had always been on the top of every ruler's agenda. Shun chose his respected minister Yu for this task. During the previous reign, Yu's father, Gun, had been appointed to work out a system of

controlling the floods. All of Gun's attempts, however, had been ineffective.

### **Determined to Succeed**

Yu carefully studied the waterways and eventually developed a new system, with irrigation canals that would relieve the floodwaters in the fields and not cause further damming up of the rivers. Legend has it that Yu spent more than 13 years working on his project. The toll it took on his body and his private life was tremendous. When he finished the project, it was said that there was no **down** on his calves and no hair on his shins.

Here is what the renowned Chinese scholar Mengzi (370–290 B.C.) reported about Yu:

*Yu separated the nine streams, cleared the courses of the Ji and Ta [rivers], and led them all to the sea. He opened a vent also for the Ru and Han [rivers], and regulated the course of the Huai and Si [rivers], so that they all flowed into the Jiang [River]. When this was done, it became possible for the people of the Middle Kingdom to cultivate the ground and get food for themselves. During that time, Yu was eight years away from his home, and though he thrice passed the door of it, he did not enter.*

## **The Mandate of Heaven**

**F**rom ancient times to the end of imperial China in 1912, a ruler was granted the title "Son of Heaven" once he had the "Mandate of Heaven." The latter was based on his ability to govern in a noble and virtuous manner. In this role, he had the privilege to rule over all that lived underneath heaven. If he could not or did not do so, the Mandate and the right to govern would no longer be his. Political revolts and natural calamities were considered clear signs of his inability. The concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" was first introduced when the kings of the Zhou overthrew the rulers of the Shang dynasty.

**Down is soft hair.**





After the waters were under control, the people settled along the Yellow River and other streams flowing through the Chinese heartland and began cultivating the lands. A new era in the development of the Chinese civilization had begun. Yu's outstanding success led to his becoming known as "Great Yu who controls the waters."

### 'You Will Follow Me'

Shun was so impressed by Yu's efforts that he chose him, rather than his own son, as his successor. The late emperor Yao had done the same when he decided to choose the most capable person to lead the country as his successor. When Yu ascended to the throne, he divided his empire into nine provinces and five dependencies. These were arranged **concentrically** around the newly established capital, located in the south of present-day Shanxi Province. Where exactly these provinces

were located is still a matter of debate. To emphasize his supremacy over all his subjects, Yu introduced a tax, which he imposed on each province. Yu also, so it was said, had nine bronze tripods made that then functioned as symbols of power.

The Xia dynasty, which is believed to be the first dynasty in Chinese history, started with Yu. But Yu did not follow the method Yao and Shun had used to choose the most capable ministers and successors to the throne. Rather, he chose his son Qi to take political power, regardless of his actual lack of ability to do so. This system of succession remained in use until the last imperial dynasty was brought to an end in 1912. Apparently, no strict regulations on the succession of rulers existed prior to the reign of Yu. Thus, a dynasty typically began with its establishment by a capable founder and ended with its downfall caused by a mediocre head of state or even a tyrannical dictator.