Yu the Engineer and Flood Stories from China: Crash Course World Mythology #17

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=A90jB9WlvYY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/A90jB9WlvYY

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugneta, and this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we are going to continue to inundate you with myths about the floods. And as you can see, Thoth isn't gonna be caught without a raft this time around.

Last week we looked at the many mythic traditions that feature a story about a god or gods bringing a flood to destroy humanity or at least teach them a real good lesson. Today we are headed to China. Anchors aweigh.

[Opening music]

So before we get started for real, now is probably a good time to mention that I don't speak Chinese. So I'm gonna do my best, but be forewarned pronunciation carnage is about to happen. Bao Qian.

Long time Crash Course fans will remember some of today's main story since it was featured in the first season of Crash Course World History. I'm talking about our old friend Yu the Engineer. But first, let's take a step back and remember that in China real, non-mythical flooding is a big and actual deal. Thousands of years of flood control projects have made sure that flooding - especially of China's two main rivers, the Yellow or Huang He and Yangtze - don't wipe out food supplies.

An inability to control floods was seen as a major shortcoming for emperors and often caused social unrest. Many people believe floods to be natural disasters brought by divine forces demonstrating their displeasure with the emperor. And of course if the floods destroy the food supply, hungry folks are gonna rebel. Just ask Limos, Greek goddess of hunger. I wonder if there's a Greek god of being hangry?

So in China anyone who was able to prevents flood or ameliorate their effects would be considered, at the very least, a hero, and at the most, possibly a god.

In one version of the Chinese flood myth, the mythical King Shen had lost Heaven's favor, and the rivers started to overflow. Yu came to the rescue, taming the flood. Shen was so impressed, that he eventually handed his title over to Yu. This is the mythical origin of the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia.

In another version of the flood myth, the flood just happens for no apparent reason. The high god, Di, calls upon the demigod Gun to stop it. Gun tries his hardest for nine years, but eventually admits defeat. After Gun gives up, his son, Yu, takes up the task, kinda like the family business. Fortunately for China, Yu has better luck than his father. He works for thirteen years straight to end the flood and save the world.

The entire time Yu is the model of diligence and selflessness. In thirteen years, he never once returns home to his wife. According to one story, he passes his house three times and never goes in. With his dedication, Yu became a model for future Chinese rulers, the world's first workaholic, and a pretty bad husband, it seems.

During those thirteen years, Yu tried lots of different flood control methods, but he also called upon a number of mythical helpers. His main solution to the flooding was to redirect the flood waters out to the sea, often by building levees, canals, and dikes.

One time, he asked for help from Yin Long, the Responding Dragon, who used his tail to create a floodwater-shifting barricade, directing the water out to sea. Very cooperative for a dragon. In another version of this story, Yu and the dragon also get help from a giant black turtle. Yu also got some help from Hebo, the God of the Yellow River. Previously, Hebo was a human who drowned while ferrying across the Yellow River, but the Supreme God took pity on him and made him God of the River.

Yu started his flood control efforts at the Yellow River when a god with the face of a man and the body of a fish came out of the water and explained that he was Hebo. He gave Yu a detailed map of the locations of China's rivers to help him get a better picture of what he was up against. Yay part human, part animal gods! Right Thoth?

As part of his efforts, Yu also had to defeat a number of monsters. He had to kill Xiangliu, a nine-headed monster with the habit of turning perfectly good land into uninhabitable marshes. Some of the other monsters he managed to spare, and even tame, but one creature, Wuzhiqi, the Monster of the Huai River, gave Yu particular trouble. Wuzhiqi and his followers made gales and storms that prevented Yu from controlling the flood. This made Yu mad, so he gathered all the gods together and ordered them to clear out the monsters.

Wuzhiqi's monster-god followers were frightened, and they surrendered to Yu, who put them in jail. Wuzhiqi himself then appeared in the form of a monkey with a green chest, white head, yellow eyes, and white paws. Oh, and also the power to stretch his neck a hundred feet, and the strength of nine elephants. So that's one scary monkey.

Yu, who is not only a diligent worker, but also a consummate manager, delegated the job to taming Wuzhiqi to a number of subordinates. Most weren't up to the task until Gengchen, who chained up Wuzhiqi by his long neck and put a golden bell through his nose. After that, the Huai river wasn't trouble anymore.

But of all the assistance that Yu received over his 13-year battle with flooding, no one was more helpful than this wife, Tushan-shi. Yu was too busy to come home, but Tushan-shi didn't take that sitting down. Understanding the importance of the flooding, she worked to find ways to help. This is clear in one of our favorite Yu flood stories. Favorite because Yu - spoiler alert! - changes into a bear.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Yu is starting to excavate a mountain in order to channel the flood waters into the sea. Before he leaves for work, he tells Tushan-shi, who's nine-months pregnant, to bring him food whenever she hears a drum. Then, he goes off to the mountain and transforms into a bear, because duh, bears are much better at tunneling through mountains than men.

While he's working, he steps on the drum by mistake. Tushan-shi hears the drum and brings food to Yu. But Yu is busy controlling floods also, you know...bearing around, so he fails to notice his wife. Tushan-shi is standing there, looking at this bear of a husband and she's filled with shame to see him in this form. Because apparently it's a shameful thing. Bear etiquette was pretty strict back then, I guess.

Tushan-shi runs away, and as she reaches the mountains base she starts to change into stone. When Yu finishes work for the day and turns back into a man, he finds her. But Tushan-shi has already turned to rock. Yu politely asked the rock if she could give him the baby. Tushan-shi obliges, splitting open on her north side. Out of this fissure, their son, Qi, is born. This is the same Qi that would later become the first Xia emperor, though it's unclear what Qi thought about having a rock for a mom and a sometimes-bear for a dad. That must have been tough on parent-teacher conference night.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

So, stories involving the Great Yu are quite different from the Jewish and Mesopotamian flood myths we looked at in the last episode. For one thing, these floods don't represent the gods' attempt to wipe out humanity. In fact, they don't seem to kill many people at all, at least not in the way the ancient, Near East El Niño did. The emperor survives, so doesn't Yu's wife/rock plus the giant turtle. Go turtle!

Yu is righteous like Utanpishtim, who survives the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh. He's chosen to save the world, and he does so, but more through his intellect and hard work than the intervention of the gods. I imagine that Yu would have been really grateful for direction on how to build dams and levees, but he had to figure it out for himself, for thirteen years.

Yu's devotion to duty in working to save China, which, in myths, stands for the world world, makes him a model human being, and because of the way the stories end, a model emperor. He does everything he can to improve the lives of his people by saving their homes and fields. He works tirelessly without fail and demonstrates what can be accomplished if we set our mind and energy to a task.

This might be the most significant difference between the Yu myths and other floods. Noah and Utanpishtim make for relatively shallow role models. Sure they follow God's instructions, but they're not always the epitome of virtue. Noah even hits the bottle after inventing vineyards post-flood. Yu, on the other hand, is meant to be read as a pristine model. In terms of a myth providing guidance for how to live and, especially how to rule, it doesn't get much better than Yu, his helpful dragon friend, and his legendarily patient wife.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching and thanks for bearing with all of our pronunciation issues. Rawr.