

Yu the Great (2200 B.C.)

Yu the Great is a legendary figure of ancient Chinese history. For generations, tales of Yu's accomplishments were handed down. In the retelling, the details of Yu's deeds sometimes changed. Eventually, when Chinese writing began, people recorded the stories—Yu appears in the earliest written Chinese history—and the legends about Yu took root and became permanent. Still, no one will ever know the complete truth about Yu: what he actually accomplished, what he looked like, where and when he lived—or whether he even really lived at all.



In Chinese tradition, Yu is respected as the founder of the first dynasty of China, the Xia. Like Yu himself, historians do not know whether the Xia dynasty is a legend or a historical fact; archaeologists have yet to find evidence of it. Still, it seems likely that the legend is based on some facts. Many historians use the term *semi-legendary* to refer to the Xia dynasty. The Xia is supposed to have ruled the region around the Huang He on the North China Plain from about 2000 B.C. to 1500 B.C. The fact that this was the region ruled by the Shang, China's first historic dynasty, lends credence to the idea that the Xia was the Shang's historical predecessor.

Xia dynasty actually existed, there is no doubt that the people of this region made important advances during this period. They invented a form of written language. They had domesticated animals and weapons made of bronze. They also improved their methods of agriculture and made attempts to use the waters of the Huang He for irrigation and perhaps to control its flooding.

The historical development of a method of irrigation is in keeping with Yu the Great's legendary abilities as an engineer.

Yu is believed to have been able to "control the waters" of the Huang He. He is revered as a builder of canals and is said to have drained away the waters of a great flood and then divided the reclaimed lands among the people. Yu is also famous as the man who cast the Nine Bronze Tripods. Legend has it that these ceremonial objects became the symbols of the right to rule. With the fall of the Xia dynasty, the tripods were said to have been passed on to the Shang and then on to the Zhou dynasties. These important accomplishments, and his legendary capabilities as a ruler, led Confucius to hold up Yu as a model. Even today, Yu the Great remains a cultural hero of the Chinese people.

Although there is doubt about whether the

Reviewing the Profile

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What are Yu's legendary accomplishments?
2. Why are Yu the Great, and the Xia dynasty he is supposed to have founded, called "semi-legendary"?

Critical Thinking

3. **Evaluating Information** Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement: Yu is a mythological figure who represents the accomplishments of a historical individual or individuals.
4. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment** Suppose that Yu is a mythological figure. Why do you think people create myths to explain things?