



Xī Wáng Mǔ, Goddess of the Wū

From Chapter 10: The Yì, the Wū, and Shamanism



Figure 10.6 Queen Mother of the West 西王母 (Qing dynasty) by 金廷標
Source: National Palace Museum, Taipei.

IN TAOIST MYSTICISM, THE QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WEST, Xī Wáng Mǔ 西王母, is one of the most important goddess figures in the pantheon. Taoist *fangshi* 方士 invoke the Queen Mother to help them cultivate the Tao. *Fangshi*, translated as “methods master,” can refer to occultists, ceremonial magicians, alchemists, diviners, exorcists, astrologers, holistic healers, and every variety of mystic. First and foremost, Xī Wáng Mǔ was the goddess shamans called upon, and she chooses shamans and *fangshi* as her medium for communicating with humanity.

The earliest records we have of a Western Mother dates back to the Bronze Age,¹ when a Western Mother (西母, Xī Mǔ) and her counterpart, the Eastern Mother (東母, Dōng

¹ Suzanne Elizabeth Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 11–12.

Mǔ) were invoked together for divination. These records were first found on oracle bone inscriptions (殷墟卜辞, *yīn xū bǔcí*) from the matriarchal societies of the early Shang (1600–1046 BC).² According to these inscriptions, offerings were being made to the Western Mother and Eastern Mother in hopes that prayers would be answered. One of the earliest mentions of Xī Mǔ was an invocation inscribed upon oracle bone: “We divined: if we make offerings to the Eastern Mother and Western Mother, there will be approval.”³

Over the next several millennia, oral tradition would maintain that the Western Mother, a Queen Mother (王母, Wáng Mǔ) as found in the I Ching, and the Queen Mother of the West 西王母 (Xī Wáng Mǔ) were one and the same goddess. Twenty-first-century historians have their doubts, though I’ll honor tradition and continue to view them as an unbroken lineage of veneration. In the southern regions of Taiwan, the Queen Mother and the Golden Mother 金母娘娘 (Jīn Mǔ Niáng Niáng), through their astrological connection to Venus, are venerated as one and the same goddess.

She is also known as Lady Queen Mother 王母娘娘 (Wáng Mǔ Niáng Niáng), though this is a later evolution of the goddess, and Lady Queen Mother 王母娘娘 is nearly always depicted as younger, beautiful, and elegant. Meanwhile, Xī Wáng Mǔ’s depictions have greater range, from a crone with wild, untamed hair and a tail to a fuller-bodied stern woman wearing an ornate *feng guan* 鳳冠 or phoenix headdress.

Within the time period of her early veneration, the western region that she ruled would have been west of China’s central plains.⁴ The west was where the sun set and thus became associated with the unknown, with mysteries, death, and the afterlife. Due to her connection with death and the underworld, she works closely with the Black Tortoise of the north, a guardian spirit over our ancestors.

² The 1956 text 殷墟卜辞综述 (*Yīn xū bǔ cí zòng shù*) by Chen Mengjia 陈梦家 remains one of the most comprehensive texts on Shang oracle bones, deciphering over seven hundred thousand words of oracle bone inscriptions. Chen noted that the most common structure of a divination record was: the name of the god or ancestor called upon, the dates when sacrifices and offerings were made to that god or ancestor, what the sacrifices or offerings were (usually the number of animals and what types of animals), and a record of the weather on that day (e.g., rain, wind, astrological alignments, moon phases, etc.).

³ Cahill, *Transcendence*, 12.

⁴ *The Travels of Zhou Mu Wang* 穆天子傳 (*Mù tiānzǐ chuán*), a biographical travelogue written between 976 and 922 BC, described a king of Zhou’s encounter with the Western Mother. The text was intended to serve as a factual historical chronicle but is colored by fanciful encounters with gods, goddesses, and mythical creatures. The king writes about meeting Xī Wáng Mǔ in the west (present-day scholars theorize that he was in the Pamir Mountains near the Himalayas). He describes her as graceful, sophisticated, and residing in a palace on Kunlun Mountain. In the *Biography of Mu Tianzi*, she’s noted as the daughter of the Jade Emperor, though in other folktales she’s married to the Jade Emperor. In Taoist metaphysics, she’s often paired with the Grand Duke of the East 東王公 (Dōng Wáng Gōng). If you consider Xī Wáng Mǔ and the Xī Mǔ referenced in Shang oracle bones to be the same, then the Queen Mother’s first counterpart was Dōng Mǔ, Eastern Mother.



Popular myth today has her residing on celestial Kunlun Mountain, though earlier accounts had her residing on Jade Mountain. Kunlun is the pillar that connects heaven, earth, and the underworld, the axis mundi of Taoist mythology. Xī Wáng Mǔ is sovereign over the axis mundi. At the peak of the axis in heaven is a tree that grows the peaches of immortality, an ambrosia. The peaches on the world tree only bloom once every three thousand years.⁵ Ritual swords and the magical tools of Taoist *fangshi* 方士 are crafted from peach wood to connect their craft to the goddess. The Queen Mother's palace is the most opulent and lavish imperial palace a mortal has ever seen, where the Queen is attended to by beautiful Jade Maidens 玉女 (*yù nǚ*).⁶

On the peak of Mount Kunlun adjoining the Queen Mother's residence is a paradise reserved for shamans, the *wū* 巫.⁷ Go there and you'll meet Wuxian 巫賢, the great ancestor of the shamans and the many notable *wū* and witches through the ages. There they tend to their gardens of numerous medicines. Through these canons, Xī Wáng Mǔ is associated as a patron goddess of the *wū* 巫. She is invoked for every form of sorcery, from love spells to curses. Taoist *fangshi* study the scriptures of the Queen Mother to cultivate stronger *qi* specific to spiritual cultivation.

The earliest depictions of Xī Wáng Mǔ showed her as a demon of plagues and a dark goddess of destruction. The West Mountain Sutra 西山經 from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經 (circa 300 BC) describes the Queen Mother as a human with a leopard's tail and tiger's teeth. Her hair is long and wild, and upon her head she wears an ornate *sheng* 笙, a regal crown with detailing that resembles the plumage of a rare bird.⁸ The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* also describes the nine-tailed fox 狐狸精 (*hú lí jīng*) as one of the Queen

⁵ As described in *Songs of the Eminent Ones* 大人賦 (*Dà Rén Fù*) by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BC).

⁶ Jade Maidens 玉女 (*Yù nǚ*) are celestials who also have powers that a mystic can call upon. They're invoked as patron protectors over homes, shrines, or altars, and they can also serve as psychopomps, or guides through the underworld. Their roles in the celestial realm range from handmaidens to warriors. For instance, the Jade Maidens that attend to the Lady of the Nine Heavens are usually depicted as warrior spirits (depicted in figure 8.1 in chapter 8), while the Jade Maidens that attend to the Queen Mother of the West are depicted as handmaidens.

⁷ The fourth century BC text *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經 (*Shān hǎi jīng*) describes a realm atop the mountain called the kingdom of Wu Xian 巫咸國, named after the great Ancestor Wu Xian, forefather of shamans, who lived during the Shang dynasty. This astral realm of the shamans is where a mythical yellow bird 黃鳥 (*huáng niǎo*) is native, along with a mysterious black/indigo snake 玄蛇 (*xuán shé*). "山海經 [Classic of mountains and seas]," Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://ctext.org/shan-hai-jing/zh>.

⁸ From the Western Mountain Sutra 西山經 (*Xī Shān Jīng*) from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經 (475–220 BC), 49: 又西三百五十里，曰玉山，是西王母所居也。西王母其狀如人，豹尾虎齒而善嘯，蓬髮戴勝，是司天之屬及五殘。 Three hundred and fifty *li* to the west is Jade Mountain, where Xi Wang Mu dwells. Xi Wang Mu (Queen Mother of the West) resembles a human, with a leopard tail and the teeth of a tiger, a good howl, long and wild ragged hair, and a crown of colorful bird feathers. "西山經," Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://ctext.org/shan-hai-jing/xi-shan-jing>.

Mother's close companions, along with a winged wolf-like beast 獸焉 (*shòu yān*) with the horns of an ox, and a mythical crimson-feathered pheasant 鳥焉 (*niǎo yān*).

Of particular note, pottery unearthed in the Qinghai province at the Lajia archaeological site, where archaeologists have excavated artifacts from the early Bronze Age (2300–1500 BC), bears illustrations depicting dancing figures that are part human and part animal. These figures had human faces and torsos, a leopard tail, and sharpened tiger's teeth.⁹ Whether there are any connections between Xī Wáng Mǔ and these Bronze Age depictions of ritual are unclear, but the specificity of the details might suggest that there are.

The white tiger is the totemic animal spirit associated with the west, and thus is also associated with the Queen Mother. Other animal spirits associated with her range from wildcats and foxes to three-legged crows and scorpions. The scorpion association is what connects her as a key divinity in *wu* shamanism.

In Taoist and Chinese shamanic lore, Heaven is subdivided into nine regions, just as Yu the Great subdivided his kingdom into nine regions, with nine tripod cauldrons as the emblem of an emperor's divine right to rule. While the Queen Mother resides in the western region of Heaven, it's nevertheless understood that she rules over all nine of them. Thus, her most well-known protégé, 九天玄女 (Jiǔ Tiān Xuán Nǚ), is referred to as the Lady of the Nine Heavens. Jiǔ Tiān 九天 is a reference to the zenith point in the sky. In Taoist cosmology, Jiǔ Tiān 九天 is also a reference to the nine tiers of Heaven, 九重天 (*jiǔ chóng tiān*).¹⁰

In the I Ching, the second line of Hexagram 35 references a Queen Mother: 于其王母 (*tú qí Wáng Mǔ*), meaning in honor of Grandmother or to be blessed by the Queen Mother.

There is progress, and there is sorrow. May I now receive Her blessings. All Hail the Queen Mother.	jìn rú chóu rú shòu zī jiè fú yú qí Wáng Mǔ	晉如愁如 受茲介福 于其王母
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In antiquity “Queen Mother” was the title for a deceased paternal grandmother and thus signifies one's ancestor. Likewise, the Wáng Mǔ (王母) in Xī Wáng Mǔ is a reference to our ancestral grandmother spirits.

⁹ Paintings on Majiayao 馬家窯文化 (3000–2000 BC) pottery featured human figures with zoomorphic components, such as leopard prints and tiger stripes. Sandrine Larrivé-Bass, “Embodied Materials: The Emergence of Figural Imagery in Prehistoric China” (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2015), 105.

¹⁰ The 太玄數 (“*Tài xuán shù*”) is a chapter from the Eastern Han (2 BC) text *Canon of Supreme Mystery* 太玄經 (*Tài xuán jīng*) by Yang Xiong (53 BC–AD 18). The text names the nine heavens: “九天：一為中天 (Zhongtian)，二為羨天 (Xiantian)，三為從天 (Congtian)，四為更天 (Gengtian)，五為暉天 (Guantian)，六為廓天 (Kuotian)，七為滅天 (Jiantian)，八為沈天 (Shentian)，九為成天 (Chengtian).” The *Tài Xuán Jīng* is a divinatory system inspired by the I Ching, whereby a solid line — represents Heaven 天, a broken line -- is Earth 地, and a twice-broken line ... is Humanity 人.

“太玄數,” Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://ctext.org/taixuanjing/tai-xuan-shu/zhs>.



Recall the creation myth of Nǚwā we covered in chapter 2. Nǚwā had to remake humans from clay after an apocalyptic flood wiped out the first humans that populated earth. Those first humans were created by Xī Wáng Mǔ, one of the first divinities to arise from the Taiji 太極 (numinous omnipresence) and Wuji 無極 (numinous nothingness).

The “Inner Chapters” 內篇 (“Nèi Piān”) from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (350–250 BC) describes Xī Wáng Mǔ as an immortal spirit dwelling in the far west, one of the first and primordial gods birthed from the Tao.¹¹ “Nobody knows her beginning, and nobody will know her end.”¹²

She is considered a dark goddess because she was created from a pure form of divine yin. “Queen Mother” isn’t just a reference to a powerful goddess; she is a creator goddess whom we honor as an ancestor spirit.

Xī Wáng Mǔ is the ruler of Heaven’s wrath (天之厲, *tiān zhī lì*), the bringer of calamities, and the Wu Can (五殘, *wǔ cán*), meaning Five Destructions, a star (or multiple star system) observed in ancient times believed to be malefic, similar to the Demon Star (Algol) of ancient Egyptian astronomy. The star’s name translates to the Five Destructions. “厲” appears in the I Ching several dozen times.¹³

Whether the malefic star referenced as the Five Destructions is the same as or even related to Algol, a multiple-star system in the constellation Perseus, is unclear. However, we do know that in Eastern astrology, Perseus is 大陵 (*dà líng*) and Algol is counted as the fifth star of the constellation, or 大陵五 (*dà líng wǔ*). Algol is in the western mansion (a similar concept to a horoscopic house) of the White Tiger 白虎. Thus, the Demon Star is still under the purview of Xī Wáng Mǔ.

In *Songs of the Eminent Ones* 大人賦 (*Dà Rén Fù*) by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BC), an Eminent One journeys through astral worlds of dragons, spirits, and other mythical beings. The world is subdivided into four directions. In the west is Xī Wáng Mǔ’s imperial palace on Kunlun Mountain, where an Eminent One can only enter guided by a Jade Maiden, one of the Queen Mother’s celestial attendants. Xī Wáng Mǔ is described as having white or silver hair, wearing an ornate crown, with three-legged blackbirds as her companions.

¹¹ “大宗師 - The Great and Most Honored Master,” from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, also known as 南華真經 (*nán huá zhēn jīng*), Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>.

¹² “大宗師 - The Great and Most Honored Master,” Chinese Text Project.

¹³ The word “厲” in reference to the Five Destructions constellation or Demon Star (Algol) appears several dozen times throughout the *Zhouyi*. For example, “貞厲” (*zhēn lì*) appears several times, e.g., Hexagram 6, line 3; Hexagram 9, line 6; Hexagram 10, line 5; Hexagram 21, line 5; Hexagram 34, line 3; Hexagram 35, line 4 (noting how the Queen Mother was referenced earlier in Hexagram 35); Hexagram 49, line 3; and Hexagram 56, line 3. The phrase can be used in hexes and curses. Recite the name of the target and then “貞厲” (*zhēn lì*). Alternatively, the phrase can be recited first, followed by utterance of the target’s name.

The Living Sutra of the Queen Mother of the West 洞真西王母寶神起居經 (Dòng Zhēn Xīwángmǔ Bǎo Shén Qǐjū Jīng), of unknown authorship dated to the Eastern Jin (AD 266–420), is a collection of Taoist alchemical practices utilizing qigong and acupuncture. The text is also used in exorcisms.¹⁴ According to the Living Sutra, the Queen Mother grants immortality to those who are worthy and will share secret formulas of mystical practices with those who are devoted to her.



Figure 10.7 The Banquet of Seowangmo (Joseon, 1392–1910)
Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

By AD 400 to 500, she is revered in many schools of Taoism.¹⁵ The White Lotus, a Taoist secret society and mystery tradition in China founded in the twelfth century, venerated the Queen Mother of the West 西王母 (Xī Wáng Mǔ). She is a frequently invoked patron goddess among the *wushi* 巫師, holistic healers, spirit mediums, and diviners. The Yaochidao 瑤池道 in Taiwan is a Taoist lineage that venerates the Queen Mother as the principal divinity and path to salvation.¹⁶

You'll have noticed that the Qing dynasty silk paintings of 西王母 featured in this chapter depict a significantly tamed version of Xī Wáng Mǔ. Most of what has survived are imperial palace paintings, which tend to avoid the version of the Queen Mother who is a feral dark goddess with wild hair, sharp teeth, and a leopard's tail. By the *Bamboo Annals* 竹書紀年 (299 BC), descriptions of the goddess took a notable turn for the gentler, regal, refined

¹⁴ The Living Sutra of the Queen Mother of the West, 洞真西王母寶神起居經.

¹⁵ Cahill, *Transcendence*, 11–12.

¹⁶ The Yaochidao 瑤池道 was a Taoist secret society that organized underground during the Qing dynasty and early Maoist era in China. The religion is heavily rooted in mystical practices, such as thaumaturgy, Fu talisman crafting, channeling spirits, shamanistic practices, speaking in tongues, faith healing, and divination. Many became political refugees in Taiwan and now continue to have a significant minority presence on the island. The Yaochidao is an offshoot lineage of a more prominent Taoist religious sect, the Tiandao 天道, or Way of Heaven, founded during the Yuan dynasty (AD 1271–1368). Groups such as the White Lotus, Tiandao, and Yaochidao are considered subversive, rebel, heterodox groups and are often politically active against authoritarian regimes.

queen. Through the dynasties, she became a venerated patron goddess of women and was prayed to for blessings of love, marriage, and safe childbirth.

The Queen Mother of the West embodies divine yin. What that means to humans will vary and even change over time. Within China, presentations of her are diverse. Similar to how Fuxi and Nǚwā are depicted as a pair, the Queen Mother is commonly paired with either the Jade Emperor or the Grand Duke of the East. The *fangshi* traditions of the south, however, will often depict her as an independent all-powerful goddess, without a partner. Unlike Fuxi and Nǚwā, the Queen Mother has her own temples and orthodox sutras or devotionals that invoke her alone, with no Jade Emperor or Grand Duke in sight.

The Queen Mother is divine yin, but she transcends the locked interdependent binary of yin and yang. She is the feminine personification of Wuji 無極, the numinous void, and was self-birthered from the Wuji. Another name she goes by is Wujimu 無極母, divine mother of the numinous void. Self-birthered from that darkness, she began life as a powerful demon. According to Taoist lore, she was a demon who taught herself the Tao and ascended to Heaven, now eternally ruling as a celestial from her palace in the west. It is her demon origins that keep her connected to the underworld, even though she's now part of the heavenly court.

Today, there has been a reclaiming of her fearsome dark goddess aspect. The new up-and-coming generation of Asian witches and Taoist mystics are hearing her call. In Korea, she is known as Seowangmo 수왕모. In Japan, she is Seiōbo せいおうぼ; in Vietnam, *Tây Vương Mẫu*.

As a self-birthered dark goddess from the numinous void and one of the first gods to be birthered, her powers are formidable and far-ranging. She has a gentle side to help in matters of the heart and in matters relating to family planning. Yet she also has a fearsome side you can appeal to when you've been unjustly wronged. Among witches and occultists, she's a go-to divinity to invoke for exorcisms, penal spell-crafting, baneful magic, and curses.¹⁷

¹⁷ The *Yì wěi* 易緯 (127–200 AD) instructs on using Hexagram 63 in exorcism spells to vanquish demons. The line being referenced is from the third line, “高宗伐鬼方” (*Gāozōng fá guǐ fāng*), translating to “Gaozong [Ancestor Wu Ding] vanquishes the demons.” The line can be modified to invoke the Queen Mother of the West to punish and curse someone who has gravely wronged you and who has not received due punishment for the transgression.

Using a ritual dagger, sharpen the tip of a tree branch until it is a deadly spike. Write the target's full name and as many personal identifiers as you can onto a piece of parchment, or alternatively, use a photograph of the target. With red ink, write the following character over the perpetrator's name or photograph: 鬼.

Pierce the parchment or photograph (or both) with the spike. Set it up at the tip of a mound atop a campfire outdoors in the remote woods. Perform this ritual late at night under a waning crescent or dark moon. Pour a hard liquor of at least 100 proof on the branch, and light the campfire from its base, so that the fire does not start with your spike or the target's identifier.

In front of the campfire on a makeshift altar, light three sticks of incense, and pour a tall chalice of the hard liquor as an offering. As the fire begins, call upon the dark and feral goddess,



Figure 10.8 Seiōbo, Queen of the West
By Keishu Takeuchi (1868–1912). Woodblock print.

Queen Mother of the West. Invoke her by reciting “*Bài qǐng Xī Wáng Mǔ*” (拜請西王母) seven times. (Translation: “I call upon Queen Mother of the West.”)

Kneel on the ground before the fire and state your case: who you are, who the perpetrator is, what happened, and why the perpetrator needs to be punished. When the fire has grown tall enough to reach your spike, begin the recitation modified from Hexagram 63: 王母伐鬼 (*Wáng Mǔ fá guǐ*), meaning “the Queen Mother defeats and vanquishes the demon.”

When you recite such an exorcism incantation, it must be done with the tone and display of authority of judge, jury, and executioner. The reference *Wáng Mǔ* 王母 becomes both a reference to your ancestors and to Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wang Mu*, 西王母). The maternal instincts of your ancestors who are listening—and, of course, the Queen Mother of the West—are triggered, and they’ll come to your assistance. After the campfire is extinguished, pour out the liquor offering onto the earth in a counterclockwise circle.



When you work with the Lady of the Nine Heavens, the Queen Mother is never far. Fox spirits are only ever a few degrees of separation from Xī Wáng Mǔ. In the various sutras and canons associated with her, she is a celestial teacher to the *fangshi* 方士 and *wu* 巫. Within the Taoist pantheon, she's considered one of the more earnestly interactive of gods, willing to mentor, to guide, and to offer divine intervention.

This book is crafted to help mediate a connection between you and Xī Wáng Mǔ, the Queen Mother. The I Ching becomes the communication tool. You'll discover for yourself the path to reaching Mount Kunlun, however you might conceptualize the axis mundi. We start building our way to that connection by first working with your spiritual mentor, should you seek to receive her—the Lady of the Nine Heavens.

A Jade Amulet for Power and Protection



Xuanji nephrite jade disc with serrated edge. Shang dynasty. The Penn Museum. Philadelphia.

The *wu* 巫 shaman uses jade to petition the spirits. From *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (AD 100) by Xu Shen 許慎 (AD 58 – 148): 巫以玉事神 (*wū yǐ yù shì shén*).

When the Yellow Emperor prayed to the Queen Mother of the West for divine guidance, the Queen Mother sent the Lady of the Nine Heavens, who taught the emperor how to craft a powerful talisman made of jade. The magical tablets of knowledge that the ancestral spirit Fuxi gave to Yu the Great, with the secrets of sciences and magic revealed, were the *yù jiǎn* 玉簡 jade tablets. The jade stone contains within it the *qi* resonant with the Jade Maidens of heaven, the spirit gatekeepers at the liminal points of the cosmos.

The recurring word “吉” (*jí*) in the Zhouyi means good fortune, happiness, and contentment, an omen of success; the ideogram depicts a jade tablet to express that Heaven’s Will is aligned in your favor.

Jade absorbs malefic, destructive energy. Corresponding with the trigram Heaven, for creative forces, jade is an amplifier. When it breaks or when you lose it, it’s because it has taken the hit for you. It has absorbed so much baneful energy that it breaks from you so that it won’t affect you.

Many Asian and Pacific Islander cultures believe that as you pass jade stone from one generation on to the next, the jade heirloom will increase in power. The *bi*, or jade carved into a circular medallion with a circle cut-out in the center, has been a part of Chinese history since the Neolithic era, before 3000 BC.

If you only invest in one amulet for protection, prosperity, and ensuring good health, then invest in a piece of jade. The highest quality jade will be those found by river beds. Untreated jadeite jade is optimal and will become heirlooms, though nephrite is perfectly fine for use as a protection amulet.

Serpentine is a great stone for connecting with the Queen Mother of the West.

Just by wearing jade while you perform rituals, divination, and invocations of the divine, the stone will absorb the celestial light from the divine presence and grow in power. The stone is believed to be a natural connection between Heaven and Earth, the celestial realm and the human, and so it also amplifies the efficacy of your divination rituals. The stone doesn’t need to be consecrated or treated in any particular way; just wear it and you are what activates its magical properties.

Practicum 5.2
from Chapter 5

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