

Summary

Yu the Great is about a difficult, but rewarding journey that a wise man named Yu undergoes to tame the flood that is ravaging China. Firstly, many years earlier, Yu's father, Gun, has been tasked by the emperor to stop the ravaging flood. Gun meets two spirits, who tell him that he must use the *shirang*, a sacred swelling soil, to stop the flood. The *shirang* is with Huang Di, the god of the heavens and Gun's grandfather. Gun steals the *shirang*, and uses it to stop the flood. Gun is hailed a hero by the people of China, but Huang Di is furious that Gun stole from him. He orders Jurong, heaven's executioner, to murder Gun. Gun tries to escape Jurong by fleeing into the mountains, but Jurong finds him and executes him. Meanwhile, Gun's work is undone and the floods return to ravage China.

Three years later, life that had been growing in Gun emerges from his body as his son, Yu. Yu is tasked by the current emperor to complete his father's unfinished work, and ascends to the heavens to meet Huang Di. Yu humbly shows great appreciation for the authority and power that Huang Di holds and abates his father's successes to appease Huang Di. Huang Di gives Yu some *shirang* and the aid of a dragon and a tortoise spirit who aided Gun.

Finally, after using the *shirang* to plug the springs, Yu, with the help of an army of spirits and other creatures, confronts the water god Gong Gong, who is causing the flood. It is unclear as to what transpired when Yu confronted Gong Gong, but the floods ended shortly after the confrontation. For posterity, Yu digs channels into the ground to let water flow from lakes into the ocean. Yu then finds a wife and has a family with her, and later becomes emperor.

Main Idea

Yu the Great was mainly about the way the gods and spirits wield their power, and how they play an integral role in driving the plot forward. This is made clear from, despite his

grand successes, Gun is still executed by his own grandfather, Huang Di, for stealing some *shirang* from him. Moreover, because Yu respects and acknowledges Huang Di, and abates his father's successes, Huang Di supports Yu in his quest to stop the floods. Only with the help of his army of spirits can Yu successfully confront and possibly kill Gong Gong.

Questions

- Did Huang Di have no other grandchildren than Gun?
- If Huang Di's descendants are all immortal,
 - How did Huang Di get children? Why are Huang Di's children not with him in heaven? Have all of Huang Di's children defied him and been killed by Jurong? Do Huang Di's children give birth to their children in the same way Gun did?
- How important is honour that Huang Di has Gun executed just for stealing the *shirang*, even after Gun did so much good?
- Who hurt Huang Di?
- Who ordered the floods?
- Why did Gong Gong or Huang Di order the floods if they did? Yu is easily able to gather an army of spirits who are against the flooding of China and their homes, so why order the floods? Can the floods be ordered?
- Why does the emperor not take any steps to mitigate flood damage?
- What is the emperor too busy with? It isn't stated that the emperor didn't provide supplies for those in flood-affected regions, but why has the emperor not tried to stop the floods?
- Why did the spirits not come together to do something about Gong Gong when the flood started?

- Were there disagreements amongst the spirits? How did Yu solve those disagreements?

Important Quotations

“I see that you have learned from your father’s mistake. It is good that you show the proper respect” (23).

- When Huang Di says this to Yu, he’s making it clear that Gun made mistakes and was punished accordingly. Furthermore, he’s telling Yu that his authority and power need to be respected if Yu wants help. In this exchange, Huang Di shows that he must be superior to his subjects, who must acknowledge his superiority, almost as if he has a power complex. Based off of Huang Di ordering the execution of his own grandson because his grandson stole some *shirang* to save China, it’s clear that Huang Di will do everything in his power to ensure that he retains superiority.

Personal Response

When I read Yu the Great, I was in awe of Yu and Gun’s perseverance and determination; even after facing many trials and tribulations, Yu and Gun save China, though Gun’s work was undone. They wanted to help the people of China, and spent years of their life doing so, just to achieve their goals. I was slightly confused about Nu Jiao’s choice to leave her home all by herself; Yu must have had some spirits who stayed with him, and some spirits who would have stayed with Nu Jiao. I would also ask Yu why he did not tell Nu Jiao that he could shape shift, since that could have saved her life.

Connections and Conventions

- Hero’s Journey
- Gun and Yu both complete their own hero’s journey, with distinct sections. For Gun, he started in the ordinary world of China, is called to adventure by the emperor, is unsure of how exactly he will stop the floods. He then receives the mentoring of the

owl and turtle spirits, crosses the threshold when he sneaks into the Celestial Palace, and faces the test of stealing the *shirang* and coming back to Earth. Once back on Earth, he lays the *shirang* on the ground as he approaches completion of his task, commands the *shirang* to grow and swell, and saves China. Upon completion of his task, he is murdered by Jurong. After 3 years, Yu emerges from him as his son. Yu follows a similar hero's journey, except has the mentoring of Huang Di, fills the springs with *shirang*, faces Gong Gong, digs trenches into the ground to lead water into the ocean, and has a son with Nu Jiao.

- Epic Conventions

- Yu and Gun are immortal, with divine parentage, Yu and Gun tame the floods of China, even if for a short period of time, Yu confronts and battles Gong Gong, Yu and Gun travel across China, and both travel to the Celestial Palace. Moreover, Yu becomes emperor and Gun is hailed as a hero by the people of China, Yu and Gun persevere and are determined to save China because they were tasked by the emperor and not for glory. Finally, Yu receives aid from Huang Di, the spirits, and fights Gong Gong, the water god. Gun receives help from the owl and tortoise spirits, but while both Yu and Gun have the same goal, they fight different battles.