Gun and Yu Tame the Flood

Ancient China · the Yellow River lands

Where It Comes From

China remembers a great flood in the days of the wise rulers Yao and Shun, long before written history. The story is told in the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*), one of the oldest Chinese classics, in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*), in the poet Qu Yuan's *Heavenly Questions*, and in the historian Sima Qian's *Records* (about 100 BC). Yu's name already appears on bronze vessels from about three thousand years ago.

What Happens

The waters rise until they cover the hills and reach toward the sky. People are driven up into the trees and the high places. The ruler Yao asks who can stop it.

A man named Gun is given the job. For nine years he builds walls and dams to hold the water back, and for nine years the water breaks through. In one old telling he steals a magic soil from heaven, *xirang*, "breathing earth" that grows by itself, and uses it without permission. Gun is banished and dies on Feather Mountain.

His son Yu takes up the work and does it differently. Instead of walling the water in, he digs channels and opens the gorges so the rivers can run to the sea. He works for thirteen years. The story says he passed his own front door three times and never went in, because the work was not finished.

At last the land is dry and can be farmed again. Yu divides it into nine regions, and the people make him their ruler.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. A great flood in the time of Yao. It is not punishment for wrongdoing; it is a disaster that must be faced.

Who was saved, and how. Everyone, through patient human work. Nobody sails away.

The boat or the refuge. None. The answer is not to escape the water but to guide it.

What came after. Yu becomes the founder of the Xia, remembered as China's first dynasty, and the model of a ruler who serves his people.

In 2016 a team of scientists led by Wu Qinglong argued in the journal *Science* that a landslide dammed the Yellow River at Jishi Gorge around 1920 BC, and that when the dam burst it made one of the largest floods of the last ten thousand years. They suggested it might lie behind the memory of Yu's flood. Other scholars questioned their dates and their link to the story, and the question is still open.

THINK IT THROUGH

Gun tried to hold the water back; Yu gave it somewhere to go. Where else in life might that difference matter?

Sources

The flood under Yao, Gun and Yu: “Yu the Great”, “Gun–Yu” and “Great Flood (China)”, Wikipedia, and the classical sources they cite (*Shujing*, *Shanhaijing*, *Shiji*).

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China* (State University of New York Press, 2006).

Wu Qinglong and others, “Outburst flood at 1920 BCE supports historicity of China’s Great Flood and the Xia dynasty”, *Science* 353 (2016): 579–582, and the published replies to it.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.