

Queen Mother of the West

The Changing Face of a Goddess



Painting from Dingjiacha tomb no. 5, Jiuquan, Gansu province, circa 400. The Queen Mother appears repeatedly in ancient funerary iconography. Here she is shown seated in her western paradise accompanied by a three-legged bird, a nine-tailed fox, and an attendant holding an umbrella over her head. The upper level of the tomb also included a painting of the paradise of the Lord of the East, with whom the Queen Mother was often paired.

The story of the Queen Mother of the West—who appears as the goddess of immortality in UMMA’s ancient carved limestone slab—is one of the oldest legends in China; it has endured in one form or another for two millennia and still plays a variety of roles in contemporary life.



Festival of the Peaches of Longevity, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), 15th century (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri). The Queen Mother’s enchanted palace in the Kunlun mountains was said to contain beautiful pagodas, lotus-filled ponds, jewel-laden trees, attending immortals, and lovely maidens. In her garden grew the peaches of immortality; these legendary fruits, of which she was the guardian, ripened only once every 3000 years and just a single bite was believed to grant eternal life.



In her earliest incarnation, the Queen Mother of the West, also known as Xiwangmu, was a great creative power of nature linked with the Lord of the East, Dongwanggong. Together they embodied the essences of yin and yang, bringing to life heaven and earth and all beings. Xiwangmu was represented in female form with a panther’s tail and tiger’s teeth; she was extraordinarily powerful and also other-worldly and terrifying. Over time Xiwangmu became more human, and by the Han dynasty (206BCE–220CE) she was associated with wealth, health, fertility, calamity, and eventually immortality. By the Tang dynasty (618–907) she was

Blessings for Long Life, hanging scroll, Yuan dynasty (1280–1368). The Queen Mother’s beauty and expression of the supreme yin essence was the subject of both poems and historical accounts in the Tang dynasty (618–907) and for centuries she was a model for and guardian to priestesses and Taoist adepts. She may be distinguished from other beautiful women by her distinctive phoenix head-dress, a symbol of long life, and is frequently shown with peaches.

glamorized as the Queen Mother in Taoist and popular belief; as a ruler of heaven she was transformed into the beautiful caretaker of the Peaches of Immortality and paired with the heavenly Jade Emperor as his wife. Though now dominated by the August Sovereign, her name was still invoked throughout China in mountains, grottoes, and secret haunts. She was especially popular in folk culture and widely celebrated in shrines and temples throughout the countryside—many unsanctioned by imperial and state authorities.

Money tree, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) (Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan). This bronze money tree is crowned with an image of the Queen Mother of the West—ruler of the western paradise and holder of the secret of immortality. The tree’s branches are hung with representations of coins that could be plucked to provide for the needs of the deceased on the journey to the realm of the immortals.



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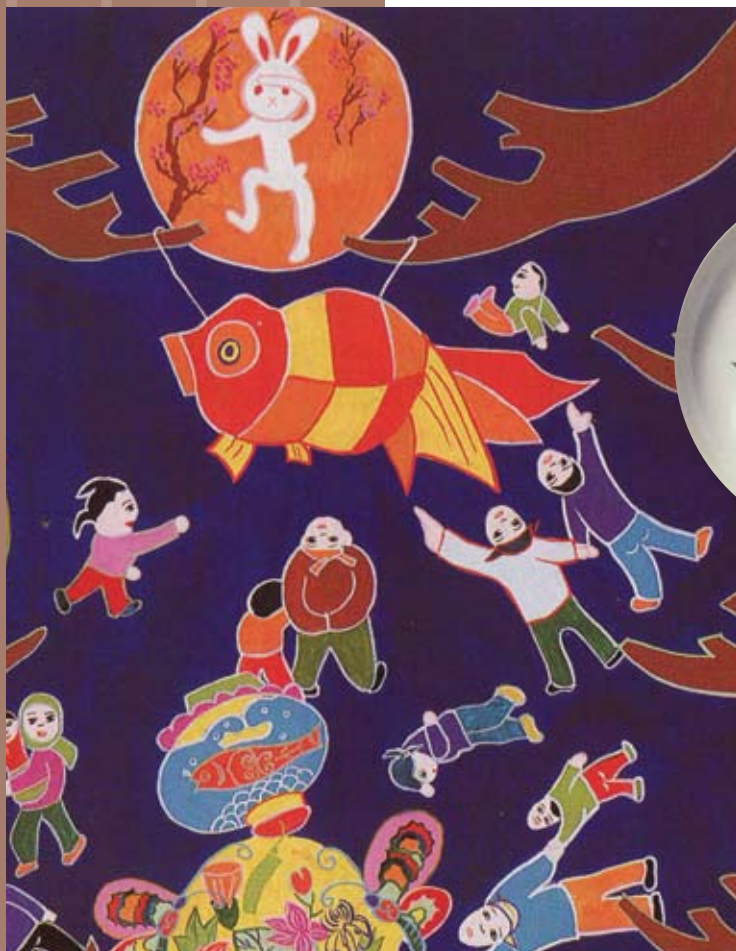
Sculpture of the Queen Mother of the West in pavilion, Queen Mother of the West temple complex, Jingchuan county, Gansu province, late 20th century reconstruction. The association of the Queen Mother with this site, believed to be the western mountains of her realm, dates back to the Western Han dynasty. This statue and pavilion, however, are recent constructions—part of a governmental effort to forge links with ancient or legendary aspects of Chinese culture in order to foster a sense of local and national identity in an increasingly global culture.

The Queen Mother of the West plays a crucial role in the myth behind the mid-Autumn festival, one of the most popular in China. In this story, after the archer Hou Yi shoots down nine of the ten suns that are scorching the earth, the Queen Mother rewards him with the elixir of immortality. Chang E's wife discovers and drinks it and immediately rises up to the moon, where she is still thought to rule over the lunar kingdom. There she coughs up the magic potion, which is transformed into the Jade Rabbit, who pounds the elixir of immortality with a mortar and pestle. Children point to his figure in the moon in this painting of the mid-Autumn festival.

Today the Queen Mother is still revered in popular religion in China and petitioners continue to go to places associated with her legend to ask for help. Her image is also ubiquitous in the secular realm, accessible virtually anytime to those aspiring to happiness and long life. And the story of the Queen Mother of the West has become so interwoven with Chinese culture that aspects of it have taken of a life of their own: she plays a supporting role, for example, in many legends that are the basis of festivals still celebrated today, and she has endowed the peach with its marvelous fame, so that the fruit alone, not the gods necessarily connected with it, brings to mind the precious idea of living forever.



Detail, Domestic wall hanging of the Queen Mother of the West with phoenix and bats, Qing dynasty (1644–1912), late 19th century.



LEFT Plate made for Kanxi emperor (reigned 1662–1722). The significance of peaches as a symbol of immortality probably pre-dates their connection with the Queen Mother, but it was she who spread their fame. They remain a popular symbol of long life and are seen frequently in Chinese paintings, New Year prints, ceramics, and clothing.

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Photos: Tomb painting from Literature, Philosophy and the Arts VRC, University of Michigan, Dearborn; plate from T. and M. Bartholomew, *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2006), p. 207; painting of moon festival by Shi Le from C. Stepanchuk, *Red Eggs and Dragon Boats* (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1994), p. 44; all other images from ArtStor.

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