

# From Fuxi to Izanagi: A Cross-Cultural Genealogy of Creation Deity Gestures

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**Abstract:** The "gestural turn" in contemporary art has introduced a more immediate perspective for studying ancient iconography, transcending textual discourse. As quintessential figures in Chinese and Japanese cosmogonic myths, the four deities Fuxi, Nüwa, Izanagi, and Izanami are depicted with distinct postures across murals unearthed from various dynastic periods. The longstanding hypothesis regarding Chinese influence on Japanese mythology gains further support from the iconographic similarities and their alignment with historical records, forming the foundation for this comparative study. However, as the myth of Fuxi and Nüwa was assimilated into Japanese culture, both their visual representations and narrative texts underwent symbolic transformations. Framed within Giorgio Agamben's genealogical framework of gestural aesthetics, this paper analyzes the poses of these creation deities to uncover the aesthetic philosophies embedded in their iconography. By tracing the Chinese intellectual origins of Japanese creation myths, decoding the symbolic significance of divine gestures, and investigating cultural and ethical factors driving their evolution, this study seeks to elucidate the intrinsic motivations behind the "transfiguration" of these sacred postures.

**Keywords:** Creation Myths, Sino-Japanese Comparative Study, Kojiki, Gestural Aesthetics, Giorgio Agamben.

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## 1. Introduction

The influence of Chinese creation mythology has long been studied, yet scholars remain divided on the categorization of Sino-Japanese creation myths and which myths or deities should serve as paradigms for East Asian creation myth research. Fuxi, Nuwa, Izanagi, and Izanami were selected as research subjects for three reasons. First, both sets of deities belong to the "twin deity myths" category of human creation myths. Second, their mythological texts share a similar structure: during cosmic chaos, siblings follow divine will to reproduce and become ancestral figures. Third, both incorporate the "sibling marriage" taboo motif. Historical records confirm Japan's significant borrowing from Chinese creation myths. Despite numerous comparative studies on these myths, no research has explored the aesthetic implications of the deities' postures in their portraits. Drawing on the works of Heidegger, Benjamin, and Agamben's "posture turn," this study uses postures as visual narratives to uncover cultural differences and aesthetic evolutions between China and Japan. As a form of presence more potent than language[2], "posture" enables ancient artifacts to speak, revealing the aesthetic and cultural differences embedded in Chinese and Japanese creation deity paintings, while manifesting the evolution of cultural aesthetic preferences through dynastic mural posture transformations.

## 2. Silent Testimony: The Gestures of Creator Deities as Symbols of Procreation

From a mythological genealogy perspective, the creation myths of China and Japan exhibit striking similarities in both iconographic postures and textual content. Based on extant mythological texts and archaeological evidence, it is highly probable that the compilation of Japanese creation myths was influenced by Chinese mythological concepts. Beyond the intimate postures of the divine couples depicted in

archaeological findings, these parallels manifest across four dimensions: myth typology, mythological motifs, spatial cosmology, and narrative structure.

Firstly, both nations' creation myths belong to the "co-emergent deities" category within cosmogonic mythology. While romantic narratives abound in various creation myths worldwide, the specific trope of sibling marriage remains uncommon. Both traditions feature this taboo motif of "sibling union" or "consanguineous marriage," while also sharing remarkable similarities in cosmological frameworks. Japanese mythology divides the world into three realms: Takamagahara (heavenly plain), Ashihara-no-Nakatsukuni (middle land of reeds), and Yomi-no-kuni (underworld) - corresponding respectively to functions of birth (life creation), existence (postnatal being), and demise (life cessation). This tripartite structure mirrors Chinese mythological cosmology. As early as the pre-Qin period, Qu Yuan's "Summoning the Soul" delineated the functions of heavenly court, mortal world, and netherworld: "The Emperor instructed Shaman Yang: 'There is a man below whom I wish to assist. His soul has scattered - divine for him!...' The habitats of mythical creatures mentioned - venomous snakes, giant foxes, and nine-headed serpents - precisely correspond to the mortal realm. Thus Japan's "Ashihara-no-Nakatsukuni" and China's "human world" both represent dwelling spaces for the living, while the "lower realm" is consistently associated with death. The term "Yellow Springs" (黄泉) in Japanese mythology had already been prevalent in China since at least the 8th century BCE, as evidenced in the Spring and Autumn period text "Duke Zheng Defeats Duan at Yan": "Not until the Yellow Springs shall we meet again." Folklorists note the Daoist origins of this term, whose influence expanded alongside Daoism's development. The Nihon Shoki, compiling Japanese creation myths around 711 CE (Wadō 4), postdates the full formation of Daoist theological systems during China's Northern-Southern Dynasties and Sui-Tang periods. Japanese scholar Fukunaga Mitsuji (1985) and others have substantiated Daoist influences on "Kiki mythology"

(referring to Kojiki and Nihon Shoki), supporting the hypothesis that Japan's tripartite cosmological structure drew from Chinese mythological texts.[12]

Moreover, both traditions share fundamental narrative structures: primordial chaos → sibling cohabitation → divine mandate → marital union → human propagation → ancestral status. Beyond this macro-structure, detailed parallels emerge. First, both feature a "pillar circumambulation" ritual preceding divine marriage. The "Records of Emperors Since Creation" describes: "With humanity perished, the siblings... survived and, instructed by Mount Jin's deity to unite, circled Mount Kunlun - Fuxi leftward, Nüwa rightward - vowing to marry upon meeting." [10] This echoes earlier accounts in the Chu silk manuscripts and persists in Chinese folktales through divination methods like millstone-rolling and turtle-shell consultation. Remarkably, Nihon Shoki records an identical ritual: "The deities descended to the island... Using its pillar, the male deity circled left, the female right... When they met, the goddess exclaimed first, displeasing the god." The directional consistency (male-left, female-right) and its visual representations in Chinese artifacts (e.g., Wu Liang Shrine reliefs [Fig.1], Sichuan Pi County sarcophagus [Fig.2]) suggest deep-rooted cultural transmission. Ōbayashi Taryō (1986) attributes Japanese myth origins to Southeast Asian and Oceanian sources, making the adapted adoption of this "pillar divination" motif plausible. Notably, the Japanese version adds patriarchal elements - prohibiting the goddess from speaking first - likely reflecting 5th-century Confucian influences when Japanese aristocracy established the Daigaku-ryō (Imperial Academy) for Confucian studies.

Secondly, both myths feature deformed firstborns. The inclusion of this episode in Japan's official "Kiki" chronicles appears narratively abrupt. Chinese variants describe abnormal firstborns like flesh lumps or grinding stones, particularly in southern Miao and Yao traditions where the fleshy ball transforms into humans when divided.[10] Japanese accounts similarly record a leech-child (Hiruko), described in Kojiki as "three years old but still unable to stand." Given limited medical knowledge about consanguineous reproduction in antiquity, this parallel seems improbable by chance. Ōbayashi suggests Japanese versions adapted Chinese prototypes, with the "fleshy lump" transforming into "leech-child" through maritime cultural reinterpretation - Japan being an island nation where aquatic symbolism held significance. Chronologically, while Kojiki and Nihon Shoki were compiled in early 8th century CE, their stories derive from 4th-6th century Kofun period oral traditions. Comparatively, the earliest Chinese textual evidence portraying Fuxi-Nüwa as spouses appears in Warring States period Chu silk manuscripts, indicating the myth's maturation by that era. These temporal and narrative correspondences strongly suggest Chinese influences during Japan's myth compilation.

Japan's creation mythology was profoundly influenced by Chinese mythological ideas yet the role of gestures in transforming the imagery of Fuxi and Nuwa after their introduction to Japan has often been overlooked for ancient societies reproduction was essential for tribal survival and gestures served as a visual medium to legitimize fertility rituals. In Chinese tomb art Fuxi and Nuwa are frequently depicted in intimate gestures-copulating facing each other or embracing-revealing a cultural emphasis on fertility worship examples[7]include wooden panel paintings from the Wei-Jin tombs in Jiayuguan and rubbings from the Wuliang Shrine

where the deities gaze at each other as spouses such imagery spanning from the Xinmang to Sui-Tang periods combines solemn artistic styles with tender interactions explicitly symbolizing procreation and the Chu silk manuscripts (4th century BCE) already mention their marriage and children solidifying their role as universal ancestors. In Japan archaeological portraits of Izanagi and Izanami often show them as lovers—holding hands or standing close—reflecting similar fertility propaganda in a context of war and hardship as Agamben notes gestures transform mundane rituals into sacred symbols by showcasing their "means-end" power and both cultures used divine imagery to elevate reproduction as a moral duty embodying an aesthetic that equates fertility with beauty. Chinese depictions of Fuxi and Nuwa emphasize harmonious completeness such as intertwined tails or holding "compass and square" (symbols of cosmic order) this reflects China's aesthetic of hemei (harmony and perfection) rooted in Confucian and Taoist ideals of balance for example the Eastern Han murals linking "compass" (roundness) to cosmic harmony align with philosophical texts like Liuzi-Hexing which advocates yin-yang equilibrium. Japanese imagery however embodies mono no aware (pathos of transience) Izanagi and Izanami are often shown alone or in separation as in Ogata Kōrin's paintings where Izanagi flees the underworld in horror this aesthetic shaped by Japan's forest-and-ocean environment views impermanence as inherent to beauty and the Nihon Shoki's tragic narrative-divine lovers separated by death curses and ritual purification-epitomizes this "pathos of 无常 (mujo)" [6]where emotional acceptance of transience replaces spiritual transcendence. While both cultures use spousal gestures to promote fertility their emotional expressions diverge: China's harmonious unity vs. Japan's melancholic transience these differences stem from contrasting aesthetic traditions-hemei's emphasis on cosmic order and mono no aware's embrace of life's fragility-ultimately shaped by their unique cultural and geographical contexts.



**Figs. 1-2** Izanagi and Izanami by Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716) and The Deities Probing the Primordial Sea with the Celestial Jeweled Spear by Kobayashi Eitaku (1816–1891)  
**Figs. 3-4** Wooden Panel Painting from the Wei-Jin Dynasty Tomb at Maozhuangzi, Jiayuguan and Rubbing of Fuxi and Nuwa from the Wuliang Shrine (Eastern Han Dynasty) [3]

### 3. Gesture Codes: Creator Deities' Gestures Embedding Eternal Beauty and Creature Worship

In the context of mythological archaeology, the "holding-aloft" gesture often carries a connotation of worship. Béla Balázs called attention to the expressive function of gestures beyond language, arguing that "hand gestures and movements" serve as "visible tools for directly expressing the soul within the body." What, then, is the special significance of the holding-aloft gesture? By elevating an object through

this gesture, the subject exalts it above all living beings while also bridging the gap between humanity and the divine, implying a philosophy of veneration for that object.

Archaeological portraits unearthed across China frequently depict Fuxi and Nuwa holding the sun, moon, toads, divine birds, and magical herbs aloft. Examples include the Fuxi Holding the Sun statue from Hechuan County, Chongqing; Fuxi-Nuwa murals from Nanyang, Henan; and the stone coffin portrait from Jiang'an No. 1 Tomb in Sichuan. Through these holding-aloft gestures, these images visually convey the mythological-era people's reverence for the sun and moon-symbols of eternal beauty. In Indian art, the lunar adornment on Shiva's head is often interpreted by scholars as a symbol of eternal time. The presence of divine birds and magical herbs in the portraits further reinforces this interpretation. Magical herbs are often associated with longevity and immortality in mythological legends, reflecting the ancient people's yearning for eternal beauty. Divine birds add a divine radiance to this concept of eternity. The Chinese aesthetic valuing eternity has a long history. Given the fragility and preciousness of life, Taoism early proposed the aspiration for "eternal life," which is discussed in texts such as the *Taiping Jing* (Classic of Great Peace) and Laozi Xiang'er Zhu (Commentary on the Laozi by Xiang'er). The Eastern Han Stele of Laozi as the Mother of the Universe states: "Laozi is the Dao, born before the formation of things, arising before the Great Beginning, moving in the primordial chaos, floating in the void, entering and exiting the netherworld, observing the undifferentiated mixture, and peering into the unseparated clear and turbid." This vividly illustrates the ancient people's yearning for and worship of immortality.

With the introduction of Taoist thought to Japan, this aesthetic of eternity and immortality also influenced Japanese creation myths. In archaeological portraits, this is manifested in depictions of the gestures of Izanagi and Izanami meeting in the underworld. For example, in Japanese painter Aoki Shigeru's *Yomi no Saka* (Slope of the Underworld), Izanagi and Izanami stand on the soil of the underworld, their hands perpetually in a gesture of upward struggle, with their raised arms pointing toward the "Reed Plains of China"-a symbol of life. The direction pointed to by the deities' hands is also the direction yearned for by the Yamato people. This yearning for eternity and immortality is reflected in the mythological texts through the portrayal of "Yomi," the land of the dead. In the Japanese creation myth's concept of death, while mortal bodies decay, souls are immortal and find eternal life in Yomi. This idea of "body-soul dualism" best demonstrates Japan's yearning for eternity.

On the other hand, holding the sun- the source of energy for all life-aloft expresses worship of life and living beings. The meaning of gestures is open to interpretation, as "there are no signs pointing to a signifié (signified), only meanings that manifest directly in the body," [4] allowing for multiple interpretive paths. Similarly, beyond solar worship, the gesture of holding the sun aloft can be interpreted from multiple dimensions. In traditional Chinese thought, the sun and moon symbolize the two energies of yin and yang, whose harmony generates all things. Toads, as fertile animals, and magical herbs, as vibrant plants, rely on the sun and moon for growth, forming a relatively complete ecosystem that embodies the ecological aesthetic of "animism." This aesthetic is not unique to China. Qiu Zihua argues that under the influence of primitive nature religion, most Eastern nations formed an aesthetic centered on "life." Japanese

creator deity gestures also subtly reflect this concept. The gesture of Izanagi and Izanami churning the sea with the "Celestial Jeweled Spear" imbues the creation of life and land with "divine will," reflecting Japanese aesthetics' reverence for life. The *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) records: "The Celestial Deities said to Izanagi and Izanami, 'There is a fertile land called the Reed Plains of a Thousand and Five Hundred Autumns of Bountiful Rice. You should go and govern it.' They were bestowed the Celestial Spear. The two deities stood on the Floating Bridge of Heaven, casting the spear to seek land. As they churned the sea and drew it up, the tide dripping from the spearhead solidified into an island." Thus, the "Celestial Jeweled Spear" held by Izanagi and Izanami was bestowed by ancient deities, with which they created life and land in the "Reed Plains of China." Rooted in this worship of living beings, both nations' myths feature numerous nature deities, such as China's Thunder God and Lightning Mother, and Japan's Susanoo and Amaterasu. In the aesthetic perspective of Chinese and Japanese life philosophy, every flower, tree, mountain, river, and sea is endowed with divine nature and mysterious power. In mythological texts, Japan portrays the "Reed Plains of China" as a fertile land with abundant life, bestowed upon Japan's first emperor, which later generations have revered, demonstrating the Yamato people's emphasis on the power of life.

Gestures always leave room for interpretation. As Agamben noted, a gesture "makes expression possible precisely by establishing a core emptiness within it." [4] The gestures of Chinese and Japanese creator deities contain a degree of semantic blankness, allowing audiences to interpret them freely. The holding-aloft gestures of Fuxi and Nuwa and the sea-churning gesture of Izanagi and Izanami with the "Celestial Jeweled Spear" are not overly explained in mythological texts, enabling people to intuitively grasp the ideas behind them: the power of eternal time and the vibrant beauty of nature. In summary, analyzing the hand gestures of creator deities in the portraits reveals both nations' admiration for eternal beauty and the beauty of life.



Fig. 5 Rubbings of portrait stones from Sichuan and Chongqing regions depicting Fuxi and Nuwa holding the sun and moon aloft[8]

#### 4. Body Images: The Spread of Confucianism and Changes in Deity Gestures

The evolution of creator deities' gestures across different periods reflects the changing aesthetic tendencies of the two nations. Building on Gilles Deleuze's "movement-image," Giorgio Agamben developed the philosophy of "movement-gesture," proposing that single archaeological portraits can be seen as "fragments of a gesture" or "frozen frames from a lost film." [5] Connecting portraits from different periods as a series of "fragments" allows us to transcend temporal barriers and gain a more complete understanding of creator deities' gestures. Thus, these images transition from static representations to dynamic narratives, evolving from isolated reflections of mythological ideas in specific times and regions

into relatively complete depictions of mythological thought across history. Examining Chinese and Japanese creator deity portraits through this dynamic, macro-level gestural spectrum reveals deeper differences in their mythological connotations.

Based on unearthed portraits, Fuxi and Nuwa's depictions evolved from intertwined limbs to separation, and from voluntary union to forced combination as dynasties changed. In contrast, the gestures of Izanagi and Izanami showed no significant temporal evolution. This suggests that the ideas embedded in Chinese creation myths are dynamic, while those in Japanese myths remain relatively static—a difference closely linked to the development and spread of Confucianism. The taboo of sibling marriage contradicted Confucian moral norms, leading to a three-stage evolution in Fuxi and Nuwa's portraiture: "standing alone-limb intertwining-separation," reflecting ancient people's shifting attitudes from ignorance to reflection and finally rejection of consanguineous marriage. When Confucianism was introduced to Japan, it merged with local culture and underwent transformation. Guo Ning notes that Japanese culture lacks elements of rational analysis and deduction, with natural human relationships and instincts rarely constrained by rational thought. [9] This does not imply a lack of reason but rather a blend of rational and irrational elements, where primal instincts are openly expressed. This is evident in the *Man'yōshū*, Japan's oldest collection of waka poems, which includes numerous love poems defying traditional ethics—such as Poem 21: "My sister is as fresh as shikon grass, how can I not admire her? Though I know she is another man's wife, my love for her remains." [13] Japanese scholar Itō Jinsai argued: "Where there is propriety, emotion is the Dao, and desire is righteousness—what is evil in that?"

The ethical framework of "the three bonds and five constants" was solidified after the Han Dynasty, excluding many irrational emotions from Confucianism—and the transformation of Fuxi and Nuwa's gestures coincided with this period. In early myths, Fuxi and Nuwa were not portrayed as spouses; Western Han murals from Luoyang's Bu Qianqiu Tomb, Qianjingtou Tomb, and Shaogou No. 61 Tomb all depict them standing alone. During the Xinmang period, while some copulation scenes appeared, separate depictions remained dominant—for example, in the Xinmang-era portrait from Luoyang's Northern Suburb Oil Station Tomb, "Fuxi holds the moon in the west, Nuwa holds the sun in the east." After the Eastern Han Dynasty, especially during the Wei-Jin and Northern-Southern Dynasties, Fuxi and Nuwa's gestures reverted to separate postures, as seen in Northern Wei stone coffin portraits from Luoyang, Northern Zhou stone coffin portraits from Xi'an, and Northern-Southern Dynasties murals from Dunhuang Cave 285. These images show no physical contact between the deities, indicating a shift from intimacy to alienation—visual evidence of ancient people's rejection of blood marriage.

Additionally, Fuxi and Nuwa's portraits evolved from voluntary to forced union. Han Dynasty creator deity portraits introduced a third "monstrous god" in 13 unearthed examples, such as a pig-headed figure in a Western Han brick relief from Luoyang, who grasps the deities' waists and tramples their serpentine tails, creating a sense of coercion. Cheng Jianjun argues this figure symbolizes forced marriage. Similar scenes appear in Han tombs across China, such as the Tanghe Knitting Factory Tomb in Nanyang and the Yanshi Xinmang Tomb in Luoyang, where the deities' forced gestures rationalize their taboo union as "divinely compelled for

salvation," reflecting Confucian condemnation of indulgent desire under Han ritual ethics.

The evolution of creator deities' gestures mirrors changing national aesthetic tendencies. Viewed dynamically, Fuxi and Nuwa's journey from separation to intertwining to alienation embodies China's Confucian-driven rejection of blood marriage, emphasizing self-restraint. In contrast, Izanagi and Izanami's unchanging gestures reflect how Confucianism in Japan accommodated natural instincts, revealing divergent cultural trajectories shaped by ethical frameworks.

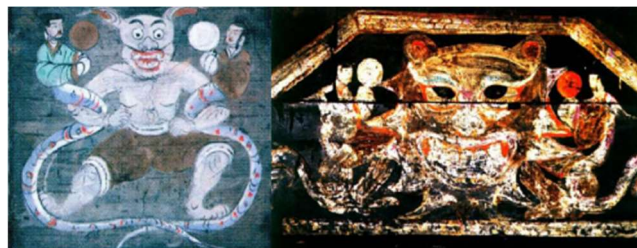


Fig. 6 Han Dynasty mural bricks unearthed in Luoyang, Xinmang Dynasty mural tomb in Luoyang Yanshi[11]



Fig. 7 Stone pillars of the Han Dynasty tomb in Yinan, Shandong; Portrait stones from the Knitting Factory Han Tomb in Nanyang, Henan; Portraits in the front chamber of Tomb M1 at Shengcun, Xiaoxian County, Anhui[1]

## 5. Conclusion

As central cosmogonic archetypes, Fuxi-Nüwa and Izanagi-Izanami exhibit structural and iconographic parallels despite lacking direct genealogical evidence. Chronological precedence of the Fuxi-Nüwa narrative and its adaptive reinterpretation in Japanese mythography suggest transcultural transmission mediated by localized aesthetics. Gestural-textual analysis reveals divergent aesthetic frameworks and ideological negotiations, while shared motifs underscore pan-East Asian mythopoetic exchanges. This study advocates non-hierarchical cultural hermeneutics to decode mythic syncretism, prioritizing contextualized interpretation over value judgments. Further interdisciplinary validation through archaeology and textual criticism remains imperative to elucidate these transcultural dynamics.

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