Document 3.1
Excerpt from Records of the Historian (Shiji, 《史记》), chapter 1, describing the Five Emperors, by Sima Qian (司马迁), written between 105 and 90 B.C.E.

Sima Qian (145–ca. 90 B.C.E.) worked as court historian during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), and compiled Records of the Historian, the first official history of China. The work of 130 chapters was based on all the documents recording Chinese traditions and legends that were available to him at the time. Sima Qian began the history of China with the legend of the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi (黄帝). Huangdi was the first of the legendary Five Emperors, said to have ruled from 2697–2597 B.C.E.

Huangdi (Yellow Emperor) was the son of Shaodian. . . .Born a genius he could speak when a baby, as a boy he was quick and smart, as a youth simple and earnest, and when grown up intelligent. . . .The princes all agreed that [he] should be the Emperor in place of Shennong [the Divine Farmer], under the title Huangdi. Those in the empire who would not submit, Huangdi pursued and chastised, and when they were subdued he left them. He made cuttings in hills, opened roads, and was never at rest. Eastward his empire extended to the sea, Ball hill, and the ancestral Mount T’ai; westward to “Hollow cave” and Cock’s-head hills; southward to the Yangtze river and Xiong and Xiang hills; while in the north he drove out the Xiongnu. He made a treaty on Kettle hill, and built on the slopes of Zhuolu [in present day Hebei Province]. He was constantly changing his residence, while his troops formed an encampment about him. He ordered his officers to be named after cloud omens. He appointed a chief and deputy superintendent over international affairs, and the various states being at peace, he worshipped the demons and spirits of the hills and streams with the feng and shan ceremonies1 in numbers. He obtained a valuable tripod, and made calculations of future events, appointing ‘Chief of the winds,’ ‘Strength-governor,’ ‘Everfirst,’ and ‘Great Swan,’ to direct the people to act in accordance with the celestial and terrestrial arrangements, the dark and bright prognostications, the disputations on life and death, the planting of the crops, plants, and trees in their seasons, and the transformations of birds, beasts, insects, and moths. He also prepared a record of the movements of the sun, moon, and stars; the flow of the tides; and the properties of clay, stones, metals, and gems. He devoted much careful attention to these things, and his observation was applied to ascertaining how fire, water, wood, and other elements could be used economically. There was an auspicious omen of the earth’s energy, and he was therefore called ‘Yellow god.’


1 Ancient rituals worshipping Heaven and Earth