The so-called "Three Augusts" and "Five Emperors" (sanhuang wudi 三皇五帝) are mythological persons of prehistoric China. The mythical "Five Emperors" or "Five Sovereigns" (wudi 五帝) were often seen as worldly, yet historically not tangible, rulers, while the Three Augusts ever had a more divine nature. The term wudi came up during the Warring States period 戰國 (5th cent.-221 BCE), while the term "Three Augusts" was created in the 3rd century BCE. This trinity was chronologically antedated to the Five Emperors during the Han period 漢 (206 BCE-220 CE).

The original meaning of huang 皇 is "great, impressive" and was used to denote a higher being (or a god) from the late Warring States period on, when the term di 帝, that originally denoted an "ancestor deity", was already used for an earthly ruler (an emperor) during the Warring States period. In southern China, tradition as reflected in the poetry collection Chuci 楚辭 knew three sacred emperors (sanhuang 三皇), namely the Celestial Emperor (Tianhuang 天皇), the Terrestrial Emperor (Dihuang 地皇), and the Grand Emperor (Taihuang 泰皇) or Human Emperor (Renhuang 人皇), but also three worldly emperors, namely that of the west (Xihuang 西皇), that of the east (Donghuang 東皇) and the Superior Emperor (Shanghuang 上皇). The terms huang and di also appear in the books Zhouli 周禮, Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋, Zhuangzi 庄子 and Guanzhi 管子, for both ruling persons and for deities.

There are five different versions of who were the Three Augusts:

- Sui Ren 燧人, Fu Xi 伏羲 (also called Pao Xi庖犧), Shen Nong 神農 (according to Shangshu dazhuan 尚書大傳). Sui Ren also stands in the mid-postion (Li hanwenjia 禮含文嘉, Chunqiu mingli xu 春秋呂烈序).
- Fu Xi 伏羲, Nü Wa 女媧, Shen Nong 神農 (Chunqiu yundou shu 春秋運斗樞)
- Fu Xi 伏羲, Zhu Rong 祝融, Shen Nong 神農 (Li haoshiji 禮號謚記). Zhu Rong also stands at the end (Xiaojing gouming jue 孝經鈎命決).
- Fu Xi 伏羲, Shen Nong 神農, Sui Ren 燧人 (Baihutong 白虎通)
- Fu Xi 伏羲, Shen Nong 神農, Huang Di 黃帝 (the Yellow Emperor). This constellation came into being during the Han period, when Shao Hao 少昊, tribal name Jintian 金天氏, was added to the Five Emperors, so that there were six. The Yellow Emperor was thereupon elevated to one of the "Augusts" (Li jimingsheng 禮稽命徵 and Huangfu Mi’s 皇甫謐 Diwang shiji 帝王世紀).

All versions include the two deities Fu Xi and Shen Nong. Because the preface (xu 序) of the Confucian Classic Shangshu 尚書 favoured the last version, with the Yellow Emperor as one of the Three Augusts, this constellation also became the commonly accepted, while the trinities mentioned in the various apocryphal classics mentioned in the above listing became obsolete. Other apocryphal classics like the Chunqiu mingli xu 春秋呂烈序, Chunqiu wei 春秋經, Sanwu jizi 三五曆記 and the Shixuepian 始學篇 do not provide names but only mention the Tianhuang, Dihuang and Renhuang. The Chunqiu wei speaks of nine Renhuang brothers that divided the earth under themselves. The
book *Shiyiji* 拾遺記 narrates the story of a gargantuan tree that one broke apart in a thunderstorm. East of the tree was a stone cave, on the wall of which one could see the picture of the Three Augusts, the Celestial August (Tianhuang, also called Tiandi 天帝 "Celestial Emperor" or Shangdi 上帝 "Superior Emperor", eventually identical to Fu Xi) with 13 (or 12) heads, the Terrestrial August (Dihuang) with 11 (or 9) heads, and the Human August (Renhuang) with 9 heads, yet all of them had the body of a snake. The heads represented brothers that lived and reigned for more than ten thousand years. Each of the Celestial and Terrestrial brothers reigned for 18,000 years. Of the Terrestrial brothers it is known that their faces had a female appearance and that they were born in Mt. Longmen 龍門山. The Human brothers rode on winged cloud chariots and divided the earth into nine provinces (jiuzhou 九州), each one of them reigning over one part. They were born in Mt. Xingma 行馬山 and ruled for 45,600 years. According to legend, the beginning of the Three Augusts age was in a year with the cyclical sign yin 寅 (a shetige 撮提格 year, when Jupiter culminates in Gemini). Instead of the Human August, the history *Shiji* 史記 speaks of the Supreme August (Taihuang) who was also in a higher position than the two others. Commentators are not sure if the character 泰 (or 太) "superior" can simply be replaced with the character 人 "man" for it might be that this constellation of the Three Augusts preferred the role of a principal deity surpassing even cosmic phenoma like Heaven and Earth and so represented the Daoist supreme unity (taiyi 太一). In some Daoist scriptures, there are three sets of trinities, namely the First Augusts (chu sanhuang 初三皇) with a human nature, the Central Augusts (zhong sanhuang 中三皇), dragons with human faces (among them Sui Ren and Chao 巢氏), and the Last Augusts (hou sanhuang 後三皇), half man, half dragon (among them Fu Xi, Nü Wa and Shen Nong). These fabulous creatures are to be found in many illustration of brick stones from the Han period. The Three Augusts were creator deities that participated in the creation of the world, either by constructing it (like Fu Xi), saving it from disaster (like Nü Wa), inventing agriculture and medicine (like Shen Nong) or taming the floods (like Gong Gong 共工), who is sometimes also counted among the Three Augusts.

The combination of a trinity and five persons was also common in historiography of the Warring States period, where the Three Kings and the Five Hegemons (san wang wu ba 三王五霸) are often mentioned. The three kings were Yu the Great 大禹 of the Xia dynasty 夏 (17th-15th cent. BCE), Tang the Perfect 成湯 of the Shang dynasty 商 (17th-11th cent. BCE), and King Wen 周文王 or King Wu 周武王 of the Zhou dynasty 周 (11th cent.-221 BCE). Similary, the three/five combination was drawn up during the same time for the mythical rulers of high antiquity. The philosopher Xunzi 荀子 is the first who mentioned five emperors, but he also names the Four Emperors (sidi 四帝) Yao 尧, Shun 舜, Yu the Great and Tang the Perfect. The military strategist Sunzi 孫子 says that the Yellow Emperor defeated the sidi(four emperors), yet in this place, the character di 帝 might be an error for jun 軍 "army". Neither the Guanzi nor the Zhuangzi list the names of the Five Emperors they mention. In fact, there were already a lot of mythological rulers or tribesleader or demi-gods mentioned in various written sources of the Zhou period. The most important of them were the following:

- persons from the West: the Yellow Emperor, Yan Di 炎帝 (also called Chi Di 赤地 "Red Emperor"), Bo Yi 伯夷, Gong Gong 共工, Gun 鯀, Yu 大禹, the Four Sacred
Mountains (*siyue 四岳*), Jī 后稷 (or Qi 荀/弃), Gāo Yú 高圉, Tai Wang 太王, Xuan Ao 玄嚣, Jiāo Ji 娬極, Chang Yì 昌意 and Qīng Yáng 青陽

- persons from the East: Tai Hao 太昊 (or Tāihào 太皞, also Zhī 堇), Zhuan Xu 颛顼, Gāo Yáng 高陽, Gāo Xīn 高辛, Yao 堯, Yi 羿, Zhuō 謁, Jiāo 濰, Jūn 俊 (better known as Shùn 舜), Xie 契, Ming 冥 and Shāng Jiā Wei 上甲微

- others: Dì Hóng 帝鴻, Jīnyún 縉雲, Jǐntiān 金天, Tào Tāng 陶唐, Bo Yì 伯翳, Feīzǐ 非子, Zhū Róng (or Zhōng Lì 重黎)

The *Zhuangzi* mentions the names of more than a dozen of demigods, the military treatise *Liutao* 六韜 fifteen, and the history *Yizhou shu* 逸周書 even 26. This multitude of various local heroes, tribal ancestors and sovereigns were reduced to five, when the cosmologic philosophy of the correlating Five Processes (*wuxing* 五行) became prevalent in China, which made it necessary to adapt the number of ancient rulers to the number five.

The following constellations are to be found in ancient literature:

- Huang Di 黃帝, Zhuan Xu 頓頊, Di Ku 帝嚳, Yao 堯 and Shùn 舜 (according to *Dà Dai Lìjì* 大戴禮記, the *Shìběn* 世本 genealogies, *Lǔshì chunqiu* and *Shìjì* 史記)
- Mí Hu 符戱 (or Mí Xī 符戲, i.e. Fúxī 伏羲), Shēn Nóng 神農, Huang Di 黃帝, Yao 堯 and Shùn 舜 (*Zhànguó zéi 戰國策*, *Yìjīng* 易經, *Zhuāngzī*, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *Sāntónglì* 三統曆)
- Tai Hao 太昊, Yan Di 炎帝, Huang Di 黃帝, Shào Hao 少昊, Zhuan Xu 頓頊 (*Lǔshì chunqiu*, *Lìjì* 禮記, *Qianfǔlùn* 潛夫論)
- (Huang Di 黃帝,) Shào Hao 少昊, Zhuan Xu 頓頊, Di Ku 帝嚳, Yao 堯 and Shùn 舜 (*Shìjìng* 世經, *Diwàng shìjì* 帝王世紀, following the *Lìjì* chapter *Yueling* 月令 and the *Shìjì*). These are six persons. Huang Di was seen as one of the Three Augusts and so made place for Shào Hao, a reorganisation of the pantheon made during the Later Han period under the influence of apocryphal speculations.
- Huang Di 黃帝, Shào Hao 少昊, Zhuan Xu 頓頊, Kū 夬 and Yao 堯 (the youngest listing, allegedly from the *Liàng shì* 梁, 502-557, preserved in the *Zizhì tongjian wàiji* 資治通鑑外紀)

Although virtually all persons of this listing are historically seen ancestral deities in patriarchal genealogies or mythical tribesleaders, the term *wudi* was during the late Warring States and the Han periods also used for impersonal deities residing in Heaven, like in the *Chuci* poems, the *Shanhaijing* 山海經, the *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋 or the chapter *Fenshàn shù* 封禪書 of the *Shìjì*. With the rise of the Five Processes thought, the Five Emperors represented a colour each, so that the Five Emperors are identified as:

- the White Emperor (Bài Dì 白帝), called Shào Hao 少昊 or Zhū Xuān 朱宣, ruling the west
- the Bluegreen Emperor (Qīng Dì 青帝 or Cāng Dì 蒼帝), called Tai Hao 太昊 or Fú Xī 伏羲, ruling the east
- the Yellow Emperor (Huang Dì 黃帝), ruling the centre
- the Red Emperor (Chì Dì 赤帝), called Yan Di 炎帝, Zhū Róng 祝融 or Shēn Nóng 神農, ruling the south
The Black Emperor (Hei Di 黑帝 or Xuan Di 玄帝), called Zhuan Xu 顓頊, ruling the north

The apocryphal classic Chunqiu wei 春秋緯 even lists the somewhat strange names of the five colour-gods, namely (in the same sequence) Baizhaoju 白招拒, Lingweiyang 靈威仰, Hanshuniu 含樞紐, Chibiaonu 赤熛怒, Zhiguangji 汁光紀.

The following list gives an overview of those of the mythical emperors that were interpreted as historical persons and to whom Chinese historiographers of the early 20th century attributed hypothetical reign dates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Mythical Emperors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tai Hao 太昊, called Fu Xi 伏羲 or Pao Xi 烏羲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan Di 炎帝, called Shen Nong 神農 or Lie Shan 烈山</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, surname Xuanyuan 軒轅氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shao Hao 少昊, surname Jintian 金天氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuan Xu 顓頊, surname Gaoyang 高陽氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Ku 帝嚳, surname Gaoxin 高辛氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Zhi 帝摯, surname Gaoxin 高辛氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao 帝堯, surname Tang 唐 or Taotang 陶唐氏, called Fang Xin 放勋</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shun 帝舜, surname Yu 處 or Youyu 有虞氏, called Chong Hua 重華</td>
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Sources:
Beiping [Beijing]: Shangwu yinshuguan. [Rev. ed. Chongqing 1947]. [For the traditional reign dates. These can also be found in other Chinese and Western dictionaries of an older date.]