

The Story of the Hare in the Moon

There's a hare in the moon.
And a toad.
And a sacred *gui* tree of immortality
that is five thousand feet tall.
And a lady named Heng'e, who is
known as the Goddess of the Moon.



Moon Goddess and Rabbit
Tang Dynasty (618-906)
White bronze; 4 3/4 in. dia.
Gift of Donald H. Graham Jr.
1996 (L35,245.78)

There is an old Chinese myth that says when Heng'e lived on earth she was married to Sheng Yi, the Divine Archer. He had something very rare and valuable that Heng'e coveted. He had obtained the peach of immortality from Xi Wangmu, Ruler of the Western Paradise. "If I had that," Heng'e thought, "I could live forever." So she stole the precious pill from her husband, and flew with it to the moon. Some say she swallowed the peach to get the power to make such a long journey.

What happened when Heng'e arrived on the moon? Many accounts say the poor lady was turned into a three-legged toad. In most illustrations we find her human image as well as the toad.

But how did the hare come to be on the moon? According to one story, Heng'e had a coughing fit, up came the peach of immortality, and from its coating emerged the hare. Another myth tells us that the hare simply came from the moon's essence. Still another says that the hare is a version of Heng'e herself. However he got there, the hare spends his time standing under the *gui* tree and grinding with a mortar and pestle the ingredients from which he will make a magical elixir of immortality.

The illustration above is from the back of a bronze mirror made in China a long time ago during the Tang Dynasty (618-906). The metal on the other side was highly polished. In ancient China, mirrors were thought to have magical powers to protect their owners from harm. When evil spirits came near, they would see themselves reflected in the mirror and become so frightened of their own image, they would run away.