

Four ways in

Where to start, depending on why you picked the book up — with Werner’s own chapter numbers, so it works with any edition of the 1922 text.

If the book looks intimidating

Start with **The Eight Immortals**. Ten short, self-contained, largely comic sections about a company of travelling drunks with magical objects. Then **Myths of Fire**, which is a thousand words and shows the whole structure of the pantheon in miniature: one ministry, one President, five subordinates, done.

If you want the best single thing here

Myths of the Stars, for the legend of Shên I, the Divine Archer — ten suns rising at once, nine of them shot down, a drug of immortality stolen by his wife, and a wife who is still on the moon. He appears thirty-nine times in this volume, more than any other figure in it, and the cycle is the closest thing in the book to a Greek hero-sequence.

If you want to see how the system works

Read the introduction’s note on the gods as a civil service, then **Myths of Thunder**, **Myths of the Waters** and **Myths of Epidemics** in that order, with the Register of the Ministries open at the back. Three ministries, three hierarchies, one shape — and by the end the pantheon is navigable rather than crowded.

If you are reading for the ideas rather than the stories

Read the introduction’s sections on the civil service and on the three religions, then **Cosmogony** for the philosophy underneath everything, then **A Battle of the Gods**, which is the same cosmology with the argument taken out and the spectacle left in. Between them they bracket the range of what this volume contains.

The eight chapters, and how long each is

III · Cosmogony — P’an Ku and the Creation Myth

4,534 words · 18 sections

V · Myths of the Stars

6,151 words · 23 sections

VI · Myths of Thunder, Lightning, Wind, and Rain

2,721 words · 12 sections

VII · Myths of the Waters

7,821 words · 30 sections

VIII · Myths of Fire

1,061 words · 6 sections

IX · Myths of Epidemics, Medicine, Exorcism

2,949 words · 12 sections

XI · The Eight Immortals

4,776 words · 10 sections

XIII · A Battle of the Gods

1,197 words · 10 sections