

The origins of **Zhenwu** can be traced to the Warring States (3rd Century B.C.) and the Han Dynasty (206 B.C to 220 A.D.). He was originally known as Xuanwu (Dark Warrior). He was the ancient symbol of the north represented by a tortoise entwined with a snake.

Xuanwu was transformed into the Taoist deity known as the Perfected Warrior in the early part of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1126). Imperial recognition of this transformation occurred during the reign of Song Zhenzong (r.998-1022). His name was changed from Xuanwu to Zhenwu at this time. There was a miraculous appearance of a tortoise and a snake in 1017 and so Zhenzong built the first temple dedicated to Zhenwu in Bianliang, present day Kaifeng in Henan Province, the capitol of the Northern Song Dynasty.

Zhenwu was closely associated with healing. In 1018 under the reign of emperor Zhenzong, Zhenwu was given the title Perfected Warrior Numinous Response Perfected Lord. In 1108, Zhenwu was given the title Marshall Yousheng and began to be associated with a group of Taoist celestial marshals known as Sisheng (Four Saints). They were spirit guardians of the Taoist faith. During the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368), after 1304, he became known as Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven, Primal Sage, and Benevolent Majesty, and Zhenwu became associated with Wudangshan and more closely with the Imperial family.

It was during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that Zhenwu reached his greatest popularity. The third Ming emperor, Zhu Di (r. 1403-24) was personally devoted to Zhenwu, who was now seen as the 82nd reincarnation of Laozi. In 1412 the emperor embarked on a massive building project on Wudangshan, culminating in the Purple Forbidden City on top. During the Yongle reign, Wudangshan was renamed Taihe Shan (mountain of supreme harmony) and took precedence over the Five Sacred Peaks. Several times during this historical period, miraculous sightings of Zhenwu on Wudangshan were recorded in the Taoist Canon and on a hand scroll now owned by the Baiyun Guan (White Cloud Monastery) in Beijing.