

UNIT 2 TOPIC 1 CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

Pre-knowledge

Before class, students should read Unit 2 Topic 1 and watch some videos on Chinese myths and legends to understand their origins and influence on the lives of the Chinese and areas such as philosophy, literature and the arts.

Aim and Objectives

Topic 1 aims to provide students with some knowledge of Chinese myths and legends, and the roles they have played in Chinese history. They will learn that myths and legends are a very important part of Chinese culture and that most myths and legends can be traced back to few thousand years ago. It will also equip them with some knowledge of how different these Chinese myths and legends are from those in the West and their impact on the Chinese.

Teaching and Learning Activities

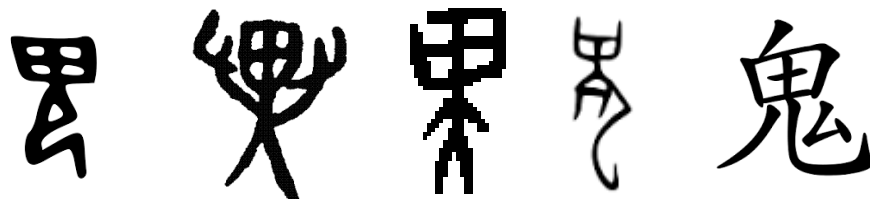
Activity 1

Show your class the images below to demonstrate the origin of Chinese myths and legends. These images show the words 神 (God) and 鬼 (Ghost) from their earliest form in the Oracle Bone Script to their current form.

神:



鬼:



Activity 2

Watch the video clip *Shan Hai Jing (The Classic of Mountains and Seas)*, a lecture by Ding Zhenzong, on YouTube. Have a class discussion on what the book is about and its significance in Chinese history.

Activity 3

Watch one or two episodes of the television series *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* produced by Hunan TV, China. Divide your class into groups of three or four. Have each group prepare an oral presentation on the main plot of the episode and how it is related to *Classic of Mountains and Seas* the book.

Activity 4

Ask your students to research online other myths and legends from China. Have each student prepare a summary of his/her findings and present it to the class.

Activity 5

Find and show your class an image of Shang Di or Huangtian Dadi. Explain the Chinese concept of God and compare it with the Western concept of God.

Activity 6

Guide your students to research online Chinese gods and goddesses. Have a class discussion on the main gods and goddesses in China and their impact on the Chinese.

Activity 7

Download and print out several articles on dragons from the Internet for your class. You may look at these titles: *Differences between A Chinese Dragon and A Western Dragon*, *Eastern Dragons Differ from Western Dragons*, *Chinese Dragon vs Western Dragon* and *Dragons Across Cultures*. Have a class discussion on these different dragons.

Activity 8

As a follow-up to Activity 7, ask your students to prepare a PowerPoint presentation on what they know about a Chinese dragon and the differences in its characteristics from a Western dragon.

Activity 9

Organise a visit to a Chinese museum during the Mid-Autumn Festival. Ask your students to look at the exhibits and information guide carefully and take notes in order to prepare an oral presentation on the festival.

Activity 10

Ask your students to research online a few key festivals in China. Have each student prepare a presentation with a brief introduction on each festival.

Activity 11

Have your students do Exercise 1 of the Workbook according to your teaching needs and progress.

Resources/Materials

Apart from those listed in the activities, you may also consult these resources/materials:

1. Birrell, A. M. (1999), *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press.
2. Goh, Pe Kii (2001), *Origins of Chinese Festivals*. Singapore: Asiapac Books.
3. Kwok, Man-ho & O'Brien, J. (trans. 1990), *The Eight Immortals of Taoism: Legends and Fables of Popular Taoism*. New York: Penguin.

4. Maspero, H. (1981), *Taoism and Chinese Religion*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts.
5. Palmer, M. (1995), *Kuan Yin: Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*. London: HarperCollins.
6. Palmer, M. & Zhao, Xiaomin (1997), *Essential Chinese Mythology: Stories That Change the World*. London: George Harrap.
7. Shepard, A. (2008), *The Monkey King: A Superhero Tale of China*, Retold from The Journey to the West. Skyhook Press.
8. Stepanchuk, C. & Wong, C. (1991), *Mooncakes and Hungry Ghosts: Festivals of China*. San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals.
9. Walters, D. (1992), *Chinese Mythology: An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend*. London: HarperCollins.
10. Werner, E. (1986), *Ancient Tales and Folklore of China*. London: George Harrap.

Assessment

1. Collect the notes taken by your students during all group and class discussions.
2. Prepare some questions and assess your students when they answer them verbally.
3. Each student is required to write a review on one book on Chinese myths and legends.
4. Students are required to prepare a PowerPoint presentation to show their understanding of Chinese myths and legends, and various gods in these myths and legends.
5. Each student is required to write a 600-word report on the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western myths and legends.

Workbook Answer Key

1. Watch video clips relating to Chinese mythology on YouTube. Write down what you have learnt about one of the myths from the video clips.

Suggested video: *Chinese Mythology Part 1*

Published by PeachyLioness on 28 August, 2011

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdpNHeA15Jg>

The six stories feature Pan Gu, Nü Wa, Fu Xi, Gong Gong, Da Yu and Hou Yi.

Students should include these points:

- Pan Gu: Created the world
- Nü Wa: Created human beings
- Fu Xi: Taught people survival skills
- Gong Gong (God of Water): His fight with Zhu Rong (God of Fire)
- Da Yu: Tamed the floods
- Hou Yi: Shot down nine suns from the sky

2. Group Discussion

What are the features of Chinese myths? In a group of three or four, choose a Chinese myth and write down your thoughts on it.

Students should consider these points:

- Chinese myths contain historical facts mixed with unverifiable stories, often involving supernatural elements. Records of prehistoric China are often interwoven with myths and legends.
- In Chinese myths, non-human characters such as deities, ghosts, foxes and spirits are endowed with human qualities and emotions.

3. Read the article *Ancient Chinese Mythology* (www.crystalinks.com/chinamythology). Write down some key points for a class discussion.

The article provides a brief history of Chinese mythology through different dynasties and many gods and goddesses are mentioned, such as the God of Moats and Walls (城隍), the God of Fire (祝融), Guan Di (关帝), Guan Yin (观音) and the God of Thunder (雷公).

Key points: how these gods and goddesses were created and why

4. What is the Chinese concept of a myth and legend? Write down the key functions and features of Chinese myths and legends.

Students should come up with their own ideas about the Chinese concept of myths and legends.

Refer to Question 2 for the features of Chinese myths and legends.

Students should consider these points:

- Chinese myths and legends provide an account of natural or historical events in China. Like myths from other cultures, Chinese myths have been believed to be a historical record of events that happened in China, and include those related to the origins of the Chinese culture and the founding of the Chinese state.
- Chinese myths and legends provide an explanation of how beliefs or social customs were shaped in China. For example, the customs of lighting firecrackers and wearing red clothes during the Chinese New Year have their origins in the story of Nian, a beast which wreaked havoc in a Chinese village once a year at the beginning of the Chinese New Year and was said to fear loud noises and the colour red.

5. Introduce two or three main books that depict Chinese myths and legends.

Students may include these books:

- *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海经): A Chinese classic text and a compilation of early geography and myths; versions of the text have existed since the 4th century BC; it reached its final form by early Han Dynasty; largely a fabled geographical and cultural account of pre-Qin China, describing over 550 mountains and 300 channels; about 31,000 words in 18 sections.
- *Wuzang Shanjing* (五藏山经): Oldest part of *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and is referred to separately; exact author(s) and time written are still undetermined.
- *Journey to the West* (西游记): A story of the pilgrimage of Tang Dynasty monk Xuan Zang to India to obtain Buddhist religious texts; during the pilgrimage, Xuan Zang and his three disciples encounter ghosts, monsters and demons, and have to fight them off.

6. Internet Search

You have learnt about some deities in Chinese mythology. Surf the Internet to identify three more and write down some key features of these deities.

Students may consider these deities:

1. Chinese Phoenix (凤凰)

- It is the mythical king of all birds, believed to be a messenger of happiness. It has the head of a peacock, body of a swan and wings of a golden cockerel. It is different from the phoenix in the Western world that rises from the ashes symbolising rebirth.
- It appears on historical objects dating back thousands of years, suggesting that its origin could have been at the very beginning of the Chinese culture. It was once believed to only appear during times of peace and prosperity and rare treasures would be found where it stopped to rest.
- The Chinese name of the phoenix, *feng huang*, refers to both a male bird (*feng*) and a female bird (*huang*). It is thus a symbol of the union between femininity and masculinity, or *Yin* and *Yang*.
- It is often depicted together with a dragon, the symbol for masculinity and the emperor. Together, they symbolise the emperor and empress, or more commonly, a husband and his wife. In this eternal union, the phoenix represents female virtues such as charm and beauty. Wedding dresses worn by Chinese brides are thus often decorated with an image of the phoenix.

2. Wenchang Di (文昌帝)

- Wenchang is the principal deity of literature. He is believed to have been born during the Tang Dynasty and has a constellation named after him. In Chinese art, he is depicted as a dignified court official, sometimes seated.
- As the God of Literature, Wenchang Di is often worshipped by people due to sit for the imperial examinations.

3. Lei Zu (嫫祖), Goddess of Silk

- Lei Zu was a legendary Chinese queen. According to traditions, she discovered silk and invented silk in the 28th century BC.
- In one story, Lei Zu discovered silkworms while on a walk near the emperor's mulberry trees.
- In another, she found silkworms eating mulberry leaves and spinning cocoons. She collected some cocoons and sat down to have tea. While sipping tea, she dropped a cocoon into the steaming water. A fine thread started to separate itself from the cocoon. Lei Zu found that she could unwind this soft and lovely thread around her finger. She then asked her husband to give her a grove of mulberry trees so that she could keep the worms that made these cocoons.
- Lei Zu is credited with inventing the silk reel, which joins thin silk threads into a thicker thread strong enough for weaving. She is also credited with inventing the first silk loom. It is not known how much of this story is true, but historians do know that silk was first made in China. Lei Zu shared what she found out with others and the knowledge became common.

7. Look at the image below. Write down your first impression. What myth or legend is it related to? How important is this creature to the life of the Chinese?

Students should consider these points:

- The importance of the dragon in the lives of the Chinese
- The Chinese consider themselves descendants of the dragon

- The dragon is a symbol of magic power and appear in different forms of Chinese, such as paintings, paper cutting and scriptures
8. Draw a Western dragon in the box below. Compare the similarities and differences between a Western dragon and a Chinese dragon.

Students should consider these points:

	Similarities	Differences
China	Mysterious creature	Symbol of good luck
Western	Magic power	Symbol of evil

Note: All URLs listed herein were ascertained to be accessible 8 September, 2020.