

UNIT 2 TOPIC 2 DEITIES IN CHINESE MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Pre-knowledge

Before class, students should read Unit 2 Topic 2 and discuss some general questions related to Chinese myths, legends and gods. They may draw on their own experience.

Aim and Objectives

Topic 2 aims to provide students with some knowledge of Chinese myths, legends and gods. It will also equip them with some knowledge of the significance of these myths, legends and gods to the Chinese society. One such legend they will learn about is the dragon.

Teaching and Learning Activities

Activity 1

Show your students the image of a poster featuring the Kitchen God below. Have a class discussion on what is presented in the poster.



Edward Theodore Chalmers Werner, commons.wikimedia.org

Activity 2

Have your students visit the website <http://chineseculture.about.com>. Show them two different fables, one Chinese and one Western. Have them work in groups of five to compare the similarities and differences between the two fables. Each group will then present their findings to the class.

You may share these stories with your class:

1. Cheap Tricks Never Last – The Donkey of Guizhou (黔驴技穷)

- Thousands of years ago, donkeys were not found in Guizhou Province. Meddlers shipped one into this area.
- One day, a tiger was looking for his prey when he saw the huge strange animal which frightened him. He studied the donkey from behind some bushes and approached it to have a closer look when it seemed like he was harmless. "Haw-hee," the donkey made a loud noise which sent the tiger running away as fast as he could. Humiliated, the tiger decided to return to have a second look at the strange thing.
- When the tiger got too close to him the second time, the donkey was enraged and started kicking him with his hooves. After several rounds, it became clear to the tiger that that was all the donkey could do. So, the tiger pounced on him and cut his throat.
- This story speaks of someone who has limited skills.

2. Aesop fable: The Lion and the Bull

- A lion wants to capture and eat a bull. He is afraid of attacking the bull as he is much bigger than him. He resorts to a trick to ensure he can destroy the bull.
- He approaches the bull and say, "I have slain a fine sheep, my friend, and if you will come home and partake of him with me, I shall be delighted to have your company." The lion is planning to attack the bull as he lies reclined eating the sheep.
- As he approaches the lion's den, the bull notices the huge spits and giant cauldrons, but no sign of the sheep. Without saying a word, he quietly leaves. The lion asks why he has left so abruptly, without bidding his host goodbye as he has not given his guest any cause for offence.
- The bull says, "I have reasons enough. I see no indication of your having slaughtered a sheep, while I do see very plainly every preparation for your dining on a bull."

Activity 3

Have your students read a Chinese fable and then retell the story by drawing a series of cartoons.

Students may choose this fable:

- The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains
 - The Taihang and Wangwu Mountains were 700 *li* in diameter and 100,000 feet tall. They originally laid south of Jizhou and north of Heyang.
 - The Foolish Old Man of the North Mountain, nearly 90 years old, lived behind these mountains. Unhappy that the mountains blocked his way to the south, causing him to have to walk round them whenever he went out or came back, he gathered the whole family to discuss the matter. He said to them, "What would you say, if I suggest that all of us work hard to level the two mountains, so as to open a way to places south of Yu Prefecture and the Han River?" Many agreed to his idea.
 - His wife had doubts. "With your strength," she said, "you can hardly remove a small hill like Kuifu. What can you do with Taihang and Wangwu? Besides, where shall you deposit the earth and rocks?"
 - "Carry them to the shores of the Bohai Sea and north of Yintu," said several people.
 - The old man, helped by his son and grandson who could carry things, began to break rocks and dig earth, which they carried in baskets and dustbins to the shores of the Bohai Sea. One trip to the sea took them a long time as they left in winter and came back in summer.
 - The Wise Old Man at the River Bend stopped the old man. "How unwise you are! At your age, old and feeble as you are, you cannot even remove one hair on the mountain, let alone so much earth and so many rocks!"
 - The Foolish Old Man of the North Mountain heaved a long sigh and said, "You are so conceited that you are blind to reason. Even a widow and a child know better than you. When I die, there will be my sons, who will have their sons and grandsons. Those grandsons will have their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. But the mountains

will not grow. Why is it impossible to level them?" The Wise Old Man at the River Bend could not answer him.

- The Old Man's words were heard by a god with snakes in his hands. He was afraid that the old man would really level the two mountains and reported it to the Heavenly God. Moved by the old man's determination, the Heavenly God ordered the two sons of Kua'e shi to carry the two mountains on their backs and put one east of Shuo and the other south of Yong. After this, there were no more mountains between Jizhou and the Han River.

Activity 4

There are many gods in Chinese mythology. Have your students work in groups of three or four to research online stories about the God of Thunder, the God of Moon, the God of Mountains and the God of Rain. Each group will then present their findings to the class.

Activity 5

Many Chinese believe in the existence of ghosts. Have your students prepare some notes for a debate on the topic of whether we should believe ghosts exist in our world.

Activity 6

Have your students research online the concepts of ghosts in the East and in the West. Have them compare the similarities and differences. Then have a class discussion on this topic.

Activity 7

Have your students do Exercise 2 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. Li, Xia (2007), *50 Topics on Chinese Culture*. Foreign Languages Press
2. Popcorn Idea Factory (2008), *Essentially Chinese: Chinese Stuff* (English edition). 五洲传播出版社.

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 a book on Chinese myths and legends that he has read.
4. Students are required to prepare a PowerPoint presentation to show their understanding of Chinese myths and legends, and various gods.

Workbook Answer Key

1. Internet Search + Class Discussion
What is a god? As a class, discuss and then write down the similarities and differences between the gods in Chinese culture and those in Western cultures in the table below.

A god is a supernatural being worshipped as the controller of some part of the universe or some aspect of life in the world.

Similarities	Differences
In China, a god is a superpower; in the Western world, a god controls the universe.	In China, a god comes from among ordinary people; in the Western world, a god is from the heavens and can perform miracles.

- Visit a Chinese shop or restaurant and find out if any Chinese god is worshipped there. Write down the name of this god and some of its features.

Students may find the God of Wealth Guan Di (关帝) being worshipped in some shops. They should consider these points:

- The Saintly Emperor Guan refers to the renowned general Guan Yu (关羽) from the Three Kingdoms Period.
 - Guan Yu's deeds and influence were glorified from the Song Dynasty onwards. It could be due to the popularity of the book *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.
 - Guan Yu's loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness are deeply rooted in the hearts of people.
 - The Ming Dynasty emperor Shenzong bestowed Guan Yu with several titles and even designated martyred ministers Lu Xiufu and Zhang Shijie as his prime ministers, Yue Fei as his Supreme Commander, and Yuchi Gong as his Garen (protective deity).
 - Guan Yu is also referred to as the Martial Saint, just as Confucius is known as the Literary Saint.
 - Guan Yu is said to possess all-round powers and is able to guide people's destiny, help people pass imperial examinations, heal sicknesses, cast away evil spirits and ward off ill fortunes, punish the rebellious, patrol the nether regions, bring in wealth and treasure, and protect businessmen. People from all walks of life thus worship him, making him a widely popular deity.
- Watch the video clip *9 Most Powerful Gods in Chinese Mythology* on YouTube. Write down the gods the Chinese believe in and the reasons why.

Guan Yin (观音), Yu Huang Da Di (玉皇大帝, Jade Emperor), Wang Mu Niang Niang (王母娘娘, wife of the Jade Emperor), Yan Wang (阎王, King of Hell), Long Wang (龙王, Dragon King), Ne Zha (哪吒, a prince from heaven), Pan Gu (盘古), Nü Wa (女娲), Sun Wukong (孙悟空, Monkey King)

Reasons for choosing these gods:

- Creating the world and human beings: Pan Gu, Nü Wa
 - Looking after Heaven and Hell, where life after death takes place: Yu Di, Wang Mu Niang Niang, Yan Wang
 - Controlling nature and fate of human beings: Long Wang, Guan Yin
 - Showing human spirit: Ne Zha, Sun Wukong
- What have you learnt from the story *Kua Fu Chases the Sun*? Compare this story with a similar one from the West and write down the differences.

Students may choose Prometheus (普罗米修斯). They should consider these points:

- In Greek religion, Prometheus is one of the Titans, the supreme trickster and a god of fire. His intellect is emphasised by the meaning of his name, Forethinker. In common belief, he was a master craftsman and associated with fire and the creation of mortals.
- Kua Fu and Prometheus both created fire for mankind and brought brightness and warmth to earth.
- Kua Fu tried to create fire for human beings by chasing the sun and Prometheus tried to steal fire for human beings.

5. Who was Nü Wa? Why did she need to mend the sky and how did she do it? Why do you think she was created as a goddess?

Students should consider these points:

- Nü Wa is the goddess who created mankind and repaired the sky.
- There was once when the four corners of the sky collapsed and the world with its nine regions split open. The sky could not cover all the things under it and the earth could not carry all the things on it. The world was savaged by calamities and mankind suffered greatly.
- Not willing to see the human beings she created perish, Nü Wa melted stones of five colours to mend the cracks in the sky with. She supported the four corners of the sky with the legs she cut off from a giant turtle.
- With the sky mended, all the calamities stopped and mankind lived peacefully on earth once again.
- She was created as a goddess because she was from a matriarchal society and it was a female who gave birth to the human race.

6. Who was Pan Gu? Explain briefly how he created the world. Compare this story with a similar one from the West and write down the differences.

Students should consider these points:

- Pan Gu is claimed to be the first sentient being and creator of Heaven and Earth. In the beginning there was nothing but chaos in the universe. Heaven and Earth were contained in a cosmic egg. For about 18,000 years, the *Yin* and *Yang* elements in the egg became balanced, creating the conditions for Pan Gu to emerge from it. Cracking the egg, he began to push it apart, splitting the *Yin* and *Yang* elements in the process. The upper half of the shell became the sky and the lower half the earth. Using his hands to support the upper half, he held the two halves apart. They grew thicker and he became taller. This pushed the sky and earth further apart. After another 18,000 years, Pan Gu died and his body became the parts of the earth while the parasites on his body became human beings.
- From the West, the Bible says God is the creator of the world. In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. And God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning.

7. Internet Search + Pair Work

Find out the story behind the creation of the Chinese dragon and a few things that are associated with it. Why do the Chinese call themselves descendants of the dragon?

Students should consider these points:

- Fu Xi, China's first emperor, was said to have a dragon's tail; Shen Nong, Fu Xi's successor, was said to have a dragon as his father.

- The Dragon has been associated with agriculture and China entered a farming culture 5,000 years ago.
- The dragon is a combination of different totems which reflected different meanings in ancient China.

8. Pair Work

Who are the people worshipped as the gods of wealth? Why are they worshipped as the gods of wealth? With a partner, write down how important the god of wealth is in Chinese culture.

Students should consider these points:

- People worship the God of Wealth because of their wish to be rich.
- There are different types of Gods of Wealth:
 - The Civil Gods of Wealth usually refer to Bi Gan (比干), who represents justice, and Fan Li (范蠡). They are portrayed as civilian officials and represent good business management.
 - The Martial Gods of Wealth are represented by Zhao Gongming (赵公明), who signifies the power to protect one's fortune, and Guan Yu (关羽), who signifies honesty.

9. Why do the Chinese worship the god of the kitchen? What are his responsibilities? Which Chinese festival is associated with him and what kinds of sacrifices do the Chinese make to him?

Students should consider these points:

- People worship the God of Kitchen because his duty is to supervise people's behaviour and give reports to the Jade Emperor each year.
- On the eve of Chinese New Year, people make sacrifices to the God of Kitchen.

10. Internet Search + Pair Work

With a partner, find and watch a video clip on Buddhism on YouTube or any other video sharing website. When was Buddhism introduced to China and how important is it to the Chinese? Why do they worship Guan Yin? Who are the other gods being worshipped in Buddhism?

Suggested video 1: *CCTV: Buddhism in China*

Published by Chieu Luu on 26 November, 2012

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7c4OHe202hA>

Suggested video 2: *Buddhism Taoism and Confucianism in China*

Published by Eduardo Tejada on 8 April, 2011

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gZY4i4Kg3s>

Suggested video 3: *The three teachings – Taoism, Buddhism Confucianism | History of China*

Published by It's History on 1 August, 2015

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvfOMhx3cj8>

Suggested video 4: *Legend of Guan Shi Yin Avalokiteshvara* 南无观音菩萨

Published by Benjamin Tan on 23 June, 2013

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuBc6zBtCLs>

Students should consider these points:

- Buddhism was introduced in the Han Dynasty and became well-developed in the Wei, Jin and Tang Dynasties.
- Importance of Buddhism in the lives of the Chinese: It provides a religious belief which helps relieve people from suffering; It provides people with a spiritual life.
- Millions of devotees around the world call on the name of Guan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, in times of need, fear or despair; She will rescue devotees from harm.
- She is also Avalokiteshvara and is similar to Green Tara, another manifestation of Compassionate Action in Vajrayana Buddhism.
- Other gods: Bodhidharma (菩提达摩), Maitreya Buddha (弥勒佛)

11. What are the two types of door gods? What are the similarities and differences between these two types of door gods?

Students should consider these points:

- Two types of door gods: martial door gods and literary door gods.
- Martial door gods are usually generals, men of loyalty and great fighters, characterised by their trustworthiness, strength, loyalty, fierce looks and impressive weaponry.
- Literary door gods provide balance to the settings in a house, enabling visitors to the house to feel at ease with their new surroundings.

12. Internet Search

Why and how do the Chinese worship Ma Zu? How is she associated with Daoism?

Students should consider these points:

- The Chinese worship Ma Zu because she is the goddess who has been protecting Chinese coasts since the Song Dynasty.
- At 16, Ma Zu was given a bronze talisman by a Daoist immortal and she used it to perform a lot of miracles. At 28, she ascended Meifeng Peak, where she became a Daoist deity.
- During the Yuan Dynasty, along with the development of marine trade, people in the northern provinces of China also began to worship Ma Zu for safe sailing.
- After the Ming and Qing Dynasties, private navigational trade brought the worship of Ma Zu to Southeast Asia. Ma Zu became the goddess of protection for the Chinese all around the world.
- There are an estimated 300 million Ma Zu devotees and 100,000 Ma Zu temples globally today.

13. Internet Search

Find and watch a video clip on the god of land on YouTube or any other video sharing website. Why is the god of land so important to the Chinese? How do they worship him? What impression did you get looking at the image of the god of land?

Suggested video: 土地公 *God of Place, Identity, and Legends*

Published by James Morris on 22 January, 2016

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjnZrZ4KNuo>

Students should consider these points:

- The worship of the God of Land stems from the worship of land in ancient times. Land was held in high esteem in the ancient agricultural society of China because it produced food and clothing.
- At that time, earth was piled up and respected as a god, to whom offerings were given and homage was paid. The Chinese character 土 (earth, land) is shaped like a pile of earth on the ground. The God of Land protects the land and community, and brings good fortune to the people.

- People built shrines for the God of Land. On the last day of the Chinese New Year every year, people hold parades and set off fireworks to celebrate and also burn incense paper and make food offerings to the God of Land.

14. Internet Search + Pair Work

With a partner, find out the story of Da Yu Zhi Shui (大禹治水, Dà Yǔ Zhì Shuǐ). Write down the key points of the story and then retell the story to your classmates.

Students should consider these points:

- A great flood ran wild all over China in ancient times. All efforts at stopping the flood failed. Yu the Great used his great wisdom and worked hard day and night without a break for years. He eventually won the battle against the flood and became the Emperor of China.
- In prehistoric times, torrential floods from the Yellow River occurred frequently and the people suffered a great deal. The situation worsened while Shun (舜) was the leader. With Shun's orders, Gun (鯀), Yu's father, found a way to tame the floods, by building embankments with soil to block the raging waters.
- This method no longer worked well nine years later. Powerful floodwater breached the dikes and brought disaster to the people again.
- Yu was then ordered to succeed his father to continue the work of taming the floods. Drawing from his father's experiences, he figured out a way of digging channels to direct the floodwater into the sea. After 13 years of fighting against the floods, he finally brought them under control.
- Thereafter, Yu organised the people to rebuild their homes and develop agriculture by fully utilising water and soil. He and his son taught them how to dig ditches to channel water into the crop lands. Their lives improved greatly.
- Just four days after his marriage, Yu left home to travel to regions severely destroyed by the floods. Over 13 years, he had travelled all over China to battle this natural disaster. Despite passing by his house three times and having his son born during his absence, he never stepped into his house. This is what makes him a legend to the Chinese.

15. Internet Search + Pair Work

With a partner, choose one of the deities in Chinese myths and legends that you have learnt about. Find out more about him/her and then make a PowerPoint presentation to your classmates. You may include interesting facts about him/her.

Assess points as presented by your students.

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