



## Learning About Chinese Culture through Local Myths

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Target Age Group: Elementary School

### Part I

**With a 5,000 year old culture, China has hundreds, maybe thousands of stories. How the world, solar system and people were created are just a few of these myths, but also fables teach morals, values and strategies. It is interesting to learn how myths and fables from China explain phenomenon and ethics and teach about the culture as well. An annotated bibliography of books and websites is included in order to help facilitate teaching this unit.**

#### **Panku Creates the World**

*This is a summary of the Chinese myth, Panku Creates the World. If you'd like different and/or longer versions, please go to the annotated bibliography of books and websites at the end of this document. This myth is similar to many creation myths worldwide, in which the world is formed from the body of a primal being.*

In the beginning there was darkness everywhere. Within the darkness there was an egg, and inside the egg slept Pangu, a spirit-god. For many years, safely inside the egg, Pangu slept and grew. When Pangu had grown to a gigantic size he stretched his huge arms and legs and broke the egg. The lighter parts of the eggshell floated upwards to make the heavens and the heavier parts sank downwards, to become the earth. Pangu saw what had happened and he was happy, but he was afraid that heaven and earth might push together again, so he placed himself between them, his head held up the sky and his feet were on the earth. Pangu started to grow again, ten feet every day for 18,000 years. This made the distance between heaven and earth further apart, until they were about 30,000 miles apart. Pangu continued to hold up the sky for hundreds of years. Pangu finally became very old and tired and could no longer hold up the sky, but by then the sky and earth did not want to be held together anymore.

Pangu fell on the earth and his huge body covered the earth like a carpet. His skin formed rich soil. His sweat sprinkled drops of rain and dew on the soft earth. The tangled hair on his head and beard became branches of trees and bushes. The hair on his arms turned into tiny leaves, vines and beautiful flowers. His teeth and bones turned into shiny metals like gold, silver, and copper down into the earth. The insides of his bones turned into lovely jade in colors of lavender, green, and white. His blood turned into rivers and lakes. Pangu's voice made the sounds of rolling thunder and bright lightning. His eyes became the sun and moon. His breath turned into blowing winds and fluffy clouds. Some people say he is still responsible for the weather, which changes according to his moods.

When Pangu's work was finally done he had made a pristine world that sparkled with bright blues, beautiful greens, deep browns, and pure waters.

#### **Questions about the story:**

1. *Why would an egg be a good symbol for the beginning of the world?*

Many creatures start as an egg and it is a symbol of life. An egg is rounded like the world and has all the nutrients to sustain life inside.

2. *Why was Pangu worried when he saw the earth and sky?*  
Pangu wanted to keep the earth and sky separate and orderly.
3. *Why do you think Pangu was happy when he was finished?*  
Even though Pangu had a difficult life, he accomplished something very worthwhile.

### **ADDITIONAL STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

1. Have students write or tell their own myths about how earth may have been created.
2. Use the attached annotated bibliography and have students use many of these books to compare stories.
3. Use Venn Diagrams to compare the many versions of Pangu Creates the World.
4. Go to websites showing other cultures' creation myths and make comparisons. One example is to compare the Native American Indian creation myths at the following website: <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/19/creation.htm> for other cultural myths see Greek and Celtic Myths at <http://www.livingmyths.com/index.htm>
5. Use Venn Diagrams to do comparisons between other cultures' ideas of creation.
6. For younger children the following is a very short story of *Pangu Creates the World*. It is read by a child and could be used as a brief introduction. Click on the link at the bottom of the page: <http://www.thejaderoad.com/creationlegend.html>

### **The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains**

*This is a summary of the Chinese fable; The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains. If you'd like different and/or longer versions, please go to the annotated bibliography of books and websites at the end of this document.*

The Foolish Old Man of the North Mountain who was 90 years old lived near the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains. These mountains were a hundred thousand feet high. He was always unhappy that the mountains blocked his way to the south and he had to walk round them whenever he went out or came back. He called the whole family together to talk about the problem. "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?" he asked his family. Many people in the family agreed with his idea.

His wife wasn't so sure about this idea. "With your strength," she said, "you could hardly remove a small hill. What could you do with the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains? Besides that, where could you put all the earth and rocks?" "We could carry them to the shores of the Bohai Sea and north of Yintu," said several people in the family.

The old man, helped by his son and grandson who could carry things, began to break rocks and dig earth. The seven-year-old son neighbor boy even came running up to offer his help. They carried the rocks and dirt to the shores of the Bohai Sea. Just one trip to the sea took them a very long time; they would leave in winter and come back in summer.

There was a Wise Old Man at the River Bend who stopped the old man. He laughed and said, "How foolish you are! You are old and feeble. You will never be able to move this mountain!"

"You're wrong," Foolish Old Man says with a sigh. "Look, my sons can continue my work after my death. When my sons die, my grandchildren will continue. So generations after generations will continue to

work so there's no end and the mountains can't grow higher. Now you see we have enough power and ability to change the position of the two mountains. As long as we have confidence and power, nobody and nothing can change our mind. Do you still say I can't move them away?"

In the Mountains there lived a Spirit. When the Mountain Spirit heard what the Foolish Old Man was planning to do he was afraid that the Foolish Old Man's family would ruin his mountain. The Mountain Spirit rushed to the palace of the god and said: "My Master, there's an old man digging my mountain." The god laughed and said, "Is that the only reason that you are so afraid?" The Mountain Spirit said, "But the old man leads their family to do this work. I'm afraid that after several hundred years, my mountain will disappear." The god said, "But the Taihang Mountain and the Wangwu Mountain also make great trouble to them." The Mountain Spirit said, "The Old Man and his family are very resourceful and hard working. If they continue, they will destroy my mountain."

After thinking, the god makes a decision. "I will order the two sons of Kua'ershi to carry the two mountains on their backs and put one east of Shuo and the other south of Yong. Then your mountains will be safe and the humans will also be happy."

That night the dark sky thundered and the wind roared. None of the people could go out of their house. When they woke up the next morning, they found that the two huge mountains disappeared. After this, there were no more mountains between Jizhou and the Han River.

## **STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

### **Questions about the story:**

1. What are the reasons of the Mountain Spirit and the Foolish Old Man in wanting their way?
2. How did the Foolish Old Man's perseverance get him what he needed?
3. What are some examples of perseverance that you have done? Explain.
4. What types of good character traits does the Foolish Old Man have? The Mountain Spirit? The family?
5. What makes the Mountain Spirit think that the Foolish Old Man will succeed in his goal?
6. How do mountains move today?

### **Geography Skills – Use a detailed map of China or use the internet to find:**

1. The Han River
2. Taihang Mountain
3. Wangwu Mountain
4. Bohai Sea
5. Jizhou
6. Determine if this story is geographically realistic
7. For younger children find maps and more activities at <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/asia/china/>

### **Language Arts and Social Studies**

1. Use the attached annotated bibliography and have students use many of these books to compare stories of this title.

## **The Magic Paintbrush**

*This is a summary of the Chinese fable, The Magic Paintbrush. If you'd like different and/or longer versions, please go to the annotated bibliography of books and websites at the end of this document.*

Once upon a time in the mountains of China, there was a young man called Ma Liang. He was very poor and worked for a rich man to tend his cattle. The rich man was not a good person; he stole from the villagers and abused his animals. Ma Liang liked drawing and drew pictures everywhere. One night, he dreamed that an old man gave him a magic paintbrush and asked him to use it to help poor people. When he woke up, he found the magic paintbrush on the floor where he slept.

From that day on, he used the paintbrush whenever people needed help. When he saw that people had no water to use in the fields, he drew a river and the river came to life. People could bring water from the river to the field and save a lot of time and energy.

When he saw it was difficult for people to till lands, Ma Liang drew a cow and the cow came to life. People could use the cow to till lands very easily.

Whenever he saw the people's troubles, Ma Liang would use his magic paintbrush to help. Then many people knew about the magic paintbrush.

A few days later, the rich man whom Ma Liang had worked for, heard that the magic paint brush could turn everything it drew to life. He was a bad man and had an idea to steal the paint brush from the Ma Liang. He knew that he could make a lot of money by turning things to life and keeping them, so he sent some people to Ma Liang's home and took him to the prison. He took the magic paintbrush from Ma Liang and felt very happy.

Then he invited a lot of his friends to come to his home and showed them the magic paintbrush. He drew a lot of pictures, but they could not become real. He was very angry and asked some people to get Ma Liang.

When Ma Liang came, he said to him, "If you draw some pictures for me and turn them to life, I will set you free." Ma Liang knew that he was a bad man in the village. Of course he did not want to help him, but had an idea. He said to the bad man, "I can help you, but you must keep your promise."

The bad man felt very happy and said, "I want a golden mountain. I will go there to gather gold." Ma Liang drew a sea first. The bad man was angry and said, "Why did you draw a sea? I do not want this. I want a golden mountain. Draw it now!"

Then Ma Liang drew a golden mountain which was far away from the sea. The bad man saw that and felt very happy. He said, "Draw a big ship quickly! I want to go there to gather gold." The Ma Liang smiled quietly and drew a big ship. The bad man jumped into the ship first and a lot of his family and friends jumped in too. When the ship sailed to the middle of the sea, the young man drew a large wave and it destroyed the ship and everyone on it.

After that, Ma Liang lived happily with his family and kept on helping people in need.

## **STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

1. Students draw something they wish would come to life, then write about why they would like that item to become real and what they would do with it.
2. Students read *The Magic Paintbrush* in different versions from the annotated bibliography. Suggested activities include compare/contrast, comprehension skills, inferences, point of view, listing adjectives to describe characters, identifying story elements, and listing sequence of events in the story.
3. Students read *The Magic Paintbrush* and a variety of fables from other cultures. Suggested activities include:
  - Identify the definition and understand elements of fables and trickster stories.
  - Recognize Aesop's fables, Ananse spider stories, and related tales from various cultures
  - List human traits associated with particular people or animals in fables and trickster stories
  - Identify the specific narrative and thematic patterns that occur in many fables across cultures
  - Compare and contrast themes of fables and trickster tales from different cultures
  - Explain how fables and trickster tales are used in different cultural contexts to point out human strengths and weaknesses
  - Differentiate between the cautionary lessons and morals of fables and the celebration of the wiles and wit of the underdog in trickster stories.

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WEBSITES FOR USE WITH THIS UNIT**

### ❖ **The Chi-lin Purse: A Collection of Ancient Chinese Stories**

Retold by Fang, Linda

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Hardcover: 160 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR); 1st edition (January 31, 1995)

ISBN-10: 0374312419

This is a collection of ancient Chinese stories with nine retold tales which are based on varied sources; from Ming novels to classic Chinese legends.

### ❖ **Chinese Children's Favorite Stories**

Text and illustrations by Mingmei Yip

Hardcover: 96 pages

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Tuttle Publishing (January 15, 2005)

ISBN-10: 0804835896

A collection of 13 very old stories. Selections include traditional Chinese elements such as dragons and the mischievous monkey king. Fables are included that impart wisdom and nearly all have a close connections with the natural world.

❖ **Chinese Fairy Tales and Fantasies**

Translated and edited by Roberts, Moss

259 pages

Reading level: Ages 9 and up

ISBN: 039442039X Format: Hardcover

Publisher: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

Pub. Date: November 1979

This is a translation of 100 tales from 25 centuries of Chinese literature. It is illustrated with woodcuts.

❖ **Chinese Mythology**

Collier, Irene Dea

128 pages

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Enslow Publishers (January 2001)

ISBN-10: 0766014126

Chinese Mythology provides historical background to mythical and historical dynasties. This book includes ten stories about creation, prehistory, and legends including popular and lesser-known tales.

❖ **Chinese Mythology A to Z: A Young Reader's Companion**

Roberts, Jeremy

160 pages

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Hardcover: 160 pages

Publisher: Facts on File (July 2004)

ISBN-10: 0816048703

This book covers everything from the Blue Dragon, bridge gods, and Buddha to carp, Chang Hsien, and Confucius, Chinese Mythology A to Z provides insight into the myths of the Chinese people. It contains hundreds of entries and is illustrated throughout.

❖ **Chinese Myths & Legends**

Ardagh, Philip.

Hardcover: 64 pages

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: World Book (August 2001)

ISBN-10: 0716626098

Retells traditional myths and legends of the Chinese people, providing brief commentary on the cultural context of the stories.

❖ **Chinese Myths & Legends**

Duane, O.B. & Hutchison, N.

128 pages

Reading level: Ages 9 and up

London : Brockhampton Press, c1998.

ISBN/ISSN: 1841861081

Vividly retells traditional myths and legends of the Chinese people and illustrated by an intriguing array of paintings and illustrations.

❖ **Cultural Background of China Folk Customs**

HuZong-feng

259 pages

Reading level: Ages 9 and up

Foreign Language School, Northwest University Xi'an, c2000

ISBN-10: 7805459118

Sections of the book include Traditional Festivals, Traditional Social Customs and Legends, Traditional Chinese Good luck Genre Paintings, Marriage Customs, Corrupted Customs in Ancient China, and Funeral Customs. There is much information about Chinese culture and folk customs in this book.

❖ **Famous Chinese Figures and Their Stories**

Jiang Xiang-yan

Paperback: 170 pages

Reading level: Ages 9 and up

Publisher: Shanghai Education Publishing House

ISBN: 7544420485

Published: 2008

This booklet describes 28 Chinese historical and literary figures who have contributed a great deal to Chinese culture. Includes excerpts and stories from Confucius, Laozi, Sunzi, Conqueror Xiang Yu, Wu Zetian and Ci Xi, Yang Guifei, Xishi, MengJiang Nu, Hua Mulan, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, Niulang and Zhinii, Chang'e, Guanyin, and many more.

❖ **Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior**

San Souci, Robert D. ; illustrated by Jean & Mou-Sien Tseng

Hardcover: 32 pages

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Hyperion Book CH; 1st edition (June 15, 1998)

ISBN-10: 0786803460

"A good swordsman should appear as calm as a fine lady, but he must be capable of quick action like a surprised tiger," says a seasoned warrior to Fa Mulan, unaware that the young soldier is in fact a woman. This is a retelling of the popular Chinese legend where a daughter goes off to war in place of her father who is too old and weak and becomes a skilled warrior.

❖ **Handbook of Chinese Mythology**

Lihui Yang and Deming An, with Jessica Anderson Turner

Hardcover: 293 pages

Reading level: Ages 12 and up

Publisher: ABC-CLIO (September 21, 2005)

ISBN-10: 157607806X

Included are Chinese myths in the past and present, and information of the interaction between myth and society. A chronology of Chinese dynasties including non-Han minorities are incorporated.

❖ **The Lost Horse: A Chinese Folktale**

Young, Ed

Hardcover: 32 pages

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Silver Whistle (April 15, 1998)

ISBN-10: 0152010165

A retelling of an ancient Chinese proverb and story dating from the Han Dynasty. The proverb is, "A loss may turn out to be a gain". When a man's horse runs away, the father refuses to see the event as a tragedy, just as he refuses to celebrate its return. When the son is thrown from the mare's back and breaks his leg, the father does not consider this accident as necessarily bad. The father trusts in the fortunes of life and when the son's injury prevents him from going to war, it saves him from possible death.

❖ **Moonbeams, Dumplings & Dragon Boats: A Treasury of Chinese Holiday Tales, Activities & Recipes**

Simonds, Nina

74 pages

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Hardcover: 80 pages

Publisher: Harcourt Children's Books (October 1, 2002)

ISBN-10: 0152019839

This book features five Chinese holidays: Chinese New Year and the Lantern Festival, Qing Ming, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. Each holiday section begins with a one-page description of the customs and history of the festival and includes a story, recipes, and two or three crafts or games.

❖ **The Peacock and the Crow [From an Old Chinese Fable]**

Kirn, Ann

32 pages

Reading level: Ages 4-8

New York : Four Winds Press, [1969]

LCCN 70081693

The crow and peacock decide to decorate their dull-colored feathers for the tiger's wedding but eventually have to pay for their vanity.

❖ **Tales from China**

Retold by Birch, Cyril; illustrated by Fowler, Rosamund

195 pages

Reading level: Young Adult

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press, USA (February 1, 2001)

ISBN/ISSN: 019275078X

This collection of Chinese stories includes the great legends of how Earth and Heaven came into being, and of how the archer Yi rid the Emperor Yao of the menace of the ten suns. There are folk tales about ghosts and rainmakers, poor students and magicians. The stories include much information about Chinese culture, character, and customs.

❖ **Tales of a Chinese Grandmother**

Carpenter, Frances; Illustrated by Malthe Hasselriis

261 pages

Age Range: 12 and up

Publisher: Tuttle Publishing

Pub. Date: September 1972

ISBN-13: 9780804810425

A collection of traditional folk-tales from China, has thirty short stories. Tales told by the grandmother character give insight into the life, history, and culture of everyday China. Stories include: *How Pan Ku Made the World*, *The God that Lived in the Kitchen*, *The Grateful Fox Fairy*, *The Spinning Maid and the Cowherd*, *The King of the Monkeys*, *Heng O, the Moonlady*, and several more.

❖ **Traditional Chinese Folktales**

Yin-lien C. Chin, Yetta S. Center, Mildred Ross

180 pages

Format: Textbook Paperback, 180pp

Grade 5-8

Publisher: Sharpe, M.e., Inc.

Pub. Date: March 1996

ISBN: 156324800X

Set in old China, there are 12 ancient Chinese stories in this book. A few examples include "Liang Shanbo and Ju Yingtai" who choose death over parting, but are reunited after death as butterflies; "Meng-Jiang Nyu" finds her husband, who was commissioned to build the Great Wall; "The Secret in the Moon Cake" about oppressive Mongol rule; "The White Snake" becomes a beautiful and faithful wife; and "Monkey" is commanded to protect a devout priest.

❖ **A Treasury of China's Wisdom: A Story Book for Everyone**

Tang Chinghua

Paperback: 418 pages

Reading level: High School and up

Publisher: Foreign Languages Press (December 1996)

ISBN-10: 7119018612

This is a story book depicting China's classic wisdom, from pre-Confucius days of more than three thousand years ago to the early Qing Dynasty, which ended in 1911. The stories are arranged under ten topics: Wisdom in Action; Education, Ethics and Family Value; Wit, Will and the Art of Winning; Leadership, Management and Human Relations; Love, Sex and Sexual Harassment; Ambition, Ability and Human Psychology; the End, the Means and the Golden Mean; Aptitude, Attitude and Destiny; the Good, the Bad and the Ugly; the Way to Peace. These stories about Chinese wisdom are very entertaining and informative.

❖ **White Monkey King: A Chinese Fable**

Retold by Hovey Wriggins, Sally

Hardcover: 113 pages

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Knopf Books for Young Readers (March 12, 1977)

ISBN-10: 0394934504

A mischievous monkey acquires god-like powers and creates havoc in heaven. First part of a translation of the Chinese legend as retold in the sixteenth-century novel "Journey to the West."

❖ **Websites**

**Crystal Dragon of Taiwan**

[http://www.cdol.org/history/chinese\\_myths.htm](http://www.cdol.org/history/chinese_myths.htm)

Website contains links to many Chinese myths, legends, and nursery rhymes.

**Selected Chinese Myths and Fantasies**

<http://www.chinavista.com/experience/story/story.html>

Many Chinese myths.

**Living Myths**

<http://www.livingmyths.com/Chinese.htm>

Much Chinese mythology is based on animism, which sees the land itself as alive.