

Legends in the Sky

Every culture has its own stories about how Earth was formed, and about the other planets and stars that can be seen across the night sky. Learn about some of the oldest and most loved Chinese stories, such as the Oxherd and the Weaver Girl, and their impact on modern life.

China Showcase Library Learn about China, through its history, people, places, and culture. Supported by original material developed by National Geographic Learning and People's Education Press, the China Showcase Library presents non-fiction reading selections on a variety of fascinating topics.

The audio for this reader is available for download at ELTNGL.com/csl

Intermediate
1600 headwords

STANFORD HOUSE

史丹福書屋

Room: 611-612, 6/F, Citimark, Shatin, H.K.

Tel: +852 2330 2533 Fax: +852 2330 3598

Email: info@stanfordhouse.com.hk

Website: www.stanfordhouse.com.hk

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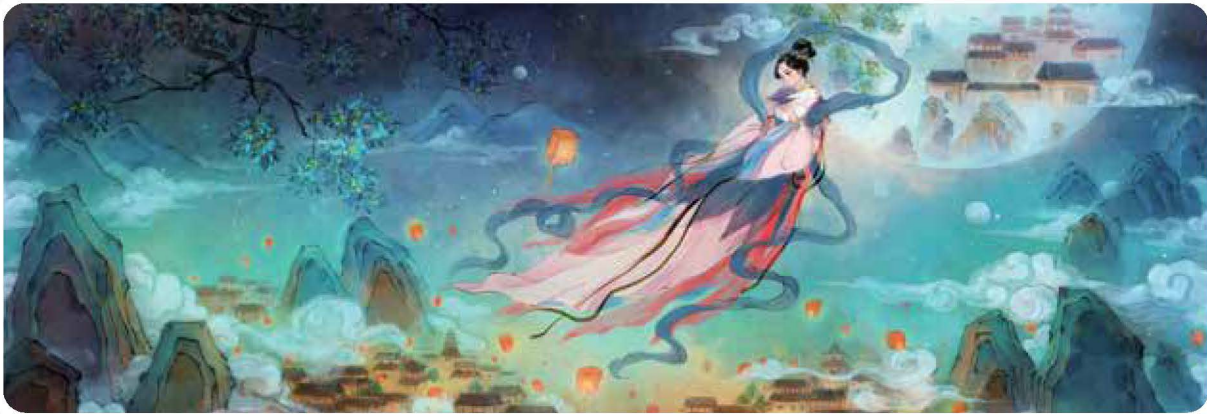


Legends in the Sky

For Review Only

Before You Read

This story is about the country of China and ancient legends¹ that show how Chinese people historically viewed the universe.



A. Legends of the Sky. Read the paragraph. Then complete each definition with the correct word.

Although modern science tells us that the universe may have started with a Big Bang, every culture has its own creation stories. China is no different. Some Western cultures talk about **the heavens**² and Earth being created in six days, but the ancient Chinese talked about the universe being born from a giant black egg. Some cultures may tell stories about the Man in the Moon, but to many Chinese people, it is a woman in the moon. And while Westerners may look into the night sky and see Orion, the hunter, the Chinese see the stars Vega and Altair as two lovers separated by a wide river.

- 1. When we use the word c_____, we mean making something new.
- 2. E_____ is used as the name of the planet we live on.
- 3. If something is a_____, it is very old.
- 4. The u_____ is used to refer to the stars, planets, and space.
- 5. If something is g_____, it is very, very big.
- 6. Things that are s_____ are kept apart.

¹ **legend:** a well-known story from a long time ago
² **the heavens:** the sky

B. The Qixi Festival. Read the email and look at the pictures in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

SEND MAIL

TO:

SUBJECT:

Hi Mom!

My first year at university has been so full of surprises. Today, a secret admirer sent me some flowers.

I asked my best friend what it was about, and she told me that the person sent them because it's the Qixi Festival, which is kind of like Valentine's Day back home. Long ago, two lovers—the **Oxherd**³ and the **Weaver**⁴ Girl—were separated, and they can only meet once a year on the seventh day of the seventh **lunar**⁵ month, which is usually in August. Because of the time when it is celebrated, it is also called the Double Seventh Festival.

In the old days, women would use this festival as a time to show off skills such as sewing or to pray for a happy marriage. Now lovers send each other flowers or presents.

I wonder who sent me the flowers. I'll write to you again when I find out.

Love,

Dorothy

Send

- 1. How do people celebrate Qixi Festival or Valentine's Day?
- 2. What do you know about ancient Chinese legends related to the sky?
- 3. Why do you think people came up with such legends?

³ **oxherd:** (old-fashioned) a person who takes care of oxen; ox: a bull used for farm work
⁴ **weaver:** a person who makes fabric by crossing threads over and under each other
⁵ **lunar:** related to the moon



⁶ **ax**: a cutting tool with a sharp metal head on a long handle

⁷ **shell**: the hard outer part that covers an egg, nut, seed, or animal

⁸ **yolk**: the yellow part in the center of an egg

One important part of a culture is the ancient legends that have been passed down through history. Many of these stories try to answer questions about who we are and where we came from. In other cases, legends were created when people looked up at the sky at night and told stories about the stars and planets. Finally, some legends are stories of heroes who bravely faced difficulty, and they show people's hope for what is true, good, and beautiful. Here are some of those ancient Chinese legends.

Pangu Creates the Universe

In the beginning, there was no universe as we know it. Instead, everything was without any form or order. There was no light and dark, or Earth and sky. In the middle of all things, there was a giant black egg. And in this egg, there slept a giant named Pangu. He looked much like a human being. He had a beard, wide shoulders, and strong arms and legs. Pangu wore a skirt of leaves and carried an ax.⁶ But where did Pangu come from? Some say that he was created by the forces of yin and yang, two opposing forces from Chinese philosophy that are balanced with each other, so that

Pangu could bring order to the universe. However, we really do not know.

Pangu slept inside the egg for eighteen thousand years, never moving. Then one day he began to wake up. He tried to reach out his arms, but the egg's shell⁷ was hard. Surrounded by yolk⁸ and egg white, he coolly took his ax in his hand and hit the shell as hard as he could. As the shell broke open, the egg white floated up and formed the sky, while the yolk flowed down and formed the earth. In the beginning, the sky was not fixed in place and kept falling. To stop it from falling, Pangu set his feet firmly on the earth, raised his powerful arms and held up the sky for eighteen thousand years. And as he stood there, every day he grew three meters taller, and the sky grew with him.

When the sky no longer needed Pangu's support, he was so tired that he fell and died. The hair on his head and his beard became the stars in the sky, and his eyes the sun and moon. His body became mountains, his blood became rivers, his skin and the hair on his body grew into flowers and trees, and the insects on his body became humans.

⁹ **ethnic**: of a nation, race or people sharing a cultural custom

¹⁰ **minority**: a small number or part of people in a country



The legend of Pangu may have had its start in the legends of different **ethnic**⁹ **minority**¹⁰ groups in southern China. For example, in the Zhuang people's stories a brother and sister named Pangu lived through a flood, got married, and had children, creating the human race. On the other hand, the Miao people may tell you they came from Pangu, and the Yao people believed that Pangu was a king who created the world. These ancient legends gradually spread in China and mixed with other legends and stories. Finally, they ended up as the story of Pangu coming from an egg and creating the world.

Pangu is seen as a great hero who was unhappy with the dark old world that he lived in and decided to create something new. He also never gave up and continued to support the sky even when he grew tired. In the end, he gave his life to create the universe.

Nüwa Creates Humans and Fixes the Sky

A more generally accepted legend about how humans were created is found in stories about a goddess named Nüwa, who had a human head and the body of a snake. As she traveled the earth, Nüwa began to feel lonely, so she sat beside a lake. Taking some yellow earth, she mixed it with water and formed a human. This new person immediately began dancing about and shouting in happiness. Nüwa was pleased so she continued to form other people until the world was full of humans.

Later, Gong Gong, the god of water, and Zhu Rong, the god of fire, had a great fight, creating a mess in the heavens and on the earth. In the end, Gong Gong lost. He was so angry that he hit his head against Buzhou Mountain, which was holding up the sky, and the mountain fell. As the sky began to fall, all the planets and the stars started to move to the northwest, leaving a hole in the sky. Then the earth broke open, and fires and floods covered the land.



Worried that her humans would be killed, Nüwa took stones of five different colors, **melted**¹¹ them and then used them to cover up the hole in the sky. To keep the sky from falling, she put a **turtle's**¹² leg at each corner to hold it up. In this way, humans were saved.

Since ancient times, people in China have **worshipped**¹³ Nüwa as the mother goddess and the creator of humans, and it is thought that this legend may show that at one time China had a **matriarchal**¹⁴ society and women played a very important part in Chinese life.

Nüwa is also known as the goddess of love and marriage, and it was thought that she could arrange marriages and help women have children. Historically, many temples in China have been built for her, and even today many people worship at them. Nüwa is often mentioned in ancient stories. For example, Jia Baoyu, the main character of *Dream of the Red Mansions*, came from a stone that was left over when Nüwa repaired the heavens. Further, the 16th-century novel *The Investiture of the Gods* begins with King Zhou (ca. 1105–1046 BCE) doing evil things that annoyed Nüwa, so she decides to bring this terrible ruler to ruin.

Today, Nüwa is generally thought of as an example of a good mother, in that she is generous and loving. She wants to help and support her children, so that they could have happy and long lives.



Fact Check

1. What did Pangu look like?
2. According to the story about Pangu, where did people come from?
3. According to the story about Nüwa, where did people come from?

¹¹ **melt:** to change something from a solid to a liquid

¹² **turtle:** a reptile with a hard shell

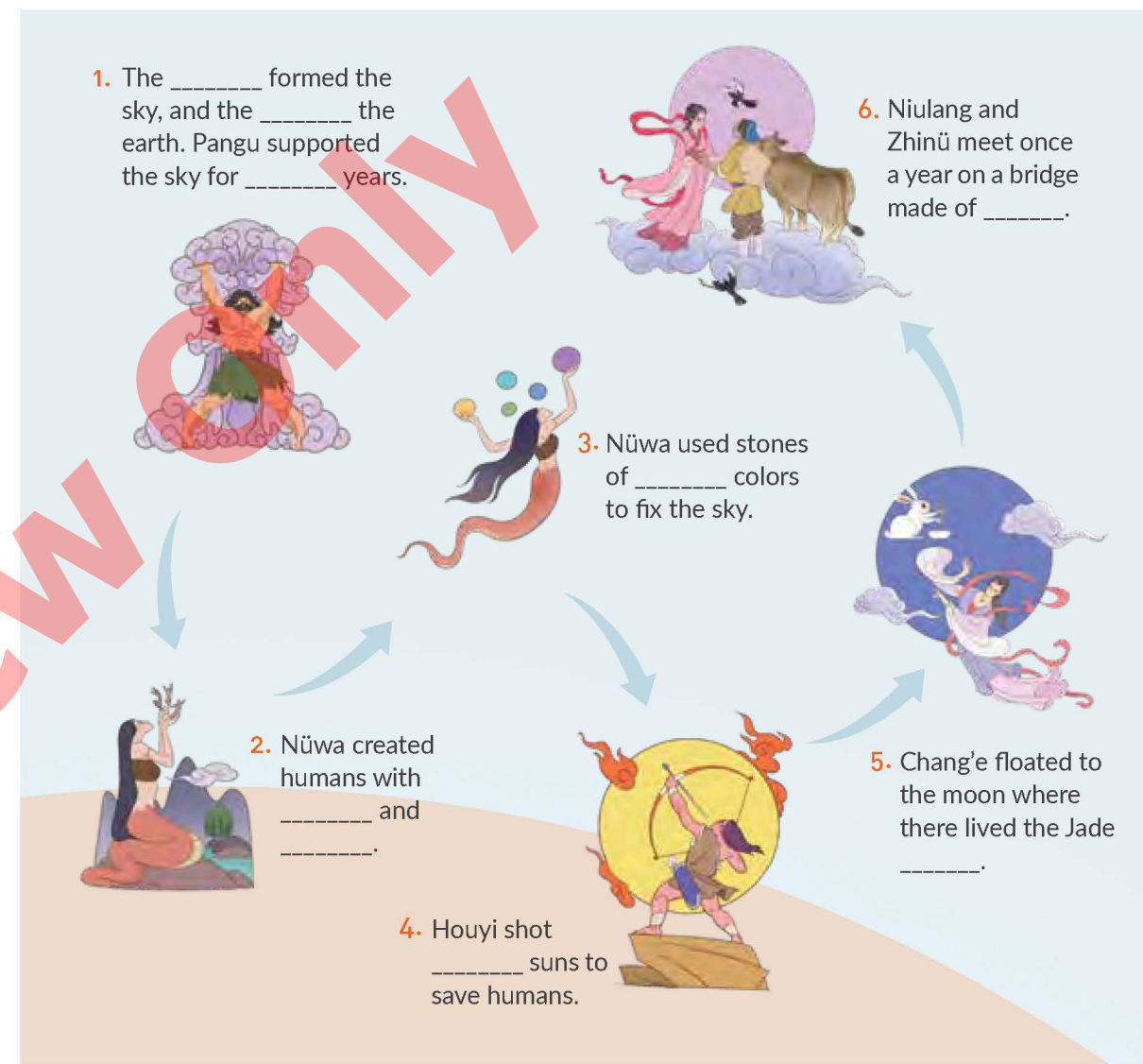
¹³ **worship:** (especially in religion) to show great respect for

¹⁴ **matriarchal:** of a society where women have the most power

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing **A, B, C,** or **D.**

1. According to these stories, what is stopping the sky from falling?
A. Pangu is holding it up.
B. It is being held up by Buzhou Mountain.
C. It is being held up by four turtle legs.
D. It is being held up by stones of different colors.
2. What historical evidence does the legend of Nüwa probably offer?
A. How people were created.
B. How the sky is held in place.
C. That women held power in ancient times.
D. Why China has different kinds of temples.
3. Why did Chang'e eat the whole immortality pill?
A. She had not paid attention to her husband's instructions.
B. She did not want to stay with her husband any longer.
C. She wanted to go to the moon.
D. She wanted to go back to heaven.
4. What is probably meant by the term "star-crossed lovers" on page 15?
A. Lovers who live in the stars.
B. Lovers who are not lucky.
C. Lovers who are angry at the stars.
D. Lovers who are celebrated by festivals.
5. In the third paragraph on page 16, who does "he" refer to?
A. The Emperor of Heaven.
B. The yellow ox.
C. Niulang's brother.
D. Niulang.

B. Complete the Visual Plotline. Complete the visual plotline below with words from the passage.



C. Answer the Questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Which of these stories would you like to see made as a movie? Why?
2. What do these stories tell you about Chinese culture?
3. How do you think the environment influenced these ancient legends? Find some examples from the stories.



The Dragons of China

Track 2

One important figure in Chinese legends and Chinese culture is the dragon. Unlike the Western dragon, which is often scary, the Chinese dragon is by and large thought of as friendly and brings good luck and wealth. And, while the Western dragon is basically just a winged reptile, it is thought that a Chinese dragon has the characteristics of nine different animals: According to one legend it has the horns of a deer, the head of an ox, the eyes of a shrimp, the mouth of a donkey, the stomach of a snake, the scales of a fish, the claws of a phoenix, the beard of a man, and the ears of an elephant.

Chinese dragons were thought to control the rain and the clouds, so people used to worship the dragon and ask it for good weather. There are temples for dragons all over China, and the dragon dances seen in Chinatowns around the world began in ancient China as a dance to bring rain, and later began to be used to ask for peace and good fortune.

Heroes in many Chinese legends flew on dragons or looked to dragons for help. In *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King received his magic staff from the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea. A dragon is also part of the Chinese zodiac and, along with the phoenix, it is an important symbol of peace, happiness, and harmony at Chinese weddings.

In ancient times the dragon stood for the emperor. In modern times, it is usually thought of by the Chinese people as standing for China.

There are many famous Chinese sayings related to the dragon. Many are related to old legends. For example, one saying refers to a story about Lord Ye, who admired dragons, and had dragon decorations all over his house. His love of dragons became so well known that one day a real dragon decided to pay him a visit. At the first sight of the dragon, Lord Ye ran away in fear. It seems that he did not really love dragons: He just loved the idea of dragons. The saying "Lord Ye loved dragons" is used in much the same way as "He talks the talk, but can't walk the walk" is used in English.

Another saying comes from a story about the 6th-century painter Zhang Sengyao. In the story, he painted four dragons on a wall but did not fill in the eyes. Since the paintings were so beautiful and realistic, many people demanded that Zhang finish the painting. Zhang refused, saying that the paintings would come to life if he did so. No one believed him, so finally Zhang agreed to paint the eyes on the dragons. As soon as he finished the eyes on the first two dragons, the sky drew dark, and there was a lightning flash. The two dragons with painted eyes came to life and flew away, up into the clouds. Inspired by this, the saying "Paint the dragon and dot the eye" means to add the final and key point.

In short, the dragon is considered an important and admired part of Chinese culture. It is something that should be welcomed and not feared.



Word Count: 534
Time: _____