

Chinese Culture Through Cinderella

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Theme

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PURPOSE

To create a comparison of Chinese culture with a more Western culture through the reading and analysis of a children's fairy tale; to recognize the differences and commonalities.

THEME STATEMENT

Cultures, Continuity & Change (CCC): Throughout periods of time, human beings have sought their historic roots while creating, learning, and changing their cultures.

SUGGESTED TIME

One hour.

KEY VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

“Culture” as everything that makes up a person's way of life.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Cinderella story (Student Handout #1); *Yeh-Shen* story (Student Handout #2).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The teacher should have knowledge of Chinese culture. Specifically, the teacher should know of the Chinese reverence for ancestors, the symbol of fish as the hope of prosperity (*i.e.*, fertility), and the acceptance of men as wise in society.

INITIATION (Inquiry, Preview, Involvement)

Have a student recount (or read) the story of Cinderella. If a student is recounting the tale from memory, encourage other students to add to the story specific parts that the original storyteller may have omitted.

SUMMARY

Adaptable Levels
Grades K-8

Related Themes
ACV, USGC

Values
Caring, goal achievement

Skills
Reading comprehension,
analysis, connecting,
oral communication

Integration
Language, social studies

DEVELOPMENT (Instruction, Data Collection, Organization)

1. Break students into groups of three or four and give them a copy of *Yeh-Shen* (Student Handout #2).
2. For groups of three, have one student read the story aloud, one student write down the *similarities* between the two tales, and the third student write down the *differences*. For groups of four or more, have the extra students share in the reading.
3. At the end of the story, the two writers should read their lists aloud, and the other group members should contribute any additional ideas.
4. On the chalkboard, create a data chart of similarities and differences (Teacher Background #1).
5. Have one representative from each group write one of their group's *similarities* on the board. Instruct all students to make sure that they do not repeat other groups.
6. As a class, recognize and discuss the similarities of these stories. . . that human nature crosses political/cultural boundaries.
7. Repeat step #5 with a different member of the group recording *differences* on the board.
8. As a class, have students hypothesize what these differences might be able to tell us about the culture of China.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT (Idea Articulation, Ownership, Experimentation)

After hypothesizing about the culture of China, ask students to provide reasons for their hypotheses based on what they already know about China (*e.g.*, geography, history).

ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT

Using the enrichment task (above), have each student write an explanation of at least two connections discussed in class. A possible rubric for assessment is as follows:

- 4 = clearly identifies and describes two connections, explaining the role of their prior knowledge in the story's symbolism
- 3 = adequately describes two connections; explanations not as clear as a "4" description
- 2 = minimally describes two connections; reasoning is not well explained
- 1 = unsatisfactory; barely describes one connection; reasoning not well explained

KEY QUESTIONS

- What is the importance of fairy tales in society? (*e.g.*, entertainment, passing on societal values, explaining historical roots of society, stereotyping traditional characters)
- Are there any *similarities* that surprised you? Why?
- Are there any *differences* that surprised you? Why?

ALTERNATIVES

- Have students create their own fairy tale about another topic that your class studies, such as a historical event (*e.g.*, Long March, Tiananmen Square protest).
- The story of Cinderella has been adapted by several cultures throughout the world. Have students try to locate these stories and bring them to class to share.

REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Although the text of the two stories are included here, the original illustrated versions are recommended:

- Louie, Ai-Ling. *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*. New York: Philomel Books, 1982. ISBN: 039920900x
- Disney, Walt. *Cinderella*. New York: Windmill Books/Simon & Schuster, 1981.

Several books are widely available on folktales around the world. The story of Cinderella is part of several different cultures. If you are having difficulty locating Cinderella stories from other cultures, contact: Shen's Books and Supplies, 821 South 5th Avenue, Arcadia, CA 91006; tel.: (800) 456-6660; <http://www.shens.com>

TEACHER BACKGROUND #1:

Sample Comparison and Contrast

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● evil stepmother ● did lots of work ● had friend (animal) to communicate with ● “guardian angel” ● social party ● looking for husbands ● need for a beautiful gown ● magical shoes <p>...etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chinese version depicts father with a <i>second wife</i>, not a re-marriage ● friend is a <i>fish</i> vs. mouse ● <i>male</i> vs. female guardian ● <i>pray to departed friend</i> (fish) ● <i>gold slipper</i> vs. glass slipper ● Chinese version recognizes the fate of the stepmother <p>...etc.</p>

STUDENT HANDOUT #1:

Cinderella

Once upon a time, there was a gentleman who had a sweet young daughter named Cinderella. Unfortunately, his wife passed away, and he took for his second wife the proudest and haughtiest woman that was ever seen. She had two daughters who were just like her in every way, bad disposition and all.

The marriage ceremony was hardly over when the stepmother's temper flared up. She could not abide this young girl, whose goodness made her own daughters seem more hateful than ever. She gave her the vilest household tasks; it was Cinderella who scoured the pots and scrubbed the stairs, Cinderella who polished the bedchamber of madame and also those of her daughters.

Cinderella did all the work and never heard a word of thanks. Her only friends were some little mice. She slept in a cold room while her stepsisters had fancy bedrooms. But Cinderella never complained. She felt sure that someday happiness would find her.

When invitations to a Royal Ball arrived, Cinderella was very excited. The Prince was looking for someone to marry, and every girl was supposed to attend. But the mean stepmother and stepsisters made her work so long that she had no time to get ready for the Royal Ball. And anyhow, she had no pretty gown to wear. Cinderella ran into the garden and cried.

Suddenly, a little lady appeared. "I am your Fairy Godmother," she said. "Stop crying and I'll see that you get to the Ball!"

"But how?" Cinderella asked.

The Fairy Godmother saw a big pumpkin and a group of mice. She waved her magic wand, and the pumpkin changed into a handsome coach while the mice became wonderful prancing horses.

Again, the Fairy Godmother waved her wand. Poof! Cinderella was wearing a lovely gown and a pair of glass slippers.

"Off you go," she said. "But remember: you must leave the Ball before midnight. At twelve o'clock everything will change back. Even your gown will turn into a dress of rags again!"

Cinderella was the most beautiful girl at the Ball. The Prince paid no attention to anyone else and danced with Cinderella all evening.

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When Cinderella heard the clock begin to strike midnight, she stopped dancing. She ran toward the coach. On the way, one of the glass slippers fell off, but there was no time to pick it up.

The next day, everyone wondered who it belonged to. The Prince said he would only marry the girl who could wear the slipper. But how could he find her? The Prince ordered the Grand Duke to have every girl in the kingdom try it on.

The wicked stepmother, meanwhile, locked Cinderella in her room so she'd have no chance to try on the slipper. Cinderella's friends, the mice, found the key, however, and opened the door.

When the Duke brought the slipper to the house, Cinderella said, "Please may I try it on?" When she did, it fit perfectly!

The ugly stepsisters glared at Cinderella. But there was nothing they could do. She and the Prince soon had a royal wedding and lived happily ever after.

STUDENT HANDOUT #2:

Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China

In the dim past, even before the Ch'in and the Han dynasties, there lived a cave chief of southern China by the name of Wu. As was the custom in those days, Chief Wu had taken two wives. Each wife in her turn had presented Wu with a baby daughter. But one of the wives sickened and died, and not too many days after Chief Wu took to his bed and died too.

Yeh-Shen, the little orphan, grew to girlhood in her stepmother's home. She was a bright child and lovely, too, with skin as smooth as ivory and dark pools for eyes. Her stepmother was jealous of all this beauty and goodness, for her own daughter was not pretty at all. So in her displeasure, she gave poor Yeh-Shen the heaviest and most unpleasant chores.

The only friend that Yeh-Shen had to her name was a fish she had caught and raised. It was a beautiful fish with golden eyes, and every day it would come out of the water and rest its head on the bank of the pond, waiting for Yeh-Shen to feed it. Stepmother gave Yeh-Shen barely enough food for herself, but the orphan child always found something to share with her fish, which grew to enormous size.

Somehow the stepmother heard of this. She was terribly angry to discover that Yeh-Shen had kept a secret from her. She hurried down to the pond, but she was unable to see the fish, for Yeh-Shen's pet wisely hid itself. The stepmother, however, was a crafty woman, and she soon thought of a plan. She walked home and called out, "Yeh-Shen, go and collect some firewood. But wait! The neighbors might see you. Leave your filthy coat here!" The minute the girl was out of sight, her stepmother slipped on the coat herself and went down again to the pond. This time the big fish saw Yeh-Shen's familiar jacket and heaved itself onto the bank, expecting to be fed. But the stepmother, having hidden a dagger in her sleeve, stabbed the fish, wrapped it in her garments, and took it home to cook for dinner.

When Yeh-Shen came to the pond that evening, she found her pet had disappeared. Overcome with grief, the girl collapsed on the ground and dropped her tears into the still waters of the pond.

"Ah, poor child!" a voice said.

Yeh-Shen sat up to find a very old man looking down at her. He wore the coarsest of clothes, and his hair flowed down over his shoulders.

"Kind uncle, who may you be?" Yeh-Shen asked.

"That is not important, my child. All you must know is that I have been sent to tell you of the wondrous powers of your fish."

"My fish, but sir..." The girl's eyes filled with tears, and she could not go on.

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The old man sighed and said, "Yes, my child, your fish is no longer alive, and I must tell you that your stepmother is once more the cause of your sorrow." Yeh-Shen gasped in horror, but the old man went on. "Let us not dwell on things that are past," he said, "for I have come bringing you a gift. Now you must listen carefully to this: The bones of your fish are filled with a powerful spirit. Whenever you are in serious need, you must kneel before them and let them know your heart's desire. But do not waste their gifts."

Yeh-Shen wanted to ask the old sage many more questions, but he rose to the sky before she could utter another word. With a heavy heart, Yeh-Shen made her way to the dung heap to gather the remains of her friend.

Time went by, and Yeh-Shen, who was often left alone, took comfort in speaking to the bones of her fish. When she was hungry, which happened quite often, Yeh-Shen asked the bones for food. In this way, Yeh-Shen managed to live from day to day, but she lived in dread that her stepmother would discover her secret and take even that away from her.

So the time passed and spring came. Festival time was approaching. It was the busiest time of the year. Such cooking and cleaning and sewing there was to be done! Yeh-Shen had hardly a moment's rest. At the spring festival young men and young women from the village hoped to meet and to choose whom they would marry. How Yeh-Shen longed to go! But her stepmother had other plans. She hoped to find a husband for her own daughter and did not want any man to see the beautiful Yeh-Shen first.

When finally the holiday arrived, the stepmother and her daughter dressed themselves in their finery and filled their baskets with sweetmeats. "You must remain at home now, and watch to see that no one steals fruit from our trees," her stepmother told Yeh-Shen, and then she departed for the banquet with her own daughter.

As soon as she was alone, Yeh-Shen went to speak to the bones of her fish. "Oh, dear friend," she said kneeling before the precious bones, "I long to go to the festival, but I cannot show myself in these rags. Is there somewhere I could borrow clothes fit to wear to the feast?" At once she found herself dressed in a gown of azure blue, with a cloak of kingfisher feathers draped around her shoulders. Best of all, on her tiny feet were the most beautiful slippers she had ever seen. They were woven of gold threads, in a pattern like the scales of a fish, and the glistening soles were made of solid gold. There was magic in the shoes, for they should have been quite heavy, yet when Yeh-Shen walked, her feet felt as light as air.

"Be sure you do not lose your golden shoes," said the spirit of the bones. Yeh-Shen promised to be careful. Delighted with her transformation, she bid a fond farewell to the bones of her fish as she slipped off to join in the merrymaking.

That day, Yeh-Shen turned many a head as she appeared at the feast. All around her, people whispered, "Look at that beautiful girl! Who can she be?"

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But above this, Stepsister was heard to say, “Mother, does she not resemble our Yeh-Shen?”

Upon hearing this, Yeh-Shen jumped up and ran off before her stepsister could look closely at her. She raced down the mountainside, and in doing so, she lost one of her golden slippers. No sooner had the shoe fallen from her foot than all her fine clothes turned back to rags. Only one thing remained—a tiny golden shoe. Yeh-Shen hurried to the bones of her fish and returned the slipper, promising to find its mate. But now the bones were silent. Sadly, Yeh-Shen realized that she had lost her only friend. She hid the little shoe in her bedstraw and went outside to cry. Leaning against a fruit tree, she sobbed and sobbed until she fell asleep.

The stepmother left the gathering to check on Yeh-Shen, but when she returned home, she found the girl sound asleep, with her arms wrapped around a fruit tree. So thinking no more of her, the stepmother rejoined the party.

Meantime, a villager had found the shoe. Recognizing its worth, he sold it to a merchant, who presented it in turn to the king of the island kingdom of T’o Han.

The king was more than happy to accept the slipper as a gift. He was entranced by the tiny thing, which was shaped of the most precious of metals, yet which made no sound when touched to stone. The more he marveled at its beauty, the more determined he became to find the woman to whom the shoe belonged.

A search was begun among the ladies of his kingdom, but all who tried on the slipper found it impossibly small. Undaunted, the king ordered the search widened to include the cave women from the countryside where the slipper had been found. Since he realized it would take many years for every woman to come to his island and test her foot in the slipper, the king thought of a way to get the right woman to come forward. He ordered the slipper placed in a pavilion by the side of the road near where it had been found, and his herald announced that the shoe was to be returned to its original owner. Then from a nearby hiding place, the king and his men settled down to watch and wait for a woman with tiny feet to come and claim her slipper.

All that day, the pavilion was crowded with cave women who had come to test a foot in the shoe. Yeh-Shen’s stepmother and stepsister were among them, but not Yeh-Shen; they had told her to stay home. By day’s end, although many women had eagerly tried to put on the slipper, it still had not been worn. Wearily, the king continued his vigil into the night.

It wasn’t until the blackest part of the night, while the moon hid behind a cloud, that Yeh-Shen dared to show her face at the pavilion, and even then she tiptoed timidly across the wide floor. Sinking down to her knees, the girl in rags examined the tiny shoe. Only when she was sure that this was the missing mate to her own golden slipper did she dare to pick it up. At last, she could return both little shoes to the fish bones. Surely then her beloved spirit would speak to her again.

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Now the king's first thought, on seeing Yeh-Shen take the precious slipper, was to throw the girl into prison as a thief. But when she turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of her face. At once the king was struck by the sweet harmony of her features, which seemed so out of keeping with the rags she wore. It was then that he took a closer look and noticed that she walked upon the tiniest feet he had ever seen.

With a wave of his hand, the king signaled that this tattered creature was to be allowed to depart with the golden slipper. Quietly, the king's men slipped off and followed her home.

All this time, Yeh-Shen was unaware of the excitement she had caused. She made her way home and was about to hide both slippers in her bedding when there was a pounding at the door. Yeh-Shen went to see who it was—and found a king at her doorstep. She was very frightened at first, but the king spoke to her in a kind voice and asked her to try the golden slippers on her feet. The maiden did as she was told, and as she stood in her golden shoes, her rags were transformed once more into the feathered cloak and beautiful azure gown.

Her loveliness made her seem a heavenly being, and the king suddenly knew in his heart that he had found his true love.