

Learning About Your World through Mythology

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching reading to reluctant readers in the 9th grade can be a tricky proposition, but if you have the right material along with the right amount of enthusiasm, then the task becomes much simpler (the bond between teacher and student is crucial to a successful educational experience). This unit will use mythological stories which are filled with action, adventure, and magic. They also contain morals to provide students with lessons about life. By representing multiple cultures, students can learn lessons about the people around them who are different from themselves. Myths are a great source to see how different cultural groups are actually very much the same. All peoples have questions, conflicts, and desires. We live in a major urban area where there are people from all over the world. It is paramount that students have an understanding of other peoples and their cultures, so they can incorporate the concept of tolerance in their everyday lives. I will use myths from Africa, India, and China. In the local news, both in print and on television, there is always mention of celebrations from both India and China. Most students do not even recognize the celebration as worth mentioning because they lack an understanding of any culture that is not their own. I have frequently heard students from Africa referred to by other students as “that African” without a clue as to how many different cultures are represented in the large continent of Africa. My students’ world is very small considering what a large city they live in. A reading class does not have to be just about reading boring, contrived pieces designed to improve reading comprehension, but should also strive to open students’ horizons to see the world through a broader lens. Multicultural mythology is the perfect tool for reaching that end.

Another aspect of these mythological stories is the theme of fate vs. self determination, which they all share. In each of the stories the characters are fated to do what they do, with the exception of the Monkey King, who defeats his pre-determined fate by doing things he is not supposed to do. Teenagers are working toward determining their place in life and society, so this is the perfect time to direct attention and conversation to how they achieve their place in society. I look forward to what the students will have to say as they consider this question and the questions that may arise from it.

OBJECTIVES

The following objectives are written as stated on the Texas Education Association website. The student will:

- Be given the opportunity to read with confidence, competence and understanding.
- Have the opportunity to locate information in varied sources, to read critically, to evaluate sources and to draw supportable conclusions.
- Learn how various texts are organized and how authors choose language for effect.
- Use context clues, entry information in dictionaries and other sources to confirm pronunciations and meanings of unfamiliar words and expand vocabulary.
- Read with fluency and understanding in increasingly demanding texts.

- Read to complete a task, to gather information, to be informed, to solve problems, and for pleasure.
- Monitor his/her own reading and adjust when understanding breaks down by rereading, using resources, and questioning.
- Use previous experience to comprehend.
- Determine and adjust purpose for reading such as to inquire, to interpret, to enjoy and to solve problems.
- Find similarities and differences across texts such as explanations, points of view, or themes.
- Construct images based on text descriptions.
- Organize, learn, and recall important ideas from texts and oral presentations such as note taking, outlining, using learning logs, rereading, scanning, and skimming.
- Summarize texts by identifying main ideas and relevant details.
- Make inferences such as drawing conclusions and making generalizations or predictions, supporting them with text evidence and experience.
- Analyze and use text structures such as compare/contrast, cause and effect, and chronological order.
- Practice using test-taking skills such as highlighting and making marginal notes.
- Generate relevant, interesting and researchable questions.
- Analyze aspects of text, such as patterns of organization and choice of language, for persuasive effect.
- Apply modes of reasoning such as induction and deduction to think critically.
- Read to increase knowledge of his/her culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures.

RATIONALE

Teaching mythology to students is important for several reasons. Exposure to mythology gives students a fundamental perspective from which they can interpret other more recent forms of literature. Mythology from around the globe offers everything from G rated to R rated stories to entice any palate. Myths can be examined and enjoyed from a deep analytical perspective, or more superficially as just a good story. Because parallel myths globally share so many of the same themes, they help us to see and understand our commonalities across cultures. This in turn nurtures and supports the concept of tolerance, which is so necessary and fundamental to our way of life and our future. The characters presented in mythological stories are also often represented in our classrooms. There is the noble character who works to make life better for the community at large. This might be the student who has aspirations of becoming civically involved or who is already involved in the community to make it a better place. In each region of the globe there is mythology which includes the trickster. This would be the class clown who either has a great sense of humor or who just wants to de-rail the status quo to get out of his work. These characters as well as others give students an image to identify with in some way. We all know someone who could fall under one of these umbrellas, and we look at them either with respect, disdain, or neutrally. Through an examination of these archetypes, students can learn to better understand one another as well as themselves. The bad and the good are represented, and yet what might be perceived as bad in this day and age might have been considered good long ago. This paradigm gives students the opportunity to consider those values from a broader perspective. They could then generalize this idea to their own lives so that when they are told something is good or bad in the future they might pause, reflect and think for themselves with a broader, more

grounded perspective. This involves critical thinking skills that, once developed, need to be nurtured whenever possible. Adventure and romance are a part of all myths as well. These concepts appeal to students' imaginations, which will develop their creative thinking skills. Where imagination is hailed in younger children, as a child ages, the value placed upon imagination diminishes to the point where students feel fearful of expressing it. Mythological stories can provide a springboard from which student's imaginations can be cultivated and expressed.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Ramayana

The Ramayana is an epic Indian myth about the trials and tribulations of Rama, his brothers, and his wife Sita. Rama is actually the god Vishnu, the protector and preserver of the world, born in human form. Vishnu is born as a man so that he can defeat the demon Ravana, the younger brother of the god Brahma, who plagues both the gods and the holy men of the forest. Ravana tricks Brahma into giving him the protection of not being able to be killed by a god; only a man can destroy him. Rama is born and lives with no idea that he is actually Vishnu. He is the first born son of the King of Koshala, with three brothers born of two other wives. Rama's family is the perfect family, and his father's kingdom is perfect as well. People are safe, prosperous, and happy. Rama and his brothers grow up loving each other more than life itself. One day the king is approached by a sage from the woods. The king, who is happy to see the holy man, offers him whatever he wants. The sage wants Rama to come into the woods and slay a demon that is tormenting him. At first the king tells him no because he does not want to send his son into danger, but then he is reminded that he has promised the holy man whatever he wants. This begins Rama's first adventure, where he receives magic weapons and learns magic spells which he can use to fight and defeat any demon he might encounter in the future. After defeating the demon, Rama goes on to another adventure where he meets his wife Sita. Sita is the perfect wife. She is beautiful and completely faithful to Rama. Rama returns to a perfect life with his perfect wife. Rama is not spoiled or afraid of hardship – quite the opposite is true. He lives up to the ideal in how he interacts with his family and others around him. The king decides that he is tired of being king and is ready to give his throne to Rama, but Rama's brother's mother is persuaded, by an evil servant, to have the king give the crown to her son, unbeknownst to him, and have Rama sent to live the life of a hermit for fourteen years. This is where Rama begins to travel the path of his destiny, which is to destroy Ravana.

This story will be good for my students to read and examine for several reasons. The morals of Rama are exemplary. He is completely honest in everything he does. When he is banished to the forest by his father's other wife, he does not become angry or vengeful but honors his father's promise to this queen. Rama protects and honors Sita throughout the entire epic until the end where he rejects her for spending so much time in Ravana's palace where she has been held captive for a year. Sita dispels any question as to her virtue with a trial by fire. She goes into and comes out of a fire looking better than ever.

The Ramayana will give students insight into the Indian culture. Students will clearly see the value that this culture places on honesty, truth, and justice. Rama and Sita represent the ideals that many Indians, as a culture, have been brought up to believe in. I have one Indian student this year, and he sits in the classroom, does all of his work very well, but he does not speak much to the other students, nor do they speak to him. I have heard students talk about Indian people they encounter in businesses and other professions. They express a lack of trust for these people simply because they do not know anything about them or their culture. People do tend to be afraid of what they do not know. This story will also give my students reminders of the importance of the social values of honesty, truth, and justice. These are values which can never

be stressed enough in any society, especially for young people who are finding their way to adulthood.

This book will be easy for my students to read because the chapters are relatively short and the vocabulary is not too demanding. The challenge for the students will be the foreignness of the material. I believe the average inner city teenager knows very little about India or the people who are from there. It will really capture their interest because it is full of action and adventure, as Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and Sita find their way through the forest and learn how to live there. Sita is stolen by Ravana and Rama must find her, fight a battle with Ravana, and return home to lead his people. The love between Sita and Rama is complete, and yet the cultural differences between the way they interact with each other and the way people interact with each other in our culture are profound. He is her lord and master, which most women today would find completely unacceptable. I expect female students will have something to say about Sita calling Rama her lord and the fact that she must prove herself to him by going into the fire. Another difference between the culture of this story and that of my students is Rama's undying belief in honoring his father at all cost. Rama is begged by his brother who holds the throne to return from the woods and take the throne again, but Rama refuses. I can hear my students now commenting on what a dumb idea that is. This might be a good opportunity to discuss the difference between what appears to be the right thing to do because it seems to be the most advantageous vs. what is right because of a fundamental belief or idea. Teenagers are notorious for disobeying their parents and authority figures, and here they are presented with Rama who values obeying his father no matter what because it is the right thing to do. This is a really interesting topic for students to discuss because it would seem to be so foreign to what many of them are used to. Students can look at why they do or do not listen to their parents. What is the value of listening to their parents, and what is the value of disobeying them? What conclusions can we come to about our society? What will the students expect their own children to do? Rama is fated from birth to grow up and become a great fighter and leader. This point serves as a springboard for a discussion about fate and what part, if any, fate has in their lives. How much control do they have over their own lives and how much of their lives are controlled by events and things that are beyond them? Both of these topics, when discussed at length, will give my students an opportunity to use their critical thinking skills to consider aspects of their lives they may not have considered before.

We will read these stories as a whole class and annotate as we go. Students do not ever get enough opportunities to practice annotating a text as a strategy for understanding a text more fully. Active and careful reading of this interesting and thought-provoking piece will not only help my students to be better readers, but more thoughtful students as they make their way through their academic years.

Monkey: Folk Novel of China

The Monkey King is a Chinese myth about a monkey who takes on the persona of a human. He is born from a stone, but goes forward to become "Handsome Monkey King" from the "Cave of the Water Curtain" on the "Mountain of Flowers and Fruit" (Wu Ch'eng-en 13). The Monkey King is a mixture of social leader and mischief maker. When he is with the other monkeys, he is a good leader who looks out for his people, but when he is on his own out there in the world, he gets into a lot of trouble. As Monkey King he is happy for a long time, until one day he has a thought about the future and decides that he wants to learn immortality. He leaves the monkeys and travels a very long way to find a teacher. Eventually, he finds a teacher and learns about immortality, but in the process he has made so much trouble that the teacher, upon his leaving, tells him, "Wherever you go... I'm convinced you'll come to no good. So remember, when you get into trouble, I absolutely forbid you to say that you are my disciple. If you give a hint of any

such thing I shall flay you alive, break all your bones, and banish your soul to the Place of Ninefold Darkness” (28).

Upon returning the Monkey King finds that a demon has installed himself in his cave and is making life miserable for all the other monkeys. He quickly dispatches the demon, but from there he decides that his group needs to learn self protection. He begins their training in weaponry, but all of their weapons are made of wood, which he eventually feels is not good enough. He leaves his cave to see the Dragon King deep under the water. Monkey King has never learned correct social behavior, so he goes to the Dragon King and demands he give him a weapon. The Dragon King brings out weapon after weapon, but none of them will satisfy the Monkey King. Finally, the underwater people take the Monkey King to their armaments room, where he selects his own weapon. Instead of taking his weapon and leaving, he then demands clothes. When at first the Dragon King tells him he has no clothes to give, the Monkey King threatens him with the magical weapon he has just received. The Dragon King eventually finds clothes for Monkey King, but he is angry and plans to go to the Jade Emperor to tell him of this bad monkey. The Jade Emperor is the supreme heavenly being.

Meanwhile, Monkey King has a dream where he is taken away by two people who take him to the “Land of Darkness” (38). The Monkey King becomes angry when he realizes that he has been called to death and begins tearing the place up. The “Ten Judges of the Dead” come out to speak to him, but he winds up crossing his name and those of his friends off of the list of people who will die (39). The Emperor of the Dead also plans to go to the Jade Emperor to file a complaint. The Monkey King is continually getting himself into trouble. Now he has two people who are really upset and are going up the chain of command to get recompense for his gross social improprieties. He reminds me of so many of my students that I currently have or have had in the past. The Dragon King and the Emperor of the Dead remind me of myself and other teachers who have to go to the office with complaints of an errant student who is out of hand and disrupting the whole class. The Monkey King is young, full of himself, and incorrigible. He does eventually get his comeuppance, but only after insulting the Jade Emperor himself, and that is after the Jade Emperor has been kind to him. I have seen that played out in the school setting, too, where the assistant principal “talks” to the errant student who only laughs because he has not gotten into any real trouble for his misdeeds. Does the Monkey King eventually learn his lesson? Yes, he does, but only after spending 500 years locked up inside a mountain and then having a cap put on his head which he can’t take off. The cap gives him a headache when a Buddhist priest recites words, which he does when Monkey misbehaves.

This story will give my students the opportunity to see that mischief making is not a new event but thousands of years old. I do not know if they will be able to identify with a monkey, but the Monkey King is so like a human that I do not think it will be a big jump. If they do not see the same correlation between the experiences of the Monkey King and some of their classmates who get into trouble, I will certainly point them in the right direction. Kids today think the concept of creating havoc and incarceration are a fairly new phenomenon, but this story will show them that this strategy, right or wrong, has been around for centuries. Also, the concept of fate again appears in this story. Bringing that idea to mind again can give students an opportunity to re-evaluate their previous conclusions to see if the Monkey King’s story changes anything for them. The Monkey King actually travels to the land of the dead and erases the names of his friends, so they will either live forever or live for a very long time. He does not accept what is written but takes definite action to change fate.

In *The Ramayana*, Rama is helped by older, wise magical monkeys, and here is a monkey who is magical but definitely not older or wiser. Students may be able to use the monkey characters from *The Ramayana* to give perspective to the Monkey King. We can compare/contrast the way each is portrayed and determine whether or not we like or respect each

in turn. We can also examine how each is understood by the other characters in the story. In the *Monkey King* the only people who admire him are his own people, but in *The Ramayana*, the monkeys are admired and respected by all. To do this, students will have to use textual evidence to support their conclusions. We can also look at the concept of trickster and consider why he is important to society. What would the world be like if there was no one to make trouble for everyone else? This may sound like this story/lesson would promote chaos, but actually students will hopefully develop a deeper appreciation for and recognize the value of those who would go against the grain.

“Sunjata”

When I chose this selection I had, at the same time, noticed among my students a lack of kindness toward each other in their words and actions. “Shut up stupid!” was a phrase I heard at least two to three times per week. I had decided that I would place the statement, “an act of kindness is never wasted,” on my wall for all to look at and, hopefully, follow throughout the year. In reading “Sunjata,” the act of kindness is used twice as a metaphor for something which once planted can grow and become beneficial, if not lifesaving. In one of these instances, a hunter is looking for a beast which has been terrorizing a village and no one has been able to kill. He comes upon an old woman who is hungry and she asks him for food. He shares his food with her and for that she tells him, “You are a good man, hunter, for giving so generously. May it come to pass that you reap as fine a harvest from these seeds of kindness as you have sown” (Rosenberg 421). This was a strong indicator to me that “Sunjata” was the right story for my students to read, study, and digest.

“Sunjata” is a mythological story from the West African country of Mali. Sunjata was a great warrior/leader of the Manding people. His father was King Nare Maghan, and his mother was a very ugly sorceress named Buffalo Woman (Rosenberg 422). The hunter who helps the old woman at the beginning of the story is actually the other self of the Buffalo woman, who will later become Sunjata’s mother. Sunjata’s future is foretold to King Nare Maghan by a hunter years before he is ever born, and unfortunately his father and mother die before the prediction of his greatness ever manifests itself. Sunjata is slow to be born and must be tricked into exiting the womb (424). Once he is born, he is a cripple who eats enormous amounts of food but does nothing to help his mother. The king’s first wife plots and plans to make her son the heir to the throne, which is easy to do, because no one can imagine a cripple ever becoming king.

Buffalo woman and Sunjata are sent to live just on the outskirts of the village. Buffalo woman is ridiculed by the other mothers for having a crippled son who does nothing to help his mother. She loves her son and does everything within her power to help heal him, but to no avail. When Sunjata turns six, and he is still not walking, his mother feels total despair; she promptly goes home and beats Sunjata. When he asks her why she has beaten him, she tells him that all of the other sons help their mothers, but since Sunjata does nothing to help her, she gets nothing but grief from the other villagers. Sunjata tells her he will walk by nightfall and that he will bring her a certain tree which holds coveted seasoning leaves for the whole village. He tells her to bring him a staff made by the ironsmith. She does as he asks, but when she brings him the staff it breaks in two because of his weight. She goes back to the blacksmith and gets a heavier staff, but this one too is broken under Sunjata’s weight. The blacksmith finally decides that he must make Sunjata’s staff out of gold, and this one works just fine. It does, however, bend into the shape of a bow when Sunjata puts his weight on it. From this moment forward, Sunjata is on his way toward becoming a great leader. He and his mother become favorites of the village, and the king’s first wife becomes more jealous than ever. She tries to get the “nine great witches of Manding, the Ancient Ones, who rule the night and who weave the tapestry of life and death in their dark kingdom” to come and shorten the life of Sunjata (Rosenberg 431). She tells them that Sunjata is unkind and mean-spirited, but when the witches test him by disguising themselves as

old hungry women stealing his vegetables from his garden, he tells them to take as many vegetables as they need. The witches realize how kind and good-hearted Sunjata is and offer him their protection in his life. Nevertheless, Buffalo Woman decides she must take Sunjata away from their home to escape further trouble from the king's first wife. They finally settle in a town called Mema where the king raises Sunjata as he would his own heir.

Meanwhile a terrible ruler has taken over nine kingdoms and brought war and misery to everyone around. He is a sorcerer like Sunjata and can't be killed unless he is struck by a rooster's spur that has been filled with gold and silver dust. Eventually Sunjata gathers a large army, and with the help of his sister, brother, and griot (oral historian), he goes to battle with the wicked king, defeats him, and becomes the great emperor he was foretold long before his birth. This story is quite a ride. It is filled with morals, adventure, magic, and intrigue. The moral aspect of the story has already been mentioned, but there is more. The evil king, Sumanguru Kante, has turned his back on God and man, and for that his end is ill-fated. Good triumphs over evil. The adventure is mixed with the magic. Twice hunters go out to defeat an unstoppable magical beast (one of those hunters was Sunjata), and both times the hunters use magic to defeat the beast. In the battle between Sumanguru Kante and Sunjata, magical owls are used to hold a dialogue between the two combatants. One of the ways that Sunjata endears the villagers to him is by getting the forest animals to bring fire wood to the villagers. On the day he is born, the clouds gather and everyone can hear the thunder and lightning. When Sunjata's griot and his sister serve as spies for Sunjata, they obtain information in anticipation of Sunjata's eventual ascendancy. Sasuma Berete plots to defeat and destroy Sunjata in an effort to derail that which cannot be changed.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: *The Ramayana* -- Pre-reading

Objectives

Students will read to complete a task, to gather information, to be informed, to solve problems, and for pleasure. Students will make inferences such as drawing conclusions and making generalizations or predictions, supporting them with text evidence and experience. Students will also read to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others and the common elements of cultures -- TEKS#110.47(b) (3)(A), #(b)(5)(H) and (b)(9).

Materials Needed

Foreign film from India
Geography textbook
Paper
Pen/pencil
Extra large memo paper

Activity

As a class we will discuss what students know about India and the people of India. We will, as a class, generate a list of information of what students know. This list will be posted for the remainder of the time spent reading *The Ramayana*. Prior to this, students will have been asked to bring their world geography book to class. Together as a class we will read through the information creating a new list of things we have learned about India. Information to be gathered will include geography, temperature, common animals and culture. Culture will include common garments worn, food, religion and language. After this, students will view a Bollywood film to get a better understanding of Indian culture. Students will compare what they have seen with the information gathered to determine whether the film increased understanding of the information

already gathered. To do this we will go back to the original list and use that as a foundation for a web connecting parts of the film with parts of the information already gathered. Students will record this information on their own paper from which a participation grade will be obtained.

Lesson Two: *The Ramayana* -- During reading

Objectives

The student will be given the opportunity to read with confidence, competence and understanding (TEKS # 110.47(a) (1). Students will have the opportunity to locate information in varied sources, to read critically, to evaluate sources and to draw supportable conclusions (TEKS #110.47(a) (1). Students will summarize texts by identifying main ideas and relevant details (TEKS# 110.47((b) (5) (G). Students will construct images based on text descriptions (TEKS # 110.47) (b) (5) (E). Students will practice using test-taking skills such as highlighting and making marginal notes (TEKS # 110.47) (b) (5) (J). Students will apply modes of reasoning such as induction and deduction to think critically (TEKS# 110.47) (b) (8) (E). Students will read to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures (TEKS # 110.47) (b) (9).

Materials Needed

Consumable copy of *The Ramayana*

Paper

Pen/pencil

Highlighter

Activity

As students read they will annotate the text using highlighters to mark important points as to the development of the character Rama and the development of the story. They will also write annotations in the margin. Annotations will include questions, summarizations, definitions for unknown words, inferences, predictions, generalizations, reflections, and personal connections. To start this activity, I will discuss with the students what is meant by character and story development. We will also consider the paradigm of good vs. bad and how that idea might be illustrated across cultures. We will consider how just as they grow and develop through life a character will grow and develop through a story. We will then go review what it means to annotate a text and how this strategy can enhance their comprehension of any text they might choose or be given to read. Each aspect of the annotating process will be defined, discussed, and noted on paper so they can use these concepts on themselves and each other to cement these concepts with emotional involvement. Once students understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we are looking for, then we can begin reading *The Ramayana*. We will read the whole story together annotating as we go.

Assessment

Students' annotations will be graded as we read. This will be a participation grade, but it will insure that students are reading actively and participating with the class. It will also enable me to provide feedback on some of their annotations as they are given more freedom to determine what should be annotated and what should be left alone. At the end of each week a short quiz over what has been read for that week. Students will be allowed to use their annotations to further reinforce the purpose and usefulness of this strategy.

Lesson Three: *The Ramayana* -- After reading

Objective

The student will produce a visual representation that communicates with others (TEKS # 110.46) (3).

Materials Needed

Paper

Pen/pencil

Copy of *The Ramayana*

Markers

Cardboard paper

Any other assorted construction material students might choose or desire to use to complete their goal. This might include dice or something to make a spinner or perhaps flash cards.

Activity

In groups of three students will create a board game using *The Ramayana* as a backdrop for the development of the game. The game could be linear so that as each player moves through the game by either rolling dice or spinning a spinner, he/she could move through the main points of the game. Players could lose points or lose spaces by making decisions which are not in keeping with type of decisions that Rama might make in the story. Students could also make a whole class game using their annotations to generate questions which class teams would have to answer correctly to earn points. The ultimate creation would be up to the student groups. Students will have two to three class periods to complete this project at which time students will be able to play the games generated.

Assessment

The grading rubric will be based on: (a) Students need to show a level of knowledge and understanding of the text. This can be illustrated by how well students are able to use different parts of the story. For example, if a group has a section of the game labeled “the forest,” then that part of the game must show an understanding of why Rama is in the forest and what decisions would he make while he is there. (b) The game must be well constructed in that it must show that care and attention was put into it rather than just thrown together. (c) Another small portion of the grade will come from whether or not other people enjoy playing it. This should help with students wanting to make their product good because not only will it receive a grade from me, but it will be judged by their peers. This type of assessment is my effort to make literature come to life for the students in that they will make it come to life through their own creations and hard work.

Lesson Four: The Monkey King Myth -- During reading

Objectives

Students will read to complete a task, to gather information, to be informed, to solve problems, and for pleasure (TEKS#110.47) (b) (3) (A). Students will organize, learn, and recall important ideas from texts and oral presentations, such as note taking, outlining, using learning logs, rereading, scanning, and skimming (TEKS#110.47) (b) (5) (F). Students will use previous experience to understand (TEKS# 110.4711) (b) (5) (B). Students will find similarities and differences across texts such as explanations, points of view, or themes (TEKS# 110.47) (b) (5) (D).

Materials Needed

Consumable copy of *Monkey*

Paper

pen/pencil.

Activity

In groups of three students will read and annotate the selection. They will read silently for 30 minutes annotating as they read. After 30 minutes they will have seven to ten minutes to compare notes and write two test questions with answers for the class. Each week the annotations will be collected and graded. Every two weeks the student-created test questions will be used by the whole class as an assessment for the whole class.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

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This book offers several myths from China which are entertaining, short and easy to read.