

# Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

The  
Cleveland  
Museum  
of Art  
A world of great  
art for everyone

## THE ROLE OF DRAGONS IN CHINESE CULTURE

### Grade Level

This lesson is intended for grades 3-5. It can be adapted to fit grades K-2.

### Objective

To learn about the symbolic importance of dragons in the Chinese culture.

### Concepts

- The dragon is a mythical creature that has long been the most important symbol of power in China.
- While in the West dragons are depicted as evil, in China they are seen friendly and the bringers of good luck.
- Yin and yang, two principles that since ancient times in China were thought to control everything in the universe. Yin and yang balance each other in that each is the opposite of the other.

### Key Ideas:

- Dragons are deeply rooted symbols in the Chinese culture and have long been associated with the emperor. The imperial throne is called the dragon seat and the emperor's ceremonial robes are called dragon robes.
- The Chinese dragon is depicted as a combination of a number of animals. It is thought to have the horns of a deer, the eye of the devil, the neck of a snake, abdomen of a large rooster, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle, and the paws of a tiger.
- Dragons are seen as the bringer of rain to grow the crops.
- Dragons are credited for the transportation of human souls to the heavens after death.
- In China, dragons are a very popular motif and appear on clothing, signs, flags, and in the shape of kites; life-sized puppets of dragons are an important part of many traditional festivals.
- The Chinese Dragon Boat Festival takes place on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (usually around the summer solstice in June). Dragon boat races are held and rice dumplings filled with dates are traditionally eaten. Dragon boats are long, narrow boats with carved wooden dragons on the front. Each boat is manned by multiple pairs of oarsmen, who row in time to the beat of a drum and a gong.
- The festival honors a great patriotic poet, Qu Yuan (b. 343 BCE.), who was exiled for criticizing the conquering rulers of his state; he drowned himself when the

new rulers destroyed the imperial palace and ancestral temple. In Chinese lore, Qu Yuan is seen as the model of the honest official.

### **Materials**

*Dragon*, c.1250-1279, CMA 1958.427.1

*Jar With Dragon: Cizhou ware*, 1271-1368, CMA 1948.215

*Stem Cup with Sea Monsters*, 1425-1435, CMA 1957.60

*Fluted Cup with Dragon Handle, Qingbai ware*, early 14<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1964.163

*Jar With Dragon Handles*, 581-907, CMA 1962.152

*Ring With Carved Dragons (Ch'ih)*, c. 5<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1963.579

*Dragons Chasing Flaming Pearls*, c. 1200s, CMA 1988.33

*Mirror With Three Dragons*, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, CMA 1995.280

*Mirror With Twin Dragons and Lotus Blossoms*, 1338, CMA 1995.388

Shui, Amy, and Thompson, Stuart. *Food and Festivals: China*. Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1999.

Yolen, Jane. *The Emperor and the Kite*. New York: Philomel Books, 1988.

Empty copier-paper boxes, one for each student

Large assortment of papers in various colors and sizes

Scissors, paint brushes, paints of all colors, beads, and other items for decoration

### **Procedure**

1. Share the artwork from the Cleveland Museum of Art. Ask the students to describe the objects in their own words. Discuss the variety of material used; explain that the metals and jade had great value. Why would artists decorate these expensive materials with dragons? Ask the students if they think the Chinese valued the dragon.
2. Discuss the concept of symbolism. Tell students that symbolism is a meaning added to the concrete definition of objects, people or places that tells the viewer that the objects, people or places also stand for an idea or an emotion. Symbolism is often a personal meaning for something based on one's experiences. It is a "hidden meaning" that is personal and unknown without an explanation. What is the symbol of the United States? The symbols of the major political parties? The symbol of a favorite team?
3. Explain that in China the dragon is the symbol of the emperor, the man who ruled the country. The emperor he was the most powerful man in China and, as his representative, the dragon was the most powerful symbol.
4. Read *Food and Festivals: China* aloud to the class. Share the pictures and discuss the Dragon Boat Festival.
5. Using empty copier-paper boxes, have each student make and decorate their own "dragon boat."
6. Have a boat festival of your own and display the students' completed "boats" for others to see.

### **Enrichment**

- A. Read aloud the book, *The Emperor and the Kite*. Show the pictures and explain that kites are often made in the forms of dragons.
- B. Invite a kite-maker into your classroom to help create their own kites to display throughout the school. (These types of artisans can be found through your local “Artists in the Schools” organization.)

### **Evaluation**

- A. At the completion of the lesson, ask the students to write a letter to a friend describing the role of dragons in the Chinese culture.
- B. For younger students, ask them to draw four ways in which they would find dragons in Chinese culture.

### **Ohio State Standards**

*Social Studies Benchmark 3-5 Program*

Compare practices and products of North American cultural groups.

*Language Arts Benchmark (Writing) by the end of the 3-4 Program:*

Write informal letters that include important details and follow correct letter format.

**This lesson was created by Tonya Salisbury, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Emerson World Languages and Cultures Elementary Magnet School, Westerville, Ohio**