

# Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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## THE RULERS OF SKY AND EARTH THE SYMBOL OF THE DRAGON AND THE TIGER IN CHINESE AND JAPANESE ART

### Grade Level

This lesson is written for grades 9-12; it can be used in a World History or an Art class.

### Purpose

To look at how symbols of power, the dragon and the tiger, are portrayed in the art of China and Japan; students will then compare and contrast this with the Western conception and portrayal of the dragon.

### Concepts

- In the Western world, dragons are portrayed as evil, fire-breathing creatures that must be subdued and killed by heroes. The Western dragon is seen as essentially negative, a symbol of evil and a sign of the devil.
- In Asia, the dragon is a positive force, a symbol of peace and harmony. Chinese and Japanese dragons are considered to be benevolent and auspicious. They breathe water rather than fire and have the power to bring rain, an important attribute in an agricultural society.
- The Chinese dragon is a supernatural, mythical creature that inhabits the sky and the waters and is connected with clouds, rains, and fertility on one hand and the emperor and his venerated ancestors on the other. For the last 4,000 years, the dragon has intertwined itself into all phases of China's social and political life as well as every form of art and literature. The dragon is the most important symbol of power, and the symbol of the emperor; no other animal has occupied such an important place in the thought and art of the Chinese people.
- Like the dragon, since ancient times the tiger has been regarded as an auspicious symbol in China. It is considered the ruler of the earth (in contrast to the dragon who is looked on as the ruler of the sky).
- Unlike the dragon, which is a mythical animal, there were real tigers living in ancient China. In Asia, the tiger is considered the king of the animals, playing the same role as the lion in the West. The four stripes on a tiger's forehead are said to form the character for *wang*, 王 (Prince).
- Both the dragon and the tiger are symbols used in the 12-year Chinese zodiac.

### Key Ideas

- The dragon, or a dragon-like creature, exists in the mythology of practically every civilization. The earliest known depiction of a dragon was found in Mesopotamia and

predates any Chinese dragon image by many thousands of years.

- There are nine types of dragons in all—the Celestial Dragon, Spiritual Dragon, Dragon of the Hidden Treasures, the Winged Dragon, Horned Dragon, Coiling Dragon, the Yellow Dragon, the Dragon King, and the Homeless Dragon. Only the emperor was permitted to wear all nine types as decorations on his robes.
- The five-clawed imperial dragon is a symbol used only by the emperor and represents the male force, or yang, the positive principle of the universe in Chinese thought. (The phoenix, symbol of the empress, represents the female principle, or yin.) The dragon holds first place among the Earth's four great creatures, which also include the phoenix, tiger, and tortoise.
- The majestic dragon flying in and out of the clouds has been the most important design motif in Chinese arts and crafts, such as paintings, textiles, and ceramics. A dragon with a pearl in its beard represents wishes for wealth and good luck.
- In Asia, each of the cardinal directions is traditionally ruled by a mythical creature. The Azure Dragon, a symbol of spring, stands for the East; the White Tiger, a symbol of autumn, rules the West. The tiger is personified by the constellation Orion, which is prominent in the autumn skies.
- The Chinese god of wealth (Chao Gongming) is depicted as riding a black tiger, and in Daoism, the "First Master of Heaven" (Zhang Daoling) rides a tiger as he escorts the dead to their final destination.
- The tiger is also an important symbol in the military. The Chinese call an able general, a "tiger general" and brave soldiers are known as "tiger soldiers."
- Dragon-Tiger Mountain, the name for the legendary palace of the hereditary head of the Daoist religion, is located east of Nanchang (Jiangxi Province).
- Tiger images are painted on the walls of houses and temples to keep danger away. In Chinese folktales, tigers are a symbol of protection, taking care of the good and killing the evil spirits. Tiger charms are often worn to keep away harm and disease. Babies are given colorfully embroidered "tiger shoes" for protection, and images of tigers are frequently used to decorate children's clothing and toys.
- One of the most frequently depicted figures in European art is the legendary St. George, the Dragon Slayer. According to tradition Saint George was born in England in the third century and served in the imperial Roman army in Asia Minor. A Christian, St. George was martyred for his faith, and has come to personify the ideal of martial valor and selflessness.
- Saint George has been the patron saint of England since the Middle Ages, when the English King Edward III (r.1327-1377) made him the patron of the newly formed Order of the Garter. Saint George was also adopted as a protector by several other medieval powers, such as Portugal, Genoa, and Venice, making him a powerful political symbol as well as a religious one.

## **Materials**

### ***Chinese***

*Old Pine Tree*, late 1530s, CMA 1964.43

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

*Tiger*, c.1250-1279, CMA 1958.427.2

### **Japanese**

*Dragon*, mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1985.134.1

*Tiger*, mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1985.134.2

*Dragon*, 16<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1959.136.1

*Tiger*, 16<sup>th</sup> century, CMA 1959.136.2

*Tiger Family*, early 1800s, CMA 1983.3.1-.2

### **European**

*Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, Lucas Cranach (German, 1472-1553), c.1510-1515  
CMA 1999.47

### **Books with Dragon Tales**

*Dragon Tales: A Collection of Chinese Stories*. Beijing, China: Chinese Literary Press, 1988.

*The Enchanted World: Dragons*. New York: Time/Life Books, 1984.

Williston, Theresa Pierce. *Japanese Fairy Tales*. New York: Rand McNally, 1930.

Yep, Laurence. *The Rainbow People*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Drawing paper and markers

## **Procedure: A Two-day Lesson**

### **Day One**

1. Write the word *symbol* on the board and initiate a discussion about the meaning of the word, using some of the ideas given above about the different kinds of symbols. Start by giving this definition:
  - o A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance.Explain that one way a symbol can function is as a visible sign of something invisible; for example, the dragon is a *symbol* of spring, the tiger a *symbol* of autumn, a lion is a *symbol* of courage, an ox of dumbness. Ask students if they can think of other such symbols.
2. Explain also that symbols can be used to represent political or social ideas, making subtle statements that glorify certain individuals for their deeds. Symbols can also be used to point out and depict such social ills as corruption or injustice.
3. Next ask students how they think artists use symbols in their work to convey ideas [the idea that the purpose of art is not necessarily to depict reality but to suggest ideas or emotions through the use of symbolic images; for example, a painting in which both beggars and wealthy aristocrats are depicted might stand as a symbol for the iniquities of the way wealth is distributed].
4. Refer to Key Ideas and the list of CMA images and ask students how they think as Chinese artist might use images of the dragon and the tiger [as the ruler of the air, the dragon is a potent force in nature, as the ruler of the earth, the tiger is a symbol of invincibility].
5. To illustrate the way in which an artist uses symbolism, project the image of *Old Pine Tree*. Ask students whether the artist merely intended to portray the image of a pine tree or if they think he might have had some deeper meaning in mind. Have students draw the outline of *Old Pine* on a piece of paper, paying attention to the details. Discuss the image and ask students what they see. [Explain that in China the dragon is thought to breathe life into nature to create the landscape. Suggest that the image of the pine with its

branches represents a dragon moving through space, and that the artist, Wen Zhengming, believed a dragon spirit inhabited the pine tree.]

6. The images of the pine tree and the dragon are explicitly linked by the poem the artist inscribed on the work. Read the poem aloud and discuss it.

Constantly its form is changing,  
Chances are it never could be caught,  
Its dragon-whiskers bristle like lances  
Rank after rank.

7. Have students look at the *Tiger Family*, a pair of Japanese six-fold screens. Ask them what they see and how they would describe the animals. Has the artist depicted the animals realistically? How does this image reflect the symbol of the tiger as ruler of the animal kingdom? [With determination and strength the tigress combats the forces of nature, the impending danger of a raging stream torrent, to move her family to safer, higher ground. A passive, trusting cub dangles from her massive jaws, while an older sibling clings to the embankment apprehensive about the unfolding drama. The tigress appears to be firmly in control of the situation and is portrayed as immobile as the large boulder that is firmly planted in the strong water currents].
8. Next display the pairs of images by Muqi (CMA 1958.427.1-2) and Soga (CMA 1985.134.1-2) combining dragons and tigers. Tell students that one pair comes from China and the two others from Japan. Can they determine which is which? What are the differences between the Chinese depiction of the dragon and tiger and the Japanese? After the students have made their choices, explain that tigers did not exist in Japan, and that Japanese artists had to follow Chinese models.

## Day Two

1. For homework on Day One, have students research the legends surrounding Saint George and the slaying of the dragon. Tell them that nothing certain is known about either his life or his deeds. Why then has he captured the imagination of the Western world to such a degree and become such a universal symbol for bravery, valor, and unselfish goodness? Ask students why they think St George is almost always portrayed as a youthful knight in full armor?
2. Pass out photocopies of Lucas Cranach's *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*. How does this dragon differ from the Chinese and Japanese dragons they have just looked at?
3. Divide students into groups of 3-4 and assign each group one of the following topics to research: the political and social climate of China in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, the political and social climate of Japan in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (the dates of the works they looked at above), or the place of the dragon in medieval European art and literature.
4. Tell students that the Annual Congress of Asian Dragons will take place in their classroom. The main topic on the agenda is how the Asian dragons should deal with a possible invasion of those peculiar fire-breathing interlopers from the West. How will Chinese and Japanese dragons retain their potency as symbols and maintain the equilibrium of their world in the face of such an attack? Still in groups, have each write a short dialogue to present the concerns of the Chinese and Japanese dragons and a rebuttal and defense by the Western dragons. Ask for volunteers to read the finished dialogues.

## Enrichment

- A. Research why the dragon has such a different reputation in the West and when and how

this dichotomy came about.

- B. Saint George's slaying of the dragon can be seen as a Christian version of the Greek myth of Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a sea monster. Write a one-page paper comparing the two stories.
- C. The production of artworks, such as those listed above, was encouraged by rulers of the royal courts in both Europe and Asia. It was both a symbol of the artistic and intellectual vitality of these courts and a symbol of the ruler's generosity as a patron of the arts. Research and write a one-page opinion paper as to how this patronage differed in Asia and Europe.

### **Ohio State Standards**

#### *People in Societies*

1. Students use knowledge of perspectives, practices, and products of cultural, ethnic, and social groups to analyze the impact on their commonality and diversity within local, national, regional, and global settings.
2. Analyze the influence of different cultural perspectives on the actions of groups.
3. Analyze the ways that contacts between people of different cultures result in exchanges of cultural practice.

**This lesson was developed by Bonnie Morosi, Beachwood High School, Beachwood, Ohio**