



Lesson Three
Images of the Cosmos
High School Grades 9-12

INTRODUCTION

“The appearance of Chinese art is deeply rooted in and reflective of Chinese philosophical traditions. The decoration and design of a robe, a jar or a poster is often a cumulative manifestation of thousands of years of thought.”

--Bruce MacLaren, Associate Curator of Chinese Art

The three themes of the exhibition *Perfect Imbalance* describe the distinctiveness of the Chinese aesthetic. The curator suggests that Chinese art is characterized by:

- A reverence for antiquity—a respect for the past is a vital element contributing to the content and style of Chinese art.
- The focus on rendering images of the cosmos—for centuries Chinese artists have attempted to capture the entire cosmos, our world and the heavens, in one art object.
- The aesthetics of the brush—the calligraphic quality of brushwork is found in many Chinese art forms.

This lesson intends to help students appreciate Chinese aesthetics, particularly the Chinese tradition of depicting images of the cosmos. The Chinese image of the cosmos is distinctive in three ways: *the aesthetics of the cosmos are symmetrical (or near symmetrical), hierarchical, and nature rules as supreme over humans*. By reading a core text from the Chinese philosophical canon, the *Daodejing* (lit. *The Way and its Power*, also Romanized as *Tao Te Ching*), traditionally attributed to Laozi (sometimes Romanized as Lao Tze) students will have the opportunity to reflect upon the Chinese tradition of cosmic imagery, in both art and literature.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will develop an understanding of the aesthetics of the cosmos in Chinese art and literature.
- Students will develop an understanding of important philosophical themes such as the interplay between opposing forces and humankind’s place in the cosmos, in Chinese art and literature.
- Students will read and analyze a primary historical source, the *Daodejing*, and compare their own values to other cultural values.

MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

English Language Arts

Reading and Literature Strand

Standards: 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15

Composition Strand

Standard: 19, 23

Foreign Languages

Cultures Strand

Standard: 4

Comparisons Strand

Standard: 5, 6

Arts

Visual Arts

Standards: 2, 3, 5

LITERACY CONNECTION: Reading Historical Primary Source Material

Background Information: The Daodejing

The primary historical and literary source for this lesson is the *Daodejing* 道德經. There are many excellent translations of this book, but due to the age and ambiguity of the text they are rather different from one another. Following is a selection of excerpts for this unit; if you are interested in the *Daodejing* in its entirety, we have listed a number of translations are listed in the reference section and many are available online.

According to Chinese tradition, Daoism originated with the philosopher Laozi who lived in the sixth century B.C.E. His writings, later canonized as the *Daodejing* (pronounced ‘Daow Day Jing’ or ‘Tao Tey Ching’) is best known by its Chinese name, but can be translated into English as ‘The Book of the Way,’ ‘The Book of the Way and of How it Manifests Itself in the World,’ or, ‘The Classic of the Way and Its Power.’ The *Daodejing* is a collection of short poems that reveal the “art of living”, or how to live a life in perfect harmony with the way things are in the world (Mitchell, 1988, Foreword). The writings in the *Daodejing* became the source for both a philosophical tradition as well as an organized religion. Although both philosophy and religion are called “Daoism” in English, they are two traditions with distinct identities in China.

The *Daodejing* can be deceptively easy to read. Many students will think because they understand each of the words in a short section they have grasped the meaning of the text. It is essential that students take time to engage deeply and repeatedly with the text. It is recommended that you:

- Begin the unit by reading some of the selections as a class.
- Ask students to read passages aloud so that the class can hear it brought to life in different voices *or*
- Have students underline sections that appeal to them, read them aloud in random order, and identify what they think are essential themes.
- Chinese foreign language students may use the side-by-side layout of the poems below to increase their oral vocabulary and character recognition, and take the opportunity to compare the two languages.

Materials Needed: Photocopied packets of each reading.

Time Needed:

60 minutes per reading

60 minutes for completion of discussion questions

Excerpts from *Daodejing*

Translated by J. H. McDonald

<http://www.wriighthouse.com/religions/taoism/tao-te-ching.html>

***Daodejing* 道德經: Poem 1**

道可道，
非常道。
名可名，
非常名。
無名天地之始。
有名萬物之母。
故常無欲以觀其妙。
常有欲以觀其徼。
此兩者同出而異名，
同謂之玄。
玄之又玄，
眾妙之門。

*The Dao that can be described
is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be spoken
is not the eternal Name.
The nameless is the boundary of
Heaven and Earth.
The named is the mother of
creation.
Freed from desire, you can see the
hidden mystery.
By having desire, you can only see
what is visibly real.
Yet mystery and reality
emerge from the same source.
This source is called darkness.
Darkness born from darkness.
The beginning of all understanding*

Daodejing 道德經: Poem 25

有物混成
先天地生。
寂兮寥兮獨立不改，
周行而不殆，
可以為天下母。
吾不知其名，
強字之曰道。
強為之名曰大。
大曰逝，
逝曰遠，
遠曰反。
故道大、
天大、
地大、
人亦大。
域中有四大，
而人居其一焉。
人法地，
地法天，
天法道，
道法自然。

*Before the universe was born
there was something in the chaos
of the heavens.
It stands alone and empty,
solitary and unchanging.
It is ever present and secure.
It may be regarded as the Mother
of the universe.
Because I do not know it's name,
I call it the Dao.
If forced to give it a name,
I would call it 'Great'.
Because it is Great means it is
everywhere.
Being everywhere means it is
eternal.
Being eternal means everything
returns to it.
Dao is great.
Heaven is great.
Earth is great.
Humanity is great.
Within the universe, these are the
four great things.
Humanity follows the earth.
Earth follows Heaven.
Heaven follows the Dao.
The Dao follows only itself.*

Daodejing 道德經: Poem 28

知其雄，
守其雌，
為天下谿。
為天下谿，
常德不離，
復歸於嬰兒。
知其白，
守其黑，
為天下式。
為天下式，
常德不忒，
復歸於無極。
知其榮，
守其辱，
為天下谷。
為天下谷，
常德乃足，
復歸於樸。
樸散則為器，
聖人用之則為官長。
故大制不割。

*Know the masculine,
but keep to the feminine:
and become a watershed to the
world.
If you embrace the world,
the Dao will never leave you
and you become as a little child.
Know the white,
yet keep to the black:
be a model for the world.
If you are a model for the world,
the Dao inside you will strengthen
and you will return whole to your
eternal beginning.
Know the honorable,
but do not shun the disgraced:
embracing the world as it is.
If you embrace the world with
compassion,
then your virtue will return you to
the uncarved block.
The block of wood is carved into
utensils
by carving void into the wood.
The Master uses the utensils, yet
prefers to keep to the block
because of its limitless possibilities.
Great works do not involve
discarding substance.*

Daodejing 道德經: Poem 42

道生一。
一生二。
二生三。
三生萬物。
萬物負陰而抱陽，
沖氣以為和。
人之所惡，
唯孤、寡不穀，
而王公以為稱，
故物或損之而益，
或益之而損。
人之所教，
我亦教之，
強梁者，
不得其死。
吾將以為教父。甫

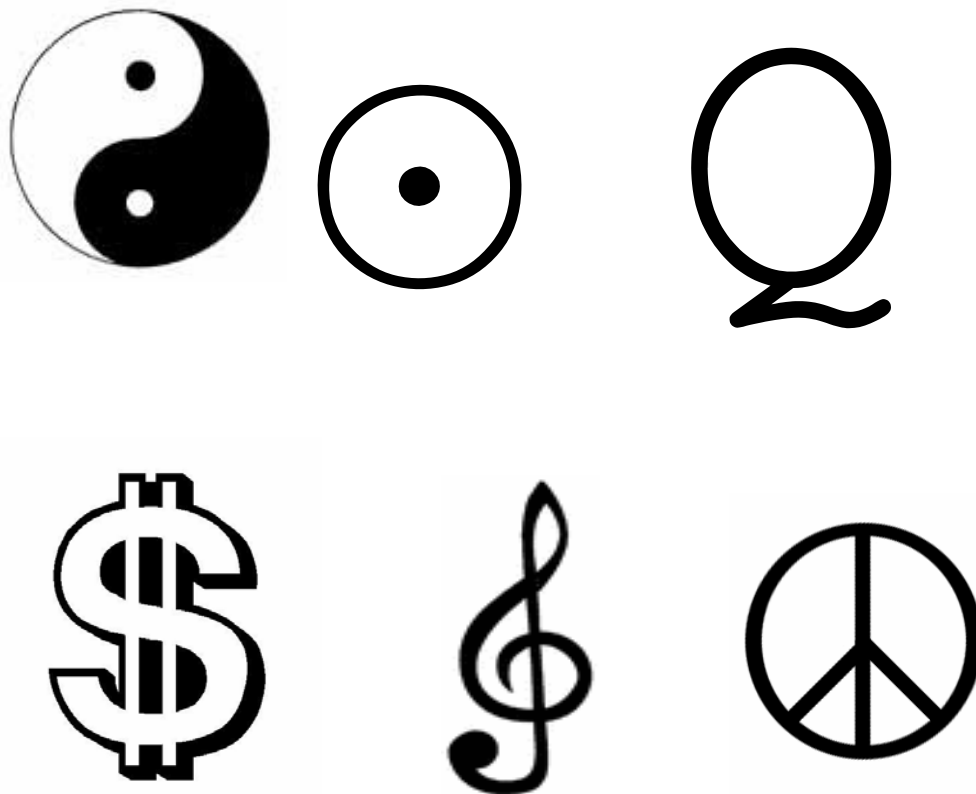
*The Dao gave birth to One.
The One gave birth to Two.
The Two gave birth to Three.
The Three gave birth to all of
creation.
All things carry Yin
yet embrace Yang.
They blend their life breaths
in order to produce harmony.
People despise being orphaned,
widowed and poor.
But the noble ones take these as
their titles.
In losing, much is gained,
and in gaining, much is lost.
What others teach I too will teach:
"The strong and violent will not
die a natural death."*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) According to the curator, one of the themes of *Perfect Imbalance* is that, “near-perfect symmetry and hierarchy are principles present in both the structure of the cosmos as well as individual elements in this gallery. As well, Chinese art works often attempt to portray the entire universe, sometimes symbolically, in a single composition.”

Find examples of symmetry and hierarchy in the *Daodejing*. How does Laozi invoke images of nature to convey a sense of completeness?

2) Laozi talks about the Yin (the forces of the feminine) and the Yang (the forces of the masculine) as blending together to produce harmony. Discuss how the images below may or may not capture this sentiment.



LOOKING AT CHINESE ART AT THE PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM This activity is designed for use at the museum. It may be modified to take place in the classroom by using images from the website.

Pre-visit Activity: Prior to coming to the museum ask students to re-read a couple of passages from the *Daodejing*.

Materials: Clipboards, pencils and paper for sketching and writing.

Time Needed: 45-60 minutes

Procedure:

INTRODUCTORY GROUP DISCUSSION—Begin by gathering in front of an image of the cosmos that is large enough for a group discussion.

- Ask students for their initial impressions and observations.
- Ask students to identify various aspects of the cosmos in the work of art (hierarchy, symmetry, elements of nature).
- As a group, ask students to discuss what inferences they can make about humankind's place in the cosmos based on evidence in the object.

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY—Divide students into small groups of two and three.

- Ask students to explore different images of the cosmos in the exhibition.
 - Have students choose an object to examine more deeply.
 - Ask students to sketch the work, including as much detail as possible.
 - Ask students to discuss the following questions:
 1. Discuss the ways in which the object you are sketching shows symmetry or compositional balance.
 2. How do symmetry and/or hierarchy help the visual interest of the art object? Do you like or dislike the composition? How else could you arrange the elements in the art objects if you wanted to restructure the cosmos?
 3. What inferences about humankind's place in the cosmos can be drawn from the object?
 4. Record relevant information from the object label, explanatory panels and location of the object in the gallery.
 5. Does this information add to your understanding of the image?
 6. What does this information tell you about the values important to the artist and his/her conception of the cosmos?
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ART ACTIVITY

The art activity for this lesson requires that students compose their own image of the cosmos. There are a number of motifs and themes from the exhibition that they should consider before beginning this project:

- ✓ It is appropriate to build on specific compositional themes that have been used in other works of art. For instance, they may use a large central image to demonstrate their most powerful force, while representing less essential forces in diminutive detail.
- ✓ It is appropriate to build on specific symbolic references used in either Chinese or Western art. Since images of the cosmos may attempt to appear eternal, the use of the yin yang image (for instance) might lend some credence to the supposition that this image captures some aspect of the eternal.
- ✓ It is appropriate to consider compositional symmetry and balance. (For a short discussion on these two components of visual composition, please see the glossary of Elementary Lesson, Lesson One).

English Language Arts and Social Studies teachers may request that students provide a written description of the student work that describes in words the choice of symbolic references and compositional motifs.

WRITING ACTIVITY

A further culminating activity asks students to compose their own entry into the *Daodejing*. Here, the class could compose their own poems in the style of the *Daodejing*, but with their own ideas on the “art of living” a meaningful life. We suggest taking a look at the structure of poems 24 or 63 from the Mitchell translation. These poems are good examples of the rhythm and balance of opposites for which the *Daodejing* is famous. Below are two templates that may help scaffold this writing project for English language learners and other learners who would benefit from a structure to guide their writing. A final activity would be to encourage students to illustrate their poem, creating a picture that speaks to the poem’s content, and to the symmetry, hierarchy, and dominance of nature in Chinese aesthetics.

RESOURCES

Chan, A. “Laozi.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2007. Available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/>

Daoist Culture and Information Center < <http://www.eng.taoism.org.hk/> >

McDonald, J.H. “Tao Te Ching – Written by Lao – Tzu: A Translation” 2007. Available: < <http://www.wright-house.com/religions/taoism/tao-te-ching.html> >

Mitchell, Stephen. *Daodejing*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988.

The Houghton Mifflin Dictionary of Biography. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.

Peabody Essex Museum, August 2007

Excerpts from *Daodejing* for Writing Assignment

***Daodejing* 道德經: Poem 24**

He who stands on tiptoe

doesn't stand firm.

He who rushes ahead

doesn't go far.

He who tries to shine

dims his own light.

He who defines himself

can't know who he really is.

He who has power over others

can't empower himself.

He who clings to his work

will create nothing that endures.

If you want to accord with the Tao,

just do your job, then let go.

***Daodejing* 道德經: Poem 63**

Act without doing;

work without effort,

Think of the small as large

and the few as many.

Confront the difficult

while it is still easy;

accomplish the great task

by a series of small acts.

The Master never reaches for the great;

thus she achieve greatness.

When she runs into a difficulty,

she stops and gives herself to it.

She doesn't cling to her own comfort;

thus problems are no problem for her.

Writing assignment scaffold

Name _____

He who _____
(3rd person verb) (object)

doesn't _____
(infinitive verb) (object)

She who _____

doesn't _____

If you want to _____ ,

just _____ .

Based on structure of poem 24 from Mitchell, 1988

Peabody Essex Museum, August 2007

Name _____

_____ without _____ ing,
(infinitive verb) (synonym of 1st verb)

_____ without _____ ing.
(infinitive verb) (synonym)

Think of the _____ as _____,
(adjective) (opposite adjective)

And the _____ as _____.
(adjective) (opposite adjective)

Based on poem 63, of Mitchell, 1988

Peabody Essex Museum, August 2007