

OBJECT IN FOCUS

## Shakyamuni, Laozi, and Confucius



China

Ming dynasty, 1368–1644

Ink and color on paper

24 3/16 x 23 9/16 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1916.109

### Describe

The painting describes a gathering underneath a pine tree next to a bridge. Reading from left to right, the three figures are: Laozi, founder of Daoism; Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni, founder of Buddhism; and Confucius, founder of Confucianism. Confucius approaches from the right, folding his hands in a bow to Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha. Shakyamuni, barefooted, wears a red robe. He can be easily identified by his *ushnisa*, a cranial bump symbolizing wisdom. Laozi stands behind Shakyamuni and looks at him with a happy smile. He holds a scroll in his hands, most likely his *Daodejing* (The Classic of the Way and Virtue).

### Analyze

The composition of the painting seems to have borrowed depictions of the Three Laughters of Tiger Creek, a popular allegorical story about the meeting of three famous figures. The Buddhist monk Huiyuan (334–416) lived in a temple as a recluse. He had vowed never to cross the stone bridge over Tiger Creek. One day, the Confucian poet Tao Yuanming (365–427) and the Daoist philosopher Lu Xiuqing (406–477) came to visit him. The three men became so deeply absorbed in conversation that when Huiyuan eventually walked with his friends to say farewell, he crossed the bridge without noticing it. Hence the three men laughed together, which signifies the harmony among the three main religions of the time. The artist here has cleverly replaced the three historical figures with the three spiritual founders.



Smithsonian

Freer Gallery of Art  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

## Interpret

Confucianism and Daoism are the two great indigenous philosophical traditions of China. Confucianism became accepted as state ideology in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Daoism came to the fore as a popular belief system around the same time. Meanwhile, Buddhism was introduced to China from India. The three beliefs had since then both conflicted with and complemented each other. The actual blending of the three philosophies did not initiate until the tenth century. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when this painting was created, the harmony among the three faiths became a prevalent thought.

## Inquire

- Write your own narrative version of the Three Laughers of Tiger Creek story. What might the philosophers have been talking about?
- The moral of the Three Laughers of Tiger Creek story reminds us that rules we make for ourselves can be too constraining or unhealthy, and this limits our knowledge or ability to grow. List some ways people may impose unrealistic or unhealthy expectations for themselves. List healthy behaviors they could engage with instead.
- Choose one of the three religious and moral leaders depicted here—Laozi, Siddhartha Gautama, and Confucius—read about their life and teachings, and take notes of what you consider to be most important. Then, gather with a small group of classmates who picked one of the other figures. Together, discuss and share what you learned.
- Research the practices and continuing influence of each of these three religious and philosophical traditions (Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) in China today.

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1916.109/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



