

Philosophies of China

How would you describe the depiction of each figure (attire, facial expression, body gesture, etc.)?

Shakyamuni	
Laozi	
Confucius	

How does the depiction of each figure relate to their respective philosophy?

The ideas of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism still have a great impact in China today. Imagine that the three thinkers in this painting are discussing topics of today’s world. What might each of the thinkers—Shakyamuni, Laozi, and Confucius—have to say based on their philosophical beliefs? The last row in the table is left blank so that you may think of your own topic.

	Shakyamuni (Buddhism)	Laozi (Daoism)	Confucius (Confucianism)
Ruling an empire			
Teenagers using cell phones in class			

The three thinkers may have had different views on many topics, but this painting also depicts harmony among them. Do you see any overlaps in their ways of thinking? How might the three thinkers achieve harmony?



Background Information

The Hundred Schools of Thought began in the sixth century BCE and ended with the rise of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) under Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. The period is so named due to the various philosophies that emerged in a time when many scholars were enthusiastically discussing morality and the nature of humanity. With the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050–221 BCE), feudalism became common practice along with the popularization of the belief in the Mandate of Heaven rather than the preceding Shang dynasty's belief in ancestor worship. With more people and rulers concerned with how to gain the Mandate of Heaven, people consulted scholars on how to behave morally and rule justly. The Hundred Schools of Thought period intersects with the Warring States Period in China (475–221 BCE), which was a time of political disunity and instability.



Daoism

In the sixth century BCE, Laozi became a popular figure and is credited as the founder of Daoism. Daoism posits that people should allow themselves to be guided by the Dao (Way). Daoism did not have strict rituals and rigid practices; instead, it promoted spontaneity and harmony. A popular book of Daoist teachings is the *Daodejing*.

Image: Laozi Delivering the Daodejing (detail). China, Ming dynasty, 16th century. Ink on paper. 9 3/4 x 20 3/8 in. Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1968.21



Confucianism

Kong Fuzi (551–479 BCE)—known in the West as Confucius—is the founder of Confucianism, another major philosophy that originated in China. Confucianism emphasized propriety in social relationships, filial piety, and order. A popular book of Confucian teachings is the *Analects*, which was written posthumously by Confucius's disciples.

Image: Confucius and Buddha Cradling a Qilin (detail). China, Zhe School, Ming dynasty, 15th century. Hanging scroll mounted on panel; ink and color on silk. 39 5/16 x 24 3/8 in. Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1916.73



Buddhism

Buddhism was founded some time in the sixth century BCE by Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, sometimes also known as Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama. Buddhism emphasizes resisting materialism and worldly desires to find peace, enlightenment, and nirvana. The basic tenets of Buddhism are conveyed in the eightfold path and the Four Noble Truths.

Though Buddhism began in ancient India, it made its way to China in the first century CE. This makes Buddhism different from Daoism and Confucianism, both because it did not originate in China and because it gained popularity in China much later than the former two philosophies. However, Buddhism became an influential

part of Chinese religion and culture and was able to overlap with followers of Daoism due to some similarities in beliefs. Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism began to converge around the tenth century CE. Today, the three philosophies are integral to ideological and material culture in China.

Image: Dehua ware image of seated Buddha. China, Fujian province, Dehua kilns. Ming dynasty, late 16th–mid-17th century. Glazed clay. 6 3/4 x 5 1/16 in. Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1904.111



About the Painting

The painting *Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Confucius* is an allegorical depiction of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek, a proverbial story about a secluded Buddhist monk, Huiyuan (334–416 CE), who refuses to cross the bridge over Tiger Creek. A Confucian poet, Tao Yuanming (365–427 CE), and Daoist philosopher Lu Xiuqing (406–477 CE) come to visit Huiyuan one day and the three engage in such deep conversation that Huiyuan does not realize it when he crosses the bridge to bid his company farewell. The three men share a laugh, representing the harmony of the three philosophies.

Image: *Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, 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

Vocabulary

allegory: a form of expression that uses symbolic figures to represent a hidden truth or meaning.

Buddha: literally, “Awakened One”; a being who has awakened to the true reality of existence and is thereby liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. A Buddha teaches others the path to Enlightenment.

Confucianism: system of ethical and philosophical teaching associated with the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE). He developed a system of thought that stressed the importance of good government, social order, and harmonious and moral living.

Daoism: (dow-ihz-uhm) a philosophy based on the ideas of the Chinese thinker Laozi, who taught that people should be guided by a universal force called the Dao (Way).

feudalism: a social system that maintains a class hierarchy, usually with peasants providing goods and services to wealthy land-owning aristocrats in exchange for protection and shelter.

filial piety: respect for one's parents and elders.

Mandate of Heaven: a belief that a ruler is bestowed a right to rule by divine powers.

morality: the ability to differentiate between right and wrong behavior.

nirvana: a spiritual state of perfect peace beyond selfish attachments to worldly possessions; reaching nirvana frees one's soul from the Buddhist cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Shakyamuni: (Shah-kya-moo-knee) literally, “Sage of the Shakya Clan,” the Historical Buddha. His given name was Siddhartha (sid-har-ta) Gautama. He lived in northeastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE.

Siddhartha Gautama: the given name of Shakyamuni, literally “Sage of the Shakya Clan,” the Historical Buddha. He lived in northeastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE