

LESSON PLAN

Philosophies of China



Subjects: Social Studies, Language Arts

Grade Levels: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: 60–90 minutes

Dynasty: Ming (1368–1644)

Object Type: Painting

Theme: Traditions and Belief Systems

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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

Objective

Students will look closely at a painting depicting the Buddha, Laozi, and Confucius and make inferences about the convergence of the three belief systems during the Ming dynasty.

Essential Questions

- What are the basic tenets of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism?
- How can Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism integrate harmoniously?
- How can art have the power to produce or affirm belief systems of its time?

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.

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*.

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.

Buddhism was founded some time in the sixth century BCE by Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, who is also sometimes 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.

The painting *Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Confucius* (F1916.109) 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.

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 landowning 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.

Procedure

1. Display *Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Confucius* (F1916.109). Have students share some observations at first glance. Be sure to write them down where all students can see.
2. Distribute and read the **Background Information** and the **Student Worksheet**.
3. Have students in small groups of three to five complete the **Student Worksheet**, and then share ideas aloud as a whole class.
4. Guide students through the **Discussion Questions** as a class.
5. Choose an extension activity to extend learning or to assess students' understanding.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What colors did the artist use?
- What sorts of objects or figures do you notice?

Analyze

- What is the mood of this painting? What elements of the painting create this mood?
- What do the figures seem to be doing?

Interpret

- Which figure is Buddha, which is Laozi, and which is Confucius? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How is the depiction of each figure related to their respective school of thought?
- What does this painting portray about life during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), when this painting was made?

Inquire

- Why might it be important to a society to have different schools of thought?
- Why might it be important to a society to have harmony among different schools of thought?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Create a new rendition of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek. Choose three people who differ in systems of belief (three different cartoon characters, three different politicians, etc.) who cross a bridge together in harmony.

English Language Arts

- This painting is a talking point for allegories. Have students write a narrative fiction of the story of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek using the painting as the allegorical inspiration and Shakyamuni, Laozi, and Confucius instead of the original story's characters of Huiyuan, Tao Yuanming, and Lu Xiuqing.

Social Studies

- Conduct more research on the differences in thought between Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. What did each religion/philosophy claim was the best way to rule in China?
- Watch the video “Qing Ming Festival” from the “Teaching China with the Smithsonian” website: <https://asia.si.edu/learn/for-educators/teaching-china-with-the-smithsonian/videos/qing-ming-festival/>. What are some beliefs that influence Chinese tradition? Conduct some research on how these thoughts influence life in China today.

Resources

The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/76663>.

National Geographic. “Chinese Religions and Philosophies,” 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/chinese-religions-and-philosophies>.

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

