

LESSON PLAN

Lucky Symbols



Subjects: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Grade Levels: Elementary School, Middle School/Junior High

Duration: 60–90 minutes

Dynasty: Han (206 BCE–220 CE), Qing (1644–1911)

Object Types: Jade, Lacquer, Sculpture

Themes: Daily Life and Folkways; Animals and Nature

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Disk (bi) with knobs, feline, and dragon

China, Eastern Han dynasty, 100–220

Jade (nephrite)

8 11/16 x 6 x 1/4 in; Diam (hole): 1 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1916.155



Box Decorated with Images of Spring and Longevity

China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign, 1736–1795

Carved red, green, and yellow lacquer on wood core

6 1/2 x 17 5/16 x 17 5/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1990.15a–e



Possibly Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) in the guise of a Buddha

China, Late Ming or early Qing dynasty, 17th–18th century

Ivory (fossil mammoth ivory) with traces of gilding, ink, and lacquer

18 x 5 1/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1957.25a–b



Smithsonian

Freer Gallery of Art
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

Objective

Students will look closely at different symbols of luck used throughout various dynasties in China and examine how luck contributed meaning to objects.

Essential Questions

- What are symbols and how are they used?
- What are symbols used in Chinese culture?
- Why are symbols for luck common in different cultures?

Background Information

“Disk (bi) with knobs, feline, and dragon” (F1916.155) has a symbol of a dragon and a feline, both representing good luck. The dragon and feline are depicted among curved lines meant to represent clouds. Clouds are another symbol of good fortune in Chinese arts. The function of jade disks is not entirely known, though the rarity of jade and the intricacy of the disk suggests it was an item of luxury.

“Box Decorated with Images of Spring and Longevity” (F1990.15a–e) contains images of the God of Longevity along with a deer—the symbol for success and long life. The symbol of an endless knot reiterates longevity. The clouds and dragon symbols once again represent good fortune, enabling this decorative box to symbolize success and longevity. This lacquered box is thought to have been used by the Qing dynasty Qianlong Emperor. The box may have been made for presenting food or may have been another ceremonial gift for a birthday or the Chinese New Year.

“Possibly Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) in the guise of a Buddha” (F1957.25a–b) is an ivory statue of the bodhisattva of compassion. The figure displays the *wan* 卐 symbol on the chest, which, in this context, is a symbol for “countless blessings.” (Later, this symbol was appropriated for different meanings.) There is a dragon by the figure’s feet and cloud and floral patterns on the figure’s garments.

See “[A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols](#)” in the **Resources** section to learn more about common symbols in Chinese art.

Vocabulary

symbol: a mark, image, or character that represents another thing.

Procedure

1. Ask students what it means to be “lucky.” Write down student answers as anchors to working definitions.
2. Ask student volunteers to draw a few “lucky” symbols. (Definition: a symbol can be a mark, image, or character that represents another thing. A symbol for luck would be any mark, image, or character that represents luck.)
3. Show students images of “Disk (bi) with knobs, feline, and dragon” (F1916.155) and “Box Decorated with Images of Spring and Longevity” (F1990.15a–e). *Note: If you use “Possibly Boddhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) in the guise of a Buddha” (F1957.25a–b) with students, be prepared to discuss how the *wan* 卐 symbol has been appropriated throughout history. See **Background Information**.
4. Guide students through the **Discussion Questions** as a class. If you would like to have students take notes during the class discussion, use the **Lucky Symbols Worksheet**.
5. Invite students to use the zoom feature for each object on the Collections website to see the details. Have them locate the following luck symbols on the objects: feline; dragon; clouds; wan
 - a. <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1990.15a-e/>
 - b. <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1916.155/>
 - c. <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1957.25a-b/>
6. Watch the “Spring Festival, Lunar New Year” video on the “Teaching China with the Smithsonian” website to learn more about an important celebration for prosperity and traditions for good luck: <https://asia.si.edu/learn/for-educators/teaching-china-with-the-smithsonian/videos/spring-festival-lunar-new-year/>. Ask students, “What additional good luck symbols did you learn about from this video?”
7. Choose an extension activity to extend learning or to assess students’ understanding.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What material(s) is this object made of?
- What color(s) is this object?
- How would you describe this object’s shape?
- Do you notice any symbols, images, and/or writing on the object?

Analyze

- For what do you think this object was used? Why do you think so?
- For whom do you think this object was made? Why do you think so?

Interpret

- Why might the artist have put that symbol, image, and/or writing on the object?
- What symbols on this object do you think represent good luck? What makes you think that?

Inquire

- What are other symbols for luck in different cultures?
- In what situations might someone want to have good luck? How do you think that influences which objects get decorated with good luck symbols?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Use the worksheet **Decorate a Lucky Vase**, having students incorporate lucky symbols from China and other cultures and countries. Refer to [A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols](#) for more commonly used Chinese symbols.

Social Studies

- The Lunar New Year is a time of celebration in many cultures, including China. Have students research the rituals, objects of, and ways to celebrate this holiday, as well as how different elements pertain to luck in the new year.

Resources

A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols:

<https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LP23WS1-Symbolism-in-Cloisonne-FA3.pdf>.

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





