

LESSON PLAN

Beliefs and Values in Ancient China: Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism



Subject: Chinese Language Arts

Grade Level: High School

Duration: 85 minutes

Dynasty: Ming (1368–1644)

Object Type: Painting

Themes: Traditions and Belief Systems; Language and Stories

Contributed by: Yuanyuan Gao, DC International School, Washington, DC

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

Objectives

Students will describe the story and the meaning of this painting. They will research and present about the founders, beliefs, and values of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism.

Essential Questions

- Who are the founders of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism?
- What are the beliefs and values of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism?
- Why are beliefs and values important?
- How do beliefs and values influence our lives?

Background Information

The painting shows 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 *ushnisha*, a cranial bump that symbolizes wisdom. Laozi stands behind Shakyamuni and looks at him with a happy smile. He holds a roll of book in his hands, most likely his Daodejing (The Classic of the Way and Virtue).

The composition of the painting seems to have borrowed from depictions of The Three Laughters at 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 and had vowed to never 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 Huiyuan. 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 he had done so. Hence, the three men laughed together, signifying the harmony among the three main religions of the time. The artist of this painting has cleverly replaced the three historical figures with the three spiritual founders.

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 have since then both conflicted with and complemented each other. The actual blending of the three philosophies did not begin 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.

Vocabulary

信仰 *xìnyǎng*: belief, faith

宗教 *zōngjiào*: religion

价值观 *jiàzhíguān*: value

佛教 *fójiào*: Buddhism

儒教/儒家 *rújiào/rújiā*: Confucianism

道教 *dàojiào*: Daoism

释迦摩尼 *shìjiāmóní*: Shakyamuni, founder of Buddhism

老子 *lǎozǐ*: Laozi, founder of Daoism

孔子 *kǒngzǐ*: Confucius, founder of Confucianism

佛经 *fójīng*: Buddhist scriptures

道德经 *dàodéjīng*: Daodejing (The Classic of the Way and Virtue)

论语 *lúnyǔ*: Analects

Procedure

1. Students will preview the key vocabulary terms and practice using them in sentences.
2. Activity 1: Students will receive a reading comprehension worksheet. They will read the background information and answer the **Interpret** questions on the worksheet.
3. Activity 2: Oral Task. Students will receive a worksheet that includes the **Describe** and **Analyze** questions and will use them to describe information about the painting. They will also answer the **Inquire** questions that are related to beliefs and make connections to their own identities and experiences.
4. After completing the worksheet, students will record themselves speaking and post the recordings online. (Online recording tools: <https://vocaroo.com/>, <https://online-voice-recorder.com/>)
5. Activity 3: Research Project. Students will be divided into three groups and each group will receive one of the following three religions to research: Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism. Students will research about the founder, the origin, and the beliefs and values of those religious and philosophical traditions in China. Also, students will research the practices and continuing influences of each of these three religious and philosophical traditions in China today.
6. After collecting the research information, students will make slides online and present their findings to the class. (Presentation tools may include: Google Slides, Power Point, Prezi, etc.)

Discussion Questions

Describe

- Who are the three people in the painting?
- What are the figures doing?
- What do you notice about the background?

Analyze

- What's the story of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek?
- How do the elements of the story of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek connect to this painting?
- How does this painting portray Laozi, Confucius, and Siddhartha Gautama?

Interpret

- Who are the founders of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism?
- Where did Buddhism originate?
- When were Daoism and Confucianism founded in China?

Inquire

- Why are beliefs and values important?
- How do beliefs and values influence our lives?
- Why do artists portray beliefs and values in works of art?

Extensions

English Language Arts

- Write your own narrative version of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek. What might the philosophers have been talking about?

Social Studies

- Choose one religious or moral leader in your own culture and conduct research about the beliefs and values of that person.

Physical Education

- The moral of The Three Laughers at Tiger Creek reminds us that rules we make for ourselves can be too constraining or unhealthy, which limits our knowledge and ability to grow. List some ways people may impose unrealistic or unhealthy expectations on themselves. List healthy behaviors they could engage with instead.

Resource

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

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

