

LESSON PLAN

Learning *Jueju* through Chinese Painting: A Branch of Bamboo



Subject: Chinese Language Arts

Grade Level: High School

Duration: 85 minutes

Dynasty: Yuan (1279–1368) or Ming (1368–1644)

Object Types: Album, Painting

Themes: Animals and Nature; Language and Stories

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A Branch of Bamboo

Ni Zan 倪瓚, inscription by Qian Weishan

China, Yuan or Ming dynasty, ca. 1369

Ink on paper

11 9/16 x 11 7/16 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1915.36d

Objectives

Students will analyze the painting *A Branch of Bamboo* along with the poetry printed on it. Then, students will create their own Chinese quatrain, a *jueju*.

Essential Questions

- What's unique about Ni Zan's painting?
- What does bamboo symbolize?
- What are the features of *jueju*?
- How do poems and paintings complement each other in Chinese art?

Background Information

Ni Zan (Chinese: 倪瓚; 1301–1374) was a Chinese painter during the Yuan and early Ming dynasties. Along with Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, and Wang Meng, he is one of the Four Masters of the Yuan dynasty.

Bamboo has been depicted in Chinese painting for more than a thousand years. Along with the pine and the plum, bamboo is a member of the Three Friends of Winter due to its ability to bear the harshest of winters. It is also one of the Four Gentlemen (the other three being the plum, the orchid, and the chrysanthemum) due to the moral virtues it represents. The hollowness of the bamboo stalk symbolizes tolerance and open-mindedness, and its flexibility and strength signify the human values of cultivation and integrity: one yields but does not break. All of these virtues make bamboo a very popular subject in Chinese painting, especially among scholar-artists.

The poet Qian Weishan (act. 1341–ca. 1379) added a few brief lines of poetry in the upper left corner of the painting to honor Ni Zan after his death:

My old friend knew how to sketch bamboo,
And patterned his approach upon Wen Tong [eleventh-century painter].
Calmly he looked out the western window,
And the cool wind filled his page with fall.

—Translation by Stephen D. Allee

This type of poem, called *jueju* or Chinese quatrain, is a type of *jintishi* (“modern form poetry”) that grew popular among Chinese poets in the Tang dynasty (618–907), although it is traceable to earlier origins. *Jueju* poems are always quatrains—or, more specifically, they are always a matched pair of couplets, with each line consisting of either five or seven syllables.

Vocabulary

竹子 **zhúzi**: bamboo

诗人 **shīrén**: poet

画家 **huàjiā**: painter

书法家 **shūfǎjiā**: calligrapher

山水画 **shānshuǎhuà**: landscape painting

水墨画 **shuǐmòhuà**: ink painting

绝句 **juéjù**: Chinese quatrain

五言 **wǔyán**: five Chinese characters in a verse

七言 **qīyán**: seven Chinese characters in a verse

押韵 **yāyùn**: rhyme

Procedure

1. Review the vocabulary terms as a class.
2. Students will observe the painting and write down answers to the **Describe** questions.
3. Reading comprehension. Students will read the background information and answer questions on the worksheet.
4. Read the poem out loud. Students will be divided into four groups and each group will receive one verse of the poem. Within groups, students will read and analyze the meaning of the poem and then discuss the connection between the poem and the painting using the **Inquire** questions.
5. Divide students into pairs. Ask students to write down what they have noticed about the form of *jueju*. Students will use the **Analyze** and **Interpret** questions to guide their pair discussions. Then, the teacher will introduce the basic rules of creating a *jueju* in Chinese.
6. Students work in groups of four. With the theme of animals and nature, each group will write a verse of a five-syllable poem. If students' language proficiency is high level, they are also required to make the poem rhyme. Students will post their work on [Padlet](#) so other groups can read it.
7. Each student will create their own *jueju* (either five-syllable or seven-syllable) and present it to the class.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What do you see?
- What does this work of art make you think about?
- What does this work of art make you wonder?

Analyze

- What is *jueju*?
- How is *jueju* different from the other poetry you have read?
- Why do you think the Chinese literati loved painting bamboo?

Interpret

- Who wrote this poem? Why did they write it?
- How does this poem connect to the painting?
- What meaning does this poem express?

Inquire

- How do poems and paintings complement each other in Chinese art?
- In what ways does the branch look like bamboo? In what ways is the bamboo simplified or less realistic?
- What is the overall feeling of this painting? What emotions does it elicit?
- What plants that grow in your environment would you use to symbolize flexibility and strength?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Students discuss the **Inquire** questions to explore and explain the meaning of bamboo in the painting. Then, they will draw their own symbol of flexibility and strength.
- After students create their own *jueju*, ask them to use a paint brush, ink, and rice paper to illustrate their poem with a complementary painting.

English Language Arts

- Ask students to research and select one quatrain in English that they like. Students need to compare and contrast the English quatrain and Ni Zan's *jueju* and give a presentation about their findings regarding form, structure, and the meaning of the poem.

Resources

Ni Zan and His Bamboo in Yuan Dynasty: http://www.360doc.com/content/17/0216/14/40375546_629444400.shtml.

绝句: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BB%9D%E5%8F%A5/96019>.

“How to Paint Black Ink Bamboo Leaves”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcxYyXyzVPk>.

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

