

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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DAOIST IMMORTALS

Grade Level

7th-10th grade

Objective

To introduce Daoism and the Daoist Immortals

Concepts

- Immortality—the ability to live forever; life without end
- Daoism—a polytheistic religion with three levels of Immortals:
 - First level (highest)—those who were immortal before the earth was created: the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity of Daoism who presides over Heaven; Dao Zhun, who controls the relations between the universal principals yin and yang; and Lao-tzu, the author of the most important Daoist text
 - Second Level—those who, after the creation of the earth, were once mortal and became the perfect Immortals, e.g. the Eight Immortals
 - Third level (lowest)—the divinities of popular religion that are recognized by Daoism, e.g. the Kitchen God
- The Eight Immortals are:
 1. Zhong Lijani—chief of the Immortals
 2. Zhang Guo Lao—believed to have magic powers so he can make himself invisible
 3. Han Xiangzi—patron of musicians
 4. Cao Guojiu—the Emperor’s brother-in-law and patron of actors
 5. Lan Caihe—patron of Chinese florists
 6. He Xiangmu—the only female immortal, depicted carrying a lotus, the symbol of purity
 7. Lu Dongbin—patron of scholars, uses superhuman powers to kill dragons and transform objects
 8. Li Tieguai—most beloved Immortal, patron of Chinese herbal doctors
- The Chinese honor these Immortals in many ways, but particularly in their literature and their artwork.
- Dao—the void from which everything in the universe came; also “the Way” (see Key Ideas)
- *Qi*—pronounced “chee;” the vital life force within each person that the Chinese traditionally consider the basic force of the universe.
- Yin and yang- two principles that since ancient times in China were considered to be the fundamental principles that control everything in the universe
- Yin— female, passive, dark, cold, negative

- Yang— male, active, light, hot, positive
- Elixir—a magic potion
- Alchemy—in Daoism, a set of procedures and principles meant to prolong life; the attempt to find the elixir of immortality

Key Ideas

- Daoism: One of the three main religious traditions in China, along with Confucianism and Buddhism. Daoism stresses personal freedom and harmony with nature. It is based on the ideas of (perhaps legendary) philosopher Lao-tzu, who is thought to have been born around 604 BCE; later Daoism was transformed into a religion focused on the quest for immortality and reverence for a group of divine beings called the Immortals.
- Dao: The Way, the ultimate source of everything in the universe, encompassing all life. It is the undivided unity of existence.
- Lao-tzu: the first sage of Daoism, who is credited with writing the most important Daoist text, *Classic of the Way and Its Power (Daodejing)*, although the text was not actually written down until the 3rd century BCE. By the 2nd century CE, Lao-tzu had been transformed into a superhuman, or Immortal, whose worship was ritually organized.
- *Wu wei*: Creative non-action, a principle of Lao-tzu. The attitude that one should be accepting of what life brings, and that there is a cycle to life that should not be challenged.
- The Eight Immortals: Eight human beings who were believed to have gained immortality through their strenuous efforts at meditation, performing good deeds, and making sacrifices. Daoists believe they are able to travel between the realms of Paradise of Earth.
- Yin and yang: Complementary forces that reflect natural harmony; one cannot exist without the other. Often symbolized by the Tai Chi diagram, a circle divided into equal black and white swirling forms.
- According to custom, the Kitchen God, who is also known as the Stove Prince (*Caozhun*), is believed to observe the good and evil done by every person in a Chinese household. A piece of red paper decorated with his picture, or a long red banner inscribed with his name, is hung in a shrine over the kitchen stove. Offerings are made to him several times a month.
- At the end of each year, the Kitchen God supposedly travels to Heaven to make his report to the Jade Emperor, the supreme God of Heaven, on what has happened on Earth during the year. Before he leaves, the male members of the household make offerings of cakes with sweet fillings so he will report favorably on the doings of the family members.
- The lips of his paper image are smeared with honey and the paper is ceremoniously burned. Firecrackers are lit to speed him on his way. The shrine remains empty for a week, while he is on his journey; he is then welcomed back and a new image is hung in his shrine.
- Another custom is to offer a lotus sticky cake to the Kitchen God in hopes that the sticky cake will make him unable to tell all the misdeeds of the family.
- The Kitchen God is still venerated by many people today (mostly in rural areas).

Materials

Daoist Immortal Zongli Quan, 1368-1644, CMA 1976.13
Shoulao (The God of Longevity), ca. 1580-1644, CMA 1940.691

Bowl with "Land of Taoist Immortals" Scene, 1426-1435, CMA 1962.260

Plate with Isle of the Immortals, 1723-1735, CMA 1956.709

Taoist Immortal He Xiang, 18th century, CMA 1976.60.a

Dish with Zhang Guolao, 1662-1722, CMA 1989.306

The Daoist Immortal Hanshan, 15th century, CMA 1991.117

Dish with Laozi Riding a Water Buffalo (interior); Pavilion and Immortals in Rocky Landscape (exterior), 1723-1735, CMA 1989.315

A picture of the Kitchen God, honey

Stepanchuk, Carol. *Red Eggs & Dragon Boats, Celebrating Chinese Festivals*. Berkeley, CA: Pacific View Press, 1994.

Little, Stephen. *Taoism and the Art of China*. Chicago, IL: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2000.

Little, Stephen. *Realm of the Immortals: Daoism in the Arts of China*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1988.

Handout: Eight Immortals (names and descriptions)

Sources: "Daoism." Calliope. Oct 2000.

Procedure

- 1) Present students with an overview of Daoism, its strong ties to nature, and the concept of *wu wei*.
- 2) The Daoist belief in the Immortals:
 - Connect immortality with our own superheroes on television (e.g. Spiderman, Batman, Superman). Ask the students to discuss their own favorite superheroes and why they are their favorites.
 - Then explore who the Eight Immortals are. Distribute Handout 1, which summarizes the Eight Immortals in chart format giving the name and a brief description. Ask the students to look over this chart carefully and using a highlighter, highlight the symbolism of each Immortal that could be reflected in pieces of art. Discuss what they highlighted for each Immortal.
 - Show pictures of the Eight Immortals from books and Internet sources and see if students can identify the Immortals from the chart's descriptions.
 - Show each of the CMA slides (see Materials above). Discuss each one with respect to how each Immortal is depicted. Ask how their well-known characteristics (see chart) are illustrated.
- 3) Be sure to explain the means of attaining Daoist immortality:
 - Becoming an Immortal is achieved by nurturing and purifying the spirit through nature and meditation.
 - And elaborate system of alchemy was also once widely used. These were thought to produce elixirs or pills that would guarantee eternal life.
 - Immortals maintain earthly bodies as spiritual beings.
 - Immortality has no earthly bounds; Immortals may ascend the clouds into the heavens, and travel freely between the human world and the Land of the Immortals.
- 4) Show the class the image of *Daoist Immortal Zhongli Quan*: Introduce Zhongli Quan as the head of the Daoist Immortals. Ask students to note the large forehead, the bulging eyes. Lead the students in examining the following:

- What type of man do you think Zhongli Quan might have been? Do the forehead and bulging eyes prompt any thoughts? Are these things exaggerated to make a point?
 - Does his clothing give you any clues to his status in his human life?
 - What is he holding? What is in the bottle? (elixir)
 - What elements of nature exist in his clothing or the background? What Daoist ideals might they convey?
- 5) View *Shoulao, the God of Longevity*. How does this sculpture express the ideals of Daoism and the Immortals? (The large forehead—heightened spirituality, his age—living a long life, the walking stick—his earthly travels, the leaf fan—an element of nature, the flowing Daoist robe.)
 - 6) View *Bowl with “Land of Daoist Paradise” Scene* and *Plate with Isle of the Immortals*.
 - 7) After they have viewed these pieces, allow time to take notes on what is depicted. Students should be paired up to answer these questions together:
 - Having studied the first two representations of immortals in human form, what do these two scenes depict?
 - Where might this paradise exist?
 - Why does it exist?
 - How are they similar and how do they differ?
 - 8) Hold up a picture of the Kitchen God and then smear its lips with honey. Explain that in Chinese culture during the New Year’s celebration Chinese will do this to honor the Kitchen God. Continue to discuss how Chinese culture is full of different spirits, such as the Kitchen God, and in Daoism there are different levels of Immortals. All are greatly respected and honored.
 - 9) First explore how the Kitchen God is honored. Read the folktale entitled “The Kitchen God” (Stepanchuk, pp. 10-13) to the class.
 - 10) Then explain how the Kitchen God is honored during the Chinese New Year celebration (see Key Ideas above).

Enrichment

- A) Religious Daoism encourages the search for immortality. Confucius said: “The wise man leaves the world, but humanity and filial piety last forever.” The Buddhists say [based on the precept of reincarnation] that men must all die, and that none can escape.
 - How might the Chinese reconcile these differences in their daily lives?
 - How do they manage to merge all these three distinct thoughts into the vision of the afterlife?
- B) Create your own Immortal based on American cultural values. How did he or she achieve this status and what does he or she look like?
- C) Students can create a comic strip of their own superheroes. Each comic strip character must have some of the characteristics of one of the Eight Immortals.

Evaluation

- A) Students will select one of the Immortals (from the Eight Immortals or the Kitchen God) that they found to be interesting from the chart or from class discussion and research this Immortal. Then each student will write a one- to two-page report on the Immortal, focusing on the complete story of the life of this Immortal. An oral presentation will follow. Students should dress like the Immortal, especially showing the symbolic representation (e.g. crutch, basket of flowers, fan).

B) Return to *Daoist Immortal Zhongli Quan* and *Shoulao (The God of Longevity)*:

- Viewing these Immortals side by side, invite students (with their partners once again) to find similarities between the two.
- Once their list is complete, ask them to review their notes and to speculate what these similarities might mean in relation to Daoism.

Ohio State Standards

Language Arts/Social Studies

1. Determine a purpose for reading and use a range of reading comprehension strategies to better understand the text.
2. Describe and analyze the elements of character development.
3. Informational essays that convey a clear and accurate perspective and support the main ideas with facts, details, examples, and explanations.
4. Describe the enduring impact of the Chinese civilization with respect to understanding of its religions.
5. Use multiple resources to obtain information for a research project.

People in Societies

1. Analyzing different cultural perspective and their impact on a society.

This lesson was developed by Diane Barone (Beachwood Schools, Beachwood, Ohio) and Pam Anderson (Shaker Heights City Schools, Shaker Heights, Ohio).

THE EIGHT IMMORTALS

NAME

DESCRIPTION

Zhong Quan	He is the chief of the Immortals. Depicted as a fat man holding a magic fan that revives people who have died.
Lu Dongbin	Usually depicted as a Daoist carrying the evil-destroying sword on his back and a fly whisk that represents his mastery over space; he uses his fly whisk to fly through the air and walk on clouds.
Zhang Guo Lao	He is depicted as an old man riding a white mule, which he can fold up and put away when not in use; when he wants to ride it again, he sprinkles it with water. His symbol is a hollow bamboo instrument played with two sticks.
Lan Caihe	He is the patron of florists. He is pictured as a young man in a blue robe carrying a basket of flowers.
He Xiangu	She is the only woman in the Eight Immortals. She is depicted carrying a lotus, the Buddhist symbol of purity.
Han Xiangzi	He is the patron of Chinese musicians who plays a jade flute.
Li Tieguai	Depicted as a crippled beggar with a crutch and carries a gourd full of magic medicine to bring the dead back to life. He was the first to become an Immortal.
Cao Guojiu	He is the brother of an empress and the last of the Eight Immortals. He is depicted as an imperial official wearing a court robe and carrying a pair of castanets.