

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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THE WHOLE WORLD YIN AND YANG AND THE FIVE MATERIAL AGENTS

Introduction

The lesson was inspired by the *Octagonal Ink Cake* (CMA 1942.232), which symbolically illustrates the concept of yin and yang along with three of the Five Material Agents: earth, fire, and metal (wood and water are the other two).

Grade Level

This lesson is designed for a 9th grade English class. It can be adapted for grades 9-12, or for an Arts or Humanities course.

Objectives

- To provide a simple introduction to the Daoist concept of yin and yang
- To introduce to the concept of the Five Material Agents (Five Elements)
- To examine how the Chinese merge these concepts to explain virtually everything in the universe.
- To explain how these concepts still influence aspects of Chinese life.

Concepts

- Daoism (Taoism): a philosophy native to China that is based upon the concepts of individual freedom and being in harmony and balance with nature and its forces.
- Yin and yang and the Five Material Agents are concepts that attempt to explain the universe in terms of complementary and counteractive forces
- Yin and yang: two principles that since ancient times in China were considered to be the fundamental principles that control everything in the universe. They represent opposing types of energy or opposing forces, which are at the same time mutually dependent.
- Taiji: the yin and yang symbol or diagram consisting of a great, eternally swirling circle that depicts the Dao and in which the complementary energies of yin and yang turn about each other. Within this circle of alternating energy all things can be produced.
- Five Material Agents: The relationship of nature's five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) to various natural cycles and phenomenon. Also known as the Five Elements.
- Ink cake: also called an ink stick, one of the Four Treasures of the Study; a solid block of ink that must be ground and mixed with water for use

Key Ideas

- Ink cakes (or sticks) are traditionally used in Chinese painting and calligraphy. They were first produced in the late Tang dynasty (618-907). An ink cake is made from a mixture of pine soot or lampblack, animal glue, and a scent such as camphor. The resulting paste is pressed into a wooden mold and allowed to harden.
- Some ink cakes are decorative as well as useful. They can be molded into figurative or symbolic forms. After hardening, the ink cake can be embellished with paintings and inscriptions. Ornamental ink cakes are often given as gifts.
- Symbols for yin and yang and the Five Material Agents are frequently depicted in Chinese art.
- Mirrors: Long before the invention of glass mirrors, people used circles of polished bronze to see their reflection.

Materials

Mirror with Four Nipples, Immortals, Dragon, and Tiger, c.125-220, CMA 1989.102
Octagonal Ink Cake, 1622, CMA 1942.232

Handout or Transparency – Yin and Yang

Handout or Transparency – Chinese Ink Cakes

Teacher Notes and Correspondences Chart Handout

Procedure: Two-day Lesson

Day 1

1. View the handout or transparency “Yin and Yang” and discuss the properties of each. Ask students if they are familiar with the Taiji diagram (the symbol of yin and yang).
2. Have a volunteer to draw the Taiji diagram on the chalkboard or on paper. Point out that the yang (active, male) energy is represented by the white teardrop shape and the yin (passive, female) energy by the black. The dots of the opposite color inside each teardrop symbolize that a portion of the yang is found in the yin and vice versa.
3. Explain that Chinese artists have symbolized yin and yang in many ways (in fact, the Taiji diagram did not come into use until about 1000 CE, during the Song dynasty).
4. View the image of the *Mirror*. Challenge students to identify elements of the design might symbolize yin and yang. Explain that traditionally the dragon symbolized yang and the tiger symbolized yin.
5. Ask students to speculate why these animals might have been chosen. Explain that the dragon represents the Azure Dragon, a constellation of stars appearing in the night sky beginning in the third lunar month (March) and was thus associated with spring and the east. The White Tiger was represented autumn and the west. Later a Red Bird and a Black Turtle became associated with summer/south and

winter/north, respectively. In the scheme of the Five Agents, a fifth element, the center, was added to these cardinal directions/seasons.

6. View the handout or transparency entitled “Chinese Ink Cakes” and discuss.
7. View *Octagonal Ink Cake* and examine the many symbolic images on the work. Inform students that some of the images represent the complementary forces of yin and yang, such as the sun and the moon. Also among the images are three of the Five Material Agents: earth, fire, and metal.

Day 2

1. Explain again how the concepts of yin and yang and the Five Material Agents influenced all aspects of Chinese life, and how they were applied to everything from politics and history, to music and art.
2. Provide an introduction to the concept of the Five Material Agents (See Teacher Notes) and distribute copies of the Table of Correspondences.
3. After reading this introduction to the students, have them summarize the information in a brief paragraph.
4. Separate students into small groups and see if students can come with other correspondences, for example smells, tastes, emotions. Make sure they have a rationale behind their choices.
5. Share group results with the whole class and discuss the rationale behind group choices.

Evaluation

- A. Students will research on the Internet how either the concepts of yin and yang or the Five Agents were applied to Chinese life. Consider the following topics: politics, ethics, history, medicine, science, music, art, or poetry. Citing at least two sources, students will write an essay responding to the following prompt:

□ *How was the concept of yin and yang or the Five Agents applied to the field of your choice?*

Be sure to provide a brief explanation of the concept before you explain its connection to your chosen topic.

- B. Assign an agent to each student and instruct him/her to compose a brief poem (four-line free verse) using the agent and its related elements. Students should then create some sort of artistic background on which to mount their poem. This completed artwork should in some way also reflect the concept of yin and yang.

Enrichment

- A. Examine other examples of CMA ink cakes (see listing on Handout) and write a brief essay comparing and contrasting your choice with the *Octagonal Ink Cake*.
- B. Choose any work from the CMA collection that illustrates the concepts of yin and yang or the Five Material Agents and write a brief essay explaining how it does.
- C. Create your own chart (including graphics) representing the Five Material Agents and the associated elements of your choice.
- D. Research the symbol of yin and yang and prepare a brief oral presentation (with visual aids) that explains the symbol.

Ohio State StandardsLanguage Arts (9th Grade)

1. Apply reading comprehension strategies, including making predictions, comparing and contrasting, recalling and summarizing, and making inferences and drawing conclusions.
2. Critique the treatment, scope, and organization of ideas from multiple sources on the same topic.
3. Determine the usefulness of and apply appropriate pre-writing tasks.
4. Generate writing ideas through discussion with others and from printed material, and keep a list of writing ideas.
5. Use available technology to compose text.
6. Use resources and reference material to select effective and precise vocabulary that maintains consistent style, tone, and voice.
7. Prepare for publication writing that follows a manuscript form appropriate for the purpose, which could include such techniques as electronic resources, principles of design, and graphics to enhance the final product.
8. Identify appropriate sources and gather relevant information from multiple sources.
9. Compile and organize important information and select appropriate sources to support central ideas, concepts, and themes.

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