Lesson Plan: Self-cultivation and Enlightenment: Cultural Activities of the Ancient Chinese Literati

Subject: Visual Arts
Grade Levels: Middle School/Junior High, High School
Duration: 50–85 minutes
Dynasty: Song (960–1279)
Object Type: Musical instrument
Themes: Daily Life and Folkways; Technology and Production
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Zither (qin) inscribed with the name “Withered Wood, Dragon’s Roar”
China, dated 1009, Northern Song dynasty
Lacquer over wood; tuning pegs and feet of jade; stops inlaid with gold; silk strings
48 1/2 x 7 3/4 x 4 7/16 in
Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art. F1915.100

Objectives
Students will be able to define the Chinese literati social class and its characteristics by analyzing a qin, a Chinese zither. Students will reflect on the profound influence the qin and other cultural traditions have left on our modern life and how we can inherit and reinvent our traditions.

Essential Questions
• How have Chinese cultural traditions and values influenced the structure and decoration of the qin?
• What are the traditional cultural activities of Chinese literati? What is special about literati cultural activities?
• What is self-cultivation and what role does music play to achieve it?
Background Information

The qin, or Chinese zither, is one of the most ancient Chinese musical instruments. Traditional Chinese music is categorized into four types: court music, religious music, literati music, and folk music. The qin belongs to the literati category. For centuries, the qin has been valued by the Chinese elite class as a symbol of high culture. In ancient Chinese culture, every scholar–gentleman (literati) was expected to be skilled in four art forms: qin (music), qi or weiqi (Chinese chess), shu (calligraphy), and hua (painting). When playing the qin, the performer plucks the strings with their right hand and alters the pitch with their left.

The qin is not just a musical instrument; each of its parts is identified by an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic name, and cosmology is ever present. The structure of the qin resembles that of the human body, as it has a forehead, a neck, and shoulders. The surface board is round to represent heaven and the bottom board is flat to represent earth. The length of the qin (in Chinese measurements) is 3 chi, 6 cun, and 5 fen, representing the 365 days of the year. The Thirteen “Hui” represent thirteen months of the year (the extra month is the leap month in the lunar calendar). These details of the qin’s design reflect the instrument’s connection to the cosmos, and the names of its other parts (dragon pool, phoenix pond, mountain bridge, goose feet) represent the qin’s close relationship to nature.

Although they all share the same basic structure, the qin can have a special feature, such as a name or other inscriptions. If a qin is given a name, it is typically inscribed on the back of the instrument. Also, there is sometimes an inscription between the Dragon Pool and Phoenix Pond that serves as a record of that specific qin’s origin or as an expression of the owner’s ambition.

Vocabulary

anthropomorphic: the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to nonhuman entities.

Four Arts: the four main academic and artistic accomplishments required of the aristocratic ancient Chinese scholar–gentleman. They are qin, a stringed instrument; qi, the strategy game of weiqi (a Chinese chess); shu, Chinese calligraphy; and hua, Chinese painting.

inscription: an etching or carving on a surface.

literati: Chinese scholars whose music, poetry, calligraphy, and paintings were primarily meant to reveal their cultivation and to express their personal feelings rather than to demonstrate professional skill.

pitch: a perceptual property of sound that makes it possible to judge sounds as “higher” and “lower” in the sense associated with musical melodies.

qin: called guqin in China, the qin is considered a literati musical instrument. For centuries, it has been valued as a symbol of high culture by the Chinese elite class. The qin is one of the most ancient Chinese musical instruments.

self-cultivation: the cultivation, integration, and coordination of mind and body. It is associated with attempts to go beyond normal states of being and the enhancing and endless polishing of a person’s capacities and potentials. Self-cultivation is a psychological process that belongs to the Confucian philosophy system, which refers to the action and effort of keeping the balance between inner and outer selves and between self and others.

zoomorphic: art that uses animals as a visual motif, sometimes referred to as “animal style.” The animal form is applied to a physical object. Here, it means ancient Chinese people created and named some parts of the qin after animals, such as dragons, phoenix, or geese.
Procedure

1. Distribute or display the image of the zither (qin) inscribed with the name “Dragon’s Roar” and allow students to silently examine the object. Distribute the See, Think, Wonder worksheet for students to complete. Discuss observations as a class.

2. After the discussion, introduce basic background information about the qin. Hand out the second worksheet, Step Inside, to students. As students work, play the piece of qin music “Three Stanzas of Plum-blossoms” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvxbfpuccXo), a famous, traditional Chinese song. Students will discuss their feelings while both observing and listening to a qin. During the discussion, introduce the idea of the qin as “literati’s music,” and provide a definition of literati.

3. Provide printouts to students of the Illustrated Guide of Qin Design and Symbolism. Students will develop a deeper understanding of the structure of a qin and the symbolism of qin design. Through learning the detailed symbols, students will understand that a qin is not only a musical instrument, but is also a medium that connects the literati to the natural world, to the self, and to the cosmos.

4. As an exit ticket, have students answer several of the Discussion Questions.

Discussion Questions

Describe

• How big do you think this qin is?
• What are the features of this qin?
• Observe both sides of the qin. What similarities and differences do you see?

Analyze

• How do you think the qin is played?
• Who in China traditionally played the qin?
• What are the traditional cultural activities of the Chinese literati?

Interpret

• What was special about literati cultural activities in China?
• How is the design of the qin influenced by Chinese culture and traditions?
• Why is the qin called “literati music”?
• The qin has a Buddhist-inspired name. What does this say about Song literati attitudes toward Buddhism?
Extensions

Visual Arts

- Students will observe the structure of the qin and learn about the symbolism of the qin’s design. Students will design their own qin and name it. Students need to express a unique characteristic in the design and integrate it using the basic symbolism knowledge of the qin. For images showing the different styles of the qin, visit: https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/135326781.

Social Studies

- Students will research the leisure activities of people from lower classes. Students will compare and contrast them with the Four Art forms of the upper class.
- Students will research how Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism have influenced the qin and how the qin reflects the essence of these three belief systems. Students will analyze why the qin is considered a mode for self-cultivation.

Music

Introduce the Chinese traditional pentatonic scale (CDEGA) to students. Students will then listen to classical qin music. Tell students that the qin has a scale of thirteen positions that all represent a natural harmonic position related to the open string.

- Students will write a melody for the qin using the pentatonic scale and will write lyrics to sing with the melody.
- Students will write a music critique based on one qin composition. The teacher should provide a selection of qin music (both classical and modern) for students to choose from. Some recommended classical and modern qin music can be found in the Resources section.

Resources


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

Qin music recommendations:

- Famous traditional Chinese music depicting plum blossoms—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvxbfpuccXo.
- Chinese animated film theme song related to the White Snake—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znImYgWdO.
- Doraemon theme song—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ22EmVLwCg.

Chinese Resources for Language Learners:

- 古琴的构造以及其寓意—https://kknews.cc/culture/33ab95y.html.