

**TITLE:** *What Does Your Dragon Look Like?* Grades 2–5 and beginning level language classes

**TIME REQUIRED:** 2–3 class periods

**CONCEPT STATEMENT:**

This lesson plan explores the image and meaning of the Chinese dragon through writing exercises and art making.

**OBJECTIVES:**

Students will:

1. Learn about the Chinese concept of the dragon;
2. Discuss how dragons have functioned as symbols in Chinese culture; and
3. Create written descriptions and pictures of dragons that reflect what students have learned.

**STANDARDS OF LEARNING CORRELATIONS:**

Visual Arts: 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.20, 2.21, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.11, 3.16, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.14, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5

English: 2.3, 2.11, 2.12, 3.2, 3.8, 3.9

World Language: This activity is easily adapted to meet aspects of the *Presentational Communication: Speaking and Writing, Cultural Perspectives, Practices, and Products*, and *Making Connections through Language* strands.

**MATERIALS:**

*Summoning Your Dragon: Dragon Profile Worksheets* (included in lesson plan)

watercolor or drawing paper

colored pencils

or

watercolors

paint brushes

pen (or brush) and ink

## VOCABULARY

**dragon** – A mythical creature. In European traditions, the dragon is usually fire-breathing and often symbolizes chaos or evil, while in East Asia, the dragon is usually a symbol of fertility, associated with virtue, water, and the heavens.

**yin** – The passive female principle of the universe in Chinese philosophy, which is characterized as female and nurturing and associated with earth, dark, and cold.

**yang** – The active male principle of the universe in Chinese philosophy, which is characterized as male and creative and associated with heaven, heat, and light.

## OVERVIEW:

Dragons figure in myths and legends from all over the world. In many of these cultures, dragons have characteristics of serpents or snakes that are combined with those of other creatures. Some cultures, particularly in the West, have viewed dragons as symbols of untamed wildness that must be conquered. Other cultures, such as those in East Asia, believed that dragons were benevolent and wise.

In China, dragons have appeared as important cultural symbols for at least six thousand years! Chinese dragons were seen as powerful and wise creatures with great spiritual powers. They were linked with authority and fertility—and they could bring wealth and good fortune to those who honored them.

Most scholars believe that Chinese dragons began as rain deities or spirits. In ancient Chinese myths and legends, dragons were usually connected with water and often lived in lakes and rivers. In many tales they were keepers of the clouds and winds, but they could also be fierce protectors of special places or treasures. The mightiest Chinese dragons were the Lords of the Oceans.

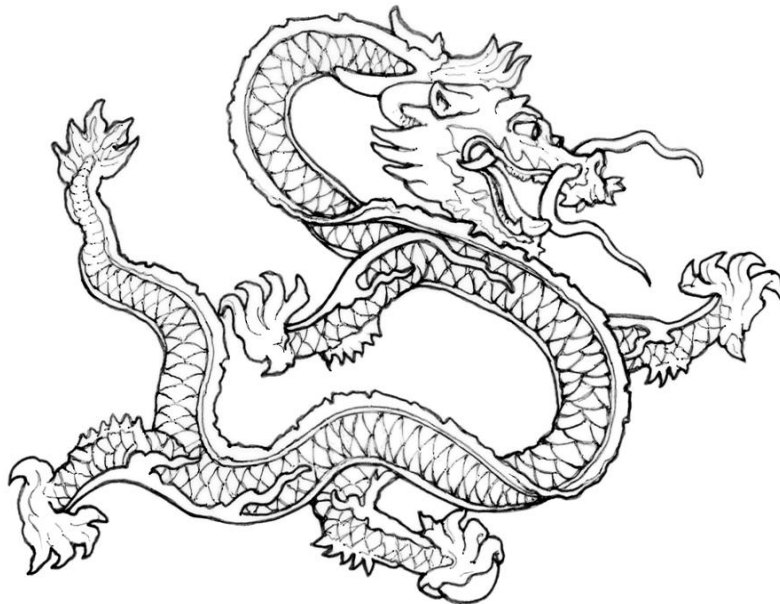
Yin and yang are two concepts that are also central to understanding ways of thought in ancient China. Yang is the active, male cosmic principle, which is associated with action, brightness and light, and the sun. Dragons are connected with the concept of yang, as are mountains. Yin is the passive, female cosmic principle. Yin is associated with non-action, darkness and the moon, and with the tiger and valleys. In Chinese tradition, the best conditions are ones in which yin and yang are balanced, each bringing something to the whole. The Chinese phoenix (or fenghuang), which is often a symbol of yin, is sometimes paired with the dragon to achieve a balance of yin and yang.

The dragon-like creatures that first appeared in Chinese mythology resembled snakes and were seen as omens of good or bad fortune. In later texts, they developed into creatures with the horns of a stag, the head of a camel, the eyes of a demon, the neck of a snake, the belly of a clam, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle, the soles of a tiger, and the ears of a cow.

These physical characteristics are taken from nine different animals. In ancient China, odd numbers were considered to be masculine—or yang, while even numbers were feminine—or yin. Nine is the largest one-digit odd number so it was viewed as the ultimate masculine number—and was therefore connected with the supreme power of the emperor.

Beginning as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Chinese rulers adopted the dragon as an imperial symbol. They ruled the “Land of the Dragon” from the “Dragon Throne.” During many of the dynasties that have ruled China, the Emperor alone could use the five-clawed dragon as his emblem. Four- and three-clawed dragons were worn by less important officials in those dynastic periods.

#### Characteristics of Chinese Dragons:



1. horns of a stag
2. head of a camel
3. eyes of a demon
4. neck of a snake
5. belly of a clam
6. scales of a carp
7. claws of an eagle
8. soles of a tiger
9. ears of a cow



*Circular Box with Dragon  
and Phoenix Design,  
1522–66*

Chinese,  
Ming dynasty,  
Jiajing mark and period  
(1522–1566)  
multicolor lacquer  
with carved design

Special Oriental Art  
Purchase Fund  
75.27 a-b

Can you find the dragon  
and phoenix on the top of  
this lacquer box from the  
collection of the Virginia  
Museum of Fine Arts?

photo: Travis Fullerton © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Chinese phoenix, or fenghuang, is very different from the phoenix that rises from its own ashes in Western cultures. The fenghuang, which is mentioned on oracle bone inscriptions that date from the Shang dynasty (1600–1045 BCE), is immortal. Like the various descriptions of the dragon, descriptions of the fenghuang have changed over time, but it is often described as having the head and body of a pheasant adorned with colorful feathers. The creature's long tail feathers are said to be red, blue, yellow, black, and white.

In this carved image, the fenghuang is swooping down on the left side of the picture. It is peering up at the dragon, whose head is near the center of the box.

## ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS

**What Does Your Dragon Look Like?** (Lower Elementary Level)

Discuss the difference between Western dragons and Chinese dragons.

Read the children's book *The Boy Who Painted Dragons* by Demi. Discuss the characteristics of the dragons in the book—and the kinds of wisdom they brought to the boy.

Next read *The Chinese Book of Animal Powers* by Chungliang Al Huang. Talk about the different animals in the book and their symbolic meanings. Ask students if there are different animals that have special meaning for them.

Ask students to answer the questions on the *Summoning Your Dragon: Dragon Profile Worksheet*. Using paper, pencils, markers, and paint, ask each student to design a personal dragon. Have students present their finished dragons to the class.

**World language adaptation:** Give the students the same assignment, but ask them to use their target language vocabulary to describe the animals. They may also label the drawings in their target language.

**What Does Your Dragon Look Like?** (For Older Students)

For this project, ask students to answer the questions on the *Summoning Your Dragon: Dragon Profile Worksheet*. Once they have developed their concepts for their dragons, ask them to create dragons that can be cut out, folded, and manipulated—and then glued to a base so that they hold their shape. Ask your students to consider colors, textures, and cast shadows as they make their dragons.

There are many choices for both paper and base. Students can make textured paper by shaking kosher salt crystals onto paper that has been painted with wet watercolor or acrylic paint. (Work quickly to put the salt on before the paint begins to dry.) Cardboard, foam core, mat board, or any other fairly rigid material will work well for the bases, which can also be treated in a number of ways to produce a variety of textures, hues, and values.

**Closure/Extensions:**

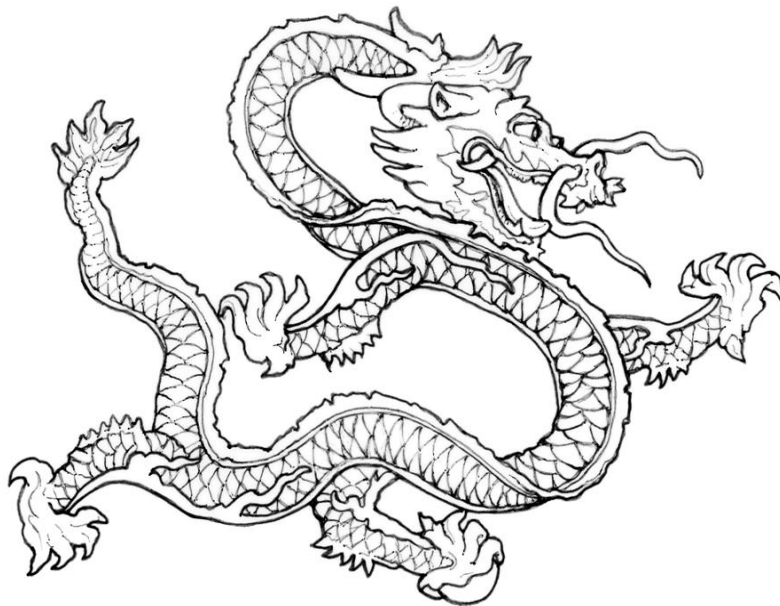
Have a class art exhibit and let the students explain their creatures to the class.

Accentuate writing skills by composing poems about the creatures the class produces.



## Summoning Your Dragon: Dragon Profile Worksheet

Can you find these characteristics on this dragon?



1. horns of a stag
2. head of a camel
3. eyes of a demon
4. neck of a snake
5. belly of a clam
6. scales of a carp
7. claws of an eagle
8. soles of a tiger
9. ears of a cow

Your dragon doesn't have to look like this one at all! You get to make all the decisions about your dragon's appearance and behavior.

What kind of a dragon are you making? Describe his (or her) personality:

Is your dragon made up of different creatures? If so, list them:

What colors have you chosen for your dragon?

Do those colors have symbolic meaning? Please explain:

On what kind of background color or pattern does your dragon want to perch?

What is your dragon's name?

**Picture Books:**

Demi. *The Boy Who Painted Dragons*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, Simon and Schuster, 2007.

Huang, Chungliang Al. *The Chinese Book of Animal Powers*. Singing Dragon, 2011.

**Additional Resources:****Reference Books:**

Cooper, J. C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. Thames and Hudson, 1978.

Visser, Marinus Willem de. *The Dragon in China and Japan*. (Marinus Willem de Visser lived from 1876 to 1930. His book, which lists no publisher or date, is digitized online at:

<https://archive.org/details/cu31924021444728> .)

*Land of the Dragon*, Time-Life Book, 1999.

**Websites:**

Metropolitan Museum of Art (dragon images from many cultures):

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi\\_anmydr.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi_anmydr.htm)

**Chinese Dragon: A Powerful Metaphor in Chinese Cultural History**

<http://resources.primarysource.org/content.php?pid=55421&sid=405880>

This curriculum unit was developed to Support the Grade 4 Gifted and Talented Program by Judy Botsford, Librarian (Retired), Runkle School, Brookline, Massachusetts.

Find VMFA resources online at [www.vmfa-resources.org](http://www.vmfa-resources.org)

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