Lesson Plan: Concepts of Nature
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested grade level: 10–12
Estimated time: 2–3 hours

Introduction

Taoism
The name “Taoism” comes from the Chinese word tao (pronounced "dow"), which literally means "way" or "path." Tao is often translated as "the way of all things" and is conceived of as an empty void ready to be filled with the infinite possibilities of existence.

Taoist cosmology was shaped by the way in which the Chinese traditionally understood the world. Taoists believe that when the world began, there was only the Tao, a featureless, empty void able to be filled with the potential of all things. At this point, the Tao generated swirling patterns of cloudlike energy, called qi (pronounced "chee"). This energy developed two complementary aspects: yin, which is dark, heavy, and feminine, and yang, which is light, airy, and masculine. Yin energy sank to form the earth, yang energy rose to form the heavens, and both energies harmonized to form human beings. Consequently, the human body holds within it the energies of both the earth and the heavens.

With their forms thrusting up toward the heavens, mountains were the most visible examples of energy converted into matter. Because of their special energy, mountains were believed to nurture magical herbs and fungi used in potions of immortality. They were also considered fitting places for meditation and spiritual retreat. Mountains also served as the earthly homes of immortals and gods.

The Chinese word for landscape literally means "mountains and water." The geographical features of the natural world—rocks and streams, valleys and peaks, etc.—were believed to be material embodiments of yin and yang energy. Landscape paintings did not just depict the outer forms of nature but were also concerned with the energies that infuse the natural world with life. All of the patterns of nature, from the loftiest cliff face to the smallest rock and from vast oceans to small stream, were viewed as outward signs of the vital energies that form all matter.

Transcendentalism
Transcendentalism was a literary and political movement in the United States that flourished from the mid-1830s to the late 1850s in eastern Massachusetts. The publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay Nature in 1836 is often taken to be the moment when Transcendentalism became a major cultural movement.
The Transcendentalists urged individuals to find their relation to the universe. Ralph Waldo Emerson and William David Thoreau, two of the most well-known Transcendentalists, sought this relation in solitude amidst nature and in their writing.

The Transcendentalists believed in the importance of the individual’s direct relationship with God and with nature. The concept at the heart of Transcendentalism is that of the Oversoul. The Oversoul formed the framework within which a direct relationship with God and nature could be explored. Simply described, the Oversoul was a kind of cosmic unity between man, God, and nature. To the Transcendentalists, the Oversoul was the divine spirit or mind that was present in each and every person, and in nature. Each particular example of nature or humanity was a reflection of this divine spirit.

The presence of the divine spirit in both nature and the human soul made the search for a direct understanding of God and the natural world a means to discover truth and self-understanding. The Transcendentalists looked to intuitive thought, as opposed to consciously rational reasoning, to achieve this self-understanding. Intuition, rather than reason, was regarded as the highest human faculty. The Transcendentalists were influenced by European Romanticism, especially in aspects such as self-examination, the celebration of individualism, and the extolling of the beauties of nature and humankind. Consequently, Transcendentalist writers saw a direct connection between the universe and the individual soul.

**Lesson Objectives**

- Describe origins of and define views of nature in American Transcendentalism and Taoism
- Compare and evaluate works from various eras and traditions
- Write compare/contrast essay
- Produce creative writing

**Key Terms**

- Transcendentalism
- Taoism
- cosmology
- landscape

**Instructional Materials**

- Brush Holder Depicting Taoist Paradise ([http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Jifu#brushholder](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Jifu#brushholder)), 1795
- Wang Yuanqi, Landscape after Huang Gongwang ([http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Landscape](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Landscape), 1642–1715
• Emerson works
  o *Nature*
  o *The Rhodora*
  o *The River*
• Li Po poetry
  o *Green Mountain*
  o *Clearing at Dawn*
• Venn diagram worksheet
• *Taoism and the Arts of China* web unit (http://www.artic.edu/taoism/menu.php)

**Procedures**

**Discussion**

• Look at *Brush Holder Depicting Taoist Paradise* and *Landscape after Huang Gongwang*. If using the Internet, take advantage of the close-up view. How does each of these works portray nature? (*Possible answers: mountains and rivers, lots of vegetation, not tamed or shaped*) According to these works, what is man’s relationship to nature? (*Possible answers: people and houses are small parts of the images; man fits within nature rather than conquering it*)

• Using the introduction and the *Taoism and the Arts of China* web unit, outline for students the basic origins and ideas of Taoism, with particular attention to the Taoist approach to nature. Discussion should include the idea of Tao, definitions of yin and yang, and the idea of balance.

• Or, if the Internet is available for your students, have students work in pairs or groups to read the introduction and the *Taoism and the Arts of China* web unit and write or present a short summary.

• Have students look at the *Brush Holder Depicting Taoist Paradise* and *Landscape after Huang Gongwang* again. How do these works portray nature with the balance of yin and yang? (*Possible answer: they show both the earth and the sky*) What elements can be considered yin? (*Possible answers: elements closer to the ground and the earth, such as the rivers and shorter vegetation*) What elements can be considered yang? (*Possible answers: elements that reach up into the sky, such as tall trees, mountains, and the sky itself*)

• Using the introduction, outline the basic origins and ideas of American Transcendentalism, focusing on the conception of nature. Discussion should include: the individual’s relationship to nature as a way to find truth; the inherent good of nature and man in light of the unity between God, nature, and man; nature as a reflection of the divine
Activity 1: Compare/Contrast Essay

- In pairs or small groups, have students create a Venn diagram that outlines the similarities and differences between Taoist views of nature and Transcendental views of nature based on the class discussion.

- Hand out copies of Emerson’s works and Li Po’s poems. Have students read the excerpts of Emerson’s essay *Nature* and his poems “The Rhodora” and “The River,” and Li Po’s poems “Clearing at Dawn” and “Green Mountain.” As they are reading, tell students to underline lines or sections that illustrate the ideas outlined in their Venn diagrams.

- Using their diagrams and the works of Emerson and Li Po, have students write a compare/contrast essay on the views of nature by Taoists and Transcendentalists. Have students cite specific passages from the works, using correct citation procedures.

Activity 2: Poetry

- Have students read “The Rhodora” and “Clearing at Dawn.” In pairs or groups, have students discuss how each poet describes nature. What poetic devices are used to evoke the imagery in the poem? Consider consonance, assonance, rhythm, and rhyme.

- Teachers should define each poetic device for students as needed.

- Have students choose the *Brush Holder Depicting a Taoist Landscape* or *Landscape after Huang Gongwang* and write a poem based on that work of art, paying particular attention to descriptive language.

Evaluation

Base students’ evaluations on their understanding of conceptions of nature in Taoism and in American Transcendentalism as expressed through participation in class and essays or through poetry.

Follow-up Activities

Have students write a short essay on the relationship between man and nature in the United States today. Have them consider urbanization and suburban sprawl, the use of cars, environmentalism and recycling, state and national park land, etc. Teachers may assign these essays as persuasive essays regarding a particular environmental policy, a research essay on a particular place, or have student present their ideas in an oral presentation or debate.
Glossary

**cosmology (n)**
beliefs about the origin and structure of the universe. Chinese cosmology referred not only to the structure and operation of the heavens but also to that of the earth and human beings.

**landscape (n)**
In Chinese, shanshui (pronounced: shahn-shway); literally, “mountains,” shan, and “water,” shui. In early China, mountains and water (streams, rivers, mist, clouds, etc.), came to represent the essence of nature. Mountains were the active and upward energy, and water was the yielding and downward energy. By the 10th century, landscape became the most important theme for traditional Chinese painters and remains so to this day.

**Taoism (n)**
a philosophical system and an organized religion based on the Tao, or “Way.” Religious Taoism developed between the 2nd and 5th century A.D. and built on earlier philosophical foundations. Religious Taoism incorporated new ritual practices and religious institutions into the earlier, philosophical Taosim.

**Transcendentalism (n)**
a literary and philosophical movement asserting the existence of an ideal spiritual reality that transcends logic and is knowable through intuition. The Transcendental movement flourished in New England from around 1836 to 1860 with writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

**Illinois Learning Standards**
English Language Arts: 1C, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4B, 5A, 5B
Social Science: 14F, 16D, 16E, 17A, 17B, 17C, 17D, 18A, 18B