Organizational Background

Is it possible to visually comprehend the intimate link between material objects and art, religious and philosophical beliefs, and political power by closely examining works in clay, bronze, jade, stone, wood, paper and silk? (Curatorial prefers that we not use the term “art” to describe any of the Chinese objects until it becomes pictorial in nature – paintings, sculptures, decorated ceramics, etc.)

Mythological beings were believed to be powerful allies in communicating with the spirits of the ancestors who lived in the next world. Contact with the celestial world took place through elaborate rituals, including drums, bronze bells, sacrificed animals, consumed food and drink until they ascended in spirit transported by fantastic animals to another sphere to communicate with the deities and ancestral spirits. This is the means by which a human being first mediated the gulf between the visible earthly and invisible spirit realms and crossed the barrier between the human and spirit worlds.

This ancient burial ritual provides insight into the dawn of the dynastic political system that flourished in China for 4,000 years and its social organization and cultural underpinnings still in place today. From its earliest beginnings, the government had its model for ruling in the ancestral relationships and duties of the family. The ruler was the son of heaven and father to the people. The ancient Chinese understood their duties and roles within the family and society and expected the same between the rulers and the ruled.

The objects in the Chinese collection are considered primary sources from the past; imagine them as written documents produced by the people who lived in these time periods. What story is being told? What information are we able to gather about those who created the objects and used them. What are we able to understand from the forms about their purpose, the materials and techniques, the importance of decorative and symbolic motifs? Consider the importance of what we are able to learn from the bronze ritual vessels:

Ancient civilizations developed in four river valley civilizations at approximately the same time in history-The Nile in ancient Egypt, the Tigris-Euphrates in the ancient Middle East, the Indus in ancient India, and the Huang He (Yellow) River in Northern China. Each of these diverse civilizations developed similarly in many ways, with complex political and social organizations, belief in the afterlife and ritualistic burials, systems of writing, and the production of objects (stone, bronze, iron) for every day and ritual uses. Some aspects of these ancient cultures are still practiced today, but none of the other three “cradles of civilization” resulted in a continuously surviving civilization lasting so long and resulting in a shared culture observed by billions of people today.
Tour Introduction

Note concerning dates in this collection:

Our culture follows a calendar which is the most widely used in the world today and recognized by international institutions like the United Nations. This calendar originated in Europe and numbers years from Year 1 A.D. (Anno Domini - *The Year of our Lord* in Latin), marking time from the birth of Jesus Christ. All time before that is referred to as B.C. – Before Christ. Ask students what today’s date is according to our calendar: month, day, year: For example: October 15, 2012 A.D.

The same year-numbering system is now used by archeologists and art historians from other cultures and referred to in the way you will see on this tour. So,

1,000 A.D. – Anno Domini (Year of our Lord) is 1,000 C.E Common Era

Many objects on this tour are from hundreds of years before the birth of Christ:

1,000 B.C. – Before Christ 1,000 B.C.E. – Before Common Era

Prepare students for understanding dates on labels referred to in this manner:

Mid 8th century C.E. = 750 C.E. Mid 8th century B.C.E. = 750 B.C.E.

Background on the importance of geography and Chinese culture (This is just to provide background information as you prepare for the tour. It will not necessarily be presented to students unless you find it appropriate; do not worry about pronunciations as tour training will cover any that are crucial.)

The geography of China isolated its ancient inhabitants from outside populations and their ideas. The Himalayas to the West are steep and forbidding (the world’s highest peaks), the plains and deserts are still difficult to cross and were impassable until camels and horses were domesticated, and oceans to the east and south were an even more difficult barrier to ancient civilizations. It wasn’t until around 200 BCE that China was widely aware of other civilizations around the Mediterranean.

In modern China, the term Zhongguo 中国 is used to refer to all of China, including China proper (including Taiwan), Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet. By contrast, Han 汉 refers to the Han Chinese ethnic group, who are mostly concentrated in China proper, Manchuria, and only parts of the other three regions. There is no general Chinese term for just China proper, or just the territories inhabited by Han Chinese 汉族.
Zhongguo: represents the concept of the Middle Kingdom. The ancient Chinese thought of their culture as universalistic, believed to be the center of the universe; the result was the formation of unique ideas and innovations not known to other cultures. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties there was no unified area called “China”, but Zhongguo, various and diverse regions who shared a written language and common beliefs and practices of ancestor reverence and respect. The characters visually represent this crucial concept by representing the distinct boundaries isolating from outside influences and the universalistic culture within.

Station One Background Notes:

Part A Gallery 232 Ancient Rituals – Bronze, ceramic, jade, oracle bones

The importance of ancestors and providing for them in life and in death.

From the beginning of Chinese history, it is evident that the people held a deep respect for and devotion to their ancestors (filial piety); the fortunes of the living were dependent upon keeping their spirits content; the people believed their ancestors watched them, helped them, and even punished them when they were disappointed.

Background – Bronze (alloy of copper and tin) casting was common in all ancient civilizations, but the method used in China quite innovative and unique. Bronze casting using piece mold method was radically different and more complex than lost wax casting methods used in other parts of the ancient world. Ceramic molds were necessary to accomplish it.

Originally, these bronzes would have had bright shiny surfaces. Imagine these vessels in a darkened tomb during a burial sacrifice that would customarily be held at dawn. Surrounded by torch light, and its play off the taotie mask elements, one is able to visualize the fierce mystical appearance that must explain the significance of the design motif to set this vessel apart as a powerful ceremonial object.

The importance of ceramics and innovations in its production from earliest beginnings of Chinese culture.

Ceramic (Clay) Tomb Items - connect to any background knowledge about Qin emperor’s infamous tomb of (“terra cotta” or baked earth/clay – we will refer to this medium as ceramics) soldiers. Briefly point out the earliest tomb piece from the Neolithic (new stone age) - earliest evidence of burying dead with ritual vessels. The egg-shell thin ceramics were too impractical for any other purpose, and the shape suggests its use for heating liquid offering to ancestors. Ceramics will over time become one of China’s most important innovations.
The earliest evidence of China’s written language that served to unite this vast and varied land and its people for 5000 years.

**Oracle Bones/Divination Bones**: (when first discovered, they were not understood and labeled “dragon bones”): The ancients believed the elite could consult the ancestors for advice; note the questions on wall, typical of how the cracks in bone were read and interpreted. What we see in the oracle bone is the ancient foundation of China’s written language. (People who could not communicate with each other in spoken language are able to read the same text when it is written in Chinese characters. This is possible because the script records the meaning of a word rather than simply its sound. Even though the character may be pronounced differently in two dialects, its written meaning remains the same.) **It is one of the earliest known writing systems and has survived for 5000 years.** The importance of being able to read and write the language has placed high cultural importance on the value of formal education

**Background for Oracle Bones**: The oldest surviving examples of written script in ancient China were recorded on animal bones and bronze vessels that were buried in tombs. Oracle bone inscriptions were motivated by the quest for communication with the ancestors and the divine. Oracle bones dating from the Shang period serve as important historical documents for this period.

The ability to read and write the script used on oracle bones was probably limited to highly educated divination specialists who used text in the service of the leader. The complicated nature of the system of script helped to consolidate power in the hands of the most educated people in society. There are approximately 5000 distinct characters that have been identified based on oracle bones – a relatively small number compared to the approximately fifty thousand characters found in modern Chinese script.

**The cultural significance of jade to Chinese culture. What a civilization values over its history is culturally ascribed.**

**Background on the Cultural Significance of Jade**
In our culture, the most valuable materials tend to be gold, diamonds, platinum – the materials chosen for our most important jewelry (wedding rings, for example) – Value is culturally ascribed by what is rare and of material worth. For the Chinese, jade is valued not for material worth but for the spiritual connection made by people in the earliest civilizations. The Chinese have maintained their reverential love for this noble stone over the centuries reserving a special place for it in the long history of their civilization. Because luxury goods were not available to the vast majority of the people, possession of them alone conveyed special social status to their owners.

Chinese word Yu (jade) refers to two minerals with a similar appearance but different chemical compositions: nephrite and jadeite. The color of nephrite ranges from white to brownish green and jadeite is brighter green, and came to China from Burma in 1700’s.
Jade is harder than any tools people could make, so how did they cut it? They figured out sand could wear away stone and by rubbing the same spot on a piece of jade over and over again with great effort could eventually wear a hole or a line - drills, awls, and saws made of wood, bamboo, stone, leather straps and gut were used in conjunction with abrasives on the block of jade.

*Confucius compared jade to the highest moral behavior and followers of Daoism saw jade as being strong and unyielding (difficult to form) and full of yang energy, but streaked with rich colors seen as vital spirit and flexible, full of yin energy*

**Jade Dagger:** *(To understand jade is to understand China.)* From its earliest period, jade has held a special place in Chinese culture; a hard stone difficult to carve, it had to be worn down. The intense labor and time required to wear down a piece of jade created great value and a belief in its protective function. Jade holds esteem far beyond material value; it seemed eternal to the earliest Chinese people and stood for immortality. It is of such great prestige it was considered an intermediary between the earthly and heavenly worlds. Contrast this jade’s natural, “raw” appearance to the thinly “sliced” and elegantly crafted ritual “bi” disk in gallery 231.

**Jade Cicada:** Jade was often placed on the buried body for preservation and small pieces placed in the mouth. The cicada served this purpose and was a symbol of regeneration. Today in China there still remains intimate and personal connection to jade; *it is kept close to the body in life as well as death.* (A small perforation at the top suggests it may have been worn as a pendant in life, passed down through generations and ultimately placed in the mouth at burial.)

**The first Chinese dynasty in history (Shang) was brutal, warlike, and chaotic, and that reality led to one of the most important developments in China’s history – the life and teachings of Confucius.**

**Bronze Ax and Kneeling Captive:** The Shang period represents the first period of written Chinese history. This ax with written inscriptions and the sculpture kneeling captive provide evidence of Shang practice of human and animal sacrifice, another method for providing offerings and service to ancestor spirits. It was customary to sacrifice human beings as well as animals and to bury them in the graves of their masters. Great numbers of slaves could be buried with their masters.
Confucianism and Burial Practices

The teachings of Confucius stressed the importance of behaving with humanity towards one another and advocated for the end of human and animal sacrifice. He suggested using straw or wooden substitutes many of which would likely not have lasted over 2500 years. What we are seeing in the burial objects in this gallery reflect the impact of his teachings and how Chinese culture changed because of him. The reason the NAMA carved wooden burial figure from the 4th century B.C.E., 2001.21.2, has survived is that it was lacquered.

Model of a Multi-Storied Tower, 33-521

In every relationship, one person is of higher social standing than the other in Chinese culture. Which would students place higher in importance between the following? Emperor and people? Father and son? Husband and wife? Son and son – even with twins, the one born first has higher social standing than the younger; the same between friend and friend. Social importance is determined from the power of position and occupation, age, and gender.

Which levels of this structure would likely be used by those of different occupations and importance? Who at the very top? Who likely on first level? Middle levels?

The Han Period immediately followed the harsh and oppressive Qin period (emperor’s tomb army) for which China gets its name. The Han people bonded together into one civilization during this time in a common culture that benefitted from the standardization (weights and measures, writing, money, laws) that had been introduced by the Qin emperor. Although outsiders call this land China after the Qin times, the people of China often, still today, refer to themselves as People of the Han.

Han Earthenware burial items: not vessels to make offerings to ancestors, but what they need to be comfortable and content in the afterlife - pigsty (meat), latrine, watchtower, sheep pen (wool), and granary. This is evidence of ceramic pottery workshops organized to produce great numbers of tomb substitutes, probably indicating burial practices available to those of various rank and social position.

Ritual Disc with Dragon Motifs (Bi), Eastern Zhou Dynasty 33-81

Look carefully at this object (sometimes getting down low and looking up enhances the translucence) to judge the depth of accomplishment based on the difficulty of working with jade. Imagine how it would feel if we could hold it in our hand and feel the texture. Point out its refined gracefulness from years of work; “sliced” thin to expose translucence, ground away with bamboo and sand mixture to create interior circular space. Note the intricate grain texture, delicate feline/dragon figures, and the rarity of a second interior circle. In burial would have been place on body for preservation, possibly under the shoulders to protect the heart. This piece is considered one of the highest artistic accomplishments in jade, and that it was completed during the same period as the emergence of the two enduring Chinese philosophies.
**Confucius compared jade to the highest moral behavior:** A student once asked Confucius why a gentleman considers jade more precious than precious stones: *Confucius “Jade is precious not because it is rarer, but because the quality of jade corresponds to a gentleman’s virtue (right behavior): Jade has fine texture, yet is solid: jade has edges and corners but is not sharp and will not hurt others: jade is beautiful, but blemishes are also obvious and will not obscure its merits: color of jade and light can be seen from all angles, just like a gentlemen’s trustworthiness: its translucence as the white clouds in heaven: jade corresponds to heavenly principles: Nowhere would people not cherish jade, because people respect and admire a gentleman’s virtue”*

**Daoism and Jade** - Harmony in nature and society arises from balance in the relationship between two energies known as *yin* and *yang*. Jade is seen as strong and unyielding (difficult to form) and full of *yang* energy, but streaked with rich colors seen as vital spirit and flexible, full of *yin* energy.

Possible student responses for the asymmetrical nature of the Jade Bi Disk:

- They may focus on the circular design of the central portion of the disk – perfectly symmetrical-rotational symmetry. The raised grain design is patterned symmetrically.

- Maybe something is missing or broken off that would have created symmetry among the feline forms of the edge.

- Nephrite so difficult to form that perfect symmetry not entirely possible

- It may have been placed under the back of the corpse in order to protect the heart (Goheen); the symmetrical design and message not the highest concern

- It is possible the value of the original raw stone superceded the interest in creating perfect symmetry in the design.
Station Two Background Notes
Part A       Gallery 229     The Silk Road; Tang and Song Ceramics

Ming Qi Miniature Ceramics
From the earliest times of Chinese history, the Chinese believed that their ancestor’s spirit continued to exist after death and that the living were responsible for providing for the ancestor’s comfort in the afterlife to keep the “dark shade” of discontented ancestors from haunting the world. By this period, miniature ceramics were made for the dead as symbolic substitutes providing for their happiness without great expense (often copies of objects that had been previously made of precious, expensive materials.) Including such items in a tomb during this period would honor a loved one’s life (much as we might do if we bury a relative with a book or symbolic item to honor their memory, not expecting they will use it in the afterlife.)

Early Chinese cultural preferences in ceramics - simplicity of form, clean lines, monochromatic clays and glazes. The cloud shoes and the boots – peasants would have worn straw sandals, the upper classes would have worn the fine cloth slippers with upturned toes; the boots are a subtle indication of the newly arrived influence of central Asian culture on traditional Chinese burial objects.

The Silk Road Text Panel: The map illustration of the Silk Road and reflects the length and difficulty of travel: hot deserts, steep mountains, brutal winds, bandits and pirates; caravans traveled in relays with one group traveling a short distance that could take months and Central Asian traders playing the role of middle men.

What went out? China’s main export was silk but likely also jade and other Chinese innovations (paper, gunpowder, compass, kites). During the Roman Empire, westerners had heard of the “Silk People” and the secret technology for producing this luxurious textile from the cocoons of silk worms. (Explain why silk is not commonly displayed in our Chinese art galleries – See notes on silk below.)

What came in? The Chinese imported gold and silver, horses from central Asia, and new ideas and ways of doing things. Buddhism arrived in China from India in the first century C.E. and powerfully transformed China’s culture and its architectural and artistic forms.

How did goods and ideas leave and arrive? Notice the photograph from 1908 showing a caravan crossing the Taklamakan desert on the eastern end of the Silk Road. This illustrates the route leaving China and would have been impassable without camels; briefly discuss the importance of camels to the opening of China to the influences of the outside world. (If students seem interested, briefly discuss Bactrian camels, their role in the Silk Road trade and interesting factoids provided below.)

Interesting to mention if you have students interested in music: Silk Road Music Project: Yo-Yo Ma, renowned cellist founded the Silk Road Project to study the ebb and flow of ideas among different cultures along the historic trade route. It celebrates the living traditions and musical voices throughout the world. www.silkroadproject.org – a musical caravan.
Notes on Chinese Silk Production: The Chinese invented silk; archeologists have found silk cloth believed to have been woven almost 5000 years ago. Only the Chinese knew how to make it, and they kept the knowledge a closely guarded secret. The leaves of mulberry trees were used to feed the silkworms; after they spun their cocoons, hot water was used to unwind the (filaments) fibers – up to 300 feet long. These were turned into one thread by means of a crude spinning wheel.

Silk became widely desired for its beauty, and its comfort. It is cool in summer and by adding padding between two layers, silk creates warm clothing. It could be dyed any color and made more beautiful by adding embroidery stitches of colored thread. NAMA has several beautiful silk robes from this time period, but because the fabric is so old and delicate, they are rarely put on view because of sensitivity to light and temperatures.

The Roman Empire existed at the same time of the Han Dynasty, and wealthy Romans had seen silk in the eastern-most areas of their empire. The Romans called the people of China the “seres” or silk people.

Background and factoids on Bactrian camels and their role in the Silk Road Trade -the two-humped variety are able to carry up to 500 pounds; perfectly adapted for the desert, where temperatures range from 100 degrees F to -20 degrees F. They can close their nostrils against wind-blown dust and sand. Bony ridges above their eyes provide shade from the burning sun and long lashes and a special membrane protect their eyes from sand. The camel’s two-toed feet are broad and flat and by spreading out over a great surface area, they prevent the animal from sinking in sand. Because it doesn’t sweat in high temperatures, it doesn’t lose precious bodily fluids and can live for weeks without water. When it comes to an oasis – clear out- it can drink more than 20 gallons in 10 minutes. It also carries its own food supply – the humps are fatty tissue that the animal draws on when food in scarce.

Chinese ceramics: This collection of objects reflects China’s use of ceramics as burial items, but with careful exploration we are able to see how trade and openness to new ideas and influences changed the culture.

New ways of doing things and cultural diffusion This collection of Tang dynasty ceramics provides dynamic opportunity to notice the differences in these tomb items as contrasted with the Ming Qi ceramics. Who are these figures? How were they used? By whom? What evidence do they provide of “foreign” influence in Chinese culture?
Text Labels for the grouping of Tang Ceramic Tomb Figures:

Table One:
Expressively modeled and brilliantly colored, this group of ten figures represents the artistic apogee of ceramic funerary sculpture. The fine quality and large size of the figures suggest that they came from the tomb of an imperial family member or high-ranking aristocrat near the Tang capital Chang’an, the modern city of Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. As burial figures they were intended to serve the deceased in the afterworld—it was believed that models and substitutes could be as efficacious as real beings—but they were also symbols of the deceased’s status and were prominently displayed on carts during the funerary procession.

Table Two:
Funerary figures such as these were made in sectional molds with hand-modeled details, and it is the amount of handwork and supplementary modeling on these pieces that accounts for their vitality. The figures are eloquent testimony to the cosmopolitan nature of Tang culture: The figures trampling demons are lokapala, guardian kings of Indian Buddhist origin; the camels and their Central Asian grooms conjure up visions of the Silk Road; and even the mustachioed officials are clearly not pure Chinese, while the magnificent horses, like those displayed elsewhere in the gallery, are a breed that was Central Asian in origin.

As you move from the Tang Ceramic section of Gallery 229, point out how large numbers of ceramics from the next period (Song) traveled not over the Silk Road by camel but over shipping routes from Southern China to the Mediterranean.

Plate, Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)
A very brief look at this piece (another tomb object) - point out this period of history when the Chinese perfected the production of porcelain – another innovation for which they were so far ahead of European manufacturers that people still refer to fine porcelain as China – known for Kaolin/fine clay, translucence and when thumped with finger, it rings like crystal.

Flower Vase with Dragon Motif:
The most important long-lasting impact of China’s opening to new ideas was the arrival of Buddhism. Buddhist ideas will fuse with established Confucian and Daoist belief. Dragon imagery has been a part of Chinese culture since ancient times, strongly associated with the Daoist concept of living in balance with the divine forces in nature. Point out the delicate balance of the energy of the dragon with the form of the vase. Note from the text panel:

“Gathering together, he assumes form; dispersing, he completes his designs. He rides on clouds and vapor, nourished by the Yin and Yang.” (Zhuangzi, 3rd century B.C.E, Tianyu chapter. Translated by Martin Powers)
The ancient Chinese lived in a world of visible and invisible forces and creatures. Among these, the dragon was the ultimate representation of divine force in nature. Symbolizing the positive (yang), male principle in the duality of natural creation, the dragon embodied the essence of life-giving forces animating all things and is balanced by the yin.
Buddhism adapted this important symbol, because it permeated Chinese culture. Dragon imagery was incorporated in a variety of ways in the Chinese Buddhist arts and architecture. Taking a moment to glance around other Buddhist imagery in this section of 229, notice how the Chinese adapted Buddhism to their culture, for example, the use of traditional ceramic for various figures of the faith.

**Part B  The Buddhist Temple Space**

Buddhism arrived in China from India in the first century C.E. and powerfully transformed China's culture and its architectural and artistic forms. Unlike galleries representing Chinese history before the arrival of Buddhism, this space displays no objects intended for the tomb. This illustrates a major shift from focus on life after death to a concern for life on earth and personal salvation from human suffering.

Buddhism appealed to the Chinese people because it addressed larger questions about life and death than was part of the dialogue in the Confucian and Daoist tradition. China embraced the new belief system, but over time adapted its major tenets to conform to foundational pillars of Confucian and Daoist thought.

The gallery space was created in 1933 when this museum opened. Authentic architectural elements from many structures in China were assembled together to suggest the experience of being in a Buddhist temple. The details of this structure visually reveal the impact of Buddhism on traditional Chinese culture as seen through the architecture, art and sculpture.

The **massive lattice door panels** through which we enter are from an official residence in China from the 1700’s and the last dynasty of Chinese history (Qing) – made of lacquered wood with bronze fittings. The open areas at the top would have allowed natural light from daytime into the space and at night the temple would most likely have been lit with candlelight; both light levels create a quiet and subdued atmosphere conducive to meditation and contemplation.

**Coffered Vault with Carved Dragons, China, Beijing, Zhihua Temple, 1736-1796**

31-118/1 B

- Side panels with bright red and green colors: color is very important to a reading of this structure; dominated by red (evokes an association with the sun and its powerful life-giving energy and symbolizes luck and good fortune) and green (associated with earth and fertility.)

- The gilded central medallion of the coffered vault with carved dragons – rich gold color, intricate carving, geometric shapes, structure and symmetry

**The Assembly of Tejaprabha**, Early 14th century

32-91/1 – ink and mineral colors on clay with central colossal image of the Buddha, the perfect example of the enlightened life and escape from the cycle of suffering and death.
The focal point, *Guanyin of the Southern Sea*, Liao (907-1125) or Jin Dynasty (1115-1234)
34-10 - they may notice other Bodhisattva sculptures in the space a figure of compassion and mercy whose role it is to help others on their spiritual paths

The colossal image of the Buddha on the wall painting provides an opportunity to assess or review the importance of this figure to the Temple’s purpose. What is its purpose in a Buddhist Temple?

**Brief introduction to Buddha:** He was a real person who lived about 2500 years ago in India. Raised as a prince, he lived a sheltered and privileged life. As an adult, he set out on his own in search for wisdom to understand the causes of human suffering. His search led to a life experience in which he achieved “enlightenment”, and his teachings became a religion that is widely practiced today.

Symbolic references communicate his teachings and practices and would serve as an example for those who would enter this “temple”. (Buddha’s posture, various mudras (hand positions) and his eyes indicate levels of meditation and teachings, etc.) The two figures closest to Buddha represent the sun and the moon and are known as Bodhisattvas who are enlightened beings whose role is to help others.

**Background on Coffered Vault Central Medallion with Carved Dragons**
Carved wood with gold relief; dragons carved in relief; overlapping geometric shapes with emphasis on the symmetry of the structure - (add brief history of this ceiling sold to a coffin maker in Beijing; found sitting in an alley way outside; the temple still exists today in Beijing)

Subject of nine dragons, in motion and lowering into space: significance of the number nine in Buddhist thought has its roots in the ancient Chinese belief in the power of the number three as universal – the universe as heaven, earth, and water; past, present and future. In Buddhism, 9 is celestial power. It is 3x3, the most auspicious of all numbers.

Dragon lore from China’s earliest civilizations; central to Daoism – mythical creature who transports soul to the heavenly paradise; also used as an imperial symbol – many Buddhist temples were constructed with support of imperial patrons or the ruling houses.
General background information for Buddhist Art

Symbolic attributes of Buddha’s life experience:

*Lotus* refers to escape from human suffering in life and death - a flower that grows in a muddy pond but emerges pure and clean at the surface – lotus throne and pedestal

*Elongated earlobes and simple clothing* reference to his renunciation of wealth and position

*Ushnisha* – a visible cranial bump signifying supreme wisdom

*Urna* – seen on Buddha and Bodhisattva – a pearl-like mole between the eyebrows refers to heavenly vision

Symbolic references to teachings and practices of Buddhism:

*Posture (seated)* lotus (Buddha of *Tejaprabha Assembly*); half lotus, relaxation, royal ease (Guanyin of the Southern Sea)

*Mudras* – hand gestures seen in Buddhist art symbolic of Buddhas action – meditation, teaching, enlightenment, greeting, blessing, turning the Wheel of the Law

*Eyes* – may refer to practices, possibly the example of a deep meditative state

**Daoism, The Five Elements of the Universe, and Symbolic use of Color**

The use of color is important to the reading of the Buddhist art and architecture in this temple gallery. A central tenet of Daoism is the Five Elements of the Universe and each is symbolically represented by a specific color. This reflects Buddhist art’s adaptation to the ancient, indigenous Chinese beliefs that permeate the art and life of the Chinese people.

Fire (red)  Earth (green)  Metal (gold)  Wood (brown)  Water (blue)

Warm colors are yang energy and cool colors reflect yin. Notice the cinnabar red and malachite green with the subtle use of blue highlights as each contributes to a rich and balanced tapestry of Buddhist symbolism in this structure.
Station Three Background Notes

Part A  Sarcophagus and Paintings Gallery

A unique aspect of China’s history is how the inhabitants of this vast and varied land maintained a strong national identity and cultural unity through the largely peaceful coexistence of three distinct belief systems, a shared culture that continues to exist today. Confucianism and Daoism, anchored in the ancient and continuing tradition of ancestor reverence, fused with Buddhism from India. All three provide the foundation of Chinese thought, society, and art.

A careful examination of the works in this station will provide an opportunity to explore the
(1) Didactic role of art in the Confucian belief system, and
(2) Daoism’s revelation of the natural world as ultimate source of human inspiration.

Art helped human relations and explored the mysteries of the universe through expression of the *abiding principle of order and energy*. Consider the importance of the Chinese written language as a unifying force in China’s history as well as the social and intellectual importance of landscape paintings.

Episode from Stories of Filial Piety (side of a stone sarcophagus), 525 C.E. 33-1543

**Confucianism**  Responsibility to family and society has existed in China from its earliest civilizations. Confucius taught a set of moral standards to govern human conduct in order to achieve a well-ordered society. Confucian thought about how to lead a moral life permeated every level of society with emphasis on respect for family, acceptance of assigned social position and duties within that position, hard work and pursuit of education.

At the heart of Confucian teaching is the division of society into five human relationships and is centered on the organization of the family and society along patriarchal lines – fathers, sons, and brothers. **Filial Piety** refers to the unwavering devotion of a son to his parents or a brother to care for his siblings. This ancient belief dates to China’s earliest civilization and was so important to the person who was buried in this tomb structure, stories of **filial piety** are used to decorate it. *This sarcophagus with its six examples of this central tenet of Confucianism has been telling the stories and instructing those who see it for 1500 years.*

As you walk to far right end of the sarcophagus, mention that there are six stories that powerfully illustrate filial piety, but for this stop our focus will be on the last cell: **The Filial Grandson Yuan Ku**. (Because it is sometimes difficult for groups of students to see the images clearly, briefly tell the story in narrative form without assuming they must see the details of the story to understand it.)
This scene tells the story of Yuan Ku, his father and his grandfather; Yuan Ku is a very good and dutiful grandson, but his father has grown frustrated with his own father’s frailty. He instructs Yuan Ku to make a litter (like a stretcher made of bamboo to carry people unable to walk) so they can carry the grandfather up the mountain to leave him in the wilderness. After leaving the grandfather, Yuan Ku puts the litter under his arm in order to take it back with him. His father asks why he has done this, and the son replies, “So I will have it when it’s time to do this for you.” Yuan’s father realizes his lack of filial piety and all three come down the mountain together.

Daoism believes that all things in the universe originated from the Dao (the way), and from the stillness and emptiness of the Dao a pure cosmic energy or breath (Qi) emerged and is present in all things. Qi then separated into two energies known as Yin and Yang. All things in the universe are made of Qi and are an expression of Yin and Yang;

Yin and Yang are interactive forces and are dependent on one another; neither is superior. Life’s dynamic energy as well as harmony in nature and society arises from balance in the relationship between these two forces. Look carefully at the details of this work to identify elements of the two energies and balance between the two:

- Light and dark, high and low, hot and cold, dry and wet, etc

In Chinese the word landscape refers to mountains and water and reflects the important balance of yin and yang—find highest parts of a landscape motif and the lowest points (water or falling water.)

A towering mountain peak expresses the assertive yang energy of the Dao in nature; (mountains have held special meaning in Chinese culture as magical and sacred places where the vitality of Qi is powerfully concentrated.) Other yang landscape features: sky, high, hot, dry, bright active – What elements in the painting indicate these?

Water (rivers, streams, waterfalls, clouds, mist) – the downward flow of water constitutes the yielding, nonassertive or yin aspect of the Dao in nature. Other yin landscape features: earth, low, cold, dark, flexible, passive – What elements in the painting indicate these?

What creates a sense of balance between the two energies? Is there a sense of Qi, the energy of life present in all things? What is the relationship between humans, man-made structures and natural forces?

Calligraphy – Chinese written art forms and also refers to accomplishment and refinement; there is a strict order for brush strokes in forming each character; calligraphy is the mark of an educated and cultivated person and one of the subjects tested in the civil service exam. Looking at the calligraphy on a landscape painting gives insight into a person’s moral integrity, energy, and is seen as an expression of the unique personality of the individual.
The Chinese written language has been a powerful unifying and stabilizing factor over China’s history. People who cannot communicate with each other in spoken language are able to read the same text when it is written in Chinese characters. This is possible because the script records the meaning of a word rather than simply its sound. Even though the character may be pronounced differently in two dialects, its written meaning remains the same.

China has fused together ancestor worship, Confucian and Daoist beliefs along with its unique embrace of Buddhism to create a culture that esteemed elders, scholarship, literature, painting, calligraphy and powers above the human order. All this is communicated through the art of the time period and for hundreds of years has been teaching the fundamentals of Chinese thought.

**Part B Chinese Furniture Gallery**

The following notes are excerpts from a Docent Handbook written by Dr. Patricia Graham which incorporated an earlier edition by Laurence Sickman.

China’s material culture, especially furniture, speaks to a way of life, the structure of society, concepts of status, family and official life, and aesthetic ideals. Chinese furniture tells a story where tradition rules and order and stability are provided by family and social relationships. The Chinese home reflects a strong sense of family unity and responsibility where two or three generations may live together.

The arrangement of a Chinese interior is very formal. In the public rooms of a great house — the reception rooms, drawing rooms or anywhere guests are received — the arrangement is strictly symmetrical. Chairs, stools, small tables come in pairs. This furniture is set according to a fixed social order. The Kang occupies the highest place at the center of a wall, farthest from the door, and facing into the room. From here in a descending order are the armchairs, then chairs without arms and finally, farthest from the Kang, and nearest the door are the stools, destined for the humbler guests or relatives of minor status. Objects of art — paintings, bronzes, or ceramics — follow, in their arrangement, this strict order of symmetry.

There is remarkable harmony and aesthetic consistency in the design of Chinese furniture, a variety of purpose, and distinct pieces and materials made over hundreds of years. There is perfect balance of geometric form, proper relationship in volume, refined proportions and detail of ornament. All these elements, expressed with the ultimate craftsmanship provide evidence of a very high order of civilization.

From ancient times and for many centuries the Chinese sat on mats spread directly on the floor. Furniture consisted mainly of low tables and arm rests just high enough to conveniently rest on an elbow. (Tables and chairs were another idea imported from the West across the Silk Route.) The change from mat-sitting to chairs produced a domestic revolution. Sitting on chairs requires tables of suitable height. The stool is in all classes of society the piece of furniture most used for sitting.
One of the most handsome chair designs is that in which the back rail and arms form a continuous semi-circle, gently descending toward the front, with the terminals of the arms bent slightly back in a reverse curve. A set of four chairs (46-78) in the collection are especially fine examples of this, and have the added interest of being carved with consummate skill to simulate bamboo.

**Canopy Bed with Alcove, 16th century**
64-4/4

The most impressive piece and one of the most important in Western collections is the great tester bed with a frontal alcove. It is a masterpiece of the joiner’s art and can be dismantled in just twenty minutes. This was very practical for the scholar-officials who owned this kind of furniture, since they were frequently transferred to new posts in different parts of the vast empire. Made of huang hua-li wood, the bed possesses general massiveness and a superbly virile design. All single elements of the “swastika” grill are joined by double tenons. The leading edges of all members are slightly convex allowing a subtle play of light and shade over the otherwise severe surface. The small alcove may be properly furnished either with two stools for visiting friends or serving maids, or may have a stool at one end and a tabouret at the head end for such items as candles and teapots. When completely furnished, the inner bed was hung around with transparent curtains of silk gauze. The ceiling and platform are of painted softwood and these parts were periodically replaced, the last item being in the eighteenth century. The interior ceiling panels bear brightly colored cranes and peaches. Since both of these are symbols of the character read wan, meaning ten thousand years, the whole expresses the hope that the occupant of the bed may enjoy the ultimate in longevity.

**Kang Couch, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) F72-51**

No Chinese drawing room of any pretensions is complete without a formal couch of imposing dimensions, frequently extending the whole width of the room. There is no piece of furniture in Europe quite comparable, so here this couch-like piece will be referred to as a Kang (a name derived from the built-in brick sleeping platforms of north china.)

The Kang is the piece of furniture with the highest social status, where the host would receive his most honored guest. This Kang from the collection is famous for the beauty of the golden, honey colored wood with its exuberant graining, the forthright simplicity of design, and the massive legs, sculpted from large blocks of precious huang hua-li wood.