

Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like

Adapted by Bret Fetzer
Based on the book by Jay Williams
Directed by Rita Giomi
Ages 5 and up/Grades Kindergarten and up
March 23 – May 12, 2007
World Premiere

SYNOPSIS

Long ago and far away, outside the gates of the ancient Chinese city of Wu, young Han, an orphan, and his pet pig, Ping, keep the entrance swept and tidy. Han is ever in search of a future for himself, a place where he can belong. With this in mind, he spends his time using his trusty broom to practice his fierce soldiering skills, so he can help protect the city one day. A Hermit who lives nearby is disturbed by Han's boisterous games and the city that has apparently grown at her doorstep. She tells him that the city must be moved. Han politely ignores the outrageous demand of the Hermit and continues his "training," until a Merchant comes to the gate. The wily trader tricks the impressionable Han into giving up all he has, even his beloved Ping, in exchange for worthless, old goods. Luckily, a Servant from the ruling Mandarin's kitchen comes to bring Han his meal for the day and sees what has been done. The Merchant isn't the only one who can play a trick or two—the savvy Servant gets all of Hans things returned to the boy by outwitting the slick trader at his own game.

This has been a rough day for the young gate keeper, so it's understandable that he's not at his most observant when a messenger Monk arrives. The boy leads the Monk to the palace to see the Mandarin, a great, if somewhat simple, ruler. Here the Monk tells of the Wild Horsemen. This marauding tribe of warriors is bent on sacking Wu and making all the citizens eat beetles and worms. Being in the presence of the great ruler, and fear of such a disgusting fate, has sharpened Han's wits, and he belatedly realizes the Monk is no monk at all—he is really one of the Wild Horsemen! The bumbling Mandarin decrees that all of Wu must pray to the Great Cloud Dragon for help, giving Han the important task of waiting for the Dragon's arrival at the city's gates. On hearing the commotion, the Hermit emerges from her cave and announces that she is, in fact, the Dragon. Han has had his leg pulled too often today to be taken in by such an outrageous claim. Although, he doubts her, Han is always polite, so he takes the Hermit to see the Mandarin. The leader has no time for the rantings of a silly old lady. He beckons a guard to throw them out, but Han recognizes the guard as the Horseman. When the Mandarin refuses to help save Han, the Horseman turns on the poor child, who luckily manages to make his escape. The rest of the city begins to flee, but Ping will not abandon his home. And Han will not leave his pet behind. The Hermit, still unsure why she had been summoned and then so rudely treated, arouses Han's sympathy, and he invites her back to his ramshackle hut to weather the attack. Han gives the Hermit all his meager food and water, which touches her heart. Due to Han's, and Ping's, bravery and generosity of spirit, the Hermit saves the city from the Wild Horsemen and, at last, reveals her true Dragon form. And now Han knows the future he'd like for himself—being a dragon.

BOOKLIST

Prepared by Chance Hunt,
Seattle Public Library

For Children

The Best Pet of All
David LaRochelle

The City of Dragons
Laurence Yep

Dragon Rider
Cornelia Funke

Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior
Robert D. San Souci

The Rainbow People
Laurence Yep

The Sons of the Dragon King: A Chinese Legend
Ed Young

Three Tales of My Father's Dragon
Ruth Stiles Gannett

Spotlight

The Empty Pot

Demi

When Ping admits that he is the only child in China unable to grow a flower from the seeds distributed by the Emperor, he is rewarded for his honesty.

For Adults

Chinese Art and Culture
Clare Hibbert

The Emperor's Silent Army: Terracotta Warriors of Ancient China
Jane O'Connor

Spotlight

Here There Be Dragons

Jane Yolen

A classic collection of stories and poems about dragons from different cultures.


EALRS:

Economics 1.1, 1.2, 2.2

Geography 3.3

History 2.1

Dragon ERG
articles by
Taryn Essinger



CHINESE DRAGONS

Dragons, called *lung* or *long* in Chinese, are the most famous of mythical beasts. Although there is little consensus on the details of the dragon's beginning, we do know that they originated in China and predate written history. Dragons are very important in the life and celebrations of the Chinese.

Asian dragons are held in reverence and are considered to be a symbol of divinity, protection, and imperial authority. At the end of his reign in 2599 B.C.E., China's first emperor, Huang Di, was said to have ascended to heaven immortalized as a dragon. Since many Chinese consider Huang Di to be their ancestor, they refer to themselves as "descendants of the dragons."

So, what does a dragon look like? They are said to be a composite of various animals, with a snake body, deer antlers, eagle talons, tiger feet, carp scales, and demon eyes. Unlike Western dragons, their Chinese counterparts usually do not have wings (some say dragons go through hundreds of years in different stages and only later may obtain wings). They vary in color—white, red, black, blue, or yellow—each with its own attributes. A dragon's color is based on the age and color of its parents.

There are nine major types of Chinese dragons: the horned dragon, mightiest of all; the winged dragon, the oldest of all and the only kind with wings; the celestial dragon, which protects the palaces of the gods; the spiritual dragon, controller of wind and rain; the dragon of hidden treasures, which guards buried fortunes; the coiling dragon, which inhabits lakes; the yellow dragon, known for its scholarly knowledge and for presenting the Chinese with the basics of writing; the underground dragon, which presides over rivers and streams; and the dragon kings, rulers of the four seas in the east, west, north, and south.



A Dragon dance at the Chinese New Year.



WHERE CAN YOU SEE DRAGONS IN SEATTLE?

The International District, established in the late 1800s and one of Seattle's oldest neighborhoods, holds Chinese New Year festivities, in January or February, that include elaborate dragon dances. Also, as part of the SEAFAIR festival in the summer, the International District hosts a parade with a 100-foot Chinese dragon, and there are dragon boat races on Greenlake. The Dragon Pole Project, an idea that originated as a salute to the Year of the Dragon in 2000, culminated in 10 fiberglass-sculpted dragons (like the one pictured above), ranging from 12 to 18 feet in size, hanging on light poles along 5th Avenue, Dearborn Street, and Jackson Street in the International District. Also, Hing Hay Park is adorned with an ornate pavilion and dragon artwork. Wing Luke Asian Museum's centerpiece exhibit features a 35-foot traditional Chinese dragon and 50-foot dragon boat. At the Odyssey Maritime Discovery Center you can also see a dragon racing boat. Within 5th Avenue Theatre there is a replica of a dome from Beijing's Imperial Palace, and the chandelier is held in the teeth of a coiling dragon. Keep your eyes open - there may be a dragon around any corner here in Seattle!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITY:

Did the Great Cloud Dragon in SCT's play mirror the characteristics you've learned about Chinese dragons? Are these dragons different from other dragons you've heard or read about, like the ones Harry Potter and his peers encounter in the Triwizard Tournament in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*? Now, draw a picture of what you think a dragon should look like.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHINA

Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like takes place in the ancient city of Wu, nestled high in the northern mountains of China. Indeed, China is a mountainous country, with two-thirds of its total land area covered by mountains, hills, and plateaus. Seven out of the world's twelve highest peaks are located in China, the tallest of which is Mount Everest, which stands on the border between China and Nepal in the Himalayan Mountain range.

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations, and one of the largest countries in the world. It is also more populous than any other nation, with more than one billion people, who account for 23 percent of the world's human population. This number nearly exceeds the combined populations of Europe, South America, the United States, and Japan.

Besides a vast land area, China has many lakes and rivers, which provide the framework for agricultural development and population growth. China's Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia and the third longest in the world, behind the Amazon in South America and the Nile in Africa. There are also more than 5,000 islands scattered over China's seas, the largest being Taiwan. China's terrain is diverse, with plains, rivers, deltas, and hills in the east; and mountains, high plateaus, and deserts in the west.

There is no city of Wu in China today, but the region of Wu has great historical significance. In the Spring and Autumn period, an era in Chinese history between 722 and 481 B.C.E., Wu was a state located at the mouth of the Yangtze River. Known by ancient Chinese historians as being uncivilized, Wu was conquered by the State of Yue in 473 B.C.E.

Starting in 222 C.E., during the Three Kingdoms period, China was divided into three empires that competed for control of the nation. One of these was called Eastern Wu, which developed into one of the commercial, cultural, and political centers of China.

Today, the largest city in the historical region of Eastern Wu is Shanghai, China's most populous city. Also, most of the region still speaks the Wu dialect—one of the major divisions of the Chinese language, which can be traced back to the ancient Wu and Yue peoples. This area continues to be an important cultural and industrial center of China.

B U D D H I S M

In the play, we are also introduced to the Tai-Shu monastery. Chinese monasteries, or temples, are used by Buddhist monks. They were fashioned after China's imperial palaces—magnificent structures that housed the emperors. In keeping with feng shui principles, monasteries face south to receive optimal sunlight and avoid prevailing winds.

Buddhism is a path of study, practice, and spiritual development that seeks insight into the true nature of life. Buddhist practices, such as meditation, are a means of changing oneself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. Buddhist believe that this path ultimately leads to enlightenment, or nirvana, which is the end of ignorance and unhappiness.

There were time periods in Chinese history when Buddhists were persecuted and monasteries demolished, but many still survive and others have been rebuilt. Buddhism has persevered because it transformed itself into a system that could exist within the Chinese way of life. With an estimated 100 to 200 million followers, Buddhism continues to be a major influence in Chinese religious life today.



An elaborate Buddhist monastery in China.

WHAT TO DO, WHO TO BE? ARMY CAPTAINS AND MANDARINS IN ANCIENT CHINA

“This is why I’m going to be a soldier. Soldiers are strong and brave! They dress themselves in shiny metal, bright armor that gleams in the sun and dazzles the eyes of all who walk by! Everyone respects soldiers! Everyone will respect me!”

- Han: Act I, scene i

In *Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like*, young Han ponders what he wants to be when he grows up, longing for respect and purpose. In ancient China both the military and civil service were well respected avenues to follow.

China has the longest period of continuous development of military culture of any civilization in history. Some of the greatest military strategists of all time came from China, which was often at strife through the rise and fall of 15 different dynasties, from 1994 B.C.E. to 1912 C.E. In fact, *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, written over 2,500 years ago, is still avidly read today.

In these times, Chinese generals were required to be familiar with martial arts—an Asian system of defense, such as karate or kung fu—and have a mastery of the tactics described in *The Art of War*. Archaeological study has revealed extensive examples of the Chinese army’s use of chariots and bronze weapons as early as 17th century B.C.E. By the 200s B.C.E., siege warfare and crossbows came into practice, and strategy shifted toward an emphasis on deception and intelligence.

China also has a proud tradition of maintaining a large and well-organized civil service. In Imperial China, 221 B.C.E. to 1911 C.E., the esteemed Mandarins were China’s civil servants—scholar-officials who immersed themselves in poetry, literature, and teachings from the early Chinese intellect Confucius, among other duties.

Initially, government authorities chose those they believed would make good Mandarins and categorized them, depending on their abilities, into one of nine ranks—the first of which had the top officials who usually were also the rich and powerful.

In 605 C.E., this rigorous examination was institutionalized. Men were tested on their proficiency in music, archery, horsemanship, arithmetic, writing, knowledge of public and private ceremonies, military strategy, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography, and the Confucian classics. The men selected to be Mandarins were then assigned to counsel over a province, making decisions that the Emperor would agree with.

As we can see here, Han, whether he chooses to follow in the Army Captain’s or Mandarin’s footsteps, could find the respect he so desires.



Life-size terracotta figures of Chinese warriors in battle formations that were buried in 3rd century B.C.E.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
Knowing the skills and wisdom men had to possess to become Mandarins, what do you think about the Mandarin in the play? Do you think he would pass the imperial examination? Which positions do you think are revered in our society? Which are devalued? Do you think this is fair?



Life-size Chinese chariots were also unearthed with the terracotta army.