

**UNIT 2: BELIEF SYSTEMS**  
**LESSON 3**

# Understanding Daoism through Mythology

Learn about Daoist mythology through the famous story  
of The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea



**Arts of China**  
TEACHING TOOLKIT

**Brooklyn Museum**

# Lesson Overview

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify Daoism as a belief system
- Learn about the role of mythology in communicating important ideas
- Look closely at a work of art to identify different characters from Daoist myths
- Reflect on the relevance of mythology in their own lives

## VOCABULARY

<u>Belief system</u>	A set of ideas that guides our morals and actions; sometimes the belief systems are associated with religion but they are not always spiritual or religious
<u>Celadon</u>	A green (jade-colored) ceramic glaze that originated in China
<u>Daoism</u>	A Chinese philosophy best known from the writings of Lao-tzu, emphasizing humility, simplicity, and <i>wu wei</i> , or “effortless action”
<u>Immortal</u>	To live forever
<u>Longevity</u>	Long life
<u>Myth</u>	A traditional story that is usually told to explain an historical or a supernatural event
<u>Relief</u>	A sculpture in which three-dimensional elements are raised from a flat surface

## INCLUDED RESOURCES

- [Detail images of Wine Jar with Eight Immortals](#)
- Eight Immortals cards (for physical toolkit or [available online](#))

# For the Teacher

## Background Information

Longevity is a major theme in the arts of China, reflected in a wide range of objects decorated with motifs and symbols associated with long life, and seen as appropriate for such auspicious occasions as birthdays and retirement celebrations. One of the reasons for the prevalence of this theme can be found in Daoist beliefs, partly concerned with “Dao,” or the Way, referring to the individual’s path to enlightenment, leading to longevity or even immortality. The Eight Immortals are Daoist deities (or gods and goddesses) that symbolize prosperity and longevity. These deities, endowed with superpowers that allow them to perform miraculous feats, offer inspiration for human beings, helping them to transcend the limitations of ordinary life through the beliefs and practices of Daoism.

The Eight Immortals are popular subjects in Chinese culture, literature, and art. Their adventures were recounted in popular Yuan-dynasty plays. Today, their stories are often adapted for Chinese opera, movies, and television shows, and their images take various artistic forms in temples and in private homes. Daoist ritual involves prayer to the ancestors and to a number of deities, including the Eight Immortals, who grant long life and prosperity to their followers.

## Artwork Description

Undulating waves and swirling clouds are carved in high relief across the surface of this jar. Most of the vessel is covered in a thick blue-green glaze, giving it a smooth, glasslike appearance. Eight figures are depicted on the belly of the jar, framed by cloud patterns; they appear to be walking across the waves. The figures, in a terracotta color, have been applied to the jar and left unglazed. Each individual figure is depicted with intricately detailed, unique clothing and accessories that help to differentiate and identify the deity. The figures stand in various poses, facing forward or in profile. Their clothing and beards look windswept. The foot of the jar is encircled by incised chrysanthemum petals, and the neck by straight lines arranged in small spirals. The interior base, rim, and circular foot of the jar have been left unglazed.



*Wine Jar with Eight Immortals*, 1271–1368. High-fired greenware (celadon), 10 × 10<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 11<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (25.4 × 27.8 × 29.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; The William E. Hutchins Collection, Bequest of Augustus S. Hutchins, 52.49.53. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## About the Artwork

This celadon wine jar, intended for everyday use, is embellished with the popular story of The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea. The Immortals, deities from Daoist mythology, represent hope for long life and abundant good fortune in the present world. Daoist tales describe in lavish detail their extraordinary origin stories as well as their unique magical powers. On this wine jar, the Immortals walk across billowing waves, and each individual is framed by cloud patterns on the belly of the jar; these details are carved in high relief and covered with a thick, celadon glaze while the figures themselves, each with a unique expression and identifying details, have been applied and then left unglazed. Celadon is a type of ceramic glazed in a jade-green color. Jade (an ornamental green mineral) has been prized in China for centuries and still is; it signifies status, spirituality, purity, health, and immortality. Celadon originated in China as master potters sought to replicate the exquisite coloring of jade for ceramics.

## STEP 1: 5 MINUTES

## Introduction/Warm-Up

Introduce students to the concept of a belief system, a set of ideas that guides our morals and actions; sometimes belief systems are associated with religion, but they are not always spiritual or religious. Inform students that some belief systems include mythology or myths.

Ask students if they know what *mythology* means. Define myth as: a type of story that is usually told to explain an historical or a supernatural event. Myths often include superhuman characters or events. Ask: Can anyone think of a myth they've heard of or read about?

Explain that students will be learning about the Eight Immortals, who are mythological figures from Daoism, one of many influential belief systems in China. Ask: What do you think it means to be immortal?

Define immortal: to live forever.

## STEP 2: 10 MINUTES

## Artwork Discussion

Show students the *Wine Jar with Eight Immortals* and ask:

- What do you notice about the jar?
- What do you notice about the figures?
- What do you think the figures are doing?
- Where do you think they are?



*Wine Jar with Eight Immortals*, 1271–1368. High-fired greenware (celadon), 10 × 10<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (25.4 × 27.8 × 29.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; The William E. Hutchins Collection, Bequest of Augustus S. Hutchins, 52.49.53. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## STEP 3: 20 MINUTES

## Activity: Card Game

Explain to students that the Eight Immortals are very powerful: Each Immortal has their own superhuman ability, and is usually depicted holding a specific object that relates to their power. Each Immortal also has their own unique mythology, including stories about who they were before becoming immortal, how they gained their powers, and what they did after becoming immortal.

Tell students that the jar depicts one scene from a famous myth called The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea. In the story, the Immortals need to travel far away, all the way across the sea. Normally, they would simply ride the clouds safely over the ocean. But this time, their leader, Lü Dongbin, suggests they use their powers to travel over the water instead. The journey is difficult, but the Immortals use their unique powers to make it all the way across.

Tell students that they are going to play a game to learn more about the Eight Immortals. (Note: Students will need to see all eight detailed shots of the Immortals; you can project these or have printouts to hang on the wall.) In pairs, students will receive an Eight Immortals card with a description of an Immortal on one side and that Immortal's image on the other. Reading the description without flipping the card over, each pair should try to guess which Immortal their card describes. Once they've made their guess, they can flip it over to see if they were right!

After the game, ask a few pairs to share:

- How did you identify your Immortal?
- What are your Immortal's special powers?

Explain: The Eight Immortals achieved their superhuman powers and everlasting life through the beliefs and practices of Daoism. They are always ready to defend the weak and helpless, punish evildoers, and encourage good deeds. The Immortals represent the hope for long life and good fortune.

## STEP 4: 10 MINUTES

## Group Discussion

Explain to students that the story of The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea is generally thought to mean that we each have our own unique abilities and that we can accomplish miraculous things in different ways.

Ask students:

- What are your unique strengths?
- Can you think of a situation where you could use them?

Explain: Daoism can be understood as the path to achieving a state of wisdom and understanding. These figures offer inspiration for human beings to rise above ordinary life through the beliefs and practices of Daoism.

Tell students that the Eight Immortals are just one example of mythology in China, and that societies all around the world have myths of their own to explain important ideas.



# Lesson Extensions

## ELA CONNECTION—WRITE A MYTH

Introduce students to the idea of the “moral of the story,” which means the main lesson or message conveyed by the story. The moral of *The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* is that we all have unique strengths that we can use to help others and accomplish miraculous things. Ask them to think about a message or lesson they want to share with other people, then to imagine a story they could write to convey their message. Ask them to consider: Who are the characters in your story? What obstacles do the characters face, and how do they overcome those obstacles?

## ARTS CONNECTION—PERSONAL SUPERPOWER

One of the main ideas of *The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* is that we all have unique strengths that we can use to accomplish miraculous things. Ask students to brainstorm: What are your unique strengths? Have them write a list, choosing one or two to focus on. Then ask them to imagine themselves as a mythological character, with a superhuman power that relates to one of their unique strengths. While drawing, they can consider: What kinds of objects would you have that relate to your abilities? How would your mythological character dress? How would they pose? When they’ve completed their drawings, have them write short descriptions of them, including details about their character’s superhuman powers.

Cover:  
*Wine Jar with Eight Immortals*, 1271–1368. High-fired greenware (celadon), 10 × 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 11<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (25.4 × 27.8 × 29.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; The William E. Hutchins Collection, Bequest of Augustus S. Hutchins, 52.49.35. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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