

**UNIT 2: BELIEF SYSTEMS**

**LESSON 1**

# Contemporary Rituals

Consider the role of rituals in ancient China and in contemporary life



# Lesson Overview

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore the idea of rituals in both ancient and contemporary life
- Discuss how contemporary art can connect the past to the present
- Create works of art that use symbolism to convey rituals that are important to them

## VOCABULARY

<u>Ritual</u>	An action or a series of actions that are repeated at specific times or places
<u>Ancestors</u>	Relatives who lived before you
<u>Symmetrical</u>	Exactly the same on both sides
<u>Contemporary</u>	Modern, present day
<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

## REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil
- Aluminum-foil sheets

## INCLUDED RESOURCES

- *Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*, frontal view
- Touch objects (for physical toolkit): bronze sample



*Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)* (detail), 13th–11th century B.C.E. Bronze, 6½ × 3¼ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 8.3 × 1.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 72.165a-b. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

# For the Teacher

# Background Information

Respecting and honoring one's ancestors is an important part of the cultural tradition of many countries, including China. Ancestor veneration, or respect for and duty to ancestors, was widely practiced in ancient China, and was based on the belief that the spirits of the dead lived on in the afterlife and watched over the living. Families honored their loved ones by placing ritual vessels, filled with symbolic food and drink, upon an altar within their homes or a family temple. This practice was believed to provide the ancestors with the necessary resources to sustain them on their journey into the afterlife. Honoring their ancestors in this way not only helped people relate to the past, but also provided a way for them to connect to *Tian*, or heaven.

Many aspects of Chinese tradition and culture were disrupted during the rise of the Communist Party in the mid-twentieth century, as the revolutionary ideals of its leader, Chairman Mao, undermined existing systems and structures. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao explicitly aimed to destroy what became known as the “four olds”—old customs, habits, cultures, and ideas—violently attacking religious institutions, objects, and practices. Many historic Chinese works of art, including those used in ritual practices, were destroyed during this time as the state pushed for more Westernized forms of artistic expression.

Spiritual practices vary widely across contemporary China. Although elaborate rituals related to ancestor veneration are no longer widely practiced, the idea of honoring one's ancestors persists as a cultural value, with many families maintaining small shrines at home or leaving offerings at grave sites.

# Artwork Description

## RITUAL WINE VESSEL (GUANG), 13TH–11TH CENTURY B.C.E.

The *guang* is a bronze vessel made to hold and pour wine during ritual ceremonies. It is made up of two pieces: the vessel, supported by a single foot with a long spout for pouring, and the lid, which fits snugly on the top. It is decorated in the round with swirling designs and abstract animal imagery. The lid is shaped like a dragon with a maniacal, toothy grin and horns, while the handle forms another creature. Two demon masks (*taotie*) with horns, fangs, and bulging eyes decorate the sides, while another two can be found under the chin and tail of the beast. In total, twenty dragons, birds, and mythical creatures morph into each other on the lid and body of the bronze vessel.



*Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*, 13th–11th century B.C.E. Bronze, 6½ × 5¼ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 8.5 × 1.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 72.165a-b. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## ZHANG HONGTU, MAI DANG LAO (MCDONALD'S), 2002

In *Mai Dang Lao (McDonald's)*, Zhang Hongtu creates a McDonald's meal cast in bronze. He includes a hamburger box, a french-fries container, and a knife and fork. The piece is identical in scale to a real McDonald's meal. Each element is decorated with such traditional Chinese designs as the *taotie* mask, the symmetrical face with a pair of raised eyes, nose, and protruding tongue seen in high relief on the fries container. The background here is decorated in lower relief with a *leiwen*, or thunder motif, resembling swirls or spirals. In contrast to these traditional Chinese forms, the top of the hamburger box features the McDonald's "M" logo, with its signature arches.



Zhang Hongtu (Chinese, born 1943). *Mai Dang Lao (McDonald's)*, 2002. Cast bronze, 7¼ × 4¾ × 2¼ in. (18.4 × 12.1 × 5.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the artist, 2014.82a-d. © Zhang Hongtu. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

# About the Artwork

## *RITUAL WINE VESSEL (GUANG)*, 13TH–11TH CENTURY B.C.E.

This Shang dynasty *guang* (lidded pouring vessel) is the finest early Chinese ritual bronze in the Museum’s collection. Animal designs on these bronzes illustrate the spiritual transformation that the people of ancient China believed occurs when one communicates with one’s ancestors, or when one leaves this world for the afterlife to become an ancestor oneself. Such vessels were used for pouring wine offerings on ancestral altars or in ritual banquets by Shang kings, who served as the link between the living and their deceased ancestors.

## ZHANG HONGTU, *MAI DANG LAO (MCDONALD’S)*, 2002

Zhang Hongtu is a contemporary artist based in New York. Zhang works across a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, collage, and digital imaging, creating satirical pieces to criticize contemporary Chinese politics. His work is part of the Political Pop movement in contemporary Chinese art; its artists juxtapose cultural objects and images with symbols of globalization and luxury. Political Pop, with its contrasting references to history and contemporary life, is both humorous and deeply critical of the materialism of present-day China.

In *Mai Dang Lao*, which means “McDonald’s” in Chinese, Zhang transforms the company’s hamburger box and french-fries container into a Shang-dynasty ritual vessel by casting it in heavy bronze, decorating it with elaborate, swirling patterns, and applying a green patina or coating to give it the appearance of age. Zhang is playful in his use of imagery: The McDonald’s “M” logo and the *taotie* face, both immediately recognizable symbols, are prominent in the work. The unlikely combination of forms—an ancient artifact used for ancestor veneration and a disposable fast-food container—provides an imaginative questioning of rampant consumerism, and asks the viewer to consider the relationship between ritual and capitalism in contemporary life.

# Lesson

## STEP 1: 5 MINUTES

## Warm-Up

Tell students that you will be learning about *ritual*, and ask if they've heard that word.

Define ritual as: an action or series of actions that are repeated at specific times or events. Many rituals have religious or cultural meanings, but rituals can also be personal. (Note: It may help to share an example of a religious ritual like praying before a meal or a personal ritual like exercising each day.)

Ask:

- What are some rituals that you participate in?
- When and where do they take place?
- Do you practice these rituals with your family, friends, or another community? Why?

If students can't think of many examples, you might try asking: Do any of you have special rituals, or a set of repeated actions, that you do every morning before school? Have a few students share.

## STEP 2: 10 MINUTES

## Artwork Discussion

Show students *Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*.

Ask them to focus on one detail in the artwork and sketch it on a sheet of paper. Have them share their sketch with a partner.

Ask:

- What were some of the details you noticed?
- What materials do you think this object is made of?
- When do you think this object might have been made?
- What do you think this object might have been used for?

Explain: This is a *guang*, a special pitcher that was used to hold wine during important rituals. In ancient China, objects like these were used to honor a family's ancestors, the family members who lived before them. During these rituals,



*Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*, 15th–11th century B.C.E. Bronze, 6½ × 5¼ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 8.5 × 1.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 72.165a-b. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

families would provide food and drinks to their ancestors to give them strength and nourishment in the afterlife.

Pass around the bronze sample, and tell students that wealthy families might have owned special objects made out of a metal called bronze. Explain that these objects were sometimes decorated with elaborate details, such as swirling lines, clouds, and animals.

Show students the frontal view of the vessel and ask: What does this remind you of?

Tell students that the face on the front of the vessel is a *taotie*, a traditional, masklike design that appears on ritual objects like this one.

### STEP 3: 10 MINUTES

## Activity: Compare/Contrast

Show students Zhang Hongtu's *Mai Dang Lao* next to *Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*.

Ask students to compare and contrast the two works.

Ask students:

- What similarities did you find?
- What differences did you find?
- When do you think this work was made? Why?

Explain to students that the second object is called *Mai Dang Lao*, which means “McDonald’s” in Mandarin Chinese, and that it was created by contemporary Chinese-American artist Zhang Hongtu in 2002. The sculpture is modeled after a McDonald’s meal, but it is made of the same material (bronze) and uses the same kinds of designs as the ancient ritual vessel we saw before.

Ask students:

- Why do you think the artist used these ancient materials and designs when he designed something so modern?

Explain to students that Zhang often combines old and new designs in a single artwork as a way to show his ideas about how the world is changing. American companies like McDonald’s have spread all over the world, including to China.



*Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)* (detail), 13th–11th century B.C.E., Bronze, 6½ × 3¼ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 8.5 × 1.6 cm), Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 72.163a-b. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)



Zhang Hongtu (Chinese, born 1945). *Mai Dang Lao (McDonald's)*, 2002. Cast bronze, 7¼ × 4¾ × 2¼ in. (18.4 × 12.1 × 5.7 cm), Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the artist, 2014.82a-d. © Zhang Hongtu. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

STEP 4: 15 MINUTES

## Activity: Daily Rituals

Explain to students that both works of art take everyday objects and make them special: They combine such familiar objects as a wine vessel or McDonald's meal with decorations like the swirling clouds and *taotie*.

Tell students to think about a personal ritual in their lives. Ask: What kind of object could you use during this ritual?

Pass out aluminum foil and pencils, and ask students to sketch the outline of the object they imagined.

After a few minutes, ask students to brainstorm designs they can use to decorate their objects. Ask:

- What other objects do you use to complete this ritual?
- What kinds of designs could show us what you do or how you feel during this ritual?

When students are done with their art-making, do a “gallery walk” during which students can walk around the room to look at each other's work. Ask: What kinds of rituals were shown by the other students?

# Lesson Extensions

## MATH CONNECTION—SHAPES, LINES, AND PATTERNS

Ask students to look at the *Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)* or *Mai Dong Lao* again. Ask them to look for different shapes in the artwork, sketching and labeling what they find. Next, ask students to look for different kinds of lines, such as straight lines, curved lines, or zigzag lines, sketching what they see. Finally, ask students to look for patterns, or repeating designs, on the artwork: Do they see any shapes or lines that are repeated? Have them sketch a repeating pattern that they can find.

## ARTS CONNECTION—PLASTER CASTING

Pass out the bronze samples again and ask students: How do you think an artist would work with this material? How would they make elaborate designs in the metal? Explain that in ancient China, the bronze would have to be melted down and then go through a process called *piece-mold casting*. Show them a video demonstrating the process. Have students make their own simple molds by sculpting something out of self-hardening clay. Once their sculptures have hardened, ask them to create a mold by pressing the sculpture into a soft piece of clay. When the mold has hardened, it can be filled with plaster to make a cast of the original artwork.

# Worksheets and Additional Materials







Cover:  
*Ritual Wine Vessel (Guang)*, 15th–11th century B.C.E.  
Bronze, 6½ × 3¼ × 8½ in. (16.5 × 8.3 × 21.6 cm).  
Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair  
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