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Tuslaw Middle School, Massillon, Ohio
Seminar on Teaching about East Asia, Spring, 2007

Title: Symbolism in China's Material Goods

Grade 6-8, Language Arts and Social Studies
Time period: approximately 3 class periods

Essential Question: How does product design reflect cultural elements over time?

Rationale: Although we may take for granted the designs and colors found on the clothing we wear, the objects we use and the signs we see as we drive down the street, these items reflect American culture. Students can easily talk about their popular culture, but may not see that the clothing, vessels, painting and sculptures of other cultures also reflect that culture's daily lives and the choices available to them.

China's artifact design shows the history of the country, and China's history has become intertwined with other East Asian cultures. This powerful country, through its succession of dynastic rule, is a mainstay of representative materials. The shapes of the vessels show their purpose in daily use.

Standards: Students collect, organize, evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources to draw logical conclusions. Students communicate this information using appropriate social studies terminology in oral, written or multimedia form and apply what they have learned to societal issues in simulated or real-world settings.

Students use knowledge of perspectives, practices and products of cultural, ethnic and social groups to analyze the impact of their commonality and diversity within local, national, regional and global settings.

Lessons: Introduce the lesson by having the students group themselves into two visual categories, perhaps gender, hair color, wearing sneakers, etc. From the two groups students will break into four groups, with another category as the separator. Continue this division, groups never overlapping, until everyone stands alone. Students must look around the group and choose a partner.

Each pair will then have a written conversation, using the worksheet provided, about what occurred in the activity. The conversation is written in order to make students more involved and accountable. When all of the pairs have completed the written conversation, debrief the activities. Students are encouraged to make a generalization about the process of 'looking' and 'grouping', hoping to show that we, as Americans, show preferences and shared choices.

Before studying Chinese symbols, students are directed to study examples of American art through time. Student groups create a class chart of examples through time, listing

their examples under the categories of creatures, nature, royalty, military, religious figures and places, etc. These same categories will be used in our study of Chinese symbols.

Using the suggested sources, or other sources of Chinese material culture, students will create posters of symbolic representations showing a connection across time and place in the categories of Chinese art, again locating examples of creatures, nature, royalty, military, religious figures and places, etc. These symbols reflect the history of the Chinese people and the value that is placed on works of art.

Student groups study the posters in order to make a comparison of the Chinese categories to the categories they found when looking at the examples of American artwork, both being reflections of the culture which they represent. Is it possible to make a generalized statement about a culture from viewing their paintings, their mode of dress, or their choice of color? It will be up to the viewer to decide.

Sources:

Dramer, Kim. People's Republic of China. New York, Children's Press, 2007.

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. China. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Macmillan/McGraw-Hill. Our World. New York, 2003.

Shepherd, Rowena & Rupert. 1000 Symbols. London, Thames and Hudson, 2002.

Conversation worksheet: In pairs, one student writes a statement about the activity in which he or she participated, and the other student responds in writing. The conversation takes place only in written form so that each student must read and respond to the thoughts of the partner.

Statement:

Response:

Response:

Response:

Response:

Response:

Response:

Response:

