

Teaching “Shi Jin the Nine-Dragoned” from *Water Margin*

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Nine-day Unit

Introduction

While writing this lesson plan, I had my own students in mind. I teach at a boys' Catholic military college prep school just outside of St. Paul, Minnesota. I find my sophomore students respond well to many different types of literature, but they particularly love stories that relate adventures. I envision what is presented here as one piece of a larger Outlaws in Literature unit. Several of the lessons presented here could be broadened to embrace wider reading of the stories and histories of outlaws from around the world. To be honest, I probably wouldn't spend as much time on one excerpt as I've outlined here but might rotate through the different activities over several years of teaching the story.

Lesson Objectives

Students will explore the place of the outlaw in literary arts and learn that this type of hero exists in East Asian folklore and literature just as it does in this west. Along with "Shi Jin the Nine-Dragoned," students will read "The Tale of Hong Kiltong" from Korea and possibly an excerpt from "A Gest of Robyn Hode" to connect the East Asian literature to Western tradition. In future years this could expand to outlaw fiction from other traditions.

Students will consider the morality presented in the story. They will examine how the corrupt society forces everyone else – Wang Jin, the bandits, and Shi Jin himself – to rebel in order to survive. They will also look at the brotherhood shown in the story and consider whether the nickname "The Chinese Robin Hood" really applies to *Water Margin* in the case of this excerpt.

In addition, students will research Confucianism and apply their knowledge to the story. They will determine to what extent the story upholds or critiques the Analects of Confucius and the Confucian system, providing evidence for their observations.

Summary

Having missed their inn along the road from the Eastern Capital to Yan'an, exiled Head Instructor of the army Wang Jin and his mother seek shelter at a farmhouse in Shi Jin Family Village, part of Huayin county near Little Flower Mountain. There, the master's impertinent son, Shi Jin the Nine-Dragoned, challenges Wang to a bout with the cudgel. Roundly defeated, Shi Jin implores Wang to instruct him in the skills of the eighteen weapons. Shi Jin eventually masters all the weapons, and Wang continues on to Yan'an. A few months after Wang has left and Shi's father has passed away, Li Ji, also known as "Rabbit-lancer," informs Shi Jin of a band of robbers in the mountains who are raiding homes and making it impossible to hunt game. Shi Jin hosts a summit of all the area farmers, who agree to band together and fight if the bandits attack their village. Meanwhile, the bandit chiefs – Zhu Wu, Chen Da, and Yang Chun – argue about whether or not to raid Huayin and incur the wrath of Shi Jin if they try to pass through Shi Family Village. Chen Da recklessly leads a force straight toward Shi Family Village. Shi Jin engages and defeats Chen Da and then announces his intent to capture the other two leaders and

claim a reward set by officials. Zhu Wu advances a plan in which he and Yang Chun throw themselves at Shi Jin's feet, begging to be put to death with their "brother" Chen Da. Admiring their brotherly love for their fellow bandit, Shi Jin releases Chen Da to them and allows them to return to the mountain. The three bandits then send Shi gold ingots and large pearls as expressions of gratitude, and Shi reciprocates with three embroidered silk robes and three fat sheep sent via his head servant, Wang Si. Shi and the outlaws fall into a practice of exchanging gifts with one another until one night when Wang Si delivers an invitation for the chiefs to attend Shi Jin's fall festival. Wang Si overimbibes while with the chiefs and passes out on the way back down the mountain. Finding Wang Si unconscious with silver and a letter from the bandits, the "Rabbit-lancer" Li Ji sees an opportunity to get rich by handing over the incriminating evidence of Shi Jin's friendly relations with the bandits to the county officials and claiming the reward. Upon awakening and realizing that he has been robbed, Wang Si decides to pretend there was no written response from the bandits. On the night of the festival, the sheriff arrives with a force to capture Shi Jin and the bandits. While the troops wait outside, Shi Jin kills Wang Si for his duplicity, asks his servants to pack up his valuables, puts on his armor along with the bandit chiefs, and sets fire to the thatched-roof huts on the far side of the village. When the troops run toward the village, Shi Jin sets fire to more of the buildings and fights his way out the gates, killing the traitor Li Ji in the process. They escape to Little Flower Mountain, where Shi Jin is offered a place with the outlaws. Choosing to remain an honest man, he instead leaves to seek his instructor, Wang Jin, and become an officer.

Historical/Literary Context

"Shi Jin the Nine-Dragoned" is part of a novel titled *Water Margin*, also known as *Shui Hu Zhuan* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*, a mammoth undertaking that chronicles the exploits of 108 bandits and outlaws during the Song dynasty. The tales originate in oral folktale tradition and were assembled into a novel during the rich printing culture of the Ming dynasty (Wang; Xu). The identity of its author is not entirely clear; scholars have most often attributed it to Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, often as collaborators, but they have also put forth the names of other possible authors.

Whatever its authorship, *Water Margin* is a highly-engaging collection of the adventures of 105 male and 3 female outlaws from Liangshan, or Mt. Liang, in Southern Shandong, an active base for historical bandits. The outlaws band together to fight the government but are eventually given amnesty and proceed to fight various government enemies until the band falls apart toward the end of the novel. Shi Jin is an atypical character, perhaps, because while he is not truly a bandit, his association with three outlaws leads to his adventures and eventual exile. The adventures in *Water Margin* have ignited the creative imagination in China and beyond – perhaps most notably in Japan – and have resulted in operas, artwork, graphic novels, films, TV dramas, and other creative works. For example, Shi Jin, with the colorful dragon tattoo that his father perhaps commissioned because it "gave him a kind of spiritual strength which completed

the outward martial arts training received by the youth” (Reed 27), captured the imagination of Japanese woodblock prints artists such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi and Utagawa Yoshiharu.

Water Margin also resonates with readers of other outlaw fiction. Some academics see the protagonists of *Water Margin* as Chinese Robin Hoods who rebel against system. Historian Yoko Miyamoto writes, “In *Water Margin*, corrupt officials cause suffering to good people and the bandits right the wrongs.” However, other scholars find the evidence for a merry band of rebels righting wrongs for the common people somewhat thin. University of Pennsylvania historian Victor H. Mair acknowledges that “Modern criticism tends to eulogize *Water Margin* as an antiauthoritarian saga protesting against the repressive forces in Chinese civilization,” but he also finds that “instances of ‘fighting the powerful to defend the weak’ are relatively rare” in the narrative (629-30).

Discussion Questions and Answers

Pre-reading/Prior Knowledge:

1. Many cultures have a fascination with outlaws. Both real and fictional outlaws receive sympathetic treatment in folktales, novels, film, music, and other artistic expression. Who are some of the outlaws who have been depicted favorably, and where do their stories appear? Why do we like outlaw stories?

Answers will vary. Robin Hood, Rob Roy, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Belle Star, Bonnie and Clyde, Jack Sparrow, and Han Solo are all names that could come up. Reasons for liking outlaws will also range widely. Outlaws often exist on the frontier, whether that frontier is the Wild West, the seven seas, or outer space. The frontier, where simply sustaining life is difficult, captures our imagination. Outlaws also buck the system, which is often powerful, antiquated, inept, obstructionist, evil, or corrupt. They are the definition of rugged individualism, which also makes them fascinating, particularly in Western culture.

Post-reading Recall Questions:

2. How does the character Wang Jin fit into the story?

Wang Jin is an expert in martial arts who has served as the head instructor to the army. He has been wronged by an envious superior and has had to flee the army for Yan'an. He trains the young and initially impudent Shi Jin in various martial arts and then disappears for the duration of the story. When Shi Jin is forced to flee Shi Family Village for Little Flower Mountain, his next step is to seek a post with Wang Jin in Yan'an.

3. What are Wang Jin's character traits? What functions does this character serve in the story?

Wang Jin shows confidence, honor, perseverance, and patience. He travels far to save himself from the corrupt military officers who would see him dead. He stands up to Shi Jin's challenge and handily defeats him. He trusts he will find a position in Yan'an because he knows his own worth. He is the rare honorable man to survive the system, so he serves as an example for Shi Jin in more ways than as his martial arts mentor. His plight also foreshadows Shi Jin's plight since Shi Jin eventually sets out on the same road to Yan'an to find a position with Wang Jin.

4. How does Shi Jin initially plan to resist the band of robbers?

He enlists the help of 300-400 farmers in Shi Family Village. He prepares a feast for the farmers and at that feast explains how he will summon them to with bamboo clappers if the raiders attack, and they will come ready to fight.

5. How does Chen Da go against Zhu Wu and Yang Chun? With what results?

Chen Da refuses to listen to the two other bandit chiefs when they try to caution against passing through Shi Family Village on the way to raid Huayin county. Though they warn him not to underestimate Shi Jin's ferocity, Chen Da ignores them, going anyway and taking 150 men with him. Shi Jin refuses Chen Da's request to pass through the village, and the two end up in a sword fight. Shi defeats Chen and ties him up

6. How do Zhu Wu and Yang Chun manage to rescue Chen Da?

They appeal to Shi Jin's sense of mercy, kneeling and crying. They beg Shi to send them to the magistrate along with Chen. He is touched by their love for their brother bandit and relents.

7. Describe the friendly relations between Shi Jin and the bandits after the initial conflict is resolved.

Shi Jin and the bandits remain in friendly contact, exchanging expensive gifts and feasting together.

8. How does Shi Jin get in trouble with the officials? What happens when they come to apprehend Shi Jin?

Li Ji finds Wang Si passed out from drinking and in possession of incriminating evidence of friendly relations between Shi Jin and the bandit chiefs (a letter and some silver). He sees a way to make his fortune by turning Shi Jin in for the reward. When the officials charged with apprehending Shi Jin assemble outside the village, Shi Jin sets fires as a diversion, fights his way out of the village, and escapes to Little Flower Mountain.

9. What does Shi Jin do in at the end of the story?

Though he is offered a place with the bandits, Shi Jin feels that accepting it would bring shame to his dead parents. He sets out to find Wang Jin in Yan'an.

Post-reading Deeper Questions

10. How are the lines between right and wrong blurred somewhat in this story?

Shi Jin's association with the bandits is questionable though he himself is not a bandit. He profits from his association through gifts and the sort of brotherhood that he forms with the bandit chiefs.

11. As modern readers, how do we cope with the absence of women in this story?

Answers will vary but obviously center around the place of women in Chinese society and the exclusion of women – or at least of powerful female main characters – from literature around the world in earlier centuries. Only one mention of a woman is made when we learn that Wang Jin is traveling with his mother. Some students will point out that at least there are three (out of 105!) characters in Water Margin who are female even though none of them appear in this particular episode. Mostly this question serves to make students note the absence of women in the story and tie it to societal attitudes then and now.

12. Under Confucianism, individuals who aspired to serve as officials were required to study for and pass a system of exams for which they learned to write essays using complex and elevated language. However, *Water Margin* is written in plain, casual, straightforward language that appealed to people who didn't aspire to an official post. Readers of *Water Margin* read for entertainment and leisure (Xu). Looking back through the text, how does the language hint that it is written for a wider audience? What do you think of the casual language in the translation?

Answers will vary:

Colloquial Language

"Let us now tell about Instructor Wang and his mother" (226).

"No problem," said the old man" (227).

"But this jerk laughed at my fencing techniques" (228).

"Dad, don't listen to this jerk" (228).

"Nice as it is to be here, I can't stay forever" (229).

"Shut your traps, you two" (231).

"Cut the idle talk!" (232).

"Those guys are doomed" (233).

"You moron! Now what are we to do?" (236).

13. What are other features of the story that appeal to the common people?

The officials are the bad guys: they rule from a distance, treat Wang Jin poorly, set out to arrest Shi Jin though he has not really done any wrong, and turn out to be incompetent since they are unable to arrest Shi Jin. Shi Jin, on the other hand – and despite his brief scorn of Wang Jin – is likeable. He is strong and skilled in all the martial arts. He has a dragon tattoo that suggests spiritual or even magical qualities and sets him apart from others. He spares the bandits when he could turn them in to their deaths for money. He is not entirely innocent, however, since he does consort with bandits and burn his people's homes in order to get away from the officials. Despite these activities, though, he is portrayed as the wronged party. He is the good man who must leave the corrupt system in order to maintain his moral position.

14. (Save this question until the ThingLink research project has been finished so that the students have a basic understanding of Confucianism) How does the story reflect Confucian values? How does it contradict Confucian values?

Shi Jin shows his disrespect for Wang Jin, who has concealed his identity as the Head Instructor of the imperial army. Shi Jin fails to be “respectful to his elders abroad” (defining “abroad” liberally, perhaps, to mean “in public”), when he scoffs, “Who are you? How dare you put me down?...There’s no way you can beat me!” and “Dad, don’t listen to this jerk.”

Shi Jin’s father chides his son for his attitude, telling Wang Jin, “Even if you break [Shi Jin’s] arm or leg, it is all his own fault.” The story goes on to reinforce appropriate behavior as Shi Jin is put in his place, realizes his error, and begs to be trained by Wang Jin. Notably, Wang Jin upholds the Confucian teaching that “The young are to be respected. How do we know that the next generation will not measure up to the present one?” His behavior toward Shi Jin is honorable despite considerable provocation by the young punk.

Confucius said, in response to Tsu Kung’s question, “Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?”, “Perhaps the word is ‘reciprocity’: Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.” Shi Jin shows mercy to Zhu Wu and Yang Chun when they come to him requesting to die alongside their brother (as part of their strategy for getting him released). Instead of killing them, Shi invites them to share a meal with him and gives them – and Chen Da – clemency for their missteps. While the bandits continue as outlaws on Little Flower Mountain, they reciprocate Shi Jin’s treatment of them with gifts, and he continues to practice hospitality toward them and give them gifts. At one point he thinks to himself, “Those three men have been very respectful to me. Let me send them something in return.” His treatment of them leads to their support of him once Li Ji shares the purloined letter with officials, and Shi Jin finds

himself in the difficult position of choosing to turn over the bandits or fight the officials. In appreciation for his honorable behavior, the bandits to offer him a place after he loses everything as a consequence of protecting them from the officials; this offer is in keeping with Confucius's precept.

Activities

1. Day One: We will start with a prereading discussion of outlaws and learn needed information about Chinese culture and geography. Using Google Maps, we will locate the setting and other places mentioned in story. We will begin reading in class, but the students will finish the story as homework.
2. Day Two: We will circle up and use the questions above as the basis for a graded discussion of the story.
3. Day Three-six: Confucian Values Mini-research Project presented via ThingLink, an online tool for creating interactive images and videos. Students will be required to consult the excerpts from Confucius's *The Analects* taken from *Sources of Chinese Tradition* and *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation* translated by Robert Eno and made available via .pdf by IU. They must also access other reference sources via databases. (See Appendix 1 for complete assignment sheet.)

Topics will include:

Life of Confucius (good topic for a pair of students who struggle with English class)

Confucius on Filial Piety

Confucius on Ethical Treatment of Others

Confucius on Learning

Confucian Examination System in Pre-Modern China

Legacy of Confucius in Chinese Civil Service Exam

Legacy of Confucius in Chinese Education System

Legacy of Confucius in Korea

Legacy of Confucius in Japan

Legacy of Confucius in the West

4. Day Seven: Sharing ThingLink presentations and discussing connections to the excerpt from *Water Margin*.
5. Day Eight: Students will debate who is fault for Shi Jin's exile at the end of the story. Each student group of four will make a case for one of the following:

Shi Jin himself is at fault

The bandits chiefs (Zhu Wu, Chen Da, and Yang Chun) are at fault

Wang Si is at fault

Li Ji is at fault

“The System” (national and local government) is at fault

In groups, students will prepare and present four-minute arguments drawing on our knowledge of the text and our understanding of the context of the story. They will be required to present textual evidence for their claims. Following the presentation of the arguments, we will join in whole-group discussion, defending our positions, arguing against other positions, providing additional evidence for the various positions, and no doubt switching sides frequently.

6. Day Nine: Brief Formal Writing

Students will write one-page papers on one of the following topics:

Loyalty and brotherhood are terms thrown around frequently, especially in our all-male school, but what do they mean? What does this excerpt from *Water Margin* have to say about loyalty and brotherhood? Which characters or actions exemplify these concepts and which ones run counter to it. What lessons regarding loyalty and brotherhood can you find in this story?

The heroes of *Water Margin*, such as Shi Jin, are sometimes referred to as Chinese Robin Hoods. What does it mean to be a Robin Hood character, and how might that label fit Shi Jin? If Shi Jin is Robin Hood, who is cast in the Sheriff of Nottingham role? What are the arguments against the idea of Shi Jin as Robin Hood?

Connections to Other Literary Works

I imagine this series of lessons on “Shi Jin the Nine-Dragoned” as part of a unit on outlaw stories that could include works such as “The Story of Hong Kiltong” from Korea and the Middle English text “A Gest of Robyn Hode.” Other possibilities might include works about or by the medieval French outlaw Eustace the Monk, Australia’s Ned Kelly, and the Irish highwayman James Freney, though I have done only the most basic research on these individuals and did not pursue these possibilities for this particular lesson plan.

Works Cited

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Appendix 1

Confucian Values Mini-research Project

For this project you will be using ThingLink to visually organize what you learn through research. ThingLink is a tool you can use to annotate an image with “hotspots” or “touches” in order to add ideas and information. You will work with a partner to complete this assignment.

Tasks

Topic Selection: We will hold a lottery to determine who gets each of the following topics.

- Life of Confucius (good topic for a pair of students who struggle in English)
- Confucius on Filial Piety
- Confucius on Ethical Treatment of Others
- Confucius on Learning
- Confucian Examination System in Pre-Modern China
- Legacy of Confucius in Chinese Civil Service Exam
- Legacy of Confucius in Chinese Education System
- Legacy of Confucius in Korea
- Legacy of Confucius in Japan
- Legacy of Confucius in the West

Notes: You need at least 1.5 pages of notes (typed, 12- or 14-point font single-spaced) (10-point HW assignment) BEFORE you go on ThingLink. These notes will contain the information you’ve discovered through your research.

- You must use high-quality sources such as articles and papers found via the databases Ms. Guenther has shown you.
- You are required to consult the writings of Confucius via excerpts from *The Analects* taken from *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (handout) and from *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation*, translated by Robert Eno and made available via .pdf by Indiana University.
- You may need to do some basic, general research on Confucius and Confucianism in order to build your knowledge base before getting into your specific topic. This research is for your own understanding and should not be used in your notes.
- Your notes can be about any aspect of your specific topic. They should be made up of a combination of paraphrases and direct quotes from your sources. **WRITE DOWN PAGE NUMBERS! KEEP TRACK OF YOUR SOURCES AND ADD THEM TO YOUR WORKS CITED ON NOODLETOOLS!**

Image: Choose an appropriate image for your ThingLink page.

- The image should have something to do with your topic and be interesting and engaging.
- The source for any found image must appear in your works cited.
- You may use one of the other internet based tools to create an image or your own if you would like.
- Brownie points will be awarded for image selections that are particularly thoughtful or cleverly connected to topics.

Hotspots: Insert at least six hotspots into your image.

- Hotspots should be a combination of information and ideas presented in your own words and quotes and other information from your research. All quotes and all information that is not common knowledge must be properly cited using MLA-style parenthetical documentation.
- One hotspot can contain multiple pieces of related information even if they are from different sources originally.
- Hotspots can contain videos, pictures, audio, interviews, or links to websites.
You must have at least one multimedia hotspot, properly cited on your works cited page. This hotspot should contain relevant material presented in a new and interesting way.
- One of your hotspots must be a link to your Works Cited page in Google Docs.
- One of your hotspots must be a link to another Google Doc containing your reflective paragraph.

Reflective Paragraph: This is a formal writing assignment in which you assess the process that took you to the completion of your ThingLink page. Please collaborate with your partner to do any of the following (more than one is fine):

- Explain the connection between your background image and the topic explored in your ThinkLink.
- Address your reasoning in placing your hotspots.
- Discuss what you learned and how it differed from what you thought was the case before you started your research process.
- Express enthusiasm for your learning process.
- Give reasons why you are proud of your final product.
- Explain which parts of the assignment you enjoyed the most/least.
- Discuss any interests that developed as a result of this project or any directions you might take if you turned this into a longer-term research project

Works Cited:

- This is a list of all sources used in your project.
- It will contain entries for all research material cited, the source of your main image, the source for your multimedia item, and any other outside source(s).
- It will be done in MLA style. Use NoodleTools to make this happen.

Dates:

Assignment introduced/lottery held: (DATE)

Notes/ThingLink work days: (DATE)

Notes due: (DATE)

NoodleTools brush-up session and work day: (DATE)

Assignment due: (DATE)