

Year of the Dragon

Resources to help your school
celebrate Chinese New Year

Primary education pack

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Introduction

According to the Chinese Lunar Calendar we enter the Year of the Dragon on February 10th, 2024. This education pack for primary schools contains information and activities to help teachers and pupils learn more about this important spring festival and explore Chinese language and culture.

Your pupils can read a traditional Chinese tale which explains the origin of four Chinese rivers, practice vocabulary and calligraphy linked to the weather and get creative making amazing dragon puppets and designs for long scrolls and ceramics.

They can also learn how to spot an Imperial dragon and celebrate the New Year festival by making a delicious stir-fry dish called Wandering Dragon.





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Chinese Dragons 龙



Background Information to share with your pupils

Dragons are very popular in Chinese art, history, and culture. They are believed to be wise and bring prosperity, and good luck. On festival days, dragon dances are performed with giant puppets by Chinese communities across the world. Did you know that the best dragon dancers are skilled at martial arts because the moves of the dance are also combat moves?

In Western myths and stories dragons are often evil creatures; but although Chinese dragons may look very fierce, they are usually stern and friendly guardians who bring protection and good luck. They are also associated with water and these elements come together in the traditional story of *The Four Dragons*, which tells how dragons helped to create the four great rivers of China.

The Four Dragons: A Chinese Tale

To make the expandable Chinese dragon puppets for the follow up activity, you will need: A4 sheets of coloured card including yellow and black, scissors, straws, chopsticks or pencils, glue, sticky tape, coloured pens, and craft materials.



Learning Objectives: To engage pupils with a traditional Chinese story and carry out activities to deepen their understanding and engagement with the text.

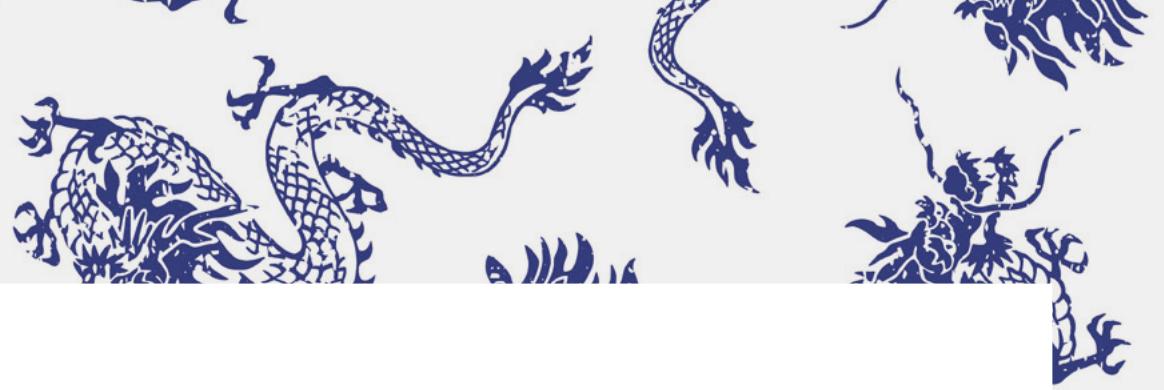
Curriculum Links: English and Art and Design

Core and transferable skills: Communication and collaboration, creativity and imagination, digital literacy.

Preparation and resources: You will need copies of the story of *The Four Dragons*.



Activities



Activity 1

Read the exciting story of The Four Dragons with your pupils. As you read, pause in places to discuss any vocabulary that may be unfamiliar to the children such as sorghum stalks, and provide opportunities for them to make predictions about what they think might happen at different points in the story. For example, they could discuss what the dragons should do when they see the people on earth suffering without rainfall. At the end of the story, you could also show the positions of the four rivers on a map of China.

Activity 2

Divide your class into small groups numbered 1- 4 and ask your pupils to then re-read the story, which is divided into four scenes. Allocate each group one scene and ask them to work together to rewrite this part of the story as a playscript. They will need to decide on the characters that will be in their scene and discuss how it will begin and end.

Share some examples of playscripts with your pupils and remind and model some of the features that they will need to include such as:

- A list of characters and a brief description of the setting.
- The character's name before each line of dialogue.
- Stage directions and possible sound effects/music.

When they have completed their scene, they could read and record each section in turn to form a complete play of the story.

Extension activity

Show your pupils how to make expandable Chinese dragon puppets using the instructions on activity sheet 1. These could then be used as the main characters in the staging of their play. Ask them to come up with their own imaginative ways to portray other characters that feature in their scene such as the Jade Emperor and Mountain God.

When they have made all the characters and props they need, they could perform or film their play using the technology available to you in school. For example, they could add music or pin up some green material to create an exciting greenscreen background for their performance. Information from Edutopia on how to do this can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IIAZoHmW20>

Encourage your class to share their final production of The Four Dragons with another class or your partner school if you have one.

The Four Dragons

Scene 1

Once upon a time, there were no rivers and lakes on earth, but only the Eastern Sea, in which lived four dragons: the Long Dragon, the Yellow Dragon, the Black Dragon and the Pearl Dragon.

One day the four dragons flew from the sea into the sky. They soared and dived, playing hide-and-seek in the clouds.

“Come over here quickly!” the Pearl Dragon cried out suddenly.

“What’s up?” asked the other three, looking down in the direction where the Pearl Dragon pointed. On the earth they saw many people putting out fruits and cakes and burning incense sticks. They were praying! A white-haired woman, kneeling on the ground with a thin boy on her back, murmured:

“Please send rain quickly, God of Heaven, to give our children rice to eat.”

For there had been no rain for a long time. The crops withered, the grass turned yellow, and fields cracked under the scorching sun.

“How poor the people are!” said the Yellow Dragon. “And they will die if it doesn’t rain soon.”

The Long Dragon nodded. Then he suggested, “Let’s go and beg the Jade Emperor for rain.”

Scene 2

The long dragon leapt into the clouds. The others followed closely and flew towards the Heavenly Palace.

Overseeing everything in heaven, on earth and in the sea, the Jade Emperor was very powerful. He was not pleased to see the dragons rushing in. “Why do you come here instead of staying in the sea and behaving yourselves?” he demanded.

The Long Dragon stepped forward and said, “The crops on earth are withering and dying, Your Majesty. I beg you to send rain down quickly!”

“All right. You go back first; I’ll send some rain down tomorrow.” The Jade Emperor pretended to agree.

“Thanks, Your Majesty!” The four dragons went happily back.

But ten days passed, and not a drop of rain came down.

The people suffered more, some eating bark, some grass roots, some forced to eat white clay when they ran out of bark and grass roots.

Seeing all this, the four dragons felt very sorry, for they knew the Jade Emperor only cared about pleasure, and never took the people to heart. They could only rely on themselves to relieve the people of their miseries. But how to do it?

The Four Dragons

Scene 3

The Long Dragon looked at the vast sea and said that he had an idea.

“What is it? Out with it, quickly!” the other three demanded.

“Look, is there not plenty of water in the sea where we live? We should scoop it up and spray it towards the sky. The water will be like rain drops and come down to save the people and their crops.”

“Good idea!” The others clapped their hands.

But,” said the Long Dragon after thinking a bit, “we will be blamed if the Jade Emperor learns of this.”

“I will do anything to save the people,” the Yellow Dragon said resolutely.

“Let’s begin. We will never regret it.” The Black Dragon and the Pearl Dragon were not to be outdone.

They flew to the sea, scooped up water in their mouths, and then flew back into the sky, where they sprayed the water out over the earth. The four dragons flew back and forth, making the sky dark all around. Before long the seawater became rain pouring down from the sky.

“It’s raining! It’s raining!”

“The crops will be saved!”

The people cried and leaped with joy. On the ground the wheat stalks raised their heads and the sorghum stalks* straightened up.

The God of the sea discovered these events and reported them to the Jade Emperor.

*Sorghum is a kind of cereal crop, that is grown as animal feed

The Four Dragons

Scene 4

The Jade Emperor was furious.

“How dare the four dragons bring rain without my permission!” he shouted and ordered the heavenly generals and their troops to arrest the four dragons. Being far outnumbered, the four dragons could not defend themselves, and they were soon arrested and taken back to the heavenly palace.

“Go and get four mountains to lay upon them so that they can never escape!” The Jade Emperor ordered the Mountain God.

The Mountain God used his magic power to make four mountains fly there, whistling in the wind from afar, and pressed them down upon the four dragons.

Imprisoned as they were, they never regretted their actions. Determined to do good for the people forever, they turned themselves into four rivers, which flowed past high mountains and deep valleys, crossing the land from the west to the east and finally emptying into the sea.

And so, China’s four great rivers were formed -- the Heilongjiang (Black Dragon River) in the far north, the Huanghe (Yellow River) in central China, the Changjiang (Yangtze, or Long River) farther south, and the Zhujiang (Pearl River) in the very far south.





Activity sheet

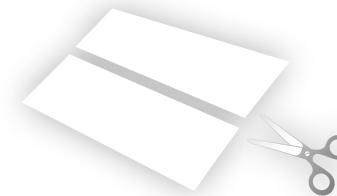
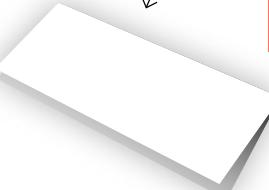
How to make a Chinese dragon puppet

You will need:

- A sheet of A4 coloured card,
- 2 A4 sheets of different coloured card
- 2 straws, chopsticks or pencils, glue, sticky tape
- Scissors
- Craft materials to decorate your dragon.

1

Fold the sheet of coloured card in half length ways, and then cut along the fold, to give you two long rectangles of card.



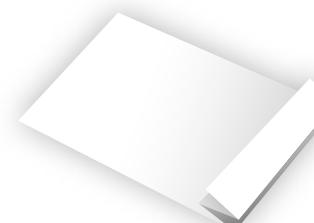
2

Starting at the short side of one of the rectangles, make a fold about 2cm deep.



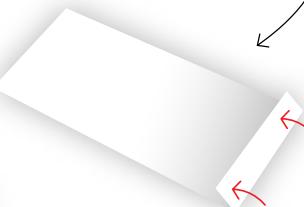
3

Keep folding backwards and forwards, making the folds the same size, to make a concertina, until all the card is folded.



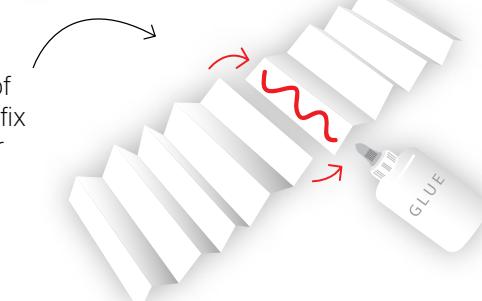
4

Do the same with the other rectangle.



5

Glue or tape one short end of one of the folded cards, and fix to one short end of the other folded card – make sure the zigzag of folds looks right.

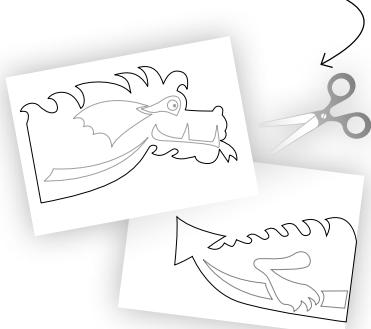




Activity sheet

6

Draw a dragon's head and tail on the gold or yellow card. The flat ends should be the same width as the folded rectangles. A photocopyable template is provided in this pack.

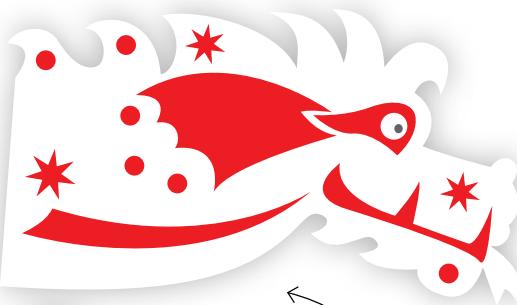


7



Cut out the head and tail.

8



Using craft materials, crayons or whatever you like, draw on the dragon's eyes and decorate it however you like. You could stick on short pieces of wool to give him a beard.



Activity sheet

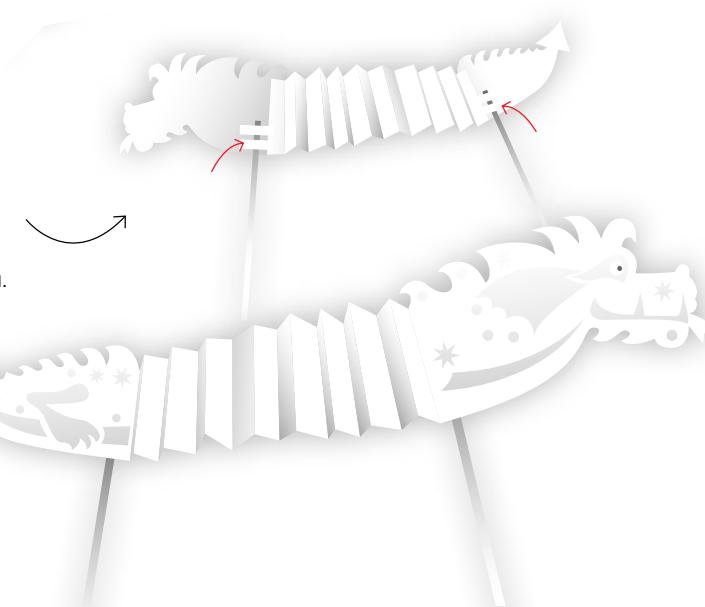
9

Glue or tape the dragon's head to one end of the folded card, and the tail to the other end.



10

Tape the straws, chopsticks or pencils to the back of the head and tail. Tape about 3cm onto the card, leaving the long ends for you to hold and move the puppet with.





Activity sheet





Activity sheet





Chinese Language Activities

天气 Tiānqì Weather

As you can see from the story of the Four Dragons, in Chinese tradition dragons help control the weather, particularly, because Chinese dragons are associated with water and anything to do with rain. Even if you don't want to talk about dragons, it is always helpful to be able to talk about the weather. Here are some useful words and phrases for you to try out!

The Chinese for “weather” is 天气 tiānqì which literally means “sky vapour”

今天天气怎么样? Jīntiān tiānqì zěnme yàng?
What's the weather like today?

今天天气很好。Jīntiān tiānqì hěn hǎo.
It's very nice today.

今天天气不好。Jīntiān tiānqì bùhǎo.
It's not very nice today.

If you want to know how hot or cold it is, you can use the same question:

今天多少度? Jīntiān duōshǎo dù?

What's the temperature like today? (Literally: how many degrees is it today?).

To reply, you just take out the question word **多少** (duōshǎo = how many) and put in a number e.g.

今天十四 (14) 度 左右 Jīntiān shí sì dù zuòyòu
It's about 14° today

Learning Objectives: To learn Chinese vocabulary, questions and responses associated with the weather. To practice writing Chinese characters.

Curriculum Links: Modern languages

Core and transferable skills: Communication and collaboration

Preparation and Resources: You will need: Paper and pens or brushes to practice writing the characters.



Chinese Language Activities

Cold weather vocabulary for you to practise:

雪 xuě snow

下雪 xiàxuě to snow

结冰 jiébīng to freeze

融化 rónghuà to thaw

冷 lěng cold; chilly

非常冷 fēichan lěng extremely cold

风 fēng wind

刮(大)风 guā dà fēng to be (very) windy

Warm weather

晴朗 qínglǎng sunny; fine (weather)

(好)热 (hǎo) rè (really) hot

暖和 nuǎnkuo warm

蓝天白云 lán tiān báiyún
nice weather (literally: “blue sky and white clouds”)

太阳很大 tàiyáng hěn dà

the sun is really strong

晒太阳 shài tàiyáng

to sun oneself; get some sun

晒伤 shàishāng

to get sunburnt

Wet weather

多云 duōyún cloudy

雨 yǔ rain

下雨 xiàyǔ to rain

毛毛雨 máomaoyǔ drizzle

暴雨 bàoyǔ rainstorm

雷雨 léiyǔ thunderstorm

雷声 léishēng thunderclap

闪电 shǎndiàn lightning

Dragons in Chinese art and culture



Background information to share with your pupils

Chinese dragons are often depicted in paintings and on ceramics as a combination of several animals. They may have the horns of a deer, the neck and body of a snake, the mane of a lion, the scales of a fish and the claws of an eagle. They are often shown alongside images of water and weather. Significantly, Chinese dragons were also associated with the Emperors and Empresses of China, who were said to sit on the Dragon Throne. You can spot an Imperial dragon by two things - the colour yellow and the number of claws it has. Only an Imperial dragon can have five claws!

Chinese Dragon handscroll paintings

Chinese handscroll paintings are long horizontal scrolls that when unrolled, often tell stories that show adventures, landscapes, and sometimes dragons! They are generally viewed from the right-hand end of the scroll. Nine Dragons is a famous handscroll painting by artist Chen Rong from the thirteenth century. When unrolled, it is more than 11 metres long and shows black and white images of nine different dragons moving in and out of rainclouds, waves, and waterfalls.

Chinese Porcelain

Ancient China is also famous for a high-quality type of pottery called porcelain. This becomes white, hard, and can be almost transparent, when it is baked in a kiln. It was first developed in China over 2000 years ago and was made for the Imperial court, the domestic market and for export. When Europeans first saw it, they couldn't believe it was pottery, not metal or glass. It is thought that the word 'China' was first used in Britain in the 17th-century to describe this type of pottery, which was very expensive. A range of styles and techniques were used to decorate the porcelain including intricate designs of dragons which remain very popular. In fact, in 2022, a blue and white porcelain vase decorated with dragons and clouds sold for almost 8 million euros.

Learning Objectives: To learn about the how the dragon is portrayed in Chinese art forms, particularly on handscrolls and ceramics.

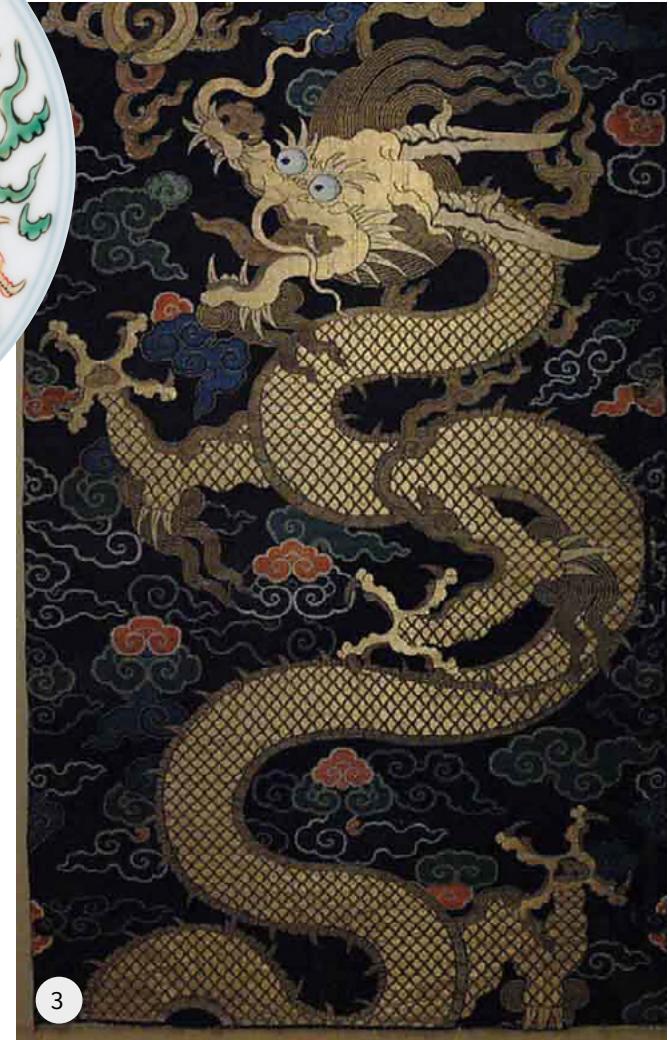
Curriculum Links: Art and design

Core and transferable skills: Creativity and imagination, communication and collaboration

Preparation and resources: You will need copies of images of Chinese dragons on activity sheet 2, large rolls of paper, paints or inks, copies of the plate template and coloured pens.



Activity sheet 2



1. Dragon wall, 2. Chinese porcelain plate, 3. 17th century woven silk panel,
4&5. Porcelain dragons, British Museum, Percival David Collection.



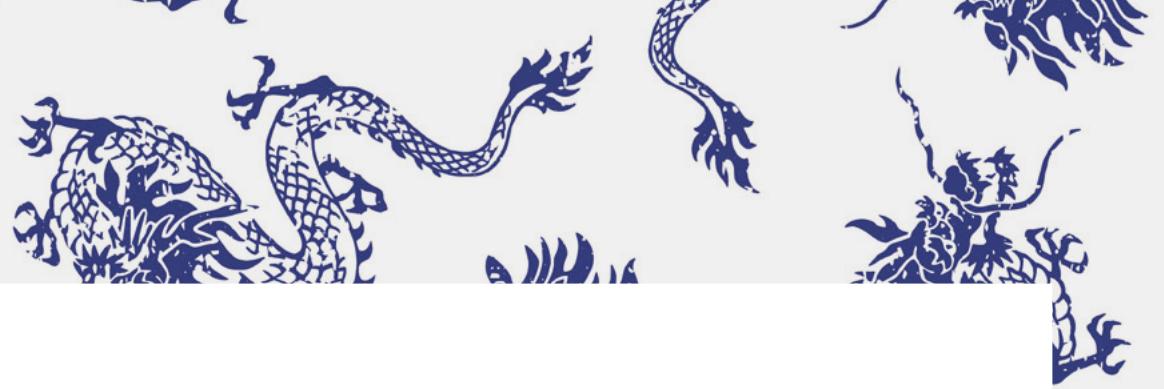
Activity

Ask your pupils to look closely at the images of the Chinese dragons on artefacts on the activity sheet, and discuss the following questions with a partner:

- Which is your favourite object and dragon? Can you explain why?
- What animals do you think your favourite dragon might be made up of?
- Can you spot any of the symbols that are often associated with Chinese Dragons such as clouds, mountains, water, or pearls?
- Which are the Imperial dragons? How do you know?

Ask them to choose one dragon and look very closely at the way it has been painted. Can they list 5 adjectives to describe the dragon, make a large, detailed sketch of it and give it an imaginative name!

You could then choose one or both of the following art activities to carry out with your pupils.



Provide paints or inks and brushes and a long roll of paper. Ask your pupils to use their sketch as a starting point to paint an imaginative picture of a Chinese dragon surrounded by images of water and weather. These can then be cut out and mounted on a large roll of paper to create your own Chinese handscroll. Perhaps the whole school could contribute dragons to create a school scroll winding around a corridor or school hall. The dragons portrayed can be displayed and viewed in the traditional manner travelling from right to left.

Alternatively, you could invite your students to create their own design for a ceramic plate decorated with dragon patterns and motifs using the template on activity sheet 3.

Extension activity

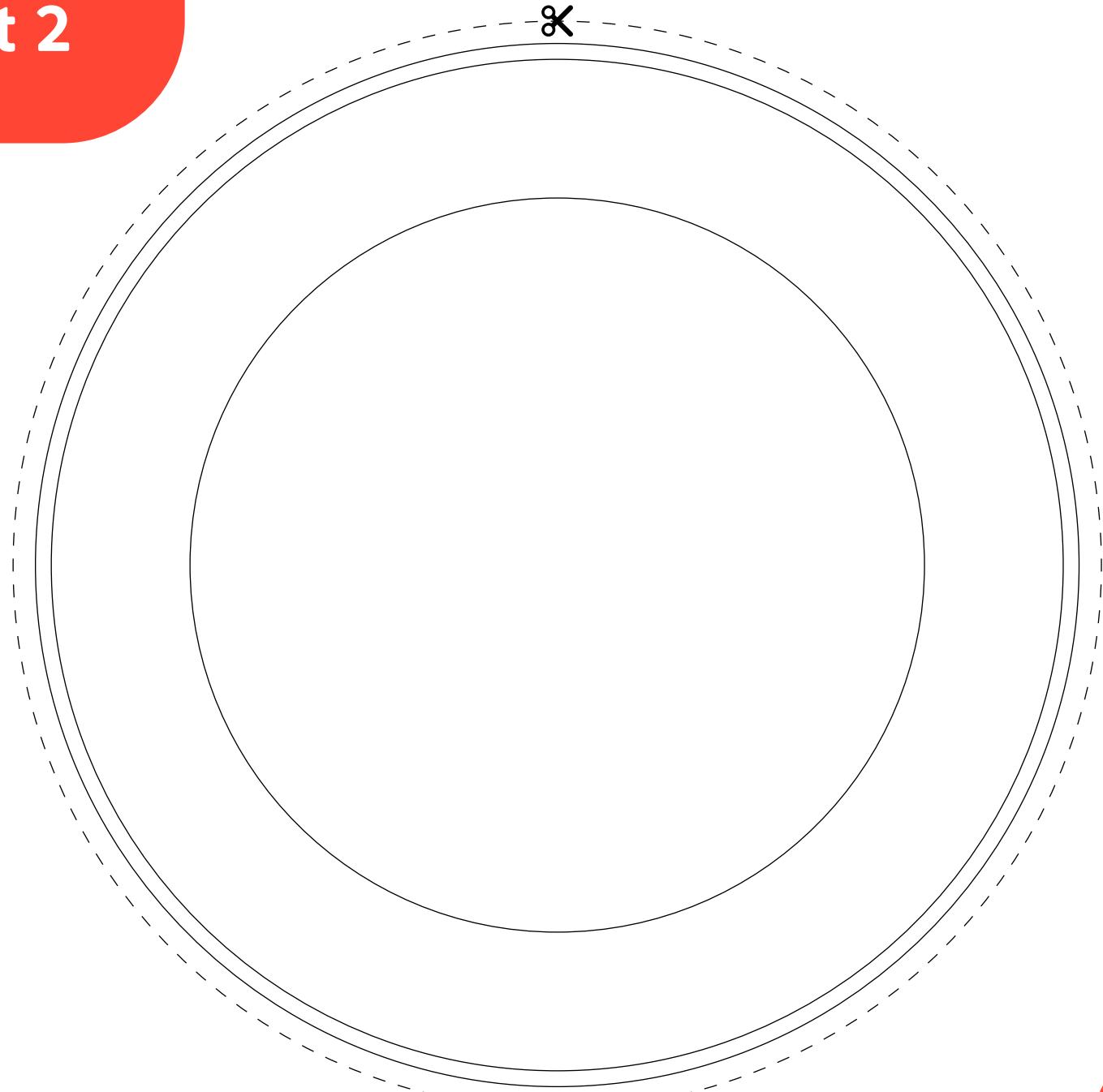
Your pupils could go on to make their own bowls and cups out of clay or paper mâché layers laid over a blown-up balloon, and then decorate them with their dragon designs and motifs. If you have a partner school, swap photographs of your dragon scrolls or plate designs.



Activity sheet 2

Design a plate

Photocopy onto card, then create your own plate design to celebrate the year of the Dragon using Chinese patterns and Dragon related motifs.





Recipe for Wandering Dragon Stir-fry dish



Wandering Dragons Stir-fry

This is a simple but tasty restaurant-style stir-fry with an appropriate name for the Year of the Dragon! For a vegetarian version, you can substitute 250g of firm beancurd (tofu) cubed and 200g of fried beancurd squares (from an Asian/ Chinese supermarket) or all beancurd.

Ingredients

- 250g skinless, boneless chicken thighs cut into bite-size pieces
- 250g raw, peeled prawns
- 2 tbs of vegetable oil

Sauce:

- 1.5 tbs light soy sauce
- 2 tbs oyster sauce
- 1.5 tbs cornflour
- 0.5 tsp sugar
- 0.5 tsp white pepper
- 115 ml chicken stock (or vegetable stock)

Veg:

- 1 medium onion coarsely chopped
- 1 carrot, finely sliced
- Half a red bell pepper, chopped
- Half a yellow pepper, chopped
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil
- 3 cloves of garlic, crushed

Method:

1. In a bowl, mix together all the sauce ingredients
2. Heat the vegetable oil in a wok or frying pan over high heat
3. Add the onion and carrot and stir-fry for about one minute
4. Add the bell peppers and stir-fry until beginning to soften but still crisp
5. Add the chicken, prawns and garlic and stir. If using beancurd/tofu add it now.
6. Give the sauce a good stir to distribute the cornflour and add to the wok/pan
7. Turn down the heat to medium and cook until the sauce thickens and then 2 more minutes
8. Serve with plain boiled jasmine rice and prawn crackers

Hold a Year of the Dragon Celebration Event

To celebrate Chinese Spring Festival and the start of the Year of the Dragon why not invite friends and family to school to watch your version of The Four Rivers story, admire your dragon artwork and eat some delicious Wandering Dragon stir – fry. You could also teach them how to ask about the weather and create their own dragon plate designs.



Find out more



We hope your pupils enjoyed the activities in this pack. There are lots more ways you can get involved in international work with China and other countries:

Find a partner school

International school partnerships can inspire pupils by bringing the world into the classroom through joint learning activities which bring language learning to life. They also offer teachers the chance to share experiences and learn new practices from colleagues in other countries. Browse our database of schools looking for partners and find guidance and support to help you make the most of your partnership at <https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/partner>

Access resources

Check out our global learning resources, including classroom activities and lesson plans: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/find>

Learn Chinese

Host a Chinese Language Assistant. It's easy to organise and you can share the assistant with other local schools. Information about the Primary Programme of Study at the Confucius Institute can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2cVRnkI>

To find out more about implementing Chinese teaching in your school contact the UCL IOE Confucius Institute for Schools at chinesenetworks@ucl.ac.uk

Get recognition

Sign up to our prestigious British Council International School Award scheme to earn accreditation for your international work: <https://bit.ly/383onFp>

And don't forget
next year is the

Year of
the _____?

