

Japanese Tiger and Dragon

The dragon symbolizes the yang forces of the universe.

The tiger symbolizes the yin forces of the universe.

The tiger and dragon are ancient symbols of yin and yang, forces that combine to make up the universe.

Ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy explains the world in terms of two forces—yin (from the ancient Chinese word for “shady”) and yang (from the word for “bright”). Yang elements include light, fire, rain, and the heavens. Yin elements include darkness, water, wind, and the earth. Male traits are yang, and female traits are yin. Yang qualities are active, while yin qualities are passive. Everything in the universe results from the interaction of yin and yang.

The dragon and tiger have long been symbols of these two forces. The dragon, a mythical animal thought to reign over the heavens, stands for yang. The tiger, respected in ancient China as mightiest of the wild beasts, stands for yin. The image illustrates why these two animals, both of them powerful and strong, are fitting symbols for yin and yang.

The tiger crouches low to the rocky ground, a sign that the yin earth is the tiger’s territory. Plants bend in the force of the wind, said to be created by the tiger’s mighty roar. But the tiger’s

strength is a quiet power, held in her taut muscles. The dragon, on the other hand, is full of active energy. His head rises out of the yang heavens. His energy causes rain clouds to swirl and waves to form. But the tiger and dragon seem evenly matched. One will not dominate the other, just as the forces of yin and yang balance each other in the universe.

(Text courtesy of Minneapolis Institute of Art)