

Shared Cultural Symbols

A Pre-Visit Lesson to *Asian Gardens: Science and Culture*

Objectives: To discuss the reasons why certain ideas become cultural symbols.
To compare and contrast the cultural symbols of countries which are geographically related.

Curricular Area: Social Studies

Time: One class period

Materials: Images of the following: The Seal of the United States, the Seal of Mexico, the Flag of the United States, the Flag of Mexico

Background: The term ‘cultural symbol’ describes anything that serves as a representative of an idea concerning a given culture. Cultural symbols may have internal significance, like a religious icon, or may serve as an outward representation of that culture, like a recognizable building or a style of dress. Identifying cultural symbols and investigating their origins can often provide insight into that culture’s history and values.

Cultural symbols are drawn from a variety of sources. Historical figures, buildings and artifacts often become cultural icons, especially if they are associated with heroic deeds or events of which the people of the culture are particularly proud. Cultural symbols may also be derived from local wildlife, plants, natural features, heavenly bodies or natural phenomenon. Colors and shapes are often associated with different ideas in different cultures, and even music styles and sounds may take on cultural significance.

Many cultures share cultural symbols. This may happen because one culture descended from another and kept the symbols of its parent culture as it developed. It may also be that one culture was influenced by another and adopted its symbols as its own.

In this lesson, you will examine examples of shared cultural symbols and discuss how the symbols became important to the two cultures that claim them.

Procedure: Discuss with students how they would define a ‘cultural symbol’. As a group, make a list of symbols of American culture, what you feel each ‘says’ about America, and (where possible) how it came to be a symbol.

Display the seals of the United States and of Mexico. Have students identify ways in which the two seals are similar. Note, in particular, that each features an eagle.

Invite the students to discuss why they think these similarities exist. You might point out the following:

- Eagles have been used in European heraldry since the Holy Roman Empire. They have long been regarded them as ‘the lion of the skies’ and symbolize bravery and dignity.
- The present populations of both the U.S. and Mexico are largely descended from European settlers.
- Bald and golden eagles are both native to the United States and Mexico. However, the bald eagle appears in Mexico only rarely (usually in winter). The golden eagle, on the other hand, can be found in Mexico year-round. Golden eagles also appear in the United States, but they are predominantly seen in the west, which had not yet been made a part of the U.S. when the decision to make the bald eagle the national symbol was made.

The choice of an eagle as a symbol for both countries is therefore the result of **similar ancestry** and **common wildlife**.

At the Missouri Botanical Garden, our Chinese Garden and our Japanese Garden are fashioned after traditional gardens in each country. Look at the images and maps of the two gardens and make a list of the similarities you notice. In particular, note that both gardens:

- Contain a body of water.
- Contain rock formations.
- Have cranes depicted or represented in some way.
- Have lotus beds.

The presence of water and stone is a fundamental aspect of any Chinese or Japanese garden. Water and stone are viewed as interconnected opposites; stones represent mountains and strength, while water represents oceans and passivity. This practice began in China and traveled with early migrants to the Japanese islands from the mainland. In this way, **shared ancestry** has led to shared cultural symbols.

Cranes and lotus flowers are native to both China and Japan, and have come to hold symbolic meaning in both cultures as well. As in the case of the eagles of North America, the countries’ **shared wildlife and flora** has led to shared cultural symbols.

Extension:

Can you think of other cultural symbols we share with other countries? Why do you think we share them?



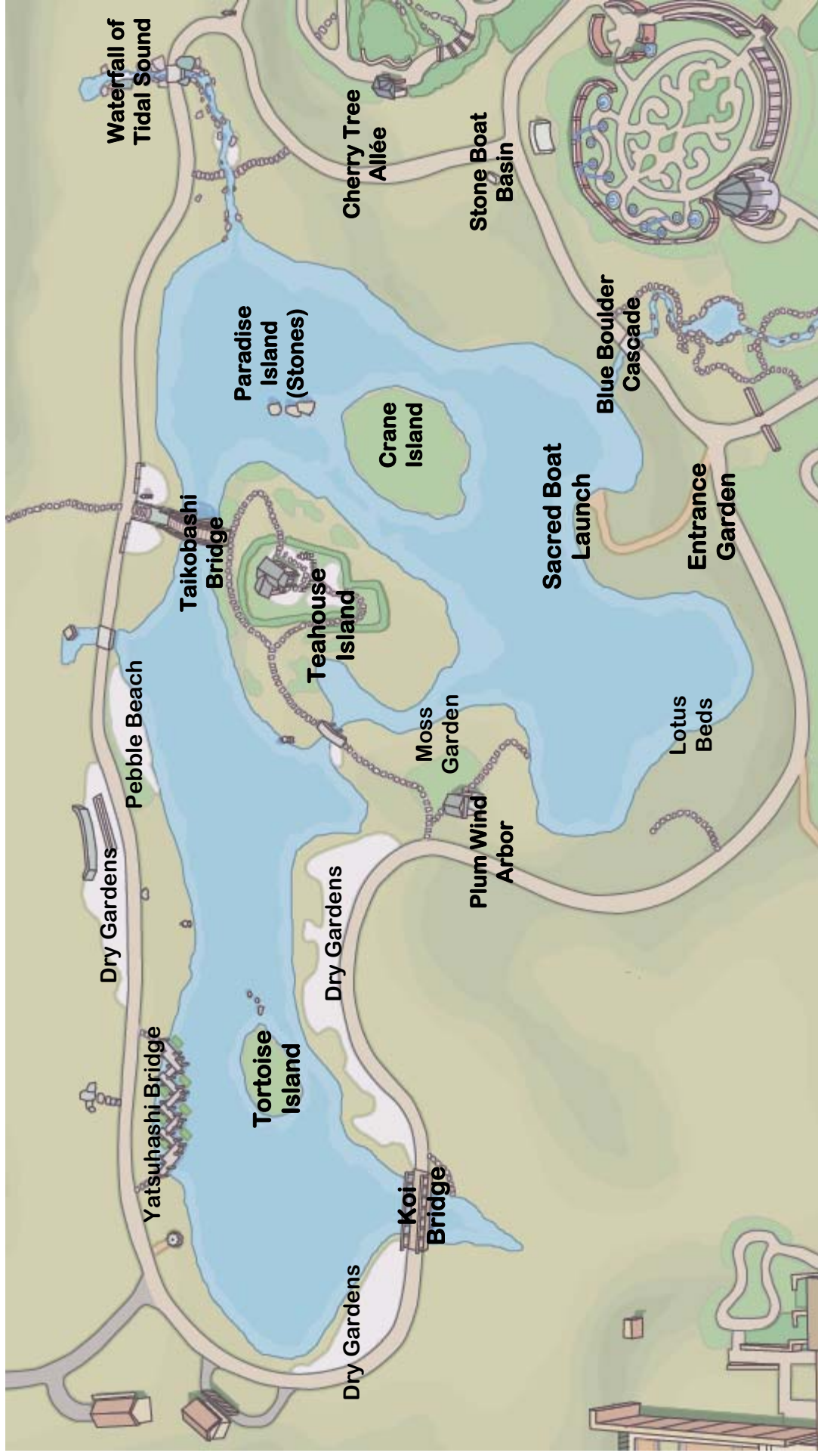
Figure 1: The Seal of the United States of America (Obverse)



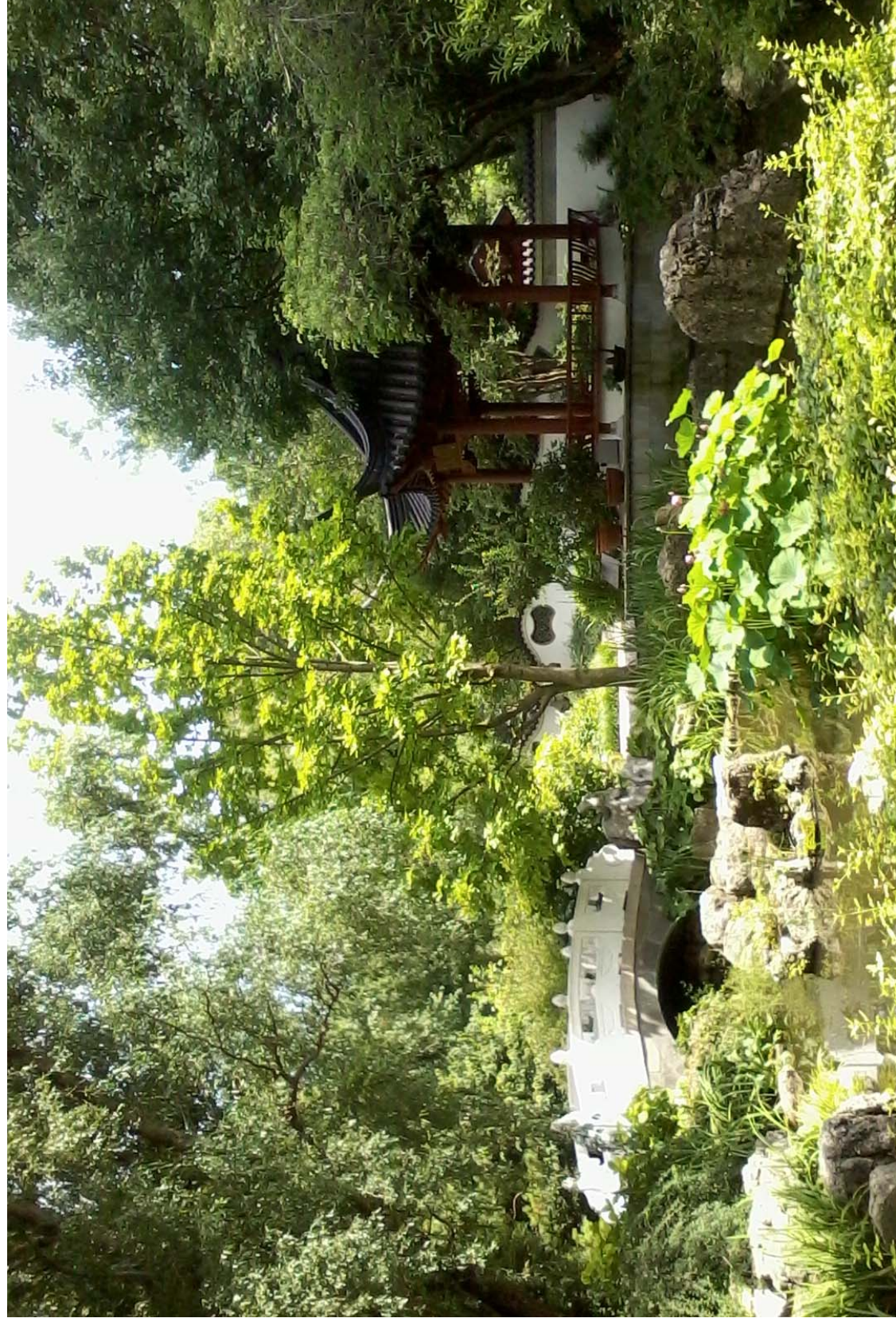
Figure 2: The Seal of Mexico



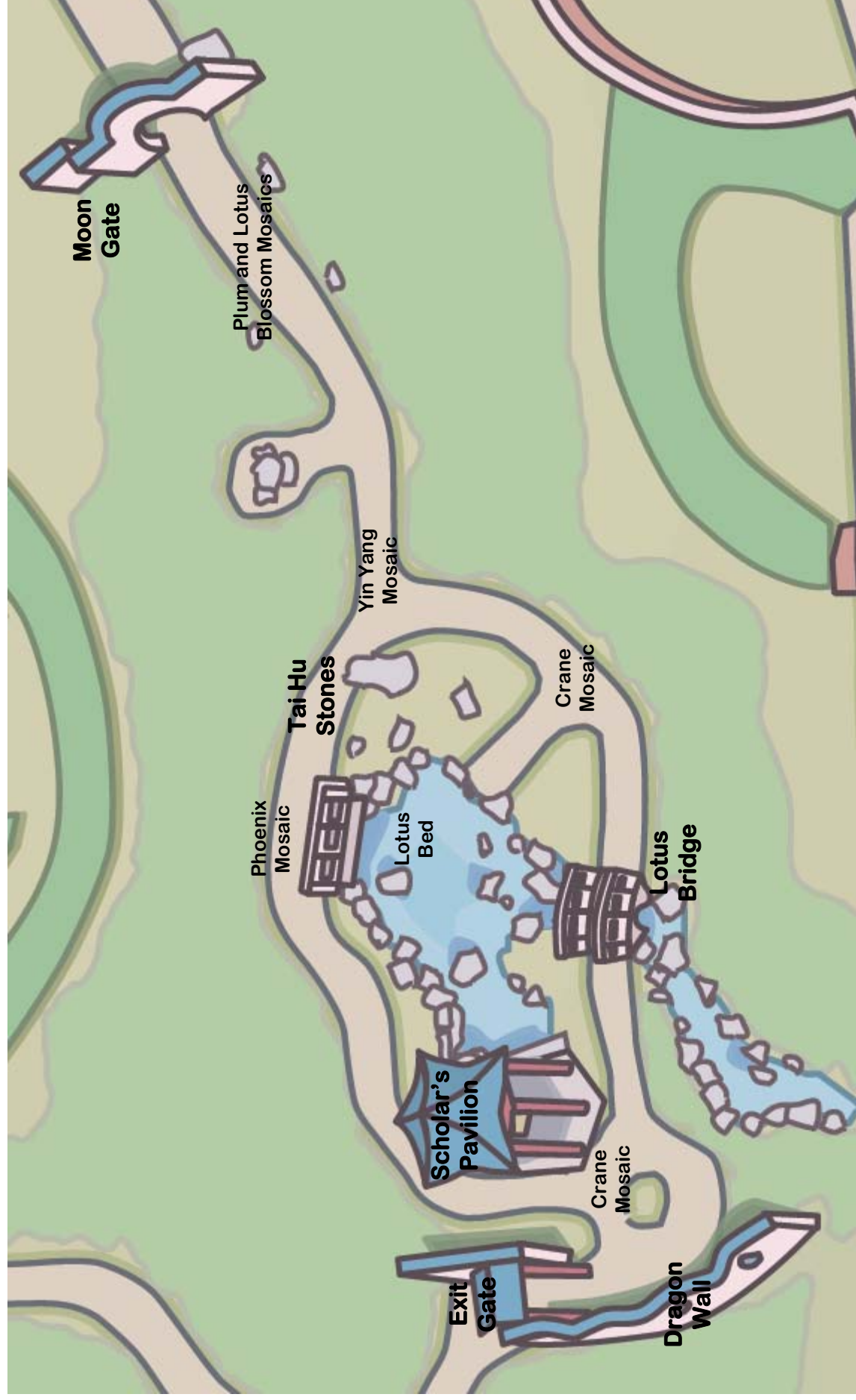
Seiya-En (Japanese Garden)
Missouri Botanical Garden, 2011



Map of Seiwai-En (Japanese Garden)
Missouri Botanical Garden, 2011



Nanjing Friendship Garden (Chinese Garden)
Missouri Botanical Garden, 2011



Map of the Nanjing Friendship Garden (Chinese Garden)
Missouri Botanical Garden, 2011