

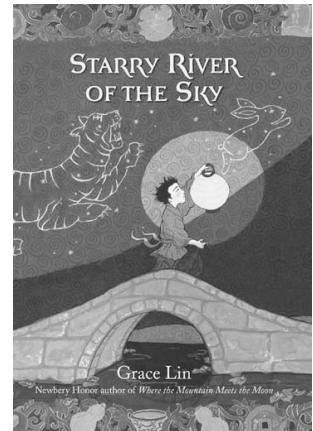


DAY OF FIVE POISONS

An Art & Symbolism Activity for the Book, *The Starry River of the Sky* by Grace Lin

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Starry River of the Sky by Grace Lin (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers) is the story of the boy Rendi, who runs away from his family only to find himself in a village where the moon has disappeared. Each night, instead of seeing the moon, Rendi is troubled by mournful moans that only he can hear. The only thing that distracts Rendi are the stories of Madame Chang. Are there hidden meanings in these tales that will explain the moon's disappearance? Will Rendi discover them and restore the balance?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace Lin is the author and illustrator of picture books, early readers and middle grade novels. Grace's 2010 Newbery Honor book *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* was chosen for the Today Show Kid's Book Club and was a NYT's Bestseller. *Ling & Ting*, Grace's first early reader, was honored with the Theodor Geisel Honor in 2011. An Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award nominee for the US, most of Grace's books are about the Asian-American experience because she believes, "Books erase bias, they make the uncommon everyday, and the mundane exotic. A book makes all cultures universal." More at www.GraceLin.com.

DAY OF FIVE POISONS

The Starry River of the Sky opens on The Day of Five Poisons, one of the most dangerous days in ancient China. The day was observed on the fifth day of the fifth month and marked the beginning of summer when villagers were most vulnerable to poisonous animals, insects, and disease.

Right after Rendi arrives in the Village of Clear Sky, we see Master Chao paint Peiyi's forehead with wang, a symbol of power (see below), to protect her from this unlucky day. Master Chao uses wine mixed with realgar or arsenic. Realgar/arsenic is a poison and the villagers believed you needed poison to fight poison.

Poisonous Animals

The five poisonous animals were the snake, the scorpion, the centipede, the spider, and the toad. If you lived amongst these poisonous animals in the summer, you too might want to wear protection like all Chinese children did on this day. The adults took their protection in a more potent way by drinking the wine with a touch of poison in it. You get a sense of how much these animals were feared when you see how easy it was to trick Rendi's kidnappers into believing that the Noxious Toad was after them.





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The Tiger

It was not just Chinese children in ancient China that wore the character for power or wang on their foreheads. Tigers were believed to be the most powerful creatures of the animal kingdom, and in paintings and drawings of tigers, the black marks on their foreheads often formed the character, wang. In fact, if you look at photographs of tigers you can start to see the inspiration for marking tigers this way in art.

Five Poison Charms

Another common protection from the Five Poisons were charms that were hung about your neck or nailed to the your house. If you search online for images of "Five Poison Charms," or look at the example below, you can see how the circular charms often depicted a tiger chasing a snake, a scorpion, a centipede, a spider, a toad, or all five. Yes, tigers were also very dangerous to villagers in Ancient China, but maybe like the arsenic that fought poison with poison, the tiger pit dangerous animal against dangerous animal.

Your Own Five Poison Charm

Create your own Five Poison Charm by drawing a tiger chasing a snake, a scorpion, a centipede, a spider, or a toad (or all five) in the circle on the next page. (Don't worry about your animals looking perfect. Remember that charms were about symbolism. Your tiger need only resemble a tiger to work!)

Cut out your charm when you are finished, cut a hole in the middle of it, thread the hole with string or yarn, and hang it on a doorknob or around your neck for protection.



(Five Poison Charm from www.PrimalTrek.com)





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