

Activity 2.1 Creating Characters

Performance Objectives Students will identify simply pictographs and ideographs from Chinese writing. After creating their own images, they will combine characters to communicate ideas to one another, introducing basic foundations of the Chinese writing system.

Grade Level Elementary, middle school

Essential Questions How did the Chinese writing system develop over time?
How is the Chinese writing system uniquely suited to the Chinese language?
As the Chinese writing system developed, what effect did it have on society?
What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese writing and phonetic systems?

Standards **Language Arts**

Language for Information and Understanding

- Using language to explain how a problem was solved or a task was conducted

Language for Social Interaction

- Understanding how to take turns and respond to others' ideas in conversations on familiar topics

Social Studies

World History

- Studying about different world cultures and civilizations, focusing on their accomplishments, contributions, values, beliefs and traditions
- Understanding the roles and contributions of individuals and groups to social, political, economic, cultural, scientific, technological, and religious practices and activities
- View historic events through the eyes of those who were there, as shown in their art, writing, music, and artifacts

Time Required One class period

Materials Photocopies of the **Oracle Bone** and **Introductory Questions** from the beginning of this section, the **Order of Language** handout, or the *Visible Traces* poster
Pencils
Chalkboard and chalk

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Assessment Piece Pictograph/Ideograph sheet and character constructions

- Procedure
1. As a class, examine the **Oracle Bone** (either as a handout or on the poster) and discuss the **Introductory Questions**.
 2. Discuss the notion of power and writing, considering the following: The Chinese written language underwent much development during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1100 B.C.E.). The Shang dynasty is also known for its highly stratified social structure with a few people ruling many. How might writing be related to this? What happens in a society if only a few are allowed access to information and knowledge?
 3. Give the **Order of Languages** handout to students. Introduce the concepts of pictographs and ideographs in Chinese characters.
 4. Have students complete the sheet, drawing a line to the appropriate modern form of the characters listed. Discuss the following:
Writing with a brush on wood strips was developed as early as the seventh or sixth century B.C.E. while paper was invented around the first century B.C.E. Are these inventions related to the way Chinese characters developed? Which forms of characters do students think would be easier to learn and quicker to write?
What might the effect be on society if writing becomes easier to learn and execute? [During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) Chinese society was greatly restructured as the educated bureaucratic class became a dominant force in society and government.]
 5. Working in groups of three to five, have students generate their own pictographs for several concrete objects. (Examples might be apple, man, horse, chair, book.) Have students share one of the objects and its pictograph with the class by drawing it on a transparency for the class to guess what it might stand for. Remind students that since our goal is effective communication, they should make the symbols as easy to recognize as possible. Identify these characters as pictographs.
 6. Now have students attempt to create a symbol for abstract concepts. Give each group a list of three concepts (examples: love, happy, life, smart, yellow, school). Again they should share their character with the class, having other students guess what it represents.
 7. When all students have shared one of their concepts with the class, discuss the differences between the object-based pictographs and the ideographs that represent concepts.
Ask students: Which was harder to represent and identify? Why?
How did this affect the way you were able to communicate?
What are other ways that we communicate an idea (spoken, written, pictures, gestures)?






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8. Have the class develop criteria for selecting symbols that best convey an object or idea. Consider simplicity and ease in reproducing the symbol.

Extension Have students generate enough characters to form a simple sentence. For example, “I will eat lunch at noon.” Have them present their sentences to the rest of the class. Ask the students: Were you successful in communicating? How many symbols did you need to use? What problems did you face as you combined objects and concepts? Based on this experience, what advantages might a character-based language have? What advantages might a phonetic-based system have?

Handout Order in Language

Over the centuries, Chinese characters have evolved and can be grouped into six different categories. The oldest characters comprise the first and smallest group, called pictographs—simple drawings that look like the object they represent, e.g., sun, horse, or tree. The characters you will be examining below are pictographs. Look at them and see if you can match the older form of the character with its modern form.

meaning	gradual evolution		modern form
sun			
tree			
person			
mouth			
field			
cart/vehicle			

However, as pictographs had certain limitations, such as not being able to convey abstract ideas, a second category, called ideographs, was created. Here are some examples of ideographs:

above  below 

Handout Order in Language

A more complex form of ideographs is called "compound ideographs" where two pictographs come together to make an ideograph.

sun 日 + moon 月 = bright 明

person 人 + person 人 = to agree/to follow 从

sun 日 + tree 木 = east (sun rising above the trees in the east.) 東

Try to guess the meaning of these compound ideographs:

tree 木 + tree 木 = 林 *

person 人 + an enclosure or confine 口 = 囚 **

The most common type of character, however, is known as a "phonetic compound." One part hints at the sound of the character, the other part hints at the meaning.

(ke) 可 + water signifier 氵 = (he) river 河

(fu) 夫 + hand signifier 扌 = (fu) support with the hand 扶

(min) 民 + eye signifier 目 = (mian) sleep 眠

This handout has been adapted with permission from the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) Demystifying the Chinese Language (1980).

Answers: *grove/forest, **prisoner