

Activity 4.1 Discovering Pictographs

Performance Objectives Language can be a window through which cultural identity can be glimpsed. It can play a key role in defining and maintaining cultural identity. Students will use the Naxi pictographic script to generate and translate stories, exploring the advantages, challenges, and unique qualities of this writing system.

Grade Level K–12 (easily adaptable to all)

Essential Questions What role does language play in relation to cultural identity?
How does the language of the Naxi reflect their complex history as a group?

Standards Social Studies

World History

- Knowing the social and economic characteristics, such as customs, traditions, child-rearing practices, ways of making a living, education and socialization practices, gender roles, roots, and religious and spiritual beliefs, that distinguish different cultures and civilizations
- Knowing some important historic events and developments of past civilizations
- Interpreting and analyzing documents and artifacts related to significant developments and events in world history
- Investigating the roles and contributions of individuals and groups in relation to key social, political, cultural, and religious practices spanning world history
- Viewing history through the eyes of those who witnessed key events and developments by analyzing their literature, diary accounts, letters, artifacts, art, music, architectural drawings, and other documents
- Investigating important events and developments in world history by posing analytical questions, selecting relevant data, distinguishing fact from opinion, hypothesizing cause-and-effect relationships, testing hypotheses, and forming conclusions

Language Arts

Language for Information and Understanding

- Listening to or reading an account of how something is done and then incorporating those techniques into their own work
- Following directions that involve a series of actions

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Language for Social Interaction

- Listening attentively to others and building on their ideas in conversations of general interest to peers and adults
- Expressing their ideas and concerns clearly and respectfully in conversations and group discussions

Time Required One class period to review artifacts and write stories; one class to share and discuss

Materials Photocopies of **Dongba Texts of the Naxi People** and **Introductory Questions** at the beginning of this section or the *Visible Traces* poster
Paper and writing materials (pencils and/or colored pencils)

Assessment Piece Pictographic stories, translations, oral presentations

Procedure

1. Review Dongba texts, handing out photocopies of **Dongba Texts of the Naxi People**. Discuss the **Introductory Questions** as a class.
2. Have students work individually or in pairs to generate a one-page story using pictographs of their own design.
3. When students have completed their stories, have them exchange pictograph renditions and offer a translation of each others' stories.
4. Return pictographs to their owners. Present the stories and have the translators describe their interpretations.
5. As a class, discuss the following questions:
What were the advantages of writing in pictographs?
What were the challenges and limitations?
Were the translators correct? If they had been looking at a phonetic-based language, would they have been more or less correct without knowledge of the system?
How might the use of this kind of writing system be important as a means of identifying a people?
How does this kind of writing system influence the way people share ideas?

Extensions Using pictographs, older students might make journal entries for several days to further explore their advantages and limitations.

Have students compare Naxi pictographs to signs used to communicate stories of rulers, gods, and historical events in other cultures, such as Egyptian hieroglyphics. How are the signs similar? How are they different?