



LESSON FOUR

Chinese Characters (汉字 Han zi)

The earliest writings in China are called oracle bones (甲骨 jiǎgǔ) which are inscriptions on tortoise shells and bones, and they date back to the Shang dynasty in 1200 BC. By contrast, Latin was first written around 700 BC.

Shang Kings believed in the power of their ancestors so they used oracle bones to find the answers to important questions. The priest would carve the king's question on to the oracle bone, he then heated a thin pin made of bronze. Once heated, the pin was held against the bone, causing it to crack and form patterns. A special oracle would "read" the cracks and provide the king with an answer.

Traditionally characters are divided into six categories (六书): Pictographs, simple ideograms, compound ideographs, phonetic loan characters, radical phonetics, and derivative cognates. Examples of pictographs would be 女 (woman) or 子 (child). A good example of a compound ideograph is 好 (good) woman + child.

There are hundreds of dialects spoken in China, but people can communicate through written language because it is universal. At one time there were more than 80,000 characters in existence, today there are over 50,000. However, an educated Chinese person knows around 8,000 characters, even though you only need to know between 2-3,000 characters to read a newspaper.

Besides the different styles, there are also two forms of Chinese characters, simplified and traditional. Simplified is the standard form employed in 1949 due to the high illiteracy rate. The Chinese government believed the steep learning curve of Chinese characters was one the major factors of such a high illiteracy rate.

Less than 5% of currently used Chinese characters originated as pictographs. The vast majority of characters are combinations of meanings and phonetic subparts, known as radicals.

Some Popular Chinese Characters and Their Evolution

WATER				SHUI
SUN				RI
MOUNTAIN				SHAN
RAIN				YU

Older Chinese was written from right to left and top to bottom, but it has become more popular to publish from left to right, similar to English.

Questions:

- How many characters do you need to know to read a Chinese newspaper?
- Traditionally Chinese was written from _____ to _____.
- What are the two forms of Chinese characters?
- All Chinese characters are pictographs. T/F
- Chinese characters were first written on what type of materials?



For more activities and information

Please visit the Confucius Institute website ouci.ou.edu/ChineseCharacters