

LESSON PLAN

Understanding Chinese Characters



Subjects: Visual Arts, Social Studies, English Language Arts

Grade Level: Elementary School, Middle School/Junior High

Duration: Two to three 50-minute class sessions

Dynasty: Shang (ca. 1600–1050 BCE); Ming (1368–1644)

Object Type: Natural Material, Calligraphy

Theme: Language and Stories

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Inscribed tortoiseshell (“oracle bone”)

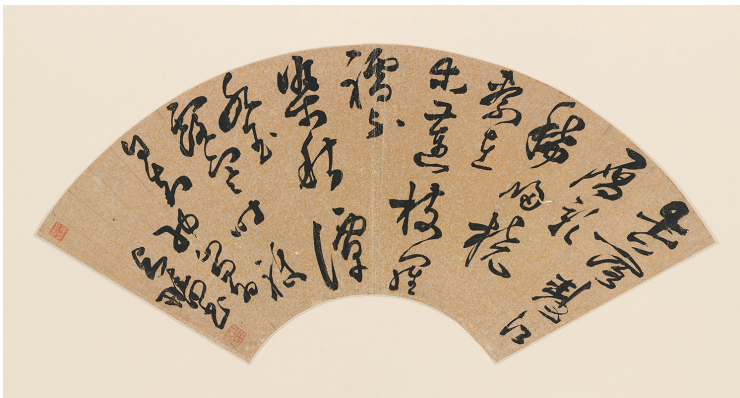
China

Anyang period, Late Shang dynasty, ca. 1300–1050 BCE

Tortoiseshell

2 9/16 x 4 1/4 x 7/8 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S2012.9.445



Poem in cursive script

China

Ming dynasty, mid-16th century

Ink on gold-flecked paper

7 3/8 x 20 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1988.7

Objective

Students will learn how to write some Chinese characters and understand how Chinese characters are grouped together to create words.

Essential Questions

- What is unique about the Chinese writing system?
- How did Chinese characters develop over time?
- What is the basic structure of the Chinese writing system?
- How did the Chinese writing system influence other cultures such as Japanese and Korean?

Background

Chinese Characters

The earliest writing systems in the world were invented in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica. Chinese characters represent one of the most ancient scripts still used today. Unlike the Roman alphabet used in English that consists of letters, the Chinese writing system consists of characters. Each character corresponds to one spoken syllable, but most Chinese words are compound words made up of two or more characters.

Chinese characters evolved from a pictograph-like script called “oracle bone script,” examples of which are found on the bones of buffalo and tortoiseshells used for divination during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE). The pictographic origins of Chinese characters are still evident in some words. For example, the character for tree (*mu*) closely resembles the tree it is meant to represent. Many Chinese characters, however, are two or more characters combined together to express a certain meaning. For example, two *mu* characters joined together form the character *lin*, meaning “woods.” Three *mu* characters put together form a new character, *sen*, meaning “luxuriant growth of trees” (fig. 1).



Figure 1. An illustration from *The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide*, p. 40.

Most of the words in the contemporary Chinese language are compound words, consisting of two or three characters put together. For example, the combination of characters *sen* and *lin* is the two-syllable word *senlin*, meaning “forest” (fig. 2).



Figure 2. An illustration from *The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide*, p. 40.

Chinese Scripts Styles

Six major scripts have developed over the course of more than three thousand years for writing Chinese characters, and all are still used in “artistic writing” (calligraphy) today. Each of these styles of writing—**oracle bone**, **seal**, **clerical**, **cursive**, **running**, and **standard**—has distinct differences in appearance (fig. 3).

						To use or take (yǐ)
						Tranquil (jìng)
						To use (yòng)
						To study (xué)
Large-seal script	Small-seal script	Clerical script	Cursive script	Running script	Standard script	

Figure 3. An illustration from *The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide*, p. 39.

Oracle-bone script, the earliest known form of systematic Chinese writing, dates from the fourteenth to eleventh centuries BCE. During the Shang (ca. 1600–1050 BCE) and Zhou (ca. 1050–221 BCE) dynasties, a modified form of earlier oracle-bone script—called large-seal script—was inscribed onto bronze objects.

In the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), small-seal script became the standard when the emperor unified the Chinese writing system, which had been previously full of regional variations. This small-seal script was often used for official inscriptions on stone monuments. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), a new script emerged called clerical script. This practical script for daily use was easier to write at a high brush speed and was more angular than small-seal script.

Running script, or semicursive script, appeared in the decades immediately after the Han dynasty. In running script, individual strokes are sometimes eliminated or condensed, and separate characters are joined by linking strokes. Due to its ease, convenience, and legibility, running script quickly became the most popular form of Chinese freehand writing in everyday use, and it retains that status today.

Cursive script, sometimes known as “grass” script, developed around the end of the Han dynasty (220 CE). In cursive script, individual strokes within a character are drastically simplified and abbreviated, often becoming a single continuous movement of the writer’s brush. Since the number and structure of strokes significantly changed, both the ability to read and write cursive script requires special training and study.

Standard script is characterized by balanced and clearly legible characters. Perfected in the mid-Tang dynasty (618–907), it is still the first script taught to schoolchildren, and it serves as the typeface for most modern printed materials.

In the mid-twentieth century, mainland China developed a system of simplified characters still in use today.

Calligraphy

Calligraphy is the art of writing. Since ancient times in China, calligraphy has been considered the most important visual art form alongside painting. It had been valued by Chinese scholars as a way of self-expression and cultivation long before painting. Calligraphers create their works using the so-called Four Treasures of a Scholar’s Studio: brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. Personal seal impressions are typically added either below or near the signature when the work is completed.

One of the traditional forms of Chinese painting and calligraphy is a folding fan. An example from the Freer Gallery collection shows a fan with a poem written in cursive script by the Ming dynasty artist [Wang Wen](#) (1497–1567). The poem describes traveling home by boat on a chilly autumn day:

*Apricots shed along the twin rivers, the shadows of geese are few;
My homeward oars are moored to a branch of this magnolia.
I do not wet my silken robe in waters of the autumn pool;
For I know it is the season of cold and dew that is clear as jade.*

Vocabulary

calligraphy: the art of producing decorative handwriting with a pen or a brush.

couplet: two lines of verse (usually written in the same meter and joined by a rhyme) that form a unit.

divination: the act of foretelling future events or revealing hidden information with the aid of supernatural powers.

Four Treasures of the Scholar’s Studio: traditional materials used for creating a painting or a piece of calligraphy—ink, brush, paper, and inkstone.

inkstone: a stone used in Chinese calligraphy and painting to grind hard ink and mix it with water.

pictograph: a picture symbol used to communicate a word, phrase, object, or idea. Pictographs are one of the earliest known forms of writing. Examples can be also found in Egypt and Mesopotamia beginning in 3000 BCE.

Procedure

Part 1: Discuss how to combine Chinese characters to make new characters

Compound characters:

1. Show students this chart describing how Chinese characters combine to form new characters.
2. Discuss combining Chinese characters to create new meanings.
3. Show students how some combinations of characters will change the meaning and the pronunciation of a new compound character.

木 Tree (<i>mu</i>)	木 Tree (<i>mu</i>)	林 Woods (<i>lin</i>)
日 Sun (<i>ri</i>)	月 Moon (<i>yue</i>)	明 Bright (<i>ming</i>)
田 Field (<i>tian</i>)	力 Power (<i>li</i>)	男 Male (<i>nan</i>)
禾 Grain (<i>he</i>)	火 Fire (<i>huo</i>)	秋 Autumn (<i>qiu</i>)
女 Woman (<i>nü</i>)	子 Child (<i>zi</i>)	好 Good (<i>hao</i>)

Writing Practice:

1. Distribute Worksheet #1.
2. Ask the students to come up with their own combinations. They can use Worksheet #2 or look up other characters using English-Chinese online dictionaries.
3. Have them practice with an ordinary pen or pencil until they have the characters fit into a square shape.
4. Then, using a brush and tempera paint with the consistency of gravy, have students practice writing a few times.

Part 2: Discuss how Chinese characters combine to make phrases

1. Distribute Worksheet #1, Worksheet #2, and Worksheet #3.
2. Using Worksheets #2 and #3, have the students write a couplet (short poem) in standard script. Characters should fit into a square on Worksheet #1. This poem won't rhyme. It can be a collection of words that just convey a simple thought (e.g., "Beautiful water play" or "Large new friend"). Characters are traditionally written in a particular stroke order, top to bottom and right to left, but you don't have to initiate that now. It is fine for this exercise to use a regular pen, pencil, or marker and ordinary paper. Students can use a regular watercolor brush and black tempera paint on ordinary copier paper (20 lb. or more). The black tempera paint should have the consistency of gravy, not too runny and not too thick.

Part 3: Discussion

1. Have a discussion with students about the Chinese fan using the background information provided and the questions below.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- Look closely at this object. What adjectives would you use to describe this fan and the style of calligraphy on it?

Analyze

- How does this fan work? (Note that the form of a folding fan was invented in Japan and later introduced to China.)
- What clothing or everyday objects do you own that have words on them? Are those words significant to you?
- What does this fan say, and what significance do you think the inscription would have had for the person who owned it?

Interpret

- Imagine who would have owned such a fan. What does this object say about them?
- Why would someone need a fan? Does anyone in your family carry a fan?
- Why do you think fans were important in ancient China? Are they important today?

Extensions

Visual Arts

Make A Banner

After students have practiced writing with a brush and tempera paint, they can create an art project using the characters they have learned:

- Take vertical strips of white paper and water-downed white glue so it is the consistency of thin syrup.
- Brush the watered-down glue on the white paper strips, and then lay a few layers of torn colored tissue paper on top. This will add texture and give the look of handmade paper.
- While the paint is still wet, you can add some glitter so it looks like the gold-flecked paper used by the Chinese emperors.
- Wait for the colored tissue paper and glue to dry. While it dries, you can continue practicing writing characters with a brush and black tempera paint on another piece of paper.
- Once the paper is dry, use a brush to write your characters on top. Use the standard script for this project first. (Find example of script styles). Write the characters vertically (the Chinese originally wrote vertically on strips of bamboo).



Make a Fan

- Fold a sheet of 9 x 12 inch construction paper in half. Use the template (page 10) to trace the fan shape on the fold so the shape is symmetrical when you open up the paper.
- On a separate piece of paper, practice writing the same characters in running or cursive script. Be wild! Your brush never really leaves the paper and each character flows into the next one and are almost indistinguishable.
- Write the characters horizontally from left to right (this became the norm in China after 1949 with the modern simplified writing system).
- Cut out and mount the decorated fan on either a background of a complementary color or black. You can also sprinkle some glitter on the ink as it dries.



Social Studies

- Compare the ancient script with other early writing systems such as Egyptian or Mayan hieroglyphs. Discuss why early cultures chose drawings or pictographs to communicate.
- Research other alphabets and writing systems. Compare and contrast with the Chinese writing system.

Resources

The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide. Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003. Pp. 39–40. <https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Art-and-Archaeology-of-Ancient-China.pdf>

Freer and Sackler Galleries: China's Calligraphic Arts. <https://asia.si.edu/learn/chinas-calligraphic-arts/>

SI Learning Lab: Emergence of Civilization in China: Oracle Bones. <http://learninglab.si.edu/q/ll-c/GK8HqcjPNomKgwJx>

SI Learning Lab, "Read and Write Qin Small Seal."

<https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/read-and-write-qin-small-seal/7JtMnm86RNHTF599>

Asia For Educators, "Chinese Calligraphy." http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1000bce_calligraphy.htm

Asia Society: Chinese Calligraphy. <https://asiasociety.org/education/chinese-calligraphy>

View these objects online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/S2012.9.445/> and <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1988.7/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

Videos:

Asian Art Museum, "Appreciating Chinese Calligraphy." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MENOCzGv5-Y>

SmartHistory, "Oracle Bone, Shang Dynasty." <https://smarthistory.org/oracle-bone>

HarvardX, "Chinese Bone Burning." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NQhFrsOOjg>

