



EVOLVING LANGUAGE

How has language changed the world?

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Students will explore the history of writing in China and draw conclusions about the impact of the written word on human civilizations, and how language has changed over time.

If you are planning to use this as part of a visit to The Field Museum, see the field trip guide on page 6.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Most of the earliest writing in China hasn't survived. Anything written on bamboo or fabric has long since disappeared. There is no way to tell exactly when or how writing emerged in China, but we do have evidence of a fully functioning written system by the second half of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BC). These fragments of shell and bone only show a few characters, once part of longer inscriptions. These pieces were used in rituals to try to foretell the future, and as such, they are known as "oracle bones." The Chinese characters on oracle bones transformed over time, but many are recognizable in characters used in China today, as the example of the word "horse" shows above.

One of the many actions taken by the Qin Emperor (221-206 BC) to unify the many smaller states into one China was to standardize the language. He decreed that all of the states abandon their local scripts and adopt the script that eventually developed into modern Chinese.

Keywords: 6-8. 9-12, power/politics, untold stories, object-based learning, reading, discussion, critical history, archaeology, foreign language, cultural empathy

Lens: history, geography, art, and anthropology

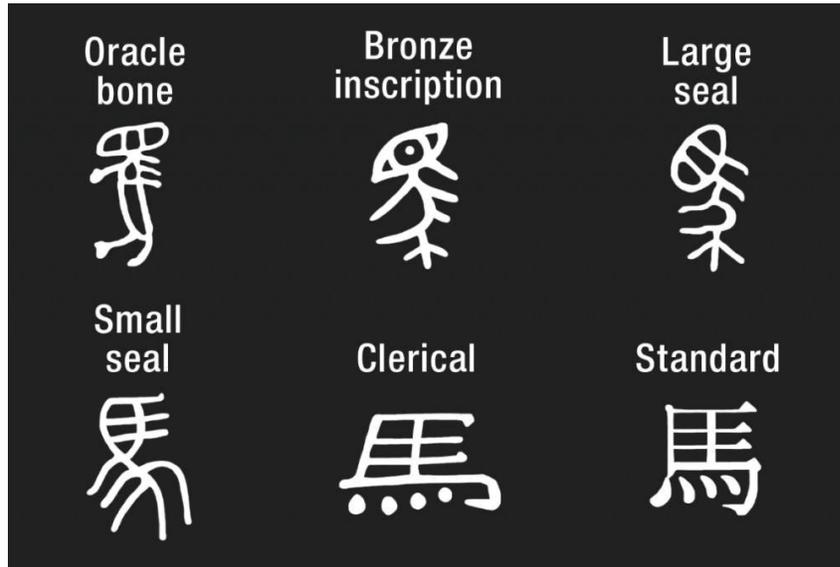


Image: Characters on oracle bones transformed over time. Many are still recognizable in characters used in China today, like the one shown above representing the word "horse." Illustration by Sayaka Isowa for The Field Museum.

Still, many other languages have existed in China, both throughout its history and today. Through the many transcontinental political and economic exchanges, communities shared and adapted practices, including language. Scholars exploring the Silk Road have identified dozens of languages used along the routes. China is also home to many ethnic groups, some of which use independent or adapted languages. Examples of these can be found in Gallery 4, in the case exploring religious and philosophical diversity in China. A silk cap from the 19th century shows a combination of Arabic script with aspects of Chinese writing. The Yi script shown in the Catholic catechism comes from the Sani people from southern China. The Naxi language, originally kept alive by religious figures in Southwest China, can be seen on street signs in parts of southwest China.

COMPELLING QUESTIONS

How has language changed the world?
Why do we use language?
How does language change over time?

OBJECTIVES

Students will analyze the role of language and how it has changed over time.

Students will evaluate the use of language on objects from across Chinese history and draw conclusions about the role writing had at different points in time.

STANDARDS

C3 Framework

D2.Civ.14 Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.

D2.Geo.6 Explain how the physical and human characteristics of places and regions are connected to human identities and cultures.

D2.His.4 Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5. Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

D2.His.7 Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

D2.His.8 Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

D2.His.10 Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CPS Framework Alignment:

Grade 6, Unit 1: Introduction to Geography; Unit 7: Rise of Asia

Grade 9, Unit 1: Introduction to Geography

APPROXIMATE TIME

1-2 class periods

PREPARATION NOTES

Students will be working in groups to explore content, both in the classroom and in the museum/app exploration.

OTHER MATERIALS

Access to museum content in exhibit or online:
<http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>

Graphic organizer

Clipboards (in exhibit)

OBJECTS OF FOCUS

Any object in the exhibit with writing on it.
Objects of particular focus are noted with *

Oracle Bones*: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-201>

Bronze inscriptions: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-202/g2-2_m1_b3

Tomb contract: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-203/g2-3_m1_b2

Inscription Rubbing*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-203/g2-3_m1_b3/correct-use-of-ritual-objects

Coins: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-204/g2-4_m2_b6

Roof Tile: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-207/g2-7_m1_b1

Qing Ming Scroll <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/interactive/qingming-scroll>

Tapestry: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-303/g3-3_m1_b2

Gazetteer *: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-303/g3-3_m1_b5

Cheats handkerchief*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306/g3-6_m1_b3

Basket: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-306/g3-6_m1_b1

Calligraphy book*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-307/g3-7_m1_b2

Stele: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-403/g4-3_m1_b1

Cast iron censor: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-401>

Bell: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-402>

Map: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-404/g4-4_m2_b1

Wooden printing block*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-404/g4-4_m2_b6

Silk cap*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-407/g4-7_m1_b1

Catholic catechism in Yi Script*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-407/g4-7_m1_b3

Naxi book*: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-407/g4-7_m1_b5

Censer: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-4/case-408/g4-8_m1_b1

PROCEDURES

› Engage

Ask students, “Have you noticed any changes in language in your lifetime? What changes have you noticed? Why do you think changes in language happen?”

If students struggle to come up with changes in their own lifetime, ask them to reflect on how language has changed since their parents were young, or their grandparents.

Students can discuss in pairs or small groups before opening up to a whole class discussion.

› Explore (Questions and Inquiry)

Share the images of the changes in Chinese script over time either as a whole class or by sharing different examples at the group level. Ask students to work together to describe the changes they observe as well as their theories for how the changes happened over time.

After exploring the Chinese symbols, ask students if they have any connections to language today.

You can supplement with histories of other languages. Videos listed in external resources connect to the transformation of the English language over time.

› Explain (Apply Disciplinary Lens)

Explain to students that they will be exploring writing across Chinese history. Ask them the initial puzzling question, “How has language changed the world?”

Generate a list of ways students think language has changed the world.

Share with students that they will be exploring writing in one specific area –China–and that they will be analyzing how writing changed over time and making inferences about how it impacted the culture.

› Elaborate (Gather and Evaluate Evidence)

Working in groups, students will explore content in the Cyrus Tang Hall of China.

Content can be explored in one of two ways:

- Visiting the museum in person.
- Using the Online Exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>

Students can either split up amongst the different galleries (five total) or explore all of the galleries, time permitting. If they split up, allow students to share their findings when you return to the classroom so that as a whole class students can analyze how writing changed over time. If they are exploring the whole gallery, have them label their notes by gallery, so they can see the change over time.

Give students the following directions:

- Explore the gallery and take note of all the objects that have writing on them.
- Use the graphic organizer to record their observations, inferences, and questions. They will be looking to draw inferences on what role that object had in society.

PROCEDURES (CONTINUED)

› Evaluate (Develop Claims, Communicate and Critique Conclusions)

Have students share their findings in a class discussion. Prompt students return to the initial question – “How has language changed the world?” They can use evidence from the exhibit and add their own experiences.

Students can make their arguments in writing or in a whole group discussion and evaluate each other’s responses using the rubric included below.

ENRICHING THE LESSON

Background Knowledge Needed:

Students will benefit from some background knowledge of Chinese history so that they can place the objects they find in context. The museum labels will be helpful for specific objects, but encourage students to explore the exhibit beyond the written objects to place them in their larger context.

Anticipated Misconceptions:

Students may take the idea of language as a way of communicating for granted. It might surprise them to think of language as a technology invented by people.

Methods to Build Empathy:

Social empathy

Students will be working together in groups and forming consensus around critical cultural issues in China. This will require active listening, restating each other’s ideas, and engaging in discussion.

Opportunities for Informed Action and Contemporary Connections:

Students can do research on “dying languages” and learn about language revival movements. Students can participate in an oral history project to learn about their family’s linguistic lineage.

DIFFERENTIATION

For an additional challenge, students can explore other exhibits in the museum, or secondary sources in the classroom, using the same questions.

Have students analyze shifts in language today.

Talk about access to written language over time. Students may not notice immediately that literacy was not a universal right until very recently.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

“How languages evolve”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWDKsHm6gTA>

“Where did English come from?": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEaSxhcns7Y>

LESSON GLOSSARY

These concepts are embedded in the museum content and may be unfamiliar to students.

pictograph – a pictorial symbol for a word or phrase. Pictographs were used as the earliest known forms of writing

censer – a container for burning incense.

stèle – an upright stone pillar bearing an inscription or design that serves as a monument or marker.

tapestry – decorative weaving.

gazetteer – a geographical index or dictionary.

NOTES FOR FIELD TRIP PLANNING

Before

The “Engage,” “Explore,” and “Explain” sections of the activity plan can be used for a pre-activity. Have students generate a list of questions and assign students to topic groups to join in the museum. You may wish to show students how the Digital Rails work (very similar to the online exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>).

During

While in the museum, students can do their object research (the “Elaborate”) in all five galleries. There are no objects with writing in Gallery 1, and very few in Gallery 4. It could be an interesting discussion topic to ask why the museum displays no examples of language in the Neolithic section (the earliest examples of writing did not survive) and along the Silk Road.

After

After visiting the exhibit, students will share their findings in the museum and engage in the discussion and/or individual writing described in the “Evaluate” section of the activity.

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Graphic Organizer

Observations What examples of writing do you see in the exhibit? Describe the objects.	Inferences What role do you think these objects and writing played in Chinese society at the time?	Questions What questions do you have?

STUDENT HANDOUT

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Rubric

	4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Meets Expectations	2 Approaches Expectations	1 Does not meet Expectations
Make a clear argument relevant to the content	Argument is clear, and illuminates something new about the content	Argument is clear and connected to the content	Argument is either unclear or not connected directly to the content	Argument is neither clear nor connected to the content.
Use evidence from objects or readings	Student uses 3-4 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, describing them fully	Student uses 1-2 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, describing them fully	Student uses 1-2 pieces of evidence from objects or readings, but does not describe them fully	Student does not mention specific objects or readings, or uses unrelated objects/readings
Explain why the evidence supports their argument	Explanation of connection between evidence and argument offers innovative interpretation and illuminates something new about the content.	Explanation of connection between evidence and arguments is clear and convincing	Explanation of connection between evidence and arguments is unclear or disconnected	No explanation of connection between evidence and argument
Listen to others and restate their ideas	In Speaking			
	Clearly restates the ideas of others and incorporates other's ideas into their own argument, whether agreeing or disagreeing	Clearly restates ideas of others before returning to original argument	Incorrectly restates the ideas of others before returning to original argument	Does not restate the ideas of others before returning to original argument
	In Writing			
	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments and uses them to strengthen their argument	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments and clearly explains reasoning for their original argument	Addresses other perspectives and/or counter arguments but does not connect them to original argument	Does not address other perspectives and/or counter arguments.

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The China Educator Toolkit was generously supported by:

