

32. “The History of Writing in China”

by Core Knowledge Staff

Instead of using letters from the alphabet, the Chinese language uses characters. A character is a symbol or picture used in a system of writing to represent spoken words. Each character represents a different spoken word or group of words. There are over fifty-six thousand Chinese symbols, or characters, compared to the twenty-six symbols, or letters, of the English alphabet. Most Chinese use only eight thousand in their everyday lives.

The writing system used in China today is very much like the one developed in the Yellow River Valley over three thousand years ago. It is quite remarkable to think that the Chinese are still writing with many of the same characters that their ancestors used many years ago.

How do we know that the Chinese writing system has survived all these years? Well, it has to do with a recent discovery of a most unusual writing surface. Today you write on paper. But Chinese farmers, digging in their fields, unearthed writing on a surface quite different from paper.

This unusual writing surface is bone! Long before paper was invented, the Chinese used ox bones and the hard protective underbellies of large river tortoises. For thousands of years, the Chinese also wrote on clay pottery, metal vases, silk cloth, wood, and bamboo strips. Bamboo, a woody plant that grows like a weed, was split and scraped to make the smooth, writing surface.

The Chinese invented paper! The first paper was made from a rope-like plant called hemp. This first paper was very thick and rough. They continued to experiment with other materials, like tree bark, fishing nets, wheat stalks, and cloth rags. They wanted to create a softer, smoother, lighter writing surface. Finally, a man discovered the right combination of materials for a paper that was just right and less expensive to create.

After creating a good paper, Chinese inventors came up with a solution for printing more books. Block printing was invented. The text, written on a thin piece of paper, was glued facedown to a wooden block. Then, each character was carved out to make a woodblock printing plate. A separate block was created for each page of the book. If you made a mistake, you had to start all over again! The method wasn't perfect for sure, but the Chinese never gave up. Over the years they developed better methods that spread throughout the world.

Word Count: 398

NAME: _____

QUESTIONS

DATE: _____

Comprehension Questions

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Assess each student’s comprehension of the selection by asking him or her to respond orally to the following questions one on one with you:

1. **Literal** What is a character?
 - » a symbol or picture used in a system of writing to represent spoken words
2. **Literal** What are two writing surfaces historically used in China?
 - » Answers may vary, but should include two of the following: bone; underbellies of large river tortoises; clay pottery; metal vases; silk cloth; wood; bamboo strips
3. **Inferential** Why did the Chinese continue to experiment with other materials for making paper?
 - » The first paper was very thick and rough and the Chinese wanted to create a softer, smoother, lighter writing surface.