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Shang Dynasty and the Invention of Writing

The Unit: This activity is part of a four week unit on Ancient and Medieval China. Prior to studying Shang Dynasty, students will have studied China's geography, the importance of river civilization in China, and a general introduction to Shang Dynasty.

Time Frame: Ancient and Medieval China Unit: 4 weeks
Shang Dynasty and Invention of Writing: 2.5 periods

Purpose and Rationale:

Students study Ancient and Medieval Chinese dynasties with an eye toward major accomplishments, inventions and innovations, cultural and scientific legacies. In the case of the Shang Dynasty, scratches on oracle bones led to pictographs which in turn led to Chinese character writing. Given that this is the writing system of more than 1.3 billion people, students should have some familiarity with the origin of this writing system.

Intended Audience: 7th grade World History social studies students

Materials:

Textbook--Journey Across Time

Handout of Chinese pictographs with comparisons to modern characters

Websites shown below

Slides from power point presentation of Ms. Lihong Wang, provided during NCTA Seminar

Admit Slip questions

The Activity:

Prior to this activity, students will make a map of China using peanut butter dough and candy to understand the location and importance of China's diverse geography and the location of its river valleys where Chinese civilization began. Students will also be introduced to the concept of dynasty.

On day one of the activity, students will learn about Shang Dynasty and the city of Anyang, the social structure of the Shang, and spirits and ancestor worship by reading their textbooks and completing directed reading questions.

On day two, students will learn about the role of religion and government in Shang life and the use of oracle bones.

Students will be given the question: What would your life be like if there was no writing? How would you communicate and understand day to day needs and wants. Show the students a box of candy or cereal. How would you know what's in the box without writing? What if you needed to know the ingredients because of a food allergy? Students will then consider a life without writing as a lead in to the form of writing invented during Shang Dynasty.

Students will view several oracle bones and analyze their characteristics. Students will then be introduced to pictographs. Thought to be the oldest types of characters, pictographs were originally pictures of things. During the past 5,000 years or so they have become simplified. Students will view a slide from Ms. Wang's presentation and be invited to guess what each pictograph stands for.

Next students will be given a copy of the handout entitled Chinese Pictographs. In pairs, students will be asked to examine 10 Chinese pictographs and speculate on their meanings. Students will then compare the pictographs to modern Chinese characters for similarities.

Homework and assessment: For homework, students will visit the website <http://pbskids.org/sagwa/index.html>

Students will play the pictograph game several times for reinforcement and to learn a few characters. Students will create a one paragraph rebus story using English words but inserting Chinese pictographs where appropriate in their story.

At the beginning of class on Day Three, students will complete an "admit slip" in which they answer the question: What role did oracle bones play during the Shang Dynasty and how did they lead to a form of writing used in China today that is based on characters that represent whole words instead of characters that stand for sounds? Students will then share their stories with a friend.

Wrap Up Discussion Questions: What are the major differences between English and Chinese language? Which language do you think would be more difficult to learn? What are the advantages or disadvantages to having an alphabet as opposed to a system like character writing?

State of Ohio Academic Content Standards--Grades 6-8

History

Compare the geographic, political, economic and social characteristics of the river civilizations in the Tigris and Euphrates (Mesopotamia), Nile (Egypt), Huang Ho and Indus valleys before 1000 B.C. including:

- a. Location;
- b. Government;
- c. Religion;
- d. Agriculture;

- e. Cultural and scientific contributions.

Geography

1. For each of the societies studied, identify the location of significant physical and human characteristics on a map of the relevant region.
2. On a map, identify places related to the historical events being studied and explain their significance.
4. Use physical and historical maps to analyze the reasons that human features are located in particular places.

People in Societies

Students use knowledge of perspectives, practices and products of cultural, ethnic and social groups to analyze the impact of their commonality and diversity within local, national, regional and global settings.

1. Analyze the relationships among cultural practices, products and perspectives of early civilizations.
4. Describe the cultural and scientific legacies of African, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Arab and European civilizations.

Resources:

Spielvogel, Jackson J. (2005). Chinese First Civilizations. In *Journey Across Time* (pp.224-229). Columbus, Ohio: Glencoe/McGraw Hill.

Conklin, Wendy. (2006). *Ancient Civilizations*. New York: Scholastic.

<http://pbskids.org/sagwa/index.html>

http://www.omniglot.com/writing/chinese_types.htm

<http://www.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/uclib/bones/bones.htm>