

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-2a Writing
Book Title: World Civilizations
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5-2a Writing

Like most languages, written Chinese was originally pictographic, but from its origins around 1250 B.C.E. it soon developed a huge vocabulary of signs that had no picture equivalents and were not at all related to the spoken word (that is, they were not alphabetic). These characters are called *logographs*, or “words in signs.” Chinese spoken language is monosyllabic (each word has but one syllable), and a single logograph can take the place of as many as several words in other languages, conveying whole descriptions or actions with one sign. Some logographs were derived from common pictorial roots, but others were not connected in any way, which made learning them difficult. All in all, students had to memorize about 5000 logographs to be considered literate. Understandably, literacy was rare, and those who knew how to read and write entered a kind of elite club that carried tremendous prestige.

Although writing emerged considerably later in China than in Mesopotamia or Egypt, it developed quickly and had a richer vocabulary and more conceptual refinement than any other written language before the first century C.E. The earliest writing beyond pictography is found on oracle bones, but by the end of the Shang Period (1045 B.C.E.), histories and stories were being written, and some have been preserved.

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