

Pictographic Character Illustration for a creative education

Yu-Heng Deng^{1,a}, Giacomo Bruni^{2,b}

¹School of Fine Arts & Design, Guangzhou University, 230 Wai Huan Xi Road, Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center, Guangzhou, China

²College of Liberal Arts, Jinan University, 601 West Huangpu Road, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, China.

^a723403085@qq.com, ^b2261206911@qq.com

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain a new teaching method through the insertion of a new class in Chinese primary schools to teach Chinese characters in a creative and more leisurely way. Our support class will use the learning of the pictographic characters from their origin. Chinese culture, and its evolution, is deeply linked to the Chinese writing system; thus, the Chinese characters are a rich store of Chinese culture, yet at the same time, they are one of the most difficult tasks for new learners. With a reforming of the teaching method in a creative way, students not only memorize the Chinese characters, but also learn their own history, the evolution of the culture, and the customs through creative practice, aesthetics and, in general, the art skills. These combine with illustration and drawing techniques, stressing creative and interesting learning, and a number of skills that too often are not taught in Chinese schools, such as cooperation, interactivity, critical skills and so on. Our purpose is to stress the cultural and artistic field of learning; the teaching method should be balanced between learning new knowledge, not just in mnemonic way, and exercising the creative side of the brain to build a healthy mind, learn how to use their own mental capacity and their own skills, with the added benefit of an improvement in their critical thinking skills. The Chinese teaching system is more open and flexible. Every school decides its own study program independently. Consequently, this situation is particularly favorable for our will. In each school, we can build a suitable study program based on the connection of our class with all the other classes in the school to create a system of cooperation and communication between the teachers. So far, this teaching is based on the teachings of Chinese characters, but we feel it can also be an effective and useful source of inspiration for the teachers of standard classes of Chinese language to avoid a dull and ineffective way of teaching. In the Chinese educational system and, in general, in Chinese ideology, Chinese language classes are the key for the education of Chinese children.

Key words: Illustration, Chinese pictograph, new teaching method, language and aesthetic learning.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to introduce a new way in education for primary schools in China. In our experience the Chinese education system to some degree is losing the creative power of learning because, the teaching method is generally based on mnemonic skills. This way of learning can be very tiring and boring for young students; they can easily lose the passion for study, their mental agility and repress their talents

and sense of criticism. To build a healthy mind, the teaching method should be balanced between acquiring new knowledge, not just mnemonically (passive learning) as well as exercising the creative side of the brain (active learning). We will stress the cultural and artistic field of learning, but at the same time, our students will become more open-minded; in this way they can more easily face any kind of learning and interest, in the academic field and also in personal growth.

The Chinese culture (humanities and arts) and its evolution is deeply linked to the Chinese writing system (汉字 *hànzì*); thus, the Chinese characters are a rich store of Chinese culture, while at the same time being one of the most difficult tasks for new learners. In reforming the teaching method creatively, students will not only memorize the Chinese characters but will learn their own history, the evolution of the culture and customs through the practice of being creative, aesthetics and the art skills generally. It is important to merge traditional knowledge with a creative spirit to prepare the new generations to face modern society with a strong critical sense.

Specifically, we want to use the teaching of the pictographic and ideographic character to build a bridge between traditional culture and world of art. These kinds of characters (we can call them logographic characters) are one of the first expressions of the Chinese mind: the representation of the surrounding world, its interpretation and the needs of communication. Often, the early writing symbols are logographic. We can find this kind of character everywhere in the world, from the American continent to Asia, but mostly, they are the first step in the evolution of a writing system. We can find good examples in the cuneiform scripts or in Egyptian hieroglyphs, but with the evolution of the respective societies, they lose their own iconic power to become phonetic characters, as they disappear totally with the decline of their own civilizations or because of the influence of another cultural system. Also, in non-literate cultures, we can find the same needs for representation of the world such as the ancient petroglyphs scattered globally. All such kinds of writing show the necessity of self-expression (in art and communication) in a growing civilization, but they all belong to history and the past. In the contemporary world, just the Chinese writing system is a direct evolution from its logographic roots. Because of this unique quality of Chinese characters, it is possible to fuse both artistic and linguistic learning into one teaching method. In fact, the contemporary pictographic and ideographic characters are the direct evolution of the ancient ones. They were subjected to a long process of abstraction but still exist in the “picture” aspect. In this way, it is possible to treat them as a kind of illustration and link this with the artistic practice and learning. Nowadays, the

majority of writing systems are purely phonetic with the result of a near total absence of iconic aspect; the words are just the expression of the sound and it is very difficult to see any kind of cultural aspect in them.

Teaching method

The modern Chinese writing system is the result of thousands of years of evolution; we can still find its logographic origin and its iconic power is still very strong. Consequently, the reading process between logographic and phonetic writing systems is also different: the phonetic system is the representation of the sound of the word and so the reader first recognizes the sound and then connects it to the meaning; in the logographic system, there is no step to identify the sound but there is a direct link from the graphical representation of the word to its meaning. This aspect is very important; in fact, the mental reading process of Chinese characters is the same as that used during reading images. When we read a phonetic word, our eyes and our brain proceed in a linear decryption of each element, linking the first symbol to the second until the end of the word. When we read Chinese characters, all their elements simultaneously give us the meaning, and once again, it is the same process to read an image [1]. With this premise, step by step we explain how learning Chinese logographic characters and their evolution could improve young students' knowledge and their artistic, aesthetic, creative and critical skills.

As stated before, the modern Chinese characters are the result of an abstraction process from the primitive logographic characters. This is a natural evolution of a writing system such as the cuneiform scripts, because the mental evolution and its sophistication has a natural tendency to remove the redundant elements. The Chinese characters, in opposition to other writing systems, did not lose their iconic origin, nor change their nature and, exactly because of this, we can find many cultural aspects nestled in them. We can explain some examples to understand how it is possible to find cultural elements inside the characters.

How Chinese characters describe the ancient customs: in the group of the composed characters, the logograms with the radical 154 貝**bèi** (from the Kangxi system of radicals 康熙字典**Kāngxī bùyǎo**) refer to the semantic group related to money. However, the meaning of this word is shell. Where is the relation with money? Is this because during ancient times Chinese people used shells as currency for an exchange of goods? The modern word for money is 钱**qián**. It has the radical 167 金**jīn**, meaning metal, but this character is much younger than 貝, meaning, in a later period, the Chinese people started to use metal as a currency.

How Chinese characters could sometimes describe ancient customs better than archaeological discovery: for example, the oldest inscription on bamboo slips (竹简**zhújiǎn**) come from the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.). Therefore, by just basing this on the archaeological sources, we cannot argue that the Chinese people used this writing support before this period. Yet, if we look at the history of Chinese characters, we discover that the pictographic word for bamboo slips (册**cè**) is

much older because we found it inscribed on the oracle bones from the Shang dynasty (16th-11th century B.C.). This is an unassailable proof of their antiquity.

How can Chinese characters describe the Chinese mind and ideas: if we take, as an example, the word 好**hǎo**, it means good and, looking at its structure, in fact it is a composed character whose two elements are 女**nǚ**, girl, and 子**zǐ**, boy. Consequently, we can easily understand that in Chinese culture, the union of a young couple has a positive meaning, probably one the most important aspects of society. It is possible to find this character from the very early times and there are many on the oracle bone inscriptions, telling us that it is one of the basic values of Chinese thinking.

Some Chinese characters bring specific historical and legendary notions: for example, the character 虹**hóng**, rainbow, in the early scripts seems to be an animal with two heads. This is because the ancient Chinese people explained the meteorological phenomenon with the legend of the doubled-headed animal, and we can also find this idea in some ancient books such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 《山海经》*Shānhǎijīng* or in the *Book of Han* 《汉书》*Hàn shū*. With the introduction of characters such as these, we can teach legends or historical facts. Listening to a story is also highly appreciated by young students and gives some notions about ancient texts (this is important because in further studies, they will acquire this kind of knowledge). Later they can use the story to draw one or more pictures, also using the characters learned before.

Teaching children this kind of knowledge and for them to learn it could seem complicated, but the iconic power of Chinese characters can make our task much easier. In fact, for them, learning about ancient culture or Chinese characters could be very boring; we have to find the right way to keep their interest. For children, a favorite activity is drawing and exactly because of this, we will use drawing as a teaching method to turn on their interest, their passion and stimulate the learning of these difficult topics. As for the primitive cultures, drawing was the easiest and the first way of expression. This is the same for the children's mind because drawing is one of the most natural activities of human expressiveness. Our teaching material is based on the ancient characters; in particular, we will take examples from the oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文**jiǎgǔwén**), inscriptions on bronze objects, such as a tripod (金文**jīnwén**) and in general, the seal scripts (篆书**zhuànshū**) from the early inscriptions until the Eastern Han Dynasty (东汉**Dōng Hàn**) when the *Shuōwén Jiězì* 《说文解字注》 was written, one of the earliest important Chinese dictionaries. We will introduce several characters to them. Inside the ancient characters, there is a high degree of drawing and we can use this to teach, educate, and develop the different skills of the children.

Our class will be taught at primary school. Naturally, the teaching program has to be in harmony with the school's teaching method and it should develop year by year, following the students' learning. In China, primary school takes six years of learning and as the other classes, our lessons have to be planned for each grade. This way of teaching will be a

supplementary class and not a substitute. For this reason, the teachers have to cooperate with each other to create dynamic and coherent teaching. Thus, the characters the children will learn with our method have to be the same as those they will learn in the standard Chinese language class.

Another important point of our teaching method is the interdisciplinary aspect. As already stated, they will learn the Chinese language, historical and cultural notions, drawing painting and writing. This way of teaching is very important because it will develop the brain's agility and the connection skills between different kinds of majors and knowledge, with a cross-sectional and longitudinal study. This will allow them to understand that the culture, history, art, and language are all related, are all different aspects of human life and at the same time, are deeply connected. This kind of synergy is important for the students in understanding that everything they study is related to life. They can understand the value of what they are learning, and the interdisciplinary aspect is also a good way to develop and strengthen the cooperation between teachers to create a much more dynamic and rich working background. This supplementary class will be the keystone of the cooperation between teachers, concerning the interactivity and intercommunication between the different majors to train the brain of each child to have a wide point of view and to open their minds and let them understand how important it is to have an agile mind. Compiling an adequate teaching program is extremely important. The new class has to consider the level of the students to promote balanced learning. The cultural and historical knowledge has to be taught in a creative way to build a stimulating environment. The children have to learn this notion without too much effort but with fun and an easygoing approach. This is another limit of the Chinese teaching system; the students have to learn a huge quantity of concepts and information in a mnemonic way. Memory is important but has to be associated with active and creative thinking, not just for improving different brain skills, but also to let the learning process be less arduous and more exiting.

Above are listed the main purposes of our class and how to attend to them. As stated before, all our teaching material comes from the standard classes, and so we will reinforce their knowledge about what they have already learned, and at the same time, the students will learn some new notions (also these related to their study course), which will be reused in the standard classes. This new knowledge will not interfere with the standard learning because there is less in total and spread over different classes, but it is very useful in enriching the interdisciplinary aspect of the learning. Thus, our teaching proposals follow the standard teaching, and year by year, they develop side by side.

Improving the imagination: based on the characters they learned before, some pictographs and some ideographs (depending on the grade of the class), some with a single element and some composed of more elements, we will let them create new logographic characters to focus and concentrate their mind on a creation of symbols functional to the communication and not just a descriptive picture of the reality. Thus, at the same time, they will develop the abstraction power of their brain and rational thinking. They will emulate the creation process of the ancient and primitive

human mind. The children's brain and the archaic human brain have some aspects in common: neither are influenced by (modern) society and are much closer to the natural world. At the beginning, they will create pictographs with just one element, and later when they are more familiar with the Chinese character, they will create pictographs and ideographs composed of more elements. In our education process, we will let the children discuss each other's (under the guide of the teacher) and their own creation and thus, they will develop their critical spirit because the similarities or dissimilarities of the characters created by them can be a cause of reflection regarding the different choices adopted in their work for a later discussion of the grade of efficiency of these choices. Finally, they will cooperate together to create the best character, because cooperation skills are also fundamental to the education process. This creative process also is useful for developing organization skills because they have to collect, organize, develop, edit, refine, and evaluate the visual material. Later, we will compare the students' creation with the ancient characters to discuss the eventual similarities and divergences. If the children find some common aspect between their way of thinking and the ancient one, it will be easier to keep the interest on the archaic culture because they will not feel it totally unrelated and extraneous to them. In this way, they will develop a confidence with their own cultural roots. In fact, very often, the students could feel disheartened, discouraged, bored and disinterested in studying the ancient culture, one of the reasons being because they do not feel any relationship or link to it.

Another exercise will be drawing a picture using the characters learned before, such as composition elements. In this way, they will enjoy the class because most children love drawing but at the same time, they will keep in mind the shape of the characters and their meaning and this will stimulate their creativity to create a coherent image. After creating several images with the consequential familiarity with an ample number of characters, they will create a short story, using them to develop their imagination and creativity more and more, feeling free to express themselves. Automatically, they will also exercise their memory: when they draw the characters, they will keep their shapes in mind, exercising the passive memory with the copy and the reproduction of the ancient character, and the active memory to create and compose a different character and drawing. For the Chinese students, learning the characters is very important at the same time as being difficult and laborious. In western countries, there is no such problem, because the letters of a phonetic alphabet (Greek, Latin, Russian etc.) are few and have a simple structure, and so the students will focus on different aspects of the language. However, in China, the huge number of characters and their complexity forces young students to put much effort into learning them. For learning the characters, the only method used in the Chinese class is to write and write them again to understand and remember the structure and the composition. In our class, with the creation of drawing, the students will keep on writing characters but in a pleasant way.

Learning about cultures: mainly, they will study Chinese culture and customs, as explained before. This notion will be useful to enrich their cultural baggage and also their mental images archive. After the introduction and description of the

characters and the creative exercises, we will display the same characters to them but from different pictographic writing systems to let them know and turn on their interest for a different culture. In this way, they can understand how different civilizations can have common or different ideas and expressions. Our modern society is characterized by globalization and so it is important to open the children's mind to different cultures from an early age.

Improving the aesthetic and artistic skills: using drawing and writing material for copying the characters first and later for creating new ones and the new images and stories, they will naturally develop their artistic skills. With the creation of the new characters, they will focus on the structure and on the use of the line. A character has to be understandable for everybody and so it has to follow some structural rules such as the balance of the strokes, the full space and the empty space, a coherence on the structure. The character has to be clear, and the lines neat and tidy. In the artistic learning, the competence in using the line is very important because it is the basis of painting and writing skills (in particular in Chinese art). With the second exercise, they will focus more on the drawing, in the composition of an image and the use of colors. They will learn illustration techniques, how to build an image and how to create a story using different pictures. They will improve these skills with a "synchronic" creative process during the drawing of one single image. When they draw a story, they will exercise the "diachronic" aspect of the creation process and develop sequential thinking to strengthen the organizational skills, and the logical and orderly mind processes and procedures. Consequently, it will secure their attention to detail, coherence in thinking and organization. Those skills are also fundamental in those activities involving the imagination, ideation, invention, and discovering new possibilities and options in every field of professional life. Naturally, they will improve and develop the synergy of brain, hand, and eye.

Conclusion

Our teaching method is based on illustration through drawing practice; the students will use different drawing materials, both western and traditional Chinese because it is important to mix and be open to the knowledge from different cultures; however, it is much more important to understand the differences and the similarities between them deeply. Thus, our class can be presented like an art class, and we will train in all the skills related to artistic learning: creativity, fantasy, imagination, aesthetic perception, practical skills in drawing and composition. Drawing can help to make out the ideas from the mind because sometimes children could find it difficult to express themselves. Therefore, thinking on the page can allow them to understand their own ideas better (develop the right side of the brain) and ponder on how to show them. After the creation, after putting their own ideas on paper, they will have a general vision of them, and later, after a process of analyzing, clarifying, editing, quantifying, and evaluating (this will develop the left side of the brain), they will have an awareness of themselves.

A good teaching method should turn on the interest of students, and in this way, they will learn easily and deeply, developing their skills in a higher way without losing interest. We want to

avoid passive learning much as possible, and for this reason, in our class, most of the time is dedicated to the creation of original works. All the knowledge we want to teach them they have already met during the standard classes. The new notions we will teach them are always expressed in an interesting way due to the link with the pictographs and their cultural heritage of legends, customs, and history. These new notions will be learnt in the other majors. Thus, our project is not limited to introducing a new class, but it will influence the whole teaching method. On the one hand, we want to stress the creative learning of the children, and on the other, we wish to create a system of communication between the different majors and the respective teachers, a synergistic background for improving the teaching efficiency day by day, based on cooperation and communication. In the new class, the students will enjoy themselves and relax and in fact, it is important that the learning process is also a leisure time. At the same time, they will review what they learnt in the other classes. After six years of this kind of training, the students' artistic skill will be considerably developed, and their knowledge of Chinese characters will be deeper and solidified. In addition, they will have strengthened their mental agility, the linking skills, the capacity to go over the common thinking range thanks to a critical mind and eye, and the predisposition toward a creative approach to the world.

Formally, our first purpose is to teach difficult and boring notions (Chinese characters) in an enjoyable way, but with deep analysis our method will exercise and build up very important brain skills to prepare the young students to be more independent in the future life. They are at the age of highest brain receptiveness. This is the period when it is very important to structure their mind to have a solid basis for the future. We think school is not just for learning new notions; it should also be the hotbed for the new generations where they will be prepared to face the world with an active, cognizant and creative spirit.

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