East Asia Study Units

Module Two: The Basics in Traditional East Asia
LESSON TWO: WRITING & LANGUAGE

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GRADE: 9-12

TIME: Two to three class periods with discussion.

GOALS:

1. Introduce the way that Chinese characters and East Asian writing systems work.

2. Explain how to read and pronounce Chinese and Japanese names and words.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Blank paper for students to write on.

2. Map of East Asia.

3. Chinese character handout provided in the lesson.

4. Enlarged images of Japanese brush calligraphy and Korean hangul (included).

5. Familiarity with pronunciation guides (included in the lesson).

INTRODUCTION:

This lesson will help teachers and students not familiar with how to pronounce East Asian names and words to learn how to pronounce them correctly. It is only an introductory lesson and so will only deal with a few basic issues. Even if you decide as the teacher not to offer this lesson, you may find it useful to study yourself as a primer on how to pronounce Asian words.

ACTIVITIES:

1. One
2. Two
3. Three
4. Four
5. Five
6. Six
7. Seven
8. Eight
9. Nine
10. Ten
11. Eleven
12. Twelve

DAY ONE:

1. Let's start with a proposition: "English is a very inefficient written language." Can you support or defend this statement? How?

2. Well, one criticism we might levy against English is that the written language only makes sense if you know the spoken language. That is to say, you cannot just look at English letters and understand what they mean, because they only represent sounds. The letters R, O, C, and K have no meanings of their own except as a way of writing out certain sounds. When we put them together, they make the sound of the word "rock," which we associate with stones, pebbles, etc.

3. Not all languages work this way. The ancient Chinese came up with a very different way of writing. Rather than use phonetic letters, they created symbols to represent specific ideas. In other words, there is a symbol for rock, a different symbol for tree, and yet a different symbol for water, etc. Instead of using combinations of letters to create words, they have these symbols to represent words. Even if you do not know how to pronounce the symbol for water, you know what it means if you have been taught how to read. These symbols are what we commonly call "Chinese characters." Some people also refer to them as "pictographs" or "ideographs," written representations of ideas. (For more on Chinese characters, see **http://www.logoi.com/notes/pictograph.html**)

4. How many of you have seen Chinese characters before? Where? (Answers might include in Chinese restaurants, video games, anime, manga, television programs like South Park, on t-shirts or as part of the tattoos on NBA players such as Marcus Camby and Jason Williams, etc. For an image of Marcus Camby of the NBA's Denver Nuggets, see http://athletetattoodatabase.com/img/wiki_up/marcus.camby2.jpg) You've probably seen them in many different places, but most likely you have no idea how they work or what they mean.

5. We are going to figure out two things today: First, how Chinese characters work, and second, what kinds of advantages and disadvantages they have over other systems of writing.

6. Let's start with the most basic Chinese character of all. Can anyone guess what that might be? It is the representation for the number "one." That is simply a straight horizontal line （一）. Two and three are equally intuitive: two （二） and three （三）straight lines. Some characters, like these small numbers, are very easy to understand because they visually show their meanings. But obviously you cannot keep following this system, or else you would have to draw twenty lines to write the number "20"!

7. Other characters originated as pictures. For example, the character for tree is thought to have been derived from the picture of a tree growing up tall with outspread branches. We can see the same thing in the character for river, which shows the two sides of the river and the water flowing downstream. (Additional examples can be found at **http://www.logoi.com/notes/symbols.html**)

8. Of course, many characters are more complex than these simple ones. They combine multiple elements. Some of the parts are included for their meaning, and other parts are included because they

suggest certain sounds or are homonyms. Two such complex characters are explained on the handout sheet below.

9. But an important part of the way Chinese characters work is that if you have been taught how to read them, then you can look at them and understand their meaning even if you don't know how to pronounce them. In other words, any literate person in East Asia would be able to see the characters on the handout sheet and know what they mean, regardless of what spoken language the person speaks. Why is this so important?

10. Let's look at a map of China. As you can see, China is a very big country. Historically, it was an empire. The people who think of themselves as ethnically Chinese – they call themselves the Han people – conquered many of the surrounding peoples and incorporated them into the Chinese empire. But not all of those people spoke the same language. And even among the Han people, regional dialects were so different from each other that people from the north would have a hard time understanding people from the south, and vice-versa. But if they were all trained in how to read and write the same set of Chinese characters, then written reports and documents could be prepared and the business of empire could be conducted even if officials could not always have conversations face-to-face.

11. This system worked just as well for people in neighboring countries. So, for many centuries, the peoples in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and elsewhere adapted Chinese characters to their own languages. Characters are still used in Korea and Japan to this day, though there are also other phonetic ways of writing those languages.

12. In Japan, simplified versions of a few specific Chinese characters came to form a kind of phonetic alphabet – or, more accurately, the characters came to represent sounds of specific syllables, since syllables are the smallest units in Japanese. One symbol came to represent the syllable "ka," another the syllable "no," etc. Today, two sets of such phonetic syllables, known as "kana," are used. They each contain 46 basic symbols that are used in combination with Chinese characters to write Japanese. Even if you cannot read Japanese, you can probably distinguish the kana from the Chinese characters. For example, take a look at this newspaper headline at
http://www.monkeyheaven.com/monkeyvids_nipponsports.jpg. It concerns the release of a series of videos that are selling well in English-speaking countries; a translation can be found at**http://www.monkeyheaven.com/videos_publicity.html.** Can you tell which of the printed symbols in the headline are the more complex Chinese characters and which are the simpler phonetic kana?

13. In mid-fifteenth-century Korea, the great King Sejong devised a way to phonetically represent all of the sounds of the Korean language. This system is still used today; it is called hangul. In the hangul system, you can match consonants and vowel sounds to create the syllables of Korean. Linguists generally consider it to be one of the most logical and well-thought-out systems of representing language ever created. As you can see if you look at a full chart (available at **http://josefwigren.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/full-hangul.jpg)** , each row and column is for one sound, either a consonant or vowel. To put one consonant and vowel together, find where the respective rows and columns meet, and there you will find the correct hangul symbol. More information on hangul is available at **http://www.omniglot.com/writing/korean.htm**