Ancient China’s Writing

The Chinese use a very different writing system than the English alphabet.

English words are made up of a collection of letters that each has its own sound. The Chinese use logograms - where a symbol represents a meaning or an entire word.

The basic principles behind Chinese writing have remained unchanged for thousands of years. Each character consists of a number of strokes or lines set inside an imaginary square. Thousands of bones from the China’s ancient dynasties have been discovered with writing on them. Many of the Chinese characters on these bones still exist today in China’s modern character writing.

History of Chinese Writing
The Chinese writing system is one of the oldest known written languages – some of the earliest examples of ancient Chinese writing date back to over 4,000 years ago. The Chinese writing system uses a logographic system (a series of symbols that represent a complete word or a phrase). The system consists of large Chinese symbols known as characters.

The Chinese writing system is unique in many respects. First, China is an enormous country with two main languages: Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese. From these two languages sprouted many different dialects. The Chinese writing system was the one unifying element that brought all these languages into one standard written language. For instance, while the pronunciation of the word “one” may vary from Mandarin to Cantonese, the written character is the same. Spoken Chinese has changed remarkably over the centuries, while Chinese writing has changed little from the ancient Chinese.

The Chinese writing system has changed little, but there are four distinct periods of Chinese writing. The four phases of Chinese writing are:

- **Jia-gu wen (Oracle Bone)**. This is the earliest of Chinese symbols. Samples of writing using this method date back to (1500 – 1000 B.C.). These symbols were etched onto turtle shells and animals bones. These bones were maintained as historical documents to the reign of the Shang Dynasty.
- **Da zhuan (Greater Seal).** This script appeared mostly on cast bronze vessels and appeared primarily between 1100 – 700 B.C.

- **Xiao zhuan (Lesser Seal).** This is the elegant, flowing script we normally associate with Chinese writing. This version of Chinese calligraphy was the predecessor for the more streamlined version of modern writing. The lesser seal script was originally found on bamboo scrolls, but you can still find this beautiful Chinese calligraphy on silk writings and landscape paintings.

- **Lis shu (Clerkly Script).** This is the modern Chinese writing system. This set of symbols became popular in part for its flowing script that was fast and efficient to write. Also, this writing system was much easier to use with pens, brushes and paper, which is part of the reason it was adapted as the main Chinese calligraphy method.

The Chinese symbols are beautifully drawn using calligraphy. Traditionally, the Chinese characters are written in columns. These columns are read from top to bottom and from right to left.

Because this writing system uses a single character to represent a word or phrase, there are literally thousands of symbols. In fact, Hanzi (literally, Chinese for “Chinese characters”) numbers more than 50,000 symbols. This enormous amount of characters accounts, in part, for the high illiteracy rate in China. In an effort to solve this problem, the People’s Republic of China introduced a program to simplify the language into a set of commonly used characters. The current writing system uses approximately 6,000 of these characters.

The Chinese writing system formed the foundation for many of the written languages throughout Asia in ancient and modern times. Even as the written language is updated, it remains a visually beautiful and intriguing writing system.

**Essential Questions**

- Describe why China’s population has such a high illiteracy rate.

- Analyze the similarities and differences between ancient China's writing and modern Chinese writing.