

A Case Study - Character Workshop with Finnish Young Children

Learning
Chinese
Written
Characters
Visually

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**“Learning is essentially concerned with signs...everything that teaches us something emits signs; every act of learning is interpretation of signs or hieroglyphs ”
(Gilles Deleuze 2000, p. 4).**

Abstract

We are living in the age of globalization and a picture of the world. The ability to understand and communicate through visuals is increasingly important. Taking Visual Literacy in the account asks us to learn how to look at visual language, how to communicate with visual reference, and so on.

Character workshop is a case study of learning Chinese written character visually, which means taking the Chinese written character as a visual language, holistic and not universal; taking the critical visual method and social semiotic analysis as methods. The purpose of the study is to enhance children's comprehension through reading and writing the signs critically and creatively.

Through learning, children developed their understandings on culture signs through seeing that each sign (both signifier and signified) can be interpreted differently, (read). At the same time, children also learned how to communicate their ideas through creating images and new signs based on the compositional structure of Chinese written characters, (write).

Keywords: Chinese written character, Visual Literacy, Visual language, Visual communication, Social semiotics

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Introduction

The relationship between China and Finland has becoming closer during recent years. The culture and trade exchanges are booming and increasing, such as the cargo train between China and Finland with a 9110 km journey started its first trip in November of 2017; Two pandas arrived in Finland in January of 2018; Chinese tourists are visiting Finland increasingly. Studying and living in Finland gives me an opportunity to see and experience a new society, with cross-cultural, multi-cultural and inter-cultural phenomena surrounding me in everyday life.

One of my Finnish friends asked me, “ why do you choose your own culture phenomenon as a main topic of the thesis since you are studying here?” I replied: “It happens so naturally.” I have been collecting all my experiences in Nordic countries and reflecting based on my life in China. It can be visualized: one moment, I am excited just because a piece of Chinese label stuck on a shop window. Another moment, I feel I am an idiot, when I can see and read the assignment, but can not understand it completely. It becomes a great challenge for me to understand the language, the context, and the meaning. It is not only because of the imperfect communication skills, but more deeply, the fundamental cultural differences. The voice in my mind is getting louder for more patience and deeper comprehension.



Figure 1: Jiamu on the island

1.1 Background and motivation

I started my research journey on Chinese Characters inspired by Finnish nature. The harmony and tranquility of fresh and healing Finnish forests are both a familiar and novel experiences to me, which takes me back to my own cultural background to look for explanations.

In 2012, an invitation from an architecture friend provided my first opportunity for visiting Finland, which was an unforgettable experience of the peacefulness on a rural lifestyle on an island for ten days without electricity, flushing toilet and faucet. Instead of modern facilities, I saw swans swimming in the river calmly with trees and flowers smiling and waving and evening sunshine reflecting beautiful rainbow lights. The house we stayed in was designed and built by a Finnish architecture couple more than one hundred years ago. The house now belongs to Finnish architectural association, donated by the previous owner. Any member of the Finnish architectural association can apply to stay for free during the summertime, however, they have to spend their professional skills and knowledge on repairing and maintaining this old house in exchange.

The pure nature and the strong tradition create the inspiring poetic environment, which is dramatically different from my life in Shanghai. The air pollution caused by modern industry is already widespread in Chi-

na, severely affecting the life and the city. Urbanization forces millions of farmers to leave their homes and move to cities. People there are increasingly isolated from nature. According to United Nations World Urbanization Prospects published in 2014, more than half the population of the world are living in the cities, and the trend is increasing rapidly, especially in Asia and Africa.

When I am thinking about nature and culture, there is one Chinese character, which comes to my mind, 休 (rest) (figure 2), composed by two characters: 人 (people) and 木 (wood). It strongly connects my experience in the Finnish forest. And it shows a holistic picture to me: human beings are connected by sharing the same way of relaxing, beyond generations and locations.



Figure 2: Chinese character 休

This Chinese character sign, created more than three thousand years ago in Asia, tells the same story I am experiencing now, in Finland.

This sign carries remote information and reflects life nowadays, like a mirror. I pondered this sign for quite a long time, thinking of the relaxing moments of my life in Shanghai: the crowded metropolitan city and the artificial landscape. There is a need to take a serious look at Chinese written characters not only as a language tool because they unveil the ancient world where they are from and we are from. According to Lindqvist, they tell the stories about the ancient people's daily life: their houses, the clothing, the tools, the transportation, the landscape, the animals and the plants in that area (Lindqvist and Li, 2016).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

We are living in “a picture of the world” (Heidegger and Grene, 1976, p. 350). The times set forth requirements for our visual literacy. How to understand, express and construct the meanings from the visual become crucial challenges to us. “Countless studies have been conducted, and books/articles have been written addressing the area of visual literacy and its growing importance in our culture” (Farrell, 2013). This requires us to have a deeper understanding of the visual and profound awareness and reflection of visual phenomena and visual behavior, such as visual

language and visual communication. This is a plea for the new way of looking and learning.

This research is a case study, based on the rethinking of Chinese written characters. Chinese as a language is learned mainly for the purpose of operational oral and written communication. The image information carried by the pictograms has lots of potential for study, however, there are few classes of learning Chinese will encourage students to interpret the character signs beyond the constraint of the linguistic perspective. Meanwhile, many visuals, like artworks, logos, and signs have been inspired from Chinese written character signs in the time of globalization, for example, wood protection Company GORI, Denmark, designed by Tormod Olesen in the 1960s was inspired by Chinese character 木 (Wood) (Zha, 2011).

I want to advocate to learn Chinese written characters as visual signs in order to enhance children's understandings of cultural codes, and to develop their creativity in visual communications: to think about what kinds of stories the Chinese characters are telling once we look at them carefully? What kinds of relevant reflections or imaginaries will evoke? What kind of information can be communicated visually via the same visual framework borrowed from Chinese written characters?



Figure 3: logo development of GORI

1.3 Purpose

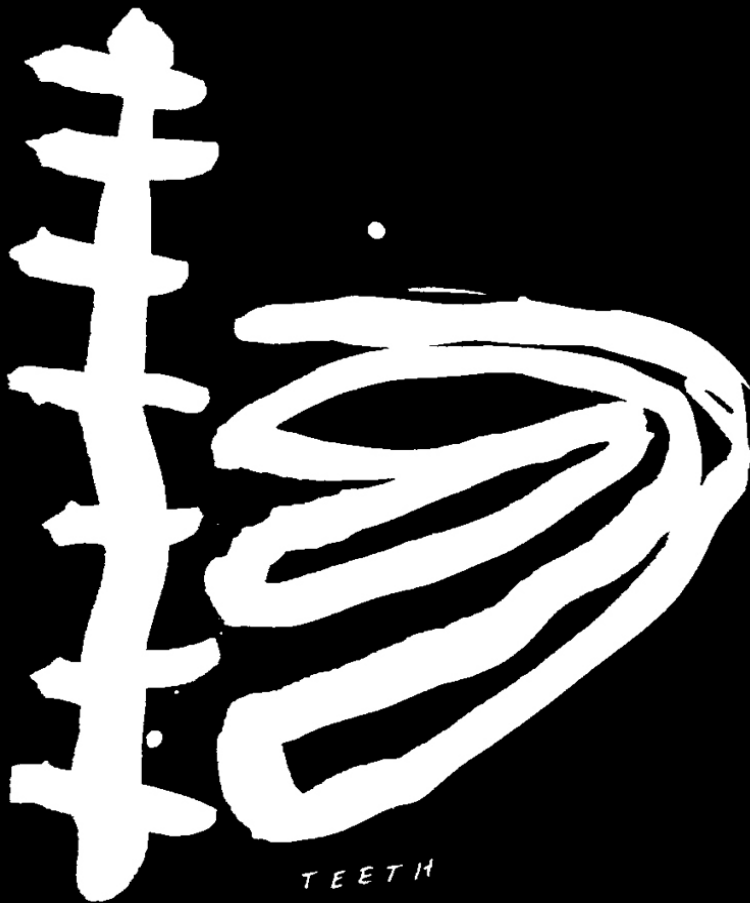
This research paper will discuss looking at the Chinese written character as a visual language, holistic and not universal; taking the critical visual and social semiotic analyses as methods. The purpose of the study is to enhance children's comprehension through reading and writing the signs critically and creatively.

1.4 Research Question and the Structure of the thesis

The research question addresses how to learn Chinese characters taking visual literacy in account? How does such learning help children to improve their competence of comprehensions and visual communication?

I structure this paper into seven chapters. The first chapter is the introduction of the research. The second chapter is the literature review on what is Visual Literacy and its components. The Third chapter is the definition of Chinese written characters as a visual language. Fourth chapter contains the method. The case study, Character Workshops, introduces the participants, and the process of the empirical research in the fifth chapter, as well as the findings and further analysis in the sixth chapter. The conclusion is at the end of the thesis.

I LOVE YOU



BEAN

TEETH



CHILD



ROBOT

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 A picture of the world

Visual culture is “an idea in the making, rather than a well-defined existing field” (Mirozoeff, 1998, p.6). With the visual culture perspective, Mirzoeff explained that human experience in the recent twenty years is more visual and visualized than ever before (Mirzoeff, 1998, p.4).

Firstly, we encounter the world known as a picture. “A picture of the world” (Heidegger and Grene, 1976, p. 350) does not mean the world is a picture or a map, but the concept illustrates that we are feeling, knowing and interacting with the world through the visual approaches. This visual movement proposes many questions at the same time, such as, where are pictures from and how produced; who are the producers and who are the audiences; how the pictures are interpreted and mediated through what kinds of accesses, and so on. Every day, we have to learn how to see and how to “engage in the practice of looking to make sense of the world”(Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p.9).

Furthermore, during the process of seeing, we also need to be aware of something invisible. As Mirzoeff states, “one of the striking features of the new visual culture is the visualization of the things that are not in themselves visual” (Mirzoeff, 1998, p.6). In other words, everything is



Figure 4: Logo of InSEA (The International Society for Education Through Art)



Figure 5: Chinese traditional pattern 回纹 (Hui Pattern)



Figure 6: Jade, Qing Dynasty

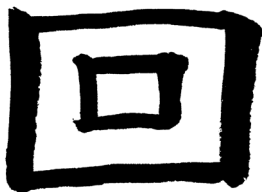


Figure 7: Chinese character 回 (hui)

visual, even that which is not. For example, we use alphabets but have not seen them for a long time: their emotions and attitudes. Until “Marshall McLuhan succinctly put it in his 1967 manifesto, ‘the medium is the message’ (Noble and Bestley, 2005. p. 100). In other words, the visual form of the text, the font, the typography design, direct effect on the content of the information, and the ways in which that content is read and understood. It was a great invention that typography became information or content itself, rather than just the media. Thus, designers became writers; audiences have the richer experiences through seeing.

The logo of InSEA, the International Society for Education Through Art, is consisted of five alphabets, i, n, s, e, and a (figure 4). These five alphabets have no meaning to me. However, when I looked at this logo, it reminded me immediately the Chinese traditional pattern 回纹 (Hui pattern), named by the Chinese character 回 (hui) (figure 7). The character 回 (hui) means “turning around” in Chinese, and 回纹 (Hui pattern) planted with the good wishes, to present “rich and constantly” (Sun and Wu, 2018). Although InSEA is an international congress which I haven’t attended before, its visual representation, the logo of InSEA, generates association with the tradition and the mission of communication and education long before I know what the organization stands for. Seeing, for me, dominated thinking and understanding.

2.2 The globalization era

Many visuals are promoting globalization, and globalization can be seen in everyday life. As Tavin argued, “we are experiencing an overwhelming globalization of economic and cultural exchanges”(Tavin and Hausman, 2004, p. 47). I am in agreement with Mirzoeff, again, who suggests, “one of the key tasks of visual culture is to understand how these complex pictures come together” (Mirzoeff, 1998, p7). To be aware that we are in the process of coming together, becoming is the crucial issue for us who are living in the visual culture context and the time of globalization.

Through seeing and sharing, we are overlapping and becoming new communities. We are more connected and influenced than ever by the cultural diversity and information mediated by worldwide communications infrastructure. The new technology and media are organizing and expanding the notion of community through rapidly disseminating the information with physical or virtual visual reality. At the same time, the experiences of sharing seeing are rising in everyday life in spite of willing or unwilling. Mirzoeff in his book *How to see the world*, chapter six *The Changing World* advocated that the national border has to be reconsidered these days because of the globalization (Mirzoeff, 2017).

The main concern of understanding visuals is to know “what they mean



Figure 8: The meander mosaic of the tepidarium, Roman

for personal and social life”(Duncum, 2004, p. 254). We are not only visual animals but also need to see animals in context. The similar pattern of InSEA logo can be also found in Greek, named meander or meanders as the key motif of Greek and Roman art, which recalls the twisting river, or a labyrinth, or political party nowadays. I haven’t got the chance to ask a Greek person’s opinion about this logo pattern. What is his or her interpretation? However, it is assertive that InSEA logo as a symbol of an international congress connects traditional patterns from different cultural backgrounds and the concatenation of different interpretations. The design wrote the cultural codes into alphabet i, n, s, e, a, and spread it to all over the world, and provided potentials and rooms for audiences to discuss.

2.3 Visual Literacy and the components

Visual literacy is a requirement from this time background. Visual literacy and multi-literacy as notions were proposed and advocated in the middle of the twentieth century, and “employed to emphasize making meanings through the interaction of different communicative modes” (Duncum, 2004, p. 253), because of the both increasing linguistic diversity and multi-model forms of expression and representation. Visual literacy is one of the important approaches derived from multi-literacy, which promotes the capacity of constructing meanings from visuals.

The term “Visual Literacy” was first coined by John Debes(1969), co-founder of International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA), who defined “Visual Literacy” as

A group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of those competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication (Debes, 1969b, p. 27).

Although, Debes tentatively gave the academic definition to of visual literacy, it is still far from the consensus. Avgerinou and Ericson (2002) pointed that “Debes’ early definition is too expansive since it emphasizes the way (senses) the stimuli are received without mentioning anything about their form (symbolic)” (Avgerinou and Ericson, 2002, p. 281).

The opinion that “here are two major impediments to research on Visu-

al Literacy. The first is lack of a widely accepted definition of the term Visual Literacy itself. The second, perhaps a consequence of the first, is a lack of a cohesive theory” (Braden, 1996, p.9), given by Braden in 1996, was once again quoted by Avgerinou in 2011 (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p. 2). What kind of components should be considered is the key question for developing the theory of Visual Literacy. Hortin suggested visual thinking (Hortin, 1983, p. 99), and Seels developed with three areas to consider: visual thinking, visual learning, and visual communication (Seels, 1994).

Based on discussion and synthesis, Avgerinou and Pettersson proposed the conceptual components structure in the article, *toward a cohesive theory of visual literacy*, with five inextricable linked components: 1) Visual perception; 2) Visual language; 3) Visual learning; 4) Visual thinking; 5) Visual communication (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p.5).

In this study, I want to examine, how to learn Chinese written characters visually, which means taking Chinese written characters as a visual language, holistic and not universal; taking the critical visual method and social semiotic analyses as methods to learn. Some components of Visual Literacy will be explained, for examples, visual language, and visual communication.

2.4 Holistic Visual language

Avgerinou and Eriscon gave the introduction of visual language parallel with verbal language by review the previous research, such as Ausburn and Ausburn's concept in 1978: visuals are language with their own vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and can be interpreted and composed to meaningful visual messages; Several examples of visual language were proposed by Debes and Willian the same year: body language, object language, sign and symbol language. (Avgerinou and Ericson, 2002, p. 281).

The concept of visual language is widely accepted. A Dictionary of Media and Communication provides one of the definitions of visual language:

Loosely, any signifying system or visual code in which a set of standard images is used as the sole or primary means of communicating concepts (as in the care symbols stitched into clothes). The use of the term " language" is metaphorical where the system cannot be reduced to basic, recombinable units, which are meaningless in themselves (Chandler and Munday, 2011).

The development of Visual language provides the sustainable growing of Visual Literacy from the research domain to working structure. Ac-

According to Avgerinou and Pettersson again, Visual language is one of the foundational components of visual literacy, and six connected constituent parts should be taken into consideration: 1) Visual language exists; 2) Visual language is holistic; 3) Visual language must be learned; 4) Visual language may improve learning; 5) Visual language is not universal; 6) Visual language often needs verbal support (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p.6).

I do not want to repeat the importance of learning and knowing visual languages since we have realized the visual culture context is the stage of today's life and the efficiency of how fast the visual can generate meanings to the audience. However, several attributes of visual language should be emphasized because we are always insouciance.

Firstly, the visual as a language is holistic and integrated. As Avgerinou and Pettersson suggested that images speak directly to us in the same way as experience (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p.7). Some languages are precise with clear meaning, like mathematics, while visual language shows an ambiguous content. We have more than one explanation for Mona Lisa's smile, just like we have thousands of versions of Hamlet in thousands readers' imaginations. We cannot withdraw the details from the entire stage. Meanwhile, the whole scenes will be changed because of a single replaced piece. The whole Visual provides

the meanings with the immersive encountering.

Secondly, images are not universal. It is true that images can be accessed universally compared with language. We can read and respond to images without the language boundary, however, we often take it for granted that we are having the same understanding of specific signs. Taking the road sign as an example, I found the sign for walking in Porvoo is the sign composed of a man, or father, and a little girl, or daughter (figure 9). For some people, it means walking safely, while for me, it feels like promoting father to take care of the child. Like Sturken stated, “image icons are experienced as if universal, but their meanings are always historically and contextually produced” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p.39). And they are also interpreted differently because of audiences with diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, the discussions about the relationships between text and image never really stop. Avgerinou and Pettersson said that “text and pictures represent different languages that complement each other when they are used at the same time” (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p.12). Yet other scholars argued that meanings become complicated once the texts and images are together. Whereas the complex and unintelligible meanings caused by the multi-layers of representations, Sturken argues that it is an opportunity of “inviting us to experience layers of meanings

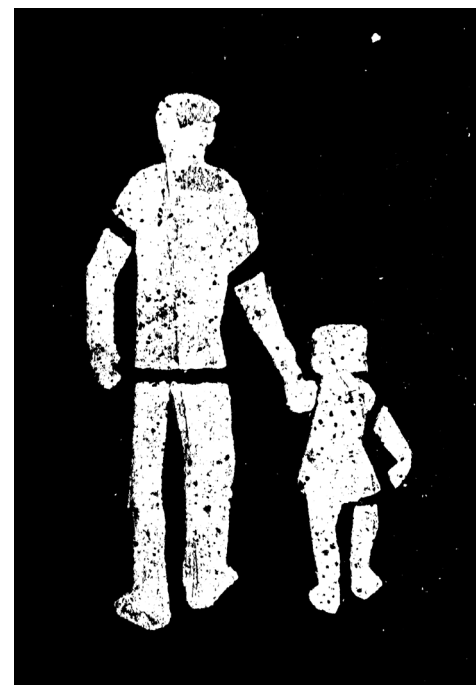


Figure 9: The sign on the street in Porvoo, Finland

beyond the obvious or the apparent real or true meaning” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p.16). The creative ways of using text and image together provide potential innovation and richness of meanings. If we think of the InSEA logo again, only several lines create a unique sign, which combines text and image and mediates different cultural codes. As Leeuwen said, the “typographic image” has the meaning of the “holistic visual impression” (Leeuwen, 2005, p. 29).

2.5 Visual communication

Visual communication is largely rooted in the social sciences, with the aim of understanding and explaining contemporary visual phenomena in social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Müller, 2007, p. 14)). I understand it as an intentional interaction with visual language in order to express and understand meanings, which also can be accessed by others. Benoît regarded visual communication as an information activity (Benoît, 2015).

Seeing and reading the information doesn’t mean we can understand it. For example, I can read majority Finnish vocabularies according to the principle of pronunciation, but I have no idea of their meanings. The method to read is not the same knowledge or reference to interpret the meanings. Professor Benoît argued, “visual things are informative only

in light of the interpretative framework of the viewer” (Benoît, 2015, p.56). This means that effective communication requires the listeners to have the knowledge of the reference for the interpretation of what the speakers are using, and vice versa.

In order to understand the meaning of the vision and eventually achieve the relationship with the world, we must understand and recognize the author’s method of reference, and aware that this method is not the only approach. Because “the meaning of the image and how we ‘read’ is not fixed by its creator or author but is equally determined by the reader” (Nobel and Bestley, 2005, p.68) This is why it is important for children to learn to interact with various forms of visual languages in order to function more effectively in the lifeworld and improve relationships with others.

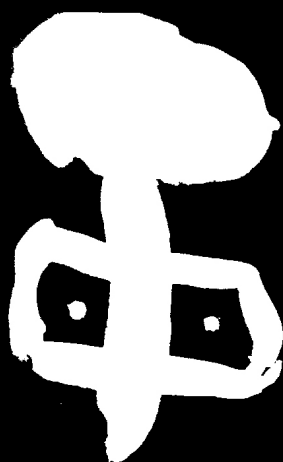
2.6 Visual literacy and Multiliteracy in education

Visual Literacy is an ongoing concept instead of a given idea, which is a product of inter-disciplines called for in this era, under the globalization and visual culture context. Visual Literacy has significant impacts on education, such as improved self-expression and the ordering of ideas; improved image of self and relationship to the world; reaching students not being reached in traditional ways; increase in student motivation,

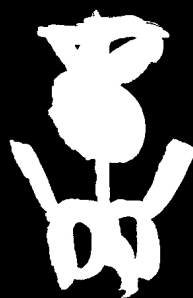
interest, confidence; increasing the ability to better comprehension of today's world (Avgerinou & Ericson, 2002, p. 288).

The foundations of the Finnish early childhood education curriculum describe five transversal sets of competencies, one of which is multi-literacy. Multi-literacy is also one of the foundations of the Finnish pre-primary curriculum, the Finnish basic education curriculum (primary and secondary education). Although there are slight differences depending on the different age groups, the main concept of multi-literacy in the Finnish curriculum context refers to the skills and knowledge of acquiring, interpreting, producing, presenting and evaluating information in a variety of forms and context, with different tools, to enable an understanding of diverse forms of cultural communications and build learners' own identities (Multiliteracy, 2018).

Avgerinou, co-editors of the Journal of Visual Literacy concluded: "However, there are many more definitions of the term. In fact, each visual literalist has produced his/her own! " (Ivla.org, 2018). For me, taking Visual Literacy into account is mainly about learning how to interact with visual languages: read, write and think. As the main Visual Literacy competencies are identified: "(a) to read/decode/interpret visual statements, and (b) to write/ encode/ create visual statements. And third (c) VL ability is to think visually" (Avgerinou and Pettersson, 2011, p.10).



CHILD



VERA

Chapter 3. Definition of the subject: Chinese written character as a visual language

Language is an important and complex subject. “For Heidegger, language is proper to man not simply because he processes the property of language; but because it is through that property that he was granted a social access to Being” (Zhang 2006, p.53). That means the language is not only the means of thinking but also building the thinking. We are deeply influenced or constrained by language claimed by the ancient traditional thinking and by modern technology. Learning the Chinese written character as a visual language is to improve holistic understandings and potential possibilities of communication and meaning-making through promoting visuals.

3.1 What is the Chinese written character

Each Chinese character has three components: the pronunciation (the way to speak), the written form (the way to write), and the meaning. “There are currently two systems for Chinese characters. The traditional system, used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and some Chinese speaking communities outside Mainland China, takes its form from standard-

ized character forms dating back to the late Han dynasty. Meanwhile, the simplified Chinese character system, developed by the People's Republic of China in 1954, simplified most complex traditional glyphs to fewer strokes" (Zha, 2011). The simplified Chinese character system is now used in Mainland China as an official language.

This study focuses on the Chinese written characters, that is, the written form. As I mentioned earlier, as the alphabet can be looked as an example of visual language, so can Chinese written characters. The Chinese written character as a visual language can be explored in many discourses, for example typographic design, calligraphy, abstract painting, contemporary art and so on. This research focuses on social semiotic discourse: exploring Chinese written characters as the semiotic resource to examine its way of meaning-making.

3.2 The Chinese written character is Pictogram

Generally, it is widely accepted that Chinese characters are pictograms. Pictograms make meaning through pictorial resemblance to a physical object. Mitchell explains pictogram in his book *Iconology*, "the idea of the 'speaking picture' which is often invoked to describe a certain kind of poetic presence or vividness on the one hand, and pictorial eloquence on the other. This is not merely a figure for certain special effects in the

arts, but lies at the common origin of writing and painting” (Mitchell, 1996, p.28). Many examples can be found in Chinese characters, which directly depict the shapes form objects, animals, plants, and humans, such as 日 (Sun), 月 (Moon), 人 (People), 木 (Wood) (Xu, 1997, p. 15). These vivid signs visualize the primitives’ observation on their surroundings.

It will be some clearer if we examine the original form, Oracle bone script, which is a conversing proof of how pictograms present meanings. Oracle bone script jiǎgǔwén (甲骨文 “shell and bone script”) is the original form of Chinese characters marked on the ox shoulder- blades and turtle shells for the purpose of divination in the Shang Dynasty, in the late 2nd millenni-

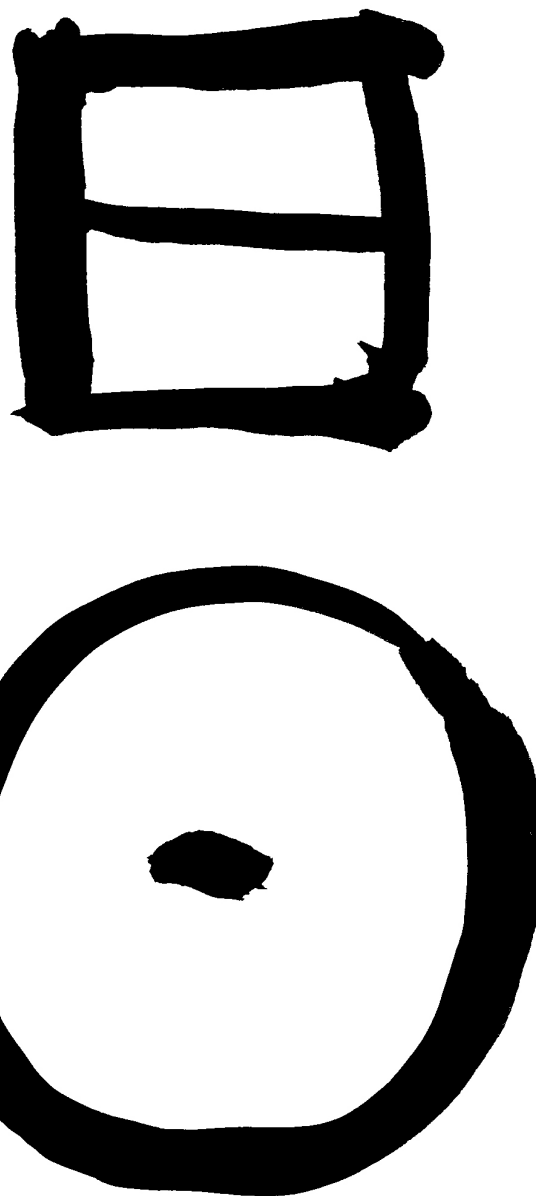


Figure 10: Chinese character 日 (Sun), and the original form in oracle bone script



Figure 11: Chinese character 月(Moon), and the original form in oracle bone script

um BCE. It is the earliest known form of Chinese writing, first unearthed in 1899. The vast majorities were found in Anyang, Henan Province. There are about 150,000 pieces of oracle bones have been found with more than 4,500 words by far. Among them, there are around 2,000 characters that have been recognized and identified. The contents of these Oracle records is extremely rich, involving many aspects of the social life of the Shang Dynasty, including astronomy, meteorology, geography, officers, conquest, prison, agriculture, animals, field hunting, transportation, religion, family, sacrifice, disease, birth, medicine, disaster, etc. It is a very valuable resource material for the study of the history, culture, and language of ancient China, especially the Shang Dynasty. It re-

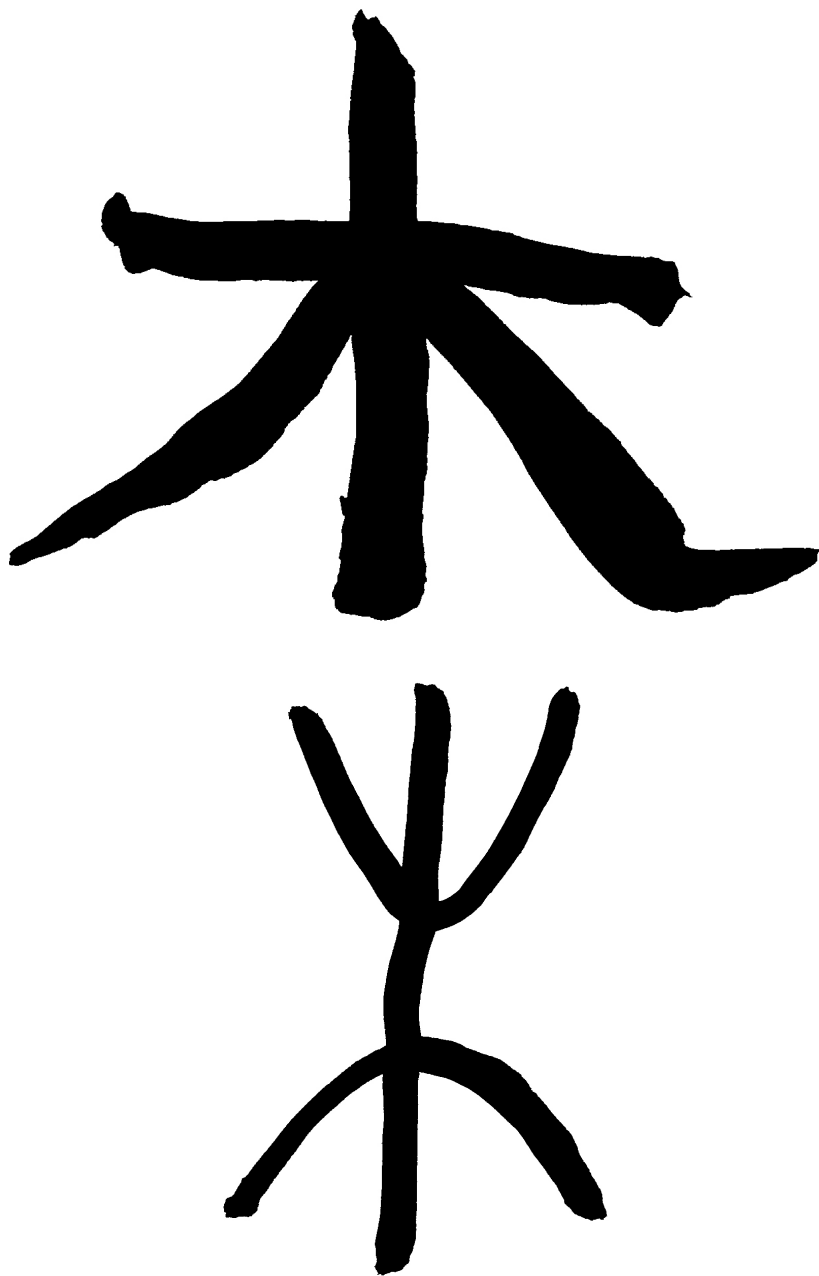
flects many aspects of social life from 1300 BC to 1000 BC (Zhu, 1997). This is strong evidence for us to examine the primitive sketches of our ancestors at the beginning of civilization.

To further know and understand how pictograms make meanings, we need to check the first Chinese dictionary 說文解字 (Shuo Wen Jie Zi) by 許慎 (Xu Shen, c. 55-c. 149). Xu Shen introduced six principles of how Chinese characters make meanings. Aside from pictograms, there are ideographic, phonetic graphic, and so on.

In order to express intricate, abstract meanings and concepts, pictograms are not enough. The Chinese ancestors created signs by composing two or more radical



Figure 12: Chinese character 人(People), and the original form in oracle bone script



parts together, for example, 明 (Bright), composed by 日 (Sun) and 月 (Moon).

The proportion of single-component characters in Chinese characters is very small, less than 300 pieces among the ten thousand daily used characters. However, they are very important, not only used as independent characters but also as an important radical part of the compound characters. For example, more than 400 commonly used Chinese characters composed of the radical part 木, (wood), and others.

Figure 13: Chinese character 木(Wood), and the original form in oracle bone script

3.3 The Chinese written character as semiotic resource

Leeuwen explains the notion of semiotic resource in the book *Introducing Social Semiotics*. Borrowing the concept from Halliday that the grammar of the language is not a code, but the resource for making meaning, Leeuwen looks at semiotic modes as resources and as the actions and artifacts for communication whether they are produced physiologically or by means of technologies (Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3). The meaning of learning social semiotics is seeing how to communicate and how to use material resources to produce meaning. Semiotics is not only about acquiring information, but also about creating meanings.

Chinese written characters are produced by both physical and technology: we use our hands and a brush to

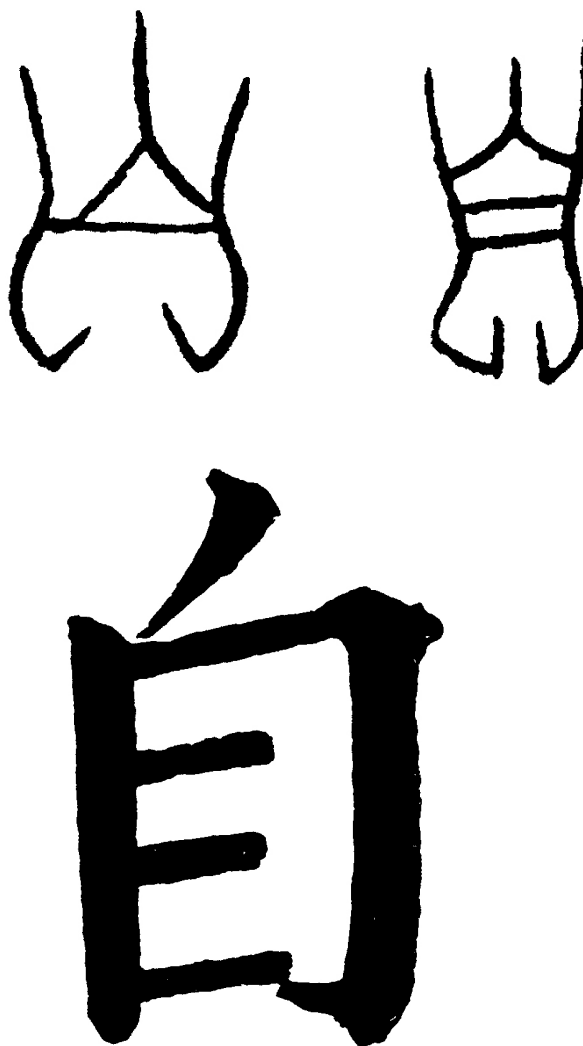


Figure 14: Chinese character 自 (Self), and the original form in oracle bone script

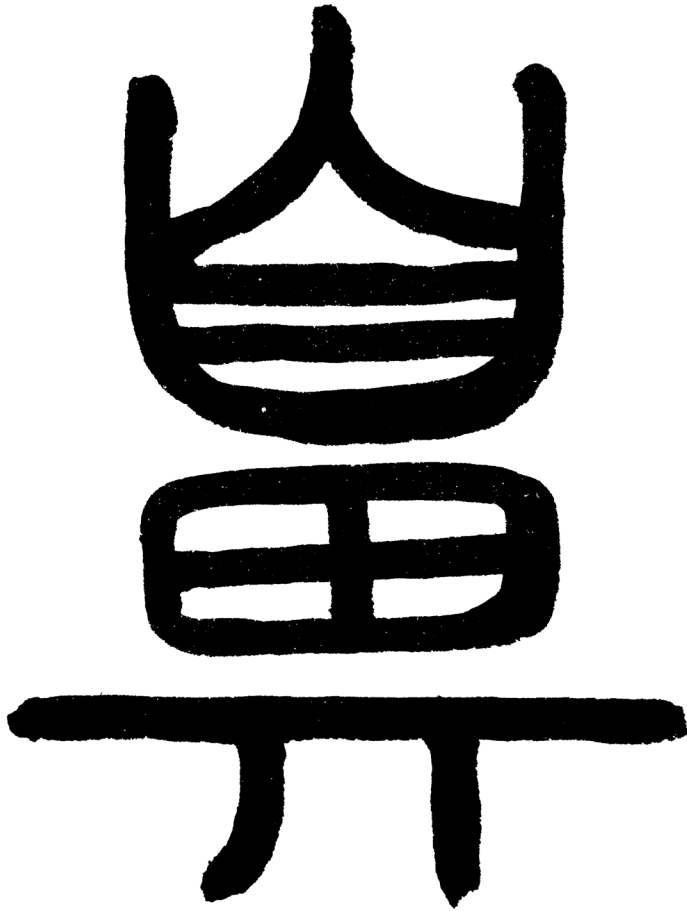


Figure 15: Chinese character 鼻 (Nose)

write or draw. As I explained before, each Chinese written character icon has many layers of connotations. This phenomenon has great potential for new meanings in the communications.

For example, the character 自 means self (figure 14), partly from the shape of the character 鼻 (nose) (figure15). Lindqvist argues that Swedish people will point to the chest when they are doing self-introduction, rather than pointing to the nose (Lindqvist, and Li, 2015, p.24). The different body language exposed by the written characters asks people to think the way of behavior in different cultures, or the different understandings on body, organ, and identity.

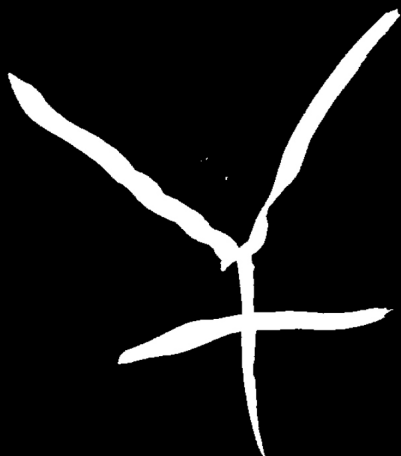
Empirical research on how to work with Chinese written characters as semiotic resource will be explained in the following chapters.



CHILD



ROBOT





MAYRA

Chapter 4. Method

Once we turn our eyes from “sign” to how people use semiotic resources to communicate in taking and creating meanings, it is the perspective of social semiotics, because we believe that “the meanings of signs are made socially” (Rose, 2016, p. 136). Empirical research Character Workshop examines how to improve children’s comprehension through reading and writing the signs critically and creatively. Applying social semiotics in the critical visual analysis, engaging young children from Porvoo Art School as participants are the research method.

4.1 Look at Chinese written characters carefully

“Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledge” (Rose, 2016, p. 23). In order to understand the meaning, we need to think about the social practices, the effects of the circulation, and the viewing and reflects on by various audiences. Several criteria of critical visual methodology posted by Rose (Rose, 2016, p. 22): a critical approach to visual culture includes taking images seriously, thinking about social context, considering the audience position, and so on.

Looking at images carefully is the basement because “in order to see

we had to think; and we had nothing to think about if we were not looking” (Arnheim, 1980, p.492). Through seeing and reading, children ask questions, discuss their opinions, and then share knowledge.

This study started with the question: “what’s going on in this picture?”. Looking provides an open-ended yet highly structured discussion that increases students’ critical thinking. I asked students to look at signs carefully, to explain the meaning from their own perspective, and to pay attention to who is the reader and who is the inventor. Such as, when you see the shape of this character sign, what are differences between your own interpretations and the accepted meaning of this sign? Imaging the life and scenes of that era, are there any relationship to your life?



Figure 16: Chinese character 山 (Mountain)
Figure 17: the sign for mountain in the map

Through looking, students saw the line, the dot, the shape; the people, the wood, the mountain. We looked carefully and emotionally, rather than just remembering a word. For example, Character (mountain) shows a constantly rising land with the shape of a triangle, which is known as a stereotypical mountain in Chinese. However, for Finnish children, it looks more like a crown. “Deeply embedded in our culture, the concept of visual thinking is so much a natural part of our lives (Fish, 1998).

4.2 Read and Write Chinese written characters differently

There are no universal icons because meaning becomes complicated and diverse during the process of representing signs. In Saussure's model, the sign is the whole form of the association of signifier, (sound, the written word, image) with signified, the concept evoked by the signifier. However, the process of seeing, understanding, or expressing signs is complicated because one sign can lead to different visual representations. At the same time, it can be interpreted differently. "There is no one-to-one link between signifier and signified; signs have multiple rather than single meanings. Within a single language, one signifier may refer to many signifieds (e.g. puns) and one signified may be referred to by many signifiers (e.g. synonyms)" (Chandler, 1994). The principle of being relatively arbitrary explains the meaning is always represented differently in different historical and cultural contexts and by diverse audiences. In other words, the consensus can be reached only when people share the same given context.

Furthermore, the linguist Louis Hjelmslev suggested that both expression (signifier) and content (signified) have substances and forms. For example, if we look at the language as the form of the signifier, then the printed or handwriting marks will be the substances of this signifier. "Hjelmslev's framework allows us to an-

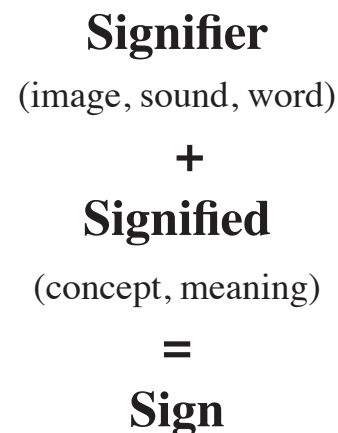


Figure 18. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's explanation about sign in 1983

alyze texts according to their various dimensions and to grant to each of these the potential for signification” (Chandler, 1994).

Many contemporary artists such as famous Chinese artists Gu Wenda and Xu Bin use Chinese written character signs as visual and cultural elements, besides the linguistic meaning, to express their aesthetic perceptions and critical opinions about language, culture, history, identity, and power. Chinese artist and curator 邱志杰(Qiu Zhi Ji), introduced their works in his article the *Power of Chinese Character: Gu Wenda’s* experience and approach to Chinese characters is a mystery when the texts are woven with human hair. Xubin’s characters are less associated with the calligraphy tradition and more relevant with square-shaped and printing-circulation. The sign is composed of alphabets instead of strokes, which evolved into a contagious virus in the cultural encounter (artlinkart.com, 2018).

4.3 Take the composition as grammar to communicate

The Chinese written character sign has many layers of connotations, which shows great potential for artists, designers, and researchers. My interests are in how meanings are communicated socially. I am curious about what kind of interpretations when people meet these pictograms, and what kind of relevant images are evoked in audiences’ imagination,

and what kind of pictures audiences will draw or create to represent their understandings of this concept. Taking the way of composition from the Chinese written character as the grammar and the reference framework, I want to investigate what kind of visual communication will achieve.

In Chinese culture, there is a tradition to “write” one character in different ways (Liu, 2014). The typical example is 寿 (Longevity). Chinese people create hundreds of different ways of writing 寿 (Longevity) to show their broad knowledge about history and literacy. Based on the same or similar composition way of writing, the meaning is explained visually and diversely. As Fairlough stated, it is important for learners not simply to know how one interprets discrete sign systems, but how the meaning is extracted from how sign systems interact with each other (Fairlough, 2000, p.162).

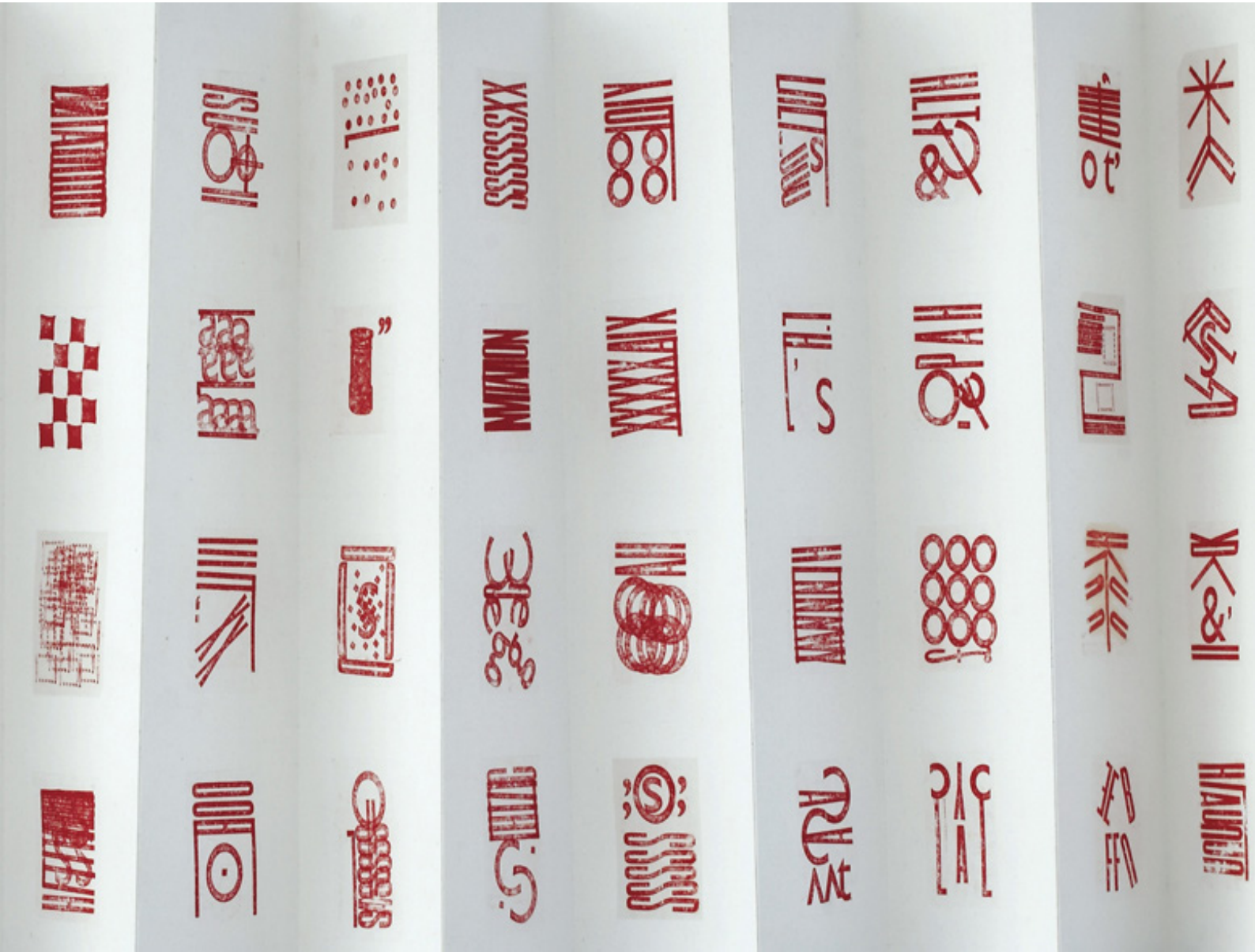


Figure 19: *Longevity*, Pan Jianfeng, 2000



Chapter 5. A case study

The case study of my research is called what does a GOOD relationship mean to you, inspired by character 好 (good). 好 has fifteen different meanings and ways of using in modern Chinese language study, however, the key linguistic meaning is good, very well, or nice. 好 is composed of two radical parts, one is 女 (female) and another is the 子 (Child). From oracle bone script, we can see it clearly (figure 20). The explanation from Wiktionary dictionary is that

the widely accepted meaning of this character is that the characters for “female” (女) and “child” (子) were put together to form a compound because it was good for a woman to have a child. Similarly, it has been proposed that the compound originally refers to the mutual affection between the mother and child, which then extended to mean “good”. These theories are supported by the smaller 子 found in some oracle bones and bronze inscriptions. However, broader interpretations of the second character 子 could lead to other theories. 子 could also mean “son”, so it may have meant two children, a boy and a girl next to each other, which is a

good fortune to have a boy and a girl. 子 could also mean “man”, so it may have referred to the love between a man and a woman, which is good. Duan Yucai, in his annotated version of *Shuowen*, interpreted it as originally referring to the beauty of 女子 (nǚzǐ, “woman”). Lastly, it could mean that the “attitude” of a girl was considered good.

The Character 好 shows a profound question that the ancestor created the meaning of Good with the representation of the human relationship, regardless of mother and child, or men and women. I interpreted the character 好 to mean “good relationship”, and asked children to draw their own understanding of good relationships with two images together. We use original shapes of characters from oracle bone scripts as teaching materials because they keep the trace of the original way of writing or drawing. Like Lindqvist looked at original Chinese characters as pictures (Lindqvist and Li, 2016, p.5).

5.1 Participants of workshops

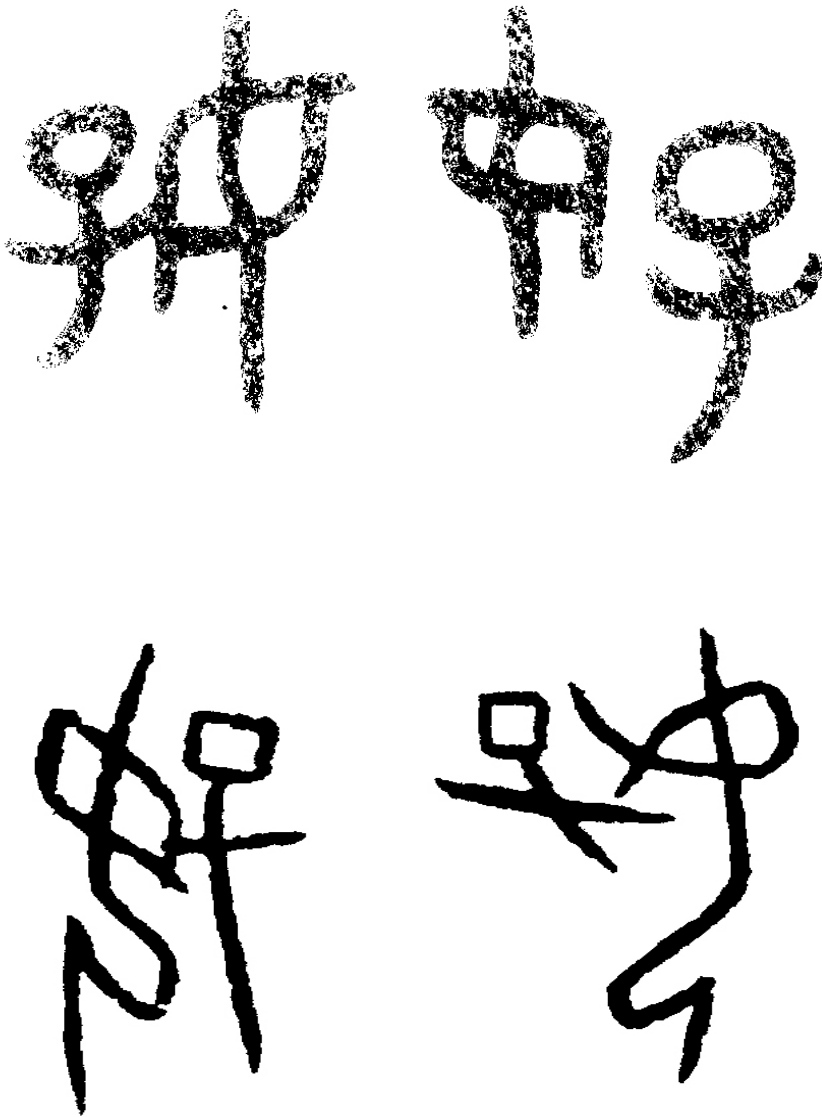
The empirical research was done in collaboration with Porvoo Art School, which is one of the biggest art schools in Finland. Porvoo Art School has a histories exceeding thirty years. There are around 750 chil-

dren and young people aged from 0 to 19 studying in the school. Developing children's different visual abilities with different materials in various ways is its aim.

The school offers different courses, for the needs of children and families. Some courses have no systematic curriculum arrangements, just provide a playful artistic environment in order to cultivate children's interests in art, like afternoon club Konstikas, from 3 pm to 4 pm, from Monday to Friday, during the whole semester for young children after their daily primary school study. Some are intensive workshops, such as summer classes. Children can complete an art project or experience special artistic skills in a short but intensive period. The weekly art class



Figure 20. Chinese character 好(good), and its form in oracle bone script



is specific education focusing on art both visual art and music. The course also lasts during the whole semester, but takes place only once a week. Every class last 90 minutes. Music lessons and visual arts lessons each last 40 minutes, and 10 minutes in between for breaks and exchanging venues. At the beginning of the course, the music and art teachers together with the children sat in a circle, said hello to each other, reviewed last week's study, and introduced today's class content. After the simple launching ceremony, the children were roughly divided into two parts. Some children started music lessons first, and the others started drawing lessons first. After the first lesson, they exchanged.

I engaged my research with different groups, like Kostikas and the art classes. In art classes, fifteen children aged between 7 and 8 participated in the character workshops. Since Finland is a bilingual country, for example, there are 16 Finnish speaking schools and 14 Swedish speaking schools, totally, in the city of Porvoo (Visitporvoo, 2018). Children attending the workshops are from both Finnish and Swedish speaking schools and families. Most children still do not understand English, and I do not understand Finnish nor Swedish. The teacher Irina, who has more than twenty years' teaching experience, gave me great support in organizing classes, translation, explanations, and so on. The interactions between Kostikas students are more casual. Also, I got much help from the teacher Okku and Liina.

5.2 Process of the workshop

The character workshops have several times. The structure of the workshop is simply seeing, discussing, and drawing. However, in the actual operation process, these three steps are often overlapping, back and forth, and cannot be separated. It is a dynamic process.

Before starting to learn Chinese characters, I gave children an overview introduction of China, its location, size, population, and the distance from Finland. Considering that the theme of the workshop was to be

“good”, or “a good relationship,” I showed students a two-minute video introducing a Chinese family. The simple introduction caused many discussions. Children are very interested in the concept of distance; for example, how much time would be spent on different modes of transportation from Helsinki to Shanghai, and how differences between Chinese and Finnish families, such as whether Finnish family consist of grandparents. too?

After the introduction, I showed students a few simple Chinese characters: 人 (people), 木(wood), 休(rest), 日(sun), 月(moon), and 明 (bright), and let them guess their meanings. I used both oracle bone scripts and simplified Chinese characters as materials. Children had the consensus and recognized some signs immediately, for example, 月 (moon). The discussion occupied most of the time of the first workshop. I also explained the way of composition of Chinese written characters as “Lego Game”, like 人(people) with 木(wood) means 休(rest), and 日 (sun) plus 月(moon) called 明(bright).

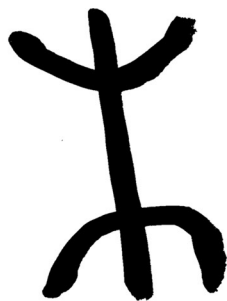
When Children got the assignment to draw a sign to represent “Good”, they were particularly excited. Some children even drew a dozen different signs at once and excitedly to share the meanings with the group. Irina patiently recorded each of these meanings under each symbol.



BIRD



HEART



TREE



CHILD



Figure 21. work of participant



ROBOT



CRAB



Chapter 6. Finding and Analysis

6.1 Holistic visual encouraging comprehension

The concept of culture is very abstract and complex, especially for young children. While the shapes, lines, and atmosphere of the Chinese written character signs visualized another culture to children.

Some drawings look like contemporary calligraphy, although many of the children even didn't know calligraphy before. The way of drawing provided an easy access and encouraged children to engage. The enthusiastic and sensitivity could be seen in children's works.



Figure 22. work of participant

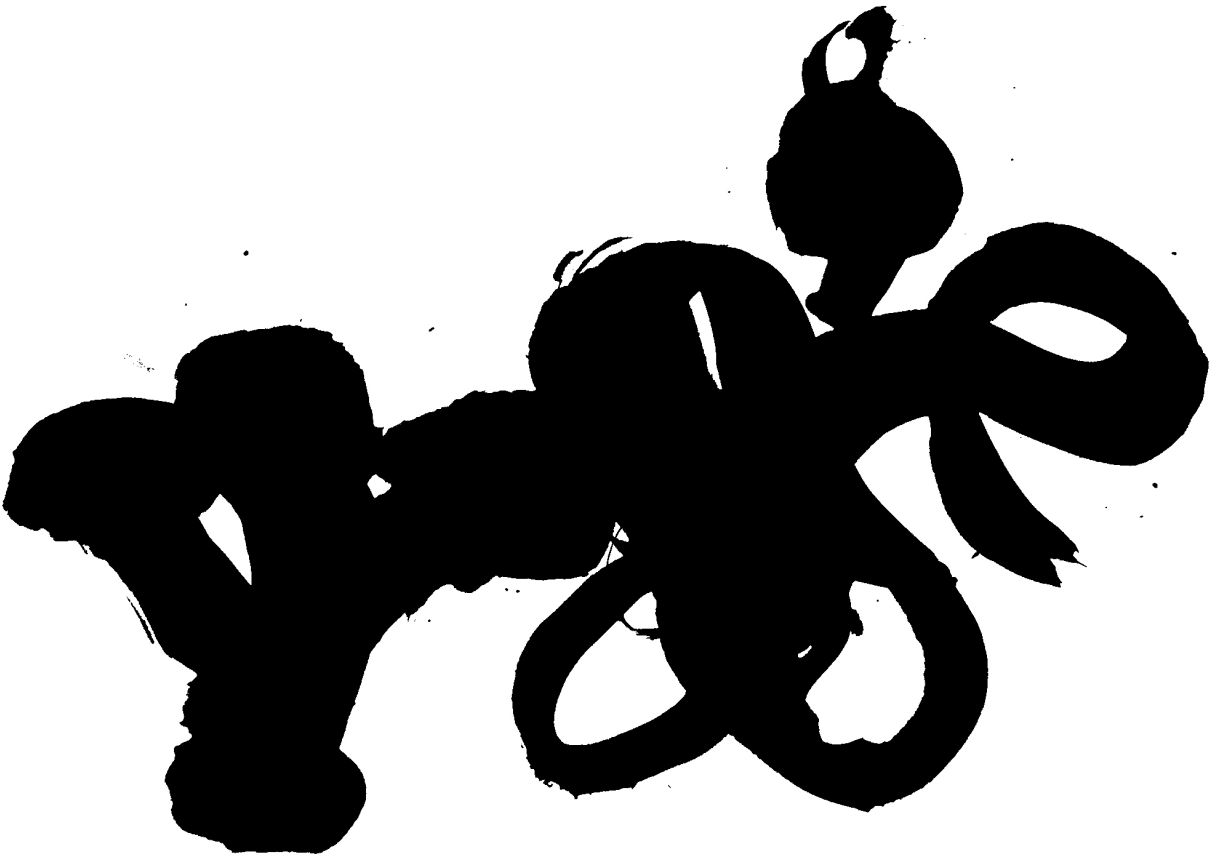


Figure 23. work of participant

6.2 Another type of language

Children's understanding of the GOOD relationships are very wide. From their drawings, I found: big bear and little boy, smiling faces together, different trees, cake and balloon, friends and snowmans. Human, animal, tree, object, and even something in the imagination can be put together to illustrate Good feeling for children.

According to semiotics, the semiotic resource must be able to expand learner potential for understanding and communicating (Leeuwen, 2005, p. 4). Character workshop is based on the promotion of visual literacy. Rather than just teaching language, the Chinese written character signs are used as visual materials to inspire and play with children: employing the composition way of the Chinese written characters to create a special “language”, like “Lego game”. This is not the language bound for operational oral and writing functions, but the heuristic and imaginative, in order to see and understand what others are thinking and expressing, and also to be used to show children's own ideas through creating signs. This new language is for the purpose of showing diversities and sharing understandings.



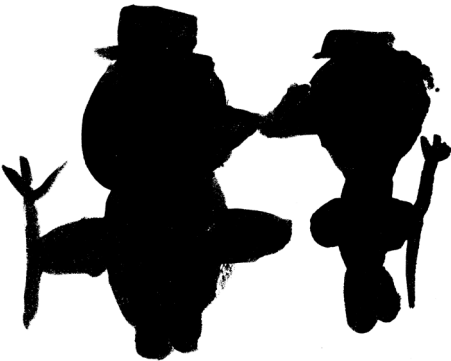


Figure 24, 25, 26
27, 28, 29

6.3 An innovative sign

Chinese written character, the pictogram, has the special nature of transforming text and image. The modalities from both linguistic and visual discourses provide the rich experiences of meaning-making, which helps children to improve their understandings of text and images. During the workshops, a child used the letters h,y,v, and ä to create a smiling face. “Hyvä” in Finnish language means good. The smiling “Hyvä” can be seen as an echo of the Chinese character sign. This semiotic innovation communicated the ideas by signs, which breaks the boundary between text and image.



Figure 30: work from participants, a smiling Hyvä

6.4 Visual unveils ideology

Through visual communication, I saw that visual language, like a mirror, reflects different ideologies regardless of whether people were living three thousand years ago in Asia, or children who are living in Finland in the twenty-first century. “Ideology is those representations that reflect the interests of power” (Rose, 2016, p. 107). Underneath our decision-making, there is something that controls the process.

By observing the children’s paintings, the smiling face icon can be seen in many children’s drawings. We found that about twenty-five percentages of children used the same round smiling faces to represent good and good relationships, although there were slight differences in the size and the expressions on faces. It is obvious to make the connection from these icons to social media. Children’s visual language exposed the visual resources in their mind and alarmed that visual language should also be aware of because it can be used as ideological forms to influence children’s mind.

6.5 Future Plan

During the workshop process, the communication took place not only between children, but also between teachers and researchers. For example, the discussion about the character 人(people) (figure 12). Irina saw

this sign as people shaking hands, while I saw it as primitive humanity, and one child looked at it as a sad people. We also discussed the gender issue together, because of some ambiguous signs (figure 28, 29). Irina told us that when she was a young girl, around thirty years ago, very few fathers participated in children's school life, however, nowadays, fathers actively attend. Many children think father and child are Good as well. In my personal experience, the mother still takes the main responsibility for taking care of the child in daily life in China, just the same as the character 好(good).

As Wertsch argues, the process of appropriating cultural tools enables individuals to be included in new collective ways of functioning and act as members of more varied and overlapping communities (Wertsch, 1998). Sleeter also argued that we could take multicultural education not only as therapy, as teaching techniques, as academic discourse, but also as a social movement for changing prejudice and exchanging belief (Sleeter. 1996). Inspired by education, how to involve more people and to create a more prolific visual inspiring pool are the questions to consider for future research. A leaflet collecting and showing all these "Good" together as an inspiring material will be used in the character workshop in the future (figure 30).



CHILD



ROBOT



SHELL



Conclusion

Visual Literacy is the competence built through the interaction read, think, and write with visual languages. This case study, character workshop, is learning the Chinese written character visually through considering the Chinese character as the visual language. Through learning, children develop their understandings of culture signs through seeing (read) that each sign (both signifier and signified) can be interpreted differently. At the same time, children also learned how to express (write) their ideas through creating images and new signs based on the structure of composition of Chinese written characters. As Benoît said,

Being able to participate in the lifeworld requires access to information resources that can be interpreted by the end-user, leading us to conclude that the public, aided by professionals, warrants exposure to the core principles of visual literacy (Benoît, 2015, p.64).

Visualizing the differences is a good way for children to understand diversity. The visual perspective opens a new understanding of Chinese written characters. Learning visually not only helps to

increase the understandings of signs, but also see the different ideologies, understandings, and representations. Thus, the visual communications happened among people, beyond the history and the culture: the primitives in Asia, and the children and teachers living in Finland, which inspires rethinking about the language and ways of learning the language.



Figure 31: A leaflet of *What Does Good Mean to You?*





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