

# *Overview of Hieroglyph in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*

Xian Chen<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Literature and Media, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, China*

*a. chenxian04216@gmail.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese characters teaching is an essential part of teaching. With the continuous development of teaching Chinese characters, the Hieroglyph teaching plays a positive role in the process of helping foreign students learn Chinese characters. By retrieving documents in China Knowledge Network and Wanfang Data Knowledge Service Platform, this paper reviews the status of the Hieroglyph teaching in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Based on the basic situation of the Hieroglyph teaching, this paper analyzes the historical development and advantages of it, points out its guide ideas, and summarizes relevant research of teaching methods. Through the comparison of the Hieroglyph teaching methodology and traditional Chinese characters teaching methodology, this paper further explores the significance of the Hieroglyph teaching, finally, the shortcomings of it and suggestions for improvement are pointed out, aims to demonstrate the feasibility and practical significance of the Hieroglyph teaching. This paper summarizes the current basic situation, potential problems and suggestions for improvement of this research field in the Hieroglyph teaching, which can help experts and scholars enhance the depth and breadth in future.

**Keywords:** Hieroglyph teaching, Chinese characters, teaching, cultural exchange.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the improvement of China's international standing, growing number of countries have created a Wave of "Chinese language fever". In instructing Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese character teaching is extremely important. But the huge volume of the Chinese characters and its complex structure, which increase the difficulty of learning Chinese characters for foreign students. As an ideograph, the Hieroglyph also is a kind of the most primitive picture character. The Hieroglyph shows meaning of characters by outlining the shapes and contours of things, most modern common Chinese characters combine and transform based on the Hieroglyph, which is the root of the development of Chinese characters.

The Hieroglyph teaching is grounded in the characteristics and meanings of Chinese characters, which is intuitive and imaginative, and it can be a good aid for foreign students to understand the literal sense of Chinese characters, thereby upgrading their level of Chinese. Through retrieving seven documents about teaching Chinese as a foreign language such as 'Research on Application of the Hieroglyph in teaching Chinese Literacy to Foreigners' and other documents about providing instruction on Chinese characters currently included by China Knowledge Network [1], and six

documents about instructing Chinese language to foreign students, such as ‘The folklore significance and instructing Chinese as a foreign language of the Hieroglyph’. Other documents about the Hieroglyph used in the procedure of instructing Chinese as a foreign language currently included by Wanfang Data Knowledge Service Platform [2], this paper sorts and summarizes thirteen documents of the Hieroglyph used in the process of instructing foreign people to learn Chinese. This paper looks at each of seven aspects of the Hieroglyph’s basic situation and present a vision of future trends in the development of the Hieroglyph teaching.

## **2. The Hieroglyph and Its Basics**

### **2.1. The Basics Concepts of Hieroglyph**

The Hieroglyph, as a category of Chinese characters constructed by the “Hieroglyph Word Building Method” in the “Four Methods of Word Building”, it is a kind of the most primitive method to make words by picture mnemonics. The Hieroglyph Word Building Method involves tracing the shape of objective things with zigzagging lines according to the contours and characteristics of things. For example, “sun”, “moon”, “water” are direct depiction of the basic contour of things, “cattle”, “sheep” are depicted by catching the main characteristics of these two kinds of animals. Therefore, the main characteristics of the Hieroglyph are intuitive shape of words, strong descriptive. Through analyzing the Hieroglyph, we also can understand living conditions and cultural background of China’s ancient people.

### **2.2. The Basic Situation of Hieroglyph Teaching**

Chinese character teaching methodology is one of important factors affecting the instruction of educating Chinese characters, reasonable Chinese characters teaching methods are right ways can help foreign students learn and master Chinese characters and improve their Chinese. The Hieroglyph teaching starts with the characteristics and contours of kanji and breaks down it to help foreign students to understand the initial meanings, which in turn leads to a fundamental mastery of Chinese characters. Although the development process of Hieroglyph teaching is not long, currently, positive results have been continuously achieved in the process of teaching Chinese language.

After taking the Hieroglyph teaching to the Chinese classes at HuayKoengpittayakarn High School in Thailand, He Huaying thought that the Hieroglyph teaching was able to stimulate the interest of Thailand students to learn Chinese characters, increase the fun of learn Chinese characters and help Thailand students go into advanced Chinese characters studies in future [3]. Li Hongdou combined the test results of four HSK Level 2 Chinese learners from Confucius Institute at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada [4]. She proposed the Hieroglyph teaching can help these four learners accurately memorize and discern the Hieroglyph Chinese characters, making them more receptive to such Chinese characters, and this teaching method also allow them to improve their level of subsequent Chinese and Chinese characters learning. After taking the Hieroglyph teaching to the Chinese classes for international students in Yemeni, Tian Wendi noted that the Hieroglyph teaches students to write in Chinese characters with the great advantage of the visual image [5]. At the same time, the Hieroglyph teaching also can make students appreciate the depth of cultural meaning behind Chinese characters, which greatly motivates students to learn Chinese characters and keeps their lastingly motivated at study.

### **3. The Historical Development and Characteristics of Hieroglyph Teaching**

#### **3.1. The Milestones of Development of Instructing Chinese Characters as a Foreign Language**

Teaching Chinese characters as a foreign language in China began in the 1950s. In the Mid-1960s, Zhong Qin developed many important theories, such as the principle of practicality, in *Summary of 15 Years of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*. He favored of “Chinese in parallel”, comprehensive and focused development in the four areas of Chinese Listening, Chinese speaking, Chinese reading and Chinese writing. In the 1970s, Lü Bisong further deepened and expanded on the “principle of practicality” put forward by Zhong Qin in *Principles of Practicality in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*. Instructing foreign language learners to study Chinese language in China is flourished in the 1980s to the 1990s.

Since the 21st century, Teaching Chinese characters as a foreign language in China has entered boom phase of development. However, during the initial stage of development of instructing foreign students to learn Chinese characters, experts and scholars in China over-emphasis on phonological aspects of Chinese, overlooked the importance of Chinese characters writing, which has not been taken seriously for an extended period [3]. Strokes teaching method, component teaching method, literacy using words and other traditional Chinese characters teaching methods are comparatively mechanical, which inclines to learn by note. And this category of Chinese characters notation pedagogy is extremely easy to reduce foreign students’ interest in learning Chinese characters, which is hard for them to form a systematic approach to Chinese character learning and the culture of China [6]. In addition to problems mentioned above, teaching materials for instructing Chinese characters as a foreign language suffer from the twofold problems of lack of relevance of the educational objects and the fun and practicality of teaching content [5].

#### **3.2. The Characteristics of Hieroglyph Teaching**

In the process of teaching every subject, interest is one of important factors influencing students to learn and master knowledge, and it is also an effective tool helping students improve the efficiency of studying. Chinese characters have the four main characteristics of being a challenge to learn, difficult to memorize, difficult to discern and difficult to write, thereby in the process of teaching Chinese characters as a foreign language, teachers should pay more attention to adopt effective teaching methods to stimulate foreign students to learn Chinese characters, it is the best way to guarantee better teaching quality.

Wang Conghui pointed out that the Hieroglyph teaching has very strong interestingness, which maximizes the interest of foreign students in learning Chinese characters [6]. Through comparing the face of the most original graphic Chinese characters with today’s regular script, she believed that this method could make foreign students understand every Chinese character from both emotional and rational aspects, feel the process of Chinese characters changing from shape to meaning. This method not only makes foreign students memorize Chinese characters and its meaning, but also let them recognize and remember Chinese characters have been mastered by them from the shape, phonetic value and meaning of Chinese characters. Tian Wendi also talked about using the Hieroglyph teaching as entry point for instructing Chinese characters as a foreign language, which makes foreign students understand and master the root of Chinese characters, this in turn provides a solid foundation for the subsequent study of Self-explanatory characters, associative compounds and phonetic compounds [5].

Furthermore, Zhao Yue reckoned that the relevance of the Hieroglyph in the shape of picture, helping foreign students understand how early Chinese characters developed into the modern Chinese characters that are now unique and distinctive [1]. Consequently, introducing the Hieroglyph teaching

into providing instruction on Chinese characters for foreign students is an extremely accurate strategy. With the Hieroglyph teaching, teachers can help foreign student to connect the Hieroglyph to Chinese characters they have learned, get to grips with characteristics of Chinese characters, understand the meaning of Chinese characters, thus improve students' level of recognizing and remembering Chinese characters.

#### **4. The Guiding Principle of The Hieroglyph Teaching**

Zhang Yu indicated that teachers should clarify the subjective status of learning of students in the Hieroglyph teaching [7]. Therefore, teachers should fully consider the need and learning situation of students and other conditions of many aspects when formulating teaching design. Hu Yanqiu also mentioned when preparing the Hieroglyph teaching, teachers should adequately understand the personality trait of students from countries taught and think the daily study program and the study habits of students, guaranteeing good teaching quality [8].

Zhang Yu believed that teachers should combine the humanistic learning theory with the Hieroglyph teaching design, emphasize the importance of human beings, and manage the relationship between teachers and students is the hinge of leading students to learn Chinese characters [7]. Teachers also should respect, care and love for students, foster the development of students' personality, and form friendly relationship of helping each other with students.

When teaching the Hieroglyph to foreign students, in addition to let them understand and master a certain number of Chinese characters, teachers also need to lead foreign students to explore the deep Chinese outstanding traditional culture behind the Hieroglyph and improve their aesthetics and appreciation, making the Hieroglyph teaching both interesting and cultural [1]. Bi Yanhua also proposed that combining the delivered Hieroglyph and cultural stories behind it, which can effectively stimulate the interest of students in learning Chinese characters [9]. This guide principle not only leads foreign students deeply dig into the meaning of the Hieroglyph, but also let them appreciate the depth and breadth of Chinese outstanding traditional culture.

#### **5. Research on Hieroglyph Teaching Methodology**

##### **5.1. Cultural Infiltration Method**

Cultural infiltration method, a teaching method that enables students to learn the surface and deeper meanings of the Hieroglyph while being subconsciously imbues and inculcates one with traditional Chinese culture. Zhang Yu raised that the Hieroglyph teaching not only is a part of educating foreign students on how to write Chinese characters, but also is a kind of cultural teaching and is a crucial vehicle for disseminating traditional Chinese culture [7]. As ideograph, the Hieroglyph has a long and deep cultural history, so teachers also can integrate the wealth of the Hieroglyph contained therein with the teaching when explaining the Hieroglyph. Through this kind of teaching method, students can not only learn Chinese characters, but also understand the vastness and depth of Chinese culture.

##### **5.2. Group Mutual Aid Method**

Group mutual aid method is a kind of teaching method that greatly motivates students to learn and participate, students can complement each other's strengths, profit from widespread suggestions, and improve the efficiency of studying. He Huaying indicated that in the process of the Hieroglyph teaching, the formality of group mutual aid enables students to discuss and learn on their own, supervise mutually and complete learning tasks. Groups can also form competitive relationships with each other, making Chinese characters learning become more dynamic and energizing and Chinese character classes turn more harmonious and vivid [3].

### 5.3. Graphical Method

The Hieroglyph is a kind of the most original and basic Chinese character, which uses curved lines to depict the morphological characteristics of things. Therefore, in the process of the Hieroglyph teaching, graphical method is a kind of very efficient teaching method. Li Wenjia believed that teachers can show separately Hieroglyphs that will be explained to students in this lesson when teaching the Hieroglyph, then show a picture of thing represented by the Hieroglyph in question. For instance, 'claw' is from "chicken claw", 'melon' is form "watermelon" [10]. Comparing the picture of thing represented by this Hieroglyph to its old Chinese character form, this method enables students see the origin of the Hieroglyph and the process of change.

### 5.4. Human Demonstration Method

Human demonstration method is also known as action demonstration method, which refers to express the meaning of the Hieroglyph through demonstrating body movements, vivid human action can help students understand Hieroglyphs they have learned. For example, in the teaching of 'human' as a Hieroglyph, teachers can present the changing image of the word 'human' through body movements, enabling students to deepen their impression of the word 'human' and thus enhance their memory [5].

### 5.5. Multimedia Teaching Method

Multimedia teaching method, with the aid of modern teaching equipment, can better demonstrate the morphological changes of the Hieroglyph, enable students feel the intuitive image of the Hieroglyph, and make Chinese characters classes interesting and students are not easily distracted. He Huaying pointed out that in the class of the Hieroglyph teaching, teachers use PowerPoint as a multimedia tool to show variations in the shape of words, and a nature picture of modern Chinese character to which this Hieroglyph corresponds. Students can understand the structure of Chinese characters, reducing written Chinese characters errors, and improve the efficiency of identifying and recalling Chinese characters [3]. Multimedia teaching method can also make Chinese characters less intimidated for students and learn Chinese characters happily.

## 6. Comparison of The Hieroglyph Teaching Methodology and Traditional Chinese Characters Teaching Methodology

### 6.1. Comparison of Students Test Scores

Shu Lili divided the test participants into two groups, one group was Class A, which uses traditional Chinese characters teaching method combines the Hieroglyph elements in Chinese characters, the other group was Class B that adopted traditional Chinese characters teaching method [11]. The number of students in Class A and B is 32, and they were all first-year students of the same level of Chinese in the same junior high school in Thailand. After two months of separate teaching sessions, the results of Chinese characters were very different. By comparing the test scores of two classes, significant improvements in the Chinese characters proficiency in class A using traditional Chinese characters teaching method combines the Hieroglyph elements in Chinese character, 49.98% pass rate on Chinese characters test scores. However, students in class B using traditional Chinese characters teaching method had insufficient knowledge of Chinese Characters, thus they were slower to improve their Chinese, 25.59% pass rate on Chinese characters test scores.

## 6.2. Comparison of Student Engagement

Hu Yanqiu adopted separately different Chinese characters teaching approaches for two classes of sixth graders in Nambu Christian School in Thailand [8]. Grade 6, class 5 was set up as an experimental group used a teaching approach based on the characteristics of the Hieroglyph. Grade 6, class 1 was set up as a control group used a narrative Chinese characters' structure-based traditional Chinese teaching approach. In terms of class interactions, students in the experimental group interacted more with the teacher, have highly motivated to answer questions and can understand and flexibly use Chinese characters what the teacher has taught. Students in the control group interacted less with the teacher, the class was basically a single model of teacher questions and student answers, students' mood in class did not show positive tendencies, and the speed of students understanding Chinese characters was slower.

In terms of students' initiative, students in the experimental group were more positive to raise their hands to make a statement or performed on stage to imitate the Hieroglyph. Despite the difficulty of problems, students in the experimental group also guided by the teacher to think actively and to make statements. However, the class of students in the control group was relatively quiet, they only make statements when the teacher ask them questions. When they could not answer a question, they used to shake their heads instead of thinking actively guided by the teacher, students in the control group were in a more passive position overall. Students in the experimental group were more active than students in the control group during play session to practice and consolidate the Hieroglyphs they have learned.

## 7. The Significance and Deficiencies of the Hieroglyph Teaching

Through the teaching of the Hieroglyph teaching, students can understand the fundamentals of Chinese characters in terms of its emergence, change and development. Fun with the Hieroglyph teaching takes the resistance out of the students' heart to learn Chinese characters, no longer find it boring and its structure is complex but can quieten their mind and feel the beauty of Chinese characters to improve the overall capacity of foreign students learning Chinese characters. Zhang Yu figured that the Hieroglyph as the most representative words in the Chinese characters, the Hieroglyph teaching can help students establish the connection between the shape, sound and the meaning of Chinese characters [7]. Li Siyao mentioned that as one of the "Four Methods of Chinese Character Creation", the Hieroglyph cuts through the rationality of the Chinese characters, uses the character sense literacy method to teach Chinese characters to non-native adult learners of Chinese at the primary level, this will be more in line with their cognitive level, which will make learning Chinese easier and more efficient [12].

The Hieroglyph teaching also can help non-native adult learners of Chinese at the primary level to cultivate conceptions of Chinese characters culture, understand Chinese characters underpinnings, stimulate their greater interest in learning Chinese characters, and lay a solid foundation for subsequent Chinese characters learning. Li Yan noted that the Hieroglyph as the cornerstone of Chinese characters font construction, because of its high degree of donation, Chinese characters are regarded as ideographically oriented characters. Therefore, the teaching of the Hieroglyph-based monograms should come provide instruction on Chinese Characters [13].

In the early stages of the construction of Chinese characters, self-explanatory character, associative compounds and other kinds of Chinese characters emerge on the basis of the Hieroglyph, thus we can say the Hieroglyph is the "root" of Chinese characters and the foundation of other methods of Chinese character creation. The Hieroglyph as an entry point for teaching Chinese characters, which can improve the efficiency of students' subsequent learning of other Chinese characters. As the most original graphical Chinese character, the intuitive image of the Hieroglyph is one of its major

advantages. Tian Wendi also remarked that the Hieroglyph combines the graphical nature of Chinese characters with the cognitive characteristics of Chinese characters grapheme and the ‘commonality’ of human brain cognitive characteristics to teach Chinese characters to foreign students can be an effectively improve the efficiency of their Chinese characters recognition [5].

Despite the Hieroglyph is the foundation for the composition of the other Chinese characters, however, modern Chinese characters are mostly phonetic compounds, associative compounds and self-explanatory characters, most of these Chinese characters differ significantly from the glyphs of the original Chinese characters, the complexity of what is being expressed is also difficult to portray using hieroglyph method of creating Chinese characters. Therefore, these Chinese characters with their complex meaning would not be able to take advantage of the graphical nature of the Hieroglyph to narrative instruct to students, so limitations are more obvious [1]. Tian Wendi also reckoned that the way the Hieroglyph helps students build connectivity between original pictures and modern Chinese characters does not apply to the memorization of all hieroglyphs [5].

The Hieroglyph teaching effectively use the visualization of the Hieroglyph, making the Hieroglyph teaching has unique advantages not found in other teaching methods of Chinese characters. The graphical properties of the Hieroglyph are very good at stimulating the memory areas of the human brain, enabling teachers effectively guide students to visualize and remember what they have learned. However, in following up foreign students’ Chinese characters learning process, it was found that they lacked a good understanding of specific strokes of Chinese characters. Consequently, the Hieroglyph teaching can only help students build an overall picture of Chinese characters. Making foreign students write Chinese characters correctly and cultivate their stroke awareness in Chinese characters also need to combine other different teaching methods.

Zhao Yue pointed out that introducing the Hieroglyph into teaching Chinese characters to foreign students was most notably designed to fully take advantage of the pictorial nature of the Hieroglyph’s intuitive image to stimulate students’ strong interest in Chinese characters learning to lay a solid foundation of subsequent Chinese characters learning for foreign students [1]. Therefore, teachers should not over-analyze traceability of Chinese characters back to their origins for foreign students and the process of changing. Teachers should choose to easy-to-understand Chinese characters combined with appropriate hieroglyphs to teach them, this will keep students interested in Chinese characters learning for a long time.

Li Siyao referred to that the traditional way Chinese characters are written, horizontal and vertical is an issue that should be noted in the Hieroglyph teaching [12]. When teachers are explaining the Hieroglyph, although they can draw on pictorial features to show the evolutionary process of Chinese characters, while they should also emphasize the way modern Chinese characters is written. And the relationship between the Hieroglyph and modern Chinese characters is important to be clear. Tian Wendi also believed that teachers should strengthen students’ concept of stroke order in the Hieroglyph teaching, guiding students to master the correct way of writing Chinese characters [5].

## 8. Conclusion

Despite the history of the Hieroglyph teaching is not long, however, some results have been achieved in this research area, which have positive implications for instruction on how to instruct foreign students to learn Chinese characters. Through analyzing, much of the existing studies focus on the features and advantages that the Hieroglyph teaching in educating foreign students how to write Chinese characters, the inadequacy of this area of the Hieroglyph teaching has not been adequately addressed. For instance, limitations of the Hieroglyph use in instructing Chinese characters as foreign language, how to implement the teaching of specific strokes of Chinese characters in the Hieroglyph teaching and other issues still need to be resolved urgently.

Therefore, in the field of the Hieroglyph teaching as an area of study, experts and scholars still need to enhance the depth and breadth of relevant research and think about how to improve the shortcomings of the Hieroglyph teaching to better integrate the instruction of Chinese as a foreign language is also important to consider.

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