

Shaw Pong Liu

Painting the River: The Art of Chinese Writing Educational Guide, Grades K-8



About the Performance

In a vivid sonic and visual journey, **Shaw Pong Liu** invites listeners to draw pictures as she performs Chinese and original music on the violin and erhu. Following each song and creative drawing, Liu shares the visual history of each Chinese character based on the same subject - river, flower, and horse - showing how each character evolved from an ancient drawing over thousands of years. Liu joyfully shares the physical pleasure - and precision - of writing each Chinese character, as students have the chance to try writing Chinese themselves. Listeners will end the journey with a set of their own hand-made drawings and Chinese written characters!



About the Artist

Shaw Pong Liu is a violinist who is fluent in both western and Chinese musical traditions. She is also a composer, a teaching artist and an activist. She engages diverse communities with creative music and social dialogue by innovating the audience experience of live music. Collaborating with artists from a wide range of disciplines, Shaw Pong creates genre-defying performances which interplay written and improvised music with narration, storytelling and movement. She is a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble and was the 2016 City of Boston Artist-In-Residence.

Program Learning Goals

1. To understand how written Chinese uses characters.
2. To explore the pictographic origins of Chinese characters.
3. To write four different Chinese characters.
4. To demonstrate the traditional Chinese instrument the erhu.

Essential Questions

1. How do we use language to communicate? Can we also communicate with music?
2. How is Chinese writing different from English writing?
3. What are some ways that animals helped humans develop technology?

Vocabulary

- **Mandarin:** a group of languages spoken across most of northern and southwestern China
- **Tonal Language:** a language in which different tones create different meanings
- **Tone:** the traits of a musical sound such as pitch, length, or strength
- **Character:** a written symbol that represents a spoken word in Chinese
- **Stroke Order:** the specific order of brush strokes used when writing a Chinese character
- **Erhu:** the traditional Chinese two-string instrument using a horse-hair bow

Key Facts and Context for Students

Where is China?

This program explores the music, language, and geography of contemporary and historical **China**. It is the largest country in **East Asia** and home to over 17% of the world's population.



Instruments Featured in this Performance



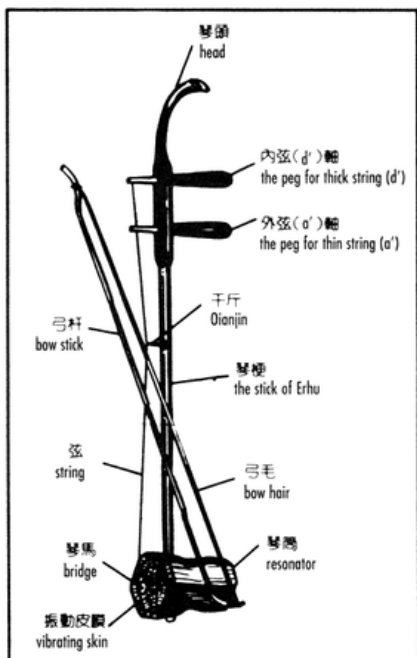
Violin



Erhu

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Key Facts and Context for Students, continued



About the Erhu

The **erhu** (pronounced “are-hoo”) is an ancient Asian instrument brought to China during the Han dynasty (around 140 BCE). This two-stringed instrument is played with a bow between the strings with a push-pull stroke. The sound box is covered by a snake skin which gives the instrument its distinctive tone, mellow yet bright. Its low notes are deep and rich, the middle notes are gentle and soothing, while high notes are clear and bold. These changes in character make it possible for the erhu to perform music with a variety of moods. In classical Chinese music, the erhu is melodic, haunting, ever-changing and alive. The traditional style of playing is full of ornamentation, giving the music a three-dimensional quality. The erhu is extremely popular for both solo and orchestral performances.

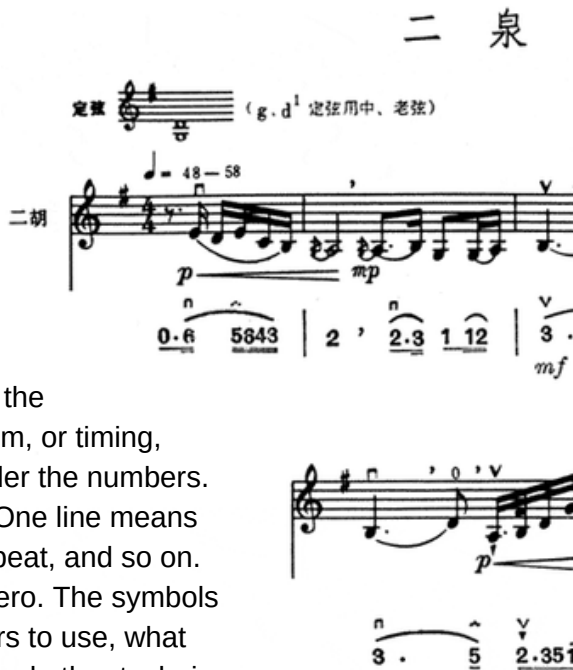
Erhu Musical Notation

This is an example of erhu music in both western and Chinese notation. This is the beginning of the famous piece ***A Moon Reflects on the Er-Chuan Spring***.

Chinese notation uses numbers to represent the relationship between notes. The number one means the primary note in a piece of music.

The number six, which begins this piece, means the sixth note away from the primary note. The rhythm, or timing, of each note is shown by the horizontal lines under the numbers. No line means one beat, or pulse, of the music. One line means half of a beat, two lines means one quarter of a beat, and so on. Rests, or pauses, are indicated by the number zero. The symbols above the numbers tell the musician which fingers to use, what direction to move the bow, which string to play, and other techniques.

二 泉



The image shows the beginning of the piece 'A Moon Reflects on the Er-Chuan Spring' in both Western and Chinese notation. The Western notation is in G major, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Chinese notation uses numbers to represent notes and rhythm. The first line of notation is labeled '定弦 (g, d' 定弦用中、老弦)' and '二胡'. The first measure is marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The second measure is marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The third measure is marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The notation includes various symbols for bowing and fingering, such as 'n' for natural, 'v' for bowing, and 'i' for fingering.

Pre-Performance Discussion Questions

- What language or languages do you and your family speak? In which parts of the world are these languages spoken?
- What are ways that you can communicate without using words?
- Compare the violin and the erhu (see page 2). What similarities do you notice between these two instruments? How would you play these instruments? What kinds of sounds do you think each one will make?

Pre-Performance Activity: Secret Message Chain

Learning Goals:

- To explore languages spoken by students in the classroom.
- To experiment with creating symbols to represent a word.

Materials:

One physical marker for a mountain (a chair, table, or sign in English), one physical marker for a river (a piece of blue cloth/paper or sign in English), paper and writing utensils



Directions:

1. Divide students into 2 teams and have each team sit in a long line or circle.
2. Designate one part of the room as the mountain, and one part of the room as the river with physical markers.
3. Tell students: "You are on an important mission and must find a way to get an important secret message to your international team about where to meet--at the mountain or the river. Pretend that your teammates don't all speak English, so you need a secret language that is somehow understandable without using English."
4. Brainstorm as a class all the ways to have a secret message. What about a different language than English? Does anyone speak another language? Say the word "mountain" or "river" in different languages spoken by the students. Write these words on the board and encourage everyone to practice each language together.
5. Discuss options for how to write a secret message to be understood by a group without a common written language.

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Pre-Performance Activity, continued

Directions, continued:

6. Decide where each team should meet, but only tell the location to the first person in each group. Ask that person to draw a symbol for the meeting location on a piece of paper and fold it.
7. When the teacher says "Go!", have the first person stealthily show their message to the next person in the group. The second person then draws their own symbol to show to the third person, and so on. The final person should quickly and quietly get to the meeting place. First group to get to the correct location wins!
8. Discuss how students chose to represent their secret meeting location. Were the messages always clear? Did the teams get to the right places?



Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- What did you learn about writing in Chinese? How is it compare to writing in English?
- What instruments did Shaw Pong use in her performance? How were they played?
- How did animals help humans develop technology for communicating? How did animals help the evolution of Chinese writing? How did animals influence musical instruments?

Post-Performance Activity: Chinese Message Chain

Learning Goals:

- To review the four characters learned in *Painting the River*.
- To practicing ancient Chinese character writing.

Materials:

[Slideshow provided by the artist](#) with ancient Chinese characters as well as animated videos of the modern characters, four physical markers to represent a mountain, river, garden, and stable (can use chairs, tables, or signs in Chinese characters), paper and writing utensils

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Post-Performance Activity, continued

Directions:

1. Discuss the performance with the class. What did students learn about the history of Chinese? What characters did they learn?
2. Using the slideshow, practice drawing both the ancient and modern Chinese characters for the words: 山 (mountain), 江 (river), 花 (garden), and 馬 (stable).
3. Divide students into 4 teams and have each team sit in a long line or circle.
4. Designate one part of the room as the mountain, one part of the room as the river, one part as the garden, and one part as a stable with physical markers.
5. Tell students: "You are on an important mission and must find a way to get an important secret message to your team about where to meet--at the mountain, the river, the garden, or the stable. You must use Chinese characters to avoid being detected."
6. Decide where each team should meet, but only tell the location to the first person in each group. Ask that person to draw the Chinese character for the meeting location on a piece of paper and fold it.
7. When the teacher says "Go!", have the first person stealthily show their message to the next person in the group. The second person then draws the character to show to the third person, and so on. The final person should quickly and quietly get to the meeting place. First group to get to the correct location wins!
8. Discuss how students felt communicating in written Chinese characters. Were the messages always clear? Did the teams get to the right places? How did this compare to the pre-performance version of this activity?



Further Resources

- [Shaw Pong Liu Artist Website](#)
- **Chinese History and Geography:**
 - [“China” by Encyclopedia Britannica](#)
 - [“History of China” by China Highlights](#): a brief overview of periods and dynasties in Chinese history
 - [Geography Puzzle of China’s Provinces](#)
- **Chinese Music and Art:**
 - [The Kennedy Center's Digital Chinese Arts Collection](#)
 - [“Erhu Facts for Kids” by Kiddle.co](#)
- **Chinese Language:**
 - [“The Story Behind Chinese Characters” by Yoyo Chinese](#)
 - [Learn Chinese Everyday](#): practice writing, reading, and saying words in Chinese
 - [Chinese Etymology](#): an online dictionary with visual history of each Chinese character (searchable by Chinese character input)
- **Bilingual Children's Books:**
 - Hu, Ying-Hwa: *Ten Blocks To The Big Wok*, Children's Book Press (2022)
 - Hsiung-Blodgett, Amanda: *Little Bun: A Bilingual Storybook about Feelings*, Miss Panda Chinese (2022)
 - Law, Queenie: *Chinese For Kids: First 50 Characters*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (2018)

Curricular Connections

Arts Standards: Music and Visual Arts

Creating

- Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (M.Cr.01, V.Cr.01)
- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (M.Cr.02, V.Cr.02)

Performing

- Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. (M.P.06, V.P.06)

Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (M.R.07, V.P.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (M.R.08, V.P.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (M.R.09, V.R.09)

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Curricular Connections, continued

Arts Standards: Music and Visual Arts, continued

Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (M.Co.10, V.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (M.Co.11, V.Co.11)

English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

Reading

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (R.PK-12.4)

Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)

Language

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. (L.PK-12.3)

History and Social Science

K

- Topic 1: Civics: classroom citizenship (HSS.K.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: connections among places (HSS.K.T2)
- Topic 3: History: shared traditions (HSS.K.T3)

Grade 1

- Topic 1: Civics: communities, elections, and leadership (HSS.1.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: places to explore (HSS.1.T2)
- Topic 3: History: unity and diversity in the United States (HSS.1.T3)

Grade 2

- Topic 1: Reading and making maps (HSS.2.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography and its effects on people (HSS.2.T2)

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Curricular Connections, continued

History and Social Science, continued

Grade 6

- Topic 1: Studying complex societies, past and present (HSS.6.T1)

Grade 7

- Topic 1a: Physical and political geography of Central and South Asia (HSS.7.T1a)
- Topic 2a: Physical and political geography of East Asia (HSS.7.T2a)
- Topic 2b: Early East Asian societies, religions, and cultures Ancient China, c. 1600 BCE-500 CE (HSS.7.T2b)

World Languages Standards

Communication

- Engage in, negotiate with, and improvise with cultural norms, etiquette, and nonverbal cues. (S.4.e)

Linguistic Cultures

- Analyze and evaluate variations among products and practices and how they relate to perspectives in multiple cultures and communities. (S.5.a)
- Analyze and evaluate the contributions of various cultural influences in the development of identity. (S.5.b)
- Investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of culture through comparisons of diverse target-language cultures and their own (S.6.a)

Lifelong Learning

- Research, analyze, evaluate, and hypothesize about diverse perspectives and distinctive viewpoints found in authentic materials from target-language cultures. (S.7.b)
- Apply cultural and linguistic skills to participate in the school, local, and global community (S.8.a)

