Chinese Characters & China
The Chinese character, different from alphabetic scripts, is the only existing ideogram in the world today. Knowing its unique formation enables you to get easily access to Chinese language with great fun, and even understand certain peculiarities of Chinese culture since the Chinese character is so closely associated with Chinese calligraphy, painting, medicine, architecture etc.
Pictographs 象形字

The first group of Chinese characters is pictographs, like paintings of Picasso, depicting the outline or special features of a life or object with a simple line, for example, 日(sun), 月(moon), 火(fire), 人(man), 目(eye), 木(tree), 牛(bull), 羊(goat), 鸟(bird), etc.
This Writer's Pen Painting, Pictographic Han Characters
This painting shows in a very artistic manner the pictographic quality of some ancient Han characters such as “日 (sun), 月 (moon), 明 (bright), 女 (girl), 目 (eye), 泪 (tear), 木 (tree), 鸟 (bird), 集 (perch), 牛 (ox), 羊 (sheep), 牛 (pen), 犬 (dog), 京 (artificial mound), 火 (fire), 止 (foot), 手 (hand) and 草 (grass).

The Famous painting by Picasso, Guernica
Picasso made use of distorted forms and symbolic method to compose a scene fully expressive of human misery, revealing the atrocity of the German fascists when their air force bombed the small Spanish town of Guernica. The painting is full of strong inspiration.
Cang Jie- the inventor of Chinese characters

仓颉造字

Chinese people owe the creation of Chinese characters to a legendary figure called Cangjie. He is said to be the historiographer of Yellow Emperor, acutely insightful with four eyes. From the footprints of birds and animals, he got inspiration for pictographs.
Can you tell differences between 牛 and 羊?
What differentiates man from other animals?
Every single pictograph like a vivid stick figure, is not the photographic reproduction of life details, but the result of perceptions and insights of man, thus being a life symbol between likeness and unlikeness. Appreciating those pictographs, we feel like being back in the human childhood, sometimes pleased at innocence and simplicity of the ancient, sometimes amazed at their wisdom and insight.
From the unearthed pottery vessels (ca. 5000 B.C.-3000 B.C.), we can find some decorated patterns of the human face, fish etc. which are strongly related with the early pictographs.
The only about 300 pictographs are the foundation of Chinese characters. Based on the pictographs, some other ways of word formation were tried to reveal abstract concepts.
Self-explanatory characters indicates a meaning by adding simple marks such as a dot or a line to a pictograph, for example putting a line over the curve indicates 上 (up, over), while the line under the curve indicates 下 (down, under) etc.
The decorated pattern on the unearthed pottery vessel (ca. 4300 B.C.-2500 B.C.) is believed the prototype of旦，with the Sun rising above the mountain or the sea.
Associative-compound characters 会意字

Associative-compound characters represent a meaning by combining two or more pictographs together, for example 从 (to follow), 众 (many), 见 (to see) etc.
The jigsaw puzzle of 人

“人” with different directions can combine into at least four associative compounds:

北 - two persons standing back to back means “opposition”;
从 - two persons facing to the left one after another means “to follow”;
比 - two persons facing to the right one after another means “to compare”;
化 - the combination of a standing person and another upside down, means “to change”, as the person in upright posture here signifies “alive” and the opposite “dead”.
Which characters are they?
A picto-phonetic character is composed of a form-component indicating meaning and a sound-component indicating pronunciation. For example,

妈 (mum, mā) consists of 女 and 马 (mǎ), 女 showing its meaning – a woman and 马 showing its pronunciation;

爸 (dad, bà) consists of 父 and 巴 (bā), the upper 父 showing its meaning – a father and the lower 巴 its pronunciation.
Combining the same sound component with various form components, there form many characters with the same or similar pronunciation. For example “包”, as a noun, it means *a package*; as a verb, it means *to cover*. There is a large number of Chinese characters with “包” as their sound component, “包” plus a “hand” radical means *to hug* - 抱, plus a “flesh” radical means *twins* – 胞, plus a “food” radical means *well-filled in stomach* - 饱, plus “water” radical means *a bubble* - 泡, plus a “foot” radical means *to run* - 跑, plus “clothes” means *a gown* - 袍, plus “fire” means *firecrackers* - 炮, plus “knife” means *to shave off* - 刨, plus “grass” means *a flower bud* - 苞 ……

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<th>Sound Component (包/bāo)</th>
<th>Form Component</th>
<th>Han Character</th>
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<td>抱(bào)</td>
<td>才</td>
<td>抱(bào)</td>
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<td>苞(bāo)</td>
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The importance of Chinese characters

With a monosyllabic language, such as Chinese language, which has only 409 syllabic combinations (not counting tones), you can imagine how many homonyms there are in Chinese language, ranging from two homonyms for one syllable even to over one hundred. So without help of their written forms, it’s rather difficult to distinguish a bunch of homonyms only by their similar pronunciations, which further demonstrates the importance of Chinese characters in discriminating meanings.
The homonym text 同音文
–a peculiar Chinese tongue twister

The phenomenon of homonym in Chinese language brings the Chinese literati some more pleasures, writing a homonym text is one of them. The rule of this word game is to invent a fantastic story by a bunch of homonyms, using only one syllable in the whole text (not counting the tones). The homonym text is usually written in the ancient Chinese, hard to read like a tongue twister, but full of wit and fun. Now let’s enjoy one of them.
施(shī)氏(shì)食(shí)狮(shī)史(shǐ)

史(shǐ)石室(shíshì)诗(shī)士(shì)施氏(shīshì)，嗜(shī)狮(shī)，誓(shì)食(shí)十(shí)狮(shī)。适(shǐ)施氏(shīshì)时时(shíshì)适(shǐ)市(shì)视(shǐ)狮(shī)。十(shí)时(shǐ)，适(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)适(shǐ)市(shì)。氏(shì)视(shǐ)是(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)，侍(shī)矢势(shǐshì)，使(shǐ)是(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)逝世(shíshì)。氏(shì)拾(shí)是(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)尸(shī)，适(shǐ)石室(shíshì)。石室(shíshì)湿(shī)，氏(shì)使(shǐ)侍(shī)拭(shǐ)石室(shíshì)。石室(shíshì)拭(shǐ)，氏(shì)始(shǐ)试(shǐ)食(shí)是(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)。食(shí)时(shí)，始(shǐ)识(shǐ)是(shǐ)十(shí)狮(shī)尸(shī)，实(shí)十(shí)石(shī)狮(shī)尸(shī)。试(shǐ)释(shǐ)是(shǐ)事(shì)。
This is the longest homonym text, with ninety nine words but only one syllable in this weird story, involving thirty six homonyms all pronounced ‘shi’. Its English version is as below,

Mr. Shi was a poet living in a stone grotto, he liked lions very much and swore to eat ten lions. Mr. Shi often went to a bazaar to search for lions. One day, at ten o’clock, it happened that ten lions appeared in the bazaar just as Mr. Shi arrived. Finding the lions, Mr. Shi shot them with arrows and killed them all. Then he carried the carcasses of the lions to his stone house. The stone house was wet with water, so Mr. Shi asked his servants to wipe it off. After that, Mr. Shi began to try eating the lions. While eating, he finally realized that the carcasses were in fact ten stone lions. Please try to explain how it happened.