Name _____

FROM ORACLE BONES TO CHINESE CHARACTERS

More than 3,000 years ago, Shang kings asked their ancestors questions about rain, harvests, wars and illness. Priests heated turtle shells or ox shoulder blades until they cracked, read the cracks as answers, then carved the question, and sometimes the answer, into the bone. These oracle bones are the oldest large body of Chinese writing. Many signs began as pictures of things. Over 3,000 years, they changed into the characters people in China still read today.

It means	Oracle bone about 1200 BC	Today
sun A circle with a mark inside; it also means "day."		→ 日
moon A crescent, the shape the moon shows most nights.		→ 月
person A person seen from the side, bending forward, arms out.		→ 人
tree A trunk with branches spreading up and roots spreading down.		→ 木
mountain Three peaks side by side, standing for a mountain range.		→ 山
water A wavy stream in the middle with drops on each side.		→ 水

It means	Oracle bone about 1200 BC	Today
rain Drops falling from a line that stands for the sky.		→ 雨
horse A horse stood on end: head, mane, legs and tail.		→ 馬
fish A fish with head, scaly body, fins and tail.		→ 魚
field A field divided into plots by paths or ditches.		→ 田
mouth An open mouth; it later became a simple square.		→ 口
woman A woman kneeling with her arms crossed in front.		→ 女

Why is there no Chinese alphabet?

An alphabet uses a few dozen letters, each standing for a sound. Chinese has no alphabet. Each character stands for a word or part of a word, one syllable long, and many characters also include a part that hints at the sound. That is why a reader needs to know thousands of characters.

◆ MATCH THE CHARACTERS ◆

Cover the chart. Write the letter of each character's meaning in its box, then check with the chart.

1	2	3	4	5	6
水	山	魚	女	田	馬
Letter ☐	Letter ☐	Letter ☐	Letter ☐	Letter ☐	Letter ☐

A. woman
B. field
C. water
D. mountain
E. fish
F. horse