

Once upon a time, it meant a sacrifice for the gods, but now, 赛 (sài) is all about challenging ourselves to be the best we can be. This character appears whenever there's a contest: a football match (足球赛 zúqiú sài), a cycling contest (自行车赛 zìxíngchē sài), or even a debate (辩论赛 biànlùn sài).

赛 is a pictophonetic character (形声字 xíngshēngzì). The top part borrows from 塞 (sài, fill in) for pronunciation. The lower part, 贝 (bèi), represents a seashell. You might be asking yourself what a seashell has to do with anything, but judging from scripts dating back over 2,000 years, the lower part is actually two hands holding a piece of seashell—an object of great value to the inland ancients. In order to show respect to the gods, they would offer seashells as sacrifices to the gods. The original meaning is one of religious piety; however, this usage has largely died off in modern day, only preserved in words that refer to rituals and offerings, such as 祭赛 (jì sài), 赛神 (sài shén), and 赛社 (sài shè).

Roughly 1,500 years ago, in the *Book of Wei* (《魏书》 wèishū, a historical writing recording the Northern Wei and Eastern Wei Dynasty from 386 to 550), the first case of 赛 used to mean contest was spotted. Some suspect this comes from the fact that—when families put up sacrifices, such as geese or pigs—they tended to compare sizes for bragging rights and social status. Other traditional contests

A symbol to make you sweat

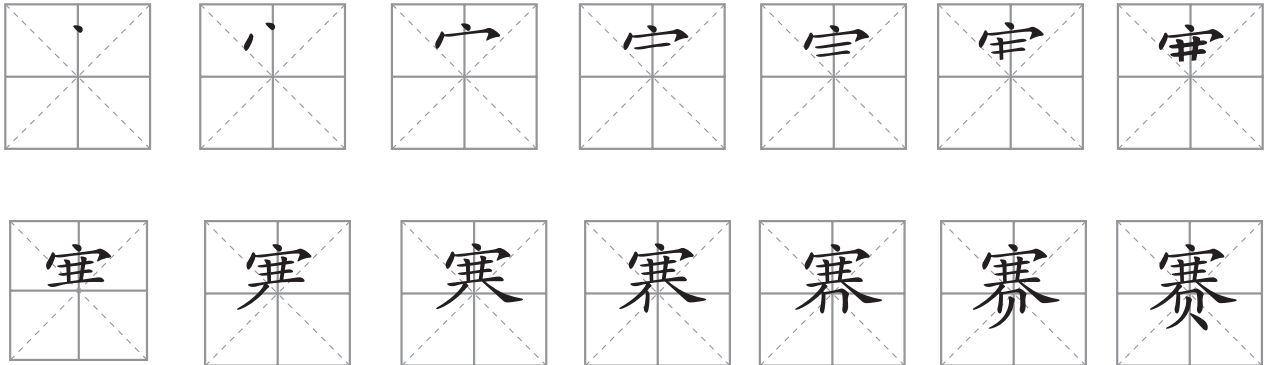
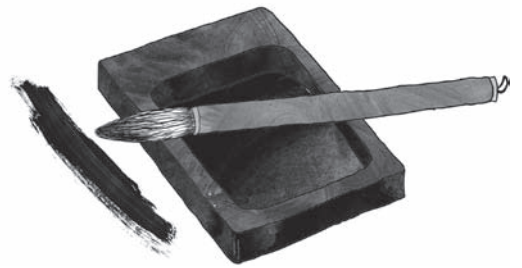
中国人的竞争意识无所不在，
即使是在两千年前祭神的时候

also include poetry contests, or 赛诗 (sài shī), during the Dragon Boat Festival and lantern contests, or 赛花灯 (sàihuā dēng), during the Lantern Festival.

The words 竞赛 (jìng sài) or 比赛 (bǐ sài) mean competition. The two characters 竞 and 比 have interestingly similar origins that complete the meaning of 赛. Both of those characters appeared over 3,000 years ago on the oracle bones in the form of two people standing

side by side (the traditional form for 竞 being 競). The difference is in the identities of the people involved. In 比, the two are a couple, which originally meant “close and intimate”. For 竞, it’s a fight to the death. The pictograph indicates that the people depicted in 竞 wear shackles, and much like the times of ancient Rome, fights between prisoners were a favorite pastime of the Chinese ancients.

Today, 赛 is mainly associated with



SEAL SCRIPT



CLERICAL SCRIPT



CURSIVE SCRIPT



REGULAR SCRIPT

sports. A race is 赛跑 (sàipǎo), a car race is 赛车 (sàichē), and a horse race is, by parity of reason, 赛马 (sàimǎ). For competition related terms and phrases, you're never wrong throwing in more 赛. Preliminary competition is 初赛 (chūshài), quarter-final is 复赛 (fùshài), and final is 决赛 (juéshài). A championship or tournament is 锦标赛 (jīnbiāoshài), literally "a competition for a brocade flag", because grabbing the flag used to be the sign of winning dragon boat races. The same prefix is

true for venue, area, and time: playing field is 赛场 (sàichǎng), division is 赛区 (sàiqū), and season is 赛季 (sàijì).

Besides being the building blocks for sports words, 赛 alone can be used as a comparative or quantitative word. For instance, 这里的风光赛江南 (zhè lǐ de fēngguāng sài jiāngnán), means "the view here is better than south of the Yangtze River"; or 这些姑娘干活儿赛过小伙子 (zhèxiē gūniang gàn huór sàiguò xiǎohuǒzǐ), which means "these ladies got the job done better than the

men". If you are having an extremely good time, you can describe it as 赛神仙 (sài shénxiān), or "merrier than the immortals".

There's also a particularly famous case of clever translation worth mentioning. Subway, the American sandwich shop, picked 赛 as a part of their Chinese brand name 赛百味 (sàibǎiwèi), which not only resembles its English pronunciation but means "better than many other flavors". - LAO HUANG (黄伟嘉), TRANSLATED BY LIU JUE (刘珏)