

The Practicability of Adopting Standard Chinese Characters in Hong Kong

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Abstract

As the outcome of the reform of Chinese characters in China during the 1950s, the system of Standard (Simplified) Chinese characters has established its international status and is one of the official languages of the United Nations. However, the conventional use of Traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong has never been affected, not even after the return of sovereignty to China in 1997. While China has had the vision of unifying written Chinese, the apparent direction is not toward resuming the use of Traditional Chinese characters. As the contacts of people between China and Hong Kong get more frequent, will Hong Kong go after China adopting Standard Chinese characters in conventional use?

Ever since the colonial days, the use of the Chinese language in Hong Kong has been rather flexible; the government has made no attempt toward standardization. In the community, people's primary consideration is on the communicative function, whether the written texts are in the standard forms or just some popular forms is not much a concern. Whenever accuracy of a script is considered, the traditional form is the basis of judgment. This all-encompassing, practical attitude toward written scripts not only does no harm to the latter's communicative function, but also facilitates the passing down of cultural traditions.

This paper is an analysis of the future development of the use of Chinese characters in Hong Kong, in particular, the feasibility of adopting Standard Chinese characters.

I

Hanzi is a system of ideograms that encodes the Chinese language built on the representation of form, sound and meaning of matters and deeds. Over several thousand years, it has been playing important roles in noting down the life and thought of the Chinese people, in the passing down of culture and the recording of history. Only until the 19th century that some people regarded *Hanzi* as scripts difficult to remember and write, and hence a backward system which hindered the progress of China. This view evolved into the demand to reform *Hanzi*, and with less than ten years' research and preparation, a scheme of standardized Chinese characters was implemented in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s. The scheme was constructed primarily by simplifying the form of the traditional scripts. The scheme of simplified characters has now been in use for over half a decade. The number of users has been increasing. It is also one of the official languages in the United Nations. In a nutshell, the scheme of Standard Chinese characters has already developed into a dominant form of written Chinese. This dominant form, nevertheless, is not conventionally used in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, where the traditional Chinese characters are the regular form of Chinese texts.

Since the coming on stage of the "reform and opening up policy" in the 1970s, there were voices among the Chinese communities in the Greater China advocating the use of the same scripts in writing Chinese (*shū tóng wén*). Coming to the 1980s, the atmosphere of discussion on the theme is generally academic and open. Several mild proposals on how to achieve *shū tóng wén*, such as "writing in traditional scripts while recognizing the simplified scripts," "be it traditional or simplified [scripts], don't bother," received serious attention. On the other hand, scholars in the mainland also admitted that there were still defects in the Standard Chinese characters. Hence, there was no reason why the standard characters should override the traditional *hanzi* then. Whether or not to abolish Traditional Chinese characters stayed within the realm of academic discussion. However, the situation changed moving onto the 1990s, the study on "*shū tóng wén*" developed into the polemic between standard and traditional characters. The avocations for non-standard scripts were criticized; thus originally an academic subject was politicized.

In October 2000, PRC adopted the *Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* which provided the legal foundation of language use and biased the controversy in favor of the Standard Chinese characters. The law states that,

“The State popularises Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters.” (Article 3, Chapter 1)

“The standard spoken and written Chinese language shall be used in such a way as to be conducive to the upholding of state sovereignty and national dignity, to unification of the country and unity among all ethnic groups, and to socialist material progress and ethical progress.” (Article 5, Chapter 1)¹

The research and adoption of Simplified Chinese characters was unarguably a political task. The legislation in 2000 was a further step in this direction. It brought academic discourse into the political arena, and put the public's use of language under state regulation.² Since then, the discourse on “*shū tóng wén*” tended to be predominated by the Standard Chinese characters.

Even though the people of Hong Kong are able to continue using Traditional Chinese characters for the time being under the “one country, two systems” policy since the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997, it is clear that the direction of development would be that of *shū tóng wén* (writing with the same scripts) for Hong Kong and Mainland China, in which the simplified scripts will displace the traditional scripts.³

It would be unlikely for the people of Hong Kong to totally resist the Standard Chinese characters. Nevertheless, it would not be easy either to fully implement the standard scripts in Hong Kong. This is because the social context of Hong Kong and the people's inclination on language use are not ready for the change yet. What is most crucial is that people's knowledge about Standard Chinese characters are generally inadequate. The existing psychological barrier among the people of Hong Kong has discouraged them from acquiring more knowledge about the simplified scripts. They think the forms of the scripts do not look nice, and the scripts are alienated from ancient culture. Moreover, there are incurable defects in the scheme of

¹引自中国政府门户网站 www.gov.cn 2005年08月31日 Quoted from the government of PRC Government website on 24 March 2013.

http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_2803/200907/49851.html

²立法之後，中同國家語言及工作委員會於2001年開始商議編訂《規範漢字表》，作為規範漢字的依據。惟遲至2009年8月教育部才能推出《通用規範漢字表(意見徵求稿)》，過程漫長，猜想爭議不少。就目前所見，大部分建議反響極大，例如“木”字的豎筆是否帶鉤，也爭論不休。由此可見，規範並不容易，規管更是吃力不討好的工作。參見中國網

http://www.china.com.cn/culture/node_7074921.htm

³龔嘉鎮據王鐵琨說補充：“我國實行的是「一國兩制」，港、澳、臺地區現在主要使用的是繁體字。但是，今天研製《規範漢字表》，就要放跟明天全球實行通用漢字的「書同文」而為之作準備打基礎。”見《龔嘉鎮文字文化論文選》(成都：四川出版集團巴蜀書社，2008年)，頁40。以簡代繁的意圖非常明顯。

Standard Chinese characters which the people of Hong Kong find them unacceptable and problematic in using.

II

Hanzi is an ideographic language, the nature of which is completely different from those of the many phonetic languages used in the world. The meaning which a script signifies underlies the form or shape that the script is written. In other words, the representation of the meaning in the form of a script is the main principle in constructing scripts. When logograms denoting both meaning and sound were developed, scripts categorized as phono-semantic compounds form the major part of the set of scripts. The traditional *hanzi* with the meaning and sound of a script embedded in its form had then developed into a mature system of ideographic language with its sound theoretical foundation laid down in *liushu*.⁴ It is unnecessary for *hanzi* to go the phonetic language way. These are the conventional perspective of the people of Hong Kong.

Traditional Chinese characters are a means to record and construct Chinese culture. People get to know concrete matters and abstract ideas by accurately comprehend each and every script. Traditional Chinese characters have gone through several stages of evolution, and the style of scripts changes from the more pictorial oracle bone scripts and bronze inscriptions to the more abstract styles of seal scripts (*zhuan shu*), clerical scripts (*li shu*), running scripts (*xing shu*), regular scripts (*kai shu*), and cursive scripts (*cao shu*). The change in semantic structure is from simple to complex, whereas the strokes of a script change from complex to simple. The scripts became more or less stabilized towards the Eastern Han Dynasty. In the one thousand and eight hundred years after, there were no further styles developed nor any apparent change in the composition of each script. However, more scripts were created as necessitated by wider application. As time goes by, *hanzi* and the related art and craft have become an object of adoration and a cultural tradition of the Chinese, including the people of Hong Kong.⁵

It is a natural phenomenon for language to change over time, driven by its own vitality and adapting to the social context. However, subjecting language to change by

⁴ 自東漢許慎《說文解字》出現後，一般人都認同把傳統漢字分類為“六書”：象形、指事、會意、形聲、轉注、假借；前四者是造字法，後二者是用字法。

⁵ 清末時期，人們對漢字的崇拜達至頂峰：“國家之建造與成立，所以顯明之者，土地也，人民也，文字也……有土地然後有人民，有人民然後有文字，有文字然後有國。”見田北湖：《國定文字私議》，《國粹學報》1908年第47號，轉引自趙黎明《漢字革命》，北京：中國社會科學出版社(2010年版)，頁47。

political force would just diminish its vitality and could even cause damage to the system. After the establishment of PRC in 1949, the Communist government promoted revolutionary ideas which advocated overthrowing the social institutions of the old regime. It was against such political scenario that the reform of Simplified Chinese characters was known to the people in Hong Kong in the 1950s, who unavoidably would associate the reform with more drastic cultural and political movement. Therefore, the implementation of simplified characters in the mainland was never welcomed by the Chinese in Hong Kong. People's concern of more drastic cultural change was later confirmed in the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, in which cultural heritage and artifacts such as literary works were purged. Coming to the 1980s with China's opening up policy, even though the purge of cultural tradition stopped, and the second scheme of simplified Chinese characters which violated the principles of *liushu* was suspended, the resistance against simplified characters, however, had already psychologically rooted in the people of Hong Kong. This mindset changed little if at all even upon and after the return of Hong Kong to China.

Both the British Hong Kong Government before 1997 and the Hong Kong SAR Government now have never prohibited the use of Traditional Chinese characters, nor have they actively promoted the use of Standard Chinese characters. The government officials in charge of education never expressed their stand on the use of Chinese scripts, not even after the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. No measures on standardizing the use of Chinese characters have ever been taken in Hong Kong. The government was not active in the groundwork of Traditional Chinese characters either. There were only a few projects in the research and enhancement of the writing system. During the 80s, a Chinese Language Art lecturer of the College of Education under the Department of Education, Li Xueming and his colleagues compiled a "*List of the Forms of Frequently Used Characters.*" (original in Chinese: 常用字字形表) A committee comprising scholars from various institutes was also set up to audit the list. The committee, however, declared that they were not playing an authoritative role in defining what the correct forms of the Chinese characters should be, but was just an attempt to alleviate the burden of the many variants on primary school teachers. Then in 1990, a "Frequently used characters of the primary school" the Department of Education issued for teachers' reference a "*List of frequently used characters for primary schools*" in the appendix of the "*Syllabus of Chinese Language for primary school (first draft)*" (original in Chinese: 小學中國語文科課程綱要(初稿)), in which 2600 Traditional Chinese characters were included. The projects mentioned in this paragraph could be regarded as the only

few efforts representative of Hong Kong in standardizing Chinese characters.⁶

As the communication between Hong Kong and the mainland gets more frequent, the students of Hong Kong also be in contact with, or as in writing public examinations, even write simplified characters themselves. However, the status of affair is far from satisfactory and there are many errors and mistakes in their use.⁷ A “*Learning kit of simplified characters*” (original in Chinese: 簡化字學習套) accompanied with a self-learning software was issued by the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI) of the Education Department in 1996. This seemed to be an act encouraging the learning of simplified characters among students. However, it was stated in the direction for use of the kit that “the objective of the kit is to help students to *read* [*emphasis added*] simplified characters,”⁸ the target learners were students of the primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, where “Traditional Chinese characters is mainly used in the curriculum.”⁹ To individual students, the document stated, “positive and pragmatic attitude is: while being able to master Traditional Chinese characters, also attempt to read simplified characters.”¹⁰ Therefore, one can see that the learn kit is not so much as to promote the use of simplified characters; and interestingly and to the contrary, some schools made use of the conversion software to teach mainland immigrant students, who were used to Standard Chinese characters, to learn traditional characters. This, of course, was an unintended outcome then.

In 2007, CDI of Education Bureau built on the previous *List of frequently used characters for primary schools*, published another *List of characters and words for learning of primary school students* (original in Chinese: 香港小學學習字詞表), which appeared to be a further step for standardizing Traditional Chinese characters. Nevertheless, a list of simplified characters was added to the appendix of the booklet, which suggested an implicit objective to encourage the learning of simplified characters. Yet the forms of some of the simplified characters in the list did not follow the most up-to-date standard then, thus cannot be used as a reference for learning.

In the higher education arena, most institutes have incorporated the instruction of Standard Chinese characters in their language courses since the 1990s. However, the

⁶ 是節參考《維基百科·常用字字形表》：

<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%B8%B8%E7%94%A8%E5%AD%97%E5%AD%97%E5%BD%A2%E8%A1%A8#.E7.9B.B8.E9.97.9C.E6.9B.B8.E7.B1.8D>

⁷ 學生常犯的筆誤例子，可參見陳熾洪：《香港高校規範漢字教學管窺》，程學蘭、賴蘭香主編：《經濟全球化與高校中國語文教育的回應》（武漢：湖北人民出版社，2005年），頁343-344。

⁸ 課程發展處：《簡化字學習套》（香港：教育署課程發展處，1996年），頁1。

⁹ 同4，頁2。

¹⁰ 同4，頁37。

teaching and learning have been less than enthusiastic judging from the inadequate teaching hours and the fact that students do not have a sense of urgency in learning simplified characters.

III

As a matter of fact, the people of Hong Kong are seriously lacking the background knowledge about the Standard Chinese characters including some of the defects. A simple survey on 300 undergraduates in October 2012 that the author conducted during a language lesson found that less than 10% of the students were aware of the legislation regarding the use of Standard Chinese characters by the PRC government. Most would roughly know that Standard Chinese characters are derived by reducing and simplifying the strokes of traditional characters. Few would know that the initial objective of the language reform in the 1950s was to transform *hanzi* into a phonetic language, which was only given up when feasibility was challenged. Then the focus was turned to the simplifying character forms and the ‘merging’ of variant characters in order to reduce the number of characters in the subsequent reform actions. In other words, few people would attend to the means and ends of the language reform, nor would they understand the related reform measures and the problems encountered.

1. The Means and Ends of the *Hanzi* Reform

In fact the simplification of Chinese characters is not the goal of the reform of written language but just an agenda in the reform process. The ultimate goal was to phoneticize *hanzi*, that is, transforming the characters into a phonetic language like English and many other foreign languages.¹¹ Thus, simplification at most would only be regarded by the reformers as an end in the short-term, which is a compromise in face of limitations yet to be overcome. As such simplification was regarded as a temporary solution and hence will be scraped ultimately. Therefore the simplification project was taken lightly by the reformers. As a consequence, the outcome of the simplification project could hardly be of top quality and the product, Simplified Chinese characters would inevitably have much faults.

The simplification of Chinese character has to be a grand project. Yet the PRC government spent just one year, from the publishing of the draft scheme “*Chinese Character Simplification Scheme (Draft)*” in January 1955 to the adoption of the

¹¹ 魏建功《漢字發展史上的簡體字的地位》：“簡體字是文字改革的一個環節。”見丁西林等編：《漢字的整理和簡化》（北京：中華書局，1954），收入《語文彙編》第30輯，頁24。

finalized scheme in January 1956, in working through consultation, revision and implementation of the then newly invented writing system; and then together with the subsequent reform actions would be an attempt to complete a task that has not been attempted over a thousand years. Therefore, people would query if that would be too radical, or if the rationales were adequate for the action. The people of Hong Kong have never shown enthusiasm in using Simplified Chinese characters. In the same token, if the people of Hong Kong do not see the rationale for the change, or was not clear about the means and ends of the written language reform, how could they identify with the reform and why should they cooperate fully?

Problem with Variant Characters and Synthesis of New Character Forms:

The people of Hong Kong regard variant characters (e.g., “強 vs 强,” “跡 vs 迹,” “韻 vs 韵,” “杰 vs 傑”) as correct forms, which are commonly used without any confusion semantically. However, the standardized characters reform aims to eliminating the variant characters as a way of simplifying the character set. The policy is so rigid that there is no exception even if the variant characters were being used in people’s names or of well known personalities. In my experience teaching in the university, students challenged the measure, queried why characters with theoretically sound structure, being in use by people for a long time are abandoned. This reflected that people of Hong Kong do not accept this harsh measure.

Another simplifying measure that the people of Hong Kong can hardly understand is the the synthesis of new character forms.¹² In order to unify the hand-written character forms and that used in printed matters, the Chinese authority (a joint committee comprising Ministry of Culture, Language Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Language Reform Committee) issued the “*List of Chinese Character Forms for General Printing*” (original in Chinese: 印刷通用漢字字形表) in 1962. The list came to the public’s attention in 1986 when it was formally published. The conventional hand-written forms were eliminated (e.g. “花” is replaced by “花”; “角” replaced by “角”; “差” by “差”; the surname “吳” by “吴”). One can see that the changes are very little and subtle, but it is exactly these subtle changes that the people of Hong Kong find confusing and can not see why the change is needed.

Problem with Homophonic Substitution:

The reduction of scripts leads to the need of homophonic substitution, that is, the use of one script to replace several scripts which sounds the same. To do so, some original

¹²見《香港高校規範漢字教學管窺》，頁 346。

scripts' ideographic and phonetic functions are 'eliminated' together with the scripts themselves, e.g., in replacing 薑 (ginger) with 姜, the ideographic function eliminated; 摺 (to fold) with 折, phonetic function eliminated. Often times the simplification is to such an extent that all the logographic principles of Chinese character construction are ignored, e.g., replacing 葉 (leave) with 叶. Moreover homophonic substitution results in greater semantic confusion because the same characters may mean different things, e.g, 海里 may mean both 'nautical mile' and 'in the sea' whereas as written in traditional Chinese characters, they are different (in the sea, 海裏). Being used to the grammar of Traditional Chinese character, the people of Hong Kong considered it a mistake if one is not able to employ an appropriate character based on the textual context among several homophonic characters. Now the use of homophonic substituted characters forcing people to give up the sound ideographic logic (i.e., use the appropriate character based on the context) for a somewhat arbitrary symbol. There is obviously an irony and would be faced with psychological resistance to be overcome..

Problem with Modifying Cursive style (caoshu) to Form Regular Scripts (kaishu):

Some standard scripts formed by emulating cursive style are (inside the bracket are the respective traditional character and an English translation): 长(長, long), 东(東, east), 车(車, car), 书(書, book), 韦(韋, Wei-a family name), 风(風, wind), 凤(鳳, phoenix), 关(關, to close), 开(開, to open). Some of these simplified scripts have structures rarely found in Chinese characters, hence are disadvantageous to being written (e.g., 长), whereas others are very similar to one another, hence are disadvantageous to being recognized and distinguished from each other (e.g., 风 and 凤). The cursive style characteristically has more connected strokes; in contrast, the regular style has more disconnected strokes. It is precisely in this approach of simplification that the connected and disconnected strokes collectively make people confused (e.g., for “东” and “车,” the top component in cursive style, the bend stroke, is one continuous stroke in cursive style, but left-downward stroke at the top is usually written separate from the lower component “木” of the bottom component). Emulation of the cursive style in the 'regularized' simplified scripts also generated many new components which do not follow the *liushu* principles. These new components, even though their structures are always simple, are hard to identify and awkward to write. For instance, the component on the left hand side of both “师” and “帅” are the same, containing a long left-downward stroke; whereas in “临” and “坚”, their corresponding components both have two vertical strokes, one long and one short. These two slight different components are easily mixed up. On the other

hand “马” and “鸟” are awkward to write because the component at the top of each is a rare structure in Chinese characters.

Problem with Replacing Components of Characters by Symbols:

This refers to the use of very simple symbols to replace components of traditional characters. These symbols are composed of very few strokes, and usually perform no semantic or phonetic functions. Some of these symbols are by themselves a Chinese character, e.g., “又” (as in 邓), “丁” (as in 灯), also “一”, “才”, and “云”; whereas others are not. The latter are not even morphemes or phonemes, examples are symbols consist of two dots or three dots (but not functioning as radicals as they are in traditional characters, locating on the left side of a script), or an ‘X’ (as in 区). While the symbols do successfully reduce the complexity of traditional characters in such a way that less literate people can write with them; they are, however, hard to be anchored in memory. This is because the symbols are used rather arbitrarily and the replacements do not pertain to a pattern. For instance, 登 is replaced by 又 in 鄧 (邓), but by 丁 in 燈 (灯); also there is hardly any rationale that “X” but not 又 is used in 区, but vice versa in simplifying 樹 to 树. As such, the simplification has to be considered script by script and cannot be generalized into groups of scripts, thus standardization process is inefficient. As this process of script construction is applied to a large number of scripts, the only way for people to remember the scripts would be by rote memory in repeated use of specific scripts.

IV

Realistically speaking, it is impossible for the people of Hong Kong to totally reject Standard Chinese characters under the increasing influence of China. Within this decade, more and more mainlanders come to Hong Kong for a tour and Simplified Chinese characters appear in more and more places; the phenomenon, nevertheless, has aroused much discontent.¹³ As a matter of fact, Traditional Chinese characters play an important role in the pass-down of Chinese culture, and they are the media with which the ancient history, culture and the classics of China are recoded and passed down. Moreover, till today Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are still using traditional characters effectively and do not see any need for change. Therefore, unless it is carried out by force, say, by means of legislation, otherwise it would not be a easy task to implement Standard Chinese characters in Hong Kong, especially

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<http://www.search.ask.com/web?q=%E7%B0%A1%E9%AB%94%E5%AD%97%E5%91%8A%E7%A4%BA&o=10000027cr&tpr=2&gct=bar>

doing it in a hasty manner (as it was carried out in the 1950's in Mainland China).

If Standard Chinese characters are to be implemented in Hong Kong to whatever extent, the authority should understand that the difficulty in recognizing and writing of simplified scripts is but a technical matter. It can, of course, be overcome by drilling. What is most disturbing is the psychological resistance in people's mind. It would be better to win people's acceptance and understanding by convincing them of the meaning and benefit of a unified writing system to the country and people of greater China, rather than just emphasizing the direct instruction of the rules and patterns of standard scripts.

However, the most essential task is to solve the intrinsic problems of set of the Standard Chinese characters. This has to do with the review of the basic principles in the construction of the standard scripts. We have to strike a balance between the basic principles "be simple," "be conventional," and "be easy to write" on one hand, and the *liushu* rules on the other hand. Also pick out those scripts with controversial forms or constructed with inconsistent simplification methods. If these suggestions can be done, Standard Chinese characters would become more acceptable to them.

