

*Standard Chinese Characters and their Role
in Chinese Cultural Heritage*

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Abstract

Hanzi is a system of ideograms that encodes the Chinese language built on the integrated representation of form, sound and meaning of matters and deeds. Over several thousand years, it has been playing an important role for cultural heritage in establishing a record of the language, history and life of the Chinese people. Only until the 19th century that some people regarded Hanzi as scripts which is difficult to recognize, write, learn and memorize, hence is a backward writing system, which hindered the progress of China. Thus the demand to reform hanzi fermented gradually. Coming to the mid-1950s, with less than ten years' research and preparation, a scheme of standardized Chinese characters was implemented in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Then in October 2000, PRC adopted the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language which provided Standard Chinese characters the legal foundation of its irreplaceability; till now it has been utilized for over half a century. Standard Chinese characters are used by many people. The characters are composed of fewer strokes, thus faster and easier to write. While their communicative function is apparently not anything weaker than the traditional Chinese characters', however, the system of Standard Chinese characters has many intrinsic weaknesses that conflicted with traditional culture. The present paper will identify some of the defects in the system of Standard Chinese characters and examine from the cultural perspective how these might affect its otherwise important role in cultural heritage.

Keywords: Standard Chinese Characters, Traditional Chinese characters, cultural heritage

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Chinese characters are ideograms; they are symbols in a writing system to record thinking, consciousness and concepts. They keep an account of the Chinese history and culture of the past millenniums, and besides, their written forms also have great cultural significance. Chinese characters do not directly indicate their pronunciations, but they show the meaning by specific symbols and it is known as "showing the meaning through the written form". As to the structure of the written form, a Chinese character is made up of strokes and components (radicals) to form a whole symbol (which includes pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols), and express the meaning. According to the information obtained from induction and analyses, the ways of making the customarily used Chinese characters ("traditional characters" or "fantizi" (繁體字)) have their own features and development trend, which are known as "six principles" ("liushu", 六書). Four of the "six principles" are ways of making Chinese characters, namely, pictographs ("xiangxing", 象形), ideographs ("zhishi" (指事)), compound ideographs ("huiyi", 會意), and picto-phonetic compounds ("xingsheng", 形聲). The other two principles are regarded as the ways of using the characters, namely, phonetic loan characters ("jiajie", 假借) and "derivative cognates" ("zhuanzhu", 轉注). When people came to new objects or things, they will make new derivative characters on the basis of the six principles.

Since the establishment of the system of six principles and the stabilization of regular script (kaishu), people have some basis to rely upon when they have to coin new characters. In the history of recent two thousand years, this set of square-shaped characters based on regular script (kaishu) become the prevailing tool for written communication. They inherit and pass on the Chinese cultural heritage and are still the most frequently used regular written form for daily life. However, following the popular use of the "standard characters" ("simplified characters"), this set of "traditional characters" (or "fantizi") with more strokes are gradually losing their dominant position. The structures of "traditional characters" have a rich cultural heritage behind their written forms and manifest many special features, such as the properties of reproduction, condensation, psychological association, absorption, artistic quality, and unity. Every character has its own story and message and the new characters coined according to the "six principles" have the same characteristics. Even though people may not be familiar with some characters, they can still guess, on the basis of their structures and radicals, what these characters roughly mean. "Traditional Chinese characters" contain a system of complicated social information. In addition to their plentiful meanings, the traditional characters may also carry positive or negative connotations. For example, just for the death of a person, there are various characters to describe the situation, and the use of a different character conveys some different message: "beng" (崩) for the death of an emperor, "hong" (薨) for a feudal prince or lord, "shi" (逝) for an official, and "si" (死) for a commoner. "Traditional Chinese characters" have a high capacity to show their meanings. Each character looks like a picture itself and a glance at it may lead to psychological association. For example, the character "jia" (家, family) has a "house" (宀, a symbol representing the "roof") as its upper part, and some "wealth" (豕, pig, a symbol of wealth in the ancient China) as its lower part. It extends from family and material needs to necessities for daily life and gathering of family members, and forms a picture of a happy and harmonious family. The dreary language at once has got some

significance and a flavour of elegance. Besides, the Chinese characters are monosyllables and each of them is a morpheme and at the same time a syllable. Therefore they produce the properties of rhyme and tone, level and oblique tones, and verbal parallelism in the Chinese language, and these properties also lead to various plays on words, such as couplets, riddles and rhymes, and also different genres in classical literature, including poetry, ci (lyrics) and poetic proses ("fu", 賦). The variety of written forms and the beauty of their structures are unique to Chinese characters and bring about the creation of various styles of calligraphy exclusively found in the Chinese culture. The most distinctive feature of the "traditional Chinese characters" is that the message conveyed by the characters can break through the limit of space and time, so that it can be "preserved in different locations, and passed on to different periods".¹ Today when we read these lines in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*, 《詩經》): “關關雎鳩，在河之洲，窈窕淑女，君子好逑” (A pair of turtle doves are cooing on the sandbar of the river; here is a good fair lady whom the young man was after), we are no longer able to recite these characters with the pronunciations in the ancient time, but we are entirely able to understand what these lines mean. In the meanwhile, the Chinese people in different regions can still recite the poem according to their own dialects. The pronunciations of these characters differ in various dialects, but with the traditional Chinese characters as a bond, people still understand what these lines say. To sum up, it is obvious that "traditional Chinese characters" played an important part in unifying and fusing together the territories, ethnic groups and culture of China in history.

2

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the government enthusiastically carried out the reform of the writing system, with the aim to use the pinyin system and abolish the traditional square-shaped characters. However, the researches and trial implementation in the early 1950's showed that the plan was not feasible, therefore the government changed the plan and carried out the Chinese Character Simplification Scheme in which a large number of traditional complicated characters were changed into simplified ones. In 1964, the *List of Simplified Chinese Characters* was published and the characters in the list were to be the standard written characters for education and daily use. In 1986, the amended *List of Simplified Chinese Characters* was published. However, the government rushed in a very short time from the initiative of using simplified characters to the universal adoption of these characters, and thus there were many errors with them. Following the passing of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (《國家通用語言文字法》) and its implementation with effect from 1 January 2001, the simplified characters were formally named as “standard characters” and their legal status was established. In 2013 the *Table of General Standard Chinese Characters* 《通用規範漢字表》 was promulgated in alignment with the legislation, with the aim to promote the standard written forms of these characters and the use of them. But to date, controversy about the use of the “standard Chinese characters” has never ceased.

The “standard Chinese characters” still keep the strokes and lexical principles of the “traditional Chinese characters” and have proved that they are not unusable.

¹ See Zhang Pengpeng(2007), pp.3-5.

However, the Chinese government at that time was rushing into implementing the reform of the writing system and carry out the scheme for simplified characters in a hurry, so it promulgated the use of these characters by government directive. It did not extensively and seriously consult the academia, especially the linguists, nor did it consider circumspectly how to handle the oversights of the scheme and the impact of the promulgation. In the political atmosphere at that time, not to mention any opposition to simplified characters, the scholars who suggested any different ideas for the implementation of the scheme for simplified characters might be suppressed and criticized, or even labelled as Rightists. Therefore it can be said that the scheme for simplified characters was not a product of well-prepared work. The government did not consider any different opinions, let alone the Chinese characters' natural trend of long-running development. As a result, many shortcomings are found in this set of characters. The "standard characters" inevitably affect, in a negative way, the inheritance of the traditional Chinese culture.

After the 1980's, scholars began to be dubious about the effectiveness of the reform of Chinese characters and they dared to raise questions regarding the shortcomings of the simplified characters. Qiu Xigui first points out that simplified characters affect Chinese characters' semantic and phonetic functions. He raises the following queries in this regard:

1. The logographic and phonetic functions of traditional Picto-phonetic characters are damaged in simplified characters.
2. Traditional characters' semantic functions are impaired or weakened.
3. The number of basic radicals/components is unnecessarily increased.

He thinks that some simplified characters do not satisfactorily fulfill the semantic and phonetic functions; and some even completely destroy or at least weaken the phonetic components' function of showing the pronunciation in the traditional Picto-phonetic characters. He points out that the simplified characters create the problem that one single word may have several different pronunciations and thus cause confusion of meanings. He is also doubtful about the application of "homophonic substitution", i.e. to substitute a difficult character with its homophone with less strokes, in simplifying the traditional characters.²

As to the simplified characters' impact on the semantic function, Li Chuanxu gives a more direct and comprehensive description and criticism. He points out that the damage done to the traditional characters' semantic function can be seen from several aspects:

1. Simplification does not follow a regular pattern for generalization: a certain component is simplified in some characters but not simplified in others.
2. There is no uniformity in simplification: a certain component is simplified in one way in some characters but in another way in other characters.
3. Simplification is quite casual. Some characters' simplification neither complies with the major means used by the *List of Simplified Chinese Characters* (namely, simplification by generalization, change of the method of character coining, change of pictographic symbols, change of phonetic symbols, and using caoshu strokes in kaishu characters), nor follows the traditional principles of making

² See Qiu Xigui(2004), in Shi Dingguo ed. (2004), pp.35-40.

characters (namely, pictographs ("xiangxing"), ideographs ("zhishi"), compound ideographs ("huiyi"), and picto-phonetic compounds ("xingsheng").

In short, as regards the incorporation of the component parts of cursive script (caoshu, 草書) and generalization of components in simplified characters, damage and confusion are obvious. Cursive script (caoshu) originally has its etymological foundation and also its artistic heritage in calligraphy. It is rooted in the Chinese culture and not made up out of thin air. However, characters in cursive script have many strokes linked together, and if their curved strokes and zigzag lines are rigidly changed into straight strokes, and linked-up lines are separated so that the characters are simplified and popularized for use, then a lot of inconvenience will be caused and they may even become difficult to identify. For example, “長” (“chang”, long) is simplified as “长”. The structure of the simplified character is no doubt simple, and it has only four strokes. But its structure is often perplexing to beginners, mainly because its third stroke is a long vertical hooked one passing through the second stroke (i.e. the horizontal one) and ends with a hook to the right, which is quite uncommon. As a result, the character “长” is easily miswritten with five or six strokes.

Similarly, damage and confusion are also found in the simplified characters in which some components are substituted by symbols. Most symbols used in simplified characters are very simple, with only two to three strokes – even illiterates can easily write them out. Nevertheless, substitution by symbols is used so extensively and so frequently that the components’ basic semantic and phonetic functions are lost. These characters are simplified purely for sake of simplicity, and consequently damage is greater than gain in simplification. For instance, the symbol “又” (“you”) is used as the component of the simplified characters (those in brackets): “鄧” (邓), “艱” (艰), “難” (难), “歡” (欢), “勸” (劝), “雞” (鸡), “對” (对), “戲” (戏), “鳳” (凤), “僅” (仅), “漢” (汉). It replaces the original pictographic and phonetic symbols without building up a new relationship of pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols. The phonetic symbols in these characters all disappear.

The damage of pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols is done not only to individual characters but also to the whole system. The Chinese character system requires categorization: characters with the same radical are arranged to form one group. If a component is damaged, the characters in the whole system will be damaged as well. Based on this point, Li Chuanxu asserts that to enforce the use of simplified characters by mandatory measures will “sever the close link between the modern Chinese and the classical Chinese... and discard the rich cultural heritage inherent in traditional characters.” He cites the two characters “后” (“hou”, empress, queen) and “後” (“hou”, behind, later) as examples. These two characters have nothing to do each other, but they are simply regarded as one and the same character merely because they have the same pronunciation. Consequently, when traditional characters are used, some ridiculous errors may occur. For example, “慈禧太后” (Empress Dowager Cixi) is changed into “慈禧太後” (Cixi far behind), and “后羿射九日” (Hou Yi shot down nine suns) into “後羿射九日” (Later Yi shot down nine suns). Besides, "radical" is also an important concept for looking up Chinese characters in dictionaries. It is very obvious that the simplified "standard Chinese

characters" make a great impact on the radicals system because the radicals of some simplified characters are removed. For example, in the simplified characters (those in brackets being their traditional counterparts) “表” (錶), “电” (電), “巩” (鞏), “复” (複), “号” (號), “产” (產), “离” (離), “雨” (麗), “亲” (親), the original radicals which carry meanings to the characters are all cut away. The radicals in these characters are: 金 ("jin", metal), 雨 ("yu", rain), 革 ("ge", leather), 衣 ("yi", clothing), 虎 ("hu", tiger), 生 ("sheng", give birth to, grow), 隹 ("zhui", short-tailed bird), 鹿 ("lu", deer), 見 ("jian", see). The semantic function of these characters are undermined when their radicals are removed.³

3

A written language can record and also develop culture. The relationship between traditional characters and the Chinese culture is particularly close, because traditional characters' features in their construction and written form carry plentiful culture messages. In the long river of history, "traditional Chinese characters have been a tool for recording and developing culture for 2000 years. Once their written forms are changed, especially if the semantic function is damaged, difficulties will inevitably be caused to the succession to the traditional Chinese culture. Riddle and couplet are the typical games of Chinese characters in the cultural activities. Riddles are designed in various ways, such as combination of meanings, separation and recombination of characters, adding or cutting away components, combination of parts, inclusion relation, homophones and doggerel, which adequately embody the intelligence and wisdom of the Chinese. Couplets are written in a succinct language and neat patterns, with syllables arranged in symmetry, and level and oblique tones at regular intervals. They accentuate the beauty of Chinese characters which integrate the pictographic, phonetic and semantic elements in harmony. In addition, the traditional poetry and poetic prose of the Chinese literature express the feelings in a vigorous and dynamic style, with rich and varied diction. These works, accompanied by the cadence and rhythm, reveal the ancient men's profound wisdom and rich sentiments. They are all excellent cultural treasures. There is also the art of calligraphy for Chinese characters. With the integration and varied forms of lines and tones of ink, calligraphy shows the beauty of Chinese characters and the calligraphers' posture and mental outlook at the same time. Therefore it has great artistic merit and aesthetic value, and is also an immortal treasure from the Chinese tradition.

However, if Chinese characters are reduced from complex to simple, and their components, including pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols, are changed, then some of the riddles will become unintelligible, and the play with characters can no longer go on. Li Baiyao (565-648) recorded in the *Biography of Xu Zhicai* in *Beiqishu*:

(Zhicai,) making fun of Wang Xin's surname, said, "It becomes cheating when going with a word, turns mad when getting near a dog, becomes a horse when neck and feet are added, and turns into a goat when horns and tail are added." Then Lu Yuanming also ridiculed Zhicai, "Your surname shows that you are not included in the category

³In Shi Dingguo ed. *Studies on Simplified Characters* (《簡化字研究》) (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2004), pp.296-307.

of human being, and your name is a miswritten character. The character Zhi (之) should be correctly written as "fa" (乏, be short of)." Zhicai immediately replied, "Your surname becomes cruelty when death comes, and turns into empty on the hill; it becomes captive when you give birth to a male child, and a donkey if you keep a horse."⁴

Xu Zhicai was a very intelligent person. When he was an official, his colleagues and he made fun of each other when they got together. He once made fun of Wang Xin's surname. The jokes in the above dialogue are based on riddles, the changes of meaning cannot do without adding, cutting away, splitting up and combining the radicals and components of Chinese characters. Because of various reasons, "kuang" ("言王", a variant form of 誑, cheat), "kuang" (狂, mad), "ma" (馬, horse) and "yang" (羊, goat) are still related to the surname "Wang" (王), and "zhi" (之) becomes "fa" (乏, be short of) when a left-falling stroke is added on its top. However, now that "lu" (虜, captive) is simplified as "虏", and "lu" (驢, donkey) as "驴", the written forms and meanings of the riddles in the dialogue can no longer match each other. The surname "Lu" (盧) is already simplified as "卢" and it does not match the component on the right of the simplified character "lu" (驴) either. The riddles with characters do not work now.

Besides, according to *Qian's Private Records* (《錢氏私志》, *Qian Shi Si Zhi*) written by Qian Shizhao in the Song Dynasty, it is said that Wang Anshi also created several riddles:

目字加兩點，不得做貝字猜；貝字欠二點，不得做目字猜。

Two dots are added (加 "jia") to the character "mu" (目, eye), but it should not be taken to be "bei" (貝, shell-fish); The character "bei" (貝) is short of (欠 "qian") two dots, but it should not be taken to be "mu" (目). They are "he" (賀, celebrate, congratulate), and "zi" (資, money, capital). And there are four "kou" (口, mouth), all in square shape; and add the character "shi" (十, ten) to the middle of them. It should not be taken to be "tian" (田, field) or "qi" (器, utensil). It is "tu" (圖, picture).⁵

Since "he" (賀), "zi" (資) and "tu" (圖) are already simplified as “贺”, “资” and “图” respectively, such traditional riddles will become meaningless. Nowadays the creation of riddles can only stick to 會意法 (the analysis of the character's meaning) and character splitting (the splitting up of the character's structure). If the methods mentioned above are not applicable, the heritage and development of riddles will definitely negatively affected.

The damage done to couplets is more or less the same as that of riddles. Let us consider the example:

四口同圖，內口皆歸外口管；
五人共傘，小人全仗大人遮。

⁴See *Beiqishu* (《北齊書》) (1972) Vol. 33, pp.447.

⁵Quoted from Li Tusheng (2009), pp.105-106.

Four mouths are in the same picture,
the inner mouths are all subject to the control of the outer mouth;
Five persons are sharing an umbrella,
the little persons all rely on the big person for shelter.⁶

As the characters "tu" (圖) and "san" (傘) are simplified as “图” and “伞” respectively, the structure and the meanings of characters of the two lines in the couplet can no longer constitute a symmetrical relation as they previously did. The couplet become unbalanced. Below is another example:

或入園中，逐出老袁還我國；
余行道上，義無回首瞻前途。

Someone entered the garden,
expelled the old monkey and gave back us our nation;
I walked on the road,
could not bear to look back the past, and were forward looking.⁷

Now that "yuan" (園) and "guo" (國) are simplified as “园” and “国” respectively, the beauty of symmetry and the feeling of sadness about the destiny of the country expressed in the couplet are undermined. This shows that the heritage and development of couplet are affected to a certain extent by the simplification of Chinese characters.

In the aspect of calligraphy, the traditional characters are formed with graceful structures. Each of them has an elegant figure, and they are rich in variety when different characters are put together to form a piece of work. Thus the exquisite art of calligraphy is accomplished. However, since some of the simplified characters consists of few strokes, there seems to be too much blank space between characters and also lines. Furthermore, there are not many variations in the width and length of the simplified characters, and even when the characters are grouped to produce a whole piece, it still looks insipid and monotonous. Worse still, many simplified characters fail to show any symmetry and balance in their configuration, and so their forms do not look pleasing to the eye. For example, the simplified characters, such as “严” ("yan"), “厂” ("chang"), “队” ("dui"), “广” ("guang"), “产” ("chan"), “扩” ("kuo"), “泻” ("xie"), “坠” ("zhui"), “儿” ("er"), “习” ("xi") and “飞” ("fei"), are with unbalanced configuration and it is difficult to give their written forms a beauty of symmetry. For some other characters, like “岂” ("qi"), “丽” ("li"), “间” ("jian"), “军” ("jun"), “卫” ("wei"), “仓” ("cang"), “亿” ("yi"), “乡” ("xiang"), “当” ("dang") and “显” ("xian"), their form and structure are monotonous and uninteresting, and do not show any grace and beauty. Some simplified characters are based on the incorporation of some characters in cursive script (Caoshu) into regular script (kaishu), e.g. “为” ("wei"), “韦” ("wei"), “专” ("zhuan"), “马” ("ma"), “鸟” ("niao"), “买” ("mai"), “练” ("lian"), “尧” ("yao"), “书” ("shu") and “发” ("fa"). The strokes

⁶Quoted from Shen Xiaolong (2014), pp.269.

⁷Quoted from Xian Yu(2013).

of these characters lose the original smoothness and grace in cursive and semi-cursive scripts (行書, xingshu) and become rigid and unnatural. It is indeed difficult to write such characters, to say nothing of adding smoothness and beauty to them.⁸

In the cultural heritage, literary works, such as poetry and poetic prose, and historical relics are believed to have suffered the greatest impact. When China began to enforce the use of simplified characters in all aspects in the 1950's, the government did not attach much importance to the traditional culture and customs. During the Cultural Revolution from the 1960's to 1970's, the government even painstakingly eliminated the traditional heritage. Only when the reform and open policy was implemented in the late 1970's, the traditional culture was highly valued anew and had the opportunity of getting resurgent. But the cultural tradition had been injured for a long time and it had difficulty in recovering. In the early 1980's, an article entitled *Book of the Later Han Was not found in Peking University Library* was published in *People's Daily*, which caused a sensation to the academic circle. As a matter of fact, a professor wished to borrow the original edition of the *Book of the Later Han* (《後漢書》, *Houhanshu*) from the Peking University Library, but the title was in traditional characters, so the library staff member who could not read the title told the professor that there was not such a book in the library. This incident reflects the situation that the number of people in China who can read traditional characters has been hugely decreased. Obviously there is a gap in the succession to historical classics. Today the Chinese are no longer hostile to the traditional culture: many classics are in free circulation. But traditional characters in the writing system have already given place to simplified ones, therefore the number of people who can read or use "traditional characters" is getting smaller and many time-honoured classics have to be reprinted in simplified characters. In the process of replacing the traditional characters with the simplified ones, the simplified characters derived from "homophonic substitution" (i.e. to substitute a character with its homophone), bring about many serious errors. These errors are often found in printed media and texts on websites, and the problem is still going on today. Among a large number of examples, the most obvious ones are those inscriptions on horizontal boards of cultural buildings. For example, the inscription on the horizontal board in the Guozijian Street in Beijing should be “聖人鄰里” ("shengren linli", the sage's neighbourhood) but it is written as “聖人鄰裡” ("shengren linli", the sage's neighbour and inside of a garment). “里” ("li") means the place where people live together, and also alley or lane, whereas “裡” ("li") is a variant form of “裏” and it originally means the inside of a garment. It does not make any sense at all.

4

To sum up, a language cannot remain permanently unchanged. For thousands of years, the pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols of Chinese characters have been changing ceaselessly. In the past, facing the demand of a world of myriad things, Chinese characters' strokes, written forms and structures naturally underwent various changes - some complicated and some trivial. It is most obvious that the phonetic elements are in an upward trend to prevail over the system of ideograms. Nowadays the great majority of frequently used Chinese characters are "picto-

⁸See Chen Weide: *Written Language and Calligraphy* .

phonetic" ones, but on the whole, it is still very obvious that people "get the meaning by observing the character". The simplified characters promulgated in recent decades have been standardized. However, for the characters included in the *List of Simplified Characters*, it can be seen that their strokes are more symbolized and become various forms of line. Some components gradually deviate from the fundamental structure of "traditional Chinese characters" and their semantic function is impaired. Consequently, the cultural messages in these characters, and even the heritage of the traditional Chinese culture, are also affected. Therefore it is indeed reasonable to infer that "standard Chinese characters" make a negative impact on the heritage of the traditional culture. Fortunately, a certain amount of characters which have not yet been simplified are still in daily use. The structure of their components are still in compliance with the "six principles" of Chinese characters, and the messages in pictographic, phonetic and semantic symbols still partially survive. Hence the speed of losing the semantic function can be lowered, which also diminishes the negative impact on the cultural heritage.

Hopefully, Chinese characters can maintain their semantic feature. The Chinese government can squarely face the natural development trend of the Chinese language, proceed to review and amend those unreasonably simplified characters in the *List of Simplified Characters*, and the *List of Standard Chinese Characters*. It can even resume the use of some or all of the discarded traditional Chinese characters, and let Chinese characters go through a natural process of change and recover their strong vitality so that they can help inherit and develop the splendid traditional Chinese culture. It is believed that this is also the shared hope of those who cherish the traditional Chinese culture

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