

## The choice of traditional vs. simplified characters in US classrooms

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**Abstract:** Which form of Chinese characters should be taught in Chinese language classes: traditional or simplified? The results of a questionnaire distributed to sections at the University of Florida show the reasons for students' preferences for one or the other form. In view of the students' awareness that traditional characters are more beneficial to understanding Chinese culture, and of revaluations in China of the traditional form as a carrier of culture, the author maintains that the prevalent practice of teaching simplified characters in US classrooms should be modified. Various other linguistic and historical considerations contribute to this recommendation. Finally, the author offers some suggestions regarding methods of teaching.

**Key words:** traditional characters; simplified characters; cultural literacy; pedagogy

### 1. Why should we raise this controversy again?

There has been a continuing debate regarding the use of Chinese traditional vs. simplified characters in US schools. In recent years, the teaching of simplified characters has become more prevalent paralleling the economic development of mainland China. On the other hand, many teachers at the university level—perhaps especially those who specialize in pre-modern Chinese literature—insist that students learn traditional characters.

Through my experience teaching at an American university, I have come to realize the importance and complexity of this issue. First year college students learn the kind of characters that the teacher requires. In the second year, using only one kind of character becomes problematic due to the varying background of students: Some students have returned from study in mainland or Taiwan. Instructors are forced by circumstance to use separate textbooks. This situation is detrimental both to the student and to the teacher. Ideally, Chinese language teachers should come to a consensus on this question and decide how best to meet the needs of both students and teachers.

A second reason of this question that is important is that the debate has spread beyond disputes among mainland and become an international concern. As early as 1956, Some Chinese scholars had initially put forward objections and expressed the opinion that the use of simplified characters was detrimental to the preservation of traditional Chinese culture. After the reform and opening-up policy of China in the 1980s, contacts between mainland and Taiwan increased. The subsequent return of Hongkong and Macao to China, along with the expanded use of Chinese characters in Korea, Vietnam and other countries, sharpened the debate <sup>1</sup>.

In October, 2007, at the *Eighth Session of the International Chinese Character Seminar* held in Beijing, a proposal was made by the South Korean attendees to compile a *Comparative Research Dictionary* and the “standard characters” would primarily be traditional form. In 2008, twenty-one commissars of the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional characters are used in Hongkong and Macao. In addition, Chinese communities in Malaysia and Thailand use both traditional and simplified characters. Most of the local presses use both traditional and simplified characters.

People's Political Consultative Conference submitted a joint proposal entitled *Setting Traditional Character Education in Elementary Schools*, which suggested beginning the instruction of traditional characters in elementary school <sup>2</sup>.

Considering the recent concern in mainland China with writing as a carrier of culture, the attention of international scholars, and the dilemma faced by teachers of Chinese in US classrooms, we cannot ignore the Chinese character issue. Should we ponder how to make the two kinds of characters equal in status? Is it necessary to adopt an instructional approach of teaching both forms and if so, what particular and methods should be used?

I maintain that it is insufficient to limit discussion to theoretical arguments by politicians, teachers and scholars.

How about the situation of those who study Chinese as a second language? What do they think of traditional or simplified characters? What are the effects on their scholastic progress of studying one or the other form? We need answers to all of these questions.

## **2. A survey of American students learning and using Chinese characters**

### **2.1 The object of the survey**

In order to understand students' perspectives, I conducted a survey during Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 at the University of Florida. Responses to 55 questionnaires were returned. Among the informants, of whom none were Chinese heritage students <sup>3</sup>, 9 had studied Chinese for one year, 26 for two years, 13 for three years, 5 for four years and 2 for over five years. Among the 55 students, 30 used traditional characters and 25 used simplified characters.

### **2.2 A simple analysis of the survey data**

To ascertain students' opinions of the two forms of characters, and students' willingness to learn the other form, the survey included 8 questions.

#### (1) Why do you study Chinese? (Multiple choice)

20 students wanted to work in mainland China in the future, 24 wanted to do business with Chinese in the mainland, 19 wanted to do something related in the mainland, 3 planned to teach Chinese in the US, 5 wanted to be diplomats, 10 planned to research Chinese language and culture, 17 were curious, 3 thought it was interesting to study Chinese. Regarding the students' motivation to study Chinese, the data show that about 67% choose the first three items, indicating goals directly related to mainland China.

#### (2) Why would you choose to use traditional characters or simplified characters?

Among the 30 students who were using traditional characters, 16 students said it was because of a teacher's request, 19 made the choice personally, 1 student was influenced by his (her) parents, 4 students thought traditional characters are more useful. Among the 25 students who use simplified characters, 18 of them made the choice personally, 2 were influenced by parents, 16 thought simplified characters were more useful. Obviously, most students make the choice traditional characters or simplified characters by themselves. But in general, use of traditional characters is directly attributable to a teacher's request.

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<sup>2</sup> According to a report in the *South Metropolis Newspaper*, March 13, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The survey excludes Chinese heritage students in order to reflect truly the actual situation of Chinese study for learners outside of the Chinese cultural milieu.

(3) What advantages and shortcomings do you think traditional and simplified characters have?

Regarding the advantages of traditional characters, 22 students thought they were beneficial to comprehending Chinese culture, 27 thought they were more beautiful, 19 thought they were helpful in learning Chinese, 33 thought they were beneficial to reading traditional books. As to the shortcomings of traditional characters, 31 students thought they were difficult to write and remember, 40 thought there were few opportunities for their use in mainland China, 19 said they require more time to learn.

As for the advantages of simplified characters, 43 students thought they were used by more people, 39 thought they were beneficial to working in Mainland China, 28 thought they were easy to write and remember, 15 thought they were beneficial to quickly learn Chinese well. However, 32 students thought they were not beneficial when reading traditional texts, 30 thought they can not be used outside of the mainland, 15 thought they were disadvantageous when studying Chinese and Chinese culture.

(4) Do you want to switch to studying the other style of characters?

Among the 55 students, 30 identified themselves as users of traditional characters and 20 of them answered that they would persist in using this form. Their reasons included: being accustomed to using traditional characters, considering traditional characters to be more useful and so on. Among the 25 users of simplified characters, 23 students would continue the practice. They said they were accustomed to using simplified characters and they thought simplified characters are more useful.

(5) Can you read the style of characters that differ from the form with which you are most familiar?

Among the 30 traditional character users, 13 could read simplified characters, 16 could read some of them, 1 could not read simplified characters. Among the 25 simplified character users, 7 could read traditional characters, 17 could read some traditional characters, 1 could not read them at all.

(6) What kind of characters is more important to future study and work?

15 students said traditional characters are more important and 34 students thought simplified characters are more important. 6 students did not reply. Obviously, most students thought simplified characters are more important.

(7) Do you hope that in the future, mainland China will return to the use of traditional characters?

Among the 55 student respondents, 27 hoped that in the future mainland China will return to using traditional characters and 27 students gave a contrary reply. Almost all of the traditional character users hoped the Mainland would return to using traditional characters.

(8) Do you think that the Chinese program at this university should require the study of traditional characters?

21 of the 55 students thought that the university should have a requirement to study traditional characters. 26 gave a negative response and 8 thought that the university should have a requirement to study both styles of characters. But most of the respondents hoped to study only one kind of characters.

### **2.3 Contrast of grades between users of the two styles of characters.**

(1) Grades

The following is a list of average final general grades of 96 students in Chinese classes of 4 intermediate sections and 5 advanced sections for Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 <sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1).

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<sup>4</sup> Because the numbers of classes and students vary from semester to semester, the semester is taken as the time unit although I have tracked students' Chinese study for a year.

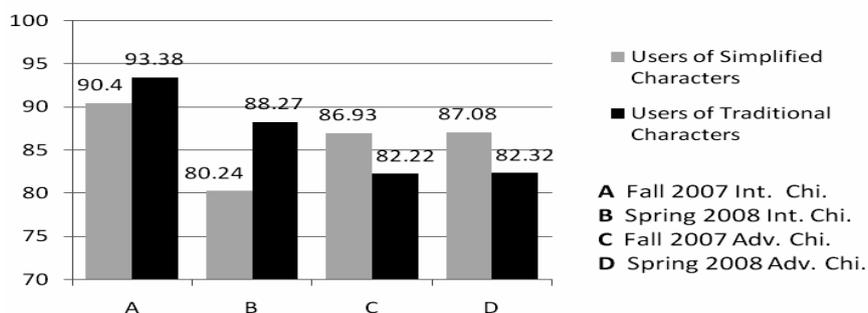


Figure 1 Comparison of grades

(2) Analysis of grade differences

The traditional character users' grades in Advanced Chinese sections are a little lower than those of the simplified character users. We believe the probable reason is that most of the simplified character users studied intermediate Chinese in study-abroad programs in mainland China. Their listening and speaking abilities were better than the others. In the 4 intermediate Chinese sections, the traditional-character users' grades are higher than these of simplified-character users. An important factor was that several simplified-character users were "problem students" whose very poor performance lowered the average grades.

2.4 Brief summary

We can conclude from the above analysis:

- (1) Simplified characters are attractive because they are used in mainland China. Most students think that simplified characters are more important because of their practical application;
- (2) Students choosing traditional characters attribute their choice directly to a teacher's request and their interest. Students choosing simplified characters attribute their choice to pragmatism;
- (3) Generally, students think that traditional characters are tied to Chinese culture and that studying traditional characters facilitates understanding Chinese culture and history;
- (4) Once students are accustomed to using one kind of character, they feel it is very difficult to change. Their basic opinion toward styles of characters is influenced by their established habit of using a particular style. Therefore, almost all of the traditional character users hope that mainland China will return to using of traditional characters;
- (5) There are more students who use traditional characters can read simplified characters than students who use simplified characters can read traditional characters;
- (6) Choice of traditional versus simplified characters appears not to affect the level of success of studying Chinese.

3. Which kind of character is better: The traditional or the simplified?

Since, according to my survey data, there are few differences in the learners' perceived levels of difficulty, efficiency and the impact on learning between the users of two kinds of characters, it is difficult to come to a definite conclusion on which style of character is better. What other factors can bring us to a relatively firm conclusion?

We know that each mature style of characters has its own historical tradition, cultural value, scientific basis and social identity. Therefore, we may review traditional and simplified characters from these aspects without reference to individual taste, habit, and other subjective factors.

The first perspective is the historical tradition. Since inscription on animal bones and tortoise shells appeared in the Shang Dynasty, the written vocabulary of Chinese characters has developed through more than 3000 years and formed a character system which gives priority to the phonogram although it has both ideographic and phonographic components. After the appearance of Regular Script (Kaishu) during the Wei-Jin Period, the Chinese character system has not markedly changed. The Chinese written vocabulary has recorded several thousand years of Chinese national history and the achievements of Chinese civilization. Until now, traditional characters are universally used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and among overseas Chinese. Traditional characters continue to show an exuberant vitality.

Certainly, no style of character has remained unaltered since coming into being. For instance, the style of the Chinese character evolved from the bronze inscription to the running script. However, character transformation generally follows the order of nature and depends on its own internal unforced adjustment. In the 1950s, Chinese character reform was put forward in response to the demands of popularization of education. It was reasonable to a certain extent. But some decision-makers blindly assumed that the Chinese character's future was an inevitable evolution into alphabetic writing. Thus, they positioned themselves in support of phoneticism and took simplified Chinese characters to be the forerunner to a subsequent transition to alphabetic writing.

From the promulgation of simplified characters in 1956 to now, the history of simplified characters is much shorter than that of the traditional characters and, thus, its tradition is also frail. In this new century, China faces the recent surge in the development of science and technology, more widespread interaction with other nations and more frequent communication between the Mainland and Taiwan. Today the reality surrounding character usage has changed. Many flaws of simplified characters have been increasingly revealed. A call to examine carefully Chinese character reform and to restore partly the use of traditional characters is unceasing. This should be seen as a natural request for character adjustment that conforms to the logic of history.

A second perspective focuses on cultural traits. The written character is not only a record of language. A character system is, in effect, the cultural genetic code. Chinese characters follow six categories of methods of transmission of meaning. Many characters have abundant connotative meaning and reflect an accumulated legacy of cultural information. Several succinct examples of such characters follow: the character “亲” (close) includes the meaning of meeting frequently and thus connotes familiarity and mutual intimacy. “麵” (flour) tells us that flour comes from wheat. “尧” (Yao) is the earth-god. A common example is the character “爱” (love) which explains that only wholehearted love is real love. These are just a few of thousands of examples. Today we can still discover information of Chinese social, material, and spiritual life from numerous age-old characters. Unfortunately, many simplified characters have lost some symbolic, ideographic and pictographic-phonetic mark symbols. Simplified character users do not know who is “尧” (Yao), or where the bread flour comes from (面粉 flour), and love without sincerity is not real love (爱 love). The cultural implication of Chinese characters has been weakened greatly as a result of simplification.

Traditional characters are stable and have changed little over several millennia. Consequently, every educated person was able to read ancient books. Values of Chinese culture are preserved in traditional characters and are beneficial to subsequent generations. After simplification of the characters was carried out, the ability to read ancient books was lost. Consequently, all the magazines and books published before the mid-20th century became essentially inaccessible antiques. Simplification blocked the natural and beneficial transmission of Chinese culture.

Again, the Chinese characters impart a special cultural cohesive force. Traditional characters have continuously sustained the Chinese nation's self-identity through several millennia. Regardless of how many speakers of Chinese are separated in all parts of the world, Chinese characters can form a kind of spiritual homeland. Since the simplification of characters was carried out, the young generations' self-identity as Chinese and sense of ascription to their native culture has consequently declined.

A third perspective is the logical development of Chinese characters. A character's development and evolution always follow an internal and objective regularity. The majority of simplified characters show a reduction in the number of strokes, a change that facilitates learning but has destroyed some basic rules of traditional character system. The main problems occur in three aspects:

(1) Homophone borrowing: Simplified characters include many different words using the same character, so that the so-called the phenomenon of "one for many" occurs. For instance:

发(fā): 頭髮(hair), 发展(development);      历(lì): 历史(history), 年曆(calendar);  
后(hòu): 后来(later), 皇后(queen);      干(gān): 干戈(arms), 才干(ability), 乾淨(clean), 樹幹(trunk)

This kind of simplification has violated the discriminative rule of Chinese characters. It also causes difficulty in converting traditional characters from the corresponding simplified characters. Statistics have indicated that homophone replacement has led to the formation of approximately 106 groups of "one for many" characters<sup>5</sup>. These characters have been developed into a kind of mark that neither records sound nor expresses meaning accurately.

(2) Symbol substitution: For example, the mark "又" (yòu, again) has replaced the original different phonetic notations of characters 汉(Chinese), 邓(a surname), 凤(phoenix), 戏(drama), 雞(chicken), 对(right), 劝(persuade), 圣(saint), which have been changed into 汉(Chinese), 邓(a surname), 凤(phoenix), 戏(drama), 鸡(chicken), 对(right), 劝(persuade), 圣(saint). The original phonetic notations are different and their pronunciations are respectively different. All of them are rewritten into "又" (yòu, again). Consequently, now we do not know their original pronunciations. Although the strokes have been reduced, students have to remember the characters one by one when they study, without reference to the originally varying pronunciations indicated by varying phonetic notations.

(3) Confusion among radicals: In a group of characters that originally used the same radical, some characters were simplified but some were not simplified. For instance, in the group of characters 拥(cuddle), 壅(obstruct), 臃(overstaffed), 囿(stop up), 癰(ulcer), 饔(cook), 甕(jar), 蕪(tuft), only 拥(拥, cuddle), 癰(癰, ulcer), 甕(瓮, jar) were simplified. In the group of characters 还(return), 环(loop), 寰(extensive region), 鬟(bun of hair), only 还(还, return) and 环(环, loop) were simplified. This kind of simplification has violated the correspondence principle of simplification: the traditional style and simplified style must correspond mutually so that students can

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<sup>5</sup> LI Xiang-he. (1995). Discrimination of traditional form and simplified form of a Chinese character, standard form and variant form

rapidly know the character analogically.

The simplifications exemplified above not only have failed to strengthen the phonetic function of Chinese characters, but also have attenuated the original function of characters to show their meaning and source. This is disadvantageous to maintaining the Chinese characters' configuration and structural principles.

The fourth perspective is social identity. As soon as a character passes into circulation, there is inevitably a certain social norm to restrict its use. In Chinese history, the standardization of characters generally depended on a natural accommodation. For example, *Annotations of Chinese Characters (Shuo Wen Jie Zi)* written by XU Shen in the Han Dynasty was accepted by the masses because it reflected a natural adjustment of characters acceptable to society. Chinese traditional characters obtained stable social acceptance through a long-term natural adjustment and widespread use. In the mid-20th century, the stage of history required that character usage be adapted to popularization of education. Therefore, the readjustment and the new standardization of Chinese characters were understandable. However, a new contradiction has appeared in the 21st century. In mainland China, people yearn to understand the value of traditional culture again. Therefore, there is more focus on the question of the Chinese written characters. More and more publishing houses return to print books by using traditional characters. Numerous books and magazines by using both traditional and simplified characters are exchanged among mainland China, Taiwan, and Hongkong. Many transnational enterprises print their product instruction booklets using both kinds of characters. In such a situation, people require temporization and adjustment to the body of Chinese characters again. This is precisely an inevitable development in the social acceptability of particular forms of characters.

#### **4. Write traditional characters and read simplified characters or the reverse?**

The above analysis has focused upon traditional characters' cultural authority, implications, and upon its aesthetic value. However, traditional characters generally have more strokes. Simplification of characters reduced the number of strokes, but the principles applied lack rationality and consistency. Simplification also undermines the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. We hope that Chinese government will re-standardize Chinese characters in order to reduce the artificial burden to study and use.

I believe that the ideal means to carry out a standardization of characters is to organize experts to study earnestly the two kinds of characters and then to improve and optimize traditional characters which truly need simplification. Simultaneously the authorities will correct wrong-headed simplification. After that, the new standard characters can be used in formally written and printed writing, and simplified characters can still be used in daily handwriting. After one or two generations' adjustment, the new standard Chinese characters can be restored to wide acceptance.

However, we must face the reality of the people's usage of characters before we re-standardize Chinese characters: Simplified characters are still the legal characters form in mainland China. Facing this reality, there are only two options for Chinese teaching overseas. They are "write simplified characters and read traditional characters" versus "write traditional characters and read simplified characters".

I think that the latter is an ideal approach. It is not only advantage when learning Chinese; it is also helpful when adapting to different situations of character usage in the future. At present, the former is more popular because many students think that the simplified characters have more practical application and are easier to learn. In fact, it is relatively easier for a traditional character user to become a simplified character user. However, the

reverse is quite difficult. This should be made explicitly clear to the students from the beginning.

After we have accepted the principle of “write traditional characters and read simplified characters”, the next question is how to bring it into effect. The traditional pedagogical theory holds that the learner should proceed from easy to difficult. However, some research has shown that sometimes it is advantageous for language teaching to move from difficult to easy. An example is an experiment conducted by Eckman Bell and Nelson, who taught students to learn English relative clauses. They began instruction with the most difficult subordinate clauses; then they taught easier clauses. The researchers’ conclusion was that students who first studied difficult clauses (with more markers) could easily grasp the easy clauses (with few markers). The reason is the clauses with more markers subsume instances with fewer markers <sup>6</sup>.

We can find a similar situation in teaching Chinese: Students who have learned simplified characters feel it is difficult to study the equivalent traditional characters. On the other hand, students who have studied traditional characters can readily and easily learn simplified characters. My investigation shows that among the students who studied Chinese for more than two years, 43% can “write traditional characters and read simplified characters”, 28% can “write simplified characters and read traditional characters”. Thus it can be seen that the former is easier than the latter. This is because the strokes of traditional characters in the majority of cases already include the strokes of simplified characters. We may try the following concrete methods to teach students how to “write traditional characters and read simplified characters”:

First, teachers request strictly, especially in the beginners’ class, if teachers do not put forward unambiguous requirements, no matter whether “writing traditional characters and reading simplified characters” or the reverse, not all students will comply.

Second, it is important to motivate students to like traditional characters through developing their interest in calligraphy and in other cultural aspects. Evidence is that gradual promotion of an interest in culture and art is a good way to stimulate students’ interest in traditional characters.

Third, emphasizing the phonetic and ideographic aspects as well as sources to show the functions of traditional characters will promote students’ understanding of the structural principles of Chinese characters and enhance their ability for logical memorization.

Fourth, the instructor should introduce the experience of freely converting between traditional characters and simplified characters using computer input methods, in order to minimize students’ dread of traditional and simplified characters transformation.

(Edited by Nicole and Lily)

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<sup>6</sup> ZHU Yong-ping. (2004). Forecast of difficulty to study a second language and teaching strategy. *Language Teaching and Research*, 4.