8 CHINESE WRITING
TODAY

The Chinese script is so wonderfully well adapted to the linguistic condition of China that it is indispensa­ble; the day the Chinese discard it they will surrender the very foundation of their culture.
—Bernhard Karlgren (1929)

Will the Chinese one day write with an alphabet? Many people in this century have thought so. In an open letter written around 1919, Hu Shih, for one, expressed the belief that phonetic writing was inevitable. To him, the coming of the alphabet appeared so likely he was concerned that the old characters might be phased out with too much haste. Other intellectuals of the time, especially leftists like Lu Xun, were convinced that alphabetization was necessary for China’s survival; they looked forward hopefully to the day when Chinese would be completely Romanized.

The prospects for alphabetic writing soared with the victory of the Communists in 1949. The revolutionary ideal was then—and ostensibly remains today—the promotion of literacy through the abolition of characters and the substitution of some kind of alphabetic writing. Accordingly, on the eve of the Revolution, one supporter of the Latinization Movement ecstatically predicted that at long last China was about to be "liberated from the shackles of monosyllabic Chinese characters."

As soon as the new government consolidated power, script reform emerged as an important issue and discussions began. There were two concurrent approaches. The first approach was to design a new phonetic writing system; out of these plans eventually came the Pinyin system of spelling. The second approach to script reform was the simplification of characters, a measure originally represented as a supplementary expedient. Some of the more ardent advocates of Romanization objected to character simplification because they thought it would only divert attention from the main goal, which was the alphabet. But the argument that prevailed was that character simplification would not hinder but rather enhance phonetic writing. A reform of the characters would, it was explained, serve as a transition stage that would prepare people for the eventual changeover to an alphabetic system. Plans for both phonetic writing and character simplification thus began simultaneously.
In early 1950 it could be thought that the new Communist government was sincerely dedicated to a true revolution in letters. China seemed poised on the verge of what Turkey had experienced under the authoritarian reformer Kemal Ataturk. Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that even then most of the leaders of China were not committed to total change.

The turnaround in policy seems to have come in July of that year, when Mao Zedong gave instructions to begin the reform of the writing system with character simplification. After this point in time, the alphabet faded in importance. The Communists continued to pledge themselves to alphabetic writing, and in public pronouncements they reaffirmed that as the ultimate objective. Mao Zedong himself supported the plan. But while a phonetic writing system was held up as a distant ideal, character simplification became the practical task at hand. Within one year character lists had been drawn up, and by the next year—a two-volume dictionary of simplified characters had been compiled. In 1952 an official Committee on Language Reform was established and given character simplification as its most urgent mission. It began work immediately and by 1954 research and planning in this area were complete. In 1956 the first official list of simplified characters was published.

Plans for the alphabet, meanwhile, moved at a much slower pace. Phonetic writing was not the priority of the Committee on Language Reform, and because of the long-range nature of the objective, there tended to be more theoretical discussion than pragmatic planning. One of the major stumbling blocks was nationalism, and for the first few years the Latin alphabet came under repeated attacks as something too "foreign." Mao Zedong had in his 1950 directive suggested that phonetic writing should be based upon the shapes of Chinese characters, and this idea appealed to nationalistic sentiments. Other factions were in favor of using the Cyrillic alphabet. After long and arduous debates alternative schemes were rejected; Romanization was approved; and in 1958 the Pinyin system of spelling was finally adopted. But by this time the issue was of minor importance. The Roman alphabet was not intended to be the primary writing system of China, and support for the traditional characters had grown ever stronger and more public. Guo Moruo, once one of the strongest supporters of the Latinization Movement, gave a speech in 1955 praising the role the characters had played in China's cultural heritage. In this speech Guo touched briefly on the official goal of alphabetic writing, but only to make it clear that the goal lay at a very great distance in the future. For a long time to come, he said, the Chinese people would have to continue to depend upon their own traditional writing system for culture and education and communication. Other high-ranking officials expressed similar views. Complaints that the revolutionary ideal had been betrayed were too weak and too late. The Chinese would not discard their script after all.

In a definitive report given on 10 January, 1958, Zhou Enlai made known what the government's policy toward writing was to be. It was the most revealing pronouncement on language that has ever come out of modern China. Zhou began his speech by announcing that top priority in government planning would be given to character simplification. As for the role of the newly developed alphabetic script, Zhou said: "At the outset, we should make clear that the purpose of Pinyin Romanization is to indicate the pronunciation of Chinese characters and to spread the use of the standard vernacular; it is not to substitute a phonetic writing system for the Chinese characters." Zhou did not defend the characters; he did not need to. He simply stated that they would continue to be used. Then, near the end of his speech, he had this to say:

There is yet another question that troubles everyone; the question is, what is to become of the Chinese characters in the future? Historically, Chinese characters can never be eradicated; we are all agreed on this point. As for what will happen to Chinese characters in the future: Will they never again change? Should they change? Will the forms of the characters themselves change? Will they be replaced by phonetic writing? These are questions for which we shall be in no hurry to draw conclusions.

With these words Zhou shelved indefinitely all public debate on the future of Chinese characters. The issue was not one of the immediate tasks of writing reform, he said.

This 1958 report formalized the shift in emphasis of the reform program from alphabetic writing to character simplification. In his discussion Zhou Enlai gave this measure an air of legitimacy by describing the simplification of characters as a revolutionary action that had been opposed by "rightists." Just the opposite was true. No one had publicly criticized simplified characters because they were too radical; the main opposition had come from certain idealists on the Left who believed that priority should be given to phonetic writing. Character simplification was actually a reformist measure that fell short of the revolutionary ideal, and in effect it represented a victory for the more conservative factions.
Simplified Characters

The conscious distinction between simplified characters and complex characters is modern. In earlier centuries the important distinction for the writing of characters was between "vulgar characters" (sùzì) and "correct characters" (zhèngzì). The correct characters were the prescribed standard forms. If a graph was not one of these standard characters, it would be thought of as vulgar, no matter whether it was simple or complex in terms of its number of strokes. The terms "simplified characters" (jiàntìzì) and "complex characters" (fánìzì) themselves, so much a part of the modern Chinese vocabulary, are neologisms coined near the end of the nineteenth century.

The basic guide to simplified characters used in the PRC is the second, 1964 edition of Jiānhuàzì zōngbiāo (A Comprehensive List of Simplified Characters). This edition superseded the much shorter list of 1956. Altogether, in its several tables, the 1964 list contains some 2,238 simplified characters, about a third of the seven to eight thousand total characters required to write modern Chinese.

In the year following publication, over five million copies of this definitive list were printed and distributed around the country. Through this act the Committee on Language Reform intended not only to propagate the characters on the list, but also to bring simplification under some measure of control. New ways to write characters had proliferated with the suspension of old standards, and the committee had become concerned that unofficial variation was getting out of hand. In his 1958 report Zhou Enlai had fretted over this matter:

In society now there is some confusion in the use of simplified characters. Some people on their own arbitrarily create simplified characters, and no one but they themselves may be able to read them, which is bad. The random creation of simplified characters has to be properly controlled. How one writes characters in making notes or in personal correspondence does not concern anyone else; however, when we write announcements or notices for everyone else to read, we should observe a uniform standard. In printed and typewritten documents, particularly, the random use of simplified characters must stop.

The publication of the 1964 list was meant to clarify what the limits were.

These limits again became obscure, however, with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Character simplification had been represented all along as a kind of Marxist, proletarian process; as a conse-
Some archaic variants of characters that had fewer strokes than their modern equivalents were made standard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex form</th>
<th>Archaic simplified form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zhòng 'multitude'</td>
<td>众</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shā ‘kill’</td>
<td>杀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wàng ‘net’</td>
<td>网</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cōng ‘follow’</td>
<td>從</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even simplified characters unfamiliar to the majority of literate Chinese often had a solid philological basis. A considerable amount of historical research went into the compilation of the simplified character lists. Librettos for popular dramas, old prints of colloquial novels, shop account books, medical prescriptions, and other kinds of texts and manuscripts were known to contain a wealth of little-used or forgotten abbreviations, and the committee was given a mandate to collect these and examine them for suitability. A systematic study of “vulgar characters” had already been done under the Nationalists during the 1930s, and researchers of the 1950s built upon this extensive earlier work. The result was that some rather specialized relics were revitalized and brought into the mainstream. Examples of obscure forms treated in this way include the characters now used to write yin and yang.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex form</th>
<th>Simplified form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yin 'yin [the feminine principle in nature]'</td>
<td>陰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yáng 'yang [the masculine principle in nature]'</td>
<td>陽</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the complex right halves of the original characters were replaced, in the case of yin by the graph for ‘moon’ (月) to suggest the dark, the lesser, the feminine; and in the case of yang by ‘sun’ (日) to suggest the bright, the greater, the masculine. These two abbreviations were not in common use at the time of the Communist Revolution, but they were both found in the texts of colloquial novels dating from the fourteenth century.

The simplified characters that are genuinely new have usually been constructed by extending shorthand conventions. The easiest and most direct way to simplify was just to leave off parts of the original character. Here are a few examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex form</th>
<th>Simplified form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xi ‘practice’</td>
<td>习</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fēi ‘fly’</td>
<td>飞</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chāng ‘factory’</td>
<td>厂</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
validity, and here the reform measures produced some desirable results. Though graphically distinct from earliest times, "xi 'related,' xi 'to tie,' and xi 'system' are almost certainly etymologically related, and encouraging people to think of them as the same morpheme does away with much orthographic confusion.

Results of the Reforms

Character simplification is usually represented as progress in China’s drive toward modernization. Yet, fundamental questions about this kind of script reform remain. How has the use of simplified characters contributed to literacy in China? More people can presumably read and write now, but that is not necessarily because the writing system is easier to learn. The experience of Taiwan where the literacy rate approaches that of Japan and other developed countries, and where simplified characters are scrupulously avoided in print, shows that the old system can be taught and taught well. To a very large degree, it has simply been assumed that the wider use of simplified characters has simplified the learning process. Very little evidence has been properly documented.

The number of symbols that must be learned in China today is approximately the same as before the reform. The characters have not been—nor can they easily be—significantly restricted in number the way they have been in Japan, where obscure words are represented by a phonetic notation. Moreover, simplified characters have not completely replaced the corresponding complex characters. For certain purposes the full forms of the characters are still preferred; in a series of footnotes, the official list of simplified characters makes explicit provisions for some of the older characters in cases where there is believed to be the possibility of confusion of meaning. Moreover, the tendency to use complex characters has increased in this more conservative, post-Gang of Four era. Historical and classical documents, such as the dynastic histories, are now printed in the traditional way without simplified characters. Deluxe editions of Mao Zedong’s poetry are always written in classical style. Even in more ordinary printed materials a number of the old, complex characters may sometimes be seen.

For highly educated Chinese the language reform program does not represent a very significant change; one must still master both simplified characters and complex characters in order to be completely literate. The principal difference is the order in which the forms must be learned. In the old days the "correct" characters were studied first, in formal classes, and shorthand styles and abbreviations were learned either sub rosa or during the study of more advanced calligraphic styles. Now, lessons begin with the simpler forms, and many of the regular characters that they replaced are not seen until much later. Texts written in complex characters may sometimes be annoyingly slower going because of the reading habits formed earlier in life; but for the intellectual elite they are certainly readable.

For the less educated, however, the situation is different. Those people who spend the minimum number of years in school never see anything but simplified characters. To what extent have reform measures made their precious hours of formal training more effective? Has the amount of time spent memorizing characters been lowered appreciably? How much has the reduction in the number of strokes that make up the characters made them easier to recognize and remember? These are questions that have never been explored in any systematic way. The information that has come out of China has been almost completely anecdotal. Here are some examples of what Zhou Enlai said in his 1958 pronouncement on language reform to justify character simplification:

When one old primary-school teacher in Henan introduced the simplified characters to his students, he told them that from now on they would write the first character in féng shòu ‘good harvest’ in its simplified form—three horizontal strokes and one vertical stroke. The children were very happy, they clapped their hands and cheered. A worker in Tientsin said that he had been trying to learn the three characters for jīn ‘all, entirely,’ biàn ‘side, boundary,’ and bān ‘to do, handle, attend to’ for a long time but he could never remember them; when he could simplify them to [the new forms], he could remember them immediately…. When Comrade Li Fenglian sent a book of simplified characters to her brother, he was very happy and replied, “These new characters are much easier to learn,” and he scolded his sister for not having sent the book to him sooner.

The only real studies conducted before the reforms went into effect seem to have been statistical ones showing the average number of strokes saved by simplified characters in running texts. Fewer strokes make writing faster but not always easier to learn. The elements that recur in Chinese characters can be useful to the memory. The character for yán ‘speech’ consists of seven squarish strokes: 喪. As a full character it is considered simple enough and so there it has not been touched by the reform. But when this same graphic element is used as a
radical, as it is in a host of common characters, it has been simplified to two flowing calligraphic lines:  \( \text{shi} \) ‘food,’ which is represented by 食 and \( \text{jin} \) ‘metal,’ written 金属 and \( \text{金} \); and of a number of other graphs. A stroke saving that seems particularly counterproductive is the simplification of common characters but not graphically related ones that occur less frequently. A typical example is the character for the everyday word \( \text{rang} \) ‘let, allow,’ which has been simplified from 識 to 讓. Here the phonetic element 識, with seventeen strokes, has been abbreviated to something with only three strokes. But the same element appears in its full form in 閃 ‘pulp,’ 閃 \( \text{rang} \) ‘soil,’ 閃 \( \text{rang} \) ‘make up uproar,’ 閃 \( \text{nang} \) ‘bag,’ 閃 \( \text{rang} \) ‘snuffle,’ and a number of other characters. These complex characters do not occur frequently enough to affect the number of strokes in a text significantly, but by the same token they are that much harder to remember. If the phonetic element still appeared in its full form in ‘let, allow,’ the frequency of that common character would reinforce the memorization of the more obscure characters.

Equally deserving of attention are the mechanics of reading, which are different from the process of learning how to write characters. Some studies on the perception of Chinese characters have been conducted in Japan, but the results may or may not obtain for Chinese subjects. One finding that would seem to apply more or less universally is the discovery that eye movements for horizontal writing are smoother than those for vertical writing. The decision of the PRC to print texts in horizontal lines instead of the traditional vertical lines would therefore seem to be one that facilitates the reading process.

A simplification in the shapes of words does not necessarily increase legibility. Studies on the Roman alphabet indicate that just the opposite may be the case. Although differences in type style seem to have little effect on legibility, texts written in lower-case letters are read far more easily than texts printed all in capitals. This greater legibility is thought to be due to the variety ascending and descending lower-case letters give to word shapes as compared to the block outlines of capitals. For reading, it is not simplicity or complexity that is important, but rather relative confusionability. Lowercase \( c \) and \( e \), for example, are Roman letters that are easy to confuse. Are 謝 \( \text{ban} \) ‘do, handle’ and 為 \( \text{wei} \) ‘do, act’ more easily confused now that they are written \( \text{办} \) and \( \text{为} \)? What about \( \text{jiu} \) ‘be old’ and \( \text{gao} \) ‘return’—or is the context always foolproof? There is much that we do not know about how Chinese read.

Chinese characters have recently been the object of script reform in most of the countries of East Asia. The Vietnamese stopped writing with them altogether in the early part of the twentieth century, choosing instead to Romanize using the missionary-inspired quoc-ngu system. Chinese writing has also disappeared in North Korea, where the Korean alphabet has been in exclusive use since the end of World War II. In South Korea, the characters have fared somewhat better, and the old, “correct” forms are still being used there, mixed in with the native alphabet in newspapers, technical works, and specialized writings of various kinds. But their existence in South Korea is precarious. Energetic, nativist opponents continue to press for their abolition, and Ministry of Education policy changes with every shift of the political winds. As a result, education in Chinese characters is disorganized and spotty at best. In Japan, including the Ryukyus, reforms were instituted during the Allied occupation. The principal reform came in 1946, when the Japanese Cabinet and Ministry of Education promulgated a list of 1,850 characters restricting the number of characters in government and general public use. The document was entitled Tôyō kanji hyō (Table of Chinese characters to be used for the time being) in anticipation of more thoroughgoing reforms, but it was not superseded until 1981, when an expanded list of 1,945 characters was issued. This latter list is called the Jôyô kanji hyō (Table of Chinese characters for common use), showing that it was drawn up in a spirit quite unlike that of the earlier, “temporary” list. The Jôyô kanji also differ from the Tôyō kanji in that they are intended to serve as guidelines, not as absolute restrictions. Thus, it would seem that the future of Chinese characters has become more secure in Japan. Still, even in that conservative country important changes have taken place. A great many of the characters that appear on the Tôyō kanji and Jôyô kanji lists are simplified characters. Although these simplifications are almost invariably “vulgar” abbreviations that have been used in China and Japan for centuries, they rarely take the same form as the simplified characters that were adopted a few years later in China. The only countries where the general public still uses the traditional, “correct” Chinese characters on a daily basis are the peripheral Chinese communities of Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In China itself, the future of Chinese characters seems settled for now, further changes do not seem to be in the offing. Given the conservative nature of the present regime, it is unlikely that the government will institute many more simplifications. Nor can one reasonably expect a restoration of the complex characters, especially since the Nationalist government in Taiwan actively promotes itself as the champion of these
traditional forms. A small but vocal minority continues to advocate the wider use of Pinyin, and these reformers have recently joined forces with young computer specialists who believe that Romanization would smooth the development of modern technology. The arguments of this latter group are new and compelling and may yet make an impression on pragmatic leaders frustrated with trying to mechanize the cumbersome traditional writing system. Such an eventuality does not appear very likely, however, because the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people at all levels seem content with the present system. Yet, there are those both in China and in the West as well who believe that it is only a matter of time before the characters must give way to a simpler system of writing. If they are right, that day would bring easier access to literacy for China’s citizens, as well as increased internationalization of China’s culture. But, at the same time, these advantages would be at a cultural cost far higher than the present generation of Chinese would ever be willing to pay.