Exploration of Problems Encountered in Simplified Chinese Characters

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Abstract: The common norms of Chinese Characters used nowadays in the world are called Simplified Chinese Characters. It has a history of half a century. Basically these Simplified Chinese Characters are evolved by simplifying those Traditional Chinese Characters. Traditional Chinese Characters have complicated structure with many strokes. They have been simplified and used in the past dynasties. Nevertheless, these simplified characters are only used widely in the lower class folks and are not accepted by members of the Chinese aristocracy. When established, the People’s Republic of China was determined to reform the Chinese Characters and start promoting the simplified versions. In 1956, a policy on Simplified Chinese Characters was announced and by stages the simplified characters have been used up to now. However from the announcement of “Chinese Characters Simplification Scheme” 《漢字簡化方案》 in 1956 to the publication of “Simplified Chinese Characters Summary List” 《簡化字總表》 in 1964, the evolution period was very short and did not have adequate discussion. The implementation in such a hurry lacking sufficient discussion and thorough investigation definitely led to many serious problems. What problems we currently encountered in the simplified characters already existed once the revolution of Chinese Characters began.

1. Introduction

It has been half a century since the People’s Republic of China implemented the use of Simplified Chinese Characters in the mid 1950s. Being a ‘communication tool’ in the modern society, the Simplified Chinese Characters still retain more or less the strokes and structures of Traditional Chinese Characters; and the system is proven to be workable in practice. However, the system has considerable defects. This is due to the fact that the Chinese government was too hasty then in putting into practice the language reform and lacked adequate discussion, especially consulting with linguists about the scheme and its impact. Recently, much concern is aroused by the government’s act of steering language development by legislation. This paper will review the history of Chinese
character simplification, pointing out the erroneous viewpoints and actions, and further explore the future of Chinese characters.

2. Unreflective Adoption

People began to reflect on the apparent backwardness of Chinese culture at the turn end of Ching Dynasty. Consistent with the anti-tradition atmosphere of May Fourth Movement, people blamed Traditional Chinese Characters to be the primary factor of China’s backwardness and urged for reform. This fervent thought extended into the 1950s and became the rationale for the hasty reform shortly after the establishment of PRC.

The Chinese-script-as-backward perspective has derived a number of apparently valid arguments. Some contend that the ideographic nature of Chinese scripts are unscientific and cannot cope with word processing and modernization. Still much people think that the number of characters in traditional Chinese script is too many, and for each character, the strokes are too many as well as too complex. Therefore they are difficult to be recognized, remembered, written and used. If Chinese script were simplified in a systematic way, China would get rid of illiterates and as a result the quality of culture, education, art, learning and politics of a nation would be boosted up. China would then become strong.

Until the 1990s, the “Chinese-script-as-backward” perspective has basically been rejected by academia in Mainland, but the viewpoint of ‘Chinese-script-as-inefficient’ lingered on. The issue that Chinese characters are “difficult to be recognized, remembered, written and used” is more controversial. The debate beginning in the 1950s is still on-going today, with the opposing parties unable to convince each other. Practically speaking, illiteracy is a problem in education. However, whether or not educational goals can be achieved depends not only the ability to recognise the scripts, but also on many other factors such as time, finance, instructional materials, and the willingness to receive education. These factors may not in any way directly related to the issue of Chinese script.

3. False Assumptions

As a means to record speech, texts function on two levels, namely, personal and interpersonal. As personal record, texts may or may not be presented to the public. The recent advance in communication technology has led to more frequent language interaction among people, thus
amplified the social, communicative function of texts. In the old days, Chinese scripts were mainly used in the aristocracy, emphasizing personal and literary expression. The written system was so developed that it separated itself from the development of the spoken language. In the early 1950s, there was the perspective that speech precedes text, and texts should be subordinate to speech. This idea emphasized the social communicative function of texts and diminished the personal, literary function.

At that time, some academics suggested that being a tool of expression Chinese characters should serve the mass. Because the sound of a character is not represented in the written form, it would be difficult for people to be able to recognize the texts. The form and the phonetic sound were unconnected. It incurred difficulty in teaching and learning. In order to grasp the phonetic sound of the characters, the reform should go toward phonetic scripts. Based on this theory, the academics concluded the “evolution of script” characterized by the following:
1. From ideographic to phonetic;
2. From complex to simple;
3. a process with human intervention.

All the above characteristics violated the historically development of Chinese characters. Taking away some strokes would not help any phonetic transcription. These are false or unwarranted assumptions. The motive is to pave way for the development of phonetic scripts.

For the evolution of Chinese script that of the spoken language, each goes its own locus. They have different rules and patterns though they may mutually influence each other. It is hard to say which is leading which. The development in the past thousands of years reflected this. If it were forced to have spoken language leading the written scripts, it would only jeopardize the contributive role played by Chinese characters in art and literature. Chinese fine art and literature all depend on the vitality of Chinese characters.

Chinese characters have their uniqueness. Having a history of thousands of years, the structure of the characters is developed to carry ideographic as well as phonemic elements. They are able to stand the test of time to become a significant set of ideograms which incorporates the representation of form, meaning and sound.
4. Hasty Reform

Nowadays, the development of Simplified Chinese Characters is regarded as equivalent to the Chinese Character Reform. However, at the beginning, Chinese Character Reform did not mean simplifying the number of strokes. Its main purpose was to change the Traditional Chinese Characters into phonetic scripts similar to an alphabet writing system.

In 1953, the Central Government decided not to use ‘phonetic scripts based on the regular strokes of Chinese script. They tried to apply the Latin standard in phonetic transcription. Such a change slowed down the development of Chinese characters Reform. The reform by simplifying the number of strokes became a short-term goal and was conducted smoothly. However, the long-term goal of Chinese Character Reform is to have the characters changed completely to ‘phonetic scripts’.

The scheme of Simplified Chinese Characters is a serious matter. Today, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are still using the Traditional Chinese Characters. People do not find any difficulty in learning and applying those characters. However in Mainland, it took one year to amend the Simplification Scheme and then about 10 years to complete the implementation. One may wonder these 10 years of work can replace the evolution of Chinese characters in hundreds of years. Is this conducted in a hurry? The reasons behind are not sufficient.

In 1964, the implementation of Simplified Chinese Characters came to an end. The ‘Simplified Chinese Characters Summary List’ marked the rules and standard of the formation of characters. However, new characters were still created in a chaotic manner in the society.

5. Administration Oriented

At the very start, the scheme of script simplification is taken as a political mission. Lack of experiences and professional consultation, the reformers made many mistakes. When a policy was decided by the leader, the executive bodies had to try their best to adapt the situation in order to make it successful. The Characters Reform Committee that was responsible for the job only did those superficial works of reducing the number of characters and the number of strokes of a character.

In May 1957, a forum on Characters Reform was held. Opposition to the simplification scheme was first heard. This was a big consultation session with much discussion on the way forward. A lot of good suggestions were
raised. Unfortunately after the meeting, opposing ideas were suppressed. People giving alternative ideas were punished. After that, no similar meetings were held so far.

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6. Standardization needs legislation?
‘Standardization’ is a means to set rules and standard. It can be written or non-written. Creation of new characters from the folks can hardly be avoided. In 1977, the Chinese government decided to announce a new set of Simplified Chinese Characters in order to minimize the abuse of incorrectly created characters. However, what had been announced did not have clearly stipulated rules and pattern. Lack of legitimate support, the announce Scheme was abolished after half a year. Chaos occurred and the development of standardization lost its direction.

In December 1985, the State Council decided to rename the Chinese characters Reform committee as ‘National Language and Characters Working Committee’. Its work focused on updating the ‘Simplified Chinese Characters Summary List’. This marked the end of simplifying characters as a reform. However, by the end of1980s, the Traditional Chinese Characters fought back. The advantages of using Traditional Chinese Characters were widely acknowledged. Hence, it resulted in a professional quarrel between ‘Traditional’ and ‘Simplified’. Initially it was an academic debate. Later on the development became a criticism of ‘non-standardized characters’. Sometimes it was very exciting and ended up in a litigation. Finally in 1997, the ‘National Language and Characters Working Committee’ decided to legislate the law for ‘standardization’. After 4 years, in January 2001, the law starts working.
In general, the legislation is used to protect the citizens. Besides protecting the majority, it also protects the minority. On the other hand, legislation is used to prevent crimes. Characters themselves have no good or bad. They are evolved from the society naturally. Even though the characters are used chaotically, it is hard to say that a crime is committed. Now, this legislation is a bit high-handed. It coarsely ordered the changes to standardize the characters. This is the most violent act that has been seen since 1950s.

7. Conclusion
Looking back the history from 1950s to 1970s of 20th century, the reform of Chinese characters fluctuated here and there with no definite vision. The above article mentioned four shortcomings or defects: unreflective adoption; false assumptions; hasty reform, and administration oriented. All the quarrels and debates only ended in 1980s. In mid 1990s, the reformers bravely admitted the mistakes and started the reform in a more practical manner. Things began to settle down. However in1990s, this practicality style vanished gradually. The fourth shortcoming of administration-oriented leadership style became prominent. It was more authoritative in monitoring and control of the Chinese characters Reform. The result definitely harmed the historical culture and tradition as well as the development of language and characters. The truth is that Chinese characters have vitality. They must develop on their own according to their uniqueness. Any interruption to the development will hamper the Chinese characters as well as the Chinese culture.