

The Historical Significance of Chinese Character Simplification

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Abstract

Chinese characters are the scripts that the Chinese nation has used to record civilization since ancient times. From the original symbols carved on stone flakes and pottery to the more than 6,000 commonly used Chinese characters today with a history of over 3,000 years. The emergence of writing was needed for social life and has also changed with the development of society. Therefore, Chinese characters have undergone several important changes in history, which can be mainly summarized as oracle bone script - seal script - clerical script - regular script - Song script. During this process, the main trend of Chinese characters has been simplification. Before the 20th century, the simplification of Chinese characters was mainly in the form of changes in shape and reduction of strokes, adapting to the need for rapid learning and writing of Chinese characters. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a movement for script reform in China. Intellectuals demanded to change Chinese characters to Latin script and created many schemes for this purpose. Although it was not successful, it also reflected the practical needs of that era. Finally, Chinese characters adopted the pinyin of Latin letters to solve the pronunciation problem. The simplification of Chinese characters also basically ended through two reforms after the founding of the People's Republic of China. In summary, the simplification of Chinese characters is beneficial. As a tool for recording Chinese civilization, it is unlikely that the role of Chinese characters can be replaced by other scripts.

Keywords: Chinese characters, simplification, script reform, Pinyin, change

1. Introduction

Chinese characters, also known as Chinese script, Chinese words, or national characters, are widely used in the Chinese cultural circle. They belong to the logographic syllabary and were invented and improved by the ancient Huaxia¹ people. The exact history can be traced back to about 1300 BC during the Shang Dynasty's² oracle bone script. Chinese characters are one of

¹ Huaxia (华夏Huáxià) is the ancient name of China, and it is also another name of the Han people.

² 商朝, Shang Dynasty, B.C. 1600-1646. It is the second dynasty in Chinese history, also known as Yin Shang, and the first dynasty in China with direct written records of the same period.

the oldest continuously used major scripts in the world and the only one of the ancient script systems that has been passed down to this day. Throughout Chinese history, Chinese characters have been the main official script.

Chinese characters are among the oldest scripts in the world. In addition, there are two other oldest scripts in the world. One is the cuneiform script created by the Sumerians living in the two-river area³, which dates back 5,500 years, and the other is the hieroglyphics of Egypt, dating back about 4,100 years. Our Chinese characters, as can be seen from recent archaeological materials, can trace their history back to at least 3,300 years ago, and the lifespan of Chinese characters is the longest. We are still using them today, while hieroglyphics and cuneiform scripts are no longer in use (Qiu Xigui, 2006, p. 28).

Chinese characters have a distinct feature; they are independently created and developed scripts. Compared with the phonetic scripts of other ethnic groups, most of them are based on the scripts of other ethnic groups. Chinese characters, on the other hand, are pictographic scripts developed from drawings, and the script system of Chinese characters is based on hieroglyphs (pictographic scripts).⁴

The origin of Chinese characters was the primitive drawing, which ancient people used in their lives to express themselves and to record things and events. Slowly, the primitive drawings turned into “ideographic symbols”.

Around the 14th century BC, the “ideographic symbols” evolved into a more standardized “oracle bone script”. This is considered the first form of “Chinese characters”. The characters carved on animal bones and turtle shells, discovered in the Yin Ruins, are considered the direct ancestors of “modern Chinese characters”, which can prove the continuity of Chinese civilization. For thousands of years, people in the Middle East could not decipher their ancestors’ hieroglyphics. Only modern Chinese people can read some of the “oracle bone script” from the Shang Dynasty (BC 1600-BC 1046). These characters on the turtle shells were originally used for divination. Ancient people believed that by carving questions about diseases, dreams, hunting, weather, etc., on turtle shells and animal bones, and then roasting them with fire, diviners could judge the auspiciousness of the matters by observing the shapes and directions of the cracks. This is the “oracle bone script” - the ancestor of modern Chinese

³ Two rivers: refers to the Euphrates River and the Tigris River. The geographical location summarizes parts of present-day Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Kuwait.

⁴ Hieroglyphs evolved from pictorial characters and are one of the oldest fonts. Unlike phonetic characters, hieroglyphics are ideographic characters.

characters. To date, more than 5,000 “oracle bone scripts” have been discovered, and more than a thousand can be deciphered.

In the early stages of writing, users were mostly religious figures serving the royal family. It is precisely because the text was controlled by them that the text was also mystified. Therefore, in the creation myths of many ethnic groups, including the Han, the creators of text are attributed to gods (Liang Xiaoqiang, 2015). For example, the creator of Chinese characters is a man named Cangjie with four eyes according to the historical records made by Daoism religion. As recorded in many classic books Cangjie was the historian who coined Chinese characters during the Huangdi⁵ period. It is said that when he created characters, it did not rain but fell millet from heaven, and ghosts and gods wept incessantly.

During the Western Zhou⁶ period, bronze ware was widely used. Bronze ware is a vessel made of copper and tin alloy, mainly including musical instruments, weapons, tableware, wine utensils, and sacrificial supplies, etc. The characters carved on bronze bells and tripods are called “large seal script”大篆.

2. The Evolution of Chinese Characters after the Qin Dynasty⁷

In the Qin Dynasty, Emperor Qin Shi Huang unified the different scripts used by other vassal states. He collected and organized the existing texts and then beautified and processed them. This unified script is called - “small seal script”小篆, also known as “Qin seal script”秦篆. The script at this time almost no longer had traces of pictographic scripts.

The “small seal script” of the Qin Dynasty period was too standardized and slow to write, so many simplified fonts appeared in the folk. This shows that the simplification of Chinese characters had already begun in this era and was spontaneously carried out by the people. This simplification was in line with the needs of production and life development and was a manifestation of social progress. The characteristics of this font are to change the roundness of “small seal script” to square, change the curves of “small seal script” to straight, and divide some radicals, which is called - “Qin clerical script”秦隶.

⁵ 黄帝Huangdi, leader of ancient Chinese tribal alliances, Huangdi is revered as the “first ancestor of humanities”.

⁶ 西周Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC to 771 BC), a dynasty in Chinese history.

⁷ 秦朝The Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 207 BC) was the first unified feudal dynasty in Chinese history. This first emperor of Qin Dynasty is called as Qin Shihuang秦始皇.

By the Han Dynasty⁸, clerical script was very popular, and the clerical script popular in the Western Han period was called - “Han clerical script”汉隶.

While “Han clerical script” was popular in the Han Dynasty, the new calligraphy style “regular script”楷体 was in its infancy. By the 4th to 6th centuries, it had become very popular, and the structure of Chinese characters was basically fixed at this time. Later generations changed the name to “regular script” because this font was used as a model for learning calligraphy.

During the Tang Dynasty, “regular script” was particularly popular, and calligraphers such as Yan Zhenqing, Liu Gongquan, and Ouyang Xun were the best of the time, and their calligraphy works are still studied as examples today.

In the Song Dynasty⁹, one of the four great inventions of ancient China, woodblock printing and movable type printing, were invented, and the “Song script”宋体 was also born. It first appeared in the Northern Song Dynasty and was derived from regular script. There are fat and thin types, but regardless of fat or thin, they are all thin horizontal and thick vertical, square and upright. It appears simple and dignified. Song script is still one of the most widely used fonts in Chinese text printing to this day (Zhao Liwei, 2004).

3. The emergence of cursive script and its contribution to the simplification of Chinese characters

There is another kind of Chinese writing that originated among the people - cursive script草, which later became a unique calligraphy art. Cursive script - the real beginning of cursive script was found in the early Han Dynasty. The influence of cursive script on the simplification of Chinese characters is in line with the influence of clerical script. At that time, in order to meet the need for quick writing and the creation of calligraphers to express their feelings and express their emotions at the tip of the writing brush, a flowing, smooth, and continuous, with great rhythm and artistic appeal, was created - “cursive script”. With the development of society, the use of Chinese characters has become more and more widespread, and the frequency of use has gradually increased, putting higher demands on the writing speed of Chinese characters. The emergence of cursive script greatly accelerated the writing speed of Chinese characters, and at the same time, it also promoted the simplification of Chinese characters. The basic

⁸ 汉朝The Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220 BC) was a unified dynasty after the Qin Dynasty. It was divided into two periods: the Western Han Dynasty and the Eastern Han Dynasty

⁹ 宋朝The Song Dynasty (960-1279) was a dynasty in the Central Plains, divided into two stages: the Northern Song (960-1127) and the Southern Song (1127-1279).

writing methods of these cursive scripts mainly reflect the simplification of Chinese character radicals, components, or parts of Chinese characters. In summary, there are mainly the following aspects:

1) Simplify characters through the simplification of radicals

Due to the development of Chinese characters and the increase in compound characters, the writing method of cursive script has changed the writing method of some single characters, so that compound characters with these single characters as radicals are simplified. Among them, there are those simplified through the form of the radical, and there are those simplified through the sound radical. For example:

① (speech): argument (論); say (說); review (評); poetry (詩); debate (辯)

② vehicle (車): connect (連); sedan (輦); warehouse (庫); turn (轉); light (輕)

③ long (長): Zhang (張); ghost (傴); account (賬); swollen (脹); tent (帳)

2) Simplify Chinese characters by retaining features or outlines

In the writing process of cursive script, often due to the requirements of writing speed, the font of Chinese characters is reduced, following the characteristics of this cursive script writing method, removing the complex parts of Chinese characters, and only retaining the features or outlines of Chinese characters, is another important method for simplifying Chinese characters. For example:

1) Retaining the features of Chinese characters: fly (飛); wife (婦); sound (聲); number (號)

2) Retaining the outline of Chinese characters: seize (奪); real (實); wide (廣)

3) Simplify Chinese characters by replacing with simple symbols

This method is similar to the second method. It also uses the writing form of cursive script to simplify the complex parts of Chinese characters. The difference is that the second method uses a part of the Chinese character font itself to achieve the simplification of Chinese characters, while this method uses some simple symbols to replace the complex parts of Chinese characters, making Chinese characters easy to write and achieve the purpose of simplification. For example:

ceremony (裡); Luo (羅); reach (達); study (學); tree (樹)

4) Simplify Chinese characters through cursive script regularization

The cursive script has the characteristics of fast writing and interlocking strokes. Many cursive script fonts are composed of a few strokes or even one stroke, and the regular script of cursive script is one of the most effective methods to simplify Chinese characters. For example:

music (樂); soup (湯); picture (圖); China (華); east (東) (Hu Ping, Yan Shuang, 2019, 17).

4. Chinese Character Reform at the End of the Qing Dynasty and the Early Republic of China

4.1. Background of the New Culture Movement

At the end of the Qing Dynasty¹⁰, the Qing government was corrupt and unambitious, weak both internally and externally. Intellectuals in the folk and the government strongly demanded to learn advanced technology and systems from the West and to carry out reforms in thought, technology, national defense, culture, and other aspects. Under this background, the famous “Wuxu Reform” 戊戌变法¹¹ took place. The New Culture Movement 新文化运动 that began in 1915 during the Republic of China can be considered a continuation of this reformist thought, but it mainly focused on moral and cultural reforms. This reform was driven by both internal needs and external factors. In addition to the internal reform needs of Chinese society, the external factors mainly included the influence of Japan’s “Chinese character abolition movement” and the Soviet Union’s “Chinese character Latinization movement”. Both of these movements to some extent promoted the reform of Chinese characters.

After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, the Qing government was defeated by Japan. The strong demand of the Chinese intellectual community to learn from Japan was urgent. Japan’s rapid rise to a world power after the Meiji Restoration¹² exposed the truth of China’s

¹⁰ The Qing Dynasty (1616 or 1644-1911) was the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history.

¹¹ The Reform Movement of 1898, also known as the Hundred Days Reform, was a reform movement in the late Qing Dynasty in which reformers represented by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao advocated learning from the West, advocating science and culture, reforming the political and educational systems, and promoting agriculture, industry, and agriculture, commerce, etc. bourgeois reform movement. The Reform Movement of 1898 was implemented on June 11, 1898.

¹² The Meiji Restoration (Japanese: めいじいしん) was a bourgeois reform movement that transformed Japan from feudal society to capitalist society. On January 3, 1868, Japan’s Meiji promulgated the “restoration” edict, which was the beginning of Japan’s famous Meiji Restoration movement.

superficial strength and actual decline. Therefore, the academic community called for learning from Japan in all aspects in order to achieve the ideal of a rich country and strong army.

In a sense, the trend towards the abolition of traditional Chinese medicine and Chinese characters during the Republic of China was related to China's urgent desire to catch up with Japan and change the country's declining situation.

The origin of Japanese script is Chinese characters. The Japanese writing system developed on the basis of Chinese characters. In Japanese, Chinese characters are called "male characters" (main official script), and kana (Japanese syllabary) is called "female characters" (folk script). Until the early Meiji Restoration, all official documents and official documents were written in Chinese characters.

As early as 1866, Zenbei Mitsu, the founder of Japan's modern postal system, proposed the "Discontinuation of Chinese Characters" to the last shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu. He believed that the foundation of saving the country lies in education, and education should be penetrated to all citizens, regardless of nobility or commonality. However, to popularize education, simple and easy-to-learn characters are needed. Chinese characters are complicated and difficult to learn, and classical Chinese is profound and difficult to understand, which is not conducive to the widespread popularization of compulsory education. "The learning process of Chinese characters is inefficient and should be abolished," and it is necessary to replace Chinese characters with "kana"¹³ in Japanese. During the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the country learned from Germany and adopted "education as the foundation of the country" as a national strategy, vigorously popularizing compulsory education. Zenbei Mitsu's "Discontinuation of Chinese Characters Theory" and "Consistency of Speech and Writing, I Write as I Speak" and other theories became the basic principles of the education sector to carry out compulsory education for primary and secondary school students, and deeply influenced China's New Culture Movement and the subsequent movement to abolish Chinese characters.

After the October Revolution in Russia, "learning from Russia" became another mainstream in the ideological world. The Soviet Union actively promoted Lenin's "Great Eastern Revolution" - the "New Script Movement", also known as the Chinese character Latinization movement, especially in the far-eastern minority regions, the government actively promoted Latinized scripts to accelerate socialist construction.

¹³ Katakana (カタカナ, katakana) is Japanese A phonetic symbol in, similar to hiragana. Together, they are collectively called "kana".

According to statistics, two years before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the number of literate people in the country was less than 3 million, and the total population of the Qing Dynasty at that time reached 400 million, with a literacy rate of only one percent (Zhao Yi, 2021). Seeing the rapid progress of our neighboring country Japan after the “abolition of Chinese characters”, and the enthusiastic participation of Chinese workers in industrial construction after the “Chinese character Latinization” in the Soviet Union, Chinese intellectuals were anxious. They actively called on the government through various means to carry out reform actions to change the current situation of the country. From the situation at that time, imperialism was accelerating its aggression against China, and the rule of warlords in the country was becoming increasingly dark. Therefore, the people must continue to carry out anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles. Economically, during World War I, Chinese national capitalism further developed. The strength of the national bourgeoisie grew, they stepped onto the political stage, and strongly demanded the implementation of democratic politics and the development of capitalism, which was the fundamental reason. In terms of thought and culture, after the Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命¹⁴, Western Enlightenment ideas further spread, and the ideas of democracy and republicanism took root in people’s hearts, while the Beiyang warlords 北洋军阀¹⁵ at that time were still insisting on going against the historical trend and implementing retrogressive policies. More importantly, it was the reflection of the failure of the Xinhai Revolution. After the Xinhai Revolution, advanced intellectuals realized that the root cause of the failure of the revolution was the lack of democratic and republican consciousness in the minds of the people. It was necessary to attack feudal ideas and feudal consciousness from the cultural and ideological level, and to popularize republican ideas to achieve a true republican government.

Thus, driven by various factors, the New Culture Movement began in 1915. The New Culture Movement was an ideological liberation movement initiated by some advanced Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century to oppose feudalism. Its basic slogan was to support “Mr. Democracy” (Democracy) and “Mr. Science” (Science), that is, to advocate democracy and science. The leaders of the New Culture Movement used the theory of evolution and the idea of individual liberation as their main weapons, fiercely attacked the “sages of the past” represented by Confucius, and vigorously advocated new morality and opposed old

¹⁴ The Revolution of 1911 refers to the national revolution that took place in the year of 1911 in the Chinese lunar calendar, that is, from 1911 to the beginning of 1912, aiming at the autocratic monarchy of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of a republic.

¹⁵ The Beiyang Warlords were the warlord forces coming out during the ruling of Republic of China and were composed of the main generals of the New Beiyang Army after Yuan Shikai came to power.

morality, advocated new literature, and opposed classical Chinese.(People’s Publishing House, 2021).

In September 1915, Chen Duxiu founded the “Youth Magazine” in Shanghai, which was later renamed “New Youth”, and the New Culture Movement began. This movement powerfully attacked and shook the long-standing dominant position of feudal orthodox thought, awakened a generation of young people, and allowed Chinese intellectuals, especially the broad masses of youth, to be baptized by Western democratic and scientific ideas, thus opening the floodgates that had been holding back the surge of new ideas and setting off a vibrant tide of ideological liberation in Chinese society.

At that time, the leaders of the New Culture Movement compared Chinese characters with Western phonetic scripts and generally believed that Chinese characters at least hindered China’s development and progress in four aspects:

1) Chinese characters are difficult to learn, write, and recognize, which is an insurmountable obstacle to popularizing compulsory education, resulting in a very high illiteracy rate at that time;

2) Chinese characters mostly wrote in classical Chinese, which was difficult to read and understand, and it was not conducive to promoting vernacular Chinese;

3) China was eager to learn advanced science and technology from the West, but Chinese characters were very inconvenient when learning and recording modern scientific and technological terms from Europe and America. Moreover, typewriters, telegrams, and other advanced technologies were all based on Western phonetic scripts, and Chinese characters were “incompatible” with these new technologies;

4) Chinese characters were not the script of the then 400 million Chinese people. Only a very small class had the opportunity to learn, and only 3% to 4% of Chinese people could use them proficiently.

The leaders of the New Culture Movement, Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and others, clearly advocated science and democracy, advocated vernacular Chinese, and opposed classical Chinese. These benevolent people further proposed the abolition of Chinese characters.

Since modern times, due to the invasion of Western powers, Chinese intellectuals have generally developed varying degrees of radical thinking, believing that traditional characters represent a backward and ignorant symbol of autocracy, which is not conducive to the

educational and cultural development of the nation. Therefore, it is necessary to achieve the Latinization of Chinese characters. It was the intense collision of Chinese and Western cultures that stimulated intellectuals to reflect on their own cultural traditions and engage in social practice. After being baptized by the New Culture Movement, the vernacular Chinese movement became more popular, and traditional characters were obviously gradually replaced.

4.2. The official initiation and development of the Simplified Chinese character movement

In 1909, Lubi Kui¹⁶ published a paper titled “General Education Should Use Vernacular Characters” in the inaugural issue of the “Education Magazine”. This was the first time in history that the use of simplified characters was openly advocated (Zhang Shuyan, 1997, p. 8). Subsequently, on February 1, 1920, Qian Xuanton published an article titled “A Proposal to Reduce the Strokes of Chinese Characters” in “New Youth”. The pioneer of Chinese character simplification was Qian Xuanton, a famous linguist and educator. He believed that the reform of phonetic scripts needed to go through a long and complex process, and could not be rushed or divorced from reality. The strategic task of Chinese phonetic script reform in the short term was to carry out the reform of Chinese character simplification. He also compiled the “Simplified Character Spectrum”, which included 2,400 simplified characters. This was the earliest systematic dictionary of simplified characters (Zhang Shuyan, 1997, p. 10).

The promoter of Chinese character simplification was the National Language Unification Preparation Committee, which was a special institution established by the Ministry of Education in 1932 to promote and unify the national language. It compiled the “National Phonetic Commonly Used Character Collection”, which included most of the commonly used simplified characters since the Song宋 and Yuan元 dynasties. It also passed Qian Xuanton’s “Collection of Inherent and More Applicable Simplified Characters” and submitted it to the Ministry of Education for implementation. This was the first simplified character scheme proposed by a government institution.

The advocate of Chinese character simplification was the Handwriting Movement¹⁷ 手头字运动, which was a social movement jointly initiated by Cai Yuanpei, Shao Lizhi, Tao Xingzhi,

¹⁶ 陆费逵 Lubi Kui (1886-1941), a native of Tongxiang, Zhejiang, was a famous educator and publisher in modern China and the founder of Zhonghua Book Company.

¹⁷ Handwriting movement -It was a literary reform movement initiated by Chinese cultural and educational circles in early 1935. The purpose of this movement is to formally promote the common characters commonly used by the people, that is, the characters that everyone writes in this way but are

and dozens of other well-known scholars in 1935. Its purpose was to enable more people to use simplified characters. It also published the “Handwriting” magazine, which included 300 simplified characters. This was the first simplified character scheme proposed by a civilian group.

The Ministry of Education of the Republic of China officially announced the “First Batch of Simplified Characters” on August 21, 1935. This was the first simplified character scheme officially promulgated by the government. It included 324 simplified characters, most of which came from Qian Xuantong’s “Simplified Character Spectrum” and the “Handwriting” magazine of the Handwriting Movement. This was the first time the government has carried out large-scale simplification of Chinese characters, but due to strong opposition from cultural conservatives, the “First Batch of Simplified Characters” was withdrawn and abolished on February 5, 1936. This was the first time the government gave up on simplifying Chinese characters (Xiang Guangzhong, 2011, p. 11).

4.3. Phonetic Script Reform from 1982 to 1911

After the Opium War¹⁸, some patriotic intellectuals proposed the idea of saving the country through education. Scholars such as Liang Qichao pointed out that the complexity of Chinese characters was the reason why education could not be popularized, thus setting off a “phonetic script movement”. In February 1913, the Reading Unification Conference was held in Beijing. At this meeting, the pronunciation of 6,500 Chinese characters was determined, and the “standard national pronunciation” was determined by voting by representatives from various provinces; a set of phonetic alphabets was formulated, totaling 39, which used the stroke style of Chinese characters, and the letters were selected from ancient Chinese characters. The syllables used the three-syllable system of initials, rhymes, and tones. Its purpose was only to mark the pronunciation of Chinese characters and not as a phonetic script. From 1920 to 1958, the phonetic alphabets were used in China for nearly 40 years. This played a great role in unifying the pronunciation of Chinese characters, promoting the national language, and popularizing phonetic knowledge.

After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, the Chinese pinyin movement entered a new stage. “Qieyin”切音 is “pinyin”, also called “hesheng”合声. The letters of these schemes used Latin letters and their variants, strokes and individual ancient scripts, shorthand

not printed in books, to the printed media, so as to realize the unity of handwritten and printed characters.

¹⁸ Opium War usually refers to the first war of opium trading. The British often call it the First Sino-British War or the “Trade War”. It was an unjust war of aggression launched by the British against China from 1840 to 1842.

symbols, numbers, and self-made symbols. In 1892, the late Qing scholar Lu Ganzhang wrote “A First Step at a Glance”, trying to use Latin letters and their variants to spell the Amoy dialect, which started the “phonetic script movement”. He was the first advocate of Chinese character pinyin in China. In fact, the Latinization of Chinese characters was not unique to the Republic of China. As early as the late Ming Dynasty, the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci tried to annotate Chinese characters with Latin letters and wrote a monograph titled “The Wonders of Western Characters”¹⁹; at the same time, the French missionary Martino Martini also published “A Guide to the Ear and Eye of a Western Scholar”²⁰ in Hangzhou, which also used Latin letters to annotate Chinese characters.

4.4. National Romanization Reform

National Romanization is a set of Chinese character Latinization schemes and was once the national standard of the Republic of China. It uses complex spelling rules to mark tones, unlike other schemes that use diacritical marks or numbers; it is the Roman alphabet applied by the Nationalist government’s Academy in 1928, different from the 注音Bopomofo symbols (ㄅ ㄆ ㄇ, etc.). Its features to use variations in Roman letters to indicate tones, such as iou (you), you (byou), yeou (you), yow (you). After the announcement of the National Romanization, in addition to publishing a small number of textbooks, teaching materials, character tables, and readers, it was not widely taught and used in schools and society (Zhao Yuanren, 1948).

4.5. Latinization New Script Reform

The 1892-1911 Qieyin character movement proposed a total of 28 individual Qieyin character schemes, marking the first climax of the Chinese pinyin movement.

Since 1840, the powerful ships and cannons of the Western powers have shattered the illusion of China’s “Celestial Empire”. For the first time, Chinese literati opened their eyes to the world and suddenly found that compared with the West, our old empire had already fallen so far behind. The backwardness of the country is the backwardness of technology, and the backwardness of technology is due to the backwardness of education. As a result, Chinese intellectuals began to re-examine the Chinese culture that had been passed down for thousands

¹⁹ 西字奇迹

https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%A5%BF%E5%AD%97%E5%A5%87%E8%BF%B9/739460?fromModule=search-result_lemma-recommend

²⁰ “Ears and Eyes of Western Confucians” is a book published by Literary Reform Publishing House in 1957. A Help to Western Scholars, compiled by Jinnige (1577-1628), a missionary of the Catholic Society of Jesus in the late Ming Dynasty. Romanesque phonetic vocabulary to help Westerners learn Chinese and Chinese characters.

https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%A5%BF%E5%84%92%E8%80%B3%E7%9B%AE%E8%B5%84?fromModule=lemma_search-box

of years. Chinese characters are a carrier of Chinese culture, so this kind of examination naturally includes the Chinese script system.

Some Chinese intellectuals, seeing the advanced science and technology of some Western countries, thought that everything about them was advanced. They fully accepted the one-sided and erroneous “linguistics” of the West. They also saw that the phonetic alphabets of the West could be written as long as they could speak (which is not entirely true), and the literacy rate of the population was very high; while Chinese characters were independent of language, with complex strokes, resulting in an illiteracy rate of over 98% in China. So they thought that the education was backward because Chinese characters were too difficult. So they thought that the Latin alphabet was more advanced than Chinese characters, and therefore, they proposed to reform Chinese characters and tried to replace the Chinese script system with “Chinese pinyin script” composed of Roman letters.

The Chinese learned the “principle of pinyin” from foreigners, decomposed the phonetics of Chinese into “initials” and “rhymes”, and used symbols representing “initials” and “rhymes” to annotate Chinese characters, thus replacing the “Chinese Qieyin method” that had been used for 2,000 years. This is indeed a progress. However, Chinese is a “language with multiple loads of voice”, and there are a lot of “homophonic words with different meanings”. The “Chinese characters” composed of pure phonetic alphabets cannot distinguish these “homophonic words with different meanings”.

After the release of the “Character Table”, scholars during the Republic of China period started discussions on whether “simplified characters” are the future of Chinese character reform from various schools of thought on Chinese character reform. Some argued that we should completely follow the path of phoneticization, some thought that the “simplified character” path was also feasible, and some believed in “multiple paths integration”.

At that time, there were still many scholars who believed that the path of phoneticization was the target direction of Chinese character reform. Typical representatives include Xiao Dichen, Zhi Guang, Da Niu, Deng Weihua, etc. These scholars either thought that the “simplified character” path was “changing the soup without changing the medicine”, or thought that “simplified characters” broke the systematic nature of Chinese characters, or thought that Chinese characters no longer met the needs of the times, etc.

In summary, the occurrence and development of the Chinese character simplification movement during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China can be divided into four stages: the exploration stage of solving character shape problems, the germination stage of the simplification of the character system, the convergence stage of the results of character

simplification, and the summary and reflection stage of the related problems of character simplification.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of Chinese characters has gone through a long process of more than 3,000 years. During this period, some Chinese characters have become more complex from simple, but the vast majority of Chinese characters have become more and more simplified. This shows that the simplification of Chinese characters has existed since ancient times and has been continuing. For example, in the book “Simplified Character Sources” by Chinese scholar Li Lexi, 535 Chinese characters were studied, and a detailed examination and analysis were conducted for each character. A table was compiled, and he pointed out that about 80% of the current simplified characters come from the pre-Qin and Han dynasties (Li Shuxian, 2009, p. 4). Wang Liuchun pointed out in “The Relationship between the Age of the Appearance of Simplified Chinese Characters and the Evolution of Chinese Character Development” (Wang Liuchun, 1996, p. 22). that simplified Chinese characters had already emerged in the oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty, and modern-shaped simplified characters were widely used during the Western Han Dynasty. On the one hand, the simplification of Chinese characters is related to the convenience of writing needed in social life, and on the other hand, it is also related to the promotion caused by historical conditions. The simplification of Chinese characters began in the Qin Dynasty and reached a climax during the Republic of China. Not only were more texts standardized and simplified, but many methods such as pinyin were also created for the convenience of Chinese character pronunciation. This shows that while Chinese characters are developing themselves, they also pay great attention to drawing on Western methods.

Of course, the simplified character movement did not end during the Republic of China period. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government also carried out important reform work to simplify Chinese characters and promulgated two simplified character schemes. The second scheme did not conform to reality and was not accepted by society, so it was abolished in 1972. The current simplified character table is the one promulgated by the Chinese government in 1964, which includes a total of 2,235 simplified characters (Yuan Zhongrui, 2019, p. 4).

From a modern perspective, the simplification of Chinese characters has many advantages. First, it is conducive to display and reading on electronic screens. The electronic screen itself is not large. If Chinese characters have too many strokes, they are not easy to recognize or easy to misread when reduced; second, it is conducive to the dissemination of Chinese culture. Chinese characters are an important carrier of traditional Chinese culture.

Ancient Chinese classics and famous works are all written in Chinese characters. In recent years, with the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and the strengthening of China's national power, more and more foreigners are beginning to learn Chinese and Chinese characters. Simplified Chinese characters are easier to learn and write, which is very efficient for cultural dissemination; the simplification of Chinese characters is conducive to more people learning Chinese characters. At present, the main users of traditional characters are calligraphers and artists. Ordinary people only use simplified characters for writing. Therefore, the emergence of more simplified characters is beneficial to increasing the audience and is conducive to the promotion of Chinese characters.

The Latinization of Chinese characters has enhanced the vitality of Chinese characters. Although the character shape is simplified, the pronunciation has not changed, so it does not affect the meaning of Chinese characters. This is a major feature of Chinese characters. Although some people propose that Chinese characters should be completely phoneticized, believing that phoneticization can fully connect China with the world and facilitate learning and writing, this is against the traditional Chinese culture and the laws of social development. If Chinese characters are completely phoneticized, it means that the symbols of Chinese characters as a record of Chinese civilization will completely disappear. The understanding of civilization and culture will undergo great changes, and the continuation and inheritance of Chinese civilization and culture will be greatly impacted. The consequences are hard to estimate. Therefore, it is necessary to take a very cautious approach to the issue of phoneticization of Chinese characters.

Disclosures

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