The Background That the Chinese Characters Were Simplified

Weijie Liu

School of Literature and Journalism, Weifang University, Weifang 261061, China
txlwj@126.com

Keywords: Simplified Chinese characters, Reasons, Theoretical basis, Defects, Fulfilling missions.

Abstract. On the surface, the simplification of Chinese characters was to eliminate illiteracy, improve the efficiency of writing and realize the alphabetization of Chinese characters. But in fact, it was the personal will of the leader that determined. One of the theoretical bases of simplification was the simplified law in the evolution of Chinese characters which was deliberately exaggerated, and the second was the three-stage theory of writing development which was accepted by many people. Over the past 60 years, many defects of simplified Chinese characters have been revealed. It seems that the alphabetization of Chinese characters has failed completely, and our higher education is about to enter the stage of popularization. For these two aspects alone, the rationale for simplifying Chinese characters has been lost. Moreover, the simplified Chinese character was only to be used as a transitional stage of the conversion to alphabetic writing, and there was no intention to use it for a long time. Therefore, the historical mission of simplified characters has been completed, and it is time for simplified characters to withdraw from the stage of history.

Introduction

Just as the Chinese civilization is the only civilization in the world without interruption, the Chinese characters are also the only ancient writing in the world that have been used continuously to this day. This shows the strong vitality and superiority of the Chinese civilization and the characters of our motherland. China has always attached great importance to the question of writing, and it is prominently represented by the emphasis on orthography to ensure the justification and stability of Chinese characters. The reason why we are still able to read ancient books two thousand years ago, the stability of Chinese characters plays a decisive role, so the characters must not be easily changed, especially for an ancient country like ours with unbroken civilization. However, since the late Qing Dynasty, due to various reasons, internal and external concerns had been invaded, and the national strength had been declining. Coupled with the confusion of the Westerners, we were increasingly lacking confidence in our own culture. Even the benevolent who seeks to save the country and the people also blamed the cause of China's backwardness as a result of the backwardness of our culture, so they had “reformed” or even completely rejected our culture. The reform of characters was an important aspect. Therefore, our writing reform in the 1950s has its origins.

Since the implementation of simplified Chinese characters for more than half a century, it has played a significant role in eliminating illiteracy and popularizing education (This point has been emphasized repeatedly when people talk about the merits of simplified characters. There are too many examples to cite). However, there has been no shortage of voices against simplified characters, and in recent years there have been growing calls for the restoration of traditional characters. So, why should Chinese characters be simplified at that time? What is its theoretical basis? What was the reaction of people back then? Reviewing the related background of the simplification of Chinese characters will be helpful to us in examining the problems of simplified Chinese characters and planning the future of Chinese characters.

The Reasons for the Simplification of Chinese Characters

As soon as the People's Republic of China was established, the Central People's Government put
the simplification Chinese characters on the agenda. Obviously, simplifying Chinese characters is a very important and urgent matter. The reasons are roughly as follows:

To Eliminate Illiteracy
Before the founding of new China, the Chinese people suffered a long period of war. The war has not only withered the Chinese economy, but also made the education rate of the Chinese people very low, so the eradication of illiteracy is very urgent to the new China even if it is still in ruins. At that time, it was believed that to enable illiterate people to know hundreds to thousands of characters in the shortest time, to be able to keep accounts, write letters, read newspapers, the most effective way was to teach them to write characters with as fewer strokes and simple structure. In this way, it was necessary to simplify Chinese characters with too many strokes and complicated structure.

To Improve Writing Efficiency
The reason is simple: it takes more time to write a character with more strokes, and less time to write a character with fewer strokes. So it was thought that simplifying Chinese characters would improve writing efficiency, and some relevant side even proposed the goal of simplifying all the characters with more than 10 strokes.

For the Goal of the Alphabetization of Chinese Characters
At the end of 1951, Chairman Mao Zedong instructed the Minister of Education, Ma Xulun: "The Chinese character system must be reformed to follow the common alphabetic direction of the world." However, changing from Chinese characters to alphabetic writing seems abrupt, so we need to simplify the Chinese characters first, and then change the simplified characters into alphabetic writing.

Now that the chairman has set the tone, things went well. But writing has been a very serious matter since ancient times, so it's improper to start at once. There must be theoretical support.

The Theoretical Basis
Looking back, we can find that there were two main theories supporting the simplification of Chinese characters. One of these theories came from China, the other from the west; one was in the light, one was in the dark, which gave the simplification of Chinese characters enough confidence.

Simplification is the Main Trend in the Development of Chinese Characters
It was the most direct and powerful support for the simplification of Chinese characters at that time to prove that the main trend in the development of Chinese characters over thousands of years is simplification. Therefore, people tried to find evidence from various periods and character styles (even dating back to the oracle bone inscriptions) to prove that Chinese characters have been simplified all the time, which makes people feel that the development of Chinese characters over thousands of years just has no purpose other than simplification. Therefore, if we did not simplify Chinese characters, we were going against the law of the development of Chinese characters and going against the trend of history.

The Three-Stage Theory of Writing Development
At the beginning of liberation, the Soviet Union was our elder brother. We must learn everything from the Soviet Union. Language research—including the reform of writing system—was naturally guided by Stalin’s linguistic theory. But Stalin had no originality in linguistics (See A Page that Should not Be Forgotten in the History of Soviet Linguistics, Southern Weekend, January 4, 2007). Therefore, the "three-stage theory of writing development" has a greater impact on the simplification of Chinese characters.

The theory of three stages in the development of writing is a long-standing theory in western
linguistics, which holds that the world's writing has experienced three stages from low to high since ancient times: pictographic writing—ideographic writing—phonetic writing. Chinese characters are still in the second stage, so they are still relatively low-level, waiting to be developed to a higher level of phonetic writing. When this idea was introduced into China, it had a profound impact. Many of us became believers in it, making a lot of very radical remarks and carrying out kinds of reforms to Chinese characters, although none of them succeeded. As Nie Hongyin pointed out, "The 'three-stage theory of writing development' and the 'three-stage theory of language development' (solipsistic→clingy→inflectional) can also be said to be products of the colonial expansion of European capitalism in the 19th century. With the development of comparative linguistics, the three-stage theory of language development was abandoned in the first half of the 20th century, while the three-stage theory of writing development still has a large number of advocates." (See On the Status Quo and Predecessor of Chinese Characters from the History of Character Development, Language Planning, no.5, 1993.) Since people have been deeply influenced by the three-stage theory of writing development, and the idea that Chinese characters are inferior has taken shape (Of course, there is the factor that we were seriously unconfident about our own national culture. But this is another topic). It is taken for granted that changing Chinese characters to alphabetic writing will become advanced, so they simplified the Chinese characters with fanfare.

People's Reaction at That Time

Nowadays, people's discussions on simplified words are getting deeper and deeper, and there are often fierce academic or non-academic debates, a clear distinction has been formed between those who support simplified characters and those who support traditional characters, showing that everyone is very concerned about the motherland characters. In fact, from the beginning when the Chinese characters were artificially simplified, there have been objections, as was the case in the 1950s.

The reasons for the objection are that, for ordinary people, there is no inconvenience in reading and writing traditional characters, and the ancients did not feel inconvenience in using them for more than a thousand years. After the characters were simplified, however, literate people became "illiterate." There should be many such people, but very few gave public opinions. Those who have done in-depth research on characters consider that simplified characters destroy the systematization of Chinese characters and are not conducive to cultural inheritance. Moreover, many simplified characters are just meaningless symbols, which are neither easy to remember nor convenient to use. These people can not only make sense, but also have plenty of examples, so they were very noticeable.

At the beginning of the debate, it still basically belonged to the scope of academic discussion, but since 1957, political factors have played an increasingly important role in the simplification of Chinese characters, and opposing the reform of Chinese characters has been equated with anti-party and anti-socialism Opposing (Character reform has become an important guilt of many "rightists", such as the famous "Zhang - Luo alliance", Chen Mengjia, "sanjia village" and so on.), and those who oppose the simplification of Chinese characters have been silent since then. In this way, things went very smoothly. The State Commission for Character Reform released "the general list of simplified Chinese characters" in a very short time on the basis of the previously announced "scheme to simplify Chinese characters", and the simplified character have been used for more than half a century ever since.

Conclusion

Nowadays, no one believes that Chinese characters will become phonetic writing. Instead, they will be used forever. In this way, as a transitional stage to the phonetic writing, the simplified characters have lost the basis of existence. At the beginning of this year, the ministry of education stated that China's higher education is about to enter the phase of popularization (https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2019-02-26/doc-ihsxncvf7868541.shtml), which at least shows that
illiteracy is no longer a problem in China, and the simplified characters designed for eliminating illiteracy has completed its mission. Apart from the other shortcomings of simplified Chinese characters, in terms of the above two aspects alone, simplified Chinese characters should be out of the stage of history.

References


[6] Carry out Criticism Boldly and Debate Heatedly—the united front work department invited democratic parties and democratic personages without party affiliation to continue the discussion [N]. People's Daily. 1957. 05. 22


