Conventionalization of the Chinese Scripts in History

Stanford University

Chaofen Sun

Abstract

Currently, outside of mainland China and Singapore, emotional debates on Chinese orthography have once again heated up in some Chinese communities. Throughout the past two millennia, Chinese scripts have, nevertheless, been a most unifying force (Norman 1988, Sun 2006) that has kept China together as one country, as native speakers of mutually unintelligible Chinese languages easily communicate in a common written language. The structure of Chinese characters uniquely transcends time and space in ways that are unmatched in any other language. According to Su (1994), even the two modern scripts, simplified and unsimplified, with nearly two thirds of the 4,010 characters published by the Taiwan authorities (1980) as standard forms of characters in running script identical with, or nearly the same as, the characters currently used in mainland China, still share a high degree of commonality.

The earliest fully developed Chinese writing that we know of today is the inscriptions on turtle shells or oxen shoulder blades, commonly known as oracle-bone script 甲骨文 that appeared in the mid-second millennium BCE during the Late Shang dynasty. According to Boltz (1994), there has been little convincing evidence showing contacts, or influence, between the much older writing system in the Near East and the oracle-bone script developed during the Neolithic age. Unlike a phonographic writing such as that of English where each alphabet encodes a phone, Chinese scripts are a logographic system with each character simultaneously encoding sounds and meaning at the level of the syllable. Therefore, it has a great advantage over other systems as it is not necessary for a person who knows how to decode the system to pronounce the characters in order to understand the messages written in them.

After the oracle-bone script, there came 金文 bronze script that are inscriptions engraved on bronze vessels. As compared to the oracle-bone script, bronze script is a less angular and more linearized style of writing. Chinese brush as a writing instrument and bamboo strips as written records were adopted in the Warring-States period, and different 篆书 Zhuan scripts resembling the bronze script in various degrees among the warring states were products following these two innovations. After the unification of the country by the Qin empire, there appeared 隶书 clerical script that eventually became the standard script of the Han dynasty. A Han scholar, Xu Shen who compiled a most remarkable dictionary 说文解字 “On graphs and composite forms” observed that 官狱职务繁，初有隶书，以趋约易 “the tasks in government bureaucracy became so complicated that clerical script first appeared in order to conventionalize easy writing.” At the same time, according to Norman (1988), in Qin dynasty 3,300 characters were used, and the number was increased to 9,535 in 说文解字 at the Han time. In other words, the change of scripts from the 篆书 to 隶书, according to Xu Shen, was a process of simplification for the sake of ease in writing. In like manner, we may say the changes of 甲骨文 to 金文, and 金文 to 篆书,
were also conventionalization of script simplification following major technological and political changes. Standard script 楷书 emerged in late Han after paper was invented. At the same time, in the Middle Chinese dictionary, 广韵, the number of characters that were included in it reached 26,149, three times more than those in 说文解字. Furthermore, woodblock and moveable type printings began in Tang and Song dynasties, and the script used was thus called standard script 楷书.

Following the invention of paper, calligraphy became popular among men of letter, thus the rise of 行书 running script and 草书 cursive script. These much-appreciated artistic forms may be ultimately responsible for the emergence of the present-day simplified characters that have become the orthographic script in PRC, Singapore, and the UN. For example, the simplified character 门 can be traced back to 王羲之’s calligraphy in Middle Chinese. The best record of the conventionalization of the simplified characters in history is 宋元以来俗字谱 by Peking University professor 刘复 and 李家瑞 and published by Academia Sinica in 1930. It collected 6,240 simplified characters in the woodblock prints of various dramas.

The biggest push for the standardization of simplified characters that already existed in popular forms in history came with the modernization and literacy movements sweeping across China in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1935, after moving the capital from Beijing to Nanjing, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China officially announced 324 standardized simplified characters through reducing the number of strokes of their unsimplified forms. Although 蒋介石 was then under tremendous pressure from the people like 戴季陶, who went on strike for three months, and eventually withdrew the published list in 1936, most of these characters were later re-adopted by the People’s Republic in 1950s. After ten years of deliberation, the Script Reform Committee of the PRC officially announced the adoption of 515 standardized simplified characters and 54 radicals in 1964, and 2235 simplified characters were officially reaffirmed by the State Council in 1986. Since then, simplified characters have made up the bulk of the orthographic forms of most frequently used Chinese characters. Although Hong Kong and Taiwan currently are still using unsimplified characters, many simplified characters are already popularly in use there. For example, 臺灣 is commonly written as 台灣, even in Taiwan.

In short, the evolution of the Chinese scripts is a history of conventionalization and standardization. All the unsimplified characters were originally simplified characters of 甲骨文, 金文, 篆书, and 隶书 respectively. Simplified characters had always been circulating among the Chinese people as 俗体字 or 异体字 throughout history before many of them were standardized as orthography at different times.