

Simplified Chinese Characters

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The Chinese writing system is the oldest in the world, in continuous use for more than three thousand years. Naturally, during that long time span, Chinese characters have evolved, but mostly by the formation of new characters, which are created by using the component parts (radicals) of existing characters.

The biggest change to Chinese writing happened during the 1950s, when the government of Mainland China introduced simplified characters as a way of increasing literacy.

Simplified Characters - Features

Simplified Chinese characters usually (but not always) have fewer strokes than their traditional counterparts, which is supposed to make them easier to read and write. Simplified characters are often based on traditional characters, but the relationship between the two sets is not always evident at first glance.

From a total of more than 40,000 Chinese characters, about 2,000 have been simplified. There are several methods used for simplifying characters, shown in the list below:

- Component simplification, both semantic and phonetic
- Retaining only part of traditional characters
- Phonetic component substitution
- Semantic component substitution
- Cursive forms
- Ancient forms
- New creations

History of Simplified Characters

Mainland China's official list of simplified characters was first issued in 1956, with a revision in 1964. In 1977, the "second round" of Chinese character simplification was published. Unlike the first two revisions which were based on familiar traditional Chinese characters, the second round introduced completely new forms. The second round was not well-received, and it was officially retracted in 1986.

Use of Simplified Characters

The simplified system is the official written language of Mainland China, and is also used in Singapore and Malaysia, but traditional characters are sometimes used in all these countries for shop signs and calligraphy. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau continue to use traditional characters for all forms of writing.

In other countries, overseas Chinese communities seem to be gradually shifting to simplified characters, perhaps because of new immigration from Mainland China.

Traditional or Simplified – The Debate

Each system of Chinese writing has its proponents, and there is a strong debate over which one is better. A level-headed summary of the issues can be found at [Simplification of Characters](#)

At some point, most students of Mandarin Chinese will have to decide which system to learn. It is possible to learn both, but many students find it easier to concentrate on one or the other.

Several [readers of this website](#) have suggested that it's only necessary to learn one system for writing, but learn to recognize both sets for reading.

Computer Conversion

There are many computer programs that will convert from traditional to simplified characters and vice versa. This is ideal if you are only able to read one form or the other, or for converting your writing to the other form.

Computer conversion is not flawless, however. There are several simplified characters which represent more than one traditional character, so the computer program may choose the incorrect characters when converting from simplified to traditional.