

China's War of Words

David Bonavia

Gradual simplification of the Chinese script, and its eventual abandonment in favour of the Latin alphabet, is a hot political issue in China, and with good reason. It has been controversial for years, but because Mao decreed it the principle was accepted, and the main focus of contention has been the method and timing.

Now that many of the policies of recent years are being rethought, it is likely that a fresh look will be taken at this one, too. In their early policy statements, the present ruling group have proclaimed that they intend to push ahead with script simplifications, but there seems to be less emphasis now than there was last year on romanisation. Chiang Ching was evidently keen on romanisation, for during the period of her last, fatal ascendancy in the summer of 1976, the teaching of the Latin alphabet in Chinese primary schools was propagandised harder than at any time in the past.

This followed a foul-up in the previous year, when the New China News Agency announced that henceforward all personal and place names would be spelt in the official *pin yin* version of the Latin alphabet in its foreign-language services, instead of the older Wade-Giles system still widely used in such publications as the *Peking Review*. The scheme was mysteriously dropped, without any explanation, and it was almost certainly an aspect of the political infighting which was brewing at the time.

Few subjects are surrounded by more fallacies than the Chinese script. In the West there are such popular myths as that in Chinese characters the symbol showing two women under a roof means "discord." This says more about Western family life than it does about the Chinese language, for the character in question does not exist. It is true, however, that a pig under a roof means "home," a woman under a roof means "peace,"

Reprinted with kind permission from *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 4, 1977, pp. 20-21; thanks, also, to the alert eyes of our correspondent in Hong Kong: Henry Steiner.

and three women together means "lechery." The Cantonese also use an archaic character showing a woman between two men, to mean "angry" (*nau*), probably by derivation from the concept of jealousy.

Another common fallacy is that Chinese newspapers are printed with a limited range of less than 2,000 characters. In fact, to read even the *People's Daily* it is necessary to know well upwards of 2,000, and keep a good dictionary at one's elbow. To be properly educated in Chinese, one should know some 5,000-6,000 characters. The total number of recorded characters is over 70,000, most of them rare, archaic or used only once in the whole known corpus of Chinese literature.

The official simplification policy is threefold: that everyone in China should eventually learn to speak and understand *pu-tung-hua* or standard modern Chinese; that in the long run Chinese should be generally written in the *pin yin* system using the Latin alphabet while in the meantime the use of this alphabet should be propagated in schools and used for the convenience of foreigners in certain cases; and that the process of reducing the number of strokes required to write existing Chinese characters should go forward.

There are many practical snags. One is that it will be 20 years at least before everyone in China proper can understand *pu-tung-hua*, let alone the Overseas Chinese and all the people of Hongkong and Macau. The *pin yin* system has never really caught on, and though Chinese school-children learn it, they probably forget it in later life. And continuing simplification of the Chinese script itself means constant revision of reference works and teaching materials, which is confusing and costly.

The *pin yin* system is also somewhat misleading for foreigners. It spells the letter *s* as *x*, and the English *chi* as *qi*, so that China's first emperor, Chin Shih Huang, is in danger of being mispronounced by foreigners as Quincey Huang. *Pin yin* also has its merits, but like Wade-Giles it requires tone marks, which are a nuisance to write. Its principal advantage is in the elimination of the troublesome apostrophe in Wade-Giles.

These, however, are technical subissues. The big question is whether it is practical and desirable to write Chinese in an all-phonetic system, be it *pin yin* or any other. To foreigners unfamiliar with the Chinese script, it seems obviously desirable, but many are unaware of the difficulties and disadvantages involved.

First, a phonetic script is useless until spoken Chinese is as standardised as, say, English. Second, Chinese is only partially a phonetic language. Its classical literature is written in a semi-ideographic script which is often meaningless when read aloud today, because of the huge number of words which have identical pronunciations but are written differently.

Thus, the romanising of Chinese would cut off all but a handful of

scholars from their own traditional culture, except to the extent that it was translated into modern colloquial Chinese and written phonetically. This would put it at the mercy of interpretations imposed by politicians and hacks—something which is possible only to a lesser extent if the traditional script is retained. Some aspects of the 1974 anti-Confucius campaign—which, it is now being hinted, was really aimed at Chou En-lai—turned on points of textual interpretation meaningful only in the context of Chinese characters.

In any case, modern educational psychologists appear to have established that children learn to read mainly by recognising visual patterns, and associating them with sounds and ideas, rather than by spelling words out letter-by-letter. A wholly phonetic system of learning would make it almost impossible to learn English, with its many anomalies such as *plough*, *rough*, *cough*, and *though*. Polish and certain other languages also have great orthographic eccentricities, which by no means prevent schoolchildren from learning their spelling.

In this respect, Chinese characters are actually superior to alphabetic languages, because most Chinese characters contain a visual element indicating their general meaning. Chinese children learn to write and read Chinese with no more apparent difficulty than English children learn their own script.

The final proof that written words are learned mainly as mental images is the Japanese script, in which Chinese characters are extensively used and are read in two or more completely different pronunciations according to their context, rendering the original phonetic element of the characters all but meaningless. Yet Japan has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, since literacy is more a factor of prosperity and social organisation than of script.

Perhaps the most serious objection to Chinese characters is that they are difficult for most adult foreigners to learn, and Westerners are usually at or over student age before they decide to take up Chinese, if they ever do. It needs a good two years' full-time study for a moderately intelligent European to learn enough Chinese characters to read even the *People's Daily* with modest fluency, four years to acquire modest competence in literary Chinese, and the better part of a lifetime to be a good scholar of the language. By contrast, a European of normal abilities can learn to speak Russian quite fluently in one year's full-time study, and Russian is generally accounted one of the hardest languages in Europe.

However, the simplification of existing Chinese characters by reducing the number of strokes required to write many of them was arguably a misguided reform. It saves no paper, since the overall size of the characters has not been reduced. True, it made the characters somewhat

easier to learn, thus speeding the literacy campaign in the early stages, but it also makes them more difficult to read quickly—just as a shorthand writer has more and more difficulty transcribing notes, the more the abbreviations that have been used.

It would have been quite possible to continue printing Chinese in its old, unsimplified form (which many people find more pleasing aesthetically than the queer, hollow shapes of the simplified characters). The populace, meanwhile, could have continued using the informal simplified forms which have been in common use for hundreds of years in brush-written Chinese, and from which most of the modern simplifications were derived in any case.

Romanisation would also cut off China's main channel of communication with its most important truly Asian neighbour, Japan. At present, Japanese and Chinese who do not speak each other's languages can communicate fairly well by writing a possibly garbled form of literary Chinese to each other. Japanese studying Chinese are in the odd position of being able to write the language before they can speak it, since thousands of Chinese characters are still in general use in Japan. Chinese people learning Japanese have to learn two Japanese syllabaries (of no great complexity), as well as the vocabulary and grammar of a rather complex native language totally different from Chinese. But on the whole, Chinese learn Japanese with more facility than any other people except Koreans.

Romanisation would make written Chinese and Japanese as different from each other as English and French. The Japanese themselves, who could romanise more easily than the Chinese because of the more phonetic character of their literary language, have staunchly continued to use characters, despite the fact that this sometimes makes it impossible for them to read each other's business cards accurately. (The pronunciation of Chinese characters in Japanese names is particularly eccentric.)

The South Koreans continue to use many Chinese characters in their newspapers, and write their names with them, though the North seems to have succeeded in doing away with characters in favour of the Hangul syllabary. Since China's relationship with Japan is almost certain to grow more important over the ensuing decades, romanisation would be quite a serious setback to mutual communication.

Another argument against romanisation is that the Chinese characters are one of the world's great cultural treasures, and to consign them to the museum would be an act requiring much more mature consideration than the subject has commonly been given in the headlong rush towards phonetic script.