

History of Chinese characters (漢字) and simplification

By the late 19th century, many people felt the need for language reform.

- Grammatical reform (from “classical” to “modern/vernacular”)
 - China: from *wényán* 文言 to *báihuà* 白话
 - Japan: from *bungo* 文語 to *gendaigo* 現代語
 - Korea: from classical Chinese to vernacular Korean
- Simplification of the characters themselves

Simplification of the written systems

- Proposals for romanization of CJK languages have been made, but none have been successful
Barriers to this idea (which worked in Vietnam) include homonyms, loss of literary tradition, and disagreements about which romanization systems to use.
- Simplification was used *de facto* in all three countries, but not standardized.

The basic dates for simplification/standardization are:

- Japan: 1946 (implementation of 常用漢字)
- China: 1956 (implementation of 汉字简化方案)
- Korea: 1930s (unofficial)

Japan

After World War II, the Japanese government made two major changes to the written language

- implementation of the 1850 regularly used, simplified, Chinese characters. 881 of these were expected to be learned by the end of elementary school.
- implementation of the new orthography (現代仮名遣い)

Almost all works printed AFTER 1946 use these systems. Works printed BEFORE 1946, sometimes even when reprinted, use the old system.

- The government also instituted a list of characters (人名用漢字別表) not in the above but OK for use in names.

Simplifications followed historical precedent (more below).

China

- The 1956 proposal contained 515 *jiǎntǐ* 簡體(简体) characters.
- In 1964, the number expanded to 2252 *jiǎntǐzì* 简体字

There are three main groups of characters.

1. The first group contains complex characters which when simplified do not form part of other simplified characters. These number 352 characters. Examples:

辦办(bàn)	寶宝(bǎo)	報报(bào)	點点(diǎn)	電电(diàn)
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2. The second group contains two types of simplified characters that are used as components of other simplified characters. The first set contains 132 characters that can stand alone as legitimate simplified characters by themselves. Examples:

貝贝(bèi)	長长(cháng)	車车(chē)	見见(jiàn)	門门(mén)
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The other 14 are simplified components only. Some of these in the complex forms were stand alone and meaningful characters, but when simplified, they could only be used as components of other characters. Examples of characters that contain such components:

记記(jì)	飯飯(fàn)	場場(cháng)	紅紅(hóng)	職職(zhí)
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3. The third group contains simplified characters that have complex components that appear in the second group, and therefore the simplifications are just a matter of transposition of the appropriate parts. These total 1754 characters.

Korea

Although in general Koreans use traditional (complex) characters, there are some characters that have been simplified historically, much like in Japan. Examples:

齊=齊	龍=竜	學=学	讀=読	會=会
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Methods of Simplification

In principle, there are four methods of simplification. The first three were certainly employed (at least in part) long before the PRC's language reform:

1. Calligraphic simplification

These simplifications are meant to reflect what "grass script" or cursive writing looks like. Examples:

紅紅(hóng)	记記(jì)	見見(jiàn)	飯飯(fàn)	場場(cháng)
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2. Homophonous simplification

These simplifications substitute a homophonous component, regardless of its meaning. Examples:

機=机	響=响	藝=艺	優=优	廳=厅
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One of the problems with homophonous simplification is that many characters can end up being simplified as the same one. Example: 台 = 臺 檯 枱 颱

Another problem is that sometimes the simplified character already exists. Examples:

機 (machine)=机 (desk)	後 (behind)=后 (empress)
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3. Partial simplification

In this case, only part of a complex character is used to represent the whole character. Examples:

聲=声	獨=独	兒=儿	雖=虽	習=习
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4. Anomalous simplification

These simplifications best simply memorized. Examples:

專=专	歲=岁	車=车	買=买	馬=马
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Simplification across lines

There are some characters that are not simplified the same in all countries. Examples:

Taiwan	傳	經	賣	關	藝
Japan/Korea	伝	経	売	関	芸
PRC	传	经	卖	关	艺