

## For students of Chinese, politics fill the characters

### Traditionalists bemoan rise of simplified writing system promoted by Communist government to improve literacy

- [Vanessa Hua, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Choosing a baby's name is seldom simple. But it can expose a rift that has been tearing at the Chinese community around the world for more than half a century.

Frank Mong and his wife, Sandra, asked his parents to pick the Chinese name for their first child, in keeping with tradition, and his mother selected one that meant "right and auspicious."

She insisted he spell it Shiang-yu, with the phonetic transliteration system used in Taiwan, where the Chinese Nationalist government retreated after losing the civil war to the Communists in 1949. Not Xiangyou, as dictated by the spelling system developed in the 1950s by the Communist Chinese government when it also introduced simplified characters to increase literacy.

"If it's born from the Communist regime, she refuses to recognize it as Chinese," said Mong, 32, who lives in San Francisco.

He rejected his mother's suggestion because most of the world now learns the system developed by China. However, the traditional transliteration system -- and traditional written characters -- remain standard in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in many Chinese newspapers published in America.

As China rises in geopolitical importance, the number of Chinese language classes and schools in other countries also has grown. Not only are children of Chinese immigrants studying the language, more and more non-Asians are learning it for work and travel. Yet as long as there are two systems, the way that many people read and write often reflects their values and loyalties. And indeed, both Beijing and Taipei are fighting for their system's dominance by providing subsidized teacher training trips and free books for language schools.

China is setting up Confucius Institutes worldwide, including one that opened this year at San Francisco State University, to promote the study of Chinese. By 2010, China's education ministry intends to open another 100. At two-year and four-year colleges and universities in the United States, enrollment in Chinese classes was 34,153 in 2002, up 20 percent from 1998, when 28,456 students were enrolled. About 100 private after-school and weekend programs for younger students enroll about 20,000 students in Northern California. Public schools across the Bay Area increasingly offer Chinese classes.

The number of students taking the SAT Chinese subject test -- offered in both simplified and traditional forms -- has nearly doubled, from 2,865 in 1996 to 4,917 in 2004.

Next spring, the College Board plans to offer a Chinese language Advanced Placement test, also in both traditional and simplified versions.

Until China opened to the West in 1979 -- when the United States resumed diplomatic relations with Beijing -- Taiwan was the cultural standard-bearer for many overseas Chinese. During the Cold War, private Chinatown language classes were treated as "propaganda outlets" for the ruling Nationalist

government, said Ling-chi Wang, a professor of Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley who plans to retire this year.

"The primary objective of these schools was, and still is, to instill pride in, and loyalty to, Chinese language and culture among Chinese children, born and raised in the U.S.," Wang said.

"Traditional characters have a lot of history and culture behind them," said Tian Tang, creator of Hanzi Smatter, a Web site dedicated to the misuse of Chinese characters in Western culture. "By simplifying (the characters), you are slowly eroding culture and everything behind it."

Either way, when in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong -- or San Francisco's Chinatown -- one must do as the locals do, teachers said.

"Out of courtesy, you use the character set they use," said Andrew Corcoran, head of the Chinese American International School, a private, bilingual institution in San Francisco for kindergarten through eighth grade.

Within Mandarin, Cantonese and other dialects, words are pronounced the same regardless of which writing or spelling system is used.

But simplified characters are starting to predominate in American classrooms, educators say, because on a practical level, that system is more widely used: China has a population of 1.3 billion. By contrast, about 31 million people use the traditional system.

As immigration from mainland China increased in the 1980s, so did the number of "heritage" or weekend schools in the United States run by parent volunteers mainly for Chinese American children.

The Chinese government will provide \$88,000 to help start the new institute at San Francisco State. It's also sending teachers and more than 3,000 books from Beijing Normal University. But Christy Lao, director of the institute and an associate professor of elementary education, said the institute is "not the voice of the Chinese government."

Housed in a one-room office, it chooses its projects independently, she said. Forthcoming events include student contests in poetry and speeches, and teacher training this summer in China.

The debate is not over.

In the San Francisco public schools, the bilingual and immersion classes teach the simplified form, while high school students learn traditional. Some area institutions, such as UC Berkeley and Stanford, teach both systems.

And many older private programs offer instruction in the traditional systems and use textbooks offered free by the Taiwan government.

Students who learn traditional characters have an easier time later learning how to read simplified ones, compared to going the other way, said Peter Yeh, president of the Association of Northern California Chinese Schools and an immigrant from Taiwan.

Growing up in San Francisco, Frank Mong learned traditional Chinese characters on Saturdays and after school. For many years, he shared his mother's attitude about simplified characters.

"Why are you changing what has been done for thousands of years?" said Mong, who often speaks Chinese when he travels for his job as a high-tech executive.

"I thought it was a ploy for the Communist Party to reinvent language, so that people would forget what their past was really about. So they only had to think about Communism moving forward," he said.

But when he studied Chinese at UC Davis and wrote out his tests in traditional characters, the teacher, from China, marked up Mong's answers in the simplified form.

"He admitted, it's true, there's two different languages accepted in the world today, and what I wrote wasn't incorrect," Mong said. "But he told me I should try and learn it, and be open-minded."

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### Character evolution

**What:** The Communist government updated the system for spelling Chinese words with Roman letters in the 1950s. To increase the country's literacy rate, it also introduced simplified written Chinese characters, which use fewer strokes. Some characters are completely new, but many are identical to traditional versions. The characters now called traditional first appeared as pictorial script incised on bone or tortoise shell during the Shang dynasty (1400 B.C.-1200 B.C.) and have evolved since.

**Why:** Supporters of simplified characters say they increase literacy. And supporters of the new spelling, called pinyin, say it more accurately reflects Chinese pronunciation. Proponents of traditional characters say they better preserve Chinese culture and history.

**Where:** Simplified characters are used in China, Singapore and Malaysia. Traditional characters are most common in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinatowns around the globe, but the use of simplified characters is gaining acceptance worldwide as China's economic and political importance grows.

-- Vanessa Hua

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