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# Reforming Chinese characters in the PRC and Japan: New directions in the twenty-first century

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This article provides a comparative evaluation of Chinese character reform in the People's Republic of China and Japan, with a particular focus on the latest changes announced in 2009 to the existing script policies in the two countries. The first Chinese script reform took place in 1956 and the first Japanese script reform in 1946, both for the purpose of simplifying the scripts to facilitate mass education. In the 1980s, prompted by nationalistic sentiments and economic security, both countries backtracked on their script reform policies and adopted a more conservative approach that put an end to any further simplification of the script. The conservative trend which continued into the new millennium is reflected in the two latest reforms. Both China and Japan have moved further away from phonetizing the script in their effort to address issues related to information and communication technology.

**Keywords:** List of Standard Common Characters; New Joyo Kanji List; standardization; globalization; modernization; nationalism



## Introduction

This article provides a comparative evaluation of script reform in relation to Chinese characters in the People's Republic of China (China hereafter) and Japan, with a particular focus on the latest changes announced in 2009 to the existing script policies in the two countries. The changes are reflected in the new official character lists – the *List of Standard Common Characters in China*, which replaced the *List of Generally used Characters in Modern Chinese* introduced in 1988, and the *New Joyo Kanji List* in Japan which replaced the *Joyo Kanji List* introduced in 1981.

A comparative study of script reform measures undertaken by China and Japan is a long overdue task, given the similar challenges faced by the two countries in adapting an ancient script to modern use. In addition, the latest policies of the two countries have not received much attention so far, let alone on a comparative basis, and therefore it is imperative that an investigation is carried out about the measures. Moreover, the two recent measures are significant for several reasons. First, both reforms took place about 20–25 years after the previous revisions of the 1980s, introducing changes to the two scripts after many long years of stability. Second, the recent reforms introduced large-scale changes to the existing script policies, with a magnitude that far exceeds the changes made during the previous revisions. Also, these reforms occurred in the context of a new wave of modernization that was under way due to the rapidly increasing use of information and communication technology. The

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Chinese and Japanese scripts had posed challenges in the past when applied to human use in modern society, but they also pose challenges when applied to machine use. The major hurdle that China had to overcome was adapting the scripts to make them more computer-efficient. The major issues that Japan had to counter were the changes or the perceived changes that had occurred in script usage due to the use of information and communication technology.

The new script reforms raise numerous questions: What exactly is the driving force behind the revisions? Are China and Japan heading in the same direction? Who is at the helm of the revisions? Which characters are being added or deleted from the current lists, and how are these decisions made? What is the fate of the goal of literacy which was at the center of the initial script reforms? How will the new initiatives be implemented? Who benefits from the revisions? Who loses?



## Challenges posed by the Chinese and Japanese scripts

Script reform became a necessity in China and Japan in modern times when the Chinese and Japanese scripts posed challenges due to their logographic nature. A major challenge is the large number of characters that is available for use. The total number of characters in the Chinese writing system is estimated at approximately 100,000 characters today. Although the number of characters in actual use is much less, this number has also been growing over time. For example, while GB-2312-80,[1] the character encoding set devised for information exchange in 1981, contained only 6763 characters, GB-18030-2000 released in 2000 contained 27,484 characters.

The high number of Chinese characters is also an issue when the Japanese script is applied to modern use. Although a fewer number of characters (approximately 50,000) is required due to the mixed script used for Japanese, the number is still high because the preferred way of writing in Japanese is to use more characters than *kana* when using the mixed script.

Due to the sheer number of Chinese characters available for general use, both the Chinese and Japanese writing systems pose challenges particularly for mass literacy and computer use. At present, both China and Japan declare high rates of literacy for both men and women. The 2000 census reported China's adult literacy rate (15+) as 90.9%, (95.1% for males and 86.5% for females) and the youth literacy rate (15–24) as 98.9% (99.2% for males and 98.5% for females). The United Nations Development Office Human Development Report for 2003 assigned Japan an adult literacy rate of 99%. While these figures suggest that the literacy problem has now been resolved, a closer examination reveals that the high rates of literacy are more to do with the way literacy is defined and measured in the two countries.

Literacy definitions in China are based on an individual's recognition and/or use of a minimum number of characters. However, the OECD defines literacy as 'using printed and written information to function in society in order to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD and Statistics Canada, cited in Liddicoat, 2007, p. 14). The literacy definition of UNESCO constitutes having multiple literacies, which includes print-based literacy (Grey, 1956; Shaeffer, 2003, cited in Liddicoat, 2007, p. 19). According to the above-mentioned international definitions, a person who is able to recognize a certain number of characters or words would not necessarily be considered a literate, because reading involves more than the passive recognition of characters.

The way in which literacy is defined and measured is equally questionable in Japan. In the United Nations report, adult literacy in Japan was defined as the percentage of people

aged between 15 and above who can read and write short simple statements related to their everyday life. Although 99% of the population may be able to use *kana*, knowledge of Chinese characters is variable and difficult to measure due to the vast numbers in use (Carroll, 2001).

The Chinese and Japanese scripts also pose challenges in relation to computer use, again due to the sheer number of characters available. A major challenge is inputting characters into the computer because the number of characters required for contemporary writing vastly exceeds the number of keys on a standard computer keyboard. A related issue is not having a clearly defined set of characters on which to base a keyboard inputting scheme. Therefore, keyboard inputting schemes, whether based on the pronunciation of characters or on the structure or shape of characters, have their own limitations.



**A comparative evaluation of the first script reforms**

The first script reforms in modern times took place in China in 1956, soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and in Japan in 1946, soon after the defeat in WWII. Both reforms were carried out as part of a broader nationwide attempt at modernizing the countries. Literacy of the masses was a focal point in these initial reforms as this was considered to be important for modernization and economic development. The high number of characters used in contemporary writing was perceived as an impediment to mass literacy because they were difficult for people to remember and reproduce. However, instead of phonetizing the script which is a radical reform, simplification of the script was chosen as the preferred option in both polities at the time, China chose to mainly simplify the shape of characters and Japan chose to mainly reduce the number of characters in current use.

The simplification attempt in China was initiated by the government and was carried out through vigorous state intervention. While the Commission of Chinese Script Reform, which was appointed by the People's congress in October 1954, was responsible for the reform process at the national level, several other official organizations were also due in charge at the provincial and local levels (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008). Similar to the Chinese script reform, the Japanese script reform can also be seen as a top-down process. The National Language Council was the official script reform body that was in charge of this reform.

A significant event in the Chinese script reform process was the publication of a draft plan for simplification in 1954 by the Ministry of Education (MOE). After nationwide discussion, the plan was amended and finally promulgated in January 1956 (DeFrancis, 1975) as the *Table of Simplified Characters* (TSC). The TSC consisted of 515 individually simplified characters and 54 simplified radials in three tables. A total of 2235 characters were simplified by analogy and published as a comprehensive list in 1964 (Zhou, 2001). Further, this simplification effort was considered to be an interim measure until the overhaul of characters altogether by phonetizing the script (Zhao, 2005). The script reform of 1956 can therefore be considered a major modification of the Chinese script in its long history.

In Japan, an official list of characters called the *Toyo Kanji List* was introduced in 1946 to resolve some of the issues that were found to hamper mass literacy. The list comprised only 1850 characters. The *Toyo List* was introduced as the prescribed maximum for government departments and documents and also for school textbooks. This meant that characters not on the list were proscribed from use in government publications. While the new character limits were not imposed on the media or private citizens, it was hoped that they would comply with the official character limits (Gottlieb, 1995; Hannas, 1997). In addition, a list

of education *kanji* for schoolchildren called the *Toyo Kanji Beppyo* was also introduced. The list contained only 881 characters and was introduced as the prescribed number of *kanji* to be taught during the compulsory school years.

Similar to the Chinese script reform of 1956, the *Toyo List* can be viewed as a significant step when considering the previous failed attempts to officially reduce the number of characters in the script. The very essence of the reform was reflected in the new Japanese Constitution of May 1947, which used only a limited number of Chinese characters, along with hiragana. It thus gave authority to the restricted character list and proved that it was possible to write the most important legal document of the country in a manner easy to understand by the majority (Carroll, 2001).



## Costs and benefits of the first script reforms

The Chinese script reform of 1956 brought about costs and benefits not only for contemporary society, but also for later generations. The significant benefit was in facilitating mass literacy which was required to develop and modernize the country. This was achieved by reducing character strokes in the most frequently used 2000 characters from 11.2 to 9.8, which made character acquisition easier for both schoolchildren and adults. A major cost of the reform can be seen as the manner in which some of the characters were simplified (Chen, 1999). This has led to problems which need to be fixed by script reformers in the present time. More importantly, the approach created two systems of writing, one based on complex characters and the other based on simplified characters, causing a divide between Chinese character-based communities which is difficult to bridge.

The Japanese script reform of 1946 also brought about both costs and benefits. The major benefit was that it facilitated mass literacy by limiting the number of characters required for non-specialist use. This also freed up a large amount of time in schooling that was previously devoted to the acquisition of characters which could now be spent on acquiring other knowledge and skills. The major cost was the constraints it placed on written expression which resulted in the practice of writing some words partly in Chinese characters and partly in *kana*, which came to be viewed as unacceptable in later years.

## A comparative evaluation of the second script reforms

A second attempt to simplify the script further was officially announced by the Chinese Script Reform Commission in 1977. The goal of this scheme was to reduce the number of strokes in all characters in common use to 10 or fewer in order to facilitate the acquisition of literacy by schoolchildren and adults (Chen, 1999). Work on this simplification effort started in 1964 and continued through the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

The second reform also began as a top-down process, with the Commission of Chinese Script Reform being responsible for the reform activities. The Commission made a draft list of simplified characters called the Second Plan for Simplifying Chinese Characters and submitted it to the State Council in 1974 to be approved and announced to the public. The list consisted of a hundred characters that had been simplified by the masses, which the Commission had collected since 1964. The list, however, was promulgated only in 1977, after it had been drastically expanded to include 853 simplified characters and 61 simplified radicals. This was due to the more radical view of script reform adopted by the Gang of Four, who wanted more characters simplified by the masses to be included in the list, and the resultant re-organization of the Commission to include laymen from the community to carry out this task (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008).

The new list, however, was short-lived because in 1980, after the overthrow of the Gang of Four and the power takeover by Deng Xiaoping, the list was recommended for revision by the Commission of Script Reform. The special Commission that was set up for the revision recommended that 111 characters on the list should be revived as they had taken root at various levels of character use in society. However, this recommendation did not materialize, and the list was formally rejected at the Second National Conference on Language and Script that was held in 1986 (Zhao, 2005).

The second script reform of Japan can actually be considered as a revision made to the Toyo List introduced in 1946. The revision became necessary as the *Toyo List* came to be viewed as having several problems. The list was said to be unsystematic as it contained some characters that were very rarely used and lacked some that were frequently used. It had led to disorder in the written language as common compounds were written half in characters and half in *kana* in a practice called *mazegaki*. It was also prescriptive and limited expression for general purposes by limiting not only the number of characters that could be used, but also vocabulary and therefore concepts, which resulted in a decrease in expressive ability. It was particularly inadequate for scientists who required an even wider range of characters for scientific terminology, and the literati who required freedom of artistic expression (Gottlieb, 1995).

The revision was implemented by recommending a new official list of characters in 1981, called the *Joyo Kanji List*, in place of the *Toyo Kanji List* that had been in force since 1946. The new list contained a total of 1945 characters, made up of all the characters in the previous list plus an additional 95 characters. The change in the policy, however, was not so much in the scope of the list, but rather in the nature of the list, because character use became more liberalized with the policy revision. In addition, the use of *furigana* (*kana* used to annotate Chinese characters to indicate their sounds) (Taylor & Taylor, 1995), which was proscribed by the previous policy was to be recognized, which meant that writers could now use characters that were not on the official list. Also, the amount of *okurigana* (the number of syllables to be written in *kana* after the Chinese characters) was decreased from what had been prescribed in the *Toyo List*.

The list was declared in the Preamble only as a target to be achieved in general areas of society, and not as a requirement for specialist fields or individual writing. This made a significant change to the nature of the list, because although the old list had been imposed as a prescribed maximum for all government documents and school textbooks, the new list was introduced as a guide, relaxing the previous strict limits placed on the use of characters. Also, the new policy did not specify the number of characters to be taught in schools, whereas the old policy had specified 881 characters as the limit to be taught for reading and writing during the period of compulsory education (Gottlieb, 1995).

## Costs and benefits of the second script reforms

The 1977 move to simplify Chinese characters did not bring about a benefit to contemporary Chinese society as it was short-lived. However, it incurred a cost which was long-lasting. The reason for this is that although the new list was withdrawn the year after it was announced, it was formally rejected only in 1986, approximately 10 years after its proclamation. As a result, a large number of these characters are still used today creating a substandard of character use. Attempts made to make some of these characters official have failed (Chen, 1999).

One of the benefits of the new Japanese character list as mentioned by the official script reform body was that it was more effective in facilitating communication. This is because

the previous list had some characters that were rarely used and excluded some that were in frequent use. The new list also helped to resolve the problem of *mazegaki* that had been created by the *Toyo List.* The practice of *mazegaki* had been under much criticism because it was considered as contributing to disorder in the written language (Gottlieb, 1995).

A major cost of the revision was seen as returning language policy from a democratic context to that of pre-war conservatism. Criticism of the list came mostly from educators who expressed concerns about the extra pressure on teaching and learning the additional 95 characters and their associated *on-kun* readings. It was also pointed out that the burden of learning additional characters would have a negative impact on the efforts to internationalize the Japanese language (Gottlieb, 1995).



## A comparative evaluation of script reform in the new millennium

The year 1980 marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese script reform. With the death of Mao in September 1976, and the overthrow of the Gang of Four by Deng Xiaoping in October 1976, a new political era dawned in China. In the context of this political upheaval, the major change that took place in the scene of script reform was the re-organization of the Committee of Script Reform in 1980 and the recommendation issued by the Committee to revise the Second Simplification Scheme, which had been published in 1977.

A series of other significant events followed soon after, signaling a new direction in Chinese script reform. Chief among them are the renaming of the Committee of Script Reform as the State Language Commission and bringing it under the State Education Commission, and the convening of the Second National Conference on Language and Script in 1986. The significance of the former event was that from the 1950s up until then, the Committee had been operating as an independent central government organization, reporting directly to the State Council. The significance of the latter event was that the Conference was held 30 years after its first meeting in 1956 and, more importantly, that the outcome of the Conference marked a major policy shift in relation to script reform, signaling the beginning of a conservative trend when compared with the reforms carried out in the Mao era (Rohsenow, 2004; Zhao & Baldauf, 2008).

An important outcome of the Conference was the clear indication made that standardization of the script and assessment of past script policy will be the future state approach to solve language and script problems. This is evidenced by some of the major decisions taken at the Conference: the decision to develop *putonghua* and promote it nationwide as the national spoken standard; the decision to officially terminate the Second Simplification Scheme, including the 111 characters that had been recommended for consideration by the Committee of Script Reform in 1980; the decision to adopt a cautious attitude in relation to large-scale simplification schemes like those carried out in the past; and the decision to preclude *hanyu pinyin* as an independent writing system, and the most important of all, the decision to establish a standardization focus (Chen, 1999; Rohsenow, 2004; Zhao & Baldauf, 2008). In addition to the above, the *List of Generally Used Characters in Modern Chinese* was released in 1988 as the current standard. The significance of this event is that some complex characters that had previously been abolished were revived in the new list.

In more recent times, the standardization of the script also came up as an urgent need in relation to the development of information and communication technology. It was strongly believed by the Chinese leadership that the four modernizations (modernization of agriculture, industry, technology, and defense) would not be possible without the development of

information technology (Yu, 2008). While creating a computer-friendly script was seen as essential for the smooth operation of information processors, information and communication technology was seen as indispensable for the country's journey to modernization.

The Chinese logographic script, however, is not ideal for computer use and began to pose a number of challenges when used on computers. The major problems among those that had to be tackled to make the script more computer-friendly were the absence of a fixed total number of characters, irregularities in the shape of characters, the lack of uniformity in the order of character composition, and variation in pronunciation which was impacting on character production on computers when phonetic inputting schemes were used. These were known as the 'four fixations' (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008).

Of the issues that had to be addressed, the most important and the most difficult one was fixing the total number of characters in use. The main obstacle to establish a fixed set of characters was that character use had fallen into a state of disarray in the 1980s. Chen (1999, p. 192) observes that 'the regulations on language issues are beginning to lose the authority or binding force they used to enjoy in the 1960s and 1970s' and notes that there were three main types of non-standard characters: complex characters (original versions of simplified characters), abolished characters from the 1977 further simplification scheme, and characters simplified by the public based on the official simplification principles proposed under the 1956 simplification attempt.

In addition to the above, 'rare characters' (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008, p. 148), which are also known as 'characters for specialised use' (Yin, 1994, p. 80), pose a challenge to the attempts to fix the total number of characters. Rare characters used in names of people were particularly found to be challenging for computer use in banks and other institutions, because some of these characters are not found in the national standard code sets for information exchange. Some rare characters used in place names cannot be found in most of the ordinary dictionaries (Yin, 1994) because they are used only in these place names and are not found anywhere else in current usage.

In this context of character standardization, several measures were taken to deal with the non-standard usage of characters. A special law was passed in October 2000 under the name *The Law of the People's Republic of China on the National Commonly Used Language and Script* (Rohsenow, 2004). The law enforces standardization in both the spoken language and the script. In addition, a new standard character list, called the List of Standard Common Characters, was compiled in China. The list was formerly announced in August 2009 to seek public opinion by publishing a document called the List of Standard Common Characters on 12 August 2009.

In Japan, a new era was born in the field of script reform with the advent of information and communication technology. Modern technological innovation made its first impact on language use in Japan in the early 1980s. The year 1984 marked an explosion in word-processor sales in Japan (Gottlieb, 1998), and therefore can be taken as the beginning of the personal word-processor age (Seeley, 1991). The word processor made a revolutionary change in writing Japanese as it facilitated the process of converting *kana* to Chinese characters. This meant that people were now in a position to use characters they had not committed to memory or that they were not very familiar with. Also, as word processors had the ability to produce all the characters identified in the Japanese Industrial Standards (JIS),[2] they facilitated the use of characters outside the official character list.

The information and communication revolution of more recent times strengthened the new trends in Japanese written culture set by the word processor. While Internet use facilitated the rapid and widespread dissemination of word-processed texts, email and mobile text messaging facilitated the rapid and instant transmission of word-processed messages

between individuals. This gave rise to a new digital culture of reading and writing which exposed people to a large number of characters in daily life to which they had never had access before.

The widespread use of information and communication technology led to concerns about the adequacy of the *Joyo List* among official language planning bodies. The practice of writing words half in characters and half in *kana* also became a major concern for language planners, as it was generally seen as affecting the correct use of characters and the beauty of the Japanese script. Discussions therefore began as early as 2005 about reviewing the *Joyo List* and replacing it with an updated list that could better reflect contemporary character use and also facilitate the use of appropriate character use in the community. Revisions were made to the revised script policy of 1981 as an outcome of the discussions, leading to an updated list called the *New Joyo List*. The new list was formally announced in March 2009 to seek public opinion by publishing a document called the *Draft New Joyo List*. The List was implemented in Autumn 2010 after some revision.



## The new Chinese and Japanese character lists

Information about the new Chinese and Japanese character lists is available in official sources. Chief among the official Chinese sources is the document on the website of the Research Institute of Applied Linguistics (http://www.china-language.gov.cn/doc/zb2009.pdf) entitled the List of Standard Common Characters, which consists of the new character list and a preamble to the list, and the document on the website of the MOE (http://www.moe.edu.cn/edoas/website18/12/info1250649807710712.htm) entitled 'Answers to questions about the List of Standardised Characters'. The former will be referred to as the Chinese Preamble hereafter and the latter as the MOE Document. Chief among the official Japanese sources is the document on the website of the Agency of Cultural Affairs entitled the *Draft New Joyo List*, which consists of the new character list and a preamble to the list. This document will be referred to as the Japanese Preamble hereafter.

The Chinese and Japanese official sources provide information about a number of aspects of the new policies, such as agency, factors that led to the policies, changes made to the existing official character lists, expected ends (goals), the scope of the lists, target population, how the lists will be implemented, and the expected effects of the policies.

## The new Chinese character list

The Chinese documents show that the new character policy is a government initiative, with the MOE and the National Committee of Language and Script Work in charge of the List of Standard Common Characters.

According to the Chinese documents, one important factor that prompted the new character standardization initiative is the rapid technological change that is occurring in the country. This is said to have resulted in an expansion of the use of language and an expansion of the use of computers in the service sectors. These factors led, in combination, to an urgent need for characters required for several specialist areas such as names of people, names of places, and science and technical terms used in daily jargon. The official Chinese documents also mention political factors, such as the need to implement the Language Law introduced in October 2000 and the need to address problems created by previous script policy, as conditions that necessitated the new script initiative.

Of the two types of ends on which a language policy is generally based – overt ends which are language-specific and latent ends which are non-language-specific (Cooper,

1989) – the Chinese documents mention the overt, language-specific ends, to a large extent. Foremost among these is solving the difficulties experienced in specialist areas due to the lack of characters. Four types of words are specified as lacking necessary characters. They are personal names, place names, science and technology terms, and classical Chinese expressions in teaching resources for primary and junior high schools. Other language-specific ends mentioned in the documents are: reflecting the different needs people have for different characters by devising a tiered list; improving the clarity of written expression by reviving variants; and unifying character shapes by adjusting the shape of Song style fonts. The documents also mention non-language-specific ends such as facilitating the smooth operation of computers and implementing the Language Law to regulate character use.

The major changes introduced to the new Chinese character list are in the number of tiers, the number of characters, and the type of characters included. The new list has three tiers, whereas the previous list had only two. The new list has a total of 8300 characters, while the previous list had only 7000. The 8300 characters in the new list are made up of 3500 characters in the first tier, 3000 characters in the second tier, and 1800 characters in the third tier. Similar to the previous list, the first tier contains frequently used characters and the second tier less-frequent characters.

The third tier, which is a new feature, contains characters for special use. For example, the new third tier includes characters that are used in printed materials related to medicines, nutrition, and characters used in classical Chinese teaching material used in schools. Although not high-frequency characters, many people need these characters specifically for the purpose of reading. The third tier also includes characters that are required in names of people and places. These again are not high-frequency characters because they are not famous names. However, they are required frequently in service areas, such as post offices, financial institutions, and transport.

The Chinese documents further mention that while 103 characters were deleted from the existing first tier, 103 new characters were added to replace them. Also, 500 characters were deleted from the total of 7000 characters in the existing list. It is not clear as to whether all the 500 deleted characters were from one tier or from both. In addition, the documents mention the revival of some variants, the simplification of some traditional characters, and the shape adjustment of some Song style fonts.

The documents specify the context in which the new list is to be used. For example, the new list will be implemented as the standard for character use in areas of common use in society, that non-list characters will be allowed only if they are historical common use characters, that the simplification of non-list characters and the use of non-list characters in surnames will be allowed only with permission, and that the revived variants will have their range of use specified by a note attached to the list. However, it is not clear as to whether the rule applies to handwritten characters, particularly to characters used in the public space and in calligraphy.

According to the Chinese documents, the primary target population comes out as organizations because the Language Law, which is the means of implementing the new character initiative, will apply to organizations. This implies that individuals who work in these organizations or use their services will become secondary targets. Again, the official documents mention that the new initiative will apply to the names of all new-born babies. The target population in this situation can be understood as the parents of the new-born babies.

The new Chinese character list will be implemented by means of the Language Law introduced in China in 2000. This means that it will be implemented by authority (Cooper, 1989).

**The new Japanese character list**

Similar to the Chinese documents, the Japanese Preamble also indicates the part played by the government in relation to the new character initiative, but in more detail. It refers to the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Culture Deliberative Council, the National Language Subcommittee, the *Keigo* Sub-Committee, and the *Kanji* Sub-Committee as having played a significant role in the new policy.

The Japanese Preamble mentions technological change as a major factor that led to the new character initiative. However, in the Japanese case, it is prompted by the dramatic changes that are said to have occurred in the language in relation to character use, as a result of being subject to the widespread use of information and communication processors such as computers and mobile phones. For example, people have more opportunity than before to see a large number of characters in day-to-day life. This requires that they be familiar with these characters and hence the need to add more characters to the Joyo List. Also, people have less opportunity than before to write characters by hand. This makes it more difficult to recognize and remember characters and hence the need to re-introduce character writing to the school curriculum. The Japanese Preamble also states that the Joyo List was compiled before the computer era and should therefore be updated to reflect contemporary character use.

The Japanese Preamble mainly mentions several overt, language-specific ends. Chief among them are: assessing the effectiveness of the *Joyo Kanji List* to function as a guide for contemporary *kanji* use at a time when information and communication technology is developing rapidly and making an impact on *kanji* use; dealing with proper nouns which until now have not been the target of a clear national policy; revitalizing the practice of handwriting as the rapid spread of information processors has resulted in fewer opportunities for people to write characters by hand in day-to-day situations; and formulating a general *kanji* policy which takes into consideration all the *kanji* that are used in Japan including JIS *Kanji* and characters for people's names.

The major change made to the new Japanese character list is the addition of 191 characters. In addition to this, changes have been made to the pronunciation of some characters, such as the deletion of one *kun* pronunciation of a character and the addition of pronunciations used in contemporary society, as was felt necessary. However, the Japanese Preamble does not mention the number of the added pronunciations. The Preamble also states that the practice of handwriting will be re-introduced into the school curriculum.

The new list is similar to the previous list in terms of the nature of the list. This is because they are both a collection of the most commonly used characters that are used in day-to-day situations in social life such as law texts, public documents, newspapers, and broadcasts. The two lists differ in terms of the shape of characters added. When the Joyo List was compiled in 1981, the shapes of characters added to the list were modified to be compatible with the shape of characters in the existing Toyo List. When compiling the *New Joyo List*, however, the shape of the new characters added was not modified.

The new list is to be used as a guide for general contemporary Japanese texts used in society, such as law texts, public documents, newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts. The list does not apply to specialist areas such as science, technology, and the arts, but it is expected that characters on the list will be used when representing specialist words that are widely used in society. Neither does it apply to the representation of proper nounsnor the printing of ancient texts written by famous writers. People are expected to use their discretion in such situations depending on the circumstances with respect to the use of characters on the list. Most important of all, the Japanese Preamble states that the list does not

apply to handwritten texts. This is an important notification as people are not left to wonder whether list characters apply to handwritten communication. In this respect, the Japanese Preamble is different from the Chinese official documents that do not make any reference to the use of handwritten characters.

Similar to the Chinese official documents, the Japanese Preamble refers to the target population only indirectly. They are implied when it is stated that the new characters will be taught in an appropriate manner in schools, by taking into consideration the developmental stage of young students. The target population could therefore be taken as educators and also students.

In contrast to the new Chinese character list, the New *Joyo* List is intended to be used only as a guide for the general public. As the Japanese Preamble also goes to great lengths to counteract the view that a character list does not serve any purpose and to establish the view that a list is required, it can be said that the new list is implemented through promotion and persuasion. However, as it will be implemented as a compulsory measure in all schools, authority is also used through institutional practices to enforce the official list of characters instead of leaving it entirely to the discretion of the people.



## Costs and benefits of the latest reforms

The Chinese and Japanese official documents mention the expected benefits of the new policy initiatives. The main benefits expected from the Chinese initiative are the facilitation of contemporary character usage, the facilitation of information technology, and the implementation of the Language Law. Having a character standard that is able to reflect the different needs people have for different characters, providing the characters necessary for data storage in computers and for specialist areas, and obtaining a unified set of fonts with standardized shape and improving clarity of expression are other expected benefits. The documents specifically mention that the addition and deletion of characters has improved the coverage of characters in the first two tiers. The main benefits expected from the Japanese initiative are achieving a character list that can be used as a guide, which takes into account the widespread use of information processors and developing the ability in the community to use characters properly.

As with any reform, there are also possible negative effects that could flow from the two initiatives. The costs are higher for the Chinese community more than for the Japanese, because only characters in the new official list can be used without permission.

Central among the costs of the Chinese initiative is the impact of restricting characters used in personal names to the standard characters on the list. This will affect many individuals as a large number of non-standard characters are used in personal names at present. Writing affected names with substitute characters could affect not only the original meaning of the names, but also family clan identification. Although non-standard characters in surnames may be allowed with permission, whether everybody will have this special privilege is uncertain.

Similarly, given that a large number of place names use non-standard characters, the impact of character standardization on place names will also be significant. The emotional cost will be high because characters used in place names are imbued with a special symbolic significance as they are closely linked with that place, the people who belong to that place, and events that have happened in that place through many generations (Zhao & Baldauf, 2007, 2008).

Also, financial costs will be incurred to re-print material, such as dictionaries, school textbooks, government brochures, and other publications, the updated list of official

characters, etc. Also, an additional cost will be incurred in changing ID cards to accommodate the shape change applied to some characters. There will also be costs related to enforcing and spreading the standard characters throughout the country.

In spite of the benefits mentioned in the official sources, the Chinese initiative can be called a machine-oriented move as the major target is to devise a set of characters that is able to support and enhance information and communication technology. The number of people who will benefit from this move is not likely to be very high in China because computer use has not yet widely spread throughout the country. The immediate beneficiaries of the current initiative would be mostly the urban population, which only accounts for approximately 40% of the total population. Even in this group, only some people would be able to afford a computer and even fewer people would be able to get access to the Internet (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008). Therefore, it is only a small minority that would benefit from the new Chinese initiative, largely, the computer literate urban youth of China.

Those who will benefit the least from the new initiative are those without functional literacy. Achieving functional literacy is more challenging in character-based communities than in alphabetic communities. This group will therefore include large numbers of the population, particularly those in the vast rural areas of China, the ethnic minorities, and people in low socio-economic classes. It needs to be acknowledged that having a tiered list is to the interest of people who are in the process of learning characters, because a large number of new characters added to the list fall in the new third tier, which general users are not required to master. However, while the number of characters in the first tier remains constant, significant changes have been made to the first tier in terms of addition and deletion of characters, and further changes of this nature are likely to be made in the future (Wang, 2004). Constant changes made to the list are likely to pose additional challenges for learners.

Although the costs of the new Japanese character initiative are likely to be comparatively less when compared with the Chinese initiative, it appears to benefit mostly those who are already proficient in character literacy. This is because the addition of 196 characters to the list is to help with reading the large volume of information that is available on information and communication systems and to overcome *mazegaki*. Therefore, the main goals of the new policy indicate that it has drifted further away from the original policy of 1946 than when it was revised in 1981. The goal of the original policy was the education of the masses, and so, the number of characters was reduced to 1850 through the *Toyo List*, and the number of education *kanji* was kept as low as 881. The revision made to the original policy in 1981 through the *Joyo List* was a shift from the goal of mass literacy, not so much in the number of characters added but in the change of scope of the list from a prescriptive list to a guide. The number of characters added then was only 95. In contrast, the changes made to the official list this time can be viewed as a reversal of the original policy also in terms of the number of characters added to the list.

It should also be noted at this point that increasing the number of characters in the official list means raising the bar that is set for character literacy in Japan. This is because the official character list is used as the standard of character acquisition in Japan. Raising the bar on character literacy would therefore have an impact on the teaching, learning, and testing of Chinese characters in both the domestic and international contexts. It will also have an impact on the education and employment sector as character literacy provides entry into certain educational and professional opportunities in Japan.

The current policy revision also places a 'burden' on high-school students, which is acknowledged by the script reform officials (*New Joyo Kanji*, 2010). While the new characters include some very complex characters, the emphasis placed on writing them by hand

makes it even harder to attain mastery over the new characters. Language planners acknowledge the difficulty as evidenced by the many concessions made to ease the learning of the new characters.

When compared with the previous script reform initiatives and script policy revisions, the new script initiatives introduced in 2009 by China and Japan can be considered as the most conservative. They both appear to have given priority to adapting the respective scripts for machine use, overlooking the difficulties people will experience due to the drastic changes made to the official lists. They have also moved further away from providing functional literacy for the masses.

## Conclusion

The script reforms in China and Japan show the impact of socio-political and economic factors on language planning that have been identified by LP scholars (Baldauf, 2006; Cooper, 1989; Fishman, 1983; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Liddicoat, 2005). While acknowledging the importance of technical linguistic skills for corpus planning, Liddicoat (2005) notes that it involves more than simple, linguistically based decision-making. In a similar vein, Kaplan and Baldauf (1997, p. 48) observe that 'corpus planning operates in real world contexts in conjunction with social, historical, cultural and political forces', and Fishman (1983) observes that the particular sociocultural context is important in each corpus-planning venture. Baldauf (2006) views decision-making in corpus planning as having a political aspect due to the role played by powerful, political figures. He observes that until recently, language planners in top-down settings have been viewed as an unbiased group who objectively examine contemporary national needs and make decisions to address the issues in the best interest of the nation. Through his language planning accounting scheme, Cooper (1989) stresses the importance of LP variables such as actors, socio-political and economic conditions, and target population that have an impact on LP decision-making.

Not only have socio-political and economic conditions made a significant impact on Chinese and Japanese script reforms, but they have also shifted the focus of script reform due to their changing nature. The initial script reforms carried out in 1956 in China and in 1946 in Japan were triggered by the urgent need to modernize the countries. Both countries were engaged in nation-building projects at the time, and literacy of the masses was thought to be a necessary factor to achieve this outcome. As the purpose of the initial script reforms was to make the character-based scripts more amenable to mass literacy, an extensive simplification of the scripts was carried out in both countries, China largely through a simplification of the shape of characters and Japan largely through a simplification of the number of characters.

However, with increased literacy, improved economic conditions, and the advancement of technology in later years, literacy needs became backgrounded, making computerization the driving force of script reform. In this new socio-political and economic environment, China aims to facilitate the use of computers, and Japan aims to respond to the impact of widespread computer use. The latest script reform initiatives of the two countries reflect these needs. Through these initiatives, China has sought to standardize its script instead of simplifying it further and Japan has sought to expand its script instead of reducing it further. Although literacy issues have not been optimally realized in either country, the focus of script reform has shifted from the previous human need to a machine-oriented need.

In addition to the national needs for modernization, the script reforms in China and Japan have also been influenced by nationalistic sentiments. Fishman (1973) observes that the major motivational focus of modern nationalism has been the belief that the

mother tongue protects the spirit or soul of nationality and that linking with the ethnic past provides a link to greatness. This observation shows the close relationship between linguistic nationalism and the belief that the national language should be guarded from foreign influences and protected in its pristine purity. Nationalism, particularly in relation to the cultural heritage of the character-based scripts, has been a governing force in script reform in both China and Japan. This is evidenced by the initial script reforms of the two countries which in spite of being radical measures did not go as far as overhauling the character-based scripts.

Again, due to growing nationalism in the country, the second character simplification scheme of China which was planned during the Cultural Revolution was rejected under the new regime that came to power at the end of the Mao era. In addition, China declared in 1986 that no further large-scale simplification would be carried out on the shape of characters, revived some complex characters in 1988 that had previously been abolished, and refused to accept the 111 simplified characters from the rejected second simplification scheme that were recommended for use by the Commission of Script Reform. As a response to the Cultural Revolution of the previous decade, Chinese people began to value what belonged to their cultural past, including the cherished traditional Chinese characters (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008).

Similarly, the post-war socio-political climate of Japan that was favorable for script reform underwent a change due to its economic bubble of the 1960s. In the wake of economic security came a resurgence of nationalistic sentiments, and the argument that characters hamper economic development began to lose its strength. The age-old attachment people had to Chinese characters was revived, and the earlier post-war movement to reduce their use began to receive much criticism. In this climate of renewed nationalism, the Toyo List came to be viewed as having several problems. Japan revised its prescribed Toyo List in 1981 by increasing the number of Chinese characters that were permitted to be used and declared that the new list (the Joyo List) should be used as a guide and not as a prescriptive list as the Toyo List was recommended to be used.

The latest script reforms in China and Japan appear to be influenced by nationalistic sentiments stimulated by globalization. In China, the need to move into an information society in the future with the developed industrialized world is driving its new character reform initiative. To address this need, China has standardized its script to make it more computer-friendly. In Japan, the need to preserve its character-based script from further deterioration and the need to ensure that people have adequate knowledge of characters to be able to read contemporary Japanese texts are driving the latest script reform. Accordingly, Japan has increased the number of characters on the New Joyo List and has also revived the practice of handwriting characters in schools. Both initiatives signal a definite turning back on the radical simplification schemes that were carried out at a time when the countries were in need of urgent economic development. Yet, neither country has gone back to the unsimplified scripts that were in use before the initial script reforms. More than ever, the latest script reforms in China and Japan reflect the 'bipolarity' of corpus planning and show how the old and the new 'cohabit constantly' in every modernization experience (Fishman, 1983, p. 111).



## Notes

1. GB18030 is a Chinese government standard describing the required language and character support necessary for software in China. GB18030 supersedes GB2312.
2. The JIS characters are a set of standardized characters identified by the Japanese Industrial Standards Committee for use in computing and word processing. The latest version consists of two sets of characters – 2965 characters in level one and 3384 characters in level two.

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