

Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese - Basic Language Guide

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese as used in Taiwan and Mainland China are essentially the same language. The main difference lies in their written appearance, although the grammatical structure is basically same.

2. Guide to Chinese Language Usage

Territory	Written Form	Spoken Form
Mainland China (PRC)	Simplified	Mandarin
Taiwan (ROC)	Traditional	Mandarin
Hong Kong*	Traditional	Cantonese
Macau*	Traditional	Cantonese
Singapore	Simplified	Mandarin
Other overseas Chinese communities	Traditional	Cantonese/Mandarin (in the same community)

* At this point in time, there is no indication that Hong Kong and Macau will adopt Simplified Chinese as their official written systems following reversion to China.

3. Historical Roots

Chinese, which is composed entirely of characters, is one of the world's oldest written languages. Generally speaking, each character represents a meaningful syllable. The Chinese characters in use today developed from pictographs carved on oracle bones dating from over 3,000 years ago and others found on ancient bronze vessels dating from a little later. In the course of history, Chinese characters evolved from pictographs into characters formed of strokes, with very much simpler structures.

Traditional Chinese has been used by the people of Mainland China and Taiwan as a writing system for many hundreds of years. Some of these characters are extremely complex, composed of more than 25 strokes. Thus, considerable time and effort was required to master the full range of characters.

Simplified Chinese is, in fact, a simplification of Traditional Chinese characters, mainly through the elimination of the complex variants and reduction of the number of the strokes of which a complex character is composed. Simplified Chinese had been used unofficially by ordinary Chinese people for many generations, until the Communists took power in Mainland China in 1949. The new government initiated a reform of written characters with the aim of developing literacy. They adopted Simplified Chinese, already widely used by ordinary people, standardised the characters and made them official throughout Mainland China. In this process, some 13,500 Traditional characters were replaced by around 7,000 Simplified characters.

However, the government in Taiwan, the old government of China did not follow the suit. They kept Traditional Chinese as their official writing system.

Following the Communist-led revolution, Mainland China and the island of Taiwan have been separate political entities for several decades. The culture has inevitably developed in different directions. The economy in Taiwan started to develop earlier, and the language has been heavily influence by the introduction of new technology. Both sides have continued to create their own words according to their own understanding of concepts and terminology. Mainland China has also been carefully selecting useful words from Taiwan and Hong Kong.



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