

Script changes

The mainland's battle to have simplified Chinese characters accepted as the global standard has been bolstered by a UN decision.

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The United Nations conducts its business in six official languages, including Chinese, and will from this year accept only the simplified form of characters used on mainland China. The UN no longer uses the traditional form it has accepted since 1945. "We are appalled by the abolition of traditional Chinese in UN documents," said an online petition to the UN, signed by more than 400,000 people. "This is an act of annihilation of the culture and history of the Chinese people. Both traditional and simplified Chinese are of extreme significance and should be recognised equally on the international level and by the UN."

Such is the depth of the feeling about the fight to establish a global standard of Chinese, which will be one of the most important languages of the 21st century.

The UN decision is the latest victory by the mainland in its drive to make the simplified characters it has used since the 1950s the global standard. The majority of foreign universities that teach Chinese use them, as do the more than 90 Confucius Institutes established by Beijing around the world.

But simplified characters are passionately opposed by millions of Chinese in Taiwan - including the Kuomintang's Ma Ying-jeou, who is likely to become the island's president in March - Hong Kong and overseas.

On his last day as Taipei's mayor in December 2006, Mr Ma attended a ceremony to honour Cang Jie, the mythical inventor of Chinese characters, the first time he had been so honoured. It was part of an effort to make Taipei the world's capital of traditional characters.

"In the world, 50 million Chinese use traditional characters, which is far less than the number of those on the mainland who use the simplified ones," Mr Ma said. "But the publishing industry of Taiwan has nearly 40,000 titles, making it the world publishing capital for Chinese. Traditional characters are our link to our history and culture. We can never give them up."

The split occurred after the end of the civil war in 1949. While the nationalist government had discussed simplifying characters during the 1930s and '40s, it was the new communist government that took the decisive steps, with two rounds of character simplifications in 1956 and 1964, to make them easier to learn and reduce illiteracy.

Mao Zedong even considered following the example of Vietnam, which abolished the characters and replaced them with a Roman alphabet. But the number of homonyms would have been so many that the language would have become incomprehensible, so the idea was dropped.

Vietnamese was written in Chinese characters until French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes developed a romanisation in the 17th century that later became the official script. This reform aimed to make the language easier to read for a population that was largely illiterate, like China's in 1949.

Another communist leader, Kim Il-sung of North Korea, abolished the Chinese characters used in his country for centuries and switched entirely to Hangul, a phonemic alphabet; South Korea continues to use both.

The KMT government in Taiwan regarded Mao's reforms as not only an effort to reduce illiteracy but also to cut Chinese off from their history and traditions: knowing only simplified characters, many would be unable to read written material published before 1949.

The split between the two forms became ideological and political, linked to the prestige and legitimacy of the two governments, which made reconciliation difficult.

The two sides fought to have their form accepted by overseas Chinese and educational institutions around the world. While the mainland was closed to the world during the Maoist era, the traditional characters were in the ascendant. The tide began to change when Beijing replaced Taipei at the UN in 1971, bringing the simplified characters, although the world body continued to accept the use of the traditional ones.

With the economic growth of the mainland from the 1980s, the status and prestige of simplified characters grew and they were increasingly accepted overseas, such as in the schools of Singapore and Malaysia.

In November 2004, the Ministry of Education established the first Confucius Institute, in Seoul - like the British Council and Germany's Goethe-Institut - as a vehicle to teach Chinese, using simplified characters. Now there are more than 80 in 34 countries - but a chronic shortage of trained teachers. The ministry estimates that by 2010, 100 million foreigners will be studying Chinese.

For the past 17 years, scholars in East Asia have been trying to reach agreement on a common standard. The first International Seminar on Chinese Characters was held in South Korea in 1991 and the most recent, the eighth, in Beijing last October.

It was attended by experts from the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Macau, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

On November 3, the Chosen Ilbo newspaper of South Korea reported that the Chinese side had changed its long-held position and agreed to develop a joint list of 5,000 characters, using the traditional form as the standard but including the simplified one for the same character if there was one. "It is the joint survival of the two forms," the newspaper announced triumphantly.

But the mainland participants were quick to deny this outcome. "The South Korean scholars put forward this proposal, but the Chinese side did not agree to any such

idea, even less agree that the traditional characters should be the base for unification," said Su Peicheng, professor of Chinese at Beijing University.

"Unifying the characters is extremely difficult. The policy on the script is part of the sovereignty of a country. You cannot emulate another country."

The South Koreans are the most enthusiastic about a common standard, to enable Chinese, Japanese and Koreans to read the same meaning from agreed characters. They argue that the characters are the joint cultural heritage of the three countries and should be mutually comprehensible.

Professor Su praised the aspirations of the Korean scholars but said the seminar was a non-official event, with no permanent secretariat and no government participation. "The promotion of simplified characters over the past 50 years has been a success and they have crossed China's borders, used for example in Singapore and even in Taiwan," he said.

Despite the 17 years of discussions, the mainland and Taiwan remain far apart on the issue. Last December Mr Ma said he would file an application with the UN to make traditional characters a world cultural heritage item. "Taiwan must aim to protect these assets so that we can pass the treasure of Chinese culture from one generation to another," reads one of the applications on the internet. "The characters are the oldest written form in the world, so people are able to read ancient poems without translation.

"People who study English know that it needs translation to understand Shakespeare's poems written in the English of 400 years ago. Once students are familiar with traditional characters they are able to recognise simplified ones without being taught," it said.

Wang Ning, professor of Chinese at Beijing Normal University, said the characters did not need protection. "They are constantly evolving. Over thousands of years, they have constantly developed and been passed on. You apply for preservation to save a culture close to extinction. This is not the case with Chinese characters."

In Hong Kong, where students are educated in traditional characters, opinion is divided. Many Hong Kong people have signed the petition to the UN. Others say that since Hong Kong is part of, and dependent on, China, it should use simplified characters.

On the mainland, traditional characters have reappeared in shop fronts, advertisements, calligraphy and dedications. In 2004, the Ministry of Education rejected a proposal by a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) for primary schools to teach traditional as well as simplified characters.

The CPPCC member argued that most young people read traditional characters with difficulty and needed this skill to deal with Hong Kong and Taiwan. The ministry said his proposal did not meet the legal requirements and could complicate the curriculum.