



# THE POLITICS OF PINYIN:

Reflections on the differences of  
Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan and China  
by a novice

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In efforts to boost literacy, the Chinese language and its romanized transcription have been modified over the past 100 years. The changes in Chinese on the mainland and Chinese in Taiwan have been motivated by literacy and by politics.

## *Transcription of Mandarin Chinese*

Until 1979 the standard for transcribing Chinese characters into readable English was a system known as the Wade-Giles system. Wade-Giles assigns some sounds in Chinese with non-equivalent letters in English. For example, the “T” represents the “D” sound as in “day.” So thousands of people eat “tofu” instead of “dofu” and practice “Taoism” instead of “Daoism.” As this can lead to confusion among those not familiar **with** the intricacies of the varying sounds, the government of the People’s Republic of China adopted *hanyu pinyin* (literally translated as *Chinese language spell sound*) in 1979, replacing Wade-Giles and *zhuyin fuhao* (a ruby character system used in Taiwan

to teach pronunciation to children and beginning learners) as the way to transcribe and teach Chinese. The *hanyu pinyin* system is more true to proper pronunciation compared to Wade-Giles, but is still imperfect.

Taiwan continued to use Wade-Giles as the romanization system. However, as noted earlier, Wade-Giles assigns some letters to sounds that are not intuitive, so Chinese language learners with no training do not pronounce some of the words correctly. *Tongyong pinyin* was developed to correct this problem. The development of a new *pinyin* system in Taiwan became an issue of identity between the two major political parties. Through some political wrangling, *tongyong pinyin* became the official romanization of Taiwan, although its use is voluntary. In 2007 the Ministry of the Interior announced they would standardize place names with the *tongyong pinyin*. The lack of an “official” romanization standard in Taiwan can lead to confusion among foreigners, especially with place names. Today, with Wade-Giles and *hanyu pinyin* the same city can be spelled two different ways. For example the city “Jilong” can also be spelled “Keelung.” A third romanization may very well lead to more confusion.

### *Complex and Simplified Characters*

As is inevitable in all languages, the written form of Chinese has evolved. Changes have been made both through common usage and through deliberate action. As one examines the earliest form of Chinese, natural simplifications can be observed, but in modern times most of these changes have been deliberate. While there were early proposals to simplify Chinese, support for simplification was lacking and not taken seriously until after the Communist revolution (1946–1950). During this time over 80% of the 500 million people in China were illiterate. One of the ways used to correct this problem was to make the characters simpler to write.

Simplification of characters, however, created two forms

of written Chinese. While Taiwan<sup>1</sup> and Hong Kong use the complex (or traditional) characters, China, Singapore and Malaysia use the simplified form. This means that if one only understands the simplified characters, it is difficult to read anything written in Taiwan or Hong Kong, as well as hundreds of years of materials written before the simplified characters were introduced.

With the handover of Hong Kong to the Mainland, there has been a push to replace Cantonese with Mandarin. The government allocated US\$25.8 million to help schools begin teaching Mandarin. This program will be expanded over the next few years. One can assume that the teaching of Mandarin would include the teaching of simplified characters over the traditional that Hong Kong currently uses.

Both China and Taiwan have developed romanized transcriptions of Chinese in what they say is an effort to make Chinese easier to learn. Characters have also been simplified in China to make them easier to learn. At first blush it can appear that education is the only motivation. However, as one digs deeper one can see that some of the changes have been fueled by a political desire to differentiate one country from another. China uses *hanyu pinyin* and no longer uses *zhuyin*. Taiwan does not officially use *hanyu* because doing so would make it the same as China. Instead, it has developed its own *pinyin* system and still uses *zhuyin* to teach Chinese. Simplified characters have been developed by China to increase literacy; and Taiwan uses complex characters as they historically have.

In learning Chinese, it is therefore important to understand the differences between Chinese in Taiwan and Chinese in China. Doing so can help make an informed decision about which path of language acquisition to take. It can further make one aware that language is not cut and dried; sometimes it is more than nouns and adverbs; it involves politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Taiwan does have a list of 57 commonly seen Simplified Characters that are considered “Standard”. An excellent example is the first character in Taiwan and Taipei. While it has an official Complex form, a simplified form is used quite frequently.