

**THE CHINESE DIGRAPHIA PROBLEM
IN THE INFORMATION AGE***

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This paper points out that since the 1986 National Conference of Language Works, Hanyu Pinyin and Hanzi no longer have equal status in the Chinese writing system. Hanyu Pinyin has assumed a subordinate status to Hanzi, and it is no longer regarded as an evolving alphabetized writing system to replace Hanzi in the future. This posture is much lower than that preferred by Mao Zedong in the early stage of New China. In this paper, the authors propose a digraphia in the information age. They suggest that if China does not promote a new Latinized writing system among the whole population, China should at least strive to implement a digraphia ('two-script system' using Hanzi and Pinyin scripts at the same time) among computer users. The use of a writing system (Pinyin) compatible to those of the majority of the developed countries would significantly increase the effectiveness of the communication networks of China, thus greatly benefiting the socialist modernization of the country. In this way, while the vision of the pioneers of the Latinization Movement remains unrealized among all Chinese, it could be partially realized in network communication. In practice, they suggest adopting the Latin alphabet as the basis of Hanyu Pinyin and to improve Hanyu Pinyin in order to achieve a very high level of readability by establishing a one-to-one relation between Hanyu Pinyin and Chinese characters.

In January 1986, Liu Daosheng, former director of the State Commission on Language Works, pointed out in his report to the National Conference on Language Works,

With regard to the promotion of the Hanyu Pinyin Program, one must emphasize that it is the nationally designated standard with legal status. Its formulation was the culmination of past experiences and since its proclamation, it has been widely used both inside and outside of China. The Hanyu Pinyin Program has a deep historical and popular base and is a scientific and practical program. We should strive to promote it, rather than reinventing something new; in fact, it would be very difficult to replace it with another program. Continued promotion of the Hanyu Pinyin Program is a necessity for social and scientific development. Therefore, we must continue to intensify the

teaching of Hanyu Pinyin, gradually enlarge its scope of application, as well as carry on research to resolve practical problems encountered in its use. In particular, these problems include difficulties in disambiguating homonyms in Hanyu Pinyin, the standardization of Hanyu Pinyin orthography, and the tonal representation of Hanyu Pinyin in technical applications.

This passage in Director Liu Daosheng's report reflects the government's revision of the basic policy on Hanyu Pinyin. This revised policy remains largely unchanged today. However, it is different from the government policy towards Pinyin in the early stage of New China. At that time, Mao Zedong pointed out that 'the Chinese writing system must reform under certain conditions; it should converge into the universal pinyin approach.' Liu Daosheng's report did not mention at all the universal pinyin approach raised by Mao Zedong, rather, it focused on enlarging Hanyu Pinyin's scope of application. This suggests that the government has abandoned the policy of the 'pinyin approach' of Mao Zedong and that Hanyu Pinyin will not be regarded as a writing system, but as an auxiliary tool to Hanzi, the Chinese character. Hanzi is the orthodox and legal writing script for Chinese, while Pinyin does not have such a legal status. Therefore, since the 1986 National Conference on Language Works, Pinyin and Hanzi no longer have equal status. Pinyin has assumed a subordinate status to Hanzi, and is no longer regarded as an evolving alphabetized writing system intended to replace Hanzi in the future. This posture is certainly much lower than that preferred by Mao Zedong.

On May 31, 1986, the State Committee on Education and the State Commission on Language Works further clearly indicated in the *Highlights of the National Conference on Language Works* that,

'from now on, for a considerably long period of time, Hanzi will still continue to function as the legal writing system'. The Hanyu Pinyin Program will be promoted and its scope will be enlarged as an effective tool for learning the Chinese language, Chinese characters, and for the popularization of the Putonghua. It will not replace Hanzi, although it can be used as a substitute when using Hanzi is not convenient or possible. With respect to the problem of alphabetization of the Chinese language, many delegates considered it a problem for the future, for which one should not draw quick conclusions.

This document clearly outlined the status and function of Hanyu Pinyin. The use of Hanyu Pinyin is completely optional and depends on the actual situation. However, the use of Hanzi is legally binding and compulsory.

During the National Conference on Language Works, delegates conducted vigorous discussions on the policy change with regard to the 'pinyin approach.' Chen Zhanqai, then Deputy Director of the State Commission of Language Works, made the following clarification in his concluding speech of the conference:

With regard to the issue of the 'pinyin approach', delegates expressed two opinions in their discussions, reflecting the different understandings on the issue that exist in our society. More than half of the delegates favored not raising this issue in the *Report on Language Works*. They believed that not doing so was in accordance with the practical spirit of 'seeking truth from facts' promoted by the central leadership, and that the newly adopted policy is effective and would facilitate the work on language in the new period, and at the same time, be beneficial to the work of language reform. Others believed that although the presentation in the Report was realistic and feasible, the failure to affirm the 'pinyin approach' is a kind of retreat, and such a low profile would hinder future work in that direction. After seriously considering and studying these two opinions, we still believe that the message expressed in the Work Report is in accordance with reality, proactive, and proper; it is progressive rather than regressive. In fact, prior to the Conference, we listened to the opinions in society and consulted some experts in the field, taking into consideration the opinions of many responsible people. We believe that the current position will receive more widespread approval and support, uniting more people to better improve linguistic work in this new period. We will better accomplish the outstanding mission of language reform, so as to better serve the modernization of our country.

We would like to explain to our friends that prior to the delivery of his Report, Comrade Liu Daosheng consulted the opinion of the comrades in the Party Central Committee and the State Council with regard to this issue. Opposing points of view expressed during the Conference were reported to both organizations. Yesterday afternoon, the State Language Commission received an instruction from the Party Central Committee and the State Council agreeing with the representation of this issue in Mr. Liu Daosheng's Report. We hope you will understand well the situation. Of course, it is normal that people would have different opinions on this issue, and it can be discussed, but we hope that the discussion will not affect the focus of our efforts to better perform the main task in front of us.

In this way, the background of the policy change at that time was clearly explained. Although the current government policy on Pinyin is outlined as above, the government has indicated that the issue is still open to discussion. Therefore, some of our country's scholars continue to publicly advocate digraphia. For example, Prof. Zhou Youguang advocates the implementation of the 'two-scripts system' (a dual-track approach in language development). The government does not discourage these scholars from expressing their points of view or carrying out freely scientific research. The nationwide Association for the Modernization of Chinese Language continues to receive strong support from the State Language Commission. The purpose of that Association is to promote

and carry out research on the problem of pinyinization (Prof. Zhou Youguang is a consultant to the Association). This open policy of our Government provides a conducive atmosphere to the study of digraphia. Precisely for this reason, we are willing to put forward our opinion on digraphia, with the intention of bringing forth further discussions.

The 260th issue of *The Chinese Language* (1997) prominently presented the paper of Feng Zhiwei, entitled 'The impact of the standardization of language and writing on language information processing' as its first article. Feng's work generated strong responses as it studied the 'pinyin approach' from a new angle. It said:

Many countries in the world are considering the problem of the establishment of an information superhighway. The United States has already begun the establishment of an information technology infrastructure in the form of a widespread multimedia information superhighway. Our country has initiated the Chinese medium-speed information highway by implementing the 'Golden Bridge' project, with a transmission speed of 114 kilobits to 2 megabits, which will eventually be enhanced to an 'information superhighway' with speeds up to or higher than 1000 megabits. As the main carrier of information, language will play a vital role in the construction of the information superhighway. As reported, Japan encountered difficulties in the construction of an information superhighway as a result of its complex writing system. If Pinyin is used as the information carrier for building our Country's information superhighway, it will greatly increase the overall system efficiency and facilitate international exchanges. In the past, pioneers of the Romanization Movement in our Country had for a long time attempted to promote a new Romanized writing. But in practice, as the cultural strength of Hanzi is strong, it is difficult to promote Romanized writing to the whole Chinese population. Hanzi is enduring as the cultural symbol for the Chinese Nation. However, in this age of information, if we do not promote Romanized new writing among the whole people, we should at least strive to implement a 'two-script system' (using Hanzi and Pinyin scripts at the same time) among computer users. The use of a writing system compatible to those of the majority of the developed countries would significantly increase the effectiveness of our communication networks, thus greatly benefit the socialist modernization of our Country. In this way, while the vision of the pioneers of the Romanization Movement remains unrealized among all Chinese, it could be partially realized in network communication. Of course, the implementation of a 'two-script system' in computer use is only one of our visions, and its feasibility and merits require comprehensive evaluation. Obviously, if we wish to implement a 'two-script system' in computer use, we need to devise various regulations and standards for the pinyin writing sys-

tem. In this regard, the research and formulation of these regulations and standards is of paramount importance.

In accordance with the new requirements of the information age, Prof. Feng Zhiwei was the first person to suggest the use of a 'two-script system' in computer use and advocate pinyinization with a new point of view. His paper was published as the leading article in the authoritative publication *Zhongguo Yuwen*, thus drawing the attention of academic circles to the discussion of the problem of pinyinization. In the current more relaxed academic atmosphere, we are exceedingly happy to see that we may be able to urge the government to reconsider the vital policy problem of pinyinization.

In July 1998, we were invited to participate in 'Symposium on Literacy and Writing Systems in Asia', held in Seoul, Korea. Feng presented a paper entitled 'A bracket form of expression in the structure of Hanzi', while Yin delivered a paper on 'The future of Hanzi'. They pointed out that digraphia will be the best choice for the future of Hanzi and proposed the following three principles of the two-script system:

- (1) Adopt the Roman alphabet as the basis of Hanyu Pinyin.
- (2) Improve Hanyu Pinyin to achieve a very high level of readability.
- (3) Establish a one-to-one relation between Hanyu Pinyin and Chinese characters.

Yin's paper suggested a practical method to realize these three principles: A Chinese character is represented by one Pinyin syllable plus two or three numeric symbols (depending upon the number of homonyms). For example, 美 'beautiful' is written as 'mei32'. The numeral 3 indicates the tone, while numeral 2 indicates that it is the second homonym. Software can be developed to automatically perform the one-to-one conversion between Hanzi and its Pinyin representation. For instance, 啼笑姻缘 'marriage in tears and laughter' can be uniquely transformed into 'ti24 xiao41 yin11 yuan28'. In practice, most viewers may opt for reading the computer output in conventional Chinese rather than such Pinyin codes, but Pinyin codes rather than Hanzi codes will be used for efficient computer processing and data communications. With the use of Pinyin representation (which is a form of ASCII text), the efficiency of Chinese data processing will be greatly enhanced, while Hanzi will continue to be used in human-computer interface. In this way, we will be able to achieve the desirable goal of maintaining the useful value of Hanzi, while moving ahead toward solving the difficult problem of Chinese computer processing and data communication. These are our views on the problem of 'digraphia' in Chinese in the Information Age.

NOTE

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