

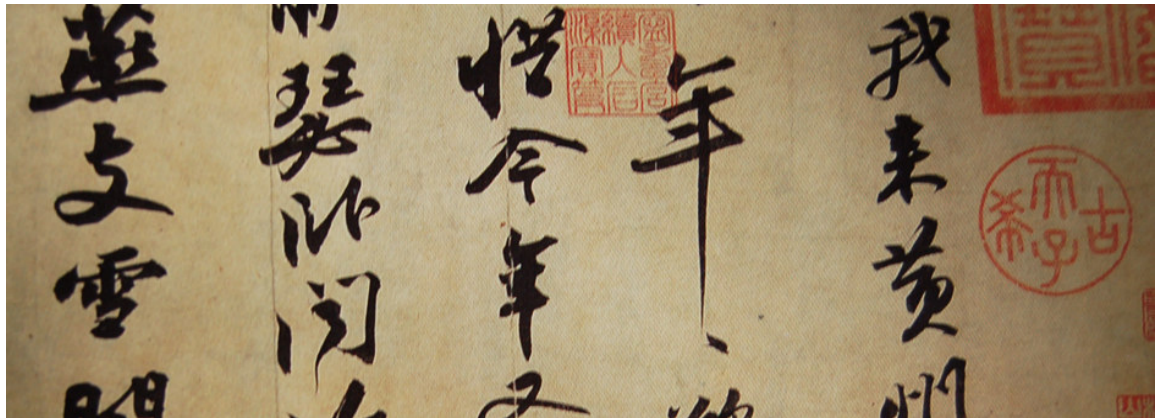
CULTURE

A Cultural Battlefield: Traditional vs. Simplified Chinese

by [Nia Tam](#) | Posted May 24, 2012

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Chinese calligraphy. Source: [asiasociety.org](#).

Walk into a Chinese restaurant, pick up the menu, and you might notice that the Chinese characters in it are different to those in the art on the walls. The characters in the art will have of written Chinese: traditional Chinese and simplified Chinese.

Although simplified Chinese is the standard script of mainland China and the United Nations, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are still using traditional Chinese as their written script. It is also argued that traditional Chinese embodies the romantic, logographic and historical elements of language that makes it far better suited for the arts and design.



Edmond Lai's "The Heart Sutra".

Source:edmondlaidesign.com.

In Hong Kong, Lui Chiu-wing, a well-known calligrapher, sees penning calligraphy in traditional Chinese as an extension of Chinese culture. Lui completed his education in mainland China using simplified Chinese but he insists on using traditional Chinese in his work. "As a calligrapher, using traditional Chinese is my insistence," Lui said, "If calligraphy is not written in traditional Chinese, then it is not calligraphy."

Calligraphy has been divided into different categories of writing styles, like seal scripts, regular scripts, running scripts, etc. and Lui says these scripts have their own ways of writing characters. However, he believes that an individual character is not authentic when written in simplified script, no matter which script is used.

Yet, despite Lui's insistence on using traditional Chinese, he doesn't resist the use of simplified Chinese in daily life because he believes it is easier to learn, read and write than traditional Chinese. Nevertheless, he believes that the use of a written language must co-ordinate with how one understands the language and the culture behind it.

In the course of our interview, Lui pointed to a Chinese character on a recent calligraphic piece in his workroom. The character "yun" (云) exists in both forms of written Chinese but conveys a different meaning in each dialect. In simplified Chinese "yun" means "clouds," while it means the verb "say" in traditional Chinese. Without understanding the context of the piece, it is easy to mistakenly interpret its meaning. So, while he understands the use of simplified Chinese, he believes, when it comes to arts, traditional Chinese is irreplaceable: "If they want to learn calligraphy, they must learn to write traditional Chinese."

Traditional Chinese characters are not only a calligraphic tradition but they also inspire modern designs. "Traditional Chinese is structurally beautiful," [Edmond Lai](#), a Hong Kong graphic designer, expressed to me. Currently studying calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting at the [University of Hong Kong](#), Lai describes these characters as "flawless" and specialises in designs based on re-creating Chinese characters. "From the aesthetic perception, traditional Chinese definitely wins." Lai believes traditional characters have a better balance in their structures and stroke distributions than their simplified rivals.

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Lai wrote two characters on my notebook with a pencil: "tin" meaning the verb "listen" in the two scripts (traditional Chinese: 聽 and simplified Chinese: 听). He commented that the simplified Chinese one looked more hollow due to too much space between the strokes and had lost its pictographic meaning. He said that in terms of minimalism, simplified Chinese has its advantages because the characters themselves are of fewer strokes and lines. He even tried to use simplified Chinese in his graphic designs, but still finds traditional Chinese better suited. More strokes and lines allow him to break them down, rearrange the structure, make changes on strokes' styles and even try new combinations of several characters into new ones. Such visual manipulation of the characters is an advantage, from the design perspective, that neither simplified Chinese nor English can complete with.

Besides his focus on the diversity of the characters and how he can play with them, Lai also admires how the script shows the traditional wisdom of Chinese culture. His recent silver [HKDA Global Design Award \(2011\)](#) winning art work, "The Heart Sutra," is inspired by the

Chinese Buddhist culture of transcribing sutra. Traditionally, a sutra is copied by hand but Lai dared to copy the sutra electronically, using a computer to re-create the characters. He said it was fun and special to transcribe the "**Heart Sutra**" in a modern way.

Lai finds it impressive that every character's meaning can be explained by analysing each part of its structure. "What is it?" Lai's foreign clients asked him about the characters on the "Heart Sutra" during an exhibition. He was glad to explain the stories behind them: "every single character carries a story and shows how clearly and precisely the character-makers observed things and thought."



Another of Edmond Lai's designs.

Source:edmondlaidesign.com.

While traditional Chinese is still commonly observed in art and design pieces, books written in the script have become less common. "Books written in traditional Chinese are of higher collective value," said So Keng-chit, a distinguished Chinese-Canadian writer, journalist and book collector. So explained that simplified Chinese has been promoted by the Chinese government in the last few decades and any books pre-dating Communist party rule, which are typically written in traditional Chinese, are now of great value. For example, in a previous book auction organised by So, one of the most precious collectors' items was **Empress**

Dowager Cixi's bible written in traditional Chinese; it was worth more than HK\$300,000 (C\$39,320).

So also added that the difference between books written in traditional Chinese versus simplified Chinese is not just the form of the characters but also the content. "Books in simplified Chinese are published in China and some of the content may be deleted," noting Chinese social activist, Zhang Yi-he's "The Last Nobles" - the traditional Chinese version published in Hong Kong contains Zhang's complete copy, while its simplified Chinese version has a certain degree of editing due to political censorship by the Chinese government.

There are now more 1.5 billion people using simplified Chinese in the world and the number is growing. But Lai, Lui and So are not pessimistic about the future of traditional Chinese. Knowing the historical, cultural and artistic values of the script, its place and value within Chinese society is undeniable, and that alone will keep the tradition alive. So believes that the use of traditional scripts is still invaluable, particularly as it is at the root of Chinese culture. He named a few Chinese officials in mainland China who are also calligraphers and are still using traditional Chinese, showing that political reasons may hinder but cannot stop the conservation of traditional Chinese in arts.