

TRANSITIONING FROM
TRADITIONAL TO SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS:
BACKGROUND AND STRATEGIES



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Welcome back from your mission! My hope is that in addition to preaching the gospel with all of your heart, might, mind and strength, you also took your language study seriously.

Now that you are enrolled in a Chinese course, you will find that studying the language in a university setting is much different than in the mission field. The rigid structure of classes stands in stark contrast to the self-guided study you did as a missionary. Part of that structure includes strong emphasis on the ability to read and write.

Here at BYU-Idaho, all Chinese classes are conducted in simplified characters. This means that since you learned traditional characters on your mission, you will need to quickly transition to simplified. All homework and tests are in simplified characters. That being said, you will have a two-week grace period in which you won't be docked points for occasionally writing a traditional character.

To make the transition easier, this booklet will outline important information regarding simplified characters. It is not meant to be exhaustive by covering every possible character. Rather it provides an understanding of how and why characters were simplified, which should be sufficient to reduce unfamiliarity and anxiety, and (more importantly) lessen your transition time.

Historical Background

Let's begin with a little history. The idea to simplify characters was raised in the 1950s and was informed by a desire to increase literacy among the general population. Characters then in use were considered too hard for farmers and peasants to read and write with proficiency. What this means for you is that learning simplified characters should be easier than learning traditional!

What is not well-known is that the simplification process was not a spontaneous, one-off event that happened after three thousand years of use. Actually, Chinese characters fluctuated between 'complex' and 'simple' over the last three millennia! As early as the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), society's growing verbal lexicon



necessitated the creation of new characters. Thus additional components were often added to characters already in use to connote new words. For example, the character 然 *rán* originally meant ‘to burn’ (literally to 火 *huǒ* roast 犬 *quǎn* dog’s 肉 *ròu* meat. Yum!). This is indicated by the 灬 or fire radical at the bottom. Later, it was borrowed to signify ‘thus, so, or correct’, and a new character was created to mean ‘burn’: 燃. Notice how it now has two fire radicals! (Burn, baby, burn!)

Another way characters became more complex was in the transition between various ancient scripts, such as from the oracle bone script (甲骨文 *jiǎgǔwén*) to bronzeware characters (金文 *jīnwén*) and seal characters (小篆 *xiǎozhuàn*) to clerical script (隸書 *lìshū*) and onward. The three boxes to the left are the same character: 隹 *zhuī*. Notice how the seal character is more complex compared to the oracle bone version.



Ancient characters occasionally also underwent simplification. This was primarily due to two reasons. First, as characters became more complex, some had too many strokes to be written effectively. Also, the advent of the running script (行書 *xíngshū*) and the more abbreviated cursive script (草書 *cǎoshū*) led to other simplifications for some characters. Regarding characters with too many strokes, one common example is 集 *jí*, which means ‘to gather, to collect.’ This character depicts a short-tailed bird (隹, the character mentioned above) on a tree (木 *mù*). The question then is, how does one bird on a tree depict ‘gathering’ and ‘collecting’? Actually, this character was simplified from an older character written 龠 (see larger forms on the right), which depicts three birds on a tree—an arrangement that depicts the meaning clearly. If you know that two thousand years ago characters were written with a calligraphy brush on narrow bamboo strips, it’s not hard to surmise why this character was simplified. Often the characters on bamboo strips were between one half to one inch tall. Imagine trying to write 龠 with a brush on such a small space!



Different calligraphy forms also played a part in characters being simplified. Take for example the character for ‘employ’: 顧 *gù*. As early as the Western Jin dynasty (265–316) a stone monument written in the clerical script had the character carved as . The left-hand component is the origin for the simplified form 顾. (There goes another 佳!) As for the right side, the character written in cursive calligraphy  shows how the 頁 *yè* gets abbreviated into 页. Another example is 爲 *wèi*, which originally depicted a hand (𠂔) leading an elephant (shown to the right in the seal script). Now in traditional characters, the form 為 is most common (from which we get the simplified 为). Thus traditional Chinese characters have not always been written the same. Rather the Chinese character set has been a dynamic body since its inception, with characters being created, made more complex, or simplified as verbal and written needs and materials change.



小篆

Another pertinent fact is that in the large-scale simplification process that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s less than 50% of the characters were altered. This means that your proficiency in traditional characters will not, for the most part, be “lost in translation.” For example, in the *Chinese Link* textbook used in Chinese 201, out of 248 characters comprising the main text for Chapter 1, only 66 have simplified forms (26%). The other 182 characters are the same in both traditional and simplified. In the textbook for Chinese 202, out of the 484 characters in the first text, only 142 are simplified (29.3%). As you can see, if you were diligent on your mission with the language, you’ll enjoy a high degree of carry-over!

Common Ways Characters Were Simplified

While the percentage of characters that were simplified is relatively small, they can be tricky to master due to the seeming lack of a consistent pattern. For example, in the characters 購 *gòu* and 講 *jiǎng*, the component on the right is the same, but the simplified versions are 购 and 讲, respectively. If you understand the ways in which characters were simplified (there *is* a method to what feels like

madness at first!), it will greatly increase your ability to remember the characters. Five main ways will be discussed, with examples, below.

I. Simplifying the Radical

For a large percentage of simplified characters, often only the radical was changed. For example, 說 *shuō* became 说, 飯 *fàn* became 饭, and 間 *jiān* became 间. When you become familiar with the simplified radicals, it'll be easier for you to identify the simplified characters from what you know of traditional. Here is a list of all radicals that have simplified counterparts, with less common ones being listed last:

Trad.	Simp.	Examples	Trad.	Simp.	Examples
糸 <i>sī</i> (糸)	纟	結 (结) <i>jié</i> 紅 (红) <i>hóng</i> 糾 (纠) <i>jiū</i>	艹 <i>cǎo</i>	艹	□(花) <i>huā</i> □(英) <i>yīng</i> □(苦) <i>kǔ</i>
見 <i>jiàn</i>	见	現 (现) <i>xiàn</i> 視 (视) <i>shì</i> 規 (规) <i>guī</i>	韋 <i>wéi</i>	韦	圍 (围) <i>wéi</i> 偉 (伟) <i>wěi</i> 諱 (讳) <i>huì</i>
言 <i>yán</i>	讠	話 (话) <i>huà</i> 謝 (谢) <i>xiè</i> 請 (请) <i>qǐng</i>	鳥 <i>niǎo</i>	鸟	鳴 (鸣) <i>míng</i> 島 (岛) <i>dǎo</i> 鴨 (鸭) <i>yā</i>
貝 <i>bèi</i>	贝	員 (员) <i>yuán</i> 則 (则) <i>zé</i> 貧 (贫) <i>pín</i>	頁 <i>yè</i>	页	煩 (烦) <i>fán</i> 領 (领) <i>lǐng</i> 頂 (顶) <i>dǐng</i>
車 <i>chē</i>	车	軍 (军) <i>jūn</i> 較 (较) <i>jiào</i> 輛 (辆) <i>liàng</i>	風 <i>fēng</i>	风	瘋 (疯) <i>fēng</i> 諷 (讽) <i>fěng</i> 飄 (飘) <i>piāo</i>
金 <i>jīn</i> (金)	钅	錯 (错) <i>cuò</i> 銀 (银) <i>yín</i> 鉛 (铅) <i>qiān</i>	龍 <i>lóng</i>	龙	籠 (笼) <i>lóng</i> 龐 (庞) <i>páng</i> 寵 (宠) <i>chǒng</i>
長 <i>cháng</i>	长	張 (张) <i>zhāng</i> 帳 (帐) <i>zhàng</i> 漲 (涨) <i>zhǎng</i>	門 <i>mén</i>	门	們 (们) <i>mén</i> 問 (问) <i>wèn</i> 聞 (闻) <i>wén</i>
食 <i>shí</i> (食)	饣	館 (馆) <i>guǎn</i> 飽 (饱) <i>bǎo</i> 餃 (饺) <i>jiǎo</i>	黽 <i>mǐn</i>	龟	繩 (绳) <i>shéng</i> 蠅 (蝇) <i>yíng</i> 澀 (涩) <i>miǎn</i>

馬 <i>mǎ</i>	马	嗎 (吗) <i>ma</i> 駐 (驻) <i>zhù</i> 馮 (冯) <i>féng</i>	齊 <i>qí</i>	齐	濟 (济) <i>jì</i> 擠 (挤) <i>jǐ</i> 劑 (剂) <i>jì</i>
魚 <i>yú</i>	鱼	鮮 (鲜) <i>xiān</i> 漁 (渔) <i>yú</i> 魯 (鲁) <i>lǔ</i>	齒 <i>chǐ</i>	齿	齡 (龄) <i>líng</i> 齧 (齧) <i>chèn</i> 嚙 (啮) <i>niè</i>
飛 <i>fēi</i>	飞		鹵 <i>lǔ</i>	卤	鹺 (鹺) <i>cuó</i>
麥 <i>mài</i>	麦	𪎭 (麸) <i>fū</i>	龜 <i>guī</i>	龟	鬮 (阄) <i>jiū</i>

II. Simplifying Common Components

In addition to these radicals, other select common components of traditional characters have been simplified on a relatively consistent basis. Many common ones are listed below for your reference. Please note that oftentimes the strokes for the simplified parts are “markers” showing that several strokes were abbreviated. Take for example 學 (学) *xué*. The simplified section is comprised of three small strokes to signify the three parts on the top 𠄎. The character 觀 (观) *guān* is another example. The left side, 隹, is reduced to 又 *yòu* (and another 佳 bites the dust). The three horizontal lines in the 見 component are signified by extending the left side of 儿 up into the box. A final example is the character 應 *yīng*, written as 应 in simplified, where each of the original components is replaced by a stroke (not another 佳!). It is key to remember that these common parts are not radicals, but they do occur often and tend to be quite systemic.

𠄎 in place of 冂 over 田: 當 (当) *dāng*、擋 (挡) *dǎng*、檔 (档) *dǎng*.

𠄎 in place of 一 over 彡: 經 (经) *jīng*、輕 (轻) *qīng*、勁 (劲) *jìn*、頸 (颈) *jǐng*.

𠄎 instead of 囟: 總 (总) *zǒng*、聰 (聪) *cōng*.

𠄎 instead of 臣: 監 (监) *jiān*、藍 (蓝) *lán*; in 覽 (览) *lǎn* it includes the 皿 *mǐn* as well.

乂 in place of 巛: 岡 (冈) *gāng*、鋼 (钢) *gāng*、剛 (刚) *gāng*; two 乂 are used for 網 (网) *wǎng*, the difference being a 亡 *wáng* instead of a 山 *shān* in the traditional form.

头 replaces 貫 in 實 (实) *shí*; also found in 買 (买) *mǎi* and 賣 (卖) *mài*; as a stand-alone it is the simplified version of 頭 *tóu*.

戈 replaces 戔: 錢 (钱) *qián*、淺 (浅) *qiǎn*、綫 (线) *xiàn*. Notice that the missing 戈 *gē* is indicated by an additional horizontal line.

扌 replaces 幸: 報 (报) *bào*、執 (执) *zhí*、墊 (垫) *diàn*、摯 (挚) *zhì*; however, 罍 is simplified to 彡: 澤 (泽) *zé*、擇 (择) *zé*、譯 (译) *yì*.

仓 replaces 侖: 論 (论) *lùn*、倫 (伦) *lún*; a similar simplification is 仓 for 倉: 創 (创) *chuàng*、搶 (抢) *qiǎng*.

勹 replaces 易: 場 (场) *chǎng*、湯 (汤) *tāng*、揚 (扬) *yáng*.

一 replaces 灬: 鳥 (鸟) *niǎo*、馬 (马) *mǎ*、魚 (鱼) *yú*.

Some simplified components have varied corresponding parts in traditional characters. Below are six examples:

instead of 夬 in 覺 (觉) *jué* and 學 (学) *xué*, but also for 𠄎 in 興 (兴) *xīng* and for 𠄎 in 舉 (举) *jǔ*. All three have a common tripartite component at the top of the character.

𠄎 instead of 隹 in 應 (应) *yīng*, but also for 𠄎 in 驗 (验) *yàn*、臉 (脸) *liǎn*、簽 (签) *qiān*.

云 instead of 重 for 動 (动) *dòng*; it also replaces the 曾 in 層 (层) *céng*, the 員 in 償 (偿) *cháng*, the 昌 in 嘗 (尝) *cháng*, the 亘 in 壇 (坛) *tán*, the 盃 in 醞 (酝) *yùn*, and the 軍 in 運 (运) *yùn*. Note that 軍 *jūn* by itself is simplified as 军; also, 賞 by itself is simplified as 赏.

又 instead of 萑 in 觀 (观) *guān*、歡 (欢) *huān*、勸 (劝) *quàn*, but also for 𠄎 and 一 in 對 (对) *duì*, as well as for the left side of 艱 (艰) *jiān*、難 (难) *nán*、漢 (汉) *hàn*.

力 is used in 歷 (历) lì and in 曆 (历) lì, as well as in place of 鼻 in 邊 (边) biān.

办 is used to represent 辦 bàn, as well as the three 力 in 協 (协) xié and 蘇 in the surname 蘇 (苏) sū.

丷 is used instead of 彳 in many characters, such as 決 (决) jué、況 (况) kuàng、減 (减) jiǎn、湊 (凑) còu, and as an indicator of duplication for traditional characters that have repeating components (for example, 棗 zǎo becomes 枣 and 饑 chán becomes 饿). Also, it is an abbreviation marker in 盡 jìn and 儘 jǐn, both of which become 尽.

III. Removing Half the Character

Traditionally there were six ways Chinese characters came to be formed, called 六書 liùshū in Chinese. These six ways are pictograms (象形 xiàng xíng), simple ideograms (指事 zhǐ shì), compound ideographs (會意 huì yì), derivative cognates (轉注 zhuǎn zhù), semantic-phonetic compound characters (形聲 xíng shēng), and phonetic loan characters (假借 jiǎ jiè). For a more detailed treatment of these categories, including common examples, search “Chinese character classification” on Wikipedia.

The semantic-phonetic compounds are made up of two components: one part that signifies meaning (semantic) and another that signifies sound (phonetic). Take 麵 miàn for example. The left part, 麥 mài, tells us that the character has to do something with wheat or barley. The right part, 面 miàn, informs the pronunciation. In the simplification process, the semantic parts of many characters were removed, leaving only the phonetic part. Thus, 麵包 miànbāo is now written 面包. A few characters that do not fall under the semantic-phonetic category were also halved because the remaining part was unique enough to have it stand alone.

The following are a few common characters that have been reduced in this manner (an asterisk indicates the traditional character is not a semantic-phonetic compound):

麼 → 么 <i>me</i>	從 → 从 <i>cóng</i>	裡、裏 → 里 <i>lǐ</i>
*開 → 开 <i>kāi</i>	*鄉 → 乡 <i>xiāng</i>	親 → 亲 <i>qīn</i>
錶 → 表 <i>biǎo</i>	廣 → 广 <i>guǎng</i>	捨 → 舍 <i>shě</i>
雲 → 云 <i>yún</i>	離 → 离 <i>lí</i>	麗 → 丽 <i>lì</i>
氣 → 气 <i>qì</i>	產 → 产 <i>chǎn</i>	復 → 复 <i>fù</i>

IV. Phonetic Replacement

The components of some characters were replaced by a simpler phonetic component that accentuated the pronunciation of the character. These are, in essence, the newest additions to the semantic-phonetic category. Common examples include:

鐘 (钟) *zhōng*, where 中 *zhōng* functions as the phonetic instead of 童 *tóng*.

戰 (战) *zhàn*, where 占 *zhān* replaces 單 *dān* as the phonetic.

畢 (毕) *bì*, where 比 *bǐ* replaces everything but a 十 at the bottom.

華 (华) *huá* is similar to 畢, with 化 *huà* being used as the phonetic.

賓 (宾) *bīn*, where 兵 *bīng* is used as near rhyme phonetic.

達 (达) *dá*, where 大 *dà* replaces 幸 *tà*; note that the replaced component has three horizontal strokes at the bottom and thus differs from 幸 in Section II above.

膠 (胶) *jiāo*, where 交 *jiāo* replaces 蓼 *liào*.

塊 (块) *kuài*, where 夬 *guài* replaces 鬼 *guǐ*; while this is not as exact as some of the other replacements, it mirrors 快 *kuài* and thus works.

徵 (征) *zhēng*, where 正 *zhèng* replaces 數 *zhēng*; also found in 癥 (症) *zhèng*.

審 (审) *shěn*, where 申 *shēn* replaces 番 *fān* for a closer modern phonetic; also found in 讞 (谳) *shěn* and 嬪 (嫔) *shěn*.

購 (购) *gòu*, where 勾 *gōu* replaces 葇 *gòu* as a simpler phonetic component; also found in 構 (构) *gòu* and 溝 (沟) *gōu*, but not in 講 (讲) *jiǎng* where the phonetic is now 井 *jǐng*, which is closer its modern pronunciation.

幾 (几) *jī* and *jǐ*, where the character 几 *jī* (a pictograph of a table) is used due to its few number of strokes; also in 機 (机) *jī* and 譏 (讥) *jī*.

擔 (担) *dān*, where 旦 *dàn* is used in place of 詹 *zhān* for a closer modern phonetic; also found in 膽 (胆) *dǎn*.

These semantic-phonetic characters are the source of the common mnemonic in Chinese: 有邊念邊，無邊念中間 (If there's a side component, use it for the pronunciation; if not, use the middle component).

V. Ancient Shorthand

Cursive calligraphy, shorthand, and vulgar characters (俗字 *súzi*) resulted in variant writings for some characters. Most often, these non-standard forms were simpler than the orthodox version. Some of these were then adopted as standard simplified characters. The following are a few examples:



無 → 无 *wú* A copy of a stone carving from the Northern Qi dynasty (550-577) shows the character written thus. Other vulgar forms used in the past include 元 and 兂.



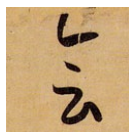
國 → 国 *guó* Táng Yín (唐寅, 1470-1523) a famous painter, calligrapher, and poet from the Ming dynasty has the character written as 国, which has a 王 *wáng* inside instead of the now standard 玉 *yù*.



萬 → 万 wàn This character was being written in its simplified form as early as the Tang dynasty, as seen from this example of Lǐ Shì mǐn (李世民, 598-649), its second emperor.



聽 → 听 tīng This example comes from Zhì Yǒng's 智永 cursive calligraphy in the Sui dynasty (581-618). Famous calligraphist Yán Zhēnqíng 顏真卿 (709-785) in the Tang dynasty wrote it as 听, which is how it's simplified today.



會 → 会 huì This was written in its simplified form in the early Tang dynasty. The famous work on cursive calligraphy 《書譜》 shūpǔ by Sūn Guòtíng 孫過庭 (646-691) contains this example.



點 → 点 diǎn This example of the simplified version, which takes the 灬 from 黑 hēi and puts it under the 占 zhàn component, was written in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). A vulgar form still used in Taiwan and other places today is 𠂔.

Strategies

Despite the fact that simplified characters are easier to memorize and write than their traditional counterparts (except for 夠 gòu, which is perplexingly “simplified” as 够), work is still required to achieve full mastery. The following are some strategies for transitioning from traditional to simplified:

- Repetition, repetition, repetition! A large part of learning characters is memorization, so get some flashcards or use an app (like Quizlet or Skritter), and practice recognizing and writing the characters multiple times each day.
- Get a simplified copy of the *Book of Mormon* (available in the university bookstore). You most likely are already very familiar with it in traditional characters, so reading it in simplified will be good practice.

- Read more, and read aloud. Doing so will test your recognition of the characters, as well as give you a chance to practice speaking. Ask me for a list of all books in Chinese available in the library.
- Remember that while at times the simplification of some characters might seem to have little rationale, it does! Just pay attention to how the characters are constructed and you should be able to identify the patterns. Seeing these patterns will help you progress faster. One example that will help in class is 東 (东) *dōng* and 練 (练) *liàn*. The simplified version of 練 has an added horizontal stroke in the middle to account for the difference between 𠄎 and 𠄎.
- Remember, this study guide does not contain every single character that has been simplified. So if you come across something that is not covered in this guide, write it down in the space below. In doing so, you will be more likely to remember it.

For those interested in understanding more about simplified characters, the tension between vulgar and official characters, regional variants, and how certain characters came to be simplified, see Roar Bökset's delightful dissertation *Long Story of Short Forms: The Evolution of Simplified Chinese Characters* (Stockholms Universitet, 2006).

ADDITIONAL NOTES

