

# **One country, two characters: Intersections of identity, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism in Hong Kong**

Received: *January 3, 2023*

Revised: *April 23, 2023*

Accepted: *June 5, 2023*

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### **Abstract**

In June 2021, the Ministry of Education of China issued a specific report titled “Language Situation in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area”. The report recommended that Hong Kong should clarify the legal status of simplified Chinese characters (SCC). However, the Hong Kong people have developed a preference for traditional Chinese characters (TCC) because of Hong Kong’s unique British colonial past. TCC is even regarded as a symbol of Hong Kong identity. This article aims to analyze the underlying causes of the Hong Kong people’s Chinese character form preference and predict the development trend of SCC in Hong Kong’s multicultural society. Based on document study and historical review of the Chinese Character Simplification Movement in Mainland China, and a comparative study between SCC and TCC, together with the consideration of Hong Kong’s particular elusive identity, this article has led to two conclusions: 1) Hong Kong people's resistance to SCC reflects their collective identity anxiety; 2) TCC and SCC will continue to coexist and complement each other in China (including Hong Kong region). In addition, as the predominant trend in Chinese language planning and policy has now turned from character form simplification to standardization, this article provides a cautiously optimistic suggestion that for both the mainlanders and the Hong Kong people, working together to reform and standardize the Chinese characters could be conducive to defining a larger and more integrative identity, even a cosmopolitan community with a shared future.

**Keywords:** Chinese characters, identity, Hong Kong, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism

## 1. Introduction

The writing system of Chinese characters, which has a long history, has been passed down to this day and played a vital role in the inheritance of Chinese culture and the national integration. Emerson (2002, p. 42) puts that “the origin of the Chinese writing system dates back almost 3,000 years”. The earliest variety of Chinese script known to us is the *jiǎgǔwén* (甲骨文) or ‘the oracle bone script’ of the Shang Dynasty (Norman, 1988, p. 83), which dates back to 1600–1066 BC. Although the modern forms have undergone some changes compared with *jiǎgǔwén* (Pan et al., 2015, p. 1) , the writing system of Chinese characters still works today, and Chinese characters are being widely used in China and overseas Chinese communities. Chinese characters, ubiquitous in Chinatowns around the world, seem to represent a cultural identity. Stavrianos (1982/2004, p. 324) also notes that the West lacked a writing system comparable to China, and China’s writing system provided China with a lasting cultural unity.

However, there are two related, but different writing forms of Chinese character in contemporary China. The simplified Chinese characters (SCC)<sup>1</sup>, which generally features fewer strokes and is relatively easier to read and write, play the predominant role in the Chinese writing system in Mainland China. The traditional Chinese characters (TCC) are still prevailing in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan regions. In June 2021, the Ministry of Education of China issued a specific report named as “Language Situation in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA)”. This is China's first paper on the language situation made for a national strategic area. It shows the Chinese government's concern for the construction and development of Chinese language. The report recommended that Hong Kong should clarify the legal status of SCC (Ministry of Education, 2021). Given the Hong Kong-Mainland China tensions demonstrated in the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protests, whether the recommendation to clarify the legal status of SCC in Hong Kong could be accepted

by most Hong Kong people and implemented in the future is undoubtedly a practical question worth studying.

China's 'one country, two characters' situation reflects the character form preference of users in different regions, which could be tied to their identity awareness. Take Hong Kong for example, the promotion of SCC has still encountered considerable resistance even more than two decades after Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. Ren (2019) contends that SCC has been regarded as a political and cultural threat from Mainland China and the preference for TCC has got involved in the sensitive problem of the Hong Kong Identity (HKID). The Hong Kong people struggle to define HKID because of Hong Kong's unique past and special entanglement with "modernity, colonialism and nationalism" (Chun, 2017). This article propose that the Hong Kong people repel SCC due to their identity anxiety.

Moreover, there are also controversies in academia regarding the simplification of Chinese characters, the effectiveness of SCC and its future development. Scholars mostly analyze and study these issues from the perspectives of linguistics, semiotics, or functionalism, and in fact many ideas opposing each other exist (Xu, 2009). However, research on the issue of Chinese characters in Hong Kong from the perspective of identity politics is fewer. Fukuyama (2018) states that identity can be used to divide, but it can also be used to unify. This article hopes to offer novel insights into studying the status quo and future trends of "One Country, Two Characters" by integrating multiple perspectives such as history, identity politics, multiculturalism, international relations etc.

Based on document research and historical review of the Chinese Character Simplification Movement in Mainland China, and a comparative study between SCC and TCC, together with the consideration of Hong Kong's particular elusive identity, this article aims to answer two specific research questions:

1) People in the southernmost provinces of Thailand are not happy using Thai script for writing Patani Malay because the Thai script represents Siam, a foreign power (Samoh & Premssirat, 2021, p. 187); but why the Hong Kong Chinese with the same language and race as mainland Chinese are not happy for the promotion of SCC in Hong Kong?

2) How will these two written forms of Chinese character, both TCC and SCC, develop in China in today's post-epidemic era?

Following this introduction, the second section defines a few terms frequently used in this article. The third section briefly describes the formation process of SCC and the major events in its history. The fourth section not only makes a comprehensive comparison of these two writing forms of Chinese characters, but also clarifies two misconceptions about TCC. The fifth section discusses the Chinese character form preference in Hong Kong and the underlying cause. The sixth section predicts the future development of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters in China. As the predominant trend in Chinese language planning and policy about Chinese character has now turned from simplification to standardization, the seventh section provides a cautiously optimistic suggestion that for both the mainlanders and Hong Kong people, working together to reform and standardize the Chinese characters could be conducive to defining a larger and more integrative identity, even a cosmopolitan community with a shared future. Finally, the limitations of this article are mentioned in the conclusion section.

## **2. Terminology**

In this article, I will refer to Chinese characters interchangeably as *hànzì* (汉字) or characters. Transcriptions are provided in *pīnyīn* Romanization (with tone marks) for Mandarin.

Since the emergence of Chinese characters, there have been two development trends; they are simplification and complication (Zhu, 2017, p.117). To avoid confusion, I will refer to

the *hànzì* found in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and used in most overseas Chinese language newspapers as TCC, following common use. However, the traditional character forms used in Taiwan and Hong Kong are not always identical and have different Chinese names. The *hànzì* used in Taiwan is officially called *zhèngtǐzì* (正体字) or “correct” character<sup>2</sup>, while the variant in Hong Kong is called *fántǐzì* (繁体字) or “complex” character.

Moreover, SCC is an ambiguous term referring to both *jiǎnhuàzì* (简化字) and *jiǎntǐzì* (简体字) in Chinese version. The former refers to the part of *hànzì* determined and adopted by the Chinese Communist government after the *hànzì* reform in Mainland China. The latter and *fántǐzì* are a pair of relative concepts that have existed in the history of *hànzì* since ancient times and *jiǎntǐzì* means the simple character form of *fántǐzì* (Long, 2002, p. 208). Unless indicated otherwise, in this article SCC will be understood to refer to *jiǎnhuàzì*.

### 3. A brief history of SCC

Zhang (2017) analyses the SCC in the past, present and future and states:

During the development of Chinese characters from the pre-*Qin* period to the end of *Qing* dynasty, the main tendency of Chinese characters is becoming more and more simplified<sup>3</sup>, which may be expressed in the aspect of pattern and phonology, and this is the basic truth of the changing process of Chinese characters. (p. 156)

Norman (1988, p. 81) contends that Chinese script became simpler as it matured due to the growing importance and use of writing as society became more complex, and to a need to simplify and rationalize the linear structure of the graphs as their use became prevalent.

However, Emerson (2002, p. 44) indicates that the First List of Simplified Characters was promulgated in August 1935 by the Ministry of Education of the Nationalist Government, containing 324 simplified characters. He also notes that while these characters were used by

some publications, the List was repealed in early 1936 after significant opposition from conservatives in the government.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the central government initiated the *Chinese Characters Reform* (汉字改革) to improve the literacy rate of Chinese people and bring China into the modern age. Wang (2010, p. 2) states that the simplification of *hànzì* was one of the three major objectives of the Chinese characters reform, and the other two were promoting the Mandarin; promulgating and implementing the *hànyǔ pīnyīn* (汉语拼音) system. Wu Yuzhang<sup>4</sup>, the director of the Commission of Reform, once said that *fántǐzì* was the main obstacle to overcome the cultural backwardness because they were so difficult to learn, to remember, to write and to read (Pan et al., 2015, p. 21).

In February 1952, the *Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Language* (中国文字改革研究委员会) was organized to collect and standardize the simple character forms already in common use.

In December 1955, the committee published the *List of First Group of Standardized Forms of Variant Characters* (第一批异体字整理表草案) containing 810 sets of variants, each set containing two to six *hànzì* each for a total of 1,865. From these, 1,053 variants were eliminated (Emerson, 2002, p. 44).

Zhang et al. (1997, p. 28) states that in January 1956, the committee released the *Scheme for Simplifying Characters* (汉字简化方案), which contained 230 simple forms already in common use, 285 proposed simplified forms and 54 simplified character components (*piānpáng* 偏旁).

In May 1964, the *Complete list of Simplified Characters* (简化字总表) was issued as a unified standard for the use of SCC, providing 2,236 simple characters replacing 2,264 complex forms (Long, 2002, p. 43).

In October 1986, after being approved by the State Council, the *State Language Commission* (国家语言文字工作委员会) reissued the *Complete list of Simplified Characters* with modifications (Long, 2002, p. 230). This commission grew out of the *Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Language*. At this time, after being authoritatively regulated by the government departments, SCC had achieved the status of authentic standardized characters in Mainland China.

After the National Conference on Language Work in 1986, the speed of Chinese simplification movement slowed down sharply, and proposals on Romanization of *hànzì* were rejected (Pan et al., 2015, p.24).

Since 2008, SCC has been designated as the only Chinese character form used by the United Nations (Zhou, 2016, p. 68). Besides, SCC are also officially used in Republic of Singapore, and according to my more than 10-year experience of teaching Chinese, textbooks teaching Chinese as a foreign language are now mostly based on SCC all over the world.

#### **4. Comparative discussions on SCC and TCC & Two misconceptions**

##### **4.1 Comparative discussions on SCC and TCC**

The brief history of SCC implies that there is not a strict dichotomy between SCC and TCC. In fact, these two written forms are used to write the same Chinese language and basically mutually intelligible. Both SCC and TCC belong to the Chinese writing system and can be used in different domains synchronically. However, there are ongoing disputes among users of Chinese characters about the introduction of SCC. Even in Mainland China, some members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) have recently recommended that the primary and middle schools should restore some *fántǐzì* (Ye, 2018, p. 70). For instance, as Pan et al. (2015, p. 24) state, in 2009, Pan Qinglin, a CPPCC member from *Tianjin* submitted a proposal and said, "We should reuse *fántǐzì* gradually." Along with the return of Hong Kong,

the differences between the use of SCC and TCC have been highlighted. Regarding the arguments over SCC and TCC, a comparison of pros and cons of each character form is essential to consider these complicated issues.

Compared with TCC, SCC is conducive to the popularization and internationalization of Chinese characters because of its fewer strokes and simple structure. For instance, the TCC form of “love” (ài 愛) contains thirteen strokes, while the SCC form 爰 contains only ten. The TCC form of “one” (yī 壹) contains twelve strokes, while the SCC form (yī 一) contains only one<sup>5</sup>. Pan et al. (2015, p. 21) contend that in order to reduce the number of illiteracy (almost 80% of the population at that time), the PRC leaders focused on hànzi simplification after 1949. They also state that the simplification of the forms of hànzi was an effective way, given that the education in China was so hard to popularize, while the prerequisite of the development of a society or a country would be the improvement of education. Though it’s difficult to totally ascribe the improved literacy rates in China to simplified characters, Huang (2019) still notes that SCC helped reduce the difficulty of popularizing knowledge and culture, and the national illiteracy rate had dropped to 52% by 1964. In addition, Gao (2016, p.72) states that SCC help students save time and vigor in learning Chinese characters with its lesser numbers of strokes and parts, its simple structure and level. Other scholars also argued that hànzi simplification helps in saving time to learn other knowledge (Mills, 1956; Tsao, 1999; Gump, 2009; Wang, 2013, as cited in Pan et al., 2015).

However, SCC also leads to confusion sometimes in people’s writing and learning because of reducing the number of hànzi through elimination of multiple homophonous characters<sup>7</sup>. Ye (2018, p. 71) contends that SCC obtained by using the method of homophonic substitution are not conducive to the conversion of traditional and simplified Chinese characters, and it is easy to cause confusion in people's writing. Additionally, Ye also notes that “some of the current simplified characters may lose their original cultural connotations, which is not

conducive to the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture”, because the forms of SCC have sacrificed some ideographic functions in return for becoming easier to learn and to use.

TCC is more complex and retains many of the intricate pictorial elements. Wang (2010, p. 5) notes that TCC is easier to recognize than SCC due to its abundant information and higher degree of distinction. TCC serves as a bridge to communicate with traditional Chinese culture (Ren, 2013, p. 91), and Zhu (2017, p. 120) agrees that TCC contains a lot of cultural information. Besides, the use of TCC on both sides of the Taiwan Strait is conducive to cross-strait exchanges and cooperation (Ren, 2013, p. 92), in the same way, TCC is beneficial for the communication among the global Chinese community. Nevertheless, its disadvantages are also obvious. TCC is more difficult than SCC to learn due to the many strokes and complex structure, and many foreigners often give up halfway when learning Chinese characters (Su, 2015, p. 78).

For the convenience of readers to compare SCC and TCC, Table 1 evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of these two Chinese Character forms respectively. It can be concluded from this table that SCC is conducive to the popularization and internationalization of Chinese characters, while TCC is relatively more advantageous in terms of reflecting traditional Chinese culture. It is also worth noting that the evolution and simplification of Chinese characters are always a dynamic process and closely related to the writing conditions. In today’s information age, typing is more dominant than handwriting, speech-to-text has also become popular. All of these emphasize the reading and recognition of characters more than the writing (Syd L, n. d.). Ease writing is no longer the obvious advantage of SCC.

Table 1 Advantages and Disadvantages of SCC and TCC

	SCC	TCC
<b>Advantages</b>	1. Easy-writing and easy-learning because of fewer strokes and simple structure 2. Being helpful for improving the literacy rate at the beginning of the establishment of PRC 3. Being helpful for the internationalization of <i>hànzì</i>	1. Being highly recognizable 2. Being abundant in Chinese culture heritage 3. Good for the communication among the whole Chinese ethnic around the world
<b>Disadvantages</b>	1. Causing confusion sometimes in people's writing because of reducing the number of <i>hànzì</i> through elimination of multiple homophonous characters 2. Some SCC lose their original cultural connotation, which is not conducive to preserving Chinese cultural heritage	1. Having more strokes and complex shapes 2. Being more difficult for foreigners to learn and write

#### 4.2 Two misconceptions about TCC

There are still popular misunderstandings about the simplification of Chinese characters, which can lead to the following two misconceptions about TCC:

One such misunderstanding is the mistaken belief that TCC has increasingly become extinct in Mainland China. After the implementation of SCC in Mainland China, although its scope of use has been reduced, TCC has never been abolished. Wang (2010) points out:

According to the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (中华人民共和国语言文字法), TCC can be accepted in such fields as Chinese penmanship, the publication of the ancient Chinese works, Chinese graphology, etc. (p. 4)

Another misunderstanding is the belief that people who know TCC can naturally read and understand traditional Chinese texts without additional training. However, knowing TCC is only a necessary prerequisite for reading traditional texts. The reader must also learn the grammar, vocabulary, phonology of classical Chinese, in addition to mastering (yī 壹) the professional knowledge such as common sense of ancient culture (Su, 2015, p. 77). According to Peng (2009, p. 63), this assumption seriously confuses the relationship between the character form and the written language, and it exaggerates the role of character form as well.

These misconceptions stem from a lack of understanding about the history of *hànzì* simplification, and they certainly have an impact on Hong Kong people's character form preference.

## **5. Character form preference in Hong Kong and the underlying cause**

### **5.1 Character form preference in Hong Kong**

When SCC was introduced in Mainland China, the Hong Kong people still used TCC because of its British colonial past. Wong (2019, p. 37) contends that since 1997, the Hong Kong government has implemented the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” (两文三语) as its language policy to develop its citizens' abilities to read and write Chinese and English, and to speak Cantonese, English and Putonghua/Mandarin. Though the Official Language Ordinance

specified the status of Chinese and English as the official languages of Hong Kong, the laws didn't clearly define the character form used (Xie, 2017, p. 49). Cheung (2013) discovers that Cantonese and traditional characters are the de facto spoken language and writing standard respectively. However, the Hong Kong people have formed their character form preference for a long time, TCC is even regarded as a symbol distinguishing Hong Kong's culture from the mainland's. For instance, Yew and Kwong (2014) note:

In April 2012, netizens were angered by the use of SCC on the menus at an agnes b. café instead of the traditional forms conventionally used in Hong Kong. The café later apologized. Debates over the cultural significance of written traditional Chinese in Hong Kong ensued. Proponents often argue its use shows that the city is superior in preserving Chinese heritage, whereas Chinese culture in the mainland has been “destroyed” by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). (p. 1108)

And Xie (2017) states:

According to a survey conducted in 2015 by the Institute of Applied Linguistics, Ministry of Education of China, TCC had always been the official and preferred Chinese character form in Hong Kong, while SCC was still far from being widely accepted. (p. 47)

But the survey also showed that 24.3% of the respondents were willing to write SCC, which reflected that Hong Kong people had recognized its time-saving and easy-to-write advantages. In addition, the survey indicated that respondents in the lower age group expressed a more negative attitude towards SCC than those in the upper age group. There is no doubt that the attitude of these future masters of Hong Kong society will determine the prospects of SCC in Hong Kong to a certain extent.

The debate on simplification of Chinese characters is being politicized. Findings from Wang and Li (2016) clearly indicate that:

In recent years, the arguments over SCC and TCC are no longer purely academic discussions, but political disturbances that have affected the entire Hong Kong society and the cyberspace. Under the instigation and hype of some "Hong Kong independence" forces, the arguments have undermined the prosperity and stability of society and threatened the national security. (p. 52)

They also note that some Hong Kong people have issued statements on boycotting SCC in the name of organizations or groups, some issued open letters in the name of individuals against the use of SCC subtitles by TV stations, and some protested the schools for teaching SCC. According to Wen (2016), for some Hong Kong people, the mandarin and SCC stand for the authoritative, closed, conservative, and backward Chinese official culture, and they could undermine Hong Kong's distinctiveness. Xie (2017, p. 42) also discovers that the argument on simplified and traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong has been utilized to express people's political position as well since 2015.

If this character form preference is out of a defense of traditional culture, why did the survey show that young people rather than their older counterparts expressed a more negative attitude towards SCC? This is just the opposite of the situation in the deep south of Thailand, where the older members of the community worry about language change as Thai dominates everyday usage, especially among the youth (Samoh & Premsrirat, 2021, p. 188). If it is due to the continuation of old habits, why has Singapore, which was once a British colony like Hong Kong, adopted SCC gradually ever since the 1960's (Xie, 1989, pp. 44-58)? In contemporary Hong Kong society, the TCC preference has become an issue that involves the most sensitive and core politics - identity.

## **5.2 The underlying cause: Identity anxiety**

Ma (2012, p.302) contends that Hong Kong society has developed a strong local identity, and “significant differences in the standard of living when compared with that of Mainland China sustained the imagined community of Hong Kong”. The study by Ellis (2018, p. 91) identifies that even at the time of the Handover, some residents saw Hong Kong’s transfer from Britain to China as an existential threat to the city’s identity. Post, Pong, and Ou (2015, p. 70) find that years of unification with China have not resolved the ambivalent political identity that the Hong Kong people felt about being either ‘Chinese’ or ‘Hong-Kongese’ at the time of the Handover. Wong (2019, p. 44) states that the increased flows of goods, people, and capital after 1997 have facilitated the integration of Hong Kong into Mainland China; but also led many Hong Kong people to question their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation and the CCP regime. Moreover, the misunderstanding of "One Country, Two Systems" scheme makes some Hong Kong people regard Hong Kong as ‘an independent political entity’ and unable to correctly recognize the relationship between the HKID and Chinese national identity (Yang & Xu, 2018, p. 116).

In the past, the Hong Kong people used to be proud of their civilized democracy and strong market economy, and then felt superior to the relatively poor Mainlanders. As the city prospered and its economy expanded by 6.5% annually since 1980 (Mihaljek & Dodsworth, 1997, p. 2), the Hong Kong people’s sense of superiority over their Mainland counterparts was augmented. However, with the mainland’s outstanding economic growth and social progress, China has risen to prominence on the world stage at present and the gap between the economic performances of Mainland China and Hong Kong narrowed. Hong Kong’s economic supremacy has been eclipsed by the stellar economic performance of top-tier Chinese cities such as Shanghai since 2009. Yew and Kwong (2014, p. 1098) comment that these factors might have dented the pride of Hong Kong people who used to look askance at their mainland

counterparts and the perceived threat of incoming mainlanders prompted Hong Kong people to assert their rights, interests, and cultural identity. Will Hong Kong become just another Chinese city? How to adapt to China's rising national consciousness? When the previous superiority is in danger of disappearing, many Hong Kong people have grown anxious and expressed nostalgia; when the surge of Mainland arrivals had sparked anxiety over the erosion of Hong Kong's indigenous culture and way of life, they began to accentuate their HKID, distinguish themselves with Mainlanders and lean towards the New Tribalism. Ellis (2018, p. 99) also notes that many Hongkongers feeling their local culture slipping away find it easy to latch onto social differences with mainlanders, as a way of exerting their own identity.

In recent years, the rapid changes in both Hong Kong society and the international socioeconomic context occurred could have prompted many Hong Kong people prefer a HKID than the Chinese national identity. In June 2012, the percentage of those who identify themselves as Hong Kong people has hit an historic high since 1997, doubling that of those who see themselves as Chinese (Yew & Kwong, 2014, p. 1088). Hong Kong has endured a prolonged identity anxiety and nowadays more Hong Kong people have gravitated toward the HKID predicated on a distinctive set of values and norms. As the traditional written form of Chinese character in Hong Kong, TCC undoubtedly belong to the Hong Kong values and norms and has renewed emphasis.

As Ellis (2018, p. 100) argues, the city has had many personalities: an idealized colony, a mainlander's refuge, a cultural *mélange* of the East and West, a Chinatown, a "consumer's paradise", a global business hub, and China's lost children. Many contemporary Hong Kong people expressed nostalgia for Hong Kong's colonial past; there are some who are too young to remember anything before the city's 1997 handover. These young people find themselves nostalgic for the community and structured life they think they have lost or that their ancestors supposedly possessed. Resentment over lost status starts with real economic distress and then

fuels prejudice, xenophobia, and violence. It is evident that Hong Kong youth are becoming more and more active in politics. According to Lau (2015, p. 24), Hong Kong youth mostly have weak sense of Chinese national identity, rising local awareness and resentment against Mainlanders. Inclining towards the post-materialism value, the younger generations are apt to politicize some practical economic and livelihood issues and turn to Hong Kong norms to distinguish themselves from Mainlanders and to define their own local identity.

The underlying cause of the Hong Kong people's Chinese character form preference is their identity anxiety. They have felt themselves marginalized in specific and unique ways. The principle of universal and equal recognition could mutate into their calls for special recognition. They may also ask for the broader society recognize and even celebrate the intrinsic differences that set them apart. TCC no doubt is one of the intrinsic differences. With a new tribalism mentality, they based their evaluation of character form preferences on their own standards. So, they cannot treat SCC in a practical and open manner like the Singaporeans have done. Because of their identity anxiety and selective memories of history, the Hong Kong youth are more hostile to SCC and regard TCC as an essential component of the HKID.

## **6. Future development of SCC and TCC in China**

The Chinese characters were invented to record language, propagate culture, and facilitate the exchange of ideas among people. Traditional characters, first codified over 2,000 years ago, is so complicated that the French philosopher Montesquieu, writing in 1777, believed that the difficulty in writing 'wholly employs their attention' during the greatest part of Chinese people's lives (Ho, 2016, p. 1).

Both SCC and TCC are the character form of *hànzì*, and the difference between the two is less than their commonality, which provides the possibility for the concurrent use of the two forms. The current consensus is that it is unrealistic for the mainland to completely restore TCC,

and the use of SCC in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan also takes a long time to adapt (Xie, 2017, p. 48). In Mainland China, the “*Read traditional characters and write simplified characters*” (识繁写简) initiative proposed by 7 Xiaoyuan<sup>6</sup> was once considered an innovative solution (Peng, 2009, p. 61). In mainland China, with the continuous improvement of the overall education level of the people and the rise of studies of Chinese ancient civilization, more Chinese will recognize, learn, and use TCC.

However, from the following three perspectives, I also predict that SCC will gradually be accepted in multicultural Hong Kong Society under the premise of steady development of Mainland China.

*From an academic perspective.* Peng (2009, p. 62) evaluates that the simplification of *hànzì* had been repeatedly studied and demonstrated by scholars and the government, and it is scientific and completely in line with the natural laws and social needs of the evolution of *hànzì*. As a great reform in the history, *hànzì* simplification plays an active role in popularizing education, eradicating illiteracy, developing scientific culture and education, and enhancing international exchanges (Zhang et al., 1997, p. 1). SCC can lower the learning threshold and help learners improve their learning efficiency due to its easy-writing and easy-learning, especially for foreign learners who want to study Chinese language and culture. In today’s information age, the promotion of SCC is an important measure for the modernization and internationalization of *hànzì*.

*From a functional perspective.* SCC could be more conducive for the Hong Kong people to enhance their international competitiveness. Nowadays, with the development and progress of China, SCC has become the mainstream form of international Chinese character learning. As a gateway to China, Hong Kong appears destined to represent a good place for the world to do business (Ellis, 2018, p. 99). Ren (2019) proposes that Hong Kong is an offshore financial center serving the mainland, the Hong Kong people can capture the economic opportunities

brought by the mainland by fully accepting, recognizing, researching, and understanding the mainland and fully culturally integrating the mainland. He also contends that the Hong Kong students should have certain ability to recognize SCC to expand their understanding of the society and culture of the mainland and improve their international competitiveness. Of course, because of their long-standing habit of using TCC, the Hong Kong people may not think that SCC is easy to learn and memorize at the beginning. But in the long run, mastering SCC would not be difficult, and would be beneficial for them. However, the Hong Kong society does not need to discard TCC, but it must introduce and tolerate SCC at least.

*From the perspective of Hong Kong's core values.* Zhang et al. (2015) shows:

Although the core values that dominate Hong Kong's social development have been changing from materialism to post-materialism due to social stability and prosperity, they still basically take materialism as their home, especially when the economy is reversing, the society is in crisis, or the future is troubled. (p. 70)

For example, Yew and Kwong (2014) have investigated:

In 2001, the Hong Kong government stressed the need to facilitate the flow of people and capital across the Hong Kong-China border to take better advantage of economic opportunities from the mainland. The idea encountered little resistance from the public then as Hong Kong had been badly hit by the economic downturn following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. (p. 1105)

Since 2019, after the double blow of the COVID-19 epidemic and the street protests, Hong Kong's economic development has stagnated for a while, and social unrest has occurred. Currently, against the backdrop of a gloomy and uncertain outlook of the world economy (International Monetary Fund, 2022), the materialism could be again valued in Hong Kong

society and the Hong Kong people would learn the significance of national development to Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and individuals. Cheung (2013, p. 25) discovers that flexibility and efficiency are two typical characteristics of most Hong Kong people. As long as Mainland China continues to maintain stable development, the Hong Kong people will eventually give up prejudice, respect the reality and gradually accept SCC.

Apart from these three perspectives, the future development of both SCC and TCC in the mainland and Hong Kong may also depend on future demographic changes: the evolving population of Hongkongers residing in the mainland, those in cross-border marriages, and mainland migrants to Hong Kong. The possibility of these population segments serving as a mediating force to reconcile differences between the Hong Kong and Chinese identities cannot be totally ruled out (Yew & Kwong, 2014, p. 1112).

However, the Chinese governments (both the central government and HKSAR government) need to consider the preservation of the uniqueness of the Hong Kong culture during the process of promoting SCC, avoid going too far in the direction of cultural assimilation and they should satisfy the Hong Kong people's needs for differentiation. On the one hand, the governments should legislate clearly that both TCC and SCC are legal Chinese character forms. TCC is allowed to exist as the official written form of Chinese characters for a long time in such regions as Hong Kong, Macao, etc. On the other hand, the governments should encourage and support pure academic discussions, pool the wisdom of both mainlanders and the Hong Kong people to seek a consensus on the development direction of Chinese characters.

As mentioned earlier in this article, SCC has its own problems. For instance, though SCC is easy and fast to write, some characters become similar after the simplifications. This would make learners feel confused to distinguish them. In addition, a single SCC character replaces some TCC characters that with the same phonetic sound during the simplification. This

homophonous substitution certainly can cause some chaos of using *hànzì*. Moreover, as Noman (1988, p. 294) contends that how Chinese characters can be made to meet the needs of mechanization and computerization is the chief problem. The homophonous substitution will also cause difficulties for the computer coding of Chinese characters. In my opinion, it is precisely because of the above-mentioned shortcomings of SCC and the changes in current Chinese writing methods that provide great support for the reservation of TCC. TCC and SCC will continue to coexist and complement each other in China (including the post-colonial Hong Kong). Just like Pan et al., (2015, p. 25) state, both TCC and SCC are variants of the Chinese script within the Chinese writing system, and they can be used in different domains synchronically.

## 7. Discussion

According to China Education Newspaper (2013, as cited in Pan et al., 2015, p. 26), China's National Outline for Medium- and Long-Term Language Reform and Development (2012–2020) says, “the first priority of language affairs is to popularize the construction of language and script, then to strengthen the technical standard, management standard and working standard of language constructions.” Zhao (as cited in Pan et al., 2015, pp. 25-26) points out that, “in today's IT era, systematic rationalization is more vital than the quantitative reduction of stroke complexity”, and “simplification of Chinese characters is giving way to the standardization of Chinese characters”. Based on this judgment, this article provides a cautiously optimistic suggestion that for both the mainlanders and the Hong Kong people, working together to reform and standardize the Chinese characters could be conducive to defining a larger and more integrative identity, even a cosmopolitan community with a shared future. By starting with the character form issue, in the process of achieving common goals through deliberation and consensus, the two sides could deepen exchanges and mutual

understanding, and pave the way to ultimate promoting political mutual trust and identity. In fact, this suggestion was once verified during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Though it proved to be short-lived, the Hong Kong people's Chinese identification peaked in 2008 (Yew & Kwong, 2014, p. 1090). Both Hong Kong and Mainland China had a common goal of establishing an international prestige through co-hosting the Olympic games then. The Hong Kong people were inclined to affirm their Chinese identity during other Olympic games as well (Cheung, 2013, p. 29).

Fukuyama (2018) maintains that people will never stop thinking about themselves and their societies in identity terms, but people's identities are neither fixed nor necessarily given by birth. Yew and Kwong (2014, p. 1109) find that, "Politically, it is inconceivable that tensions between the national and local identities in Hong Kong can be easily resolved in the short term". They also contend that the rising local identity today is proof that Beijing's attempts to inculcate a sense of belonging in the Hong Kong people have not only failed but also backfired. Back to the topic of this article, since some Hong Kong people's resistance to SCC reflects their identity anxiety, the Chinese governments and social groups could define a larger and more integrative identity that consider the complexity of the Hong Kong society. This undertaking could start with the National Education stressing national identity and Chinese patriotism, the teaching of basic civics. However, according to Wu (2017, p. 45), national education in Hong Kong has met great challenge because of complex historical and practical reasons. For example, when the Hong Kong's Education Bureau tried to incorporate National Education into history teaching between 2007 and 2012 (Liu, 2012, as cited in Ellis, 2018, p. 97), many Hongkongers opposed the curriculum, believing it was tantamount to patriotic indoctrination that would "brainwash" children's minds with pro-mainland propaganda (Lai, 2012, as cited in Ellis, 2018, p. 97).

As we all know, Hong Kong is a multicultural immigrant city. In a sense, compared to the Mainlanders, the Hong Kong people could be regarded as a minority cultural group.

Multiculturalists are keen to stress that the nation-building process leads to winners and losers and that the majority language group retains all gains (Phillips, 2007, p. 72). “Multiculturalism, originally as a quality of diverse societies, became a political program’s label that valued each separate culture and lived experience equally, at times by drawing special attention to those that had been invisible or undervalued in the past” (Fukuyama, 2018). Maybe cosmopolitanism rather than multiculturalism can accommodate itself to creating a consensus about values and behaviors in the Hong Kong society. Because “as an intra-state practice, cosmopolitanism does not recognize cultural segmentation, but assumes complex, overlapping, changing and often highly individualistic choices of identity and belonging” (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002, p. 18).

It is always easier to talk about democracy and freedom than to come up with potentially costly plans that would concretely reduce inequality. In this post-epidemic era, the Russian-Ukrainian war is aggravating to the world economic downturn, while cultural diversity is irreversible, nation-states are interdependent, non-traditional security threats such as plague, pollution need to be resolved by the whole human society. People all over the world need to transcend traditional thinking and find a new path, one that hopefully can be defined by mutual respect, equality and justice, and mutually beneficial co-operation.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this article I commence with a historical review of the Chinese Character Simplification Movement in Mainland China. I next make a comparative analysis between SCC and TCC along with clarifying two misconceptions about TCC. Then I discuss the preference for TCC in Hong Kong, concluding that the underlying cause of the Hong Kong people’s character form preference is their identity anxiety. I also predict that SCC will gradually be accepted in multicultural Hong Kong society; TCC and SCC will continue to coexist and complement each other in Greater China.

The major limitations of this article are the lack of first-hand reliable data, and possible biased literature review. While I have used relevant data from research conducted by other scholars and institutions in Hong Kong, it would make my argument more convincing if I had done some field work on the usage of SCC in Hong Kong and gotten some first-hand data from the Hong Kong respondents about their attitudes towards SCC. Besides, as to the literature related to the theme of this article, I have searched and read those of Western scholars, Singapore scholars, but most of the literature is from scholars of mainland China, only a small number of literatures is found from Hong Kong and Taiwan scholars due to my limited literature search ability. This may affect the generalizability of the findings of this article.

### **9.Acknowledgement**

In the process of writing and revising this article, I have got constructive guidance and invaluable advice from professionals by participating in the SOASRILCA writing workshop conducted by Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University. Hence, I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to the SOASRILCA Team. I also own an important debt of thanks to Dr. Philip John Galloway for having primarily checked the first draft of this article for grammatical accuracy as a native speaker of English language.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations in this article:

SCC is the abbreviation of simplified Chinese characters.

TCC is the abbreviation of traditional Chinese Characters.

GBA is the abbreviation of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

HKSAR is the abbreviation of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

PRC is the abbreviation of People's Republic of China.

HKID is the abbreviation of Hong Kong Identity.

CCP is the abbreviation of Chinese Communist Party.

CPPCC is the abbreviation of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.

<sup>2</sup>The Taiwan authorities promoted the name 正体字 because 繁 conveys a negative image of complexity and difficulty compared to simplicity and ease of 简.

<sup>3</sup> There are still exceptions to a few Chinese characters, which have become more elaborated throughout history. For example, the Chinese character “个” is older than its variant “個”.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Yuzhang (吴玉章, 1878–1966) was a great revolutionary, educator, historian and writer. He was appointed as President of *Renmin* University of China at the time of the establishment of People’s Republic of China and Director of Committee for Reforming the Chinese Written Language. He made great contributions to China’s education.

<sup>5</sup> In Hong Kong and Taiwan, people now write “一” in daily life as well, they typically use “壹” on very formal occasions or to avoid misunderstanding.

<sup>6</sup> Yuan Xiaoyuan (袁晓园) is a professional diplomat, the founder and president of the Research Association of Chinese Character Modernization (later changed to Beijing International Association of Chinese Character Studies and Yuan Xiaoyuan Research Institute of Language, Culture and Science).

<sup>7</sup> One of the significant cases is that the Chinese surname yè (葉) is substituted by yè (叶, leaf). Another example is the complex character hòu (後), meaning ‘behind’, was simplified to the homophonous hòu (后), which means ‘queen’.

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