UN*GEILI*VABLE: LANGUAGE CONTROL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Annie Drahos

THE FORMER CHINESE leader Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 refused to simplify the second character of his name following the radical script reforms of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1993, the State Language Work Committee 国家语言文字工作委员会 quietly added the 'offending' character (镕) to the official standard character list. This contrasts sharply with the blunt treatment ordinary citizens routinely meet when they express a similar attachment to non-standard characters in their names. Over the last decade, the government has been pushing a sweeping modernisation agenda with the help of digital technology — with the side effect of making life difficult for people whose names contain uncommon characters.

In 2005, citizens' compulsory IDs 身份证 went digital along with a raft of other bureaucratic processes. The result is that many people are having trouble obtaining IDs and household registration permits. They are also being refused banking and postal services, and facing other obstacles from bureaucratic processes requiring their name in digital format. Take, for example, the story of Ma Cheng 马骋, whose given name is written with the rare character *cheng* 骉 (gallop). Her grandfather chose this name to give her a spark of individuality, which is why she likes it so much, and it pairs perfectly with her family name Ma (horse).[25] Despite its rarity, she had always been able to use it in her official documentation by handwriting

A selection of common Chinese radicals
Source: pinterest.com

it. However, 韇 is not contained in the Public Security Bureau's 公安局 (PSB) database. When Ma applied to the PSB for a new ID in 2008, she was told to change her name to allow computer input. She eventually resorted to using backdoor connections to obtain a temporary ID that needs updating every three months — an unreliable strategy that also makes her vulnerable to legal repercussions for not following official

channels and for continuing to use a non-standard character.

Ma Cheng is not alone. In 2015, ten-year-old Zhang Yanhao 张燅皓 was not able to collect his English exam certificate, as the school's computers did not contain his name's middle character, *yan* 燅 (meaning wise or superior). So they simply left it out, printing his name, after a long delay and incorrectly, as Zhang Hao 张皓.

During the character simplification and women's liberation campaigns of the 1950s, the radical 女 (female) was eliminated from many characters, which were then assigned the non-gendered radical 亻, signifying a person. Chinese characters generally comprise different recurring components called 'radicals', often including a semantic component, indicating meaning, and a phonetic component, indicating pronunciation. To the dismay of Xia Xiaoyu 夏小婨, this meant that her given name was forever miswritten as 小偷 *xiaotou* (thief) instead of 小婨 *xiaoyu* (delightfulness). Feng Mei 冯娒, a high school student in Changsha, was unable to obtain an ID in 2007 as PSB computers did not contain the rare character 娒 *mei* (meaning matron or tutoress). Without an ID, Feng Mei was unable to

Students sitting their *gaokao*
Source: dongyangliu, Flickr

sit the crucial *gaokao* 高考 university entrance examination — a life-shaping event. Her father was told that the only solution was for his daughter to change her name, yet to change it for the *gaokao* alone would render all her other documentation incorrect.

There is no consistent policy mechanism in place to protect people affected by digitisation-focused script reforms, and the official reform process does not take into consideration social impact. Individual local authorities such as schools, banks, and police stations respond inconsistently to those whose names are not found in the official computer database. They generally face demands to change their names to conform to the new technical requirements and bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, the story of Zhu Rongji neatly sidestepping this problem highlights the gap between the privileged elite and the rights of common citizens, and the growing tensions around Party-state agendas that fail to look after ordinary people's interests.

The government's authoritarian approach to script reform and its impact on personal naming practices are symptomatic of a lack of concern for preservation of personal and cultural identity, as well as individual rights. The reforms do not address the reality that personal identity is intertwined with language and culture, nor do they recognise that culturally significant Chinese characters in a name are intricately connected to personal identity. Identity is not a passive 'status' that one is born into, but rather is a conscious and constant act of choice, and a personal name is the most fundamental expression of one's identity. In the Chinese context, names play an even more complex role due to the traditional genealogical system designed to preserve family lineage, as well as being related to fortune telling and many other cultural practices.

Traditional Chinese names contain a 'generation name', which designates a person's place in the family hierarchy and preserves continuity throughout successive generations. It

Zhu Yuanzhang
Source: zh.wikipedia.org

is rumoured that Zhu Rongji is a distant descendent of the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398), and that the character 镕 was chosen by Zhu Yuanzhang himself as the generation name for sons in Zhu Rongji's generation — a strong motivation for Zhu Rongji to keep his name in its traditional form.

It is obvious that the current autocratic approach to script reform generates dissatisfaction. However, digitisation of the language does throw up considerable technical challenges that require the standardisation of script.

Each character must be individually coded — a technical and time-consuming process. Whereas the total number of characters in the language exceeds 100,000, the current official Chinese character set coded for information interchange (called GB 18030-2000), contains only 27,484 characters. The 2013 *Table of General Standard Characters* 通用规范汉字表, to which the public is encouraged to restrict themselves in the naming of children, contains fewer still, at 8,105.

Rising education levels, economic development, and globalisation have

resulted in growing awareness of individual rights, dreams, and desires, including expression of personal and cultural identities. This brings people into direct conflict with a government that is becoming increasingly conservative and controlling of language use.

Language Control

The Party-state has been tightening its control over language generally in recent years. In 2010, the General Administration of Press and Publication 国家新闻出版广播电影电视总局 (GAPP) banned the use of foreign words, and the mixing of Chinese with foreign words to create abbreviations or slang in newspapers, books, and on websites. It argued that unregulated use of foreign words damaged the 'purity' of the Chinese language and the 'harmonious' cultural environment. Chinese netizens were quick to ironically dub the GAPP restrictions 'un*geili*vable' — cyber-slang that combines 给力 *geili* (give power) with English morphological rules to produce 'not very cool/unbelievable'.

But classical, restrictive modes of language are breaking down and China's youth like playing with characters, as some artists have been doing for

Duang
Source: YouTube

years — one created an entirely new set of characters for pollution-related terms. When Jackie Chan ad-libbed the nonsense sound effect *duang* in a hair product commercial in 2014, netizens swiftly invented a new character, comprising the two characters of Chan's name, 成龙, to express the otherwise impossible-to-transcribe sound that became a viral Internet sensation. But creative use of language online has functions beyond the frivolous, with people using self-created words and phrases to discuss banned or politically sensitive topics. 'Martian language' 火星文 (a mishmash of characters, pinyin, numbers, emoticons, and symbols) helps to confound government censors. The character *jiong* 囧 — an archaic character for 'bright', now reappropriated as an emoticon meaning anything from dismay to embarrass-

ment to shock due to its resemblance to a person's face — is not contained in the 2013 *Table of General Standard Characters*, yet it is ubiquitous online. The character 囧 is an optional embellishment to another popular Martian language phrase, '3QOrz' or '3Q囧rz'. The number three is pronounced *san* in Chinese; *san q* sounds like a Chinese accented 'thank you'. Orz graphically resembles a person kowtowing with their forehead to the ground, so 3QOrz is Martian language for 'thank you very much'. Unconventional and creative use of language, particularly online, facilitates non-mainstream discussion and transformative connectivity among citizens, which makes the state nervous: language is another area of tension between the controlling Party-state and an increasingly independ-

ent-minded citizenry. The popularity online of characters such as 囧 speaks volumes about the ineffectiveness of attempts to control the online environment, as it shows that many are simply ignoring the standardisation mandate, and the government does not have the means to control such widespread flouting of the rules.

As long as the Party-state maintains its heavy-handed approach to script reform and language control, tension is inevitable. Restrictions on personal naming practices and online language use are only the tip of the iceberg; this discussion is ultimately about the quest for a kind of technology-driven modernity at the expense of respect for humanity, individual identity and language rights.

How to Orz
Source: evchk.wikia.com