

WORLD: EUROPE'S NEW IRON LADY **P.14** | NATION: MAKING SCIENCE POPULAR **P.20**

# BEIJING REVIEW

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## WRITING AMNESIA

Chinese old and young are forgetting  
how to hand write their language.  
What needs to be done?



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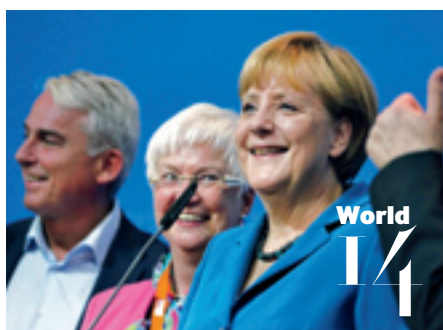


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Is the art of writing Chinese characters dying?



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## EDITOR

# Handwriting and the Keyboard

In the digital era, many Chinese are faced with the prospect of losing their handwriting abilities. As one of the oldest existent languages, Chinese is used by the largest population in the world today. Chinese characters, or *hanzi*, were first invented 6,000 years ago, according to current archaeological discoveries. Until the Shang Dynasty (about 16th-11th century B.C.), they were found mostly inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones.

Over thousands of years, generations of Chinese have developed handwritten *hanzi* into a calligraphic art and means by which to spread ancient wisdom. An old Chinese saying states that a man's personality is like his or her handwriting. It is believed in China that a person's attitude and spirit are reflected in calligraphy, which embodies traditional Chinese esthetics.

However, with the advent of modern technology, handwritten *hanzi* seems to be on the decline, with many fearing its eventual extinction. Inputting Chinese characters into computers and cellphones using various types of keyboards has become the major means by which to communicate with most people, posing a possible threat to the survival of handwriting.

Despite growing concern, some argue that handwritten *hanzi* faces little danger. Li He, a philosophy researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that the decline of handwriting is not exclusive to Chinese, with many other languages, including English, up against similar problems. In his view, boosting handwriting training in educational instructions might prove a solution. In turn, Zhang Yiwu, a professor of Chinese language and literature at Peking University, believes that the invention of handwriting-input technology would help revive handwritten *hanzi* in the modern age.

With *hanzi* a key part of Chinese civilization, the problems it faces have given rise to similar questions around the globe pertaining to the ongoing preservation of traditional culture. ■

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# HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Visitors pose by a bed of flowers in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on October 1. The day is China's National Day, with this year marking the 64th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.



## A New Chapter

The China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone has its opening ceremony on September 29.

Located on the outskirts of Shanghai, the zone will be used to explore new methods of reducing government intervention and opening the Chinese economy up more to global investors.

At the ceremony, 36 companies were given licenses to operate in the zone, which covers 28.78 square km.



## Service Purchasing

The Chinese Government issued guidelines for government purchase of public services from social organizations and private companies on September 30.

The State Council, China's cabinet, announced in a statement that the country is to gradually purchase services at a local level between now and 2015, and it will establish a system by 2020 for the purchasing of private sector services by government organizations.

Public service sectors including education, employment, social security, medical health, housing security,

culture and sports, as well as services for the disabled, will be opened up to more private sector investment, according to the statement.

Service providers may include social organizations, companies or institutions legally registered or approved, it said.

Services that should be offered directly by the state, those that have been deemed unsuitable for the private sector, or those that are otherwise not included in government responsibilities, should not be purchased, the statement added.

Local governments and other related departments should formulate detailed guidelines for

purchasing public services, according to the State Council.

## Defaulter Blacklist

China's Supreme People's Court (SPC) is to compile and publish a blacklist of those who have defaulted on court-ordered payments. The list will be the first of its kind in China.

The regulation, which allows courts to publicize the names of defaulters, came into effect on October 1.

The SPC, with the cooperation of state-owned banks, will punish parties involved in lawsuits who fail to pay damages. Punishment may take the form of further investigation and the freezing or transferring of assets, according to a memorandum previously signed by state-owned banks in conjunction with the SPC.

According to the memorandum, an exclusive channel for sharing

names of defaulters between courts and commercial banks will also be established.

## Retail Giant

British retail giant Tesco PLC announced on October 2 that it signed an agreement to establish a joint venture in China with the China Resources Enterprise Ltd. (CRE).

Tesco, which entered the Chinese market in 2004, announced that the two companies "have entered into a definitive agreement to combine their Chinese retail operations and create the leading multi-format retailer in China."

The joint venture will create a business with estimated sales totaling 10 billion pounds (\$16 billion) in which Tesco will hold 20 percent, and CRE the remaining 80.

The joint venture, aiming to create the leading retailer in seven



## BEST BUDDIES

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang meets with recipients of this year's Friendship Award, as well as their relatives, in Beijing on September 30. The annual ceremony is held by the Chinese Government to commend outstanding foreign experts working in China



## FOURTH GENERATION

A China Mobile employee shows off a new smartphone in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, on September 28. The phone is one of the first handsets able to take advantage of the wireless service provider's new high-speed 4G mobile network



of the most populous and economically advanced provinces in China, will combine Tesco's 134 existing stores as well as its shopping mall businesses with CRE's 2,986 stores.

Tesco will make cash contributions totaling 345 million pounds (\$560 million) to the joint venture, and will hold two seats on the board of 10 members.

## Record Rice Yield

A team led by Yuan Longping, known in China as the "father of hybrid rice," set a record for hybrid rice production with an average yield of 988.1 kg per *mu* (0.0667 hectares). Hybrid rice is any genealogy of rice that has been created through cross-breeding between different types of rice.

Experts from the China National Rice Research Institute, Wuhan University and the Fujian Academy of Agricultural Sciences confirmed the new record. The three organizations combined efforts to harvest

three lots from a farm of 101.2 *mu* (6.75 hectares) in Niuxing Village, Longhui County in central China's Hunan Province. The farm was growing a new strain of hybrid rice, known as "Y liangyou 900". Officials from the China National Hybrid Rice Research and Development Center confirmed the record yield.

Yuan Longping, 83, an academician with the Chinese Academy of Engineering, developed the first variety of hybrid rice to be grown in China in 1974.

His team's progress is fast approaching the 1,000 kg-per-*mu* target set by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2013 after the yield of hybrid rice was successfully increased to 963.65 kg per *mu* in 2012.

The yield of per *mu* of hybrid rice in China has increased steadily, surpassing 700 kg in 2000, 800 kg in 2005 and 900 kg in 2011, according to the ministry.

## Air-Quality Check

China has added a further 40 medium-sized cities to the country's upgraded air-quality monitoring network, according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Environmental Protection on September 29.

A total of 172 monitoring stations in the cities added to the network became operational on October 1.

The stations will provide measurement of the six airborne pollutants stipulated by the country's improved air-quality standard. The statement added that upgrades have been made in order to provide real-time data on sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide and PM 2.5—airborne particles measuring less than 2.5 microns in diameter.

To date, China has 668 monitoring stations under the new network.

## Numbers

### 10.33 mln

Number of railway passengers across China on October 1, the first day of the week-long National Day holiday

### 51.1%

Purchasing Managers' Index for China's manufacturing sector in September

### \$771.95 bln

Total Chinese debt to foreign lenders as of the end of June

### 140,000

New software copyright registrations in China in 2012

## Safe Return

Rescuers deliver a man to hospital after 268 fishermen trapped by Typhoon *Wutip* in the South China Sea arrived in Sanya, Hainan Province, on October 3.

Searches continue, as 58 fishermen remain missing off the coast of Shanhui Island in the Xisha Islands. Three boats were sunk there by Typhoon *Wutip* on September 29.





# THIS WEEK WORLD



## THE UNITED NATIONS

The UN Security Council votes to approve a resolution that requires Syria to give up its chemical weapons during a meeting at UN headquarters in New York on September 27

XINHUA/AFIP



XINHUA/AFIP



## THE UNITED STATES

Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. on September 29. Disagreements over budget decisions forced the U.S. Government to shutdown at midnight on October 1 after the Senate and the Congress failed to reach an agreement



## AUSTRALIA

Warships from 11 countries arrive at Jarvis Bay to take part in a marine security exercise on September 29

ZHA CHUNNING







## KENYA

Women light candles during a 24-hour prayer vigil for victims of the Westgate Mall massacre in Nairobi on September 28



## REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Students participate in an annual ceremony at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul on September 28 to celebrate the birthday of Chinese philosopher and scholar Confucius



## PAKISTAN

Rescue workers pull a survivor from the debris in Awaran on September 28 after a 6.8-magnitude earthquake, killing at least 22 people in southwest Pakistan already devastated by an earlier tremor that claimed the lives of more than 300 others





## COVER STORY

# HANZI CRISIS

**Dictation contest proves handwritten Chinese characters are under threat in digital age** By Bai Shi

**I**n the digital age, people are becoming adept at inputting Chinese characters, or *hanzi*, into computers or cellphones, using little more than thumb and forefinger. While many have abandoned the habit of using a pen, some can't even remember the last time they had to physically write something down.

### A sensational program

This summer, a TV program has fueled enthusiasm for handwritten Chinese characters across the country. The Chinese Characters

Dictation Contest, a Chinese version of the U.S. Spelling Bee, is being screened on China Central Television (CCTV) during prime time every weekend from August 2 to October 18. According to CCTV reports, the show ranks top among cultural and entertainment programs.

"This is not a talent show. There are no sensational performances or odd-ball stories. Instead, we just present a pure and simple contest for *hanzi* writing on TV. And we try to encourage our audience at home to write down each character along with contestants," said Jin

Yue, executive producer of CCTV's education channel.

A total of 160 high school students grouped in 32 teams from across the country compete for the position of national champion over 12 rounds by writing down various common and uncommon Chinese characters.

According to Jin, research staff at CCTV spent two years preparing for the contest. Outstanding Chinese linguists are invited to judge the game, with prestigious TV news broadcasters acting as dictation examiners.



**PRECIOUS RELIC:** A fragment of bone script, excavated from the relic of the Shang Dynasty (about 16th-11th century B.C.) in Anyang, Henan Province, is on show at the National Library in Beijing on April 20, 2012

**TRUE OR FALSE:**  
Linguistics experts examine answers by a student contestant at the Dictation Contest of Chinese Characters on CCTV

"Apart from font, pronunciation must be correct," he said. "By revealing the intricacies of writing, we hope the program can induce the audience to simultaneously take part in the game."

"The contest is not easy," said Guan Zhengwen, program director. The vocabulary list covers a lot of ground, he says, from classical literature such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* written by Cao Xueqin (about 1715-64) in the 18th century, to contemporary masterpieces, including works by Lu Xun (1881-1936), as well as idioms and technological terms.

"Without extensive reading and vocabulary skills, a player would struggle to pass on to the next round," Guan stressed.

"Many misused and often mispronounced Chinese characters are also included in the contest to provide viewers the chance to correct their errors," he said.

Apart from vocabulary, competition rules are strict. Players must write down characters

correctly and each stroke must conform to a certain standard.

## Characters forgotten

As Jin expected, the program has rekindled enthusiasm for the native language. However, most adults struggle to pen common characters, let alone rare forms of *hanzi*. For example, only one third of audience can correctly write *ganga* (meaning embarrassment), two common characters in Chinese. Furthermore, many

people cannot write the characters they are able to read, which could be put down to burgeoning digitalization. A survey carried out by *China Youth Daily* shows that 98.8 percent of respondents have encountered the embarrassment of "character amnesia," while only 38.9 percent write every day. As for why some forget how to write, 92 percent of respondents said they have grown used to digital input devices. Around 72.3 percent think the habit of reading is decreasing in daily life, with 43.9 percent criticizing Chinese cultural education.



Qi Fei, a correspondent working for a magazine in Anhui Province, could not believe that he failed to write nearly half the characters during one episode of the program.

"Though my job involves writing, I use a computer instead of a pen," Qi said. "In recent years, many companies have promoted office digitalization and reduced the use of paper for the sake of the environment. Except for signing package receipts and bills, I am hardly required to write. My handwriting looks like a scrawl."

"It is a terrible fact that competence in written Chinese across society is on the decline," said He Yu, head of a research team for Chinese teaching at a high school in Beijing. "Compared to adults, teenagers do well in writing *hanzi*, because they spend more time in learning and practicing at school. Thus, young players mostly outperform older audience members," He said.

However, "the impact of digital technology on students cannot be ignored," He pointed out. "Many students are obsessed with digital devices such as electronic dictionaries and computers to assist their studies. Over dependence on such tools, as well as the Internet, will make students too lazy to think and write."

## Digital input

China has been anxiously trying to include *hanzi* script in computers since the early 1980s. Unlike English and other alphabetic languages, Chinese is one of the most complex and one of the oldest hieroglyphics in the world. *Hanzi*



**LONGHAND LEARNERS:** Teachers at Sakura Foreign Language Training School in Hangzhou, capital of east China's Zhejiang Province, learn to write Spring Festival couplets on December 30, 2011

consists of comparably more "strokes" than the 26 letters in English, which means adding them to digital devices is a difficult procedure.

In 1983, Wang Yongmin invented the Five-Stroke Chinese Code, or the Wang Code, which greatly increased the speed of typing. Accordingly, people were able to type up to a record breaking 100 characters per minute. Wang dismantled *hanzi* into a number of frequent parts, and sorted them into 25 keys. But typists had to recite a special formula which put these strokes together.

Several years later, *pinyin*, or spelling, input was invented, rendering Wang's formula relatively absolute. As long as *hanzi* could be spelt out using Latin letters, people were able to input

## The Lost Art of Longhand

By Joseph Halvorson

Offer an average American on the street 10 dollars to correctly spell the word "restaurant," and you are likely to see beads of sweat form across their brow. If you really want to get inside their head, ask them to spell "psychology."

It is a difficult task for many adults whose memories of their first spelling bee have faded along with their early lessons in long division, but in English at least we can make semi-educated guesses when applying the written word. Erroneously writing "E-M-B-A-R-A-S," for instance, might be a cause of embarrassment for the speller, but most people wouldn't pass J-U-D-G-M-A-N-T upon someone for their mistake. We still get the idea.

Chinese, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated. I asked a friend recently to show me the character for "frog," and it was as though I had asked an English speaker to spell the word "accommodate." The same nervous look appeared on his face as he fiddled with a pencil, trying to recall a skill that had slowly abandoned him.

Finally my friend reached for both the partial cause of and the ultimate solution to this nationwide form of academic amnesia: their smart phone.

Punching the *pinyin* spelling into their iPhone, the correct characters for the word "frog" jumped up on the screen.

I've talked to other 20-something Chinese friends since then

Chinese into computers.

Today, the Wang Code and *pinyin* are the two major methods for Chinese to write *hanzi* on computers. For English, typing is writing because pronunciation and spelling are consistent. But Chinese is different. When a computer user types Chinese, a menu box opens on-screen, from which the user needs to choose characters from a group of options. Repeatedly using such an input method, the user inevitably grows less familiar with handwritten Chinese.

Furthermore, affected by utilitarianism, the prospects for Chinese language writing remain bleak.

"Most students are not able to learn and



who have all said the same thing: Writing *hanzi* was a major part of their primary education, but those skills have dwindled with the growing pervasiveness of texting technology.

The trend is visible almost everywhere. On each subway commute people are typing away furiously on their phones, but not once have I seen someone with a writing utensil squeezed in among the masses trying to manually pen the complicated strokes of the Chinese script onto a piece of paper.

The art of the handwritten word seems destined to be replaced by whatever technological inventions arise to satisfy our need to get things done quicker. Writing by hand takes time; and these days we associate it with unpleasant tasks, like finishing an essay exam under deadline pressure, or filling out forms at the bank—only to be told by the clerk, “I’m sorry, sir, but there’s an error in box 62b and I’m afraid we’ll need you to fill out this entire form again.”

After suffering from prolonged hand cramps as a student of Chinese while writing characters repetitively, following a careful order of strokes only to produce what looks like a toddler’s attempt to draw a spider, I can’t say I am opposed to the electronic writing revolution. I am a regular user of the text and voice messaging app WeChat, which has helped me gain familiarity with a greater volume of characters much faster than the traditional methods of learning. And should an unknown word arise, the answer is readily found with a quick copy/paste over to Google Translate.

There will be cultural purists and those who remain nostalgic for the old ways—like the people who, when electronic book readers were introduced, said, “But I just love the smell of an old book”—and many of their arguments will be worth hearing.

While some government officials may lament the texting masses, they can rest assured that the writing system itself is not going away. Until a person can write *shi* without about 100 different possible characters appearing, there will always be a need for the intricate and beautiful characters that make up the Chinese script. That, at least, is G-A-R-U-N-T-E-E-D.

practice calligraphy at primary school,” said Xie Yong, who teaches Chinese at Beijing Lu Xun High School. “Parents and teachers are zealous in sending their children to learn mathematics and English rather than about traditional culture, mainly due to enrollment requirements at key middle schools.”

There is an old Chinese saying: A person is always judged by his or her handwriting. In ancient times, a person with excellent calligraphy could always win respect and admiration from others.

In the West, calligraphy is regarded as a form of art, though the writing style differs from that of Chinese. Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple Inc., talked about learning calligraphy

Jobs put his learning into the Mac, which features beautiful typography, multiple typefaces and proportionally spaced fonts.

## Efforts needed

Currently, it is an urgent task for China to tackle new challenges in the digital age and revive its language, seeing as many countries have made remarkable efforts to preserve and promote their own native tongues.

Spelling Bee, an English language spelling competition, has been held in the United States for middle school students every year since 1925. Its purpose is to help students improve their spelling, increase their vocabularies, learn the definition of each word, and develop

## The Origin and Evolution Of Chinese Characters

As one of the oldest forms of writing in the world, Chinese characters have survived for over 4,000 years. Today, it is the language spoken by the largest population in the world.

Chinese characters have their origins in ancient rock drawings, and were first utilized as part of a mature writing system during the Shang Dynasty (about 16th-11th century B.C.).

Having evolved from scripts on animal shells, bones and bronze ware, *hanzi* embodies the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture.

The invention of printing technology and the availability of Chinese characters in computers have further facilitated its popularization.

Chinese writing is not only the carrier of Chinese culture, but has generated many forms of art such as calligraphy and seal cutting.

Source: National Museum of Chinese Characters in Anyang

correct English usage. Furthermore, one generation after another has been inspired by the TV program.

The Japanese have shown enormous interest in written *hanzi* as their

own language is mainly derived from Chinese. Since 1975, an exam on *hanzi* has been held in Japan every year in a bid to improve vocabulary and knowledge. To encourage interest, the Japanese Government has even issued a preferential education and employment policy for those who have passed the test.

In Guan’s opinion, the first episode of the contest is a good attempt to cultivate national pride in the Chinese language. “Though the program is quite young compared with those overseas, it garners a considerable amount of media attention. More importantly, it arouses public enthusiasm to revive our native language,” he said.

The government has also realized that handwritten Chinese characters are under threat, with the Ministry of Education recently calling for better calligraphy education at local primary and middle schools. ■



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