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The Chinese Language

The complexity of the Chinese writing system is well known. Some of the linguistic factors that contribute to this include the large number of characters in common use, the complexity of the character forms and the major differences between Traditional and Simplified Chinese.

The terms “Mandarin” and “Cantonese” are bound to confuse most Americans or non-Chinese. The main thing to remember is that Mandarin is the official language of Mainland China taught throughout the country and is understood by more than a billion people. Cantonese, on the other hand, is one of the many dialects within the realm of the Chinese language. The characteristics of this dialect would be relatively familiar to Americans, since the majority of Chinese immigrants in the US are originally from China’s eastern coastal region where the Cantonese dialect is spoken.

“Simplified” and “Traditional” Chinese are not languages, but different writing systems containing sets of characters which are used to express the same language — Mandarin.

Historically, traditional Chinese was the only writing system of this mostly spoken language. In recent years — from 1956 to 1986 — the government of China’s Communist Party tried to “simplify” the traditional writing system. Accordingly, 2235 characters were simplified, and the resulting Simplified Chinese is used in Mainland China and Singapore. Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan and most overseas Chinese continue to use the old, complex forms referred to as Traditional Chinese.

Traditional characters look more complex than their simplified counterparts. Most educated in Chinese are able to understand both versions, although terminology of concepts and certain idiomatic expressions may vary. These differences are very much like those among the varieties of English spoken in the major English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Chinese does not have an alphabet but instead uses thousands of different characters. Each and every character has its own subtle distinction and intricacy of meaning. Given the huge number of characters available, Chinese consumes more than twice the space in computer memory, thus it’s called a “two-byte language.”

One thing seldom understood by clients is that we cannot simply “transliterate” an English name into Chinese. The common assumption is, if the translator is native Chinese, he can simply write down the name of the client’s Chinese partner in Chinese. Actually, he can write any English name in Chinese. The problem is, there is simply too broad a selection of choices (one name may have more than 20 variations in Chinese) and each choice carries a slightly different meaning. So, selecting the right Chinese name for a product becomes an art. The right name can determine the strength of a company’s image. Likewise, when the client knows their Chinese partner or employee’s name in English, we cannot write them in Chinese. This is true for most proper names like places, products and schools, regardless of the target document.

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