

## Alphabetization: Chinese

In 1956 the Chinese government began to convert Chinese writing to our familiar 26 letters. It simply was too inefficient to alphabetize everything from telephone books and dictionaries to tax registers by the 214 radicals used to write their complicated-looking characters or ideograms.

If we had 214 letters in our alphabet, how much longer would it take you to learn to write or to look up a word in a dictionary or a name in a telephone book? Could we do with fewer letters in our own alphabet? Would the advantage of fewer letters outweigh the problems created by trying to eliminate some of them? Compare your answers with the present efforts to replace our British units of measurement by the metric system.

Word processors have been devised that can convert entire sentences written in Chinese characters into grammatically correct Japanese or Korean or vice versa. This invention will change the fabric of Asia's cultural and economic life in fundamental ways. It will bring more women into the workforce (who master the machines more quickly than do their male counterparts), speed communication in the business world, bring together diverse cultures previously divided by language barriers, and raise the level of literacy of Asian nations.

An even more dramatic invention is the telefax or facsimile ("fax") machine, which transmits pictures and handwritten messages, as well as typed and printed material. What special effects might the fax machine be expected to have on commercial transactions, political life, and the standard of living in Asian countries? (See "Metric System," p. 122.)

**Think about this . . .** Taxpayers' money is presently used to search for life elsewhere in the universe. Should this effort be stopped? Expanded? Left unchanged?

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