



The Chinese script is one of the most ancient writing systems extant in the world. — Hellorf

Time to use *hanzi* as standard translation of Chinese script

Hugo Tseng

Last Saturday was the United Nations Chinese Language Day, a day chosen to honor Cangjie, the legendary inventor of the Chinese script. In light of this, I propose that the term *hanzi* (汉字) be officially adopted as the translation for the symbols of the Chinese script.

For far too long, we've relied on the term "Chinese character" as the English equivalent of *hanzi*. However, given the evolving nature of language, it is imperative to reevaluate this lexical equivalence and adopt a more nuanced perspective. Particularly during the celebration of Chinese Language Day, let's spread the use of the Pinyin-transliterated term, *hanzi*.

The Chinese script stands as one of the oldest writing systems in the world. It is an invaluable cultural treasure for the Chinese people, a symbol of national

identity and a bridge that connects people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. But its influence doesn't stop there. The Chinese script has had a profound impact on the languages of Japan, the Korean Peninsula and Vietnam.

The Japanese writing system, for instance, owes its origins to China. Its kanji characters are directly borrowed from their Chinese counterparts. Additionally, the hiragana and katakana symbols are adapted from different styles of Chinese calligraphy. These terms — kanji, hiragana and katakana — have garnered widespread acceptance within the English language, featuring prominently in major English dictionaries.

Similarly, the Korean alphabet, known as Hangeul, was created in the 15th century with the square form of the Chinese script in mind. The term Hangeul, a native Korean word, has also been included in many English dictionaries.

However, it is important to note that

the English equivalent for the Chinese script continues to be "Chinese character," despite its role as the basis for the Japanese writing system and the reference model for Hangeul. This translation is indirect in expression and lacks precision in meaning.

So, let's embrace Chinese Language Day and take this opportunity to give the Chinese script the recognition it deserves. Let's make *hanzi* the standard term in English, reflecting the true spirit and significance of this remarkable writing system.

The term "Chinese character" has long been used to refer to those written symbols of the Chinese language. However, it's not an ideal choice, as it allows for different interpretations, deviating from the uniqueness it represents.

Let's consider this. The Sumerians had cuneiform, which means "wedge-shaped." The ancient Egyptians had hieroglyphics, which means "sacred

carving." Both, like the Chinese script, were among the major writing systems of the ancient world. In contrast, the Chinese script lacks a proper English name. The current standard, "Chinese character," is indirect and vague.

Looking at it from a fresh perspective, translating the Chinese script as "Chinese character" is like calling cuneiform "Sumerian letter" or hieroglyphics "Egyptian symbol." It falls short of capturing the essence.

So, on this Chinese Language Day, I propose giving the Chinese script a fitting English name: *hanzi*. "Chinese character" can still be used, but as an annotation. *Hanzi* should be the standard term, reflecting the true nature of this remarkable script.

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