

## “When writing no longer counts”: Chinese character writing and language ideologies in the age of AI, from a sociolinguistic perspective

With the rapid development of AI technologies such as predictive input, handwriting recognition, and large language models, the role of Chinese character writing has been fundamentally reconfigured. An increasingly common belief among learners—and even some educators—is that the ability to handwrite characters is no longer an essential component of Chinese language proficiency. However, whether this intuition reflects broader sociolinguistic realities remains an open question. This study investigates how Chinese character writing is perceived, evaluated, and pedagogically negotiated in the age of AI, from the perspectives of both native speakers and learners of Chinese.

Situated at the intersection of Chinese sociolinguistics and Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) pedagogy, this study addresses the following research questions. First, what sociolinguistic parameters—such as age, educational background, profession, frequency of handwriting, and level of interaction with non-native speakers—shape native speakers’ perceptions of character writing? Second, how do native speakers conceptualize character writing in relation to holistic language ability, and how have these attitudes shifted over the past decade, particularly following the widespread adoption of AI-assisted writing technologies? Third, how have formal requirements for character writing in native-speaker education changed in recent years?

The study further extends the inquiry to second language learners and heritage learners of Chinese. It asks whether learner groups differ in their attitudes toward character writing, and whether these attitudes align with or diverge from native speakers’ views. In addition, it examines learners’ responses to native-speaker ideologies: Do native speakers’ attitudes toward character writing influence learners’ own beliefs, motivation, and learning goals? Finally, the study explores whether there is a measurable correlation between learners’ attitudes toward character writing and their overall language learning performance, and whether such correlations vary across learner types (second language vs. heritage learners) and proficiency levels (beginning vs. advanced).

Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data are collected through large-scale questionnaires administered to native speakers, second language learners, and heritage learners, followed by statistical analyses examining correlations between attitudes, background variables, and learning outcomes. Qualitative data are drawn from semi-structured interviews and sociolinguistic analysis of participants’ metalinguistic discourse on writing, technology, and language competence.

The findings offer pedagogical insights for Chinese language instruction in the AI era. Rather than treating character writing as a uniform or declining requirement, the study argues for differentiated instructional expectations that account for learners’ sociolinguistic backgrounds, learning objectives, and evolving language ideologies. Such an approach can better align pedagogy with contemporary language practices while sustaining learner motivation and meaningful engagement with written Chinese.