

# the law of the letter

WIELDED BY DICTATORS OR EMBRACED BY THE PEOPLE, TYPOGRAPHY HAS LONG BEEN A POWERFUL TOOL IN THE SHAPING OF NATIONS.

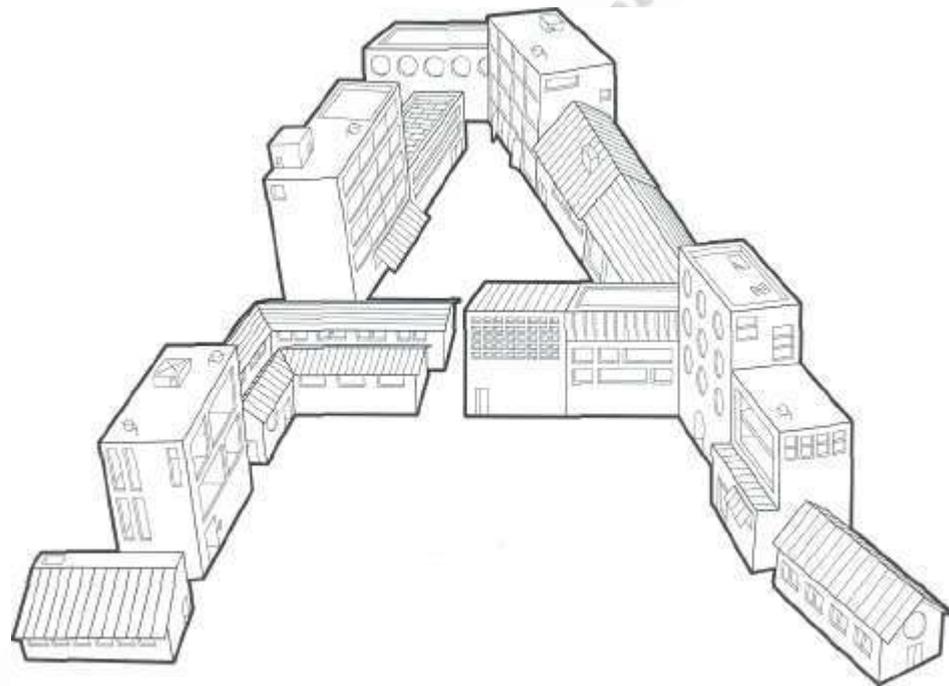
By John Emerson

It's a humid day in January 1998. A car full of Tai Lxie monks rattles into the checkpoint on the sweltering road between Burma and China. The border guards wave the monks through, heedless of contraband. But hidden in the saffron robes of the passenger in the backseat is a key to the Tai Lue people's struggle: a USB thumb drive containing the latest version of the Tai language font.

Like the Kurds, the Tai Liie lack a country of their own. Spread across southern China, northern Thailand, Burma, and Laos, Tai communities have been repressed for decades, their culture pushed underground as those nations' regimes have sought control over public expressions of "ethnicity." But after decades of struggle, Tai culture is experiencing an underground renaissance, and is flourishing once again. Digital technology—and type, in particular—has enabled this resurgence, reinforcing a cultural community that cuts across national borders.

Type designers know well that context, culture, and history shape the connotations of letterforms. But aside from an occasional critique of election-year broadsides, there is little attention paid to the role of type in politics, and the way that politics drives type. In fact, type plays a starring role in the making of nations.

In his 1991 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, political scientist Benedict Anderson describes the modern nation as an imagined political community—•£ bundle of ideas about geography and identity bound by culture and force and transmitted through



language and imagery. Typography is key to this cultural transmission. It's no accident that the rise of movable type and the decline in paper prices in the 17th century coincided with the European Enlightenment. The collapse of the anciens regimes and the rise of the modern nation-state were also contemporary with the spread of independent printers publishing in local languages. No longer confined to religious and official texts, printers introduced local-language publications to readers, who began to develop a sense of simultaneity and cultural community within the larger empires bound by Latin, Chinese, and Arabic. This simultaneity is rendered literally by the graphic design of the newspaper: disparate narrative elements in an interlocking grid.

While in the 19th century national identities emerged from the bottom up, in the 20th century the modern nation was reinforced by typography from the top down when a number of states changed their writing systems. Although the spoken languages remained largely the same, their visual representations changed in every book, sign, and printed product in the country. In each of the following cases, the choice of script shaped ideas of what a modern nation is—and is not.

On January 1, 1929, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, outlawed the use of Arabic script to write Turkish. He mandated Latin letters and Western-style numerals, both to unite the diverse Ottoman empire under a single

script and language and to reduce "outside influence." By imposing a new script, the government sought to establish an overarching Turkish state and promote a national identity that would supersede citizens' ethnic and religious identities. The new script has been strictly enforced, including a ban on characters not in the Turkish alphabet. As recently as October 2005, a Turkish court fined 20 people for using the letters *q* and *w* on placards at a Kurdish New Year celebration.

Twenty years after Atatürk's policy was instituted, China also transformed its written script. Chinese script reform has its roots in the 19th century, but Mao Zedong gave it the force of law. (Mao, a calligrapher himself, must have been keenly aware of the power of type.) A month after taking power in 1949, the Communist Party established the Language Reform Committee to simplify written Chinese. The move was intended to promote literacy and unify the nation, but it also worked to crush the many local languages within China's borders.

Script reform is not always a tool of oppression, however. It can also be an occasion for celebration—a symbol of independence. Each year, North and South Korea celebrate Hangul Day to commemorate the invention of the Korean writing system in 1443. The script was suppressed for hundreds of years under a series of regimes and occupations, but after the 1945 expulsion of the Japanese, Korea purged Chinese characters and officially recognized Hangul as the national writing system.

Azerbaijan, a tiny, oil-rich country where Eastern Europe meets Western Asia and Iran, has a fraught history with its current Latin script. In the 7th century, Arabic script was introduced during the Arab conquest, and was used to write Azerbaijani until the '20s, when it was exchanged for Latin script under Soviet rule—a deliberate attempt to counter the influence of Islam. In 1939, Joseph Stalin took his colonization program further when he imposed the Cyrillic alphabet on the Soviet Empire. After

obtaining independence in 1991, though, Azerbaijan switched from Cyrillic to Latin script again, adopting a modern variation of the 1929 writing system. The switch was part of a massive repackaging of Azerbaijani national identity, and a vehicle for the new government's claims to legitimacy.

Writing systems can have the power to unite or divide related communities. Serbian and Croatian, for instance, are close dialects of the same language—so close that the language is usually referred to as Serbo-Croatian. Each, however, is militantly defined by its own script: Serbs use Cyrillic, Croats use Latin. Hindi and Urdu also share a common vocabulary and grammatical structure, and linguists refer to them as one language: Hindi-Urdu. In print, however, the distinction has religious and political significance. Hindi is written in Devanagari, historically associated with Hinduism, while Urdu is written in an Arabic script associated with Islam. Hindi is used in India, while Urdu is used in Pakistan. The ideological wedge between what it means to be Serbian or Croatian, Hindu or Muslim, has been used by nationalist demagogues to promote conflict and political power.

Typography can also evoke narratives of the past in the service of national identity. In the '30s, the Nazis embraced blackletter type as deeply and authentically German, and the Italian fascists engraved their monuments with capital letters in a Trajanic style, making a conspicuous connection between their party and the Roman Empire. But such movements can emerge from the grassroots as well. In the Basque region of Spain, the Euskadi-style script—lettering with bulging shapes and tapered serifs, the result of ancient artisans' technique of scraping stone from the outside of the letters instead of engraving them—evokes myths of an idyllic past separate from Spain. After the

ban on expressions of Basque nationalism ended in the '30s, Basque printers and foundries lavished attention on Louis Colas's 1888 catalog of monuments in the region, a collection of studies and type rubbings gathered on travels by mule around the countryside. Using the script can be an expression of patriotism or insurgency, depending on one's point of view.

Colas's catalog looked to inscriptions and tombstones from the Roman period for inspiration. Some of the most potent conveyors of nationalist myths exist in such humble functions of type. The U.S. National Park System signs, with white Clarendon or NPS Roadway on a tan background, evoke frontier wood type and the Wild West. This treatment is particularly notable because it diverges from the Federal Highway Administration's sans-serif Series D and Series E-Modified used on a green background for other traffic signage. The difference underlines a distinction between park roads and "regular" roads.

Consistent use of type over a broad geographic area helps cement its cultural weight, and legislation has the power to enforce consistent use throughout a governed territory. Such public typography gives an area character and helps shape ideas of place. In the lowliest text and signage, it helps determine the baseline—what is "normal"—and in the process, it influences understandings of cultural identities that help define communities of "us" and "them."

Ruling parties can use type to sway these ideas, and to consolidate their power; but as the Tai Lite monks knew as they crossed the border with defiance and smuggled fonts, the tools of cultural transmission are increasingly accessible. Grassroots movements are discovering that it's not necessarily law or force, but culture and ideas that bind communities, identities, and nations. 

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