COMPUTERISATION helped end centuries of tradition, as Taiwan's parliament passed a new law that official documents in Chinese can no longer be written from right to left.

Texts must now go from left to right, the same way as Western languages, said Tsai Ting-kui, spokesman for the cabinet-level Research, Development and Evaluation Commission.

The change to standardised writing also means that bureaucrats will also abandon the top-to-bottom style and go horizontal, he said.

The old method "looks very confusing especially when texts contain numbers and English," Mr Tsai said.

Taiwan first considered switching writing styles early last year, to cope with increased computer use and to fit in with international standards.

"The change would help expedite the process of e-government while international exchanges are on the rise," Mr Tsai said.

Standardisation has long been a vexing issue in Taiwan, where some have switched to left-to-right but many still write in the old way.

The problem also affects the media, with the widely circulated Chinese-language China Times using the traditional style but the group's evening newspaper Chinatimes Express being printed from left to right.

Some have opposed the landmark change on the grounds that domestic culture would be dealt another blow, in a society where an increasing number of youths are opting for Western trends.

But Mr Tsai dismissed their concerns, saying: "Arts and literature would not be confined by the requirement".

The government system is expected to complete the change within a year after the legislation, which Mr Tsai termed as "the biggest barrier," has been approved.

Premier Yu Shyi-kun said in February 2003 that the government was considering the change because it was promoting the use of English and because some official documents were written both in Chinese and English.