

## English polymorphs of Chinese personal names

LI LAN discusses variation in Chinese names as used in English, following on from Peter Tan's 'Englishised names? – An analysis of naming patterns among ethnic-Chinese Singaporeans', in *ET68* (17:4), Oct 01

In its global spread, the English language has not only exercised a profound influence on other languages but also created mosaics in nomenclature – a phenomenon that has however been largely neglected. In 1995, in his book *Japan's Name Culture: The Significance of Names in a Religious, Political, And Social Context*, H. E. Plutschow found it surprising that names have received little or no attention, despite being so significant in social, political, economic and religious life. Chinese names as used in English are a good case in point, especially because they can have different versions when translated into, or simply presented in, English. By and large, there are three reasons for this:

- 1 the different systems of romanization available for use
- 2 the different pronunciations in different Chinese dialects
- 3 the kinds of hybridization that can occur between English and Chinese.

This paper discusses the use and translation of Chinese names in terms of the four systems of romanization adopted for Chinese at different times and in different places. The question raised is whether there should be a unified form for all such names in both English in particular and romanization in general, so as to reduce difficulties and confusions for governmental and financial institutions, for foreign learners of Chinese, and for Chinese people seeking to use a consistent version of their name for international purposes.

### Personal experience

My interest in Chinese names in English started

six years ago when I was engaged at the University of Exeter in the UK in the literature search for my doctoral thesis. I noticed an increasing number of publications by Chinese scholars in international journals and in fact that, through the way a name is spelt, one can tell where an author is from: a Chinese name in English bears information of one's origin. I did some research in databases of different subjects and was surprised by the great variety among the same family names. However, this interest remained idle until I read Peter Chan's article in *ET68*, in which he described Chinese names in Singapore. I would like to respond here to that article, with regard to Chinese English names in other places.

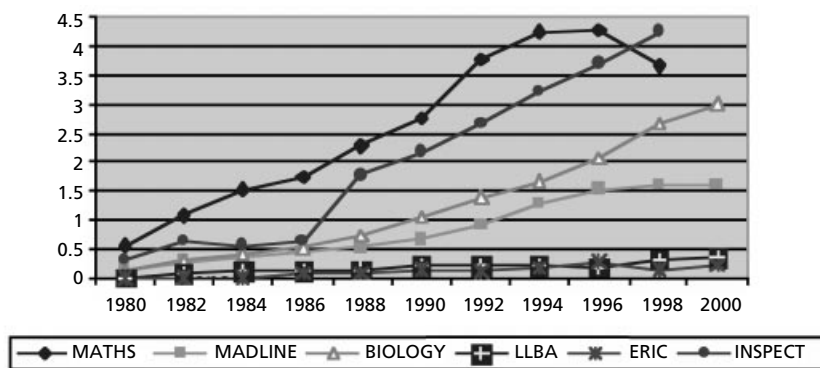
My data has been collected through the following sources: publications related to the romanization and pronunciation of Chinese; electronic databases on the Internet; the CD-ROM interlibrary network; Chinese–English dictionaries published in different ethnic Chinese communities; reports of government population censuses; and the staff directory of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where I work.

### Varieties of Chinese names in English

The international publication in English of scholars with Chinese backgrounds started about two decades ago, after China opened its door to the world in 1978. I have searched 33 databases of both natural and social sciences, in terms of 10 unique mainland Chinese surnames<sup>1</sup> that are among the top 50 most common in China: Zhang, Zhao, Zheng, Zhou, Zhu,

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Fig 1: Percentage of total publications by 10 Chinese family names



Zen, Xiao, Xie, Xu, and Xue. I worked out the above chart with the data from six leading databases (MathSciNet, MadLine, Biological Abstract, LLBA, ERIC, and INSPECT), so as to demonstrate the surge of publications by Chinese scholars in international journals from 1980 to 2000.

Before the year 1978, few mainland Chinese would have imagined their names appearing in English-language documents and were hardly concerned with how they would – or could – occur other than in traditional Chinese characters. In the last twenty years, however, over 270,000 Chinese students and scholars have studied in about 100 countries, where in many instances their families also joined them. As a result, bearing an English or romanized name has become commonplace.

Chinese characters used worldwide in ethnic Chinese groups are the same, whether in their simplified or complex forms. However, when a name is presented in English, the words represented by those characters tend to have several spellings. Such Anglicized (or, more properly, romanized) names may come from a government registrar, the recommendation or decision of a teacher, a bilingual dictionary, or some other such source. In addition, individuals sometimes change the spelling of their names when they see one that better suits their personal inclination – or even whim. The fact that a single Chinese character can have several spellings in English and other Western languages often causes confusion, and for this reason has become a significant matter for immigration departments, banks, insurance companies, and other such institutions.

### Differences in word order and capitalization

The first confusion arises from word order. Traditionally, a name in Chinese consists of a family name followed by a given name, but in English this ordering becomes uncertain. I always tell people ‘My name is Li Lan’, but when I fill in a form with a separate surname and given name, it will automatically become Lan Li in an English document. As a result it becomes difficult to be consistent: from different data sources, 12 distinct name-styles can, as it were, be generated from Chinese names rendered into English. They are:

- 1 names, composed of two characters, that follow the Chinese pattern, surname first: Li Lan
- 2 names composed of three (or more) characters represented by three (or more) roman words, family name first, in open form: *Gao Xiao Ping*
- 3 hyphenated disyllabic personal names, the second character in lower case: *Gao Xiao-ping*
- 4 hyphenated disyllabic names, the second character in upper case: *Gao Xiao-Ping*
- 5 the family name and the given name in reverse order, in open form: *Lan Li, Xiao Ping Gao*
- 6 the family name and the given name in reverse order, the given name as one word: *Xiaoping Gao*
- 7 the combination of a Christian/English name, then a Chinese given name, then the family name: *Jane Fung Yee Mok*
- 8 the combination of a Chinese given name with a Christian/English middle name in middle position: *Sao-yin Connie Lam*
- 9 the Christian/English name first, then the

- family name, then the Chinese personal name:  
*Robert Law Chung-hung*
- 10 the Christian-cum-English name first, then initials for the disyllabic Chinese given name, then the family name: *Tracy S.Y. Wong*
  - 11 the use of only one initial for the disyllabic Chinese given name: *Tracy S. Wong* (where the *S* stands for *Siu-Ying*)
  - 12 increasingly commonly, in (especially academic) institutions and publications, the family name (in whatever position) presented in upper case and the given name(s) in lower case: GAO Xiaoping., Jane MOK Fung Yee, Sao-yin Connie LAM.

In addition, married women now tend to use both their husbands' family names and their maiden names. Thus, after marriage, adding the husband's surname *Lam*, *Susan Mok Fung Yee* may become *Susan Lam Mok Fung Yee*. One fortunate thing is that, however confusing the overall system may be, individuals tend to be consistent with regard to the English/roman form of their names (much as most Euro-Americans are consistent about their own names, so that for example *Sarah Macdonald* does not suddenly become *Sara McDonald* (unless it is someone else's mistake).

### Differences derived from spelling systems

In addition to differences in word order and among individual preferences, a name written as a single Chinese character may have different roman spellings because four distinct systems of romanization have been employed for Chinese in different countries, regions, and periods of time. Indeed, from the way a Chinese name is spelt, one can often tell a great deal about someone's background. Several systems of romanization for Chinese have been invented for purposes of pronunciation.

#### 1 The Wade-Giles system

The oldest in current use is known as Wade-Giles, introduced by Sir Thomas Wade in 1859, and developed by his successor in Chinese Studies at Cambridge University, Herbert Giles. This is the system that is most familiar to Western eyes and for many years it has served as the standard transcription in scholarly sinological works in English. People in Taiwan and Hong Kong continue to use the Wade-Giles system.

#### 2 National Romanization

During the period 1912–49, the first Chinese system of romanization, the National phonetic alphabet (*guoyin zimu*) was devised by Lin Yutang and Chao Yuen-ren and based on the Beijing dialect. It was approved by the government in 1918 and became obligatory in the teaching of Chinese at secondary schools. In 1930, its name was officially changed to *zhuyin fuhao*, using phonetic symbols. It continues to be used in teaching Chinese in Taiwan. *Zhuyin fuhao* has been regarded as an unhappy compromise: it employed symbols derived from the traditional script, and in reality is not a writing system at all. Its drawbacks were obvious: it was hard to learn, hard to write, hard to remember, and hard to print. 'In short, it was in outmoded and cumbersome nuisance' (Norman, 1988:259). When it comes to international communication, this system still needs interpretation. The parallel National Romanization also had complicated spelling rules to indicate four tones, and was regarded as more difficult to learn. The government paid little attention to it and it failed a few years after its creation.

#### 3 The Yale system

During the Second World War, Yale University introduced an intensive programme of Chinese training for Air Force pilots and introduced a new system, related more clearly to American pronunciation. The Yale system was later widely used in teaching in the US for a period of time. It has also influenced spellings of Chinese names in some regions.

#### 4 The Pinyin system

The *Pinyin* alphabetic scheme was promulgated in 1957 in China. It is based on the Beijing dialect and used as an aid in the teaching of the standard language and not as a fully-fledged autonomous writing system. The system employs 21 *shengmu* (consonants) and 35 *yunmu* (simple and compound vowels). The tone mark is placed on top of each vowel and there are four tones altogether. *Pinyin* is compulsory in learning Chinese in primary education in the People's Republic of China. In English-language publications in China, all Chinese personal and place names are spelled following the rules of *Pinyin*.

For historical reasons and because of political

and geographical separation it has been difficult for Chinese ethnic communities to apply a unified spelling system in their communication through English and other languages. With the recent rapid development of China and the implementation of the 'open-door policy', an increasing number of Chinese people and places are known to the world in the field of science, politics, economics, and the like. The older, widely-used *Wade-Giles* system 'is now slowly but surely yielding its place to the newer *Pinyin* system' (Norman, 1988:173), and Pinyin has gradually been recognized worldwide.

The Library of Congress of the United States, in 1979 and 1980, recommended that the library community undertake conversion from Wade-Giles to Pinyin for the romanization of Chinese. It anticipated that 'more and more people will, in the future, approach Chinese through Pinyin romanization,... because fewer and fewer library users will have a working knowledge of Wade-Giles' (Melzer, 1996). In 1990, the Library of Congress again investigated the feasibility of converting from Wade-Giles to Pinyin, and since October 2000 all US library materials in Chinese have been catalogued in Pinyin form. This has been a huge conversion project for American libraries with Chinese collections (Lin, 2001: personal communication).

The United Nations has been using Pinyin for Chinese personal and place names for many years. After Pinyin was adapted as the U.N. Mandarin Phonetic Symbol (U.N.MPS) system, more and more government agencies, as well as most scholarly and international communities, have used Pinyin to romanize Chinese names. Dictionaries published in the UK and the US now consistently use Pinyin for Chinese names, for example *Mao Zedong* instead of *Mao Tse-tung*. International news agencies are doing the same. When Deng's death was reported in February 1997, most leading newspapers and magazines in America and Britain used the Pinyin forms *Deng Xiaoping* and *Beijing* rather than the Wade-Giles *Teng Hsiao Ping* and *Peking*.

Singaporeans now use Pinyin as a pronunciation tool for language learners and as a system for inputting Chinese characters into a computer (Kuo & Jernudd, 1994:82). In 1999, Taiwan also decided to adopt Pinyin as used by the mainland to romanize Chinese names, dropping Wade-Giles (*Asiaweek*; Hong Kong, 6 Aug. 99). Pinyin has also increasingly gained inter-

**Table 1: Consonant differences in the four spelling systems**

Pinyin	W-G system	National Romanization	Yale
b	P	B	b
d	T	d	d
c	Ts	ts	ts
g	K	g	g
J	ch	j(i)	j(i)
Q	ch	ch(i)	ch(i)
R	J	r	r
X	hs	sh(i)	s(i)
Z	ts, tz	ts	dz
Zh	ch	j	j

national recognition for diplomatic and official purposes as well as in the media.

Pinyin differs significantly from Wade-Giles and also has differences from the National Romanization and Yale systems. The major differences are:

#### *Spelling differences in consonants (shengmu)*

In the four spelling systems, consonants are the same with *p, m, f, t, n, l, k, h, ch, sh, s*. In Wade-Giles, the consonants *ch, zh, j* and *q* all have the same spelling *ch*; *c* and *z* both use *ts*; *d* and *t* are both spelled *t*; *g* and *k* are both *k*, all posing problems in distinguishing some sounds.

#### *Spelling differences in single and combined vowels (yunmu)*

As for the vowels, *a, o, ai, ei, ou, an, en, ang* and *eng*, all four systems employ the same spellings. The differences are listed in Table 2.

#### *Differences arising from the dialects*

The multidialectal nature of the Chinese language strikingly affects its spelling. Dr Chao Yuen Ren has listed nine main Chinese dialect groups. This great variety has impeded spoken communication among people from different parts of the country, but the written lingua franca provides an essential unity. However, the English versions of Chinese names, and especially surnames, can vary because of wide sound differences among dialects, the sounds

**Table 2: Vowel differences in four spelling systems**

Pinyin	W-G system	National Romanization	Yale
ian	ien, yen	ian	yan
Ie	ieh	ie	ye
Uo	o	uo	wo
A	a	a	a
O	o	o	o
I	i	i	yi, i
I	ih	ih	z, r
U	u	u	w
E	e	e	e
E	eh	eh	
E	erh	erh	
ua	wa, ua	ua	wa
ue	ueh	ueh	
ue	uo, wo	uo	wo
ue	io	io	
ia	ya, ia	ia	ya
ie	yeh, ieh	ie	ye
iao	yao, iao	iau	yau
iu	yu, iu	iou	you
ian	yen, ien	ian	yan
in	yin, in	in	yin, in
iang	iaug	iaug	yang
iong	iung	iung	iung
ou	on	on	ou
ong	ung	ung	ung

being phoneticized by means of different combinations of roman letters.

In mainland China, the spelling is unified, based on Pinyin, permitting a standard Chinese pronunciation. It is noted that the spelt-out forms vary from place to place in Chinese communities outside mainland China, even though the characters are the same. The following table shows the spelling variants of a set of family names (among the fifty most common), and is taken from a national survey carried out in China in 1990.

Other varieties are recorded in the book *Chi-*

**Table 3: Spelling variants in different dialects and regions**

Putonghua	Cantonese	Taiwan	other
Zhang	Cheung	Chang	Cheong
Zheng	Cheng	Cheng	Ti
Qian	Chin, Chen	Chien	Chi
Zhao	Chiu	Chao	Toi
Li	Lee	Li	Li
Wang	Wong	Wang	Ong
Huang	Wong	Hwang	Hong, Ong, Ooi
Wang	Wong	Wong	Ong
Zhou	Chou	Chou	Chiu
Xia	Ha	Hsia	Ha
Xiao	Siu	Hsiao	Seow
Xu	Hui	Hsu	Kho, Chee
Jiang	Kong	Chiang	Kang
Jia	Ka	Chia	Ka
Qiu	Yao	Chiu	Khu
Zeng	Tsang	Tseng	Chan
Chen	Chan	Chen	Tan
Zhu	Chu	Chu	Chu
Guo	Kwok	Kuo	Keh
Yang	Yeung,	Yang	Iu
	Young		
Wu	Ng	Wu	Goh
Yan	Ngan	Yen	Yam
Yan	Yim	Yen	Giam
Ni	Ngai	Nee	Ge
Ye	Ip, Yip	Yih	Gak
Hong	Hung	Hung	Ang

*nese American Names: Tradition and Transition*, Emma Woo Louie (1997:39)

### Conclusion

The spelling in English of names of Chinese origin reveals the layered history of this ethnic group, including different spelling systems, dif-

**Table 4**

Selected spelling	Dictionary meaning	surname character
Bai, Bock, Pai	white	—
Be, Ma, Mah, Mar	a horse	—
Cai, Choy, Tsai	herbs, weeds	—
Chiang, Ging, Jiang, Kiang	a large river	—
Chu, Gee, Jee, Zhu	red, vermilion	—
Hsiung, Hung, Xiong	a brown bear	—
Hwang, Huang, Hwang, Wong	yellow color	—
Lam, Lin, Ling	a forest	—
Lei, Loui, Louie	thunder	—
Mei, Moy, Mui	a plum	—
New, Niu	an ox	—
Ngan, Yan, Yen	a color	—
Shek, Shi, Shih	a stone	—

ferent dialects, and influence from the English language itself. There is every reason for someone formulating a unified and standard means of romanizing Chinese names and other Chinese proper nouns. Such an attempt would not only benefit the Chinese but also the rest of the world, of whose population the Chinese constitute one-fifth. While there are various Chinese romanization systems, there is only one Pinyin, providing 'the spelt-out sounds' of Putonghua. Pinyin certainly answers the call for the systematization of Chinese names. The struggle to obtain worldwide recognition for Pinyin has been more or less a political one, and in spite of some resistance the adoption of Pinyin has become a world trend.

However, although attempts have been made at various times to standardize the romanization of Chinese names, it would be difficult to change the history of a family name, and the Chinese names of major individuals have long been internationally recognized and recorded, regardless of how they have been spelt at different times and in different places. It is important therefore that each name should be regarded as existing in its own right. As Elsdon Smith once observed, the owner of a name is the one who is 'most intimately concerned with its shape and form and is accorded the authoritative voice.' This advice should be applied to the individual's choice in name-style. The variants of Chinese English names might remain for a

fairly long period due to the native dialect, regional norm, and personal preference of a Chinese person, but Pinyin will probably slowly and steadily serve to clear up the many current confusions in Chinese names. ■

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## The Spokesperson's Manual, Chapter 1: Denial

Your first move is to scoff  
 And laugh the whole thing off  
 Dismiss it all as "idle speculation"  
 Attribute it to rumour  
 Throw in a touch of humour  
 And no one will believe the accusation

Next rubbish the accuser  
 Imply he's quite a boozier  
 And bears a grudge against his old employer  
 Inform them he was sacked  
 And if he won't retract  
 He'd better have a darn good libel lawyer

And if the hacks start pressing  
 Confuse them by digressing  
 No question is impossible to handle  
 Sheer force of repetition  
 Will blunt their inquisition  
 And soon they'll start to look elsewhere for scandal

There's just one golden rule  
 To learn in PR school:  
 No matter what, you must go on denying it  
 But if that line falls through  
 Then turn to Chapter Two  
 To find out how you switch to justifying it

— Roger Berry,  
 Lingnan University, Hong Kong