

Chinese personal names: How to decode them

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Note: All family names in this article are in capital letters for clarity.

Overview

Chinese names are puzzles to Westerners who do not know much about Chinese culture or language. Librarian Junlin PAN illustrates this fact with an interesting story of her constant struggles to get her name right while living and working in the U.S.¹ Indeed, the romanized forms of Chinese names are often the cause of frustration to cataloguers, indexers, and those who have to decode them for work or business. Name order probably poses the greatest challenge as it is sometimes impossible to determine unless you know the person. This problem is aggravated by the fact that publishers often have varying rules with name formats, thereby creating inconsistencies and confusion.

To understand the complexities of romanized Chinese names, it is important to know some basic facts about Chinese name formats. There are two forms of written scripts in the Chinese language – traditional and simplified. The traditional form is used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and many of the old diasporic Chinese communities, whereas the simplified form prevails in mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, and the rest of the world. In terms of pronunciation, Chinese is a monosyllabic language, i.e., one character is pronounced as one syllable. When written in Chinese scripts, Chinese names always follow the format of family name first, then given name. Many Westerners confuse the middle syllable of a three-character Chinese name as a middle name, but Chinese do not have any middle name convention. This misunderstanding often occurs when names are written in three parts, as often is the case of Hong Kong, Singaporean, and Malaysian Chinese names.

The two main Chinese romanization systems in use today are:
Hanyu pinyin, or ***pinyin*** for short, and ***Wade-Giles***,
both based on Mandarin pronunciation.

Most Chinese have three-character names that are romanized in different ways depending on where they live, and sometimes the dialects they speak. The two main romanization systems in use today are *Hanyu pinyin*, or *pinyin* for short, and *Wade-Giles*, both based on Mandarin pronunciation. Except in rare cases as with minority groups, names of mainland Chinese always follow the pinyin format. Pinyin names have two parts: family name first, then given name as one word, such as MAO Zedong or YAO Ming. Let us take a look at the four Chinese name formats with examples of well-known people, all rendered in pinyin:

The four formats of Chinese names

1. Three-character names = 1-character family name (FN) + 2-character given name (GN)

E.g., MAO Zedong - former political leader in China

3-character names are the most common format of all Chinese names.

	FN	+	GN	GN
Name in simplified script	毛		泽	东
Pronounced in Mandarin as	MAO		Ze	Dong
Full pinyin form	MÁO Zédōng			
Full Wade-Giles form	MAO ² Tse ² -tung ¹			

2. Two-character names = 1-character family name (FN) + 1-character given name (GN)

E.g., YAO Ming - Chinese basketball player

The problem with this format is that it creates uncertainties as to which part of the name is the family name. Many Westerners have difficulties in determining whether the name Yao Ming is family name first as in YAO Ming, or family name last as in Yao MING.

	FN	+	GN
Name in simplified script	姚		明
Pronounced in Mandarin as	YAO		Ming
Full pinyin form	YÁO Míng		
Full Wade-Giles form	YAO ² Ming ²		

3. Four-character names = 2-character family name (FN) + 2-character given name (GN)

E.g., SIMA Xiangru - scholar of the Han Dynasty

A minority of the Chinese population also has two-character compound family names, so some names can be four characters long.

	FN	FN	+	GN	GN
Name in simplified script	司	马		相	如
Pronounced in Mandarin as	SI	MA		Xiang	Ru
Full pinyin form	SĪMǎ Xiāngrú				
Full Wade-Giles form	SSU ¹ -MA ³ Hsiang ¹ -ju ²				

4. Three-character names = 2-character family name (FN) + 1-character given name (GN)

E.g., ZHUGE Liang - chancellor of the Three Kingdoms period

This format causes the most confusion as it looks like the last part is the family name but in actual fact, the first two characters form part of a compound family name.

	FN	FN	GN
Name in simplified script	诸	葛	亮
Pronounced in Mandarin as	ZHU	GE	Liang
Full pinyin form	ZHŪGĚ Liàng		
Full Wade-Giles form	CHU ¹ -KO ³ Liang ⁴		

Complexities of romanized Chinese names

As can be seen from the examples above, it is easy to imagine the difficulties in identifying the “cut-off point” between family and given names. This also explains why knowing the order does not always guarantee success in identifying which part of a name forms the family name and which part the given name.

In addition to name order, there are other complexities as well. The following section cautions indexers when working with romanized Chinese names:

1. Name order

Written in logographic scripts, Chinese names are simple and straightforward. They can only appear in one order – always family name first, then given name. Nobody would ever change it to any other way. Name order becomes a problem only when Chinese names are romanized. Imagine trying to decode names like Linda Miranda or George Thomas if you do not know the order, unless of course, there is a comma in between to indicate otherwise. If you believe a name to be in pinyin form, you can be sure that it is family name first, except in the case when someone inverts it deliberately to make things “easier” for Westerners. Junlin PAN mentioned above is one such example where she reversed her original name order to fit in with American name convention. Because pinyin names are always family name first, most indexers treat them as they are printed; no comma follows Chinese family names in indexes as they do other types of names.

However, Chinese names also come in other romanized forms apart from pinyin and may not always be family name first. This is why name order causes so much confusion, particularly for an international audience. In recent years, many librarians and politicians from Hong Kong and Japan have started to capitalize their family names on official documents and websites to avoid confusion. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s online World Leaders directory also displays family names of world leaders in

capitalized form for the sake of clarity, making it easier for those who have to work with politicians' names. Unfortunately, practices like these are not as widespread as we would like.

It is interesting to note that many overseas Chinese during the gold mining era of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had their names permanently reversed in English, often by immigration officials. The SEW HOY family in New Zealand is one such example where CHOIE Sew Hoy's given name, Sew Hoy, became his family name. However, this name reversal was not just for him, but for all descendants after him too.² Many Chinese names from that period were also deliberately anglicized by immigration officials – family names like LO or LAW became LOWE, SHAO became SHAW, and LUI became LOUIE.

2. Different romanization systems in use simultaneously

Since pinyin became an international standard in 1979, all mainland Chinese names are romanized in this format. However, people outside mainland China still continue using other conventions as they have for decades. An atypical example is the former Chinese National Party leader CHIANG Kai Shek. His name appears in different forms depending on where and which romanization system is used:

Romanized Form	Romanization system	Spelling based on
JIANG Jieshi	Pinyin	Mandarin (mainland China)
CHIANG Chieh-shih	Wade-Giles	Mandarin (Taiwan)
CHIANG Kai-shek	Wade-Giles	Cantonese (Western world)

According to pinyin, JIANG Jieshi is the standard form, and this is how all Mandarin speakers will pronounce his name. But unlike MAO Zedong whose name had a quick and easy transition from its former Wade-Giles form of MAO Tse-tung, CHIANG Kai Shek, based on Cantonese dialectal pronunciation, remains the more popular form to this day. This is rather a rare example for well-known figures but demonstrates a typical confusion because JIANG Jieshi, CHIANG Kai Shek, and CHIANG Chieh-shih all sound very different from each other.

In Taiwan, even though the Taiwanese government made pinyin official in 2009, people still observe the Wade-Giles rules which have been used for decades.³ The Wade-Giles system employs a lot of diacritic marks, as well as superscript numbers to indicate levels of tone in each syllable. Wade-Giles names also have hyphens in between two-syllable given names, making romanized Taiwanese names easy to identify.

Elsewhere in Hong Kong where Cantonese is spoken, the Hong Kong government uses its own rules based on the *Jyutping* system to romanize personal names. However, people can still determine how they want to spell their names. This lack of

standardization is mainly because there is no internationally recognized system for the Cantonese dialect. Many authors and family history researchers also use the *Yale* or *Sidney Lau* systems to romanize Cantonese names. Another distinct feature of romanized Hong Kong Chinese names is that each syllable is written separately. They are neither joined together as in pinyin names nor separated with a hyphen like the Wade-Giles format. The same is true of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese names. Hong Kong businessman Li Ka Shing and the former Singaporean Prime Minister LEE Kuan Yew are two such examples.

For the rest of the older diasporic Chinese communities, there is hardly any standard at all. Most people use self-deduced ways to romanize names based on their spoken dialect, giving many idiosyncratic systems. This explains why there are so many different spellings of the same family names for many overseas Chinese.

3. Omission of tone marks, diacritic marks, and apostrophes

Correct use of the pinyin and Wade-Giles systems very much depends on tone marks, in pinyin as diacritic marks and in Wade-Giles as superscript numbers. However, romanized Chinese names are rarely written with these marks because they look cumbersome and add complexities when entering into computers. Wade-Giles names in their correct form also make abundant use of the diacritic mark *ayn* (often written as an apostrophe to indicate aspiration) which easily confuses people. Designed for academics and specialists, the Wade-Giles system has been heavily criticized as being inaccurate in terms of Chinese pronunciation, mainly because most people do not know how it works. As such, authors and editors often leave those marks out altogether, causing a lot of confusion for the “educated” readers. A classic example is the martial art term *T'ai Chi*. The *ayn* after T indicates an aspirated sound, i.e., with a puff of air when you say the word. Without the *ayn*, T is pronounced as D, so Tai is then actually pronounced as Dai. As for Chi, because it is written without the *ayn*, it is non-aspirated – with no puff of air when you say it, so it is pronounced as Ji. The following shows how *ayns* work in terms of pronouncing T'ai Chi in Wade Giles, and its pinyin equivalent:

	Romanized as	Pronounced as
In pinyin	Taiji	Tai Ji
In Wade-Giles (without the <i>ayn</i> mark)	Tai Chi	Dai Ji
In Wade-Giles (with the <i>ayn</i> mark)	T'ai Chi	Tai Ji

The irony with Wade-Giles is that both the presence and absence of *ayns* confuse people. Despite this, it is worth knowing that this diacritic mark is an important part of the Wade-Giles system and as such warrants careful treatment.

For pinyin names, the absence of umlauts also creates confusion. Without this diacritic mark, u can be pronounced in two ways, either as u or ü. In pinyin, ju, qu and xu are

always pronounced as jü, qü and xü so there are no ambiguities. However lu and lü (both are family names) represent completely different characters and need to be sorted separately in indexes. Similarly, nu and nü are two different words too. On the other hand, apostrophes are also an important element in pinyin names as they separate joined syllables in the case where there may be confusion. For example, WANG Yan'an is pronounced as WANG Yan An but without the apostrophe, it can also be pronounced as WANG Ya Nan, two completely different names!

4. Dialectal variations

China has seven major dialect groups and hundreds of sub-dialects that are mutually unintelligible. As can be seen in CHIANG Kai Shek's example, dialectal variations (variations in spelling) play an important part in how Chinese names appear in their romanized forms. A majority of the international Chinese diasporic communities is from Southern China where the Guangzhou (Cantonese), Kejia (Hakka), and Fujian (Hokkien) dialects are spoken. Consequently, many overseas Chinese have strange-looking romanized names because of uncommon dialectal pronunciations. Other names look odd because people did not follow common conventions and came up with their own idiosyncratic spellings. The family name Huang (in Mandarin pinyin) can be romanized as follows depending on the dialect:

Dialect	Romanized form
Mandarin	Huang, Hwang
Guangzhou (Cantonese)	Wong
Kejia (Hakka)	Bong
Fujian (Hokkien)	Oei, Oi, Ooi, Uy, Wee
Chaozhou (Chiu Chow/ Teochew)	Ng, Ong

5. One name shared by many people

Similar to the English versions of John Smith or Mary Jones, the overuse of a small pool of Chinese family names means that there is a large number of Chinese sharing exactly the same names. In addition to this, there is also the problem of people having different names, but when romanized they all become spelled the same! This coincidence is due to the large number of homophones in the Chinese language. A comparable example in English is the name Mary Ann, which can also be spelled as Maryanne, Marianne, or Maryann – all having the same pronunciation but different spellings. Similarly, Chinese names that are different but share the same sounds can only be distinguished by their written characters.

The omission of tone marks in romanized Chinese names creates further problems. Chinese is a tonal language; Mandarin has four tones while Cantonese has nine. Tone marks in romanized names provide vital information because they help differentiate characters that have the same sounds but different tones. In Mandarin, the syllable *yi* can be pronounced in four different tones as follows:

4 tones of <i>yi</i>	Tone level
<i>yī</i>	high
<i>yí</i>	rising
<i>yǐ</i>	falling then rising
<i>yì</i>	falling

The fourth falling tone *yì* alone represents 80 different characters in an everyday use Chinese dictionary! Tones are indicated in pinyin with diacritic marks and in Wade-Giles as superscript numbers (although rarely used). The name of SIMA Qian, the father of Chinese historiography, can be written with tone marks as follows:

In pinyin	SĪMǎ Qiān
In Wade-Giles	SSU ¹ -MA ³ Ch'ien ¹

The following example shows six different persons all sharing the same pinyin name WANG Wei. Without tone marks, the names are all spelled exactly the same. But even when written with tone marks, the last two pairs still cause confusion.

王威 WANG Wēi
 王维 WANG Wéi
 王伟 WANG Wěi
 王纬 WANG Wěi
 王卫 WANG Wèi
 王为 WANG Wèi

Name duplication has become a huge problem, particularly within the biomedical and science publishing field because more and more Chinese authors are publishing their work internationally. Some even went as far as to describe this confusion as an identity crisis for Chinese authors.⁴ In works of classical Chinese literature and philosophy, name duplication frequently happens. This is why in many authoritative works where names are important and numerous, authors or editors usually list corresponding Chinese characters next to the romanized version for easy reference as well as name disambiguation. However, this may prove impractical because publishers may not be willing to include Chinese scripts, or authors and editors do not know the Chinese language. Sometimes the only way to solve name duplication problems in indexes is to include birth and death dates, or add attributes such as the individual's profession to provide differentiation.

6. Female married names

It is very rare for Chinese women to alter their names after marriage. However, many female politicians, members of the Hong Kong's upper class, and some Taiwanese do add their husbands' names in front of their maiden names. Married names are similar to how compound family names work when written in Chinese. The name of Madame CHIANG Kai Shek whose maiden name is SOONG May-ling (also SUNG Mei-ling) can be written as:

Madame CHIANG SOONG May-ling, or
Madame CHIANG Kai Shek, but **NOT** Madame CHIANG May-ling

7. Adoption of Western names

The adoption of Western names explains why some Chinese have more than one name and why name order can sometimes become a nightmare to decode. Either as birth names or in addition to the given name, many Chinese in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia adopt Western names. The standard format used by the English press in Hong Kong actually has the family name in the middle! It places the adopted Western name first, then family name, and lastly a hyphenated two-syllable given name. The name of the former Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Government appears in Hong Kong's English press as:

Donald TSANG Yam-kuen

Former Singaporean Prime Minister LEE Kuan Yew also has an English name in addition to his Chinese one – Harry.⁵ His full name can be written in a variety of ways:

LEE Kuan Yew, Harry
Kuan Yew LEE, Harry
Harry LEE Kuan Yew
Harry Kuan Yew LEE, or
Harry LEE

If we add initialization and hyphenation to the above, the list will go on and on. Complexities like these may help to explain why many overseas Chinese simply drop their Chinese given names for the sake of convenience – Harry LEE is definitely a lot easier for Westerners to remember than LEE Kuan Yew.

8. Ethnic minority names

China has 55 minority groups **each** with completely different naming conventions from the Chinese Han people. One example is Tibetan names. Names of the Tibetan people are often romanized into pinyin based on the sound of the Tibetan words – a practice known within the scholarly community as *ethnic pinyin*. However, there also exists another way of romanization which is a pinyin version of the Chinese characters transcribed from the original Tibetan name. As a result, multiple versions of the same name may occur.⁶ In view of this arbitrary practice, minority names should be treated differently from pinyin names.

9. Names written in Chinese scripts do not always belong to Chinese

This is probably the least expected of all possible confusions. The languages of the Sinosphere (Chinese cultural sphere) countries – China, Japan, and Korea are different, but all three countries use logographic Chinese characters, known as *hanzi* in Chinese, *kanji* in Japanese, and *hanja* in Korean. Written in Chinese scripts, Chinese and Korean

names can sometimes be hard to distinguish, both countries employing three-character names as the most common format. Some Japanese also have three-character names but they are relatively rare. When I studied in Japan, I was able to continue using my written name in Chinese. However, the three characters of my name were pronounced in completely different ways – my Japanese teacher and friends would pronounce it based on Sino-Japanese pronunciation; and my Korean classmates the Sino-Korean way. What is more, I also happened to share the same name with some Japanese women, and they would pronounce it according to Japanese pronunciation. Thus my name can be romanized within the Sinosphere in five different ways:

My name in traditional Chinese script	林麗香
Pronounced in	Romanized as
Cantonese	LAM Lai Heung
Mandarin pinyin	LIN Lixiang
Sino-Japanese	LIN Reika
Sino-Korean (Revised Romanization)	IM Ryeo-hyang
Japanese (Hepburn Romanization)	HAYASHI Reika

10. Sometimes there is no rule at all!

Outside China, there are often no strict requirements as to how people romanize their names so formats can be unpredictable. My sister and her husband who live in Cantonese speaking Hong Kong romanized the names of their children as CHENG Log G and CHENG Log C, both very unusual spelling for the Chinese. The G and C are not initials but were chosen because these two letters replicate almost the exact same sounds in Cantonese. Names such as these easily confuse Chinese as much as they do Westerners!

Tips and suggestions

It helps to know that decoding Chinese personal names may not always be as complicated as suggested above. No doubt it is a lot easier if you only need to work with pinyin names. For those who are less fortunate, here are a few tips and suggestions to help you avoid getting confused:

1. Except in rare cases, all pinyin names are family name first followed by given name. The same is true of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese names. Hong Kong and Taiwanese names can be tricky as people sometimes invert their names to fit in with Western standards.
2. Be cautious of names on book covers if they are works by Western and Chinese co-authors. These names often appear alongside each other in “mixed-orders” – Western author names are arranged family name last while Chinese author names the

opposite! Imagine a work co-authored by LEE Kuan Yew and Barack OBAMA. One would readily assume Yew as the family name but in this instance it is obvious that it is LEE and not Yew. This inconsistent practice leads to a lot of name order confusion.

3. Take extra care not to miss diacritic marks and apostrophes in both Wade-Giles and pinyin names if they have been rendered properly.
4. Most Taiwanese names are still in Wade-Giles format and can be easy to identify. Pinyin and Wade-Giles names have different starting and ending syllable combinations shown as follows:

	Pinyin	Wade-Giles
Starting syllables	B-, D-, G-, Q-, X-, Z-	Hs-, Ts-
Ending syllables	-an, -ian, -ong, -ue, -ie	-ung, -ueh, -ieh
Example	MAO Zedong	MAO Tse-tung

5. Watch out for names from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, particularly those with adopted Western names, as the family name may sometimes be embedded in the middle. Names from these regions almost always have spaces between each syllable as in LEE Kuan Yew. The same is true of most overseas Chinese names.
6. It is important to know that names commonly used may not be the person's "real" name. For example SUN Yat-sen's name is his pseudonym and he has many other names. He is known to all Chinese as SUN Zhongshan which is actually his Japanese name. CHIANG Kai Shek is known in Taiwan under his official name CHIANG Chung-cheng. Chinese literary authors, artists, calligraphers, and painters also tend to have many different pseudonyms or style names. It is always a good practice to add *see references* or create double entries so people can find those variant names.
7. If you are sure a married woman uses her husband's name **in addition to** her maiden name, the name can be indexed in several ways, either:

CHIANG SOONG May-ling (similar to a compound family name), or
 CHIANG May-ling (SOONG) (maiden name in brackets)

Again, it is helpful to add a cross-reference or create a double entry for the maiden name.

8. Do not attempt to translate Wade-Giles name formats into pinyin and vice versa without reference to the actual Chinese scripts. In some cases these two systems do not correspond to each other. For example, although ch- or ch'- in Wade-Giles can still be ch- when translated into pinyin, it can also be j-, q-, or zh-.

9. If a name appears in Wade-Giles form and you are aware of the correct pinyin version, it would be helpful for readers to include the pinyin name in brackets or create a *see reference* entry. E.g., Chiang Kai Shek. *See* Jiang Jieshi.
10. With works that involve a lot of names, it is worth finding out if publishers are willing to include a separate name index as it is a lot easier for readers.

If you find yourself constantly struggling with name order, Liqun DAI has an article with a “Hundred Surname Pinyin Index” which can help you decode name order for pinyin names.⁷ For non-pinyin names, extra research is often needed to ensure accuracy. However, there are times when it is just impossible to identify which part of a name is the family name. For instance, all three characters of my name, when romanized, can be family names. The same is true of my husband’s and my daughter’s names. In such cases you have to seek advice from the author or editor. The good news for indexers is that a lot of the detective work would have already been done with names decoded when the work arrives in your hands. It is also common for authors to include introductory notes indicating how they choose to romanize Chinese names within their works. Authors sometimes have bi-lingual glossaries which can be helpful for indexers as reference materials, even though you can only guess from the look of the Chinese scripts if you do not know the language.

For those having to work with ancient materials such as classical Chinese literature or historical works about imperial China, it can be very challenging as name duplication is common. Taiwanese authors living abroad or Chinese scholars in Taiwan who publish in the English language may still use a lot of Wade-Giles names, often alongside pinyin equivalents. This practice is particularly common in works **such as** Chinese martial arts. With jobs like these, names can be tedious to work with because of the abundant use of ayns and other diacritic marks. It may also involve a lot of background research and communicating with either the author or editor to get things right. In such cases, you may seek help by networking with other Chinese-speaking indexers as they can answer questions you may have when you get into tangles.

Final Comments

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that pinyin was not designed as a romanization system for foreigners, but as a teaching aid for the Chinese people and has been used in mainland China since 1958. It was not until 1979 that it came into wide-spread use internationally as a romanization system for non-Chinese. Another interesting concept put forth by Yewang WANG is that, a person’s romanized name is a phonetic version of his original name written in English form. It is not a real English name, but rather a “surrogate” name.⁸ Understanding this concept may help indexers appreciate why Chinese names can be romanized in so many different ways.

The Virtual International Authority File database
is an excellent resource for foreign names.
It supports searching across languages in many different
scripts and spellings, including variant names.

For those interested in finding out more about issues with romanized Chinese names, there is a resource section at the end of this article. The Library of Congress Authorities and The Virtual International Authority File Databases are both very helpful tools for indexers when working with established Chinese names. There are also plenty of resources on the Internet. Wikipedia has a wealth of information on naming conventions, not only about Chinese names but names of all kinds, with some very interesting debates on template rules too. Last but not least, veteran indexer Noeline Bridge's "Resources for personal names" provides invaluable guidance for indexers who need to locate resources when decoding personal names of all kinds, not just Chinese. It is certainly an important resource not to be missed.⁹ Good luck and happy indexing Chinese names!

The author welcomes any questions or comments on this article and can be reached at: laihlan.hk@gmail.com.

Endnotes

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