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PROBING INTO THE ENGLISH TRANSLITERATION OF CHINESE NAMES:  
PROBLEMS AND COUNTERMEASURES

TAN ZHUXIU

College of Foreign Language Education, China West Normal University  
No.1. Shida Road, Nanchong, Sichuan, China



ABSTRACT

Within the globalization era, Chinese people have more and more chances to communicate with people from foreign countries. The translation of Chinese names becomes an important issue in the cross-cultural communication. However, the transliteration of Chinese names has become a prominent problem, which often causes confusion and even embarrassment during the communication process. This paper aims to present the existing problems based on the analysis of different standards for the transliteration of Chinese names and then corresponding countermeasures and suggestions are also given in order to solve these specific problems.

**Key word:** Chinese names, transliteration, problems, countermeasures

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1. INTRODUCTION

With enormous amount of international exchanges with the outside world, English has been widely used by Chinese people now. In order to have a successful cross-cultural communication with people from foreign countries, it is absolutely necessary to translate Chinese names into English correctly. However, Chinese and English belong to two different language families. So when we are doing the translation of Chinese names into English, what we should take into consideration include not only the translation of the character itself, but also the customs and acceptability in English language. Making a general survey of the English translation of Chinese names, we can find that the most common method used is transliteration. However in practice, the transliteration of Chinese names into English is still in a state of chaos because of lacking of unification and standard. Facing totally different English transliterations of the same Chinese name, people often feel confused and even embarrassed in their communication with foreign friends. This paper mainly intends to analyze the existing problems of Chinese-English transliteration of names and then put forward some corresponding countermeasures.

2. The current situations of Chinese-English transliteration of names

Although the Chinese government has published relevant policy in Chinese names' transliteration early in 1950s, the translation now is still in a state of chaos. The same Chinese name may have several English

translations. For example, the name 王翊 is often transliterated as follows: 1.Wong Kia-tung, 2. Wang Jiatong, 3.WANG Jiatong 4.WANG Jia-tong, 5.Wang Jia-tong, 6.Wang Jia-Tong, 7.Wang Jia Tong, 8.Jiatong Wang, 9.J.T. Wang, etc. The main reason for the differentiated translations is that there exist simultaneously several standards for the transliteration of Chinese name.

### 3. The main standards of Chinese-English transliteration of names

#### 3.1 The Wade-Giles Romanization System

Chinese is pictograph and its characters do not represent phonemes directly. There once have been many systems that used Roman characters to represent Chinese throughout history, which provided useful tools for those foreign language learners in China by indicating the pronunciation of unfamiliar characters. The first widely accepted system was the Wade-Giles Romanization System which was co-created by a Chinese scholar and a British diplomat whose name was Thomas Francis Wade in 1859. This system was then revised and improved by Herbert Allen Giles in *Chinese-English Dictionary* of 1892 (Xin, 2005). Since then, the Wade-Giles system has become the most popular system for the Romanization of Mandarin Chinese for the majority of the twentieth century. Nowadays, in mainland China, it has been entirely replaced by *the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet* that was approved and then published in 1958. Outside of mainland China, it is still used by people in Hongkong, Macao, Taiwan and by those overseas Chinese as well. In their daily life, people transcribe their names in the Wade-Giles system, such as Tung Chee-Hwa(董建华), Ma Ying-jeou(马英九) and Poon Chung-kwong(潘宗光).

Although the Wade-Giles system has been widely used and has great influence on the transliteration of names, its deficiency is also apparent. The most confusing phenomenon is that some completely different Chinese family names have the same transliteration. For example, the family names 张 and 常 are both transliterated as Chang. The same goes for many family names, such as 于 and 尤 both are Yu, 朱 and 瞿 both are Chu). The discrepancy of family names is ignored in the Wade-Giles system, which causes much inconvenience in communication and also violates Chinese people's clan awareness. So after 1958, the Wade-Giles system has been gradually replaced by *the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet*.

#### 3.2 The National Standard

In 1958, Chinese government published *the Scheme of Chinese Phonetic Alphabet* in which the phonetic alphabets were firstly applied to the transliteration of Chinese names. Later in 1978, China announced *the National Standard of Chinese Names in Phonetic Alphabet Spelling* to formulate the specific criterion for Chinese names' spelling. Right after that, the United Nations Secretariat in 1979 followed on to publish the *Notice of Adoption of Chinese Phonetic Alphabet* claiming to transliterate the Chinese personal names with the *Phonetic Alphabet* (Lu, 2001). From then on, the Chinese phonetic alphabet was widely used to spell Chinese names in non-academic field around the world.

In the *National Standard*, there are definite rules for the spelling of Chinese names. First, surname and given name should be written separately and the initial letter of each part should be capitalized. Second, the two-character surname must be written together. For example, the family name 欧阳 should be spelt as Ouyang. Thirdly, the two-character given name must be written together. Fourth, there is no dash or any tones used in the spelling of surname and given name. Finally, surname should come before given name in accordance with Chinese custom. Therefore, based on the national standards above, the proper translation of the name 王翊 should be Wang Jiatong.

However, there are also some defects in the *National Standard*. Because no dash or any other separators are used in the two-character given names which must be written together, confusion will be caused in distinguishing individual names. For example, the spelling Xu Yunan can refer to not only one Chinese name 许云 but also another name 徐安 the spelling Li Chuan can be the transliteration of 李安 or 李川. In addition, the lack of dash in names would result in the failure to distinguish the surname and given name for foreign people. For example, looking at the name Wang Jiatong, foreign people may think Jiatong is the surname based on their custom of naming. Besides the problems above, the transliteration of Chinese names in phonetic alphabet also has some shortcomings in academic field. For example, if the name Wang Jiatong is

used in international academic literatures, it often appears like Wang J. in which the translation for character 彤 is omitted. This would definitely increase the difficulties to identify the specific individuals and also affect the precision of bibliographic retrieval and data statistics.

### 3.3 Chinese Academic Periodical Standard

In 1999, *Chinese Academic Periodical Standard* was born in response to the solving of the problems of name translation in academic field. In this Standard, the specific rules for the English transliteration of Chinese names are made as follows: First, surname should come before given name and the two parts are divided by a blank space. Second, all letters of surname are capitalized and two-character surname must be written together. Third, the initial letter of given name must be capitalized and there is a dash between the two characters of given name. Fourth, given name cannot be abbreviated (Tan, 2008). According to these rules, the only way to spell the name 王彤 should be WANG Jia-tong in academic literature. The Standard, as an alternative and supplement for the *National Standard*, certainly plays a positive role in solving the troubles of Chinese name translation in academic literature. But due to its inconsistency with *National Standard*, some writers are still puzzled by the issues of capitalization of letters and the use of dash, which finally leads to the inconformity of translation.

### 3.4 Overseas academic periodical standard

Besides the three standards discussed above, there is an overseas academic periodical standard. Different international periodicals have different rules for the transliteration of Chinese names. Generally speaking, the correct spelling is to put given name before surname. The full given name and the abbreviation of it are both acceptable. For example, the name 王彤 can be translated as Jiatong Wang or J.T. Wang

In conclusion, the translation of Chinese names into English has more than one form. One should understand clearly the corresponding standard well in order to use proper translation under specific occasions. Based on the problems of Chinese-English name transliteration analyzed above, the suggestions and countermeasures would be given.

## 4. Suggestions and countermeasures

### 4.1 To respect Chinese culture and social customs

Names are not only the symbols of individuals but also the carriers of profound social cultural meanings. When it comes to the translation of Chinese names, Chinese culture and social customs must be considered. The present author holds that surname should be put before given name in the transliteration of Chinese names into English. There are mainly two reasons. First, the transliteration should adhere to the principles of following the pronunciation of the name's owner which was once proposed by Chinese Confucius nearly two thousand years ago. Confucius insisted that when one recorded names in historic books, "the transliteration of personal names or names of places should be in accordance with the pronunciation of native people" (Chen, 1992:13). This idea can also apply to the name transliteration today. When English names are translated into Chinese, the English language customs in which name is put before surname should be kept. In a multicultural world, every culture should be understood and respected by others. Peter Newmark (2001:70) once pointed out, "If the name becomes commonly used, it may be modified in pronunciation and spelling. But nowadays, people have become as jealous of their names as of their national and linguistic independence. This is not likely." Therefore, when Chinese names are transliterated into other languages, including English, its custom of putting surname before given name should also be followed. Second, the special social cultural connotation of Chinese names determines the order of the surname and name. According to the Chinese tradition, surname stands for ancestry and clan which are very important in people's eyes. Besides, most Chinese names have two characters, first of which has been decided even before one is born by his generation rank in the clan. This character was devised by the ancestors of the family thousands years ago and the descendents adopt this rule strictly. By this, people can easily infer one's generation rank in his family and the relationship between him and other family members. After the character standing for generation rank comes the character representing an individual. The surname and name character standing for generation difference have special functions in history. For example, in traditional matrimony, one could not marry another one with

the same surname and the relatives within five generations were forbidden to marry (He, 2001:3-8). This rule was definitely beneficial to human beings' development. From this analysis, it is clear that the order of Chinese name just represents people's social values and any reversal of the order is not so proper. And it is not difficult to find that in any English media, there is no reversal of the order in the paramount Chinese leaders' names, such as Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.

However, the order of Chinese name differs from that in international academic periodical field. The present author thinks that doing in Rome as Rome does maybe a solution for this specific group. After all, there is no any permission expressly stated in international academic field for the application of the order of Chinese names in transliteration. If the writer insists on the order of transliteration, he or she may probably be refused by the international journals. On the other hand, the inconsistency in name translation may cause chaos in bibliographic retrieval.

#### **4.2 To promote the revise and implementation of *National Standard***

In order to eliminate the confusion of name transliteration, we should admit the necessity to promote the revise of *National Standard*. According to the analysis and comparison of the two standards, the *National Standard* can be revised from two points. One is to add dash between the two characters in given names. Doing like this, the confusing name Xu Yunan can be changed into Xu Yun-an or Xu Yu-nan, which is definitely much clearer than before. The second is to make the regulations of abbreviation. There is no shorten form for surname and the given name can have abbreviation with capitalized initial letter of each character, which would avoid the loss of second character in translation. For example, Wang Jiatong can be shortened as Wang J.T.. After the revise, *National Standard* becomes like this: (1) Surname goes before given name. (2) Surname and given name are written separately and the initial letter of each part should be capitalized. (3) Two-character surname must be written together. Two-character given name must be written together with a dash between the phonetic alphabets of the two characters if necessary. (4) The surname must be full and the given name can have abbreviation with capitalized initial letter of each character. (5) The tones of the phonetic alphabet can be omitted. After rational and scientific revise, *National Standard* can completely replace *Chinese Academic Periodical Standard* and become the only standard for Chinese name transliteration in China.

It is obvious that the revised *National Standard* is still different from the overseas academic periodical standard. The present author holds that Chinese government should insist on the *National Standard* strengthening around the world. Through intensifying publicity, more and more foreigners and foreign media would come to understand Chinese *National Standard* and then gradually accept it as a common principle for Chinese name transliteration in the world.

#### **4.3 To keep the established version in history and some specific areas**

There are some historic celebrities and famous overseas Chinese whose translations of names have been used for many years. The present author argues that although those names were not translated in Chinese phonetic alphabets, we might just as well keep the established version, such as Sun Yat-sen, Soong Ching Ling, Confucius, Genghis Khan, etc.. The same goes for the Chinese people settling in Hongkong, Macao, Taiwan and other foreign countries. Those people have been influenced greatly by local language and customs. The transliterations of their names in Wade-Giles System, in combination of English and Chinese phonetic alphabet or other ways would make them enter the mainstream of society easily. Their Chinese-English translation of names should be respected.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The translation of names is a serious academic issue and should be treated carefully. Early in 1961, Fu Lei, an expert in translation filed, pointed out that the unification of Chinese names transliteration is a long-term and challenging task for the specific academic institution (Nu, 2005:14-19). Therefore, On the one hand, the government departments should attach great importance to this job and on the other hand, the experts and teachers in this field should focus more on the improvement of Chinese name translation. With more and more efforts done to solve the problems existing in the Chinese name translation into English, the cross-

cultural communication can become more and more smooth between Chinese people and the people from other countries.

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