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The Switch to Pinyin Romanization: What Library Users Need to Know

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History of Chinese Romanization

Romanization of Chinese words – writing Chinese in the Western Latin alphabet – dates back to the early seventeenth century, when Catholic missionaries and others came to China and developed romanization as a tool to help them learn the Chinese language to promote Christianity and increase trade. Their efforts were later joined by other Westerners, and a variety of ways of romanizing Chinese came into existence. In 1867, Thomas F. Wade, the Chinese language secretary in the British embassy to China, published a book *Teach Yourself Chinese*, in which he used a Romanization system adapted from the 1815 system developed by the English Protestant missionary Robert Morrison. Forty-five years later, H. A. Giles published his Chinese English Dictionary, in which he used Thomas Wade’s Romanization system with slight modifications. This is how the famous Wade-Giles system came about. It was the system predominantly used by English-speaking people and by libraries in North America until October 2000.

In 1949, the newly-established government of the People’s Republic of China set up a committee to study the issue of Chinese Romanization. A new scheme, called Hanyu Pinyin Fangan (Chinese romanization guideline) was announced in 1958 and was adopted for use in teaching pronunciation of characters in elementary schools in China. However, Wade-Giles continued to be used to romanize Chinese in English-language publications elsewhere in the world until 1979, when the International Standard Organization passed a resolution adopting Hanyu Pinyin as the international standard for Chinese Romanization, and even after, in many books written by scholars more familiar with the Wade-Giles system.

Why use romanization in library catalogs at all?

It has long been a goal for scholars as well as librarians to find a cataloging system that would embrace all the world’s languages for a total integration of bibliographical information. However, Chinese is a rather complicated language for non-native speakers. The characters give few clues to either their pronunciation or to their tones.

Romanization is a method of using the letters of the Roman alphabet to recreate the sounds of a language whose writing system may or may not use the Roman alphabet. Since Chinese is a non-Roman language, romanization systems have been used throughout the world to indicate the pronunciation of Chinese characters.

The question might be asked, why use romanization in library catalogs at all? Why not just have the characters? One reason is that romanization is easier and faster for non-Chinese speakers who have

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not acquired fluency in reading yet. Non-Chinese speaking scholars are able to use romanization to read titles, names, places, etc., while doing their research. Another reason to use romanization was simply that when cataloging was first started, the information had to be written either by hand or by typewriter. Even after the invention of the computer, it was still 1983 before it was possible to include Chinese characters in a library catalog record. So, romanization was the most convenient way to record the information.

Why pinyin instead of Wade-Giles?

A press release by the Library of Congress on November 19, 1997 stated: “[Pinyin] is used throughout the world, including by the United States government and by the news media. Most users of American libraries today are familiar with the pinyin romanization of Chinese names and places, and providing access to the Chinese language with that system will make it easier for them to locate material. The use of pinyin romanization by libraries should also facilitate the exchange of data with libraries internationally. . . . The Library of Congress first proposed conversion from the Wade-Giles system to pinyin in 1980 to coincide with its introduction of computerized cataloging of Chinese material. The East Asian library community did not support the change at that time. Since then, however, most librarians have come to realize that conversion to pinyin will be necessary if American libraries are to provide adequate service to their users. This year, in a survey conducted by the Council on East Asian Libraries, East Asian librarians indicated strong support for conversion to pinyin.” (Library of Congress Pinyin Conversion Project found at http://www.loc.gov/catdir/pinyin/announce.html).

Creating a standard for romanization is another reason for the switch to pinyin romanization. An article in the RLG’s (Research Libraries Group) bimonthly electronic newsletter Focus notes that “American libraries have long been at odds with the rest of the world in using Wade-Giles, instead of Pinyin, in their bibliographic records to romanize Chinese characters. Even within the United States, federal agencies, mass media, and the scholarly community have been using Pinyin for years. As a result, researchers looking in online bibliographic catalogs for citations for such well-known names as "Laozi," "Mao Zedong" or "Deng Xiaoping" could not find them unless they knew to look also under "Lao-tzu," "Mao Tse-tung" or "Teng Hsiao- ping"(Focus, Issue 35). Other major organizations that use the pinyin romanization are the United Nations, the Chinese government, and the National Library of Australia.

What are the main differences between Wade-Giles and pinyin?

Some of the main differences between Wade-Giles (WG) and pinyin (PY) are:

a) Spelling in each individual syllables

- Syllables that begin with the letters B, D, G, Q, R, X, and Z are pinyin while syllables that begin with the letters HS, TS are Wade-Giles.

- Syllables that end with the letters ONG, UE, IE, AN, IAN are pinyin while syllables that end with the letters UNG, UEH, IEH, EN, IEN are Wade-Giles.

For example:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Wade-Giles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bao Dao</td>
<td>Pao Tao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gao</td>
<td>Kao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian Zai</td>
<td>Hsien Tsai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) Differences in diacritic marks and spacing particularly in personal names

- **Use of Diacritic Marks**

  Common diacritic marks used in Wade-Giles are the ayn and umlaut.

  For example:

  Wade-Giles
  ts’ui (ayn)
  lü (umlaut)

  Pinyin never uses the ayn, and only uses the umlaut for the nü and lü to differentiate from the syllables that are romanized as nu and lu respectively.

- **Hyphen**

  i) Some WG syllables are separated by a hyphen, particularly in personal and geographical names, but the hyphen is not used in PY.

  For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Wade-Giles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mao Zedong</td>
<td>Mao Tse-tung</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  ii) There are several differences in how place names are romanized:

  - **Joined syllables in PY vs. hyphenated syllables in WG:**

    For example:

    | Pinyin          | Wade-Giles       |
    |-----------------|------------------|
    | Beijing         | Pei-ching        |
    | Guangzhou (China) | Kuang-chou shih (China) |

  - **Individual syllables of multi-syllabic generic terms are separated in WG, but they are connected in PY:**

    For example:
A comprehensive explanation on the differences between Wade-Giles and pinyin can be found at [www.loc.gov/catdir/pinyin/difference.html](http://www.loc.gov/catdir/pinyin/difference.html).

**Can I forget Wade-Giles forever, or should I still in some cases use Wade-Giles to search?**

Peter Zhou, chair of the Council of East Asian Libraries’ (CEAL) Pinyin Task Force, discussed some of the issues about pinyin conversion in an RLG Forum planning meeting, on June 27, 1999. He said, “Not all Wade-Giles strings are to be converted—for example, place names in Taiwan and some well-established Wade-Giles subject headings and personal names [will remain unchanged.]” ([www.rlg.org/eas/pinyinforum.html](http://www.rlg.org/eas/pinyinforum.html)).

One would assume from this statement that knowledge of some Wade-Giles terms will still be required. This assumption has been confirmed, at least for RLIN® users, in a memo issued by RLG entitled “Guidelines for Cataloging Chinese Materials in RLIN® during Conversion Period” ([http://www.rlg.org/eas/pinyincat.html](http://www.rlg.org/eas/pinyincat.html)). It stated, “There will be a mixture of Wade-Giles and Pinyin records in the RLG union catalog during the conversion period. You may retrieve a cluster with an ISBN, ISSN, or LCCN search that is either in Wade-Giles or in Pinyin. If you do a title phrase search for a known item, be sure to use both Wade-Giles and Pinyin romanization in your search value.”

Library users will still need to use Wade-Giles in searching to find books written in English with Wade-Giles words or names in their titles, for example, *China memoirs: Chiang Kai-shek and the war against Japan* by Owen Lattimore and *The selected poems of Li Po* translated by David Hinton.

Other information that may be helpful can be found by accessing the Cataloging Policy & Support Office Web page at: [http://lcweb.loc.gov/catdir/cespo/](http://lcweb.loc.gov/catdir/cespo/).

**When did the switch begin, and when will it be done?**

The Pinyin Conversion Project started on October 1, 2000. Currently, “All 1.4 million clusters (over 3.3 million Chinese-language records) in the RLG Union Catalog have been converted from Wade-Giles to Pinyin. A few thousand records require individual cleanup, to be completed by May 31, 2002” ([http://www.rlg.org/eas/pinyinstatus.html](http://www.rlg.org/eas/pinyinstatus.html)).

A timeline of conversion events is available on LC’s Pinyin Conversion Project Web page. The dates for completion of conversion of Chinese language records in individual libraries in the U.S. and Canada will vary depending on personnel and how the projects are planned.

**Conclusion**

When the Library of Congress announced plans to switch to Pinyin as the standard Chinese romanization scheme for bibliographic records in 1997, there were already more than 2 million Chinese-language records in the RLIN database alone. With further changes in Chinese authors,
uniform titles, subjects and series etc, the change in romanization will also affect access to millions of other bibliographic records of non-Chinese materials that are about China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as authors with Chinese names. The completion date for conversion is solely dependent on the resources of each individual library. Therefore, when a library user is searching for Chinese materials, he or she should first consult the library catalog in order to get comprehensive search results.

**SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

Library of Congress Home Page—(http://www.loc.gov/)
Library of Congress Pinyin Conversion Project—(http://lcweb.loc.gov/catdir/pinyin/)