

## TRANSCRIPTION SYSTEMS OF CHINESE

Chinese is a hard language to pronounce and a very hard language to render in the Roman alphabet. Many systems of “Romanization” have been used in the past - each one awful in its own special way. In this course, we will primarily use the *pinyin* system of Romanization, which was developed in the 1950s in the People’s Republic of China. It is a bad system, but far better than the most common alternative, a system known as Wade-Giles transcription, which was the most commonly used method until the 1990s. Unfortunately, some of the readings assigned for this course use Wade-Giles, so you’ll need to make sense of both systems.

You don't need to become an expert in the pronunciation of Chinese, but you do need to have some ability to pronounce names and terms – if you pronounce them all “Bleep” in your head as you read you will be unable to remember any, if you pronounce them all “Bleep” in class everyone will think you are cursing, and if you write them all “Bleep” on the final exam your grade will be an occasion for truly colorful language.

Guidelines for *pinyin* pronunciation appear on the next page. Use them as you begin reading, try to sound out names as you encounter them, and listen in class.

### **Why Chinese words seem to “look alike”**

Chinese is a “syllable-poor” language. There are only about 450 possible sounds for syllables in Chinese (you can't make up neat new syllables like “bleah” or “putz” in Chinese). It is this aspect of Chinese which makes Chinese names and terms often seem to be all alike. The incredible variety in Chinese written graphs allow for this. In the ancient Chinese written language virtually every word was one syllable long, and each different word was written with a distinct graph, or “Chinese character.” Homonyms – and in a language of one-syllable words with only 450 possible syllables there are many – were distinguished through their written forms. (It is also true that from an early date Chinese pronunciation employed up to four distinct intonational tones as well as vowel and consonant sounds, thus multiplying the number of possible syllables. However, these tonal distinctions do not show up in most Romanization systems.)

Each of the 450 possible Chinese syllables may be thought of as having an initial consonant sound, a vowel sound in the middle, and a consonant sound at the end, although the initial and/or final consonant sounds are absent in many syllables (for example, the word “ai,” which means “love,” has neither initial nor final consonants).

## *Pinyin* Transcription

*Pinyin* is relatively easy to figure out; most letters may be pronounced just as they commonly are in English. The following guide focuses only on the few difficult spots:

“c” is pronounced like “ts”

“q” is pronounced like “ch”

“x” is pronounced like “sh”

“z” is pronounced like “dz”

“zh” is pronounced like “j”

Some common problems:

“chi” = chur

“shi” = shur

“zhi” = jur

“ri” = rur

“ji” = jee

“qi” = chee

“xi” = shee

“zi” = dzuh (actually, more like a buzzing “z-z-z”)

“ci” = tsuh (actually, more like a hissing “ts-s-s”)

“si” = ss (just a hiss)

## Wade-Giles Pronunciation

To describe the Wade-Giles system, we will simply list the forms of initial consonants, vowels, and final consonants that appear in it and explain how they are pronounced.

### 1. Consonant sounds that may begin a word

There are 23 of these, but a few are very hard for English speakers to distinguish. Twelve of the 23 occur in paired sets, where one member of the set is “unvoiced” and has an aspiration mark ('), while the other is “voiced” and has no such mark. Whenever a letter is followed by an ' it is pronounced as it is in English. When the same letter has no aspiration mark, it is pronounced differently (it is voiced).

**ch'** as in chin

**k'** as in kin

**p'** as in pin

**t'** as in tin

**ts'** as in ts

**tz'** [like **ts'**]

**ch** like “j” in jam

**k** like “g” in gun

**p** like “b” in bin

**t** like “d” in din

**ts** like “z” in zone

**tz** [like **ts**]

There are nine consonant initials that simply sound as they do in English.

**f, h, l, m, n, s, sh, w,** and **y** are all similar to natural English readings

Two unusual initials are as follows:

**j** much like “r,” as in run

**hs** much like “sh,” as in shoo!

### 2. Vowel sounds

Basic vowels:

**a** as in father

**i** like “ee” in bee

**u** as in rude

**eh** like “e” in pen

**e** like “u” in up

**o** as in soft

**ü** as in German über

Exceptions:

**ih** sounds like the “ir” in sir

**u** after **ss, tz, tz'** is barely pronounced

**u** after **y** or **i** is pronounced like “oe” in hoe

Diphthongs:      **ai** like “i” in ice  
                         **ao** like “ow” in cow  
                         **ei** as in weigh  
                         **iu** like “yeo” in yeoman  
                         **ou** like “o” in obey  
                         **ui** like “way” in sway

### 3. Final consonants

There are only two: **n** and **ng**, as in English son and song. (A final **h** is always silent.)