**PINYIN TRANSCRIPTION OF CHINESE**

Chinese is a hard language to pronounce and a very hard language to render in the Latin 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.

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 a disappointment.

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 many words that appear to be homonyms for the English reader are actually not. This is because Chinese pronunciation employs four distinct intonational “tones”: in general, any syllable that exists in Chinese can be pronounced in four ways and each word possesses not only a fixed pattern of consonants and vowels, but a fixed tone. So for a Mandarin-hearing ear, there would be about 1800 distinct syllables in the language – for us, because these four tonal distinctions do not show up in pinyin Romanization, we see only 450.

Very occasionally in this course we will need to distinguish between two words that are “spelled” identically, but which are different words that carry different Mandarin tones. In those cases, diacritic marks will be added above the main vowel. For example, we will encounter two important words that are both transcribed li: one means “ritual” and the other “profit.” To distinguish them, we will mark the second with its tonal value: ̀li.
Pinyin Transcription

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

A few consonants that begin words are represented by letters that don’t correspond very closely to their English pronunciation.

- **c-** is pronounced like “ts”
- **q-** is pronounced like “ch”
- **x-** is pronounced like “sh”
- **z-** is pronounced like “dz”
- **zh-** is pronounced like “dj” (or the “dge” in “judge”)

There are several initial consonants that can occur virtually alone, without any full vowel following them, just a stifled release of breath. That little breath sound is represented by the vowel ‘i’.

After the consonants **ch-**, **r-**, **sh-**, **zh-** this “dummy” ‘i’ sounds like an ‘-ur’ to our ears:

- **chi** – sounds like ‘chur’
- **ri** – sounds like ‘rur’
- **shi** – sounds like ‘shur’
- **zhi** – sounds like ‘djur’

After the consonants **c-**, **s-**, **z-** this dummy ‘i’ sounds like a small grunt (almost unworthy of any vowel at all):

- **ci** – sounds like ‘tsuh’ (actually, more like a hissing “ts-s-s”)
- **si** – sounds like ‘ss’ (just a hiss)
- **zi** – sounds like ‘dzuh’ (actually, more like a buzzing “z-z-z”)

After any other consonant, ‘i’ sounds like a full vowel: ‘ee’. For example, **bi** sounds like ‘bee’, **qi** sounds like ‘chee’, **xi** sounds like ‘shee’, and so forth.

These few tips should allow you to “hear” *pinyin* terms and names in your mind adequately to distinguish and remember them, and to match up the words you see in your readings with the ones that you hear in class.