

Guide to

The romanization of Chinese

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Foreword

This British Standard has been prepared under the direction of the Information and Documentation Standards Policy Committee. It describes and compares the two principal systems of romanization used to represent the pronunciation of characters in Modern Standard Chinese, also known as Mandarin, Kuo-yü and Putonghua. It supersedes PD 6483:1978 which is withdrawn.

This standard has been placed in the general series of BSI publications in accordance with the general policy relating to the identity of standards on transliteration. It differs from the previous publication, PD 6483:1978, in that the descriptive material has been aligned with recent trends in the romanization of Chinese. The effects of the increasing international recognition of Pinyin are discussed and a few minor errors in the syllabaries have been corrected.

Although the official standard of Chinese pronunciation has varied through the ages, since 1932 it has been strictly based on the phonetic system of Peking speech. A directive of the State Council of the People's Republic of China of 6 February 1956 confirmed this, and made it clear that the standard spoken language took the northern dialect as its basic dialect.

For linguistic description and teaching, other dialects use their own systems of romanization, but names of persons and places, titles of books, and technical terms are normally given in a romanization of Modern Standard Chinese. The main exception is the practice in Hong Kong, where place names and personal names are romanized according to Cantonese pronunciation.

Chinese script is not phonetic. It is common practice to romanize names and terms that occur in earlier periods according to the modern pronunciation, despite the great changes that have taken place in both the phonetic system and the pronunciation of individual characters.

Various systems of romanization are currently in use, and this causes some confusion. The adoption of one standard system of romanization would reduce that confusion and facilitate reference to Chinese language material.

Developments in the People's Republic of China are adding emphasis to this fact.

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Summary of pages

This document comprises a front cover, an inside front cover, pages i and ii, pages 1 to 8, an inside back cover and a back cover.

This standard has been updated (see copyright date) and may have had amendments incorporated. This will be indicated in the amendment table on the inside front cover.

1 Scope

This British Standard describes the romanization of Chinese characters according to the two principal systems, the Wade-Giles and the Pinyin, and includes comparative tables of the two syllabaries in romanized form. It does not attempt to formulate rules for the juncture of syllables or offer instruction on romanizing directly from Chinese characters.

NOTE The titles of the publications referred to in this British Standard are listed on the inside back cover.

2 The two principal systems

2.1 Wade-Giles

2.1.1 The first systems of romanization were devised by foreigners in China, beginning, in the early seventeenth century, with the Jesuits. Until recently, the most widely used system was that devised by Sir Thomas Francis Wade, first published in 1859 and revised in his textbook *Yü-yen tzü erh chi* (London, 1867). Being comparatively simple and based on the dialect of Peking, it offered certain advantages, but came into general use only after the publication of *A Chinese-English Dictionary* by Herbert A. Giles (London, 1892; second edition, revised and enlarged, 1912), who modified the system in some minor details. It is on this account that the system is usually called Wade-Giles.

2.1.2 The Wade-Giles system has long been felt to be inadequate for teaching purposes. However, in the fields of documentation and publication it is still widely used, especially in English-speaking countries. Many reference works of all kinds are based on Wade-Giles and many libraries use it in their catalogues.

2.1.3 The introduction of the official standard of Chinese pronunciation in 1932 has necessitated certain minor changes in the Wade-Giles system. The forms *chio*, *ch'io*, *hsio* and *yo* are now obsolete and have been combined with *chüeh*, *ch'üeh*, *hsüeh* and *yüeh*, and the alternative forms *i* and *yi* can now be reduced to the single *i*. However, *yi* should be kept for transliteration in cases where confusion between the letter *i* and the Figure 1 is likely to arise. This modified Wade-Giles system is described by Y.R. Chao in the American edition of *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), pp. xviii–xxi: “List of syllabic headings”.

2.1.4 The version of the Wade-Giles system used in the United States is a modified form of the system as laid down in the authoritative style sheets of the *Journal of Asian Studies* and the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. Another simplification is the abolition of the circumflex (as in *chê*) and the breve (as in *ssü*) as the omission of these redundant diacritics is favoured by practically all scholars. The system thus simplified is included in the syllabaries in Table 1.

2.1.5 The Wade-Giles system indicates aspirated initials by means of a rough breathing mark (as in *t'ang*) or, more commonly, an apostrophe (*t'ang*), which cannot be omitted without causing serious ambiguity. The úmlaut could theoretically be omitted in *chüeh*, *ch'üeh*, *hsü*, *hsüan*, *hsüeh*, *hsün*, *lüeh*, *nüeh*, *yüan*, *yüeh*, *yün*, and only retained in *chü*, *ch'ü*, *chüan*, *ch'üan*, *chün*, *ch'ün*, *lū*, *lūan*, *nū*, *yū*. However, even in the former category the suppression of the umlaut would lead to some confusion, particularly by disrupting the alphabetical order of catalogue entries, and is therefore not recommended.

2.1.6 For some purposes it may be necessary, in the Wade-Giles system as in other systems, to indicate the tones. If required, superscript numbers or accents may be used, e.g. *tan*¹, *tān*; *tan*², *tán*; *tan*³, *tǎn*; *tan*⁴, *tàn*.

2.1.7 No strict rules can be formulated for transcribing juncture. Some style sheets advise hyphenating syllables according to sense, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to do so consistently, except in the case of disyllabic components of personal names, e.g. En-lai in Chou En-lai, Ou-yang in Ou-yang Hsiu. Others prescribe no juncture at all, except in names. In indexes and library catalogues the alphabetical order does not normally take account of hyphens in title entries, but in author entries disyllabic surnames are filed separately from monosyllabic ones as here the hyphen has a function.

2.1.8 In Wade-Giles romanization, capitals are avoided as much as possible, but they are always used to mark the beginning (*not* the second syllable) of a hyphenated name, as illustrated in **2.1.7**.