

Chinese names in English

Many systems for the romanisation of Chinese dialects¹ have been used in the past and so much confusion results when texts from different periods are used. ‘Mandarin’, which is the national language of the People’s Republic of China, has had numerous romanisation systems developed to enable it to be pronounced phonetically. Some of the most common are Wade, Yale, Giles, Wade-Giles and finally *Pinyin*, which is that officially used by the Chinese Government today. However, for Cantonese, its sub-dialects and even non-Cantonese dialects such as that spoken within the Long Du area of Zhongshan county few or no standard romanisation systems have been developed.

As neither those from China, nor the various English-speaking officials seeking to write down their names, would have known any such systems, the result was a variety of renderings into English script of the names of people and places. Thus, the county of Zhongshan (using its *Pinyin* romanisation in mandarin pronunciation) was usually written either Chungshan or Chongshan and either variation is recognised by descendants today. When it comes to personal names, however, there are even more complications.

As Philip Lee Chun, whose Chinese name was Lee Lum Chun though he’d been naturalized as a NSW citizen under the name Ah Tchee, conceded, “I can readily understand that the Chinese system of nomenclature is rather bewildering to a European.”² Many Australians of Chinese descent today carry family names such as Hoon, Gay and Gooley which have no relation to traditional Chinese family names. These names usually derive from the personal names of the first family member to arrive in Australia.

The explanation for such renderings is a combination of the non-phonetic basis of written Chinese, dialect variations within spoken Chinese and different cultural practices in the way family and personal names are given and written. The absence of

¹ ‘Treatment of them [Chinese languages] as mere dialects is based on the fact that they all can be put down, at least to some degree, in Chinese characters acceptable to the Great Tradition.’ Moser, op. cit., p.3.

² Australian Archives (NSW), SP42/1; C36/813, Lily Lee (Lily Lee Ung Land), letter, Philip Lee Chun to the Collector of Customs, 1 February 1915.

a consistent system of spelling English renderings and a lack of interest in ‘getting it right’ on the part of the officials writing them down are contributing factors.

When, for example, John Louie Hoon’s father, Louie Hoon, gave his name he was expressing his family name Louie (雷) and his personal name Hoon (寬) in the Chinese order. Europeans, however, considered ‘Hoon’ to be the family name. Both ‘Louie’ or ‘Louey’ and ‘Hoon’ were roughly rendered English phonetic equivalents of the characters 雷寬 in the Min dialect of his Long Du area in the district of Zhongshan.³ When his son was born he was given the English name John, though usually called Jack, and this was appended to his father’s name to make him John Louie Hoon in the files of the Customs and Excise Office of NSW. He was also given a Chinese name which began with his family name Louie (雷) and then Jer (則). This last was chosen either because it sounded similar to John (or Jack) or visa versa. As an added twist, John Louie Hoon’s fellow Chinese might ignore his Chinese name and attempt to write his ‘English’ name in Chinese characters. The result, 則雷寬 or Jer Louey Hoon was a confused mix of naming conventions.⁴

John Louie Hoon and his father were relatively unusual, however, in referring to their family name at all. The majority of villagers when asked their name for various bureaucratic purposes would omit what, for English speakers would be the essential element, the family name. This was not because it was thought unimportant, but because it was too important. For most Chinese speakers at the end of the nineteenth century the ‘family’ name was the clan or lineage name. They were members of a specific clan but were not in the habit of using that name as part of their personal identification. Such a use was all the more unlikely given that most people would have come from either single surname villages, or villages that had at most, 3 to 4 separate clan names. In such a situation, the habit of using a ‘family’ name as a personal identifier would not have been very practical.

³ These same characters would be written Lei Ze in *pinyin* when romanising their mandarin pronunciation.

⁴ Australian Archives (NSW), SP1122/1; N1952/24/3951, John Louis (Louie) Hoon. This was how Norman Lee explained the various renderings in Chinese characters of John Louie Hoon’s name that appear throughout his file, interview with Norman Lee, 25 September 1997 (12).

The result of all this was that when giving his name to a customs official in the port of Sydney, the average arrival simply gave his personal name. Yuk Kwan's family name, for example, was Wong, a name that does not appear in his files until the 1950s, some 30 years after the file began, when he also begins to refer to himself as Ken.⁵ If a name happened to sound similar to an English name or word then that was written down, such as with Young or Lee. Otherwise a name was rendered as best the differences in basic sounds between the two languages allowed, such as Duck or Dick for 德, and Yet or Yat for 日.

Another common variation also came about when a person had only a single character for their personal name. In this case, it was usual to extend it and make it sound more 'polite' by adding another sound to the beginning. For those of the Pearl River Delta districts this was invariably the sound 'ah' (亞). Sufficient people became known as Ah something, Ah Moy, Ah Yat, etc, that the second and subsequent custom-made alphabetical registers ordered by NSW Customs needed to have additional leaves tagged 'AH' inserted between the 'A' and 'B' leaves to facilitate their being recorded.⁶

The final factor adding confusion to this issue is that a person's name might have been different when a boy or young man (that is, before marriage) from that later in his life. As Philip Lee Chun explained, for the benefit of the Collector of Customs, when a son is born, "the mother gives him a name; when he goes to school, the schoolmaster gives him a name; if the boy marries, then he takes his paternal name..." "The names given to him in his infancy are of no import, except the family name. It is when he marries that he acquires a definite name."⁷ This was the Chinese practice, but the imperatives of bureaucratic documentation meant that the name of "no import" often became ones 'official' name. Philip Lee Chun himself was writing this explanation because the Collector of Customs wanted to know why he was claiming to be the naturalized Ah Tchee, the name he used before his marriage.

⁵ Australian Archives (NSW), SP11/12; Yuk Kwan, Tai Moon, & others, 1926-47 and SP1122/1; N56/6446, Yuk Kwan Wong.

⁶ Australian Archives (NSW), SP726/2; Particulars of Applications for CEDTs, vol. 2, 10/1/11 - 21/10/18. For a similar explanation for the number of 'Ah' names see, Char, op. cit., p.61, n.19.

⁷ Australian Archives (NSW), SP42/1; C36/813, Lily Lee (Lily Lee Ung Land), letter Philip Lee Chun to the Collector of Customs, 1 February 1915.