

Chinese names as written in Australia

Many systems for the romanisation of Chinese dialects have been used in the past and so much confusion results when texts from different periods are used.¹ ‘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 many Cantonese dialects and non-Cantonese languages, such as Taishanese or that spoken within the Long Du area of Zhongshan, few or no standard romanisation systems have been developed. As neither most Chinese people arriving in Australia nor the various English-speaking officials seeking to write down their names, would have been familiar such systems in any case, the result was a variety of renderings into English script of the names of people and places. Thus, Zhongshan (using its *pinyin* romanisation in mandarin pronunciation) was usually written either Chungshan or Chongshan and either variation is recognised by Chinese descents 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 and language variations within the Chinese in Australia, and different cultural practices in the way family and personal names are given and written. This last referring to the placing of the family name

¹ The distinction between languages and dialects in China is confused as: ‘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.’ Leo J. Moser, *The Chinese Mosaic. The Peoples and Provinces of China*, Westview: London, 1985, 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.

before the personal name perhaps contributing most to the resultant “Australian-Chinese” names many families now have. Finally the absence of 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 (宽) in the Chinese order. European Australians, however, automatically considered ‘Hoon’ to be the family name. Both ‘Louie’ or ‘Louey’ and ‘Hoon’ were roughly rendered English phonetic equivalents of the characters 雷宽 in the Cantonese of his of Zhongshan County.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 (则). 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, 则雷宽 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 the purposes of registration or ‘Certificate Exempting the Dictation Test’ (CEDT) applications 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 Chinese people would have come from either single surname villages, or villages that had at most three to four 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 Kuan 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 Chinese person 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 began 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' (ㄚ). Sufficient people became known as Ah something, Ah Moy, Ah Yat, etc, that the second and subsequent custom-made alphabetical CEDT registers ordered by NSW Customs had 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 the permanent name, at least in English. Philip Lee Chun himself wrote his explanation because the Collector of Customs wanted to know why he was claiming to be the naturalized Ah Tchee, the name he had 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 Tin-Yuke, *The Sandalwood Mountains. Readings and Stories of the Early Chinese in Hawaii*, The University Press of Hawaii: Honolulu, 1975, 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.