

Notes on the Romanization of Chinese Language

The Chinese language, though bound by a common system of written characters, possesses seven or so main dialects with dozens of regional variations. The originators of Taijiquan were from the northern parts of China and therefore spoke *Beifanghua* (lit. 'Northern Speech'), more commonly known as *Mandarin* or *Putonghua*.

'Romanization' is the transliteration of non-Latin languages into the Latin alphabet used in languages such as English, French, Spanish etc. Three main Romanization systems have been used to transliterate Chinese characters into pronounceable, phonetic words for Latin language speakers. These are *Wade-Giles*, *Yale* and most recently *Hanyu Pinyin* (known better simply as 'Pinyin').

Somewhat ineffective in popular spoken use, the Wade-Giles system has largely been replaced in China by *Hanyu Pinyin* (lit. 'Chinese Alphabet') which was officially adopted by the Chinese government in 1979. Pinyin is now widely used in China on street signs, maps and as an aid in learning Chinese characters. Several minority languages also use variations of Pinyin and the system is now generally used by the international community. Wade-Giles remains the de facto system in Taiwan.

The *Yale* system of romanization was created during World War II by the United States military for its soldiers and was used in the US for teaching Asian languages to civilian students. Although the Yale system is probably the most intuitive for English speakers, it has all but vanished from contemporary use.

Shortcuts for Pinyin Romanization

Detailed guides to the pronunciation of Pinyin is provided in many books and on numerous websites. Here are some of the more unusual Pinyin letters that English speakers need to pay special attention to.

Consonants

c - English 'ts' (as in 'its')

q - English 'ch' (as in 'cheer') eg. '*Qigong*', '*Taijiquan*'

x - English 'sh' (as in 'ship') eg. '*Xingyiquan*', '*Maxiqi*'

z - English 'ds' (as in 'pads')

zh - English 'j' (as in 'job')

Vowels

i after h - English 'r' (as in 'grr')

i after s, c, z - English 'z' (as in 'bzzzz')

i elsewhere - English 'ee' (as in 'beet')

ian or yan - English 'yen' (as in ¥)

ui - English 'way' (as in 'lost his way')

u after q, j, x, or y - French 'u' or German 'ü'

u elsewhere - English 'oo' (as in 'pooh')

ü or yu - French u or German ü (place your lips to say oo and try to say ee)

Tones in Pinyin

Tones are pitch patterns which characterise pronunciation. Pinyin uses four tones (flat, rising, scooping up and dropping) which are often represented in romanized text by diacritical marks above vowels. Though tone indicators are not generally used in most print material, they are necessary both for learning correct pronunciation and to distinguish similar sounding words, they are not generally used.