

# Understanding Chinese names

By Detective Sergeant Michael G. Watson

**U**NLIKE English and the other Western languages, the Chinese language does not use an alphabetical system.

It is made up of thousands of characters, each of which represents an idea rather than a sound. Some of these are pictographic characters derived from the ancient Chinese symbols that were pictures of the objects they represented.

Although all Chinese read the same language, there are many dialects within the language which are not understood by all Chinese. One could compare Chinese characters with Arabic numerals. Whilst each numeral represents the same idea to anyone who understands them, irrespective of their language, the numeral would not be pronounced the same in all languages.

The most common Chinese dialect is Mandarin. It originated in northern China and is spoken by about 70 per cent of the population of mainland China. It is the national language of both the Peoples Republic of China and the Republic of China. The second most common dialect is Wu, which comes from the areas around Shanghai. It is spoken by about 15 per cent of the population. Cantonese, with about 10 per cent of the population speaking it, is the third most common dialect. Cantonese is common to the areas around Canton and in Hong Kong. Among the many other dialects are Fukienese (Hokkien), Teochiu (Chiuchow) and Hakka.

The process of transliteration of a Chinese character into an English word is known as romanisation. Romanisation is accomplished by replicating the pronunciation of the Chinese character using English letters. As an example, the transliteration of 夫 is "fu" which replicates its Chinese pronunciation. It should be noted that this is different from its translation which is "man".

Although the Chinese are the most populous and the most widely distributed ethnic group on earth, they are also, perhaps, the least known and least understood.

This can be attributed both to their inherent sense of privacy and to their reluctance to let themselves be known by strangers.

Another, and probably more valid reason for this lack of knowledge, is that most non-Chinese have not stopped to look at all closely at the Chinese around them. Understanding the structure of Chinese names is a step towards obtaining an understanding of their culture.

When romanising a Chinese character into English, it is most important that the English equivalent is pronounced similarly to the Chinese pronunciation. Coincidentally, both the Mandarin and Cantonese pronunciation of the character 夫 is "fu" and therefore is romanised as "fu" in both dialects. Romanisation should be standardised and documented to ensure that each transliteration remains consistent and accurate. If there is no standardisation then 夫 may be romanised as "fu" by one person and "foo" by another. While both intend this romanised word to depict the same character, it does not. Because of this, people may be led to believe that two different characters are involved when this is not so. Consistency in romanisation is critical when it is applied to specific individual names.

Standard romanisations exist for most common dialects such as Mandarin and Cantonese. Mandarin has two romanisation systems, Pinyin and Wade-Giles. Although both systems are meant to depict the same Mandarin sounds, they both use different rules for transliterating the sounds into English.

The Wade-Giles system was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by two British diplomats, and is used in many countries of the world today, including Taiwan. In the 1950s the government of the Peoples Republic of China introduced Pinyin and officially adopted it in 1978 in or-

der that it be used to write Chinese names in romanised form in all countries using the Latin alphabet.

Often the romanisation of Chinese names is not based on any standardised system. On many occasions a Chinese name will be romanised solely on how it sounds to the particular English listener.

While Chinese characters remain the same no matter who writes them, the romanised forms differ according to the romanisation system used. The name of the late President of the Republic of China, **Chiang Kai-shek** may be written in English as:

**Jiang Jiesh** - Mandarin (Pinyin);  
**Chiang Chieh-shih** - Mandarin (Wade-Giles);  
**Tseung Kai-shek** - Cantonese; and  
**Chiang Kai-shek** - His own romanisation (Part Wade-Giles Mandarin and part Cantonese).

Chinese names generally consist of three characters. The first character represents the family name and the last two characters the given names. Unlike the western system, Chinese names are presented with the family name first. This system is continued when romanising the names. With Cantonese and the Wade-Giles romanisation of Mandarin the given names are hyphenated.

All Chinese have a hereditary family name and every child, whether male or female, automati-

cally bears his or her fathers name for life. However, it should be noted that on occasion, in the Peoples Republic of China, a female child may bear her mother's family name. In Chinese culture the family name is of great importance and a source of pride.

Chinese will, generally, be addressed by both their family name and given names. A **Wang** Jianguo would be addressed as **Wang** Jianguo rather than Jian, Jianguo or Wang. It is only among family and close friends that he would be addressed solely by his given names.

Chinese Australians commonly have a western or "Christian" name as a prefix to their Chinese name. A Cantonese, **Leung** King-hung, could become Henry King-hung **Leung** or Henry **Leung**. The use of a western name is often for convenience only and might not be reflected in official records. Married women retain their full names, adding their husband's name before the others. Should a Miss **Leung** Yut-wa marry a Mr **Chan** then she becomes Mrs **Chan** Leung Yut-wa. Often Chinese Australian women will not use their given and maiden names, and will use only their married name. This is especially so if the woman has an Australian name, for example, Susan Yut-wa **Leung**.

After her marriage to Mr **Chan** she becomes Mrs Susan Leung **Chan**. It is, however, permissible to address a married Chinese woman by either her maiden name ie Miss **Leung** or her married name ie Mrs **Chan**. As an exception, again in the Peoples Republic of China, some married women keep their maiden names and do not carry the name of their husband.

A means of creating numerical equivalents for Chinese characters is made possible by The Standard Telegraphic Code (STC). This code is published as a book which provides a four digit number for approximately ten thousand common Chinese characters and is similar, in virtually every respect, to the Chinese Commercial Code and the Chinese Telegraphic Code.

**Chiang** Kai-shek's name is listed as follows:

蔣 is assigned the number 5592;  
介 is assigned the number 0094;

and 石 is assigned the number 4258.

By this means the name can be accurately recorded or transmitted by Morse code, telex etc as STC 5592/0094/4258. The receiver would then be able to accurately transpose these numbers back into their respective Chinese characters, as well as obtaining the correct romanisation of the name in Mandarin (either Pinyin or Wade-Giles), Cantonese etc.

A further example of this can be seen using the family name **Chan** (pronounced in Cantonese), which is written as 佳 and has the STC of 7155. This character **Chan** could be romanised and spelt as **Chin**, **Chen**, **Chang** or even **Tan**. Likewise the family name **Wong** (again pronounced in Cantonese), written as 黃 and with an STC of 7806. This character **Wong** could be romanised and spelt as **Wang**, **Ong**, **Huang** or even **Ng**. However, by using either the respective Chinese character or the respective STC numbers it would be possible to positively identify the

person concerned. Giving the persons full name in English and not positively identifying the family name is also not much help.

An example of this can be seen using the name John Lee Fong Lo. In this case Lee, Fong or Lo could be the family name if no Chinese characters are provided. Lee could be the family name with the STC number 2621 and character 李 or the STC number 0448 and character 利. Fong could be the family name with the STC number 2455 and character 方 or the STC number 6782 and character 鄰. LO could be the family name with the STC number 4151 and character 盧, the STC number 5012 and character 羅 or the STC number 0525 and character 勞.

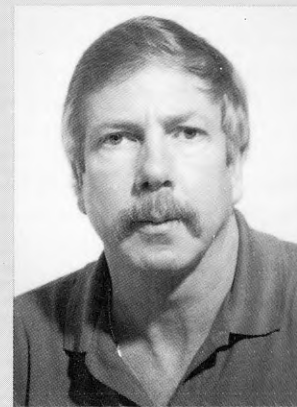
As can be seen, knowing only the romanisation of a person's name, is not sufficient to positively identify them. One also needs the Chinese characters in the correct order. It is an added bonus if one also has the Standard Telegraphic Code numbers.

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