The Library of Congress and Chinese Romanization

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Sun Chung-shan or Sun Zhongshan? Pei-ching or Beijing? The first question shows the name of the leader of the republican revolution and the Father of modern China, while in the second is the name of the fabled Chinese capital that most of the world has known for about 550 years. The Chinese characters in both cases are unvarying, but they are spelled differently in our roman alphabet depending on which romanization scheme is being used. Among the many different romanization schemes designed for the Chinese language, the two most widely used are Wade-Giles and pinyin. The Wade-Giles system was invented around 1860 by Thomas Wade, a diplomat and Cambridge University professor, and subsequently developed by Herbert Giles, also a Cambridge professor. Through this system, the pronunciation of Chinese became accessible to English-speaking people. In the library field, the Wade-Giles system has been used as an American library standard since 1957. It is not a perfect system, however. For example, one of the most confusing aspects of pronunciation in the Wade-Giles scheme is the use of an aspirated mark to distinguish aspirated consonants such as p'ai (pronounced with a “p” sound) from unaspirated consonants such as pai (pronounced with a “b” sound). This idea created a novel value for the aspirated mark quite arbitrarily. Pinyin, on the other hand, was announced in 1956 by the Committee for Chinese Writing Reform of the PRC as being in the planning stage. The final version of pinyin was promulgated by the National People's Congress in 1958. Generally, it uses the existing
conventions of western spelling and moreover, while aiming to represent Chinese characters phonetically, has been designed to be acceptable to more than the English-speaking world. Of course, this new system uses roman values such as “c”, “q”, “x”, “zh”, and “j” in ways that may still puzzle English speakers. It must be recognized that these values represent a compromise between expectation of English-speaking and non-English-speaking persons and for that reason they are justified. In fact, pinyin is well qualified to become an international standard romanization for Chinese.

Because schemes for the order of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters are so diverse, uniform romanization of headings and titles would be mandatory even if a separate Chinese catalog were feasible. Therefore, we must have Chinese romanization in the catalog even if the sole purpose is filing. One may question the need to specify which romanization system should be chosen for library usage. The Library of Congress listed many reasons in the Library of Congress Information Bulletin (June 29, 1979) for considering the adoption of pinyin. Although we believe switching to pinyin concurrently with the adoption of AACR 2 would have realized efficiencies in the handling of authority work with a consequent reduction in costs, we finally decided that cooperation with the Far Eastern library community in the U.S. should take precedence over our belief in the value of pinyin. It is for this reason that you saw the recent announcement in the Library of Congress Information Bulletin (May 2, 1980). The announcement stated that based on the preference expressed by the American library community and on close consultation with the Committee on East Asian Libraries of the Association for Asian Studies, we would continue our romanization of cataloging information on Chinese language materials according to the Wade-Giles system rather than the pinyin system. We still think that some access via pinyin is necessary, however. The following policy for providing this access is currently (July 1980) under discussion at the Library of Congress:

1. Continue the present policy of using the Wade-Giles system in headings and cross references. For geographic names, when a U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) response is in pinyin, still use Wade-Giles for the heading.
2. When a source (the item being cataloged, a BGN response, a reference work, etc.) provides a pinyin version of the heading, make a cross reference from it.

3. When no source provides a pinyin form, or when a source provides a pinyin form significantly different from the Library of Congress pinyin form (see 4 below), formulate the Library's pinyin version of the heading; do not also do it for the other cross references. Apply the same policy to uniform titles, both those entered under a main entry and those not.

4. The formulation of pinyin versions of the heading by the Library of Congress catalogers will conform to the following guidelines:

   (a) Do not use "word division" except for personal and geographic names. For personal name and geographic name headings, when two or more characters go together in significance, combine their romanizations with no intervening space. (This is the same as the Wade-Giles policy for our cataloging, except that under Wade-Giles a hyphen is used to link such units in these names.)

   For corporate name headings, do not link the romanization of any character with that of another; leave a blank space before the romanization of the next character in each case, unless punctuation intervenes.

   (b) Do not use any diacritical marks, such as ˊ ˇ ˋ , to represent the four tones. (Not representing the tone marks in romanization is the same as our Wade-Giles policy.)

The controversy over romanization having ended, we can now concentrate our energy and resources on learning AACR 2 and the way it will be applied by the Library of Congress.