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Pronouncing and Using Chinese Personal Names
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Abstract

This document gives general rules for how to pronounce Mandarin Chinese names in conversation, and how to determine which name is someone's surname. It also covers some other related topics about Chinese names. The intent is to allow IETF participants who are not familiar with Chinese to communicate better with Chinese participants.

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1. Introduction

In typical conversations in the IETF, people's names are used heavily. In face-to-face meetings, people will speak about other participants by name both formally and informally ("Mr. Smith says..." or "Bob says..."), and the same is true about how people sometimes refer to each other on working group mailing lists. Most times, people want to use other people's names correctly, to be both more precise and more polite.

The number of Chinese participants in the IETF, both in face-to-face meetings and on mailing lists, has greatly increased in recent years. Many non-Chinese participants have a difficult time knowing how to pronounce a Chinese name that they find on a mailing list, RFC, or name badge. In fact, many people don't know how to tell which of the two names in a printed Chinese name is the surname and which is the personal name. And yet most people want to be able to use each others' names correctly.

This document covers general rules for Mandarin Chinese names. The rules are widely applicable, especially to those whose names are based on the pinyin romanization. The rules do not necessarily apply, however, to Cantonese, Hakka, or the dialects native to Taiwan or Shanghai. They also do not apply to non-Han ethnic groups, even where those ethnicities use romanizations based on pinyin.

There are many other documents that cover similar material, such as [[ChineseNames](#)]. Also, this document mostly discusses Chinese personal names, but the pronunciation section applies to Chinese company names as well. It is hoped that this document makes typical communications between non-Chinese and Chinese in the IETF easier and more natural.

2. Pronouncing Chinese Names

2.1. Background

Nearly all Chinese people normally spell their names with Han characters, which are non-phonetic ideographic characters. However, many Chinese people also spell their names using Latin characters. Converting Han characters to Latin character equivalents is called romanization [[Romanization](#)].

Non-Chinese speakers seeing the romanized spelling of Chinese names often have a difficult time pronouncing them correctly. The essential problem is that there have been two major standards for romanization from Chinese. An older system, "Wade-Giles", was widely

used until the "pinyin" system was adopted in the mid-1960s, but pinyin is now much more common. This document focuses on pinyin spellings [[Pinyin](#)].

2.2. Introduction to the Pinyin System

Pinyin is the official phonetic system for transcribing the sound of Chinese characters into Latin script in China. It is often used to teach Standard Chinese and spell Chinese names in foreign publications and may be used as an input method to enter Chinese characters (Hanzi) into computers. "Pinyin" literally means "spelled-out sounds."

Pinyin was published by the Chinese government in 1958 and revised several times. The International Organization for Standardization adopted pinyin as the international standard in 1982.

Note that there are many ways to learn to pronounce Chinese words. Some methods are tailored for English speakers, many others are tailored for other languages. There are numerous resources online for those who want to explore beyond what is given here.

2.3. Pronouncing Pinyin Words

This section describes a simple way to pronounce a syllable in pinyin. The basic steps are to divide the pinyin syllable into an initial sound and a final sound, and combine the two sounds together.

The examples of the sounds are all from spoken American English. Of course, there are variations in that, but it is maybe the most recognizable to readers of this document. Also, there are many regional variations in China on pronunciation of some of the sounds, so these tables cannot be considered definitive.

Spoken Chinese also has inflections (usually called "tones") within a syllable. The four tones of Chinese are "level" (no inflection), "rising", "down then up" (sometimes called "departing"), and "falling" (sometimes called "entering"). These four tones are used to clarify the meanings of words. Since many characters have the same sound, tones are used to differentiate words from each other. The tones are sometimes difficult to learn, just as it is often difficult for non-native speakers of many languages to learn intonations and pitches. Many non-Chinese speakers just pronounce all syllables with the level tone. The four tones are covered in great detail in other documents, such as [[FourTones](#)].

[2.3.1.](#) Pronouncing the Initial Sound

The following table lists the initial sounds.

Pinyin	English approximation
b	unaspirated "p", as in "spit"
p	strongly aspirated "p", as in "pit"
m	as in English "mummy"
f	as in English "fun"
d	unaspirated "t", as in "stop"
t	strongly aspirated "t", as in "top"
n	as in "nit"
l	as in "love"
g	unaspirated "k", as in "skill"
k	strongly aspirated "k", as in "kill"
h	as in "hay"
j	no equivalent in English; like "ge" in garage
q	no equivalent in English; like "pun*ch y*ourself"
x	no equivalent in English; like "wi*sh y*ou"
zh	like "ch" (a sound between "*ch*oke" and "*dr*ew", but with the tip of the tongue curled more upwards)
ch	as in "chin", but with the tongue curled upwards; similar to "nur*tu*re" in English, but more strongly aspirated
sh	as in "shoe", but with the tongue curled upwards; similar to "marsh" in American English
r	similar to the "z" in "azure" and the "r" in "reduce"
z	similar to something between "su*ds*" and "ca*ts*"
c	like the "ts" in "cats"

s		as in "sun"
w		as in "water"
y		as in "yes"

Figure 1: Pronouncing Pinyin Initials

[2.3.2.](#) Pronouncing the Final Sound

Final sounds are generally more difficult to pronounce than initial sounds. But unlike English where there are often many ways to pronounce a final (such as the "ough" sound in "cough" and "rough" and "though" "through"), final sounds in Chinese are more regular.

Pinyin		English approximation
a		as "a" in "father"
i		as "ee" in "see"
e		as "er" in "her"
ai		similar to "eye", but a bit lighter
ei		as "ey" in "hey"
ao		approximately as "ow" in "cow"; the "a" is much more audible than the "o"
ou		as in "so"
an		as "on" in "con"
en		as "en" in "taken"
ang		as "ong" in "monger"
eng		like in "en" above with "g" added
er		similar to the sound of "ar" in "bar"
ia		as "ya" in "yard" but with a brighter beginning
ie		as "ye" in the slang "yep" but with a brighter beginning

iao		similar to the slang "yow" but with a brighter beginning
iu		similar to the slang "yo" but with a brighter beginning
ian		similar to "yen" but with a brighter beginning
iang		like "ian" above with a "g" added
in		as "een" in "seen"
ing		as in "sing"
u		as "oo" in "soon"
v		like "you" ### Paul thinks this should be removed ### because it doesn't appear in other tables
ua		as "wa" as in "water" but with the "w" lighter
uo		as in "woe", but with the "w" lighter and the "o" shorter
uai		as in "why" but with the "w" lighter
ui		as in "way" but with the "w" lighter
uan		as in "wan" but with the "w" lighter
un		as in "won" but with the "w" lighter
uang		as in "wrong" without the "r" and the "w" lighter
ong		starts with the vowel sound in "book" and ends with the nasal sound in "sing"

Figure 2: Pronouncing Pinyin Finals

2.3.3. Examples

One of the authors of this document has the first name "Zhen" and the last name "Cao". For the first name, divide "Zhen" into initial "zh" and final "en", looking them up in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively. From the tables, "zh" pronounces like "ch", and "en" follows its pronunciation in "taken". "Cao" is broken into "c" and "ao". Another of the authors has the first name "Hui" and the last name "Deng". "Hui" can be divided into "h" (initial) and "ui" (final), while "Deng" is divided into "d" and "eng". (The third

author's name is not in pinyin, of course.)

3. Using Chinese Personal Names

In China, when giving somebody's full name, usually his or her family name is put first, and the given (personal) name last. One of the Chinese authors of this document has the given name "Hui" and the family name "Deng", and the other Chinese author has the given name "Zhen" and the family name "Cao"; when one speaks of them in China, they say "Deng Hui" and "Cao Zhen". (Because this document is in the IETF, the authors cannot show their names using the Chinese characters that they would normally use.)

Almost all family names have only one Chinese character, with only a few having two characters. For given names, however, both one-character names and two-character names are common.

Thus, most Chinese people's names have two to three Chinese characters (although a few people's names have four characters). When saying the name of someone whose name has two characters, it is normal to say both names, with the family name first. However, when saying the name of someone whose name has three or more characters in informal conversation, it is normal to only say the given name.

For example, "Hui Deng" has two characters, and in China is normally called "Deng Hui". Another example would be a name such as "Xiaodong Duan". This is a name of three characters ("Xiaodong" is the given name and has two characters, and "Duan" is the family name and has one character). In this case, Chinese people speaking his name in informal conversation would normally family name, and just call him by using his given name, Xiaodong.

If people are not familiar with each other, or are introducing each other for the first time, it is common to use the full name, regardless of the number of syllables.

As a side note, the discussion above points out a problem with IETF protocols that only have one field for a person's name, instead of multiple fields for given name, family name, and so on. A Chinese person has to decide which order to put their name in the single field: they order they would normally put them in China, or the order that they want people outside of China to understand them. Future revisions of these protocols might allow for better distinctions in the names of people who do not follow the European customs of "given name comes first".

4. Difference Between Written and Spoken Order

Because both Chinese and English speakers might try to conform with other cultures, Chinese people will often write their given name first and their family name second, like the use of "Hui Deng" and "Zhen Cao" in this document. Non-Chinese speakers will then say the names in the order they read them in the written document, but that will be the reverse of the way that Chinese people would say them.

A useful and growing convention is to write the family name in all capitals. Thus, you might see "Hui DENG" or "DENG Hui" instead of "Hui Deng".

5. Women's Names

Few Chinese women change their family names to their husband's family name when they marry; normally, they just keep their family name. Today, some Chinese children have both their father's and mother's family name, then given name.

6. Use of English Names

Some Chinese people have informally adopted English given names for use in business. The name might be one that sounds like the Chinese name (such as "Sheldon" for "XiaoDong" or "Lisa" for "Lixia") or might be a name whose meaning is similar to the Chinese meaning (such as "Lilly" for a Chinese woman's name that means a type of flower). These names are rarely the legal name of the person, and Chinese people usually don't use the English name when speaking to other Chinese people.

7. Writing the Four Tones

The four tones introduced in [Section 2.3](#) are sometimes indicated in Chinese names as the numbers 1 through 4. Even is 1, rising is 2, down then up is 3, and falling is 4. Thus, a name such as "Deng" might be written as "Deng2" to indicate a rising tone.

The four tones are also sometimes indicated with Latin punctuation that is meant to show the movement of the sound. Even is with a macron (a horizontal bar), rising is with a acute accent, down then up is with a caron (like a small raised "v"), and falling is with a grave accent. (Because RFCs still cannot contain non-ASCII characters, these characters cannot be shown here.)

The use of digits and punctuation to show tones is not very common, but it is seen in some academic journals and sometimes on business cards.

8. Using Titles

Most Chinese people are called by different names according to the relationship between them and the person addressing them. For example, parents call their child by one name, but his or her friends may use a different name, and work colleagues might use yet a different name. These different names include titles (terms of respect), nicknames, and so on. In Chinese culture, it is extremely common to show respect to someone by using a proper title according to their occupation or status in society.

These days, there are many commonly used titles. Two generic titles that have similar meanings to "Mr." and "Ms./Mrs." are "Xiansheng" and "Nvshi" (pronounced as "Xian1sheng1" and "Nv3shi4"). ### Is this really Nu3shi4? ### These two titles are widely used either between people who are unfamiliar with each other, or during the formal situations like a conference.

Another two commonly used titles are "Jiaoshou" and "Laoshi" (pronounced as "Jiao4shou4" and "Lao3shi1") which indicate that someone is a professor or instructor. For example, if the surname of that person is "Zhang", then you could call him or her "Zhang Jiaoshou" or "Zhang Laoshi". Other titles which also have been widely used include "Laoban" (pronounced "Lao3ban3") for a high-level manager in a company, "Zhuxi" (pronounced "Zhu3xi2") for the chairman, and "Zong" for the president. In most cases, the title comes after just the surname, but occasionally, the title comes after both the given name and surname.

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10. IANA Considerations

None.

11. Security Considerations

None.

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