PRONUNCIATION GUIDE FOR NON-ENGLISH NAMES

In the Seattle-Tacoma area, almost 20% of the population speaks a language other than English at home. The number of non-native English speakers increases even more at colleges and universities in the area, with the large number of international students. Names in some languages, like Spanish and Japanese, are fairly easy for English speakers to pronounce, owing to a general familiarity with those languages and the absence of many unfamiliar sounds. Others have sounds not found in English, which English speakers either have to attempt to master or work around (Khalid with a “kh” sound, like clearing your throat, becomes “Kalid”). Finally, still other languages have Latin letters or letter combinations which have completely different pronunciations than we would expect (Vietnamese Nguyen is pronounced “nwen”, like Gwen with an “n”).

In most Asian countries, last name (family name) comes first and first name comes last. Asians living in the US know family names come last here, but visitors sometimes feel more comfortable using the family name first.

Most people with non-English names expect Americans to blow the pronunciation; some take on English first names to avoid that indignity, or get used to it. You will make a big positive impression, however, if you at least come close to the right pronunciation. Asking how to pronounce a name is always appreciated, particularly if you write down the phonetics and remember how to pronounce it later (asking how to pronounce it again and again becomes tedious). Here is a brief guide for pronouncing non-English names for the language groups we’re most likely to encounter (with much thanks to Cal Poly Pomona’s website on foreign names).

MANDARIN CHINESE (MAINLAND CHINA (PRC), TAIWAN, SINGAPORE)

Chinese is a close second behind English as the most widely spoken language in the world. Putonghua, or Mandarin Chinese, was standardized from the Beijing dialect over the last century, given a simplified writing system in Chinese and English (Pinyin) in the 1950s, and used exclusively as the language of education, government and culture in China. Today, almost everyone in China can speak Mandarin, although often with an accent that reveals their home region.

There are two kinds of transliteration systems used, Wade-Giles (the old system, still used in Taiwan) and Pinyin. About 1.3 billion people use Pinyin and maybe 50 million (Taiwan and overseas Chinese) use Wade-Giles, so we’ll go with Pinyin. Like Vietnamese and Thai, Chinese is a tonal language in which meaning is determined partly by tone or pitch (giving Chinese a “sing-song” sound to English speakers). Forget tones. If you can master Chinese tones, you don’t need this guide.

Main “problem” letters and English pronunciation:

\[
\begin{align*}
X & \quad \text{– sh} \\
Q & \quad \text{– ch} \\
Zh & \quad \text{– mix of j and ch; go with “ch”} \\
E & \quad \text{– uh (uh-oh)} \\
C, Z & \quad \text{– ts (cats)} \\
\text{Yi} & \quad \text{– ee}
\end{align*}
\]

Note: HS in Wade-Giles = X (sh) in Pinyin. Hsiao = xiao = shao

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Name</th>
<th>English Pronunciation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhang</td>
<td>chang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>huh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>chao</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xiao</td>
<td>shao</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qianqian</td>
<td>chenchen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henan</td>
<td>huhnan (province)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meng</td>
<td>muhng</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qisheng</td>
<td>cheeshuhng</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xi</td>
<td>shee</td>
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<td>Xinzhu</td>
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<td>Cai</td>
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<td>Zhu</td>
<td>chu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qingdao</td>
<td>chingdao (city)</td>
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<td>Yiming</td>
<td>Eeming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zeng</td>
<td>tsuhng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi'an</td>
<td>sheean (city)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CANTONESE CHINESE

About 30% of the Chinese people speak a Chinese dialect other than Mandarin. The dialect with greatest status is Cantonese, found in Hong Kong and Guangdong province in southern China. Cantonese is widespread in the US, owing to the fact that most early Chinese immigrants came from Guangdong province and Hong Kong. Hong Kong students are also well represented in US colleges and universities. Accordingly, it is useful to learn how to pronounce Cantonese names.

Cantonese is more difficult for English speakers to pronounce than Mandarin, for several reasons. One, it has more tones than Mandarin. Two, Cantonese has nasal sounds unlike anything in English (ng, mg). Three, the transliteration system is not as logical as Pinyin. Like names using other national transliteration systems, some names can be pronounced using standard English phonetics. Others can not. Here are some of the “nots”, first line last names and second line first names:

Au – ngao     Ho – haw     Hui – hayoo     Koo – goo     Mok – mau     Ng – mg     Tang – doong
Ka-Ling – gahleeng     Kok-Wing – kawweeng     Sau-Ha – sowhan     Shuk-Yee – suhyee     Tak-Wah – duhwah

INDONESIAN

Indonesian is the largest member of the Malayo-Polynesian family of languages, which stretches from Hawaii to Madagascar, off the coast of southern Africa. Indonesian and Malayan (the language of Malaysia) are mutually intelligible. An “inclusive” language like English, Indonesian has also been influenced by Dutch, Javanese and now English. As one would expect in an island nation 3,000 miles wide, there are many dialects, Javanese being the largest. Like Mandarin Chinese, however, “Bahasa Indonesia” is the only language taught in school and is a major factor unifying the country.

The vowels are somewhat similar to Japanese and Spanish, except for “a”, which has two variants. Other than that, Indonesian names are pretty easy to pronounce for English speakers. A high proportion of Indonesian students in the US are of Chinese origin. About 70% of them have English or European first names, 20% Indonesian, and 10% Chinese first names. Government policy forced Chinese to take official Indonesian last names, but with more liberal policy some of the Chinese names, never lost but just not officially used, are reappearing. The first line of names below are last names, the second boys’ first names, the third girls’ first names, and the last two the most popular Indonesian first names.

A – ah or uh (father or up)     E – ay (Abe)     I – ee (eagle)     O – oh (boy)     U – oo (boo)

Darmadi – durmudee     Gunawan – goonawan     Irawan – eerawan     Sanjaya – sunjaya     Tedjo – tajo

Most popular Indonesian names: Budi (boodee), Siti (seetee), Trisno (treesno), Purwatini (purwateenee) and Susilo (sooseelo).

JAPANESE

Rejoice, English speakers. Japanese names are pronounced pretty much as written in Latin letters. The vowels are identical to Spanish, and the famous “l/r” confusion in English comes from the fact that one letter in Japanese is pronounced as a kind of blend of the two. Penultimate “i” vowels are usually dropped in long words or names (Yamashita becomes “yamashta”), and all syllables in Japanese have equal stress. Other than that, Japanese names should be pretty easy for English speakers to handle.

A – ah (father)     E – ay (wait)     I – ee (feet)     O – oh (hero)     U – oo (Sue)
KOREAN

Most Korean names in Latin letters are fairly easy to pronounce for English speakers. Some Korean vowels are very
different from English vowels, but close is usually good enough. There is no standard Latin alphabet spelling system for
Korean, so the same names can be spelled several different ways. For example, “Lee”, one of the most common Korean
last names, can also be spelled Yi or Rhee. It is pronounced “ee” like the letter “e”, although Koreans with that last
name will expect to be called “Lee” outside of Korea.

Korean first names have two parts, like Eun Young and Min Ho. Sometimes they are spelled as one word, and
sometimes two. Koreans don’t use the first part as a name or nickname, but non-Koreans often do, so some Koreans go
by Eun or Min outside Korea to make things easy. The first line of the names below are family names, the second, first
names.

Main “problem” letters and English pronunciation:

SI – shee  K – g as in “gas”  P – usually “b”  CH – j or ch


VIETNAMESE

Like Chinese, Vietnamese is tonal, meaning different pitches (rising, like we use in asking a question, falling, etc.) change
the meaning of words. For this purpose, however, forget tones. The writing system was developed by Portuguese and
French priests in the 1600s and 1700s, and froze into place despite the later development of the language. This partly
explains why the script doesn’t match the actual pronunciation that well, much like the English spelling of words like
eight, through and knife. Some Vietnamese names are pronounced as they look to English speakers, while some are
quite different. Here are some of the latter (top line last names, bottom line first names):


Name Pronunciation Guides

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He – huh  Henan – huhnan (province)  Xinzhu – sheenchu  Yiming – Eeming
Zhao – chao  Meng – muhng  Cai – tsai  Zeng – tsuhng
Xiao – shao  Qisheng – cheeshuhung  Zhu – chu  Xi’an – sheean (city)

Two online guides—

http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~zhuxj/readpinyin.html

Ross Jennings, January 2010