Asian names in an English-language context: negotiating the structural and linguistic minefield

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Names from Asian countries may differ from English-language[1] names in two key areas. First, names from many cultures do not follow the given name/s + surname English-language structure, although individuals may adapt their names to fit this format. Second, names from most Asian languages must be romanized for use in English-language contexts, a process which can give rise to inconsistencies because of competing romanization systems, dialect variations and various other factors. This article aims to clarify these key differences and help indexers identify and unravel possible sources of confusion.

Introduction

Personal names in the English-speaking world typically share a number of features. They tend to consist of one or more given names and one surname, and each part is written as a separate, capitalized word. Outside the English-speaking world, personal names may not have these features. This article looks at names from Asian countries, exploring how they differ from English names and from one another, and looking at the implications these differences have for indexers.

Structural issues

For names in the English-language format (given name[s] + surname), the most important identifier is the surname. The surname is placed last, and is normally either inherited from the person's father or acquired from the husband upon marriage. While also seen in Thailand and much of northern India, this format is by no means the norm across Asia.

In some Asian cultures, there may not be any connection between the names of children and their parents, and single-component names or *mononyms* are common. Like many Indonesians of Javanese origin, former Indonesian president Suharto had only one name, as did his father, Kertosudiro, and his mother, Sukirah. In Burma, names may have from one to five components and are usually preceded by an honorific, such as U (Mister) or Daw (Ms). For example, Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, had a father called U Pha and a mother called Daw Suu. At birth he was given the name 'Htain Lin', but he changed this to 'Aung San', meaning 'victory', when he was a student political leader. This practice of changing one's personal name in response to a significant life event is seen more often in Asian countries than in the English-speaking world, where the only common name change occurs when a married woman adopts her husband's surname.

Other Asian cultures use surnames, but have different customs surrounding them. Surnames from Korea, China, Japan, Vietnam and Cambodia are placed first, rather than last. For example, in the names of political leaders Kim Jong-Il, Deng Xiaoping and Ho Chi Minh, the surnames (called 'family names' in these cultures) are Kim, Deng and Ho respectively. In Japan women almost invariably adopt their husband's family name upon marriage, but in the other countries listed above, although children inherit their father's family name, wives retain their own family name.

The selection of given names also differs from culture to culture. In English-speaking countries, although there are situations in which, for religious or state reasons, restrictions are put on what is an acceptable name, it is usual for parents to choose their children's names according to their personal tastes. In Asian cultures, many other factors may play a role in name selection. Among traditional Buddhists, parents may consult a religious scholar for a list of auspicious initials for their child, based on when and where he or she was born. Sikh parents may open their holy book and choose a name that begins with the first letter on that page. Many Asian cultures also believe that choosing a name with a good meaning is crucial for the child's future health and success, and it is common for people to change their name in response to significant life events (as Aung San did) or to use different names in different contexts. For example, the actor known as Jackie Chan in the West was called Chan Kong-Sang at birth, but has also been known as Fong Si-Long, Yuen Lou and Da Ge.

These structural differences can cause havoc when people with Asian names enter contexts where the given name/s + surname format is taken for granted. Asian people often adapt or westernize their names to approximate this format to make their names easier to use. Common westernization strategies include:

- moving a family name normally placed first to the end of the name (e.g. Chow Yun-Fat ⇒ Yun-Fat Chow)
- substituting a Western given name for an Asian one (often combined with the above; e.g. Morita Noriyuki ⇒ Pat Morita)
- using the last part of the name as a surname when technically it is a given name or the person's father's given name

(e.g. 'Hussein' was in fact Saddam's father's given name, not his surname)

• doubling or adding another name to a single name (e.g. Budiharto⇒Budiharto Budiharto *or* Ananta Budiharto).

Linguistic issues

The majority of Asian languages are not written in the Roman alphabet. This means that they must be converted into the Roman alphabet from their original script for use in the English-speaking world, a process known as 'romanization' or 'latinization'.

Romanization was the product of the colonial era, when European colonists wanted to write down local names and words in an alphabet they understood. The spellings of romanized words reflected the language of the colonizing country: Vietnamese words were spelled according to French pronunciation, Indonesian words according to Dutch pronunciation, and so on. As a result, the spelling of romanized names can be quite counter-intuitive for English-speaking readers. For example, the Chinese family name spelt 'Chin' by the English was spelt 'Tjin' by the Dutch. Where an Asian sound had no equivalent in the colonist's language, the colonists either picked the existing letter or combination with the closest sound, invented a new combination of letters (e.g. the Kh in Khan) or added a diacritic to indicate a different sound (e.g. the diacritic on the D in the Vietnamese name Đinh).

Unfortunately for indexers, romanization is often inconsistent. In some countries, names are romanized on a case by case basis, with no consistency about how sounds are spelled. Where there is a government-approved system of romanization, people may not apply it consistently, especially if the government does not enforce it, or changes from one system to another. For example, the officially recognized Kunrei-shiki romanization system for Japanese is seldom used except by linguists and a handful of native Japanese speakers. Most signs, documents and English-language media use the older Hepburn system, which is more intuitive for non-native speakers to pronounce. To illustrate, the surname 千葉, pronounced 'Chee-ba', would be written 'Tiba' in Kunrei-shiki and 'Chiba' in Hepburn.

The romanization of Mandarin Chinese presents similar challenges. The current official romanization system is *hanyu pinyin*, which uses spelling that is often misleading for non-native speakers. 'Qing', for example, is pronounced 'ching' and 'Xiu' is 'shee-OH'. Many English-language publications still use the familiar, more pronounceable Wade-Giles system, referring to Chairman Mao as 'Mao Tse-Tung' instead of the hanyu pinyin rendering 'Mao Zedong'.

A further challenge posed by romanized Chinese names is the possibility of identity confusion. While written Chinese has tens of thousands of characters, Mandarin in romanized form has only 413 unique syllables. This means that the transliterated names of two or more Chinese people may look identical although the actual characters are different. For example, the Li in the romanized name 'Zhang Li' could be 莉, 利, 力 or any one of various other characters which look nothing like each other in their original script.

Note also that in languages that use pictograms (characters) like Chinese and Japanese, there is no necessary connection between the way a word looks and how it sounds. Unlike the English word 'cat', whose three symbols c, a and t are a direct guide to pronunciation, the character for cat, 猫, does not give any indication of the pronunciation, which is 'mao'. This means that just as the symbol '3' is pronounced 'three' in English, 'trois' in French and 'drei' in German, the character 张 is pronounced 'Zhang' in Mandarin, 'Cheung' in Cantonese, and 'Chō' in Japanese. As a result, someone known as 'Zhang Li' in China might go to Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong and use 'Cheung Lik', the 'Cantonese reading' of his name.

In South Asia and Indo-China, most languages are written in a type of script called an *abugida*, which falls somewhere between a character system and an alphabet. Unlike character languages, the way a word is written in an abugida is directly connected to its sound. For example, the name राहुल (romanized form 'Rahul') is made up of the symbols रा (ra), हु (hu) and ल (la). These scripts do not have capital and lower-case forms, and do not separate words with spaces. When they are romanized, capital letters and spaces need to be inserted artificially to fit English-language conventions. This can lead to inconsistencies in how a name is printed. For example, Sinhalese names often contain what is called a 'ge' name, which consists of the family's traditional profession followed by the word 'ge', meaning 'from the house of'. In English, Sinhalese people may write part of their name either as a single word (Guruge) or with the 'ge' separate (Guru Ge). An English speaker might well take these versions to be different surnames.

Conclusion

The diverse scripts and name structures found among Asian names make them challenging to index for English-language publications. Understanding how names from different countries are structured and adapted for use in English-speaking contexts will help indexers feel more confident about working with personal names from Asia.

Note

1 It should be noted that this article is limited to English-language name conventions. Many non-English western cultures follow quite different conventions, often much the same as those to be found in Asian countries.

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