

A Guide to Gwoyeu Romatzyh Tonal Spelling of Chinese

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This presentation is based on material in Yuen Ren Chao's *Mandarin Primer* and *Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (for publication details see the short bibliography at the bottom of Chao's biography).

Note: Since Pinyin is now the most widely known form of Chinese romanization, I have described Romatzyh in comparison to Pinyin spelling. Pinyin equivalents are given between square brackets ([]).

This Web page, in its present form (date 27 December 1995) is a draft and still in need of correction. The author would be greatly obliged to anyone who would honor him with lists of errata or well-intended suggestions. But please do not write to us to debate the merits of Romatzyh or other systems — the point of this page is to make the rules of GR accessible to people. If you don't like it, don't use it.

Introduction

Gwoyeu Romatzyh (also known as GR) is most closely associated with the name of Y. R. Chao, even though it was supposedly the product of a committee and even though the original inspiration for tonal spelling seems to have been Lin Yu-tang's. There is no question, however, that in its present form it is largely Chao's work. It is a finely crafted system of romanization that shows his handiwork and insights in many places.

Gwoyeu Romatzyh is probably too complicated for most people to bother with. Indeed, some people seem to become enraged merely on seeing it in print or hearing it praised. For the student who is willing to spend a little time to learn it, however, the investment brings an enormous reward. The great value of Romatzyh is that tonal distinctions are ineradicably built into the spelling of all syllables, and so anyone who can remember the letters of the alphabet can remember the tones of the words, which seems to be much easier for many Westerners than remembering diacritic marks.

Even if it were easier to learn, Gwoyeu Romatzyh would still never be a widely used system. Although it was adopted by the Nationalist government early on and although it has been used in Taiwan until quite recently, it was the subject of vociferous attacks by the Communists almost from the beginning and for reasons of Communist face it can never be promulgated again. Perhaps that is just as well. Today, daring to use Romatzyh marks the cranky Western scholar as someone who cares a great deal about language and is willing to take the trouble to indicate tones in print. And perhaps also as one who is not willing to let politicians dictate his or her choice of scholarly tools.

Tables

Table of Initials				
b	p	m		f
t	d	n	l	
g	k			h
j	ch		r	sh
tz	ts		s	
			y/i w/u	

The initials are mostly the same as in Pinyin, with a few exceptions.

1. Romatzyh initials **j**, **ch**, and **sh** include both the Pinyin **zh-ch-sh** series and the **j-q-x** series. Since these two series are in complementary distribution — they can never occur before the same sounds — no information is lost by combining them into a single series.

Note that Romatzyh uses different spellings for the finals that Pinyin writes as **i**: Pinyin **chi** is **chy** in Romatzyh, and Pinyin **qi** is **chi**.

2. The Pinyin initials **z** and **c** are represented in Romatzyh by **tz** and **ts**.
3. The Pinyin initials **y** and **w** are also sometimes written **i** and **u**; see Rules [3](#), [8](#), and [9](#), below.

Table of Endings													
	(open)			-i		-u		-n		-ng			-l (L)
Row													
A:	y	a	i	ai	ei	au	ou	an	en	ang	eng	ong	el(EL)
I:	i	ia	ie	iai		iau	iou	ian	in	iang	ing	iong	
U:	u	ua	uo	uai	uei			uan	uen	uang	ueng		
IU:	iu		iue					iuan	iun				

There are a number of differences between this and the Pinyin final system. The most important are:

1. Romatzyh uses **y** for the final Pinyin writes as **i** after certain initials, as in Pinyin **zhi** (Romatzyh **zy**), **chi** (Romatzyh **chy**), **shi** (Romatzyh **shy**), **ri** (Romatzyh **ry**), **zi** (Romatzyh **tzy**), **ci** (Romatzyh **tsy**), and **si** (Romatzyh **sy**).

2. Romatzyh writes as **iu** the final that Pinyin sometimes writes as a **u** with an umlaut (Pinyin **nǚ** ‘girl’) and sometimes as plain **u** after the initials **j**, **q**, and **x**. So Romatzyh writes **jiu** for Pinyin **ju**, **chiu** for Pinyin **qu**, and **shiu** for Pinyin **xu**. Similarly, **iu** is also used as a medial, as in **chiuan** for Pinyin **quan** or **shiue** for Pinyin **xue**.
3. Romatzyh writes the rhotacized (“r”) ending of Northern Chinese, as in **xiǎo-gǒur** ‘puppy’, with the letter **l**. No doubt this is confusing to beginners. The reason **r** is not used is that it already plays an important role in tonal spelling. For more information about this **erluah** (Pinyin **ér-huà**), see [below](#).

A few differences of lesser importance are that Romatzyh writes Pinyin **un** as **uen**, Pinyin **iu** as **iou**, Pinyin **ui** as **uei**, and Pinyin **ao** as **au**. Note that the final **uo** is written plain **o** after the labial initials **b**, **p**, **m**, and **f**, as in Pinyin.

Tone

The most important feature of Romatzyh, however, and the one that makes it look utterly different from Pinyin, is tonal spelling. Romatzyh does not use diacritic marks to indicate tones. Instead, tone is actually **spelled** into each syllable. This is what makes Romatzyh hard to learn but at the same time extremely valuable. Tonal spelling is much easier for many non-Chinese to remember — especially people whose native languages do not use diacritics — than Pinyin. This means that people who use Romatzyh will find it easier to remember the tones of well-known proper nouns that they might otherwise only know in toneless romanized spelling.

Since Romatzyh uses only symbols that appear in the ordinary lower ASCII character set, it can be used to write fully tonal Mandarin on the internet or in telegrams, without forcing you to resort to all sorts of ad hoc tricks to indicate tone.

List of rules for tonal spelling

Rule #1

Begin with the basic form of the syllable: this means the plain initial and the plain final, as shown in the tables above. This basic form undergoes various changes, described below, to show tonal distinctions.

Rule #2

To make Tone #2 from finals in Row A of the table, add **r** after the vowel. E.g.:

cha goes to *char* [chá],
he goes to *her* [hé],
tsai goes to *tsair* [cái],
chen goes to *chern* [chén]
hong goes to *horng* [hóng].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #3

To make Tone #2 from finals in Rows I, U, and IU, change the medials **i**, **u**, and **iu** into **y**, **w**, and **yu**, respectively. E.g.:

shiang goes to *shyang* [xiáng],
hua goes to *hwa* [huá],
ching goes to *chyng* [qíng],
iuan goes to *yuan* [yuán].

Note, however, that as complete finals of themselves, **i** is changed into **yi**, (not plain *y!) and **u** into **wu** (not plain *w!). E.g.:

chi goes to *chyí* [qí],
hu goes to *hwú* [hú],
i goes to *yí* [yí],
u goes to *wú* [wú].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #4

To make Tone #3, any vowel letter used alone, as well as any **e** appearing next to **i** (that is, in **ei** and **ie**) and any **o** appearing next to **u** (that is, in **ou** and **uo**), are doubled. E.g.:

jy goes to *jyy* [zhǐ],
da goes to *daa* [dǎ],
ching goes to *chiing* [qǐng],
gei goes to *geei* [gěi],
jie goes to *jiee* [jiě],
shou goes to *shoou* [shǒu],
huo goes to *huoo* [huǒ].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #5

To make Tone #3, change the medial or ending **i, u, iu** into **e, o, eu**, respectively. E.g.:

jiang goes to *jeang* [jiǎng],
guen goes to *goen* [gǔn],
jiuan goes to *jeuan* [juǎn],
mai goes to *mae* [mǎi],
hau goes to *hao* [hǎo].

But if the medial is changed, the ending is left unchanged. E.g.:

shiau goes to *sheau* [xiǎo] (not **sheao* or **shiao*),
guai goes to *goai* [guǎi] (not **goae* or **guae*).

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #6

In order to make Tone #4, change the endings **zero, -i, -u, -n, -ng, and -l (L)** into **-h, -y, -w, -nn, -nq** (that's N+Q), and **-ll** (double L), respectively. E.g.:

ju goes to *juh* [zhù],
mai goes to *may* [mài],
gou goes to *gow* [gòu],
man goes to *mann* [màn],
shang goes to *shanq* [shàng],
el goes to *ell* [ér].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Supplementary Rules:

Rule #7

The basic form of a syllable beginning with the letters **m, n, l, or r** is considered to be in Tone #2. This reflects the fact that sonorant initials in the classical pyng tone regularly appear in Mandarin tone 2, not tone 1. For example:

ma [má],
nian [nián],
lai [lái],
ren [rén].

To make these syllables into Tone #1, add **h** after the initial. E.g.:

ma goes to *mha* [mā],
nie goes to *nhie* [niē],
la goes to *lha* [lā],
reng goes to *rheng* [rēng].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #8

In order to make Tone #3 when a zero initial occurs with a final from Rows I, U, or IU, add the letter **y**-, **w**-, **y**-, respectively. E.g.:

iou goes to *yeou* [you3] (compare *jeou* [jiu3]),
ua goes to *woa* [wa3] (compare *goa* [gua3]),
iuan goes to *yoan* [yuan3] (compare *cheuan* [quan3]).

But the final **-iee** is **changed** into **yee** (not ***yiee**), and **-uoo** into **woo** (not ***wuoo**).

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

Rule #9

In order to make Tone #4 when a zero initial occurs with these same finals (finals from Rows I, U, or IU), you must **change** the initials **i**-, **u**-, **iu**- into **y**-, **w**-, **yu**-, respectively. E.g.:

iau goes to *yaw* [yào] (compare *jiaw* [jiào]),
uen goes to *wenn* [wèn] (compare *kuenn* [kùn]),
iun goes to *yunn* [yùn] (compare *jiunn* [jùn]).

But **add** the initials **y** or **w** to the four finals **-ih**, **-uh**, **-inn**, **-inq** (that is, N+Q). E.g.:

i goes to *yih* [yì],
u goes to *wuh* [wù],
in goes to *yinn* [yìn],
ing goes to *yinq* [yìng].

(go to the list of examples, [below](#))

An extra rule

The name of the city of Rome and words derived from it are to be spelled “Roma”, even though they are pronounced (and ought to be spelled) Luomaa. Hence the name of this system of Romanization is spelled Romatzyh, not *Luomaatzyh.

Special matters concerning rhotacization (“erluah”)

The pronunciation of erluah ([ér-huà], rhotacized finals) is not as simple a matter as many people think. There are actually many rules about which syllables merge with which and in what tones, and these rules are not the same for all speakers, even within Peking dialect itself. As a result it is not easy to give a concise list of principles for how Romatzyh treats this feature — not because Romatzyh itself is complicated, but because Mandarin and Peking dialect are complicated and inconsistent from speaker to speaker.

Certain finals become merged when rhotacized, and are treated differently by Romatzyh and Pinyin. Take a syllable like **ji** [jī]. When it undergoes erluah it becomes homophonous with the erluah form of **jin** [jin1]. Since the two forms are homophonous, Romatzyh writes them the same way: **jiel**. Pinyin distinguishes them, as **jīr** and **jīnr**. Similarly, **jie** [jiē] and **jian** [jiān] become merged when they undergo erluah: Romatzyh writes both as **jial**, but Pinyin distinguishes them as **jiēr** and **jiānr**. Clearly, Romatzyh operates at a more purely descriptive level, while Pinyin is intent on showing the syllable underlying the rhotacized syllable. If you don’t happen to know the underlying syllable, however, it is easy to make mistakes in Pinyin. And if you don’t know the exact rules of erluah, you may pronounce the Pinyin form incorrectly. Many Westerners, in fact, seeing a Pinyin form such as **jiānr**, pronounce it with the same nasalization as **jiángnr**, and this is a decidedly minority reading in Peking. Romatzyh writes **jial**, which is unmistakably not nasalized. The erluah form of **jiang** in Romatzyh is **jiangl**.

The neutral tone (“chingsheng”)

The neutral tone is indicated by placing a period (.) before each syllable that is neutral. Obviously this is more work than the practice in Pinyin, where tonally neutral syllables simply have their diacritic marks left off.

In Y.R. Chao’s own writings, certain common morphemes appearing in the neutral tone are often written without vowels: for instance, **sh** for **.shy**, the copula; **g** for **.ge**, the common measure word; **d** for **.de**, the possessive particle; etc. These are not standard today, with the exception of the noun suffix **tz** for **.tzy**. Chao tended to indicate the underlying tones of neutral syllables, even though those underlying tones could not be heard.

The use of the apostrophe (') to separate syllables

As in Pinyin, an apostrophe is used to mark the break between syllables that might otherwise be run together and read the wrong way. For instance, the ancient city of Charng’an (“extend the peace”) needs the apostrophe after the **g**, because if we wrote *Charngan some people might decide to break after the **n** and pronounce it as *Charn-gan (“cicada livers”). The modern name of the same city is written Shi’an (“western peace”), because without the apostrophe we might read it as *Shian (“deliciously fresh tasting”). In both of these examples, Pinyin uses an apostrophe the same way and in the same place.

Special words whose tone is not allowed to change

The four words **bu** 'not', **i** 'one', **chi** 'seven', and **ba** 'eight', whose tones change in different tonal environments, are always written in their Tone 1 forms in Romatzyh.

A few more examples in tabular form

Rule #2:

Tone 1:	ba	po	shy	tai	tong
Tone 2:	bar	por	shyr	tair	tornng
Pinyin:	[ba]	[po]	[shi]	[tai]	[tong]

Rule #3:

Tone 1:	shiuan	uan	shing	chu	ji
Tone 2:	shyuan	wan	shyng	chwu	jyi
Pinyin:	[xuan]	[wan]	[xing]	[chu]	[ji]

Rule #4:

Tone 1:	tzy	shan	jin	fei	duo
Tone 3:	tzyy	shaan	jiin	feei	duoo
Pinyin:	[zi]	[shan]	[jin]	[fei]	[duo]

Rule #5:

Tone 1:	jiau	guei	shiue	dai	shau
Tone 3:	jeau	goei	sheue	dae	shao
Pinyin:	[jiau]	[gui]	[xue]	[dai]	[shao]

Rule #6:

Tone 1:	chiu	gai	dou	shin	fang	jiel
Tone 4:	chiuh	gay	dow	shinn	fanq	jiell
Pinyin:	[qu]	[gai]	[dou]	[xin]	[fang]	[jir/jinr]

Rule #7:

Tone 1:	mhi	nhiou	lhau	rheng
Tone 2:	mi	niou	lau	reng
Pinyin:	[mi]	[niu]	[lao]	[reng]

Rule #8 (Tone 3 only):

Consonant initial:	chii	goan	guoo	jiee
Vowel initial:	yii	woan	woo	yee
Pinyin:	[qi]	[guan]	[guo]	[jie]
Pinyin:	[yi]	[wan]	[wo]	[ye]

Rule #9 (Tone 4 only):

Consonant initial:	guay	jiow	chih	shuh
Vowel initial :	way	yow	yih	wuh
Pinyin:	[guai]	[jiu]	[qi]	[shu]
Pinyin:	[wai]	[you]	[yi]	[wu]

Practice your Romatzyh on this:

Chyan Chyhbih Fuh

Su Shyh (Dongpo)

Renshiu jy chiou
chiyueh jih wanq,
Su Tzyy yeu keh fannjou
you yu Chyhbih jy shiah.
Chingfeng shyu lai
shoeibo bushing,
jeujeou juukeh,
sonq mingyueh jy shy
ge yeauteau jy jang.

Shao yan,

yueh chu yu Dongshan jy shanq
pairhwai yu doouniou jy jian,
bairluh herng Jiang
shoeiguang jie tian,
tzoneq iwoei jy suoo ru
ling wannching jy mangran.
Hawhaw hu ru pyng shiu yuh feng
erl bujy chyi suoo jyy,
piaupiau hu ru yi shyh dwulih
yeu huah erl dengshian.

Yushyh yiinjeou lehshenn, kowshyan erl ge jy. Ge iue:

‘Gueyjaw shi... lanjeang,
jyi kongming shi... suh liouguang,
meaumeau shi... yu hwai,
wanq meeiren shi... tian ifang.’

Keh yeou chuei donqshiau jee, yii ge erl heh jy. Chyi sheng mingmingran:

ru yuann ru muh
ru chih ru suh,

yuin neauneau
bujyue ru leu,
wu iouhuo jy chyanjiau
chih gujou jy lifuh.

Su Tzyy cheauran, jenqjin erl wenn keh iue, 'Herwey chy ran yee?' Keh iue:

Yueh ming shing shi
uchiueh nan fei...

tsyy fei Tsaur Menqder jy shy hu?

Shi wanq Shiahkoou
dong wanq Wuuchang,
shan chuan shiang mou
yuh hu tsangtsang,

tsyy fei Menqder jy kuenn yu Jou Lang jee hu? Fang chy poh Jingjou, shiah Jiangling,
shuennliou erl dong yee,

jwulu chian lii
jingchy bih kong,
shyjeou lin Jiang
herngshuoh fuh shy.

Guh ishyh jy shyong yee, erl jin an tzay tzai? Kuanq wu yeu Tzyy, yuchyau yu Jiang duu jy
shanq, leu yushia erl yeou miluh,

jiah iyeh jy beanjou
jeu paurtzen yii shiang juu,
jih fwuyou yu Tiandih
meau tsanghae jy isuh,
ai wu sheng jy shiuyu
shiann charng Jiang jy wu chyong,
jya feishian yii iauguay
baw mingyueh erl charng jong,
jy bukee hu jiuh der
tu yisheang yu beifeng.'

Su Tzyy iue: 'Keh yih jy, fwu shoei yeu yueh hu?'

Shyh jee ru sy, erl weicharnng woang yee.
Yngshiu jee ru bii, erl tzwu moh shiaucharnng yee.

Gayjiang

tzyh chyi biann jee erl guan jy
tzer Tiandih tserng buneng yii ishuenn,
tzyh chyi bubiann jee erl guan jy,
tzer wuh yeu woo jie wujinn yee,

erl yow her shiann hu? Chieefwu,

Tiandih jy jian
wuh ge yeou juu,
goou fei wu jy suoo yeou
swei ihaur erl moh cheu.
Wei jiangshanq jy chingfeng
yeu shanjian jy mingyueh,
eel der jy erl wei sheng
muh yuh jy er cherng seh,
cheu jy wujinn
yonq jy bu jye,
shyh tzaw wuh jee jy wujinn tzanq yee,
erl wu yeu Tzyy jy suoo gonq shyh.

Keh shii erl shiaw
shii jaan geng juo.
Yau her jih jinn
beiparn langjyi,
Shiang yeu jennjieh hu jou jong
bu jy dongfang jy jih bair.

The Yuen Ren Society for the Promotion of Chinese Dialect Fieldwork

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