

Handout III.3

GUIDE TO CHINESE TRANSCRIPTIONS

I. Pinyin

Pinyin was developed in the 1950s by the People's Republic of China as a Latin-alphabet-based transcription of Standard Chinese pronunciation. It is widely used in teaching materials and as a standard Romanization of Chinese throughout the world.

Many of the letters represent sound values similar to those in European languages. However, a few have unusual sound values. Among them are:

c	like <i>ts</i> in <i>cats</i>
i	after <i>z, c, s</i> pronounced as a buzzing vowel similar to English <i>z</i> after <i>zh, ch, sh, r</i> pronounced as a buzzing vowel similar to English <i>r</i> (otherwise, pronounced like <i>ee</i> in <i>cheese</i>)
q	like <i>ch</i> in <i>cheese</i>
x	like <i>sh</i> in <i>she</i>
z	like <i>ds</i> in <i>lids</i>
zh	like <i>j</i> in <i>jersey</i>

To hear pronunciations of syllables spelled in pinyin:

1. Go to <http://courses.washington.edu/chin342/ipa/syllables.html>
2. Click "Pinyin" (it will light up blue)
3. Find the pinyin syllable on the grid and click it

Try it with *yún* 'cloud' (found in the very last square at the bottom right).

II. Old Chinese

Old Chinese is the name given to the Chinese language spoken in the first millennium BCE. It is possible to reconstruct its pronunciation to an approximate degree. While somewhat later in time than the earliest written records (the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty), Old Chinese pronunciations are helpful as guides to understanding phonetic extension (rebus usage) and the role of phonetic elements in phonetic-semantic compound characters during the early period of the Chinese script.

In this class, a simplified version of the Old Chinese reconstruction of Baxter and Sagart (2014) is used.¹

¹ William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese: a new reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2014).