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Between Localism and Nationalism: The Romanization of *Canton* (Guangzhou, China)

Abstract

This paper presents the different ways of romanization and divergent ideologies in the toponymy of the city of *Canton* (Guangzhou, China). The Portuguese named the city *Cantão*, which was transliterated as *Canton* in French and English and then into other European languages in an identical way. Later, attempts to standardise romanization emerged in China. With the rise of nationalism and the diffusion of Mandarin, romanizations based on the pronunciation of the national language were later developed. Since the introduction of the pinyin system by the government, the name *Guangzhou* was legitimized as the only official transcription. However, there is complexity underpinning the linguistic practices and ideologies of the different romanizations of this city. From local identity to national authority, *Canton* or *Guangzhou* serve as a representation of a trial of strength in terms of divergent cultural and socio-political values.

Keywords

romanization, *Canton*, *Guangzhou*, localism, nationalism

1. Introduction

Toponyms usually reflect the historical and cultural origins of the place as it is named. However, the usage or the choice of different names for a place sometimes stem from divergent ideologies. As the usage of *America* instead of the *United States* remains disputed (Immerwahr, 2019), the choice of the shortened form of the United States of America is determined by the geopolitical identity recognition of the user.

In this paper, we will first present the etymology of the toponym of *Canton*, a Chinese city officially known as *Guangzhou* today. As the Chinese languages are not alphabetic, romanization is needed to transliterate Chinese toponyms into English, French, German, Russian or any other alphabetic language. Thus, the different ways of romanizing the name of this city will be discussed with a focus on the ideologies that underpin Cantonese and Mandarin as two major sources of transliteration. By approaching the specific status of the Cantonese language, we will also compare the usage of *Canton* or *Guangzhou* within China and internationally.

2. *Canton* the city and Chinese toponyms

Before we look into the subject, we briefly introduce *Canton*, the city, the origins of Chinese toponyms and the writing system of the Chinese languages, which will bring about a better understanding of the romanization of this toponym.

2.1. A brief introduction to *Canton*

Located in southern China, *Canton* is at the upper centre of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province. It is less than one hour's train ride to Hong Kong and Macau. Perhaps less famous than Beijing (also *Peking*) and Shanghai, *Canton* started trading with Europe much earlier than those two megacities.

Moreover, one of the official languages in Hong Kong and Macau, Cantonese, is named after *Canton*, the city in which this language originated.



Figure 1. Location of *Canton* (Guangzhou)

Source: <https://geology.com/world/china-satellite-image.shtml>

As the capital city of Guangdong Province, *Canton* is ranked the fourth largest city in mainland China in terms of GDP and population after Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen as of (Xu, 2021). With a history of over 2,200 years and as a major terminus of the maritime “Silk Road”,¹ *Canton* continues to serve as a major port and transportation hub, as well as one of China’s top megacities. This city gained its reputation by trading with European countries very early during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and it was the only international port of China that the emperor had permitted for nearly a hundred years under the “Canton System” during 1523–1566 and 1757–1842 (Van Dyke, 2005), which made Canton the only Chinese port accessible to foreign traders for a long time. Later, Canton was captured by the British during the “First Opiumar” (1839–1842). No longer enjoying the monopoly after this war, Canton

¹ A network of Eurasian trade routes that connected China, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, Egypt and Europe.

lost trade to other ports, such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, but continued to serve as a major transshipment hub. Today, this city holds the largest import and export fair in China, that is, the “Canton Fair”, and has been doing so since 1957. Possessing a large urban population and great volumes of port traffic, Canton is classified as a large-port megacity, the largest type of port city in the world (Roberts et al., 2020), comparable to Rotterdam or Hamburg.

2.2. Chinese toponyms: Writing system and its romanization

Generally, Chinese cities are named according to two principles. The first is socio-geographic, which indicates the location and the status of the city. The most salient example is the capital *Beijing*, also known as *Peking*, the postal romanization of early Mandarin pronunciation used from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.² The first syllable *bei* refers to ‘north’, and the second *jing* means ‘capital’, so *Beijing* literally denotes the capital in the north. Another way of naming a city in China is on a cultural basis, usually by means of a wish or words with positive meanings. Taking the city of *Ningbo* as an example, *Ningbo* had also been an important trading port long before the rise of its neighbour Shanghai. The first syllable *ning* means ‘peaceful’, and the second *bo* refers to ‘waves’. The emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, named this city *Ningbo* in the hope that the peaceful waves of the ocean would foster prosperity through trading by sea (Fan, 2018).

However, the writing system of Chinese languages is logographic according to Morpho-syllable Typology (Xu, 2001), meaning that each Chinese character bears one single syllable and one morpheme correspondingly. Traditional Chinese lexicography divided characters into six categories: pictograms, ideograms, compound ideograms, phono-semantic characters, phonetic loan characters and derivative cognates (see Table 1). We are not going into the detail of this classification, but we conclude that pictograms, ideograms and phono-semantic characters occupy the majority of the formation of Chinese characters.

² In English, this form is no longer found in any official translation except in the name of *Peking University*. However, its equivalent form in some other languages remains in current usage, e.g., *Pékin* in French.

Table 1. Six categories of Chinese logograms

Category	Pictogram	Ideogram	Compound ideogram	Phono-semantic	Phonetic loan	Derivative cognate
Explanation	stylized drawings of the objects they represent	express an abstract idea through an iconic form	compounds of two or more pictographic or ideographic characters to suggest the meaning of the word	Phonetic part + semantic part	characters that are “borrowed” to write another homophonous or near-homophonous morpheme	Cognates from the same etymology, which mean or sound the same
Example	木 mù	本 běn	森 sēn	沐 mù	本 běn	考/老 kǎo/lǎo
Meaning	‘tree’	木 + 一 tree + bar ‘root (of a tree)’	木 × 3 3 trees ‘forest’	氵 + 木 water (semantic) + tree (phonetic) ‘to water something’	‘root’ borrowed to mean ‘book’	both characters mean ‘elder person’

Source: summarized by author.

When it comes to romanization, each character is transliterated by one syllable according to its pronunciation. That is to say, *Guangzhou* (廣州) is composed of *guang* (廣), a phono-semantic character that means ‘vast’ or ‘extensive’; and *zhou* (州), a pictogram that describes the shape of a ‘land in the water’. Comparable to *-burg* in Germanic toponyms, *-zhou* forms many place names in China, such as *Hangzhou* and *Suzhou*, two famous water-surrounded cities regarded as the most pleasant places to live in the country. Thus, *Guangzhou* (*Canton*) literally means a vast land surrounded by water.

3. *Canton*, from a misunderstanding to a well-known place name

3.1. Early romanization of Chinese cities

The first documented romanization of Chinese place names dates from the Ming dynasty during the late 13th century. The most known ones were introduced by the Italian missionary and sinologist Matteo Ricci, who landed China in Macau and reached as far as the capital. The major way of romanizing

Chinese place names at that time was imitating the local pronunciation at first contact. In regard to *Canton*, the most recognized name by most European countries was given by Portuguese missionaries in the early 15th century and was later adopted by French, English and other European languages. *Canton* remains the most common appellation of *Guangzhou* to Westerners. It serves as the phonologic-morphological root of the local language of this region: Cantonese.



Figure 2. Early record of *Cantão* on the “Padrão dos Descobrimentos” monument in Lisbon

Source: photograph by author.

3.2. Capital city of *Guangdong* Province

In fact, the name *Canton* was a misunderstanding of *Guangdong* (廣東), the province’s name (Han & Wu, 2020), pronounced in Cantonese as [kwɔŋ.tɔŋ]. Although no direct proof of such an origin was found in the literature, there is no denying that the letter *t* in *Canton* transliterates the sound [t] in *dong* [tɔŋ] and that the letter *n* indicates the nasal coda of this syllable, which is never found in *zhou* of *Guangzhou* either in Mandarin or in Cantonese. Table 2 shows the linguistic mutation from *Guangdong* to *Canton* in Cantonese. The pronunciation has experienced a series of sound changes, such as delabialization and

nasal fronting (assimilated to the dental-alveolar onset of the succeeding syllable), the two being the featured characteristics of modern Cantonese phonology (Bauer & Benedict, 2011).

Table 2. Sound changes in modern Cantonese phonology

Phonological process	After	Before
delabialization	[kɔŋ. tɔŋ]	[kwɔŋ. tɔŋ]
nasal fronting	[kɔn. tɔŋ]	[kɔŋ. tɔŋ]

Source: summarized by author.

Based on this linguistic cue, we conclude that *Canton* finds its origin in the Cantonese pronunciation of the province's name *Guangdong*, [kɔn. tɔŋ]. This inference is reasonable because, at the time when the Portuguese came to Macau, people did not distinguish clearly the city and the province. Thus, although *Canton* sounds more like the province, it indeed refers to its capital city. This name was circulated to Western countries afterwards with the prosperous trading activities between China and the world (as mentioned in 2.1.), and has become lexicalized in European languages.

4. Romanization of *Canton* throughout history

Like many other countries, such as France, since the establishment of the Republic of China and the current People's Republic government, the authorities have made every effort to standardise the romanization of the place names of the country. First, some romanization systems based on the local Cantonese pronunciation emerged. Then, several romanization systems based on Mandarin pronunciation were put forwards, and the pinyin system was finally officialised as the only legitimate translation/transliteration of this city.

4.1. Cantonese romanizations

The beginning proposals were based on the Cantonese language. The major characteristics of its pronunciation include the principal vowel [ɔ] of the first character [kwɔːŋ] and the absence of retroflex in the second character [tsɐu].

Table 3. Systems based on Cantonese pronunciation [kwɔːŋ.tɕəu]

Romanization form	Linguistic reference	Emerging date
<i>Gwong-jau</i>	Yale's system	1958
<i>Gwong-zau</i>	Guangdong Provincial Education Department	1960
<i>Gwong-zau</i>	Linguistic Society of Hong Kong	1993

Source: summarized by author.

These romanizations based on Cantonese pronunciation were rarely seen, except in the names of some private companies. These names remain relatively far less used than *Canton*, because it had become familiar to foreigners long before the establishment of the linguistic references.

4.2. Mandarin romanizations

With the spread of Mandarin, the national language, the central government tended to promote romanization based on Mandarin, whose phonological characteristics include the principal vowel [a] in the first character [kʷaŋ] and the retroflex consonant [ʈʂ] in the second character [ʈʂou]. The last romanization by pinyin became the only officialised orthography for transliterating Chinese toponyms (ISO 7098: 1982, superseded by ISO 7098: 2015).

Table 4. Systems based on Mandarin pronunciation [kʷaŋ.ʈʂou]

Romanization form	Linguistic reference	Emerging date
<i>Kuang-chou</i>	Wade-Giles system	1892
<i>Kwangchow</i>	Imperial Postal Joint-Session Conference in Shanghai	1906
<i>Guangzhou</i>	Chinese <i>Pinyin</i> system	1982

Source: summarized by author.

The two bases of romanization represent, in fact, different ideologies between localism and nationalism. Cantonese romanization and non-pinyin Mandarin romanization are regarded as a sign of liberalism, which is against the unification of the country. Mandarin pinyin romanization strongly endorses nationalism, which is critical to the current government.

5. Particularities of the Cantonese language

Compared to other local languages or dialects of China, Cantonese enjoys a specific status under the spread of Mandarin. This is why arguments still exist between *Canton* and *Guangzhou*, unlike other cities in China.

5.1. Linguistic unification in China

In China, there are many local languages or dialects that are not mutually understood by their speakers. However, the written language in China, which is independent of pronunciation, has been highly unified thanks to the stable Chinese characters. Speakers of different dialects could communicate without difficulty by writing. However, oral communication became increasingly important as society developed. Thus, the spoken language of the capital area was set as the *lingua franca* to identify the country as a unified nation. Based on the dialect of northern China, Mandarin is a result of such political movements and is used as a tool for imposing the ideologies of nationalism.

Under such circumstances, the use of local languages or dialects soon diminished. With the economic reform, large numbers of rural and inland people flocked to the richer south-eastern areas and cities. This kind of great convergence of languages/dialects left Mandarin an important role to play, allowing people speaking different dialects to understand each other. Therefore, standard Mandarin has gradually become the language considered a symbol of civilisation, especially in public institutions, enterprises and schools (Dong, 2010).

Therefore, Mandarin-based pinyin romanization has almost thoroughly replaced any dialect-based romanization of toponyms. Nearly all the Chinese

names of cities initially romanized according to dialect pronunciation have been changed into pinyin romanization. Those names that were once well known to Westerners exist only in brands or university emblems nowadays for the sake of showing their long history, as the examples show in Table 5.

Table 5. Disappearance of the non-pinyin romanization of Chinese cities

Mandarin pinyin romanization	Local language romanization	Toponyms in emblem or brand
<i>Beijing</i>	<i>Peking</i>	Peking University
<i>Xiamen</i>	<i>Amoy</i>	Universitas Amoiensis
<i>Qingdao</i>	<i>Tsingtao</i>	Tsingtao Beer

Source: summarized by author.

5.2. Cantonese language

Despite the quick spread of Mandarin, Cantonese survived more than other local languages or dialects. To ensure the harmonious reunification of the British and Portuguese colonies Hong Kong and Macau, the central government of China specifically allowed the existence of Cantonese in Guangdong Province. The Pearl River Delta area around Canton is the only region in the country where it is allowed to broadcast in dialects, and it is also the only region in the country where Hong Kong television can be received legally (Guo, 2017). Thus, Cantonese is regarded as a tool of ideological propaganda helping the integration of Hong Kong and Macau and is still tolerated in Guangdong's public domain.

However, the government has not stopped its efforts to restrict local expression by trying to cancel Cantonese announcements on public transportation and Cantonese broadcasting in local media. Both the law and language policies have positioned Mandarin in the public spheres of education, media, government affairs, and public communication. Cantonese has become increasingly limited to private contexts, such as folk entertainment, neighbourhoods, and family life. Such policies have led to an influential social movement in Canton, appealing to the preservation and legitimacy of the Cantonese language within Guangdong Province (Guo, 2017).

Nevertheless, despite the efforts of revitalising Cantonese by non-governmental groups and individuals, the use of the name *Canton* remains very limited nowadays, as it is only found in the “China Export and Import Fair”, as known as the “Canton Fair”, or a few tourist sites within the whole territory.

6. *Canton* or *Guangzhou*? A subtle choice

The choice of one of these two toponyms reflects, as a result, the ideologies of localism and nationalism. We observe an extremely limited utilisation of *Canton* in China but a variety of usage of the two by foreign countries, depending on different traditions.

6.1. Inside China: Standardisation and officialization of pinyin

First, the usage of *Canton* inside China is extremely limited. The majority of governmental institutions or nongovernmental organisations have adopted the pinyin romanization *Guangzhou* in their official names and forced organizations to change non-pinyin romanizations into pinyin transliteration. At present, *Canton* is only used to name the *Cantonese* language and very few institutions, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Limited usage of *Canton* in China

Name	Reference
The Canton Tower (and metro station name)	
The Canton Fair	
IATA airport code of Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport CAN	

Source: summarized and photographed by author.

6.2. Different usage by foreign countries

Second and interestingly, a particular phenomenon of choice can be observed on the websites of the consulates general of different countries in *Canton* or *Guangzhou*. In 2022, there were 64 countries which have established consulates-general in this city.³ A consulate is a national representative office dispatched by the government of one country to a certain city of the other country and where consular duties are performed. Therefore, the official appellation of a consulate represents the tradition and ideology of the country.

Among the consulates of the major powers of the world, we can separate them into two categories: one naming their consulate by *Guangzhou*, the

³ Source: Guangzhou Foreign Affairs Office, retrieved December 5, 2022, from http://www.eguangzhou.gov.cn/2022-08/01/c_413267.htm

official romanization of pinyin, and one naming their consulate by *Canton* or its equivalent form in their language. English-speaking countries tend to adopt the Mandarin pinyin romanization in their consulate appellation, including the most influential countries (see Table 7).

Table 7. Consulates named after *Guangzhou* by English-speaking countries

Country	Consulate name
UK	British Consulate-General Guangzhou ⁴
USA	U.S. Consulate General Guangzhou ⁵
Canada	Consulate General of Canada to China, in Guangzhou ⁶

Source: summarized by author.

However, non-English-speaking countries, such as France, Portugal, Germany and Poland, seem more attached to historical Cantonese romanization, that is, *Canton* or equivalent forms (see Table 8).

Table 8. Consulates named after *Canton* by non-English-speaking countries

Country	Consulate name
France	Consulat Général de France à Canton ⁷
Portugal	Consulado Geral de Portugal em Cantão ⁸
Germany	Deutsches Generalkonsulat Kanton ⁹
Poland	Konsulat Generalny RP w Kantonie ¹⁰

Source: summarized by the author.

⁴ Retrieved January 25, 2020, from <https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-consulate-general-guangzhou>

⁵ Retrieved January 25, 2020, from <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/guangzhou>

⁶ Retrieved December 5, 2020, from <https://www.international.gc.ca/country-pays/china-chine/guangzhou.aspx?lang=eng>

⁷ Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://cn.ambafrance.org/-Consulat-Canton->

⁸ Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://cantao.consuladoporugal.mne.gov.pt/pt>

⁹ Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://china.diplo.de/cn-de/vertretungen/gk-kanton>

¹⁰ Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://www.gov.pl/web/chiny/konsulat-generalny-w-kantonie>

The two different choices of *Guangzhou* or *Canton* might be explained by the following reasons. First, as some countries or cities have done, the Chinese government prescribes the official translation of place names by political order. Usually, such an order only applies to English because English is the only *de facto* international language in the world. One of the similar examples is the dispute between *Myanmar* and *Burma* in English (Dittmer, 2010), which is not necessarily the case in other languages. On the one hand, English-speaking countries are more likely to choose *Guangzhou*, as it is the official name legitimized by the Chinese government. On the other hand, this choice does indicate that English is more inclined to foreignization in regard to transliterating foreign toponyms.

Second, different countries have different conventions of adopting toponyms in their own language. In languages of the European continent, lexicalization plays an important role in the adoption of foreign toponyms, which impels more local-like spellings. For example, *Kraków* in Polish is transcribed as *Krakow* in English, which perfectly respects the orthography of the source language. However, we find *Cracovia* for *Kraków* in Spanish and, regarding another city, *Aachen* in German but *Aix-la-Chapelle* in French without disagreement. These languages appear more attached to historical and lexicalized forms of foreign toponyms in their own languages. Thus, we could consider these preferences of domesticating foreign place names as a matter of linguistic convention for the countries that name their consulates after *Canton*.

7. Conclusion

As a result, different names and toponymic variants are used in different situations and contexts. The users are often conscious of the implications and ideologies associated with different variants. As Ainiala (2009) states:

Social identity and place identity are often linked with each other: identifying yourself with a place also often means identifying yourself as a member of a social group. By using a given name variant you can show you are part of a social group with a special link to a place (hometown) and to how you

experience and perceive the place. The speakers of a language may use or at least report that they are using a name preferred by the community with which they want to identify themselves, or they may avoid using names associated with user groups they want to differentiate themselves from. (p. 74)

We can conclude that the usage of *Canton* is strongly associated with localism, archaism, or even exoticism in reverse. It is not only the earliest romanization of the city, but it also recalls the “good old days” when the city was the only commercial centre connecting China and the world. Furthermore, *Canton* remains a symbol of the recognition of the indigenous identity of the Cantonese-speaking community. In contrast, the official preference of *Guangzhou* is undoubtedly marked by nationalism and the authority of the nation-state.

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