

A System without a System: Cantonese Romanization Used in Hong Kong Place and Personal Names¹

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Abstract

From the colonial period (1842–1997) to the SAR period (1997–present), Hong Kong has used romanized Cantonese forms for local place and personal names, which can be found on identity cards, business cards, maps, street signs, as well as in underground and railway stations. This Cantonese romanization, generally called the Government system, may look systematic at first glance. However, as we carefully observe the ‘system’, we find it is inconsistent at times, which leads us to a series of questions like ‘Is there a system? If so, why is it inconsistent?’ or ‘Who designed this romanization in the first place?’ These questions triggered our research interest, so we started collecting data from various primary sources. Our analysis reveals that Cantonese romanizations are closely related to the presence of early protestant missionaries in China. This paper attempts to prove that the Government system is substantially a hybrid of three romanization systems—those of Eitel, Dyer-Ball and the Standard Romanization—all of which are legacies of nineteenth-century missionaries in China.

Brief History of Protestant Missionaries in China

Christianity in China started in the seventh century with the arrival of the Nestorians. However, no solid foundation for Christianity was built until the sixteenth century when Roman Catholic missionaries, such as Ricci, Valignani, and Xavier, were allowed to preach and build churches in two southern Chinese cities, namely Macao and Guangzhou, after gaining the trust of the Ming dynasty government.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in China in 1553 for trading purposes, eight Jesuits and over 5,000 Christians were recorded in Macao in 1565 (Zhao, Lei & He, 2002, p. 5). Macao later became an important missionary base for the Portuguese in the Far East. In the sixteenth century, Guangzhou was not only a trading port, but also a stepping-stone for missionaries to go further into other parts of China. A survey by Stauffer (1922) showed that during the period 1807–1860, 37% of all missionaries in China were located in Guangzhou, thus outnumbering other cities. After the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 and the Treaty of Peking in 1860, China opened more trading ports to foreigners, and thus missionaries had freer access to other parts of China. Nevertheless, statistics showed that during 1807–1920, Guangzhou was still the largest centre in terms of the number of missionaries.

After 1917, independent Chinese churches started to develop and the churches in China entered the indigenization era. Because of political turmoil, missionaries were forced to evacuate from Mainland China in the early 1950s and so they moved to

Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao to await the opportunity to go back to the Mainland again.

Hong Kong attracted missionaries mainly from Britain, America and Germany after Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842. Unlike in Mainland China, missionaries had considerably more freedom to develop their missions. In order to communicate better with the local people, western missionaries devoted themselves to the study of the written Chinese language and local varieties. However, as it turned out, Chinese was not an easy language to learn. In fact, when Morrison started learning Chinese in Macao and Guangzhou, he described the difficulties of learning Chinese as follows:

But if he goes to Chinese, he finds no letters—nothing to communicate sounds—no similarity, the method radically different, and not one word like what he has known before, and when he knows the pronunciation of words and sentences, the sound does not at all direct to the character which is the sign of the same idea. If my statement be correct, it will appear that the Chinese is more difficult than any of the European languages.²

Missionaries intending to work in southern China usually first landed in Hong Kong or Macao and then started to learn the Chinese language before commencing their missionary life. They soon realized that the Chinese dialects greatly differed among themselves and the written variety did not correspond to the speech they heard in daily life. No systematic learning aids were available except for simple phrase books or coastal Chinese Pidgin English conversation books. There were manuscript dictionaries edited by Catholic missions, but they were not accessible to every missionary, because only big libraries, such as national libraries or the library of the Royal Society, owned them.³ Even if they luckily obtained one, the Chinese romanization that was employed was so unfamiliar to the English-speaking protestant missionaries that it was not a great help in learning Chinese.⁴ Owing to practical needs, many Cantonese romanization systems were developed.

History of Cantonese Romanization

In contemporary China, Pinyin is the official romanization system of Mandarin Chinese or Putonghua. Only Hong Kong and Macao still coin new words in romanized Cantonese in the form of place and personal names.⁵ Below we discuss the development of romanized Cantonese systems which are divided into five groups: *Morrison's System*, *Williams' System*, *Lepsius' System*, *Standard Romanization*, and *Post-missionary Systems*.

Morrison's System

The first attempt to romanize Cantonese was by Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society (LMS); he used his system in his *Vocabulary of the Canton Dialect*, which was published in Macao in 1828. This bilingual dictionary was mainly designed for the employees of the East India Company based in Guangzhou.

His romanization has the following features:⁶

1. English vowel spelling generally employed, e.g., ‘oo’ to denote [u:];⁷
2. Voiceless consonant letters for both aspirated and unaspirated Cantonese consonants;
3. No tone marks;
4. The use of diacritics to differentiate similar vowels;
5. No mark to denote aspiration;
6. Syllabic-initial velar nasal [ŋ] denoted by the letter ‘g’;⁸
7. Syllabic nasals [m] and [ŋ] denoted by ‘im’ and ‘ing’, respectively;
8. Different spellings sometimes used to denote identical vowels, e.g., ‘uk’ and ‘ok’ for [ʊk];
9. The same spelling sometimes used to denote two different vowels, e.g., ‘ok’ for [ʊk] and [ɔk].

(See Appendix)

John Chalmers of the London Missionary Society modified Morrison’s system in his *Cantonese Phonetic Reader* in 1855 (see Appendix). Similar systems were employed by Devan (1847) and Bonney (1854). Although Morrison’s system made a pioneering contribution to the transcription of Cantonese, it was inconsistent at times and lacked feasible symbols to express aspiration and tones. In their later works, Devan and Chalmers changed their systems so that they were similar to Williams.⁹

Williams’ System

The second attempt to romanize Cantonese was made primarily by Williams of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Mission (A.B.C.F.M.), who came to Guangzhou in 1833 to assist Morrison as a printing technician. Later he distinguished himself as a writer and a Sinologue. He adopted and altered William Jones’ romanization, the system that had been applied to many non-European languages.¹⁰ Williams produced *Easy Lessons in Chinese* in 1842 and *Tonic Dictionary in the Canton Dialect* in 1856 in this romanized system. Bridgman (A.B.C.F.M.), who published the missionary journal *Chinese Repository* with Williams, also compiled the Chinese textbook *Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect*, using Williams’ system in 1841.¹¹ This system was employed by a lot of later works on Cantonese. Eitel compiled *Chinese Dictionary in the Cantonese Dialect* in 1877, and Ball also produced a series of Cantonese textbooks, such as *Cantonese Made Easy* (1883).¹² Other publications using Williams’ system or its modification include Stedman and Lee’s *Chinese and English Phrase Book* (1888) and Chiang’s *Practical English-Cantonese Dictionary* (n.d.).

Williams’ system has the following features:

1. The use of Italian- or German-like vowel spelling and English-like consonant spelling, e.g., the vowel [i] denoted by ‘i’ as in Italian or German, but not ‘ee’ as in English, the consonant [ʃ] by ‘sh’ as in English, not ‘sch’ in German or ‘ch’ in French;
2. Voiceless consonant letters for both aspirated and unaspirated Cantonese consonants;
3. Aspiration marked by using a reversed apostrophe ‘after a consonant letter’;
4. The use of diacritics to differentiate similar vowels;
5. Tones denoted by ‘fa quan (faat hyun)’, a series of half-circle signs placed

at one of the four corners of each syllable, the system traditionally used by the Chinese to mark tones.
(See Appendix)

Lepsius' System

The third attempt was that of the Rhenish Missionary Society (R.M.S.). The *Gospel of Luke* was translated by Louis of R.M.S. and transliterated in 1867 by Faber of Basel Missionary Society (B.M.S.) in the system called the Lepsius system. This was the earliest romanized gospel in Cantonese. The system was named after the German linguist Lepsius, who intended to create a standard alphabet for non-European languages. B.M.S. used this system to transliterate Hakka, another Chinese dialect, but it was never used again in romanizing Cantonese.¹³

The features of this system are:

1. The use of Italian- or German-spelling to express vowel sounds, e.g., 'i' denoting [i];
2. Aspiration denoted by adding 'h' after the syllable-initial consonant;
3. The use of diacritics for distinction of similar vowels;
4. Tones denoted after each syllable with a slash-like sign;
5. [ŋ] denoted by 'n' with a diacritic underneath, regardless of its syllabic position.

(See Appendix)

Standard Romanization

The fourth group was characterized by its communal, rather than personal, invention. The number of British and American Protestant missionaries in Guangzhou and Hong Kong increased continuously towards the end of the nineteenth century, and romanized Cantonese versions of the Bible and religious tracts were in short supply. English-speaking missionaries were not familiar with previously-used romanized systems, in which Cantonese vowels were spelt like similar vowels in German or Italian. The use of special symbols to mark tones in Williams' system was also an obstacle to mass printing.

In 1888 the missionaries in Guangzhou held a conference, and a representative committee decided on a union romanization—Standard Romanization (abbreviated thereafter as S.R.), for which they consulted Chalmers' *English and Cantonese Dictionary*, especially its romanization for Cantonese vowels (Bridie, 1904; Cowles, 1914; see Appendix for Chalmers' system in 1870). The *Gospel of Mark* was transliterated in S.R. in 1892 by the committee under the supervision of Graves of Southern Baptist Convention (Nida, 1972). Individual members on this committee have yet to be identified, but judging from the names of the transliterators mentioned in Nida (1972) and Spillett (1975), we believe that Bridie (A.P.S.) and Wisner (A.P.S.) were on this committee.¹⁴

After several minor alterations, the orthography was fixed and made available for public use. Owing to its similarity to English spelling and minimized use of special diacritics, the system became quite popular. Various publications, both religious and pedagogic, came out in this system. For instance, several editions of the Bible and its

portions were transliterated in this system from the 1890s.¹⁵ The first monthly paper in this system was also published in 1902 (Bridie, 1904). Many Cantonese learning aids and dictionaries were compiled in this system. Cowles compiled *Pocket Dictionary of Cantonese* in 1914,¹⁶ Tipson's *Cantonese syllabary-index* was appended to Soothill's *The Student's Four Thousand Characters and General Pocket Dictionary* (2nd edition) in 1924,¹⁷ and Meyer and Wempe of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America compiled a very comprehensive syllabic dictionary called *The Student's Cantonese English dictionary* in 1934.¹⁸ Quite a few Cantonese course books were also produced in this system. Wisner compiled *Beginning Cantonese* (1st edition in 1906, 2nd edition in 1926), Cowles compiled his *Inductive Course in Cantonese* in 1915, and a Catholic priest, O'Melia, used it in his Cantonese textbooks called *First Year Cantonese* in 1939,¹⁹ just to name a few. O'Melia's textbook enjoyed a good reputation until the Yale textbooks took its place in the late 1950s. S.R. was first invented and promoted by Protestant missionaries, but by the 1930s it developed as a common Cantonese romanization tool that was also used by Roman Catholic missionaries, such as Meyer and Wempe, and O'Melia.

The features of S.R. used in Wisner (1894) are as follows:

1. Diacritics on the first vowel letter to differentiate tones, not vowel values;
2. Vowels differentiated by anglicized spelling, i.e., the diphthong [ou] spelt as 'o'; the long vowel [ɔ] as 'oh'; the high front rounded vowel [y] as 'ue', [u] as 'oo', etc;
3. Voiceless consonant letters for both aspirated and unaspirated Cantonese consonants;
4. Aspiration expressed by a reversed apostrophe;
5. Poly-syllabic words expressed by linking syllables with a hyphen.

(See Appendix)

Post-missionary Systems

While S.R. in O'Melia's textbook lasted a very long time, a lot of other publications in S.R. became out of print or out of date by the 1970s. There were also non-missionary systems, such as that of Jones and Woo (1912), which used phonetic symbols similar to the IPA, and that of Wong (1941), which modified the system of Jones and Woo in his Cantonese syllabary. The famous Chinese linguist Chao Yuen Ren invented a system for his *Cantonese Primer* in 1947, in which tones were incorporated in the spelling without using diacritics. A system called Barnett-Chao was created on the basis of Chao's, but was limited to only a few publications. The emergence of textbooks and dictionaries with up-to-date Cantonese vocabulary and usage had to wait until Sidney Lau's series of Cantonese textbooks, glossaries and dictionary. Yale University's Cantonese course books and dictionary came out in the 1970s. The romanizations adopted were called Sidney Lau's and the Yale systems respectively. While there are a lot of discrepancies with early missionary systems,²⁰ they have also inherited their tradition. Sidney Lau's system resembles S.R. in that English spelling is used for vowels, while tones are changed to a numerical system (see Appendix). The Yale system uses acute and grave accents and the letter 'h' to denote tones, which is similar to the use of diacritics for tones in S.R. (see Appendix). Nevertheless there is one essential difference from prior missionary systems: both Sidney Lau's and Yale systems use voiced consonant letters, such as 'b, d, g', to denote Cantonese unaspirated voiceless consonant sounds [p, t, k].

Efforts to romanize Cantonese have also been made by linguists based in Hong Kong. In 1993, the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong announced the Hong Kong Cantonese Romanization Scheme, and since then, their romanization, generally called Jyutping,²¹ has been promoted through various sources to transliterate Cantonese. Jyutping can be characterized by its user-friendliness: it uses no diacritics to denote tones or vowel quality, and one letter (in some cases a set of two letters) is assigned only one sound, i.e., ‘a’ only denotes [ɛ].²² Tones are expressed numerically, using numbers 1 to 6 (see Appendix).

There is one system that has succeeded the missionary tradition: it is the romanization used in the *Chinese Commercial/Telegraphic Code Book* (abbreviated thereafter as C.C.C.), in which every Chinese character is assigned a romanized spelling. Since every place and personal name has to be rendered both in Chinese and English in Hong Kong, this book, compiled by the Organizational Surveys Unit, the Hong Kong Government in 1976, has been consulted by Hong Kong Immigration officers in the course of birth registrations²³ and also in the coining of new place names in English.

The features of this romanization are:

1. No diacritics;
2. No tone marks;
3. The aspiration mark partially used;
4. Voiceless consonant letters for both aspirated and unaspirated Cantonese consonants;
5. Different spellings sometimes employed for the same phonemes.

(See Appendix)

Place and Personal Names in Hong Kong

Wherever romanization is required, place and personal names in mainland China are transliterated in Pinyin, the standard romanization based on Mandarin (Putonghua). Under the Chinese One-Country-Two-Systems policy, Chinese and English are both official languages, and place and personal names in Hong Kong must be produced in English and Chinese. What is different from the situation in China is that in Hong Kong, English personal and place names are not necessarily the transliterated Cantonese sounds.

Romanized names in Hong Kong can be classified into three categories as in the table below:

Table 1

Three categories of romanized names in Hong Kong

		Examples of Place Name	Examples of Personal Name
1	Wholly or partially English	Aberdeen	Jackie Chan
2	Transliterated names in Cantonese	Tsim Sha Tsui	Wong Ka-wai
3	Transliterated names in other Chinese dialects	Woosung Street (Mandarin)	Tung Chee-hwa (Shanghainese)

Since this paper focuses on Cantonese romanization, only those under category 2, transliterated names in Cantonese, will be discussed. Some conventional spellings such as Mong Kok will also be excluded because they do not really reflect the actual Cantonese sounds.²⁴

When Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842, the British Army was first in charge of the place names in the colony. The task was then taken over by the Department of Chinese Affairs. In 1954, the Urban Council and the District Office became responsible for regulating place names. Since 1982, it has been under the jurisdiction of the Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department (Rao, 1998). The registration of personal names is made at the Immigration Department, where Chinese people register their names in Chinese as well as in English. English names for most of the Hong Kong people mean the transliteration of their names pronounced in Cantonese.²⁵

Government Romanization

Evaluation of the Government Romanization

The spelling currently used in place and personal names is generally called the Government System. While no official status is given to it and people in Hong Kong never learn this ‘system’ through schooling, people somehow know how to spell someone’s name in romanization, because there are a lot of opportunities to see other people’s names in materials like class lists and name cards. In an official gazetteer published by the Hong Kong Government in 1960, we have found a clue about what this system is: the romanization used in place names is referred to the Dyer-Ball/Eitel system.²⁶ As we have mentioned earlier, Ball and Eitel both used romanized systems similar to Williams’ in their textbooks and dictionaries.

Ball was born in Guangzhou in 1847 and was the son of the Rev. Dyer Ball. He worked as a Hong Kong civil servant for 35 years, during which time he was appointed Acting Assistant Interpreter in the Supreme Court and Registrar-General and Protector of the Chinese.²⁷ Eitel came to Hong Kong in 1862 as a missionary of the Evangelical Missionary Society of Basel. He later joined the London Missionary Society. He worked for the Hong Kong Government from 1875 to 1897, during the time when he was appointed Inspector of Schools, and private secretary to the Governor. Both Ball and Eitel were Hong Kong civil servants whose Chinese talents were highly regarded by the Government. It is thus not surprising the Government romanization reflected their systems.

Sure enough, a lot of names can be explained as having been spelt in the systems of Eitel and Ball. Some names, however, have been transliterated in Cantonese, but the spelling matches neither Eitel’s nor Ball’s. For instance, a place called ‘Tsuen Wan’ has ‘ue’ in its spelling. If it were Eitel’s or Ball’s, it ought to be spelt as ‘ü’. Another example is ‘ut’ in ‘**Mut** Wah Street’, which would be spelt as ‘**Mat** Wah Street’ in Eitel’s and Ball’s systems.

Some questions arise: why is the Government romanization different from Eitel’s or Ball’s? What system is it? We suspect that it is based on the Standard Romanization or its successor, Chinese Commercial/Telegraphic Code Book. The spelling ‘ue’ is

generally substituted for German ‘ü’ in English texts. Similarly, anglicized vowel spelling was preferred to Eitel’s or Ball’s continental vowel spelling during the colonial rule,²⁸ which over time led the Government to revise the spelling of place names originally rendered in Eitel’s or Ball’s system. Such revision could be seen when we compare the 1888 map of Hong Kong with the current one.²⁹ An interesting point is that the revision was not always made towards anglicization, which resulted in a lack of consistency in the system, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 2

An example of inconsistency in government romanization

IPA	Place name	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	C.C.C. 1976
y	Yung Sh <u>ü</u> Wan (1888)	✓	✓		
	Yung Sh <u>ue</u> Wan (current)			✓	✓
u	Sai Ying P <u>oo</u> n (1888)			✓	✓
	Sai Ying P <u>u</u> n (current)	✓	✓		

Phonological Changes Observed from Romanization

In spite of the inconsistency in the Government romanization, it does have its positive sides. For example, the comparison of maps tells us that some Cantonese words have undergone phonological change during the last 120 years. One example shows that the vowel [i] has diphthongized to [ei]. This is reflected in the spellings of place names in old maps.³⁰

Table 3

Diphthongization of [i] to [ei] in place names

IPA	Place name	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	C.C.C. 1976
ei	Yau Ma T <u>i</u> (1888)	✓			✓
	Yau Ma T <u>ei</u> (current)		✓	✓	✓
	Ap L <u>i</u> Chau (1888)	✓			✓
	Ap L <u>ei</u> Chau (current)		✓	✓	✓

Sometimes we do not need old maps to trace the phonological changes. As shown in Table 4, some place names have ‘om’ and ‘op’ in their spelling, which suggests they are to be pronounced [5m] and [5p], although they are presently pronounced with unrounded vowels [ɐm] and [ɐp] respectively.

Table 4
Pronunciation of ‘om’ and ‘op’ in place names

IPA	Place name	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	C.C.C. 1971
ɔm	Hung <u>Hom</u>	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<u>Kom</u> U St.	✓	✓	✓	✓
ɔp	Wo <u>Hop</u> Shek	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Luk <u>Hop</u> St.	✓	✓	✓	✓

The examples in Table 5 show a phonological change in consonants: currently used place and personal names use two sets of affricates and fricatives denoted by ‘ts/ts’/s’ and ‘ch/ch’/sh’, which indicates that Cantonese used to have the distinction between dental [ts/ts^h/s] and alveolar [tʃ/tʃ^h/ʃ]. These two sets, however, have merged into one set [ts/ts^h/s] in modern Cantonese.

Table 5
Pronunciation of affricates/fricatives in place names

IPA	Place name	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	C.C.C. 1971
ts	<u>Tsim</u> Sha Tsui	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Wong <u>Chuk</u> Hang	✓	✓	✓	✓
ts ^h	<u>Tsing</u> Yi	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<u>Chai</u> Wan	✓	✓	✓	✓
s	<u>Sha</u> Tin	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<u>Sai</u> Kung	✓	✓	✓	✓

Another point to be mentioned is the peculiar vowel used immediately after this affricate and fricative set [ts/ts^h/s], a vowel usually referred to as ‘apical vowel’ in Chinese linguistics.³¹ They have merged with a high front vowel [i] and are pronounced as [i] in present pronunciation. This vowel was denoted by ‘z’ or ‘ze’ in S.R. and C.C.C., and these spellings are still found in place and personal names.

Table 6
Pronunciation of the ‘apical vowel’ [i]

IPA	Place name	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	C.C.C. 1971
i	<u>Sz</u> <u>Tsz</u> Shan	✓	✓	✓	✓

The process of these phonological changes must have been completed by the middle of the 20th century, for the post-missionary systems such as Sidney Lau’s or the Yale system only reflect modern Cantonese phonology. So it is only in the spellings of place and personal names that we can trace the features of old Cantonese sounds.

Confusion in the Government Romanization

Foreigners in Hong Kong very often find it difficult to understand the reading of romanized place or personal names in Cantonese. This is partly because these romanized names may reflect the old sounds. However, we need to be aware that it

may also be due to the omission of diacritics and tone markers in place and personal names. For example, long ‘a’ [a] and short ‘a’ [ɐ] are two phonemic vowels in Cantonese, and were differentiated by using ‘á’ and ‘a’ in Williams’ system. However, without the acute accent, both sounds are spelt alike, and one cannot tell which is long or short. For example, one can never tell which ‘a’ is long (or short) in the following place names: ‘Wán Chai’ (long + short) and ‘Chai Wán’ (long + long).

In Ball’s and Eitel’s systems, the letter ‘ò’ denotes the diphthong [ou], while ‘o’ is used for the monophthong [ɔ]. If the acute accent is omitted, it is impossible to tell if ‘o’ used in place and personal names denotes [ou] or [ɔ]: e.g., ‘Tai Wò’ [ɔ] and ‘Tai Po’ [ou].

Confusion is also associated with the distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants in Cantonese, as they are identically spelt in the Government romanization: ‘Tai Wo’ [t^h] and ‘Tai Po’ [t].

Our final example of confusion is the result of the combination of phonological change and omission of diacritics. The diphthong [øy] in modern Cantonese may have been pronounced higher and more back, similar to [ɔi] in the nineteenth century.³² Eitel succeeded Williams’ system and used ‘ui’. However [ɔi] changed to [øy] towards the end of the nineteenth century because Ball employed the spelling ‘öü’ in the 3rd edition published in 1907. The same sound was spelt as ‘ui’ in S.R., identical to Eitel’s spelling. The confusion is that another diphthong [ui], which is spelt as ‘úi’ by Eitel and Ball, is also spelt ‘ui’ without an acute accent in the Government romanization, so it is impossible to tell whether the sound represented by ‘ui’ denotes [ui] or [øy] in current Cantonese: e.g., ‘Tsim Sha Tsui’ [øy] and ‘Hung Mui Avenue’ [ui].

Irregular Romanizations in Place and Personal Names

Lastly, let us briefly touch on some cases where Cantonese-based romanized names show discrepancies with the Government Romanization. Some are believed to be due to the currently on-going sound change in Cantonese, but this is beyond the scope of our paper and will not be discussed here. What we would still like to mention is the two irregular, yet very major, romanized names: Hong Kong (lit. *fragrant harbour*) and Kowloon (lit. *nine dragons*). Their real pronunciations in Cantonese are [hœŋ kɔŋ] and [kœu lɔŋ] respectively, which would be spelt ‘Heung Kong’ and ‘Kau Lung’ in the Government Romanization. One might ask: how come they were so spelt in the first place? An explanation for the spelling ‘Hong’ is that it was based on the pronunciation of the local boat people, or Tanka, who commonly lived in bays of Hong Kong in the early nineteenth century.³³ In the case of ‘Kowloon’, ‘kow’ is an anglicized spelling for [kœu]. As for [lɔŋ], a sound not existent in English, the continental spelling ‘lung’ was not opted for because it sounded and meant something else in English. Instead, a substitute ‘loon’ was used. In fact, in the 1780 map of Hong Kong, ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘Kowloon’ were spelt as ‘HE-ONG-KONG’ and ‘CO-LONG’ respectively, which suggested that the sounds [hœŋ] and [lɔŋ] were not totally unfamiliar to English ears. Interestingly, the same maps produced during the colonial period often showed both ‘Heong Kong’ and ‘Hong Kong’ as well as ‘Kau Lung’ and ‘Kowloon’. The spellings ‘Heong Kong’ and ‘Kau Lung’ were opted for when followed by Cantonese morphemes such as ‘tsai’ (lit. *little*) or ‘tong’ (lit. *pond*),

whereas ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘Kowloon’ were combined with English terms such as *Island*, *City*, *Peninsula*, or *Town*.³⁴ It seems that the difference in use indicated the special statuses of ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘Kowloon’ during the colonial days.

Closing Remarks

As we have seen, the Government romanization is a hybrid of several missionary systems from different times. Chaotic though it may look, each romanization was a self-contained system to transliterate the Cantonese language at the time of its invention. When several systems were mixed together, however, it is natural that the ‘romanization’ would no longer work as a system. Besides this, the Cantonese language itself has undergone some phonological changes, and these have made the Government romanization look even more unsystematic.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the Hong Kong Government has always taken the *laissez-faire* policy towards the romanization used in the territory. While causing a bit of confusion, the Government ‘system’ does provide us with a lot of clues about the history of the Cantonese language as well as the history of Hong Kong.

Notes

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- 2 See E. Morrison (1839).
- 3 R. Morrison (1819) mentioned that he used the manuscript that was owned by the Royal Society, once the property of Sir William Jones.
- 4 For instance, Ricci used ‘m’ to denote syllabic-final consonant [ŋ], as in ‘eam’ [eaŋ] (Luo, 1930).
- 5 Cantonese descendants in Singapore may use romanized Cantonese for situations like birth registration, but they will not be taken into account in this paper.
- 6 Morrison’s system is discussed in detail in Bauer (2005).
- 7 Morrison was born in Newcastle, England and his father was Scottish. Some spellings may have resulted from Morrison’s own linguistic background, as he used ‘ay’ to denote [ɛ].
- 8 Manuscript dictionaries compiled by Catholic priests such as Ricci and Varo also used ‘g’ for velar nasal syllabic-initial sounds in Mandarin (Coblin, 1997). Since Morrison consulted manuscript dictionaries during his compilation of his Chinese-English dictionary (Morrison, 1828, preface), it could safely be said that he adopted this tradition in his 1828 dictionary.
- 9 In 1868, Devan employed Williams’ system with modification in the third edition of his textbook. Chalmer’s 1907 edition of English and Cantonese Dictionary also employed a tone marking system similar to Williams’.
- 10 The description about William Jones appears in Williams (1842), Bridgman (1841), and Williams (1856). The part in Bridgman is identical to others, which seems to suggest that it was also written by Williams. It is mentioned that the romanization was altered to adapt to the Chinese language. Interestingly, Robert Morrison also mentioned William Jones in his Chinese dictionary in 1822.
- 11 *Chinese Chrestomathy* was a collaborative work with others, one of whom was S.W. Williams, so it is likely that Bridgman agreed on the adoption of Williams’ romanization.

- 12 Eitel's and Ball's brief biographical data are given under the section 'Government Romanization'.
- 13 This was possibly because B.M.S. mainly worked among Hakka speakers, and the system was not common amongst missionaries who worked in Canton.
- 14 According to Huang (1995), Wisner was Principal of Canton Christian College (later renamed Lingnan University) from 1899 to 1907.
- 15 Mark (1892, 1896), Mark and Luke (1896), Gospels and Acts (1898–1899), Genesis – 2 Chronicles (1900–1903), Bible (1905–07), published by British and Foreign Bible Society (Shanghai) and Church Mission Society (C.M.S.) Press (Pakhoi) (Nida 1972).
- 16 Cowles also compiled *The Cantonese speaker's dictionary* in the same romanization system (1965).
- 17 In Wong's *A Chinese Syllabary Pronounced according to the Dialect of Canton* (1941), this system is misleadingly introduced as Tipson's system.
- 18 It should also be noted that since this dictionary was so well-known, this system is sometimes referred to as 'Meyer and Wempe System' (e.g., Bauer and Benedict, 1997).
- 19 He slightly modified the romanized system in his revised edition in 1966 and replaced 'aa' with 'ah'.
- 20 The way to denote aspiration is one of the biggest differences (see Appendix.).
- 21 That Jyutping was a collaborative invention bears a close parallel to S.R., which was created by a committee of missionaries.
- 22 'a' denotes two sounds in the Yale system: [a] when used on its own, and [ɐ] when used as part of a diphthong or followed by syllabic-final consonants.
- 23 This was confirmed by our telephone interview.
- 24 Mong Kok is pronounced as [w⁵ŋ k⁵k] in Cantonese. According to Rao (1998), this place was renamed several times. It was originally called [m⁵ŋ k⁵k], with the first syllable [m⁵ŋ] being the Cantonese morpheme of 'mango' and the second 'point', which suggested that the place was named after mango trees. Later the first syllable was changed to the same sound but with a low tone, meaning 'overlooking'. Finally the sound [m⁵ŋ] was replaced for an auspicious reason by [w⁵ŋ], the morpheme meaning 'prosperous', although its English counterpart remained to be 'Mong'.
- 25 Since there is no official romanization, registrants can choose non-Cantonese spelling if they wish. So transliterated names can be in Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Shanghainese, or even Mandarin, all of which are spoken by inhabitants in Hong Kong.
- 26 This gazetteer mentions that many incorrectly spelt place names found in Hong Kong maps have been corrected using the unified system. According to Rao (1998), early place names in the colony were transliterated based on the pronunciations of local habitants, who may have spoken Cantonese, Hakka, or the tongue of boat people.
- 27 See Lethbridge (1982).
- 28 English vowel spelling is the preferred option in contemporary Hong Kong.
- 29 See Empson (1992) for old maps of Hong Kong.
- 30 This sound change is also observable from the presentation of Chinese characters used in place names: Salisbury Road and Mody Road include the sounds [ri] and [di] respectively. The Chinese counterparts were coined based on the original English names and use the characters with the pronunciations [lei] and [tei] respectively. The change is reflected as well in the spelling of a very common surname Li or Lee, which is pronounced [lei] in modern Cantonese.
- 31 Chalmers describes it as 'a mere buzz' (Chalmers, 1907, p. iii).
- 32 The actual vowel value has yet to be confirmed, but the letter 'u' as in 'ung' denoted the sound [ʊŋ] in Williams' or Eitel's system.
- 33 According to Zhan and Cheung (1987), boat people in Doumen, Guangdong also pronounce the standard Cantonese rime [œŋ] as [ɔŋ]. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for providing us with the information.
- 34 See Empson (1992) for various maps of Hong Kong. The 1780 map was produced in English.

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Appendix: Cross-referential lists of Romanized Systems

1. Initials

Morrison 1828	Bridgman 1841	Chalmers 1855	Williams 1856	Louis 1867	Chalmers 1870	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	Yale 1973	C.C.C. 1976	Lau 1977	Jyutping 1993	Present Cantonese (IPA) ³⁷
p	p	p	p	<i>p</i>	p	p	p	p	b	p	b	b	p
p	p ^ˊ	p ^ˊ	p ^ˊ	<i>ph</i>	p ^ˊ	p ^ˊ	p ^ˊ	p ^ˊ	p	p ^ˊ , p	p	p	p ^h
m	m	m	m	<i>m</i>	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
f	f	f	f	<i>f</i>	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
t	t	t	t	<i>t</i>	t	t	t	t	d	t	d	d	t
t	t ^ˊ	t ^ˊ	t ^ˊ	<i>th</i>	t ^ˊ	t ^ˊ	t ^ˊ	t ^ˊ	t	t ^ˊ , t	t	t	t ^h
n	n	n	n	<i>n</i>	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
l	l	l	l	<i>l</i>	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l
ts	ts	ts	ts	<i>ts</i>	ts	ts	ts	ts	j	ts, ch	j	z	ts
ch	ch	ch	ch	<i>tš</i>	ch	ch	ch	ch		ch			
ts	ts ^ˊ	ts ^ˊ	ts ^ˊ	<i>tsh</i>	ts ^ˊ	ts ^ˊ	ts ^ˊ	ts ^ˊ	ch	ts ^ˊ , ch, ts	ch	c	ts ^h
ch	ch ^ˊ	ch ^ˊ	ch ^ˊ	<i>tšh</i>	ch ^ˊ	ch ^ˊ	ch ^ˊ	ch ^ˊ		ch ^ˊ , ch			
s	s	s	s	<i>s</i>	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s
sh	sh	sh	sh	<i>š</i>	sh	sh	sh	sh	s	sh			
y	y	y	y	<i>y</i>	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	j	j
k	k	k	k	<i>k</i>	k	k	k	k	g	k	g	g	k
k	k ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	<i>kh</i>	k ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	k	k ^ˊ , k	k	k	k ^h
g	ng	ng	ng	<i>ŋ</i>	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ŋ
h	h	h	h	<i>h</i>	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h
kw	kw	k	kw	<i>kw</i>	kw	kw	kw	kw	gw	kw	gw	gw	k ^w
kw	kw ^ˊ	k ^ˊ	kw ^ˊ	<i>khw</i>	kw ^ˊ	k ^ˊ w	kw ^ˊ	kw ^ˊ	kw	kw ^ˊ , kw	kw	kw	k ^{hw}
w	w	w	w	<i>w</i>	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w

(The spelling(s) and tone mark(s) in each column are so listed that they correspond to the equivalent sounds and tones in modern Cantonese.)

2. Finals

Morrison 1828	Bridgman 1841	Chalmers 1855	Williams 1856	Louis 1867	Chalmers 1870	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	Yale 1973	C.C.C. 1976	Lau 1977	Jyutping 1993	Present Cantonese (IPA)
a	á	a	á	<i>ā</i>	a	á	á	a	a	a, ah, o	a	aa	a
ai	ái	ae	ái	<i>ai</i>	aai	ái	ái	aai	aai	aai, ai	aai	aai	ai
aou	áu	aou	áu	<i>āu</i>	aau	áu	áu	aau	aau	aau, au	aau	aau	au
am	ám	am	ám	<i>ām</i>	aam	ám	ám	aam	aam	aam, am	aam	aam	am
an	án	an	án	<i>ān</i>	aan	án	án	aan	aan	aan, an	aan	aan	an
ang	áng	ang	áng	<i>āń</i>	aang	áng	áng	aang	aang	aang, ang	aang	aang	aŋ
ap	áp	ap	áp	<i>āp</i>	aap	áp	áp	aap	aap	aap, ap	aap	aap	ap
at	át	at	át	<i>āt</i>	aat	át	át	aat	aat	aat, at	aat	aat	at
ak	ák	ak	ák	<i>āk</i>	aak	ák	ák	aak	aak	aak, ak	aak	aak	ak
ei	ai	y	ai	<i>ei</i>	ai	ai	ai	ai	ai	ai, ei	ai	ai	ɛi
ǎw	au	ow	au	<i>au</i>	au	au	au	au	au	au	au	au	ɛu
um, ǎm	am	um	am	<i>am</i>	am, um	am	am	am	am	am, um	am	am	ɛm
	óm	om	òm		om	òm	òm	om		om			
un, ǎn	an	a`n	an	<i>an</i>	an, un	an	an	an	an	an, un, en	an	an	ɛn
ǎng	ang	a`ng	ang	<i>ań</i>	ang	ang	ang	ang	ang	ang	ang	ang	aŋ

(Present Cantonese vowels and consonants in IPA are based on Chinese (Hong Kong Cantonese) by Eric Zee in *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association* (1999).)

3. Tones

Morrison 1828	Bridgman 1841	Chalmers 1855	Williams 1856	Louis 1867	Chalmers 1870	Eitel 1877	Ball 1883	S.R. 1894	Yale 1973	Lau 1977	C.C.C. 1976	Jyutping 1993	Tone category & Present Cantonese pitch contour
NIL	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	NIL	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	a_1	a	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	a	$\grave{\text{a}}/\bar{\text{a}}$	$a^1/a^{1\circ}$	NIL	a1	upper even 53/55
NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	a'	a'	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\acute{\text{a}}$	$\acute{\text{a}}$	a^2	NIL	a2	upper rising 35
NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	a^\supset	a^\supset	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	$\grave{\text{a}}$	a	a^3	NIL	a3	upper going 33
NIL	at_\supset	NIL	at_\supset	at_1	at	at_\supset	at_\supset	at	$\bar{\text{a}}\text{t}$	$\text{at}^{1\circ}$	NIL	at1	upper entering 5
NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	at_2	at^\supset	at_\circ	at_\circ	$\grave{\text{a}}\text{t}$ $\acute{\text{a}}\text{t}$	at	at^3	NIL	at3	middle entering 3
NIL	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	NIL	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	a	a	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\underset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\bar{\text{a}}$	$\grave{\text{a}}\text{h}$	a^4	NIL	a4	lower even 21
NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	a'	a'	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}$	$\check{\text{a}}$	$\acute{\text{a}}\text{h}$	a^5	NIL	a5	lower rising 23
NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	NIL	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	a^\supset	a^\supset	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	$\overset{\cdot}{\text{a}}^\supset$	$\hat{\text{a}}$	ah	a^6	NIL	a6	lower going 22
NIL	at_\supset	NIL	at_\supset	at	at^\supset	at_\supset	at_\supset	$\bar{\text{a}}\text{t}$	aht	at^6	NIL	at6	lower entering 2

(Entering tones are represented by using 'at' where 't' could be either 'p', 't' or 'k'.)