

Romanization in North American Libraries: History, Challenges, and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

Romanization is a widespread practice in North American libraries for integrating non-Latin materials into cataloging systems. However, technological advancements have fundamentally transformed the information landscape, raising critical questions about the continued relevance and effectiveness of romanization.

This study:

- Adopts a user-centered perspective;
- Examines the historical development and current challenges of Chinese romanization; and
- Investigates opportunities for improving the discovery of non-Latin materials.

It critically reflects on:

- What's the core mission of library catalogs?
- Whether and how romanization still fulfills this core mission?

Late 19th Century

- Libraries in Europe and the United States began standardizing cataloging practices.
- Antonio Panizzi's 1841 *Rules for the Compilation of the Catalogue* laid the foundation for modern cataloging.
- Romanization practically became an essential method for filing purposes in alphabetical catalogs.

Early 20th Century

- Early experimental efforts of cataloging Chinese materials (Figure 1&2).
- Standardizing the cataloging of Chinese materials.
- Manual of Romanization, Capitalization, Punctuation and Word Division for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean* was published in 1959.
- The *Manual* mandated the use of the Wade-Giles system of romanization.

Late 20th Century

- The Library of Congress considered adopting the Pinyin system as early as 1977.
- The Library of Congress announced its decision to convert to Pinyin in 1997.
- Between 2000 and 2001, North American libraries converted tens of millions of records from Wade-Giles to Pinyin.

Volume No.	Title (English)	Title (Chinese)	Author	Edition
A 40-43	"Kuan Tzu"	管子	Kuan Chung (7-244 B.C.)	
A 44	1. "Kwei Tzu Tzu"	鬼谷子	Kwei Tzu Tzu	
	2. "Ha Kuan Tzu"	韩非子	Ha Kuan Tzu	
A 45	"Lieh Tzu"	列子	Lieh Tzu	
A 46-49	"Hui Nan Tzu"	淮南子	Prince Liu An (169-122 B.C.)	
A 50-52	"Han Tzu Tzu"	韩非子	Han Tzu (280-233 B.C.)	
A 53-54	"Sun Tzu"	孙子	Sun Tzu (6th century B.C.)	
A 55	"Wan Chung Tzu"	文中子	Wan Chung (574-617 A.D.)	
A 56	1. "Kuan Yin Tzu"	關尹子	Kuan Yin Tzu	
	2. "Fa Yen" or "Serious Talk"	法言	Yang Huang (2-53-15 A.D.)	
A 57-58	"Chun Chiu Yan Tzu"	春秋繁露	Tung Chung Shu	
A 59-60	"Collected Sayings of Confucius"	孔子集語		
A 61	1. "Shih Tzu"	尸子	Shih Tzu	
	2. "Han Tzu"	商子	Han Yan (B.C. 1-135)	
A 62	"Cha Tzu"	賈子新書	Cha Yi (B.C. 201-168)	
A 63-66	"Lo Shih Chun Chiu"	呂氏春秋	Lo Pu Wei (300?-255 B.C.)	
A 67	"An Tzu"	晏子春秋	An Yin (715-645 B.C.)	
A 68	1. "Wu Tzu"	吳子	Wu Tzu	
	2. "The Six Military Doctrines"	六韜		
	3. "Wei Liao Tzu"	尉繚子	Wei Liao	

Figure 1. Hu Shih, *List of Books Presented to Cornell University Library by Chinese Students*, Dec. 28, 1911

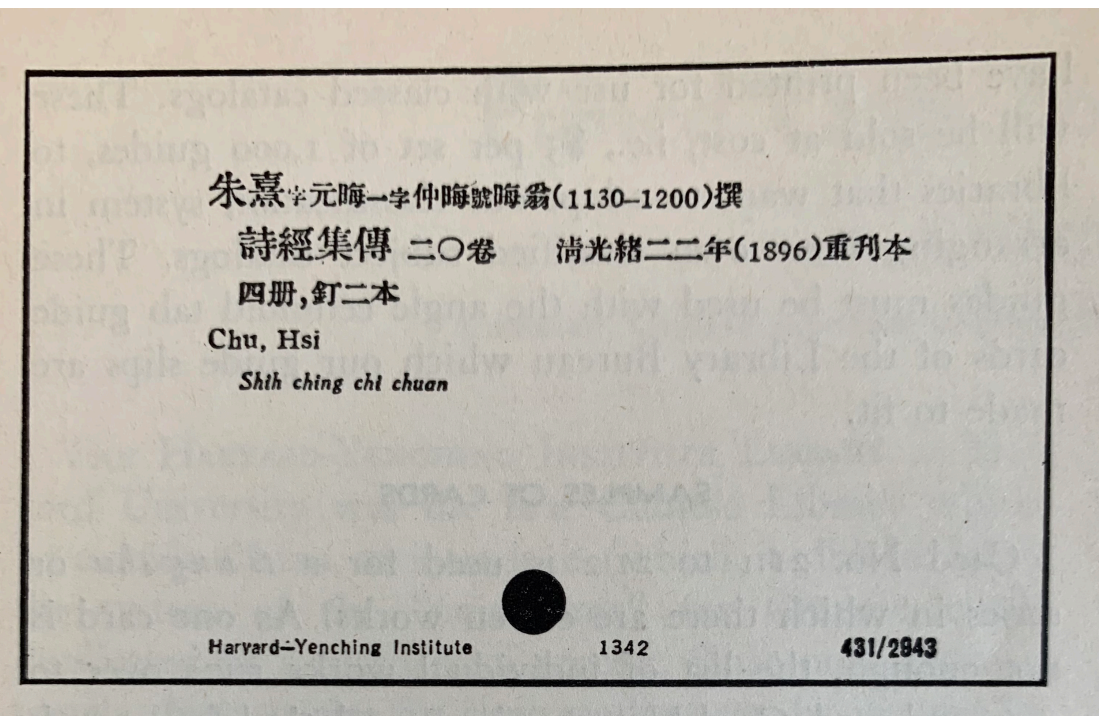


Figure 2. Card catalog of Chinese materials from Harvard-Yenching Library in the early 20th century



HISTORY



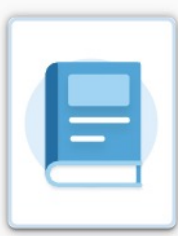
Linguistic Challenges

- Character-based system:** Each character = logograph + sound + meaning
- Homophones:** Many characters share the same sound
- No word spacing:** No visual word boundaries in Chinese text
- Romanization is sound-only:** Removes visual and semantic cues
- When romanized, **visual cues are lost**, making it hard to identify meaning.



Operational and Technical Challenges

- Romanization schemes are often **modified** to meet cataloging standards and technical constraints.
- These adjustments can potentially cause **distortion or obscure information**.
- The complex romanization systems require training and deliberate study of rules and conventions, increasing the **risk of inconsistencies and human errors**.



Jiang zong cai zhi you ren shu
Authors: Kai-shek Chiang, Mingda Wang (Editor)
Print Book, Chinese, [1943]
Edition: View all formats and editions
Publisher: Zhong wen shu dian, Changsha, [1943]
Show more information

Figure 3. Screenshot of a catalog record illustrating the difficulty of identifying the title without original script



Shanxi dong Han hua xiang shi ke xuan ji
Author: Shanxi Sheng bo wu guan
Print Book, Chinese, 129 p
Show more information



陕西来信：致中共中央 / Shanxi lai xin : zhi Zhong gong zhong yang bian
Authors: 中國共產黨 陝西省委 廣東日報 中國共產黨 / [Zhongguo gong chan dang] Shanxi Sheng wei [yuan hui]
Print Book, Chinese, 1931
Publisher: [publisher not identified], [China], 1931
Show more information

Figure 4. Screenshot of catalog records reflecting inconsistencies in the application of romanization guidelines



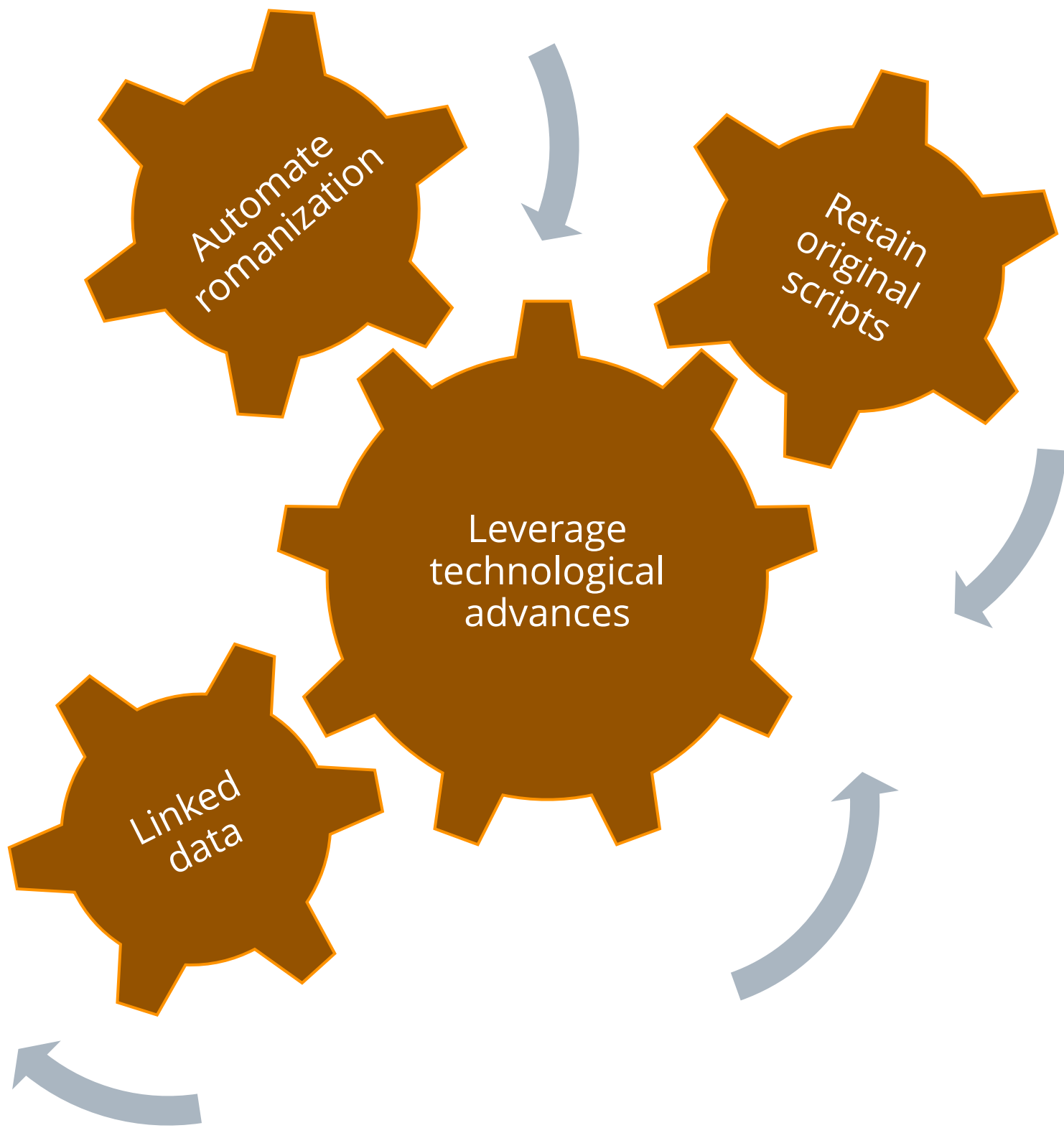
张洵工作室：艺术与劳动 / Zhang Yuan gong zuo shi : yi shu yu lao dong
Authors: 张洵, 1945 / Wu Hong zhu, Wu Hong
Print Book, Chinese, 2009
Edition: Di 1 ban View all formats and editions
Publisher: 广西师范大学出版社, Guilin Shi, 2009 / Guangxi shi fan da xue chu ban she, Guilin Shi, 2009
Show more information

Figure 5. Screenshot of a catalog record showing incorrect romanization of an artist's name in the title



CHALLENGES

What are the new possibilities for improving the discovery of non-Latin materials in library catalogs?



OPPORTUNITIES