

Pronouncing Chinese Names

This guide is for Chinese names written in the Pinyin Romanization system used in the People’s Republic of China.

If written in Chinese style, the family name comes first, followed by the given name or names, e.g. 毛泽东 written in Chinese characters, or Mao Zedong using pinyin romanization. Traditionally there are two given names—when written in pinyin these are usually written as one name without space or hyphen.¹ It is also very common to find people with only one given name. This guide is written for English speakers and is designed to provide a close approximation to standard Mandarin pronunciation. China is a very large country with many regional dialects and accents. This guide is not perfect, but should get you very close to the standard pronunciation.²

The names marked with an asterisk are the 25 most common family names in China.

Initial/Final Sound	Pinyin	English sound	Examples & Hints	Family Names
initial	b	b	be	Bai
initial	c	ts	bats	Cai
initial	ch	ch	china	Chen*
initial	d	d	do	Dai
initial	f	f	fun	Fang
initial	g	g	go	Guo* and Gao*
initial	h	h	he	Hu*
initial	j	j	jay	Jiang
initial	k	k	key	Kong
initial	l	l	like	Li*
initial	m	m	me	Mai
initial	n	n	no	Nai
initial	p	p	people	Pan
initial	q	ch	china	Qian
initial	r	r	run	Ran
initial	s	s	so	Sun*
initial	sh	sh	she	Shi
initial	t	t	to	Tang*
initial	x	sh	she	Xu*
initial	w	w	we	Wang*
initial	y ³	y	you	Yang*
initial	z	ds	ads	Zou
initial	zh	j	jay	Zhou*

¹ Traditionally the middle character was used as a generational name shared by siblings and cousins. It is not considered a middle name as we think of them.

² Chinese characters have different meanings depending on the tone. In Mandarin Chinese there are 4 pitched tones and a “toneless” tone. To simplify this tutorial, tones are not discussed. If you are interested you can ask the student the proper tones to pronounce his name.

³ If a “y” is followed by any final sound beginning with “i”, the y is silent.

Initial/Final Sound	Pinyin	English sound	Examples & Hints	Family Names
final	a	ah	rhymes with lah dee dah	Ma*
final	ai	eye	eye	Nai
final	an	ahn	aun in aunt (not ant)	Nan
final	ang	ahng	French: <i>anglais</i>	Zhang*
final	ao	aoww	cow	Zhao*
final	e	uh	uugh	He*
final	ei	ay	day	Lei
final	en	un	runner	Ren
final	eng	ung	ung in bungle	Zheng*
final	i	ee/ir/uh ⁴	bee in most cases girl after r, zh, ch or sh estimate after z, c or s	Qi
final	ia	yah	yahoo	Jia
final	ian	yen	yen	Qian
final	iang	yahng	ang in French: <i>anglais</i>	Liang*
final	iao	yoww	yowwch!	Xiao
final	ie	yeh	e in ebony	Xie*
final	in	in	in	Lin*
final	ing	ing	king	Jing
final	iong	yoong	ung in German: <i>achtung!</i>	Xiong
final	iu	yew	you	Liu*
final	o	o	wore NOT woe	Bo
final	ong	oong	ung in German: <i>achtung!</i>	Song*
final	ou	oh	oh	Zhou
final	u	oo	boo!	Wu* and Zhu*
final	uai	why	why	Huai
final	uang	wahng	ang in French: <i>anglais</i>	Huang*
final	uan	when/wahn	sounds like <i>when</i> after y, j, q and x; otherwise like <i>wand</i>	Guan
final	ue	weh	whe in where	Xue
final	ui	way	way	Rui
final	un	wuen	un in Spanish: <i>junta</i>	Yun
final	uo	wo	wore NOT woe	Luo* and Zhuo*

Directions

1. Determine which is the family name and if there is one given name or two.
2. For each name identify the initial sound and final sound. Each name is only one syllable.
3. Locate the sounds on the appropriate table above to determine the correct pronunciation.
4. Say it out loud and see if the student recognizes his or her name.
5. Get feedback and make any needed adjustments.

⁴ The sound of an “i” following a z, c, or s is not so much like the “uh” sound of the “e.” I couldn’t think of an equivalent sound in English other than the perhaps the i in intimate. Not being a linguist, I’m not certain that this is even that different...