

# Pros and cons of Russian transcription of Chinese characters, the experience of Uzbek sinologists

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the analysis of the use of Russian transcription in Chinese. The positive and negative aspects of the Palladium system were considered, as well as its history of occurrence, distribution, application and sound. The reason for the “non-relevance” of the Palladium system as a whole is studied and a comparison is made of why Russian transcription is not preferred in Uzbekistan. It is concluded that the Palladium system occupies an important place in the connection of two cultures and is unique.

**Keywords:** Palladium system (palladic), transcription, Russian Cyrillic, pinyin, putonghua, Uzbek Latin.

**Introduction:** Many students of the Faculty of Chinese Philology encounter the term "Palladius System" while learning the language. At first, it may seem like a complex "theorem," but in this article, we will try to understand its importance in studying Chinese—one of the most difficult languages in the world—as well as examine its advantages and disadvantages.

The "Palladius System" or "Palladitsa" is a widely accepted system. "Palladitsa" is an informal name for the traditional practical transcription, which allows any Chinese word to be written in Russian. It is used in the translation of official and legal documents, business letters, certificates, visas, and literary works, and is also found in Chinese-Russian dictionaries. The "Palladitsa" system is often used when writing Chinese proper names, such as 惠州 (Huizhou) or 习近平 (Xi Jinping).

The first system of Chinese-Russian transcription was developed by the well-known sinologist Archimandrite Iakinf (Bichurin) in the first Chinese grammar published in 1839. Archimandrite Iakinf was an orientalist, traveler, and the first Russian sinologist, considered the founder of Russian Sinology.

Later, the Chinese-Russian transcription system was slightly modified by Archimandrite Palladius (Pyotr Kafarov), who was a clergyman of the Russian Orthodox

Church in Beijing. It was Palladius who began creating a Chinese-Russian dictionary, popularizing the Cyrillic transcription system for the Chinese language. With some modifications, this transcription system is still in use today. The Palladius system remains the universally accepted and practically the only system used by Chinese-Russian translators.

In 2017, thanks to the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a book titled *Dictionaries of the Kyakhta Pidgin* was published, documenting and detailing historical records, reports, scientific descriptions, and dictionaries containing Chinese words written in Cyrillic. One example of a border trade dialogue is:

Hao bu hao you? Bu hao mei you! (Good, bad—do you have? – No bad ones!)

Its Chinese prototype is:

好不好有? - 不好没有! (Hǎo bù hǎo yǒu? Bù hǎo méi yǒu!)

It should be noted that simple words underwent significant changes due to phonetic differences between Russian and Chinese. Research has shown that it was the Chinese who more frequently used this form of communication when speaking with Russian traders, sailors, etc.

One of the records of a Russian traveler in China during the 18th–19th centuries describes the peculiar pronunciation of Chinese speakers who spoke Russian. He noted that many words were spoken softly and incompletely, initially making comprehension difficult. For example, instead of saying "twenty-five coins," they would say "tua-ze-ti piati moniza," and so on. Other records provide examples of animal names adapted into a Chinese-style pronunciation:

- zélibetsy – stallion
- goni – horse
- gébulé – mare
- waké – wolf

This demonstrates how significantly the original sound of words was altered and how actively the specifics of a native language influence the pronunciation of foreign words.

At present, many electronic Chinese-Russian dictionaries rely on the Palladius table, instantly converting Chinese characters into Cyrillic.

Of course, Chinese words written in Russian letters using the Palladius system cannot fully convey the exact pronunciation of the word. Since the Russian language lacks most Chinese sounds, it is impossible to represent them accurately with Russian letters. It can be assumed that in the 19th century, these were the closest sounds corresponding to the local dialect. Modern Palladius transcription has not reached us in its original form due to orthographic changes.

Like Pinyin, the Palladius system can only represent the syllables of Putonghua. It cannot be used to transcribe Shanghaiese, Cantonese, or Southern Min dialects. Separate practical transcription systems must be used for these dialects!

However, not all Chinese words, even when transcribed using Pinyin, are written in Russian according to the Palladius system. The names "Pekin" (Beijing) and "Nankin" (Nanjing) entered the Russian language long ago and are traditionally recorded in this form rather than as "Beijing" (Běijīng) and "Nanjing" (Nánjīng). The Chinese province 陕西 (Shǎnxī) is written in Russian as "Shensi" to distinguish it from 山西 (Shānxī), which is transcribed as "Shansi." The word for ginseng (人參 rénshēn) has been established in dictionaries with the spelling "женьшень" (zhenshen) using "e."

As we have seen, the Palladius system cannot convey most Chinese sounds, and many letters undergo significant changes during transcription. However, the system still has its advantages.

The Palladius system uses only letters of the Russian alphabet. Occasionally, an apostrophe is used to

separate syllables to avoid misreading words as single units. For example:

- 簋 suǎn – a ritual bamboo vessel, transcribed as "суань"
- 苏安新村 (sū'ān xīncūn) – "Су'аньсиньцунь" (a district in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province)

The system is convenient for those who do not know Chinese at all. Chinese names written in Russian letters may seem unusual but are still readable. The Palladius system also allows for the reconstruction of Pinyin spelling.

One common issue arises when translating documents containing geographic names and city names written with different Chinese characters but sounding similar at first glance. For example:

- Zhengzhou (郑州 Zhèngzhōu) – the administrative center of Henan Province
- Zhenzhou (真州 Zhēnzhōu) – a town in Yizheng, Jiangsu Province

If a person does not know the transcription system when purchasing a ticket or shipping goods, they might end up in a completely different place.

At the beginning of the 21st century, many Russian Sinologists using the Palladius system realized that it needed modification. Unfortunately, many were unable to improve it successfully. Linguists understood that no system using Russian (or Latin) letters could precisely record Chinese phonetics, as many languages lack Chinese sounds.

Many European Sinologists have noted that some Russian-speaking students, after becoming familiar with the Palladius system, start speaking Chinese with a "Palladius accent." Many translators also find aspects of the system inconvenient, but no one is willing to change the established standard.

Translators who use the Palladius system recognize that it is imperfect, but it remains a structured system rather than a chaotic collection of letters. Additionally, translators working between Chinese, Russian, and English have noticed difficulties when transcribing English proper names, as there is no unified transcription system. For example, in different translations of Sherlock Holmes, his assistant is sometimes called "Doctor Уотсон" (Watson) and in other cases "Доктор Ватсон" (Watson).

Today, Sinologists in Uzbekistan prefer Pinyin. Until 1940, the Uzbek SSR used the Latin alphabet. However, in 1939, an Uzbek alphabet based on Cyrillic was officially introduced, and in subsequent years, schools adopted Uzbek Cyrillic. After gaining independence in

1993, Uzbekistan passed a law on "Introducing the Uzbek Alphabet Based on Latin Script." Relying on the old Latin alphabet, the new version was modified and improved.

In 1957, the Chinese Language Department was established at Tashkent State University (TashGU), and the first teaching materials, written by Russian authors, used classical Russian transcription.

In 2017, Professor A.A. Karimov of the Chinese Philology Department at TashGU published an article in the journal *Sharq Mash'ali* ("The Beacon of the East") titled "Theoretical Issues of Transcribing Chinese Proper Names into Uzbek Cyrillic and Latin Script." The article compared the transcription of Chinese words in Uzbek Cyrillic and Latin. The Uzbek alphabet includes letters such as k and q, h and x, g and g', o and o', which are pronounced differently from English. Examples provided in the article include:

- 汉 hàn → xan (not han) since Uzbek has both soft "h" and hard "x," so the transcription uses "x" (хан)
- 壮 zhuàng → djuang (джуанг)
- 侗族 tòngzú → tung (тунг), as Uzbek "o" is pronounced without palatalization
- 苗 miáo → myao (мяо), where "ia" is pronounced as "ya"
- 东乡族 dōngxiāng → dongsiang
- 土家族 tǔjiāzú → tudzia (тудзядзу), where "j" is transcribed as "z"
- 人 rén → jen (ж), where "r" is transcribed as "j"
- 羌族 qiāngzú → tsiáng, since "q" has no Uzbek equivalent and is replaced by "ts"
- 裕固族 yùgùzú → yuygu (юйгу)
- 彝族 yízú → izu (йидзу)
- 水族 shuǐzú → shuy (шуй)

The article demonstrates that Uzbek Latin script allows for a more accurate transcription of Chinese sounds. This is because Uzbek has phonetic features that align more closely with Pinyin, making it easier to learn Chinese in Uzbekistan.

The Palladius System is a Russian transcription system that enables students to delve deeper into Chinese phonetics. Originally developed for spreading the Russian Church's influence, it later became a bridge for understanding a foreign culture. The earliest Cyrillic transcriptions illustrate how both Russian and Chinese speech evolved over time.

Yes, the Palladius system is imperfect but irreplaceable. Over time, many have tried to modify or create a "new"

Palladius system, but the best approach is to learn to use the existing one correctly. It has its own rules and theories that should be followed, helping to improve accuracy in translating, reading, and pronouncing Chinese words. This system was not only crucial for the development of Russian Sinology but also laid the foundation for the study of Chinese in Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan.

The Palladius system does not suit everyone, but in some cases, it works better than other transcription methods. It is both simple and unique. Despite its flaws, it has paved the way for further development in Chinese language studies.

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