Today, many law enforcement agencies are experiencing increasing difficulties in identifying accurately individuals with Chinese names. These difficulties have arisen primarily because of the diversity of the Chinese language and naming systems and how authorities recorded Chinese names in the past. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss Chinese characters and dialects, romanization systems, and how to determine and record Chinese proper names. It is intended to provide law enforcement officers with a basic understanding of the Chinese language and naming system, thereby helping them to report and record Chinese names more accurately.

CHINESE CHARACTERS

Unlike English and other Western languages, Chinese is not built upon an alphabet. Rather, it is composed of thousands of characters each of which represents one syllable, is also a unit in itself and represents a complete idea. Some Chinese characters are pictographic in nature. These characters are derived from ancient Chinese symbols that are pictures of the objects they represent. Chinese characters may also be combined to create another character and concept. For example, the character meaning "bright" is composed of the characters that represent the sun and the moon. Together, they suggest the idea of brightness.

CHINESE DIALECTS

Written Chinese characters are understood by anyone who understands Chinese; however spoken Chinese varies according to dialects. In other words, although all Chinese read the same language, they may not be able to understand someone who speaks a different dialect of Chinese. Therefore, to consider Chinese as one language is an oversimplification. Rather, Chinese is a group of related, yet distinct, languages within the Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Chinese is composed of hundreds of dialects and subdialects, each of which developed as various people migrated to different

---

1 Mr. Jim Tailor is professor of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, Boston, United States of America. Mrs. Susan Tsjeung is associate professor and translator at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
geographic regions. Scholars disagree as to the number and classification of Chinese dialects, but for the purpose of this article, only seven major dialects will be discussed.

The most common Chinese dialect is Mandarin. Mandarin is spoken by approximately 70 percent of the Chinese population, primarily in northeastern, eastern and southwestern China. It is the national language of both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China on Taiwan. The Wu dialect, common to the area near Shanghai, is the second most prevalent and is spoken by roughly 15 percent of the people. Cantonese is popularly spoken in Canton and Hong Kong. Taishenese, or Toyshan, a subdialect of Cantonese, was once the most important Chinese dialect in the United States because it was spoken by most of the early Chinese immigrants. The Min, or Fukienese, dialect is derived from Fujian Province of China. Gan and related dialects are common in eastern-central China, and Xiang is spoken in central and southwestern China. In addition, Hakka, unlike other dialects, is not geographically based. This dialect is common among descendants of refugees from China's 9th century civil wars. It must be emphasized that the above dialects are as different as French is to Spanish. For example, a Mandarin speaker cannot communicate verbally with a Cantonese speaker just as someone who speaks Spanish could not understand someone who speaks French. However unlike French and Spanish, speakers of different dialects can still communicate through the written form of the language.

Furthermore, most dialects branched out and subdialects evolved. Subdialects are variations of the mother dialect. While subdialects differ to varying degrees, it is easier for speakers of various subdialects, derived from the same dialect, to understand one another. For instance, a speaker of the Southern Min subdialect will find easier to converse with a Northern Min speaker than with someone who speaks Cantonese.

Language reformers within China have tried to standardize spoken Chinese, in the hope of eliminating the difficulties created by so many dialects. This movement led to the establishment of Mandarin Chinese as the standard dialect and official language of China. Mandarin is also taught uniformly throughout the educational systems.

**ROMANIZATION SYSTEMS**

The phonetic representation of a Chinese character into words or syllables using the Latin alphabet is called romanization. This process is, at times, referred to as transliteration. Transliteration is different from translation in that it only provides the pronunciation, whereas translation provides the meaning of the character.

Romanization of a Chinese character into English is accomplished by replicating the pronunciation of the Chinese character using English letters. For example, the Chinese character meaning "man" or "husband" is pronounced in both Mandarin and Cantonese as "fu" and thus, it is romanized as