A Look at the Phonological System of Cantonese in Mid-19th Century:
by the Cantonese Romanisation Scheme Used by the British

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Before the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Hong Kong has been under the British colonial rule for around 150 years. Not until 1974, the only official language used by the Hong Kong government is English. Therefore, a Cantonese romanisation scheme is required and has been used for the transliteration of the Chinese names for people, streets, roads, *et cetra* in official documents.

Due to the requirement of the transliteration of the names for the official documents, the British government has derived a romanisation scheme at the very beginning of their governance. It can be seen that most of the tokens in the romanisation scheme pronounced in Received Pronunciation match with the pronunciation of present-day Cantonese. However, in some cases, there are some deviations. This phenomenon essentially reflects the historical pronunciation of Cantonese in mid-19th century.

Due to the nature of Chinese script and the tradition of despising of dialectal literature, there is always a shortage of materials for studying the historical phonology of Chinese, not to mention the various southern dialects. The research in historical phonology of the southern dialects mainly relies on the materials left by the missionaries and the textbooks for dialectal-teaching purpose.

Previous researches concerning the geographical names in Hong Kong mainly focus on cultural aspect (Lun 1993) and only a microscopic phonological analysis was briefly mentioned in Zee (1999) but a systematic and quantitative investigation lacks. Therefore, this research tries to fill in this gap by conducting a comprehensive survey of the romanisation scheme.

In this paper, the Cantonese romanisation scheme used by the government will be constructed by generalising the transliteration of the streets' names listed in the book *Hong Kong Guide 2005* published by the Hong Kong Government. The generalised scheme is then compared with the pronunciation of contemporary Hong Kong Cantonese. After that, the differences will be compared with the pervious studies in Cantonese historical phonology while the historical pronunciation reflected will be explained with Chinese historical phonology.

The results of this study show that some onsets, rhymes contrasted in mid-19th century have merged to form single ones in contemporary Cantonese.

It can be seen in Table 1 that for each of the following pairs: -i/-ɿ, tʃ-/ts-, s-/ʃ-, l-/n-, ŋ-/∅-, -ɔm/-ɐm, the distinction was neutralised in modern Cantonese. In the last two cases, the pronunciations of the monophthong [i] and syllabic consonant [ŋ̍] have been shifted to the diphthong [ei] and the bilabial [m̩] respectively.

More interestingly, inconsistencies can also be observed in the romanisation. For instance, the character "熙" is transliterated as *Hei* in a number of cases. This reflects the historical sound change of the diphthongalisation of [i] to [ei] in Cantonese.

(Word Count: 446)

Character	Romanisation	Onset/Rhyme in LMC	Modern Pronunciation	Reconstructed Pronunciation

智	Chi	知母	tsi	tʃi
紫	Tsz	精母		tsɿ
照	Chiu	照₃母	tsiu	tʃiu
蕉	Tsiu	精母		tsiu
善	Shin	禪母	sin	ʃin
茜	Sin	清母		sin
麗	Lai	來母	lɐi	lɐi
泥	Nai	泥母		nɐi
雅	Nga	疑母開	a ~ ŋa	ŋa
亞	A	影母		a
甘	Kom	咸開一	kɐm	kɔm
金	Kam	深開三		kɐm
熙	Hi	止開三	hei	hi
五	Ng	疑母遇合一	m̩	ŋ̍

Table 1 The Onsets and Rhymes Contrasted in Mid-19ᵗʰ Century's Cantonese

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