Inconsistent Transcription of Chinese Toponyms in Mongolian: Evidence from Media and Learner Usage

Lundegjantsan Soyol

Department of Asian Studies, National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Banzragch Nyamjav

Foreign Language Center, National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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Abstract

This study investigates the transcription of Chinese provincial and major city names into Mongolian, focusing on inconsistencies in current usage despite the existence of an official transcription guideline issued in 2016. The research examines two primary data sources: (1) commonly used Mongolian news websites and (2) written responses from Mongolian learners of Chinese with at least two years of study experience. Although the official guideline is based on adapting Pinyin into Mongolian phonological and orthographic systems, findings reveal substantial and systematic variation in transcription practices across both media and individual users.

While a limited number of place names show signs of stabilization, most continue to appear in multiple orthographic variants. Notably, all participants reported being aware of the official transcription guidelines; however, this awareness does not correspond to consistent application in practice.

The analysis identifies recurring patterns of phonological confusion, including the misrepresentation of nasal distinctions, affricates, and vowel correspondences. These issues do not stem from the absence of such categories in Mongolian, but rather from differences in their phonetic realization and distribution across the two languages. In particular, the frequent confusion between the alveolar nasal /n/ and the velar nasal /ŋ/ suggests limited phonetic awareness among users, especially in distinguishing place of articulation in transcription.

Despite the guideline being introduced a decade ago, the expected standardization has not been achieved. The study argues that effective standardization requires not only formal guidelines but also systematic integration into language education and increased attention to phonological adaptation.

Keywords

Chinese toponyms, Mongolian transcription, Pinyin, orthographic variants, standardization, language policy

Introduction

The transcription of foreign proper names is a crucial issue in linguistics, language policy, and translation studies. In Mongolian, the transcription of Chinese place names presents particular challenges due to phonological differences between the two languages and the widespread use of Pinyin as an intermediary system. As Mongolia maintains close political, economic, and cultural ties with China, Chinese toponyms frequently appear in Mongolian media, education, and public discourse. Ensuring consistency in their transcription is therefore essential for clarity, standardization, and effective communication.

Pinyin, the romanization system of Chinese, plays a central role in this process. Originally developed in the 1950s and officially adopted in the People's Republic of China in 1979, Pinyin has since been internationally standardized, being recognized by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in 1982 and later endorsed by the United Nations in 1986. Beyond its function as a tool for representing Chinese characters, Pinyin has become an important medium of communication and a bridge connecting China with the global community. The term *Pinyin* itself literally means "phonetic transcription" in Chinese.

The development of this guideline followed earlier efforts to establish a standardized system. Work on a unified transcription system began in 2015, involving multiple expert meetings, academic conferences, and collaborative discussions. These discussions emphasized that the transcription of proper names is not static but evolves over time, and that standardization requires collective agreement among scholars and practitioners (Egshig, 2016a).

Prior to this initiative, several transcription systems had been proposed in Mongolia by different scholars, such as Khereed L. Jamsran, B. Gerelt-Ireedui, G. Bilguudei, Ts. Damdinsuren, S. Munkhsaikhan, D. Ider, and P. A. Kafarov, reflecting the absence of a unified standard (Egshig, 2016a).

Building on these efforts, an official guideline for transcribing Chinese syllables into Mongolian was formally adopted in 2016 by the National Council for Language Policy. This guideline aims to ensure standardized usage across media and public communication by regulating the transcription of Chinese names based on Pinyin, adapted to Mongolian phonological and orthographic conventions.

The transcription system operates at the syllable level, aligning with the structure of Pinyin rather than mapping individual phonemes, which has important implications for how users interpret and apply it. The guideline aims to provide a unified system that reflects both pronunciation and the structural constraints of the Mongolian language. However, despite nearly a decade since its introduction, variation in transcription remains widespread. The persistence of variation despite formal regulation suggests a gap between language policy and actual linguistic practice, highlighting challenges in implementing standardization measures.

In contemporary Mongolian usage, Chinese place names are transcribed in various ways across contexts, including media and learner practice. However, the extent and patterns of this variation, as well as the factors contributing to it, have not been systematically examined. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Chinese provincial and major city names are transcribed into Mongolian in actual use, drawing on data from Mongolian news media and learners of Chinese with at least two years of study experience to examine both institutional and individual practices. It provides a usage-based analysis of transcription practices and offers a phonologically informed account of variation, highlighting the role of phonetic awareness and cross-linguistic influence in shaping orthographic outcomes. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent are Chinese place names consistently transcribed into Mongolian in current usage?
2. What types of orthographic and phonological variation occur most frequently?
3. What factors contribute to persistent inconsistency despite the existence of official guidelines?

Literature Review

Hanyu Pinyin, the official romanization system of Standard Chinese, is widely used to represent Chinese pronunciation through the Latin alphabet. It encodes syllables in terms of initials and finals, providing a standardized framework for pronunciation. Although Pinyin provides a standardized representation of Mandarin pronunciation, it is not designed as a fully accurate phonetic transcription system, and multiple phonemes may be represented by the same letter (Odinye, 2015). As noted in previous

research, Pinyin "conveys no meaning and does not conform to the international phonetic system" (He & Xiao, 2006, p. 133), which makes it prone to misinterpretation when used across languages.

Although many consonants in Pinyin resemble those of the Latin alphabet, their phonetic realization often differs significantly. For example, consonants such as *j, q, x* and *zhi, chi, shi, ri* do not correspond to English pronunciation, and certain vowel sounds, including *e* and *lü*, lack direct equivalents in English (Odinye, 2017). These phonetic mismatches are further complicated in languages such as Mongolian, where equivalent sounds may be absent or distributed differently, requiring systematic approximation. As a result, users—especially those influenced by other linguistic systems such as English or Russian—often interpret Pinyin forms through their own phonological frameworks, leading to consistent patterns of variation.

In addition, Mandarin Chinese is written in a logographic system, meaning that pronunciation cannot be directly inferred from characters (Odinye, 2015). Consequently, Pinyin functions as an intermediary representation of pronunciation rather than a transparent phonological system. It has therefore been described as a "pseudo-transcription" system that combines orthographic and phonetic features (Heselwood, 2013, as cited in Odinye, 2015). This hybrid nature contributes to ambiguity, particularly in contexts where tonal marking is omitted and where users rely on orthographic rather than phonetic interpretation.

The transfer of proper names across languages is often discussed in terms of transcription and transliteration, which differ in their focus on phonetic representation and orthographic form. In practice, however, these approaches may overlap, particularly when intermediary systems such as Pinyin are involved. Because Pinyin uses the Latin alphabet, users often interpret its symbols through the phonological conventions of other languages, such as English, which can result in systematic mispronunciation and variation (Odinye, 2015). This illustrates how romanization systems function not only as phonetic representations but also as hybrid frameworks shaped by multiple principles. Romanization has thus been described as encompassing a range of approaches, including transliteration, transcription, and broader phonetic representation, each involving trade-offs between phonetic accuracy and usability.

From a phonological perspective, cross-linguistic transcription is further shaped by differences in phoneme inventories, syllable structure, and phonetic realization between languages, as well as by competing functional demands. Systems that prioritize phonetic precision may be difficult for non-specialist users, whereas more accessible representations often sacrifice phonological detail, contributing to variation across users and contexts. In the case of Chinese and Mongolian, differences in phonotactic constraints may influence transcription practices, as certain sound combinations permissible in Chinese do not align with Mongolian phonological patterns. Even when similar phonological categories exist, they may differ in articulatory features, distribution, and contrastive function. As a result, speakers tend to rely on the closest available equivalents in the target language, leading to systematic approximation rather than exact correspondence. This process is particularly evident in the representation of consonant distinctions, vowel quality, and syllable structure.

Beyond phonological constraints, transcription practices are also shaped by broader linguistic and cultural considerations. Transliteration is not merely a phonetic process but a strategic choice influenced by linguistic, cultural, and communicative factors (Shen, 2022). In cases where direct equivalence is lacking, transliteration serves to preserve the source form, reflecting the broader phenomenon of "untranslatability" in cross-linguistic transfer (Shen, 2022, p. 14). Established transliterated forms may persist even when they diverge from phonological accuracy, particularly when they are widely recognized or structurally simple.

Furthermore, in the context of proper names, especially place names, transliteration is often the preferred strategy for preserving identity and usability across languages (Yu, 2024). However, empirical evidence suggests that actual practice frequently involves hybrid strategies. For instance, transliteration and mixed forms have been shown to dominate in real-world usage, accounting for the majority of translated place names in certain contexts (Yu, 2024). This indicates that actual language use reflects a balance between phonological approximation, orthographic convention, and communicative clarity.

Finally, efforts to standardize transcription through language policy do not necessarily guarantee consistent implementation. Variation may persist due to differences in user awareness, competing linguistic influences, and the inherent complexity of cross-linguistic phonological mapping. In this regard, transcription is not merely a mechanical process but requires linguistic expertise, as users must interpret and approximate source-language sounds within the phonological system of the target language. As emphasized in previous studies, effective transcription depends on the ability to balance phonetic similarity with the constraints of the target language, ensuring that the resulting form is both pronounceable and recognizable to users (Egshig, 2016b).

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to examine variation in the transcription of Chinese place names into Mongolian. The data consist of two main sources:

1. **Media corpus:** Transcriptions of Chinese provincial and selected first-tier city[1] names collected from major Mongolian news websites.
2. **Survey data:** Written responses from Chinese language learners and professionals with at least two years of study experience.

The media corpus was compiled from officially recognized Mongolian news websites, including Montsame, Ikon, Gogo and MNB. News articles published from 2017 onwards were systematically collected and screened, with the starting point selected to reflect contemporary usage following the introduction of the 2016 official transcription guideline.

Relevant articles containing references to Chinese provincial and major city names were identified through keyword-based searches and manual screening. Each occurrence of a place name was extracted and recorded, and its transcription form was categorized. The collected data were then organized into a structured table including the original place name, its Pinyin form, the standardized Mongolian transcription, and all observed variants. The official transcription guideline, which serves as the normative reference for evaluating transcription accuracy, is provided in Appendix A.

For each place name, the total number of transcription variants was calculated, including both standard and non-standard forms. This approach enables the identification of variation patterns in actual media usage rather than focusing solely on correctness. In total, the dataset comprises 291 instances of place name usage across the selected sources.

Survey data were additionally collected to examine how Chinese place names are transcribed into Mongolian by users with varying levels of Chinese language proficiency. The survey consisted of three general questions and a transcription task involving 45 Chinese place names. A total of 46 participants took part in the study. Their backgrounds included 22 students (intermediate to upper-intermediate levels), 12 teachers, 4 professional translators, and 12 participants from other professional fields. All participants had studied Chinese for a period ranging from two to over thirty years, which was considered sufficient for familiarity with Pinyin and exposure to the official transcription guideline.

Participants were also asked about their awareness of the official Mongolian transcription guideline. Among them, 40 reported being aware of the guideline, 2 indicated partial awareness, and 4 reported no awareness.

Results

The analysis focuses on four main dimensions: (1) variation across transcription forms, (2) frequency of non-standard forms, (3) recurring phonological error patterns, and (4) the relationship between awareness of official guidelines and actual transcription practices.

The findings indicate that, despite the existence of an official transcription guideline introduced in 2016, transcription practices remain highly inconsistent across both media and individual users. While

[1] Cities are classified as first-tier based on multiple criteria, including economic capacity, business concentration, global influence, industrial leadership, real estate valuation, and population density. Cities with the highest overall performance across these indicators are categorized as first-tier cities. Currently, there are 15 first-tier cities, within a broader classification system consisting of six tiers.

a limited number of place names have achieved relative stabilization, the majority continue to appear in multiple competing orthographic forms.

Analysis of Mongolian media sources—including Montsame, Ikon, Gogo, and the Mongolian National Broadcaster—reveals substantial variation in the transcription of Chinese provincial and major city names. The dataset includes 23 provinces, 3 autonomous regions (excluding Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau due to established naming conventions), 4 municipalities directly under the central government, and 15 first-tier cities. To illustrate the extent of variation, Table 1 presents the standardized forms, their IPA representations, and the number of transcription variants identified in both the media and survey datasets. For reference, the full transcription table based on the official guideline is provided in Appendix A. The IPA representations of Mongolian Cyrillic forms in this study follow the conventions proposed for Mongolian in *Phonetics* (Vol. 8 of the Studies in Mongolian Linguistics series, 2022). It should be noted that the IPA symbols used for Mongolian do not always correspond directly to those used in Standard Mandarin phonetic descriptions. These differences arise from language-specific phonological analyses and conventions rather than inconsistency in transcription. Therefore, variation in IPA symbols across languages should be interpreted as reflecting distinct phonetic and phonological systems, rather than a lack of standardization.

Table 1. *Variation in the Transcription of Chinese Provincial and Major City Names into Mongolian Across Media and Survey Data*

№	Place Names	Pinyin	Standard Cyrillic Mongolian Forms	IPA (Cyrillic Mongolian)	Total Variants from News Channel	Total Variants from Survey
1.	河北	Hebei	Хөбэй	[xөpeː]	2	4
2.	山西	Shanxi	Шаньши	[ʃænʃi]	4	6
3.	陕西	Shanxi	Шааньши	[ʃæːnʃi]	3*	8
4.	辽宁	Liaoning	Ляонин	[ɬjaɔniŋ]	2	6
5.	吉林	Jilin	Жилинь	[ʧiɬin]	2	6
6.	黑龙江	Heilongjiang	Хэйлунжян	[xeːɬoŋʧjaŋ]	3*	9
7.	江苏	Jiangsu	Жянсү	[ʧjaŋsu]	4*	10
8.	浙江	Zhejiang	Жөжян	[ʧөʧjaŋ]	4	16
9.	安徽	Anhui	Аньхуй	[ænχoi]	3	6
10.	福建	Fujian	Фүжянь	[ɸuʧjan]	6	12
11.	江西	Jiangxi	Жянши	[ʧjaŋʃi]	3	11
12.	山东	Shandong	Шаньдун	[ʃæntoŋ]	3	8
13.	河南	Henan	Хөнань	[xөnæn]	2*	9
14.	湖北	Hubei	Хубэй	[χopeː]	3	4
15.	湖南	Hunan	Хунань	[χonan]	2	7
16.	广东	Guangdong	Гуандун	[ɣwaːŋtoŋ]	3	5
17.	海南	Hainan	Хайнань	[χæːnæn]	2	3

18.	四川	Sichuan	Сычуань	[sɪʧʰwaːn]	3	6
19.	贵州	Guizhou	Гүйжөү	[ɣuiʧəu]	3	5
20.	云南	Yunnan	Юньнань	[jʏnan]	4	8
21.	甘肃	Gansu	Ганьсү	[ɣænsu]	3	7
22.	青海	Qinghai	Чинхай	[ʧʰiŋχæː]	2	7
23.	台湾	Taiwan	Тайвань	[tʰæːwan]	1	3
24.	广西	Guangxi	Гуанши	[ɣwaːŋʃi]	2	8
25.	宁夏	Ningxia	Нинша	[niŋʃa]	3	9
26.	新疆	Xinjiang	Шиньжян	[ʃinʧjaŋ]	4	10
27.	北京	Beijing	Бэйжин	[peːʧiŋ]	1*	3
28.	上海	Shanghai	Шанхай	[ʃaŋχæː]	1	3
29.	广州	Guangzhou	Гуанжөү	[ɣwaːŋʧəu]	3	6
30.	深圳	Shenzhen	Шэньжэнь	[ʃenʧen]	5	8
31.	成都	Chengdu	Чөндү	[ʧʰəŋtu]	2	7
32.	杭州	Hangzhou	Ханжөү	[χaŋʧəu]	2	5
33.	重庆	Chongqing	Чунчин	[ʧʰoŋʧʰiŋ]	4	10
34.	武汉	Wuhan	Үхань	[uχæn]	4	10
35.	苏州	Suzhou	Сүжөү	[suʧəu]	3	6
36.	西安	Xi'an	Ши-ань	[ʃi æn]	4*	8
37.	南京	Nanjing	Наньжин	[nanʧiŋ]	2	7
38.	长沙	Changsha	Чанша	[ʧʰanʃa]	1	4
39.	郑州	Zhengzhou	Жөнжөү	[ʧəŋʧəu]	3	10
40.	天津	Tianjin	Тяньжинь	[tʰjanʧin]	3	9
41.	青岛	Qingdao	Чиндао	[ʧʰiŋtaɔ]	2	6
42.	东莞	Dongguan	Дунгуань	[toŋɣwaːn]	3	9
43.	宁波	Ningbo	Нинбө	[niŋpə]	3*	7
44.	佛山	Foshan	Фошань	[ɸɔʃan]	2	6
45.	合肥	Hefei	Хөфэй	[xəɸeː]	2	8

Note. The table presents 45 Chinese provincial and major city names, along with their Pinyin forms, standardized Mongolian Cyrillic transcriptions based on the 2016 official guideline, and IPA representations of the Mongolian forms. The columns "Total Variants from News Channel" and "Total Variants from Survey" indicate the number of distinct transcription forms identified in each data source, including both

standard and non-standard variants. An asterisk (*) indicates that the standardized form was not observed in the dataset.

As shown in Table 1, the data reveal substantial variation in the transcription of Chinese place names into Mongolian across both media and survey data. The overall number of variants is generally higher in the survey data than in media sources, indicating greater variability among individual users compared to institutional usage. However, variation remains significant in both datasets, demonstrating that transcription inconsistency is a widespread phenomenon across different contexts.

The number of transcription variants per place name ranges from 1 to 6 in media data and from 3 to 16 in survey data. Zhejiang (浙江) exhibits the highest level of variation, particularly in the survey data, with 16 distinct forms. In media sources, Fujian (福建) shows the highest variation with six forms, followed by Shenzhen (深圳) with five variants. Several other place names, including Shanxi (山西), Jiangsu (江苏), Zhejiang (浙江), Yunnan (云南), Xinjiang (新疆), Chongqing (重庆), Wuhan (武汉) and Xi'an (西安), also display relatively high variation, each with four distinct forms.

In contrast, certain place names such as Shanghai (上海), Beijing (北京), Changsha (长沙) and Taiwan (台湾) display minimal variation in media data, suggesting a higher degree of stabilization in institutional usage. However, even these names exhibit variation in the survey data, indicating that consistency is not fully established across users.

Notably, in the media dataset, seven place names—Heilongjiang (黑龙江), Jiangsu (江苏), Henan (河南), Xi'an (西安), Beijing (北京), Ningbo (宁波) and Shanxi (陕西)—show no instances of the standardized transcription, as indicated by the asterisk. This suggests that, in institutional usage, certain non-standard forms have become dominant to the extent that the prescribed standard is entirely absent.

A notable case among them is Beijing (北京), where the standardized Mongolian transcription prescribes the form ***Бэйжин*** [peːʧiŋ]. However, the variant ***Бээжин*** [peːʧiŋ], which has been widely used over a long period, continues to dominate in practice. This suggests that established usage conventions can override official standards, even among users who are familiar with Chinese pronunciation.

Interestingly, among the survey participants, five Chinese language teachers consistently produced the standardized form ***Бэйжин*** [peːʧiŋ], indicating that higher levels of linguistic training and phonological awareness contribute to more accurate application of the guideline. This contrast highlights the role of both habitual usage and professional expertise in shaping transcription practices.

Survey data from Chinese-language learners further reinforce this pattern. Although the majority of participants reported being aware of the official transcription guidelines, this awareness did not translate into consistent application in practice. This discrepancy highlights a gap between declarative knowledge and procedural application. Awareness of rules alone does not ensure accurate transcription, particularly in contexts requiring phonological interpretation and cross-linguistic adaptation. This finding supports the view that transcription is not a purely mechanical process but requires active phonological processing and linguistic competence.

Analysis of Common Error Patterns

The identified transcription errors cannot be fully explained by the absence of equivalent sounds in Mongolian. Rather, they reflect systematic phonological and phonetic mismatches between Chinese and Mongolian. Even when similar sound categories exist in both languages, differences in articulation, distribution, and phonemic contrast lead to inconsistent representation in Cyrillic Mongolian orthography. The analysis identifies three major categories of recurring transcription errors, reflecting systematic phonological and orthographic mismatches between Chinese and Mongolian. Taken together, these patterns indicate that transcription errors are not random but follow systematic tendencies driven by phonological approximation and orthographic interference, particularly through the influence of Pinyin. This reinforces the argument that variation arises from predictable cross-linguistic constraints rather than isolated user mistakes.

1. Nasal Sound Confusion

One of the most frequent error patterns involves confusion between the alveolar nasal /n/ and the velar nasal /ŋ/. In Pinyin, these sounds are represented as “n” and “ng,” respectively. In the standardized Cyrillic Mongolian transcription system, however, this distinction is encoded differently: the alveolar nasal /n/ is represented by the sequence *нь*, while the velar nasal /ŋ/ is represented by *н*.

Despite this systematic distinction, users frequently neutralize the contrast, representing both sounds with a single form, typically *н*. This results in the loss of phonological contrast and leads to widespread non-standard variants.

For example, forms such as *Шаньши (Shanxi)* are often written as *Шанси*, *Жилинь (Jilin)* as *Жилин*, *Фүжянь (Fujian)* as *Фүжян*, and *Шаньдун (Shandong)* as *Шандон* or *Шандун*.

Conversely, hypercorrection is also observed, where the velar nasal /ŋ/ is incorrectly represented using *нь*. Examples include *Жянсү (Jiangsu)* written as *Жяньсү*, *Жөжян (Zhejiang)* as *Жөжянь*, and *Гуандун (Guangdong)* as *Гуаньдун*.

These patterns suggest that users have difficulty distinguishing between the two nasal categories, particularly in mapping Pinyin “n” and “ng” onto their corresponding forms in Mongolian transcription. This indicates a lack of phonological awareness at the level of place of articulation, rather than a simple absence of equivalent sounds in the target language.

2. Misrepresentation of Affricates and Fricatives

Another prominent source of variation involves the misrepresentation of Chinese affricates and fricatives in Mongolian transcription. These errors do not arise solely from the absence of equivalent sounds in Mongolian, but rather from differences in phonetic realization and the complexity of distinctions within the Chinese consonant system.

Mandarin Chinese distinguishes multiple series of fricatives and affricates, including retroflex sounds such as /ʈʂ/ (*zh*), /ʈʂʰ/ (*ch*), and /ʂ/ (*sh*), as well as alveolar-palatal sounds such as /tɕ/ (*j*), /tɕʰ/ (*q*), and /ɕ/ (*x*). In the standardized Mongolian transcription system, these are systematically differentiated through distinct Cyrillic representations.

However, the data show that these distinctions are frequently neutralized in practice. One common pattern is the substitution of fricatives such as /ʂ/ and /ɕ/ with the alveolar fricative /s/. As a result, forms such as *Шаньши (Shanxi)* are often written as *Шаньси*, *Жянши (Jiangxi)* as *Жянси*, and *Ши-ань (Шиань)* as *Сиань*, indicating a loss of contrast between retroflex/palatal and alveolar fricatives.

A further pattern involves the misrepresentation of the affricate /tɕ/ (*j*), which in standard Mongolian transcription is represented by *ж*. In non-standard forms, however, this sound is frequently rendered as alveolar affricates such as *з* /ʦ/ or orthographic sequences such as *з* or *цз*. For example, *Фүжянь (Fujian)* is often written as *Фүзянь*, and *Хэйлунжян (Heilongjiang)* as *Хэйлунзцянь* or *Хэйлунцзян*. These forms reflect a shift from palatal to alveolar articulation, as well as the influence of non-standard orthographic conventions.

Similarly, affricates such as /tɕʰ/ are often simplified or merged with alveolar counterparts such as /ʦʰ/. This is evident in forms such as *Чиндао (Qingdao)*, written as Циндао, and Чунчин, written as *Чунцин*.

Overall, these patterns demonstrate a systematic reduction of phonemic distinctions among retroflex, alveolo-palatal, and alveolar consonant series. Instead of preserving contrasts in place and manner of articulation, users tend to map multiple source-language categories onto a smaller set of familiar target-language sounds. This results in consistent patterns of simplification and substitution in transcription.

3. Vowel Substitution Patterns

In contrast to the consonant-related patterns discussed above, vowel-related variation appears to be driven more strongly by orthographic interpretation than by phonological constraints. These patterns arise from mismatches between the vowel systems of Chinese and Mongolian, as well as from the influence of intermediary orthographic systems such as Pinyin and, in some cases, Russian.

A common pattern is the substitution of the Mongolian vowel *ө /ɵ/* for *э /e/*. For example, *Хөбэй* (*Hebei*) is often written as *Хэбэй*, *Чөндү (Chengdu)* as *Чэндү*, *Хөнань (Henan)* as *Хэнань*, and *Жөжян (Zhejiang)* as *Жэжян*. This pattern appears to be influenced not by phonological constraints, but by the

visual interpretation of Pinyin forms. For instance, spellings such as *Hebei* and *Chengdu* may lead users to associate the vowel with *e*, resulting in forms like *Хэбэй* and *Чэндү*.

Similarly, the vowel *ү /u/* is frequently rendered as *у /o/*. Examples include *Жянсү (Jiangsu)* written as *Жянсу*, *Фүжянь (Fujian)* as *Фужиан*, *Ганьсү (Gansu)* as *Ганьсу*, *Ухань (Wuhan)* as *Ухань*, and *Сүжөү (Suzhou)* as *Сужоу*. An example of vowel substitution is the representation of *о* /ɔ/ as *ө* /ө/, as seen in the transcription of *Фошань (Foshan)* as *Фөшань*. These substitutions are likely influenced by the orthographic form of Pinyin, where sounds such as *-и* and *-о* are interpreted based on their visual similarity rather than their actual phonetic values.

In addition, variation is observed in the representation of the Pinyin sequence *ou* [oʊ̯], which in the standardized Mongolian transcription system is rendered as *өү* [өu], reflecting the closest available phonetic approximation. In practice, however, this sequence is frequently mispronounced as [ɔo], reflecting an alternative interpretation based on orthographic form rather than phonetic value. For example, standardized forms such as *Ханжөү (Hangzhou), Сүжөү (Suzhou)*, *Гүйжөү (Guizhou)* and *Гуанжөү (Guangzhou)* are often written as *Ханжоу*, *Сүжоу*, *Гүйжоу* and *Гуанжоу*. In some cases, the sequence *ou* is further reduced to the single vowel *у* [o], as seen in forms such as *Гуанжу* for *Guangzhou*. These patterns suggest that users interpret the Pinyin sequence *ou* using familiar orthographic conventions, resulting in systematic deviations from the standardized transcription.

In addition, the vowel *у /o/* is sometimes replaced by *о /ɔ/* or *ү /u/,* as seen in forms such as *Шаньдун (Shandong)* written as *Шандон*, *Чунчин (Chongqing)* as *Чончинь*, *Хубэй (Hubei)* as *Хүбэй*, and *Дунгуань (Dongguan)* as *Донгуан*. These substitutions do not appear to reflect systematic phonological constraints, but are more likely influenced by the visual interpretation of Pinyin forms. For example, forms such as *Guangdong* and *Shandong* in Pinyin may encourage the use of *о* in Mongolian transcription because of the visual representation of the -ong sequence. Similarly, the vowel *u* in forms such as *Hubei* may be interpreted as either *у /o/* or *ү /u/* in Mongolian, as the Pinyin representation does not clearly indicate vowel quality for Mongolian users. This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, leading to variation in transcription.

The vowel *ы /ɪ/* is also frequently replaced by *и /i/,* as in *Сычуань (Sichuan)* being written as *Сичуан*. In the standardized system, the use of *ы* distinguishes the Chinese alveolar fricative /s/ from similar sounds by introducing a distinct vowel quality. The replacement of *ы /ɪ/* with *и /i/* therefore reflects a loss of this contrast, resulting in the neutralization of distinctions that are maintained in the official transcription.

In a limited number of cases, variation is observed in the interpretation of certain sequences. Sequences such as *я /ja/* are often reanalyzed as *иа /ia/*, *а /a/*, or *аа /aː/*, as in *Ляонин (Liaoning)* written as *Лиаонин*, *Жянсү (Jiangsu)* as *Жиансү*, and *Шиньжян (Xinjiang)* as *Шиньжаан*, *Шинжаан*, or *Шинжан*. Similarly, *э /e/* is sometimes represented as *е /je/*, as in *Шэньжэнь (Shenzhen),* which is written as *Шенжен*. These patterns suggest that transcription is influenced not only by phonological constraints but also by orthographic interpretation. The use of *е /je/* in place of *э /e/*, for instance, may reflect the influence of Russian-based transcription conventions, while other substitutions—such as *ү /u/ with у /o/* or *ө /ө/ with э /e/* —are likely shaped by the visual interpretation of Pinyin forms.

Overall, these patterns demonstrate that variation is primarily driven by vowel substitution and orthographic interference, particularly through the visual interpretation of Pinyin. Rather than systematically mapping source-language vowels onto their closest equivalents, users rely on familiar graphemic patterns, resulting in consistent but non-standard variation.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that inconsistency in the transcription of Chinese place names into Mongolian persists despite the existence of a standardized system, as well as due тогыйау systematic phonological and orthographic factors identified in the analysis. Variation remains widespread across both institutional and individual usage, indicating a complex interaction between language policy, phonological constraints, and user practices.

From a phonological perspective, the observed variation reflects systematic mismatches between the sound systems of Chinese and Mongolian, as evidenced by recurring patterns such as nasal confu-

sion, affricate neutralization, and vowel substitution. Although the two languages share certain phonological categories, such as nasals and affricates, they differ in their phonetic realization and contrastive distribution. As a result, users tend to approximate unfamiliar sounds using the closest available equivalents in Mongolian, leading to recurring patterns of substitution and neutralization. These findings are consistent with previous research on cross-linguistic transcription, which highlights the role of phonological constraints and perceptual approximation in shaping transcription outcomes.

At the same time, the results suggest that transcription practices are not determined by phonological factors alone. The case of *Beijing* clearly illustrates the influence of entrenched orthographic conventions. Despite the availability of a standardized form *Бэйжин*, the historically established form *Бээжин* continues to dominate in actual usage. This indicates that long-standing usage patterns can override prescriptive norms, particularly when they are widely disseminated through media and public discourse.

A further important finding concerns the contrast between media usage and individual performance. While the media dataset shows relatively fewer variants overall, it also includes cases where the standardized form is entirely absent. In contrast, the survey data exhibit greater variation but consistently retain at least one instance of the standardized form. This suggests that institutional usage may reinforce stable but non-standard conventions, whereas individual users, despite producing more variation, maintain access to the standard through formal learning.

This contrast also highlights the role of expertise. The fact that Chinese language teachers were more likely to produce the standardized form indicates that accurate transcription requires not only awareness of the guidelines but also sufficient phonological competence and training. In other words, transcription is not a purely mechanical process of applying rules, but a cognitively demanding task involving phonological interpretation and cross-linguistic mapping.

From the perspective of language policy, these findings point to a gap between prescription and practice. The mere existence of a standardized guideline does not guarantee its consistent implementation. Without systematic integration into education, media practice, and reference resources, non-standard forms may continue to circulate and become entrenched in usage.

Overall, the findings suggest that transcription variation is not random but systematically structured, arising from the interaction of three key factors: (1) phonological mismatch between languages, (2) the mediating role of Pinyin as a partially non-transparent system, and (3) the influence of entrenched orthographic conventions and user experience. These results indicate that effective standardization requires not only formal regulation but also sustained attention to phonological training and real-world usage practices.

Conclusion

This study has examined the transcription of Chinese place names into Mongolian through a combined analysis of media usage and survey data. The findings reveal that, despite the introduction of an official transcription guideline in 2016, considerable variation persists across both institutional and individual practices.

The results show that the inconsistency in transcription cannot be attributed to a lack of awareness of the standardized system. On the contrary, the majority of participants reported being familiar with the guideline. However, this awareness does not consistently translate into accurate application, indicating a gap between declarative knowledge and practical implementation. This gap is particularly evident among learners, while more consistent usage among teachers suggests that higher levels of linguistic training and professional engagement contribute to more accurate transcription.

These findings indicate that Mongolian learners of Chinese tend not to accurately distinguish the pronunciation of the Chinese sounds [oʊ̯], [ə], [e], [ɔ], [ʊŋ], [n], [ŋ], [ʦ], [ʦʰ], [ʂ], [ʨ], [ʨʰ], and [ɕ]. These differences in phonetic realization and contrastive function lead to recurring patterns of substitution, neutralization, and simplification, suggesting that transcription errors are not random but follow predictable tendencies shaped by cross-linguistic constraints.

They further show that users tend to rely on the visual form of Pinyin rather than its phonetic value, while entrenched usage patterns continue to influence transcription practices. In particular, place names

such as *Шанхай (Shanghai)* and *Тайвань (Taiwan)* appear relatively stable due to long-term conventionalization, whereas others, such as *Бээжин* (*Beijing)* and *Шинжаан* (*Xinjiang)*, remain resistant to standardization despite users' awareness of the correct pronunciation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that transcription inconsistency arises from the interaction of multiple factors, including phonological mismatch, orthographic interference, user experience, and the gap between language policy and actual usage. These findings suggest that effective standardization cannot rely solely on formal regulation but must also address user competence and real-world linguistic practices.

In light of these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed. First, the official transcription guideline should be more actively implemented across media and public institutions through policy support and standardization measures. Second, transcription training should be more systematically integrated into Chinese language education at both secondary and tertiary levels, with greater emphasis on phonological awareness and transcription principles. Third, efforts should be made to raise public awareness of standardized transcription through educational initiatives and accessible reference materials. Finally, for certain place names with deeply entrenched usage, it may be necessary to establish clear guidelines on whether to preserve conventional forms or enforce standardized transcription.

Taken together, these measures highlight that successful standardization requires coordinated efforts across policy, education, and public usage. Without such integration, variation is likely to persist despite the existence of formal guidelines.

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Appendix A

Хэлний бодлогын үндэсний зөвлөлийн 2016 оны 9 дүгээр сарын 8-ны өдрийн
06.... дугаар тогтоолын хавсралт

Хятад хэлний үеийн галиг 汉语拼音音节表

韵母 \ 声母	b	p	m	f	d	t	n	l	g	k	h	j	q	x	zh	ch	sh	r	z	c	s	y	w
a	ba	pa	ma	fa	da	ta	na	la	ga	ka	ha				zha	cha	sha		za	ca	sa	ya	wa
а	ба	па	ма	фа	да	та	на	ла	га	ка	ха				жа	ча	ша		за	ца	са	я	ва
o	bo	po	mo	fo																			wo
о	бо	по	мо	фо																			во
e			me		de	te	ne	le	ge	ke	he				zhe	che	she	re	ze	ce	se	(ye)	
ө			мө		дө	тө	нө	лө	гө	кө	хө				жө	чө	шө	рө	зө	цө	сө	е	
i	bi	pi	mi		di	ti	ni	li				ji	qi	xi	(zhi)	(chi)	(shi)	(ri)	(zi)	(ci)	(si)	(yi)	
и/ы	би	пи	ми		ди	ти	ни	ли				жи	чи	ши	жы	чы	шы	ры	зы	цы	сы	и	
u	bu	pu	mu	fu	du	tu	nu	lu	gu	ku	hu				zhu	chu	shu	ru	zu	cu	su		(wu)
ү/у	бү	пү	мү	фү	дү	тү	нү	лү	гү	кү	хү				жу	чу	шу	рү	зү	цү	сү		ү
ü							nü	lü				ju	qu	xu								(yu)	
юй							нюй	люй				жюй	чюй	шюй								юй	
ai	bai	pai	mai		dai	tai	nai	lai	gai	kai	hai				zhai	chai	shai		zai	cai	sai	yai	wai
ай	бай	пай	май		дай	тай	най	лай	гай	кай	хай				жай	чай	шай		зай	цай	сай	-	вай
ei	bei	pei	mei	fei	dei	tei	nei	lei	gei	kei	hei				zhei		shei		zei	cei			wei
эй	бэй	пэй	мэй	фэй	дэй	тэй	нэй	лэй	гэй	кэй	хэй				жэй		шэй		зэй	цэй			вэй
ui					dui	tui			gui	kui	hui				zhui	chui	shui	rui	zui	cui	sui		
үй/уй					дүй	түй			гүй	күй	хүй				жүй	чүй	шүй	рүй	зүй	цүй	сүй		
ao	bao	pao	mao		dao	tao	nao	lao	gao	kao	hao				zhao	chao	shao	rao	zao	cao	sao	yao	
ао	бао	пао	мао		дао	тао	нао	лао	гао	као	хао				жао	чао	шао	рао	зао	цао	сао	яо	
ou		pou	mou	fou	dou	tou	nou	lou	gou	kou	hou				zhou	chou	shou	rou	zou	cou	sou	you	
өү/оу		пөү	мөү	фөү	дөү	төү	нөү	лөү	гөү	көү	хөү				жөү	чөү	шөү	рөү	зөү	цөү	сөү	ёу	
iu			miu		diu		niu	liu				jiu	qiu	xiu									
ю			мю		дю		ню	лю				жю	чю	шю									
ie	bie	pie	mie		die	tie	nie	lie				jie	qie	xie									
е	бе	пе	ме		де	те	не	ле				же	че	ше									
üe							nüe	lüe				jue	que	xue								(yue)	
юэ							нюэ	люэ				жюэ	чюэ	шюэ								юэ	
er																							
эр																							
an	ban	pan	man	fan	dan	tan	nan	lan	gan	kan	han				zhan	chan	shan	ran	zan	can	san	yan	wan
ань	бань	пань	мань	фань	дань	тань	нань	лань	гань	кань	хань				жань	чань	шань	рань	зань	цань	сань	янь	вань