

A Note on Romanization and Chinese Names

No standard romanization system for Chinese names was used a century ago in the original documents consulted in the preparation of this book. The venerable Wade-Giles system for rendering the Mandarin dialect of northern China, a variation of which was spoken by Wong Chin Foo, was just being developed when the action of this book begins, and had not yet come into popular use. But it would not have been particularly appropriate anyway, since most of the Chinese people mentioned in the book—indeed, most of the Chinese in America during this era—were Cantonese; more particularly, they were men from Xinning (now Taishan) County in Guangdong Province. They spoke an entirely different dialect, which to this day does not benefit from a standard, widely used romanization system, and they did not say, or attempt to spell, their names according to Mandarin pronunciation.

Spelling of Chinese names was not an issue in China, where written communication was accomplished entirely in characters. But when Chinese people came into contact with missionaries, or reached America's shores, some form of romanized spelling of their names was required. If the immigrants themselves did not know how to render their names in letters, it was done for them by ship captains, immigration officers, court clerks, preachers, or journalists, few if any of whom spoke any Chinese at all.

The result is a hodgepodge of spellings, some more, some less true to the Chinese pronunciations, the consequence of different people spelling personal and place names as they sounded to them. For purposes of clarity, I have adopted one consistent rendering and spelling for each name in this book, but I cannot change how the names appear in the historical documents or the quotations from them that appear in these pages.

For Chinese place names, names of dynasties, publications, and general terms, I have generally relied on the modern *pinyin* system. In the few instances in which traditional spellings appear, such as in quotations from historical documents, I have indicated the *pinyin* spellings in italics immediately after the first mention. Please consult the glossary at the end of this work for the standard Chinese characters (simplified characters were not yet in use during the period covered in the book) associated with the Chinese names and terms, and for *pinyin* equivalents where necessary.

In the case of personal names, I have generally employed the spellings Wong and his contemporaries used during their lifetimes but used *pinyin* as a fallback for famous people. In the table that begins on page xxvii, I have listed the names of key persons in the story, including “aliases” for each who was known by more than one name, or whose name was generally spelled in more than one way. Chinese characters and *pinyin* are provided where known. For less important personages, *pinyin* is provided after any traditional spelling at the first mention of the person.