Why Do They Sound Different? － Variant Transliterations of Character's Names in Japanese Fantasy Anime into Mandarin Chinese

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Introduction

In Taiwan, where people are heavily influenced by foreign culture, books, movies, and tv-series from abroad all became a vital part of our lives. Translation, especially about the characters' names, is important while publishing books or airing shows from other nations. Nevertheless, some of the sounds in the original language does not exist in Mandarin. Some exceptions that do not usually encounter this issue may include shows from China, K-dramas, and Japanese anime. In these cases, translators in Taiwan could simply use the Chinese characters from the source language as the official translated name for them.

However, this pattern does not apply to the fantasy genre of anime. Living in a medieval-European-like society, characters of this genre generally have a Westernized name that is not related to Chinese characters. Transliteration (i.e. Transferring the pronunciation of the original name) is therefore the most practicable way of translation, and debate has then arisen over the question as how to adapt the foreign pronunciation to the phonological system of Mandarin Chinese. For instance, people the character Shanks (シャンクス) in *One Piece* is "Jie-ke"(傑克), which is traditionally used to translate the English name *Jack*. The other variant is "Xiang-ke-si" (香克斯). The variation derives from different strategies of adaptation.

While the latter stresses phonetic faithfulness, the former is catchier due to advantages in prosody and familiarity. As *isekai* anime becomes more and more popular in recent years, more characters from fantasy settings are being variably transliterated into Mandarin. Therefore, this research aims to address the following questions: (i) how fantasy anime character names are transliterated into Mandarin? (ii) what factors contribute to different choices of adaptation and hence the variation of transliteration?

Literature Review

Since different languages have their own set of consonants and vowels, the process of interpreting a sound that does not exist in the target language, phonological adaptation, is needed. Despite the lack of sources that focuses on Japanese transliterating to Mandarin, many have discussed about loan words and their phonological adaptation in Mandarin that come from other languages.

According to Miao (2005), plosives as both onset and coda have a clear dominance in their choice of Mandarin adaptation. The sounds /p-, t-/ as onset in English, German, and Italian have a 71.52% chance of being adapted as /p^h-, t^h-/ in Mandarin; they also have an 89.74% chance of being adapted as /-p^hV, -t^hV/ when used as coda, which in this case epenthetic vowels are added after the plosives since Mandarin does not allow plosives as coda. Similarly, /g-/ in English has an 87.8% chance of being transliterated to /k-/ and only 12.2% of them are articulated as /tɕ-/ in Mandarin. However, it is not random that the /tɕ-/ sound appear. In fact, the velar onsets “tend to be somewhat palatalized before a front high vowel” (Lu, 2022).

When talking about vowels, however, there seem to be a smaller difference between different adaptations. Because Mandarin has a smaller set of vowels compared to English, it is common that a single vowel from English can correspond to various vowels in Mandarin (Lin, 2008; Miao, 2005). Nonetheless, there are still sets of rules to explain the complexity behind vowel adaptations, which the case of from Japanese to Mandarin will be analyzed in detail in the present study.

Method

Speaking of fantasy anime, it refers to not just the *isekai* genre but simply the ones with imaginative settings. To include a wide variety of fantasy anime, I collected character names from 7 anime works, including (in chronological order) *Akazukin Chacha* (1994), *Slayers* (1996), *Record of Lodoss War: Chronicles of the Heroic Knight* (1998), *Attack on Titan* (2013), *KonoSuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!* (2016), *Violet Evergarden* (2018), and *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation* (2021). A total of 160 characters' names in Japanese *kana* forms with 203 transliterated names in Mandarin are included in the database; there will be more Mandarin names in total due to the different translated variants of the same characters from different publishers or time periods.

The first step of data organization is to transcribe both the original names and the transliterations into IPA symbols. Together, the syllable breaks would be marked to facilitate further data organizations. After that, by comparing the IPA transcriptions, the differences between the original and the transliterated versions were tagged as different processes of adaptation, including insertion, deletion, or mutation. The specific changes and their phonological environment were then be listed for tally.

Results and Analysis

Japanese has two features that do not exist in Mandarin. The first is gemination, which is represented by the *sokuon* (っ or ッ). The other feature is long vowel, represented by the *chōonpu* for *katakana* and an extra vowel for *hiragana*. As an example, the character Levi Ackerman (リヴァイ・アッカーマン [ɾi.vai a.kːaa.maɴ]) from *Attack on Titan* has the gemination of /k/ and long vowel of /a/. Both features are

usually degeminated and shortened in Mandarin, as Levi Ackerman is being transliterated as “Li-wei A-ka-man” (里維・阿卡曼[li.weɪ akʰa.man]),

1. Consonant Adaptation

Table 2-1: Plosive Adaptations

Japanese Phoneme	**Mandarin Adaption**	**Abundance (%)**	**Japanese Phoneme**	**Mandarin Adaption**	**Abundance (%)**
/p-/	/pʰ-/	15 (68.2%)	/k-/	/kʰ-/	36 (76.6%)
	/p-/	7 (31.8%)		/k-/	2 (4.3%)
/b-/	/pʰ-/	1 (2.6%)		/t͡ɕʰ-/	3 (6.4%)
	/p-/	34 (89.5%)		/t͡ɕ⁼-/	5 (10.6%)
	/f-/	1 (2.6%)		/x-/	1 (2.1%)
	/w-/	2 (5.3%)	/g-/	/kʰ-/	3 (6.4%)
/t-/	/tʰ-/	38 (86.4%)		/k-/	30 (63.8%)
	/t-/	6 (13.6%)		/t͡ɕ⁼-/	14 (29.8%)
/d-/	/tʰ-/	8 (17.8%)			
	/t-/	37 (82.2%)			

Note: Due to phonetic restrictions, Japanese does not allow plosives as coda.

Shifting to consonants, like previous research, the pattern of /p, t, k/ becoming /pʰ, tʰ, kʰ/ and /b, d, g/ becoming /p, t, k/ are observed. This exhibits how Mandarin adaptations try to maintain the contrast between voiced and voiceless using aspiration. For both bilabial and alveolar plosives, the other Mandarin outputs, which mostly stay in the same or near places of articulation, are modified semantically. For instance, Pikapon (ピカポン[pi.ka.poɴ]) from *Akazukin Chacha* is transliterated to “Bi-kap-ang” (畢卡龐[pi.kʰa.pʰaŋ]) since the sound “pi” (usually using 皮[pʰi]) has a meaning of naughty in Mandarin which the translator does not want to relate the character to.

However, alveolar consonants have an alternative: the alveolo-palatal sound /t͡ɕ/ which occur when a high front vowel is after them. This pattern mostly occurs due to

Mandarin's phonological limitations, while semantic reasons also affect the outcome. Gabi (ガビ[ga.bi]) from *Attack on Titan* is transliterated as "Jia-bi" (賈碧[t͡ɕ ja.pi]) since the sound "ga" in Mandarin can only be used in onomatopoeia. In order to prevent this, /g/ is palatalized as /t͡ɕ/ which is an alternative for transliterating alveolar plosives.

Table 2-2: Fricative and Approximant Adaptations

Japanese Phoneme	**Mandarin Adaption**	**Abundance (%)**	**Japanese Phoneme**	**Mandarin Adaption**	**Abundance (%)**
/s-/	/s-/	71 (83.5%)	/z-/	/t͡s-/	13 (59.1%)
	/ʂ-/	12 (14.1%)		/t͡ʂ-/	2 (9.1%)
	/ɕ-/	1 (1.2%)		/t͡ɕ-/	4 (18.2%)
	/j-/	1 (1.2%)		/s-/	3 (13.6%)
/ɸ-, /ç-/	/f-/	24 (96.0%)	/v-/	/f-/	1 (20.0%)
	/x-/	1 (4.0%)		/w-/	4 (80.0%)

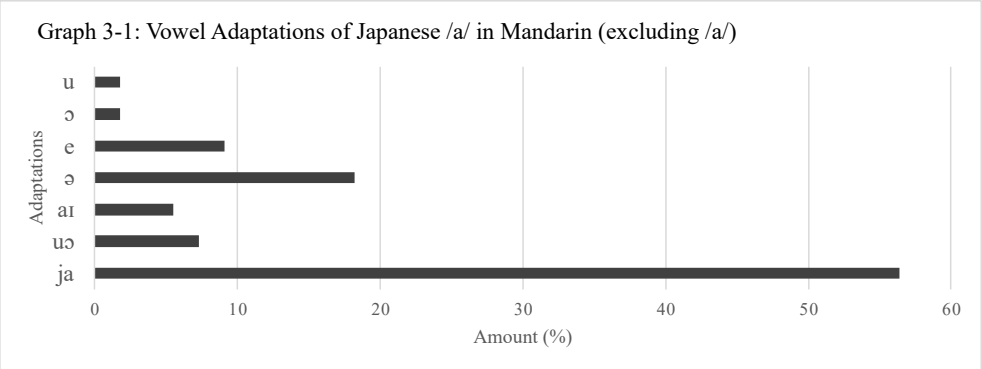
Note: This table only includes certain consonants.

Semantics also interfere fricative consonants. While most fricatives tend to adapt into its closest form (e.g. /s/ for /s/ and /t͡s/ for /z/) as shown in Table 2-2, the adaptation might still change sometimes even if that sound is technically allowed. A good example would be Sasha (サシャ[sa.ʃa]] from *Attack on Titan* whose transliterated version is "Sha-xia" (莎夏[ʂa.ɕja]). The sound /s/ becomes /ʂ/ since the character "sha" (莎[ʂa]) is usually used to translate females in Mandarin.

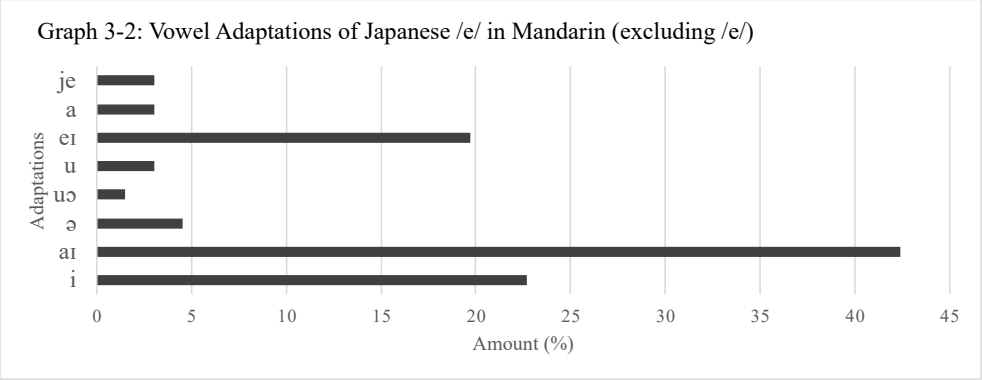
2. Vowel Adaptation

On the other hand, vowels have much more sophisticated patterns of adaptation. As shown in Graph 3-1, the secondly preferred adaptation is to insert the palatal approximant /j/ before the vowel. In addition, this adaptation is frequently used to prevent the situation of two vowels from different syllables next to each other. For

example, the Mandarin transliteration of Aqua (アクア[a.kɯ.a]) from *KonoSuba* is "A-ke-ya" (阿克娅[a.kə.ja]) which adds the /j/ to prevent the collision of vowels.

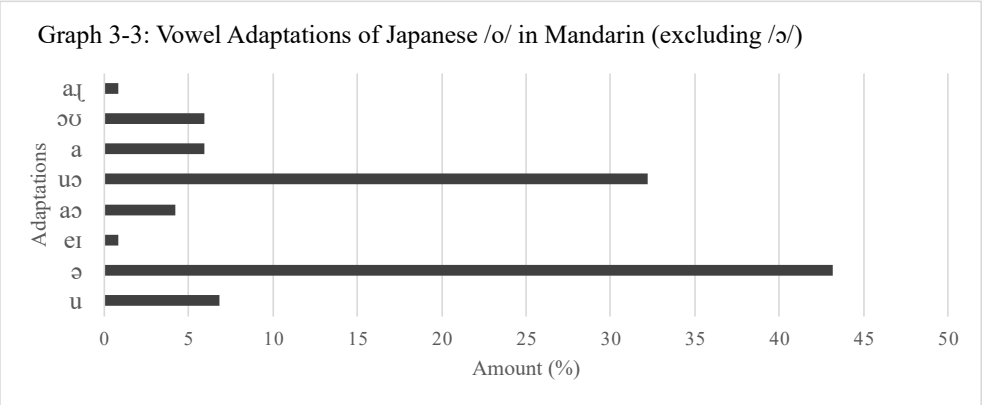


While the /j/ insertion still applies to /e/, it is no longer the dominant adaptation. By observing the top 3 adaptation patterns, we can infer that Mandarin likely inserts /i/ or /ɪ/ after /e/ (or its adapted form), or substitute /e/ with the high front vowels due to the necessary cooccurrence of /e/ and /i/ (or /ɪ/). This phenomenon happens because while Mandarin does not allow /e/ to be the only vowel in a syllable, it also only allow the direction from low to high for front vowels if palatalization is prevented.

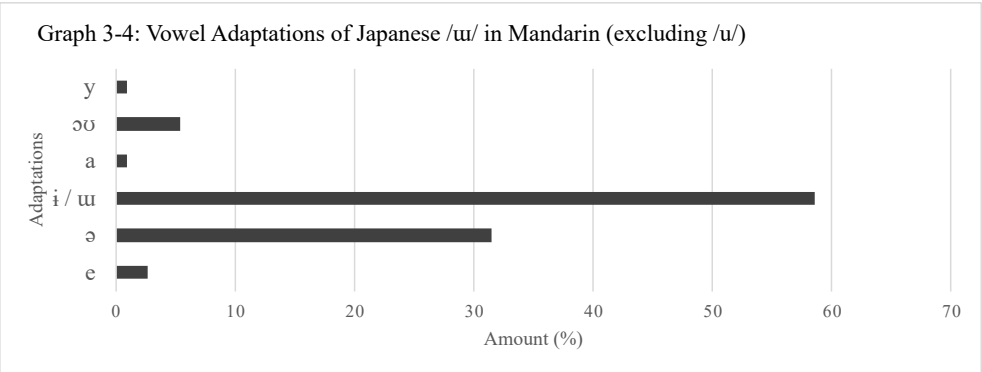


Next, for the vowel /o/ referring to Graph 3-3, by neglecting the /ɔ/ sound which is generally not considered as an adaptation due to its proximity to /o/. Even though Mandarin accepts both falling (/uɔ/) and rising diphthongs (/ɔʊ/) for back vowels, there are way more distinct Chinese characters, especially the ones appropriate for transliterations, to choose from the sounds containing /uɔ/. As a result, /uɔ/ would also be a more reasonable semantic choice compared to /ɔʊ/. For example, Charlotte (シャ

ルロッテ[ʃa.ɾɯ.ɾo.tːe]) from *Violet Evergarden*, a 14-year-old princess, is transliterated as “Xia-luo-te” (夏洛特[ɕja.luɔ.tʰə]). If the /ɔʊ/ is used instead of /uɔ/ here, the character could likely be “lou” (樓[lɔʊ]) that means floor or building, which is not suitable for a role like princess.



For most of the time, /ɯ/ is transliterated as /u/ in Mandarin since this sound is Romanized as “u” conventionally, which is not phonetically accurate when it is used to transcribe both /u/ and /ɯ/ (Backley & Nasukawa, 2016). While there are still many other adaptations, they are mostly influenced by a deduced Western name origin.



3. Influence of Hypothetical Western Name Origin

Vowel adaptations are tremendously influenced by a deduced Western name origin. Starting with /a/, another adaptation that stands out from the rest is /ə/, which is significantly influenced by the hypothetical source language with a European background. The /a/ in Japanese is commonly used to interpret the /ər/ sound, which

could simply be transliterated as /ə/ in Mandarin where /r/ as coda is not allowed.

Next, for the case of /ɔ/ transliterated as /ə/, it again relates back to the hypothetical source language that accept plosives, especially /t/ or /d/ as coda. Since Japanese does not allow plosive as coda, the epenthetic vowel /o/ is usually added. In the situation of Mandarin, however, /ə/ is more commonly added to interpret the plosive coda which resulted in this pattern.

Lastly, /ɯ/ is quite commonly used as an epenthetic vowel in Japanese to prevent fricatives like /s/ or /z/ becoming coda. On the other hand, Mandarin has a pair of epenthetic vowels which is /ɨ/ or /ɯ/, depending on whether the consonant's place of place of articulation is retroflex or alveolar. Therefore, in this condition, Mandarin translators tend to anticipate the sounds of /sɯ/ or /zɯ/ in Japanese as /s/ or /z/ in the deduced source language and that the transliterations depend solely on the origin.

It also commonly adapts as /ə/ which is like the situation of /o/. However, another possible position of the consonant in the deduced source is in before another consonant in a complex onset or coda. For example, the last name of the main character from *Mushoku Tensei* is Greyrat (グレイラット[gɯ.ɾei.ɾa.tːo]), which is translated as "Ge-lei-la-te" (格雷拉特[kə.leɪ.la.tʰə]]. The /ɯ/ is added after /g/ in Japanese modifying after the Latin script, yet for Mandarin, /ə/ is added following conventions.

Conclusion

Referring to our database with 160 characters' names and their translations from Japanese to Mandarin from 7 fantasy anime, similar patterns on plosive adaptations to previous research on Mandarin loan words have been observed. Distinct features of

deletion and fricative consonants are also clearly analyzed as there are always dominant and logical patterns of adaptation. Most importantly, the analyses exhibit intricate patterns of vowel adaptations because of (i) the interference of the hypothetical sources language behind fantasy character names, (ii) regulations on Mandarin diphthongs, and (iii) semantic reasons beyond phonological restrictions (including the choice on Chinese characters). In the future, further investigations could be done to dig deep into how the unpopular vowel adaptations occur.

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