

# If you prefer to say Peking rather than Beijing – that's fine

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It's often said that China's capital "has changed its name" from Peking to Beijing. But that's not really what happened. The Chinese name of the city hasn't changed at all. Peking and Beijing are both transliterations into the Latin alphabet of the same Chinese name. (Beijing means "northern capital". Nanjing means "southern capital".)

Naturally, Peking/Beijing is written by Chinese-speaking people in their own non-alphabetic writing system. For us to be able to read it, it has to be converted into our alphabet. This conversion of Chinese sounds into the Latin alphabet is called romanisation.

The "change" of the city's name simply involved an older romanisation system which rendered the Chinese name as Peking being replaced by a newer system. This newer, Chinese-government favoured romanisation represents the same Chinese name by a different sequence of Latin letters.

But how could the same name end up being converted into the Latin alphabet in two different ways? The advocates of the new system believe their spelling is a more accurate reproduction of the Chinese pronunciation. But linguistic change has



■ People wait in line with their luggage for ticket checks and security screenings outside the Beijing - or Peking - railway station in Beijing.

Picture: AP

also played a role. In the centuries since the original romanisation as "Peking", a sound-change has taken place in Mandarin Chinese: the k-sound in the middle of the name has changed so that it now sounds to us more like a "ch" or a "j".

There's actually no need for English speakers to abandon the long-established English-language name Peking and start saying Beijing if they don't want to. The French language name for the city remains Pékin; in Polish it's still Pekin; and in German it's Peking. The official English-language name of the former Peking University is today ... Peking University.

And what about the Indian city Bombay? This case is a little different. Bombay did

not "change its name" to Mumbai either. Mumbai was already the name of the city in the local language, Marathi. But English is one of the official languages of India – it's the major language of regional intra-communication within the country – and the English-language name was officially changed by the Indian government in 1995.

The change of the English name to Mumbai resulted from pressure from Marathi nationalists. They thought "Bombay" was a legacy of British colonial oppression – even though the Hindi name was also Bumbai. Plenty of local citizens today still say Bombay when they are speaking English, and so we can do that too if we want to.