

# The stroke-count-based sort isn't random, although it looks that way if you only see it in translation

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During the NBC coverage of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, the announcers more than once said that the teams will not be entering in the normal order, but rather in a random order based on the number of strokes in the team's name as translated into Chinese.

This is an odd use of the word *random*. You might say that at the Athens Olympics, the teams did not enter in the normal order, but rather in a random order based on the collation of the characters in the team's name as translated into Greek.

Teams enter the stadium in the collation order customary for the host nation, with the exception that Greece always goes first and the host nation always goes last. (Which created an interesting puzzle for the Athens Olympics: How do you go both first and last?) For Chinese, there are a variety of collations, which fall into two broad categories: pronunciation-based and stroke-count-based, and the organizers chose one of the stroke-count-based sorts. Fair enough.

Of course, it *seems* random if you don't get to see the original Chinese names. And for some reason, NBC didn't show the Chinese names for the countries, so the opportunity to see the sort order in action was lost on the viewing audience. Viewers in the United States who saw the Ghanaian, Canadian, and Gabonese teams enter one after the other would just say "Yeah, that's the stupid random order again," because they didn't see that it was 加納, 加拿大, and 加蓬.

(Conspiracy theorists would say that NBC didn't show the Chinese names to allow them to manipulate the order of the teams and place the United States closer to the end of the list than it normally would appear.)

Freaky Raymond-trivia that will probably show up on Wikipedia within 30 minutes: The first character of my given Chinese name is 瑞, which happens also to be the first character for the Chinese names of the countries 瑞士 (Switzerland) and 瑞典 (Sweden), so it's only fitting that the first two languages I learned in a classroom setting were Swiss German and Swedish. Alas, life is not as poetic as it should be, for the second character of my given Chinese name

sorts after 典, so I would actually have marched between Sweden and Nauru (瑙魯). Of course, another impediment to my marching between Switzerland and Sweden is the more significant fact that I am not personally an Olympic team.

**Bonus griping about language reporting:** The official Chinese-language cheer has been reported by the English-language press as *China, add oil!* While literally true, it's also a misleading translation. The phrase 加油 does mean, if you take it apart word by word, *to add oil*, but as a phrase, it means *to refuel* or, when used metaphorically, *to cheer on*. Chinese speakers don't think about oil when they say 加油 any more than English-speakers think of objects hurtling through the air when they say *throw a party*. In both cases, you only think about the phrase literally when you're making a pun or are otherwise playing around with the language.

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