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Problems of characters and pronunciation on Chinese geographical names*

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The main problems of characters and pronunciations on Chinese geographical names are many homophones/polyphones/variant form and rarely-used Chinese characters are in use. They block the transmitting of geographical names information, the simplification of Chinese character and the popularity of mandarin (Chinese Putonghua). Many geographical names have same pronunciations but different characters for using homophones. Special note should be used to differentiate them, which lowers the efficiency of communication. For example, two Chinese counties “? ? ”(in Zhangjiakou Shi of Hebei Sheng) and“? ? ”(in Handan Shi of Hebei Sheng) have same pronunciations(Wei xian) but different characters. You should emphasize their locations to differentiate them. It is difficult to decide the pronunciation of polyphone. It is difficult to read and write variant form and rarely-used character too. The burden learning and using Chinese character is increased because of these problems of geographical names. There are 2,500 special characters of geographical names on 1:250,000 map of China and 4,000 on 1:50,000 map of China. Special database of characters is needed to process these characters on computer.

Special history and geographical environment of Chinese lead to the above problems. Firstly, Chinese has long history. The number of the whole Chinese characters and each character's grapheme/pronunciation and meanings are evolving all the time. Many characters are conserved in geographical names and turned into special characters while they have no longer been used in other areas. So geographical name is one of the main sources of rarely-used Chinese characters. Secondly, Chinese is used by a great deal of population in a large area. There are many dialects of Chinese. The pronunciations of a character may be different in diverse areas. Different characters may be used to express the same meaning in diverse dialects. Many polyphones and special usages are added to Chinese because of the special pronunciations and meanings in dialects and made Chinese become more complex.

China started making a research on the characters and pronunciations of geographical names to solve above complex problems in 2000. The emphasis is names of administrative districts at first to make the work easier. The goal is reducing rarely-used characters, eliminating variant form characters, standardizing simplified/self-made characters and confirming pronunciations and single romanization forms of all names of administrative districts. The base is General Language Law and Administration of Geographical Names Ordinance of China. The criterion is standard Chinese character and mandarin.

In the course of the work we found although the standardization is necessary but some irregularity should not be changed temporarily.

- a. Characters of surnames. For example, there is “荷? ? ” (Manshan Zhen)in Shandong Sheng. “荷”(Man) is a rarely-used character. But it also a local surname which includes thousands of

persons.

- b. Rarely-used Characters have special meanings and cannot be replaced by other characters. For example, there is “? ? ?”(Yuanban Xiang) in Pingxiang Shi of Jiangxi Sheng. “?” is a rarely-used character which means slime. There are many slime fields there.
- c. Self-made characters have special meanings and cannot be replaced by other characters. For example, there is “? 鶯?” (Wuchi Xiang) in Yongjia Xi an of Zhejiang Sheng. It is said that five waterfowls named “? ? ?”(xi chí) were found by local hunters. They wanted to name the place “? ?”, but the two Chinese characters are so complex to write. So they made“鶯”from the two characters as the name of the place.
- d. Variant form characters have special meanings and cannot be replaced by other characters. For example, there is “? ? ?”(Miaoquan Zhen) in Changshu Shi of Jiangsu Sheng. “?” is the variant form of “?”. But “?” means large water, while “?” means little. There are many rivers in the area. So “?” is correct but “?” is difficult to interpret.
- e. Dialects used in geographical names also should not be denied completely. For example, “?” (Jing) has been regarded as the variant form of “?” (means pathway). But “?” is still used in many geographical names in south of Jiangxi Sheng and north of Guangdong Sheng, such as “? ? ?”(Nanjing Zhen) and “? ? ?”(Shejing Xiang) in Quannan Xian of Jiangxi Sheng. But the “?” is pronounced as “Gang” which means special landform has wide ends and narrow midst. The character may also ought to be reserved in geographical names for its special meaning/pronunciations and widely distribution.

We realize that geographical name is not only important information but also special cultural phenomenon. Many ancient geographical names have rich meanings. They should be protected and researched as active fossil of human history. The soul of geographical names is their special meanings. Simply replacing original characters with others may distort or eliminate their meanings and cut the connections between ancient and modern geographical names.

In order to fully respect history and preserve culture, China regards protecting old culture of geographical names as an important principle. The homophones/polyphones/variant form and rarely-used Chinese characters in geographical names should be decreased to make transmitting of geographical names information easier. But interior meanings of geographical names also should be preserved. Wariness is needed in the course of the standardization of geographical names. The opinion of local people should be fully respected. If changing characters or pronunciations lead to the primary meanings be changed, the original forms should be preserved until suitable way be found in the future. So the standardization of characters and pronunciations of geographical names will be a long process. All characters used in names of administrative districts, including counties/cities and provinces, have been attached to general Chinese characters already. Some variant forms characters of geographical names will also keep on being used as standard characters.