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Activities relating to the Working Group on Pronunciation

The Current Research Situation of Variant Pronunciations of Chinese Geographical Names

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Summary

Variant pronunciation is an important linguistic phenomenon of geographical names. The reasons of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names are extremely complex. In recent years, China reinforced the research on variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names and selected some variant pronunciations of geographical names which assuredly possess historical and cultural values to disseminate and protect them as the cultural heritage of geographic names.

Chinese Putonghua (common speech based on Beijing pronunciation) is the commonly-used language in China. However, there are some variant pronunciations with distinctive local feature reserved in geographical names. In recent years, China reinforced the research on the phenomenon of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names.

Variant pronunciation of geographical names is a sort of variant pronunciation of Chinese characters. It refers to a Chinese character that has the general pronunciation while possesses another different pronunciation in some geographical names. For instance, the character “六”, it pronounces “liù” in Putonghua, but it pronounces “lù” in “Luhe”(六合) of Jiangsu Province. The character “蚌” pronounces “bàng” in Putonghua, but it pronounces “bèng” in “Bengbu”(蚌埠) of Anhui Province. The character “番” pronounces “fān” in Putonghua, but it pronounces “pān” in “Panyu”(番禺) of Guangdong Province. The character “厦” pronounces “shà” in Putonghua, but it pronounces “xià” in “Xiamen”(厦门) of Fujian Province.

The reasons of the formation of variant pronunciations of Chinese geographical names are extremely complex. For instance, some geographical names maintain the ancient pronunciation rather than follow the change of pronunciation of general character in spoken language. Some characters used in geographical names have changed but the pronunciations have remained unchanged. Some characters used for geographical names have differences between literary and colloquial pronunciations and the latter were widely accepted by the society.

For variant pronunciations of Chinese geographical names, the practice of total acceptance of the pronunciation in dialects cannot be adopted, because a great deal of polyphonic characters would appear, the phonologic rules would be disturbed and the burden of Chinese learning and mastering would increased in that case. However, the practice of total acceptance of the general pronunciation in Putonghua can not be adopted either, not only that would be likely to cause the fracture of history and do harm to culture heritage of geographical names, but also would give rise to the mismatch between the pronunciation in Putonghua and local pronunciation, bringing about needless confusion and negative effect on the local life and communication. For example, all the voice services in civil aviation and railway transport report geographical names in Putonghua, so people who get used to variant pronunciation of geographical names, may delay their schedule due to they cannot understand correctly the pronunciation of geographical names in Putonghua.

When dealing with the problem of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names, its current usage in society and the principle of the linguistics must be considered comprehensively. At present, the Chinese academic community thinks generally that when dealing with variant pronunciations of geographical names, the primary task is to make sure whether the pronunciation is the one that agrees with the general dialect-Putonghua conversion rules, or is the one that is being used specifically in local areas. When the variant pronunciation obeys the rules, it should be pronounced according to the principle of Putonghua. When the variant pronunciation is specifically used in local areas and if the usage of the pronunciation has long history, high frequency, broad application, deep impact and has been well accepted by the society, then acknowledging and accepting the pronunciation as a part of Putonghua should be taken into account. Those variant pronunciations of Chinese geographical names with cultural values can be regarded as the cultural heritage of geographical names.

China had issued four versions of *The Authorized Table of Putonghua Words with Variant Pronunciations* in 1957, 1959, 1962 and 1985. As the situation of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names is very complicated, China worked very prudently in these four revisions and only revised the variant pronunciations of major geographical names, such as the pronunciations of names of counties. Along with economic growth and development of society of China, we should use better solutions to solve the problem of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names. As the urbanization of China is progressing rapidly, a lot of old geographical names are disappearing. China is taking measures to develop and protect the cultural connotation of geographical names, and thus China is paying more attention to the research of variant pronunciation of Chinese geographical names.

In recent years, relevant government agencies, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Language Commission, have made revisions on some variant pronunciations of geographical names, such as the character “豸” normally pronounces “zhì”, but it pronounces “zhài” in “Guanzhai Shan” (冠豸山), the name of a mountain in Fujian province (a famous scenic spot) and the character “宕” normally pronounces “dàng”, but it pronounces “tàn” in “Tanchang Xian” (宕昌县), a county in Gansu province. These government agencies have taken special researches and arguments on those two geographical names, and acknowledged the variant pronunciations as standard pronunciations. Those two variant pronunciations have been enrolled into authoritative reference books such as *Modern Chinese Dictionary*. In the future, during the progress of the standardization of geographical names, China will pay more attention to the research on variant pronunciations of Chinese geographical names, confirm the special pronunciations of geographical names when necessary and select variant pronunciations with historical or cultural

values into the cultural heritage of geographical names, and take measures to publicize and protect them.