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TRANSCRIPTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM

Document prepared by the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam

Compilation, the purpose of which is to collect and catalogue the geographical names of the Republic of Viet-Nam, is seriously impeded by the long-standing state of war in our country. These difficulties are compounded by another which creates delicate problems for the National Geographical Directorate: the transcription of geographical names into Viet-Namese.

This operation would seem to be very simple, since Viet-Namese is written in Roman characters, but it is complicated, firstly by the existence of diacritical marks in the written language and the particular phonemes of the language, and secondly by the presence of numerous ethnic minorities, in various parts of the territory of the Republic of Viet-Nam, who speak other languages which were until recently unwritten. Consideration must also be given to terms of foreign origin, which must be dealt with separately.

In order to explain the method of transcription which has been adopted in cartographic work in the Republic of Viet-Nam, we propose to consider:

- Purely Viet-Namese geographical names
- Geographical names deriving from ethnic minorities
- Geographical names introduced by the French
- Geographical names from other countries.

I. PURELY VIET-NAMESE GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

As a rule official names could, to a certain extent, be faithfully transcribed by copying them exactly as written in official instruments such as decrees, orders official gazettes, statistical bulletins, etc.

Names which have not been catalogued by the authorities and are therefore frequently misrepresented give rise to some difficulties of interpretation:

1. Difficulties due to diacritical marks

The existence of diacritical marks such as á, à, â, ã, ç, ê, ě etc. in written Viet-Nameese has been a great problem, not only for foreigners, but also for some Viet-Nameese.

Each diacritical mark represents a particular sound, the pronunciation ranging from high to neutral to low; this causes frequent confusion and distortion.

Thus maps previously published by the former Indo-China Geographical Service feature many geographical names on which the diacritical marks are incorrect or missing.

These errors are also found in some official documents published by the Viet-Nameese authorities; occasionally the same name is written in different ways by various governmental organs.

Example:

The name of the commune of TÂN KIÊN (province of GIA ĐỊNH) is written incorrectly as TÂN KIEN in maps previously published by the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

2. Difficulties due to pronunciation

The presence in written Viet-Nameese of letters which do not occur in the Roman alphabet creates confusion for foreigners which can be amusing sometimes. For example, the letter Đ, đ (barred D) is pronounced in the same way as ordinary D, d and the letter D, d (unbarred D) is pronounced in the same way as Z in Viet-Nameese.

Examples:

NÚI ĐÁT - hill without rocks (barred Đ is pronounced like D)

HÒN DỪA - island of coconut palms (unbarred D is pronounced like Z)

3. Difficulties due to spelling

Certain pairs of consonants, such as CH and TR, D and GI, X and S, which are difficult to differentiate in the popular pronunciation, are often the cause of innumerable misspellings.

Example:

The name of a locality in the province of PHONG DINH was incorrectly written BA SE, instead of BA XE, on Viet-Nameese maps published before 1969.

4. Hyphenation

The use of hyphens is also tricky. Since Viet-Nameese is essentially monosyllabic, each word has its own meaning and should be written separately. Several words used together may have a different meaning, and for that reason the use of hyphens is necessary.

Three categories may be distinguished here:

If a place-name is composed of a noun followed by one or several modifiers, such as a qualifying adjective, a past participle or another noun qualifying the first one, as in ordinary texts, hyphens are not used.

Examples:

<u>Compound name</u>	<u>Meaning and part of speech</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
DẠT ĐỎ	DẠT - earth, common noun ĐỎ - red, qualifying adjective	District of DẠT ĐỎ
CHỢ GẠO	CHỢ - market, common noun GẠO - rice, common noun	District of CHỢ GẠO
KINH XÁNG MỎI	KINH - canal, common noun XÁNG - dredged, past participle MỎI - new, qualifying adjective	NEW DREDGED CANAL

If two or several nouns are combined to form a compound name whose meaning differs from that of the individual words, particularly in the case of nouns of Sino-Viet-Nameese origin, hyphens are used.

Examples:

<u>Compound name</u>	<u>Meaning of each word</u>	<u>Meaning of compound name</u>
AN-MỸ	AN - peace, common noun MỸ - beauty, common noun	Village of AN-MỸ
HƯỜNG-THỦY	HƯỜNG - perfume, common noun THỦY - water, common noun	Village of HƯỜNG-THỦY

In the case of proper nouns formed of a surname and one or more first names, hyphens are used in accordance with the composition of these names.

Examples:

NGUYỄN-VĂN-AN
 NGUYỄN-PHƯỚC
 BẢO-TÂN

There are some names of towns which are very widely known, such as HA-NỘI, HAI-PHÔNG, SAI-GON, etc., which should be written in the correct monosyllabic form. These names are found written on maps previously published by the former Indochina Geographical Service, or published abroad, in the polysyllabic form and without the diacritical marks: HANOI, HAIPHONG, SAIGON, etc.

The polysyllabic transcription, which is obviously a foreign invention, should be avoided.

II. Geographical names deriving from ethnic minorities

The population of Viet-Nam includes, in addition to the Viet-Nameese race, several heterogeneous races such as the Montagnards of the upper plateaux, Viet-Nameese of Khmer or Cham origin, etc. Each ethnic group has its own dialect and some of them have only recently adopted the romanized transcription.

One particular feature of the toponymy of the Republic of Viet-Nam is the existence of geographical names of non-Viet-Nameese origin. We shall examine these particular cases separately.

The ethnic minorities are for the most part grouped in the upper plateau: the Thai, Meo, etc. in the north, the Rhade, Koho, Bahnar, etc. in the south, and the Cham in the coastal provinces of central Viet-Nam.

Geographical names of Cham origin have been transcribed into Viet-Nameese for many centuries, by transcribing them phonetically first into Chinese (CHU HÁN) or Viet-Nameese (CHU NÔM) characters, and later into the roman alphabet. They have become universally adopted, by the population as well as official bodies.

Examples:

<u>Cham name</u>	<u>Viet-Nameese name</u>
CU PIÔNG	CŨ MÔNG
IA RANG or IA TRANG	NHA TRANG
PAN IDARANG, PAN NRANG or PAN RAN	PHAN RANG

As regards geographical names deriving from other ethnic groups, in the days of the former Indochina Geographical Service the French (or other Europeans) were the first to transcribe them into the roman alphabet.

There is a trend at present to transcribe these names in monosyllabic form. This trend should be discouraged for reasons which will be given in the Conclusion.

Examples:

French transcription

KCNTUM
PLEIKU

New transcription
(to be rejected)

CÔNG TUM
BỎ LÂY CU or PỒ LÂY CU

The polysyllabic form, which is a legacy of the French transcription, is foreign to our monosyllabic system of writing. However, at present, in the absence of a more thorough linguistic study, the polysyllabic form has been provisionally adopted by the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

Geographical names in the border regions

Generally speaking, in the border regions the populations of adjacent countries do not stay within precise boundaries, even though the national frontiers have been clearly demarcated. The fact that a large number of inhabitants of one country live in the territory of the other, and vice versa, produces a kind of demographic mix. This explains their influence on the toponymy of the border regions.

Thus, in the territory of the Republic of Viet-Nam, several geographical names of Laotian or Khmer appearance occur along the border.

Examples:

In the provinces of THỪA THIÊN and QUẢNG TRI, along the Laos-Viet-Nam border, Laotian toponyms are found such as:

CO PUNG (CO or KO = mountain)
BAN HOUEI KATANG (BAN = village)

In the province of CHÂU ĐỐC (THẤT SƠN region), on the Khmer Republic-Viet-Nam border, Khmer toponyms are found such as:

PHNOM KACHONG (PHNOM = mountain)
PHUM KHDENH (PHUM = village), etc.

Geographical names of Malaysian origin

Maps of the Republic of Viet-Nam feature, particularly along the coast, several toponyms of Malaysian origin which have been transcribed in polysyllabic form:

Examples:

POULO PANJANG, POULO WAY, POULO OBI, POULO CONDORE, POULO CÉCIR DE MER, POULO GAMBIR, (Poulo, in Malay, means island)

Ancient documents repeatedly assert that these names were introduced by Malay pilots, who were hired by European navigators or merchants to ensure greater safety on the last lap of the Far East route, which was still often unknown.

It should be noted that the majority of these islands have Viet-Nameese names, which date back many centuries and are not, as some believe, of recent creation.

Viet-Nameese geographical names of Khmer origin

When they become Viet-Nameese citizens, Viet-Nameese of Khmer origin form their own separate nuclei, speak their own language, retain their ways and customs and, consequently, have a preponderant influence on regional toponymy.

In these regions there are several geographical names of Khmer origin with a Viet-Nameese distortion.

Examples:

<u>Khmer Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Viet-Nameese Distortion</u>
TUK KHMAU	Black waters	CÀ MAU
MY SOR or MÊ SOR	Pretty girl	MY THO
SROCK KHLÉANG	Village granary	SÓC TRANG

III. GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES INTRODUCED BY THE FRENCH

There also exist French geographical names introduced by French traders or Catholic missionaries. Although they appear on maps published abroad or previously published by the former Indochina Geographical Service, since 1970 they are not as a rule to be found in the maps of the National Geographical Directorate. These French names were translated literally into our language, whimsically or out of ignorance, by certain Viet-Nameese who did not trouble to find out the original names, and they are "barbarisms" which are inadmissible in our national catalogue of toponyms.

Example:

<u>Name introduced by French</u>	<u>Mistranslation</u>	<u>Correct original name</u>
FLEUVE ROUGE	HÔNG HÀ	NHÌ HÀ or SÔNG NHÌ

IV. GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

The search for a logical method of transcribing geographical names from other countries has for two years been another special concern of the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam. Up to the present, everyone has been transcribing them in his own way, depending on his knowledge of foreign languages - from foreign languages - from French, English, or Chinese.

Three approaches should be considered:

Transcription from the original language

This method consists in adopting, letter by letter, the foreign geographical names as originally transcribed in the roman alphabet.

Examples:

LONDON, BEYROUTH, KJOBENHAVN, TEHRAN.

With this method, it would be difficult to obtain the original documents; checking proper names would therefore be hard to do.

Transcription from Chinese documents

This is perhaps the oldest method of transcription: it was very often employed from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, when Viet-Nameese scholars began to discover countries outside their familiar range, through the use of Chinese texts.

The toponyms were transcribed phonetically by the Chinese into Chinese characters; those characters were then pronounced in the Viet-Nameese manner by our scholars and later romanized.

Examples:

<u>Foreign name</u>	<u>Sino-Vietnamese transcription</u>
LONDON	LUAN DON
PARIS	BA LE
ITALIA	Y DAI LOI
ASIA	A TE A
etc.	

These toponyms, the transcription of which is a triangular process are simple for Viet-Nameese to pronounce and remember. However, they undergo a twofold distortion - first Chinese and then Viet-Nameese.

Direct transcription into Viet-Nameese

This method only appeared a few years ago. It consists in transcribing geographical names of other countries phonetically into Viet-Nameese.

However, the transcription is not systematic. It is done from documents either in English or in French; there is also the difficulty of certain syllables which cannot be transcribed into another language.

Examples

<u>Foreign toponym</u>	<u>Transcription from documents in French</u>	<u>Transcription from documents in English</u>
ROME	RÔ MÔ	RÔ MA
LE CAIRE	LÔ KE	KÊ RÔ
LA MECQUE	LA MÉCH	MÉCH CA
etc.		

This method is not uniform.

V. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above analysis, we shall set out below some guidelines for the transcription of toponyms which were adopted two years ago by the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

TRANSCRIPTION OF VIET-NAMESE GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

The spelling, including diacritical marks after checking, where possible, on the spot is to be strictly followed.

Initial letters should be capitals except in the case of articles, prepositions and conjunctions.

Example:

tu Vinh Thành đen Vinh An

Hyphens are not included, although this is contrary to normal usage, since they may clutter the map and conceal other details.

Unidentified and unused toponyms are deleted.

Before the definitive form is decided upon, toponyms are thoroughly checked.

The polysyllabic form of transcription introduced by the French (or other Europeans) has been provisionally adopted. Pending the establishment of a National Commission on Toponymy any other method of transcription might cause further confusion.

In the case of orographic names of Sino-Viet-Namese or non-Viet-Namese origin care should be taken to avoid pleonasms and translation into the corresponding Viet-Namese names.

(a) Pleonasms (to be avoided)

Examples:

Correct transcription

NAM HẢI or BIỂN NAM
HOÀNG LIÊN SƠN or
NÚI HOÀNG LIÊN

Transcription to be avoided

BIỂN NAM HẢI
NÚI HOÀNG LIÊN SƠN

(b) Translations (to be avoided)

Examples:

<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Transcription to be avoided</u>	<u>Correct transcription</u>
RIVER NA	<u>SÔNG NA</u>	NÂM NA
RIVER DAM	<u>SÔNG DAM</u>	DAI DAM
etc.		

These orographic names will be translated into Viet-Namese in a marginal glossary.

Toponyms of non-Vietnamese origin are transcribed phonetically into Viet-Namese on the basis of their correct pronunciation.

Toponyms introduced by the French should never be translated unquestioningly into Viet-Namese; their original form should be found.

Example:

Toponym introduced by the French

RIVIÈRE CLAIRE

Original form which should be adopted

SÔNG LÔ

TRANSCRIPTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

This is a very delicate problem. The logical method is to adopt the romanized toponyms which appear on existing maps published by the official cartographic services of the countries concerned.

At present the preparation of a Dictionary of Geographical Names is one of the main projects of the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam. Sets of index cards have been made of toponyms and work has been begun on cataloguing them.

However, the preparation of a definitive dictionary for the entire territory of the Republic of Viet-Nam is too time-consuming. For that reason, the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam has decided first to publish booklets of the geographical names together with miscellaneous information: one for each of the 44 provinces of the Republic of Viet-Nam. These booklets will be used later for preparing the definitive Dictionary, pending the establishment of the National Commission on Toponymy.

This report shows that the problem of toponymy in the Republic of Viet-Nam is extremely complex. Countries which in the future will be drawing up maps featuring the Republic of Viet-Nam are therefore recommended, in order to avoid any error or confusion as regards Viet-Namese toponyms, to send the proofs of the maps to the National Geographical Directorate of the Republic of Viet-Nam for checking before final printing.
