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Writing systems and pronunciation: conversion into non-Roman writing systems

New developments in formulating guidelines for converting geographical names from foreign languages into Chinese

Summary**

For the past few years, China has been constantly strengthening the work of converting geographical names from foreign languages into Chinese. On the basis of the eight guidelines for converting geographical names from foreign languages into Chinese, China has formulated four new standards over the past five years, which include the conversion of geographical names from Korean, Japanese, Persian and Lao into Chinese.

Chinese is the official language of China and also one of the six working languages of the United Nations. As pictograms, Chinese characters are able to express both sound and meaning. It is common for one Chinese character to have multiple pronunciations and for multiple characters to have the same pronunciation. Therefore, the only way to achieve standardization in the conversion of foreign geographical names into Chinese is to apply specialized techniques and norms. The four new conversion guidelines all involve the conversion between Chinese and non-Roman writing systems. The common principles for conversion are:

(a) To use original materials and adopt commonly accepted Chinese translations in conversion. Maps, gazetteers, geographical dictionaries and other materials used in converting geographical names from foreign languages into Chinese should be official, up-to-date and standardized. Commonly accepted Chinese translations of foreign geographical names should be followed;

(b) To transliterate proper nouns and translate common nouns;

(c) To convert derived names and eponyms in the same manner as was done for the source names.

* E/CONF.105/1.

** The full report was prepared by Liu Lian'an, Gao Yu and Ji Yuan, and is from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/ungegnConf11.html>, in the languages of submission only, as document E/CONF.105/71/CRP.71.

