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WRITING SYSTEMS:

CONVERSION OF NAMES FROM ONE WRITING SYSTEM INTO ANOTHER:

ROMANIZATION

The application of Pinyin spellings for

Geographical Names

Paper presented by the United Kingdom 1/

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The United Kingdom adopted Pinyin spellings of Chinese names early in 1979. The conversion from Wade-Giles to Pinyin is a long and difficult task, necessitating a number of studies to overcome the problems successfully.

Several conclusions have been drawn from our studies. It was apparent beforehand that it was not possible to convert Wade-Giles names directly into Pinyin. Work over the past three years has reinforced this view. Names have changed, new settlements have grown up, and the readings of some characters have altered through time. Up-to-date character sources are therefore essential to determine the correct Pinyin spellings of Han geographical names.

Minority names cannot be generated from character sources. The sound patterns of minority languages differ greatly from those of Chinese, so that Chinese characters are at best only a very rough approximation of the names in minority areas. On occasions more than one set of characters exists for one minority name. Thus these names can be taken from Pinyin sources only, but even these can vary in their spellings. Ideally, all minority-area province maps should be published in Pinyin.

Difficulties were encountered in understanding the exact relationship between administrative and "local" names, particularly at county and commune level. Administrative changes are frequent; consequently names often alter or are transferred from place to place. It is with interest that we wait to see how the change from the commune system to the township system will affect the choice of names.

In a small minority of names, greater difficulties have been encountered. A number of characters used in place names have two or more readings. In cases where only the characters are given in the source material, it can be very difficult to determine which reading should be used.

Discrepancies between various sources are somewhat puzzling. A comparison between the Pinyin Atlas (1977) and the Shandong province map (1979) revealed 28 differences in one diqu (second-order administrative division) alone. Again, a comparison between the Pinyin Atlas and the handbook "The Administrative Divisions of the People's Republic of China" (1980) brought to light a number of differences in spellings in the minority areas of Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang.

Finally, there appear to be some discrepancies over word division. The official Pinyin hydrographic charts in particular often differ from other sources in this respect.

Many of these problems spring from the nature of the immense work involved in standardizing names in so vast and varied a country as China. The growing number of maps, charts and atlases that have appeared since 1977 are therefore very welcome. These sources show just how great a degree of standardization has been brought to Chinese names, where confusion and dual systems existed before. A number of dictionaries, which include the characters used for place names, now exist. Other material relating to place names and their problems has also appeared. In particular, the magazine "Diming Zhishi" (Knowledge of Place Names), which is issued bi-monthly, has proved a very useful source, since it discusses many of the problems outlined above.

It is hoped that future Chinese publications will contribute further to the solution of these problems.