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REPORT ON THE STATE OF STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN JAPAN

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Report on the State of Standardization of
Geographical Names in Japan
(Item No.5 of the Provisional Agenda)

The state of the standardization of geographical names and related activities in Japan since the 5th UN Conference (the 13th Session of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names) are as follows:

1. Standardization of Geographical Names

(1) Domestic Names

There is no single central agency responsible for the collection, registration, and standardization of geographical names in Japan. The several agencies and organizations have been sharing the responsibility in their respective fields of speciality, and have been cooperating to achieve the consistent standardization of geographical names.

Concerning the names of both the municipalities and their areal subdivisions, their spelling, pronunciation and area are controlled by laws and regulations. There is no need for standardization of these names any more. Effort and standardization has been mainly made on natural feature names and conventional place names.

The agencies engaged in mapping, namely, the Geographical Survey Institute and the Hydrographic Department of the Maritime Safety Agency, have been collecting names for the purpose of annotating their maps and charts. In order to coordinate the use of names by the two agencies, the Joint Committee on the Standardization of Geographical Names was established in 1960 and has been convened once or twice a year.

The committee completed the standardization of about 6,000 natural feature names to be used on 1:500,000 scale maps and charts by 1978. Then followed the standardization of the names to be used on 1:25,000 scale maps and charts except the place names controlled by laws as mentioned above. About 19,000 out of the total 80,000 names had been standardized by the time of the last Conference, although no significant progress has been made since then.

In addition, the committee has been continuing review work of the standardized names, which includes delineation of the area indicated by each name, just started recently. The present main concern is placed on the group of islands and the sea zone such as channel, bay and so forth.

(2) Names of Undersea Features

The names of undersea features adopted by the GEBCO Sub-committee on Geographical Names of Ocean Bottom Features and approved by IHO are being used as the standardized ones with no exception.

The names of undersea features discovered and observed by Japanese agencies have been determined by the Hydrographic Department after deliberation by the Assembly on Geographical names of Oceans and Bottom Features, the members of which are agencies associated with ocean and undersea observation.

Since the last Conference, 90 names have been adopted and the total number of the adopted names is of 770 at the present time.

(3) Antarctic Geographical Names

The naming of natural features and important places discovered and observed by the Japanese Antarctic Research Expedition is expedited by the following procedure.

The director of the National Institute of Polar Research seeks counsel from the Antarctic Place-Names Committee of Japan, then prepares a draft of names. On the basis of the draft, the names are adopted at the general convention of the Headquarters of the Japanese Antarctic Research Expedition.

The names of 276 places had been adopted by the time of the last Conference, although no new names have been added since then.

2. Romanization of Geographical Names

Two systems of Roman spelling of the Japanese language, which are called the "Kunrei Siki" system and the "Syusei Hebon Siki" system (the modified Hepburn system), have been advertised and wide spread for a long time.

In order to achieve unification, in 1954 the government of Japan issued the notification of the cabinet which stated the "Kunrei Siki" system should always be used while the "Syusei Hebon Siki" system might be tolerated when the immediate change of the system was difficult.

The geographical names annotated on the Japanese official maps and charts prepared for international use issued by the Geographical Survey Institute and the Hydrographic Department have been accordingly spelled with the "Kunrei Siki" system.

The "Syusei Hebon Siki" system, however, has yet been widely used. Considering the historical background and the present situation, it appears to be quite difficult to immediately abandon one system.

As for reference, it must be noted that only 14 out of 100 basic sounds are differently spelled with the two systems, and that the conversion rule from one system to the other is very simple.

3. Geographical Data Files

With the spread of the use of computer systems in governmental agencies and private enterprises, the information processing on geographical names by utilizing computer systems has become very common.

Each of about 3,300 municipalities has been assigned a unique code number by the Japanese Industrial Standard (JIS). Data files of the table of the name and the code of municipalities have been made and are well used by many agencies and companies.

The Data file of names of municipalities and their areal subdivisions has been compiled by the Japan Geographic Association, which is the extra-departmental organization of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Close to 400,000 place names with the information such as classification, ordinary spelling, spelling with "Kana" letters, which represents pronunciation, and so forth have also been making these types of data files, and have made them available to the public.

In regard to other place names and natural feature names, the standardized geographical names adopted at the Joint Committee on Standardization of Geographical Names have been converted into digital form and stored in magnetic tape files by the Geographical Survey Institute. The data record of a name consists of following items:

classification, ordinary spelling, spelling with "kana" letters, spelling with Roman letters, sequential code number, approximate position and map name.

The Geographical Survey Institute started the creation of the data files of geographical names annotated on 1:200,000 scale maps last year, where, besides basic information items mentioned above, the data record of each name includes the position and the direction of the string of letters on the map. To represent the position and direction data, the corner point coordinates of both the first and the last letters of the string are recorded. The simple software to retrieve and display this data on a personal computer was also prepared.

In addition, the Hydrographic Department and the Geographical Survey Institute are conducting research and development on the geographical name data base system for practical use, aiming for the application to their respective computer-assisted mapping.