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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-Namse geographical names
Geographical names deriving from ethnic minorities
Geographical names introduced by the French
Geographical names from other countries.

I. PURELY VIET-NAMSE 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.

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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, ã, ã, a, á etc. in written Viet-Name has been a great problem, not only for foreigners, but also for some Viet-Name.

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

   **Examples:**

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

   HỘN ĐẢ - 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.
4. Hyphenation

The use of hyphens is also tricky. Since Viet-Namese 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound name</th>
<th>Meaning and part of speech</th>
<th>Meaning of compound name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ĐẤT ĐỎ</td>
<td>ĐẤT - earth, common noun DỎ - red, qualifying adjective</td>
<td>District of ĐẤT ĐỎ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHỢ GẠO</td>
<td>CHỢ - market, common noun GẠO - rice, common noun</td>
<td>District of CHỢ GẠO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KÍNH XÃNG MÔI</td>
<td>KÍNH - canal, common noun XÃNG - dredged, past participle MÔI - new, qualifying adjective</td>
<td>NEW DREDGED CANAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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-Namese origin, hyphens are used.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound name</th>
<th>Meaning of each word</th>
<th>Meaning of compound name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AN-MỸ</td>
<td>AN - peace, common noun MY - beauty, common noun</td>
<td>Village of AN-MỸ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HƯƠNG-THỦY</td>
<td>HƯƠNG - perfume, common noun THỦY - water, common noun</td>
<td>Village of HƯƠNG-THỦY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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-PHƯƠNG
BẢO-TAN

There are some names of towns which are very widely known, such as HÀ-NỘI, HÀ-NỘI, HÀ-PHÒNG, SÀI-GÒN, 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: HARIOI, HAI-BONG, SAICON, 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-Namese race, several heterogeneous races such as the Montagnards of the upper plateaux, Viet-Namese 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 toponomy of the Republic of Viet-Nam is the existence of geographical names of non-Viet-Namese origin. We shall examine these particular cases separately.

The ethnic minorities are for the most part grouped in the upper plateau: the Thai, Mèo, etc. in the north, the Nhade, 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-Namese for many centuries, by transcribing them phonetically first into Chinese (CHU HÀN) or Viet-Namese (CHU NỘM) characters, and later into the roman alphabet. They have become universally adopted, by the population as well as official bodies.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chàm name</th>
<th>Viet-Namese name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CU PHÔHE</td>
<td>CÔ MÔNG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA RANG or IA TRANG</td>
<td>NHA TRANG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN IDARANG, PAN NRANG</td>
<td>PHAN RANG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or PAN RAN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French transcription</th>
<th>New transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KONTUM</td>
<td>CÔNG_TUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLEIKU</td>
<td>BÔ LÂY CU or PÔ LÂY CU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 THŮA THIÊN and QUANG 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 Đ ÔC (THÁT SƠN region), on the Khmer Republic-Viet-Nam border, Khmer toponyms are found such as:

- PHNOM KACHONG (PHNOM = mountain)
- PHUH KHĐENH (PHUH = 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 CONDORÉ, POULO CÉCIR DE MER, POULO GAMBIIR, (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-Namene names, which date back many centuries and are not, as some believe, of recent creation.

**Viet-Namene geographical names of Khmer origin**

When they become Viet-Namene citizens, Viet-Namene 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 toponomy.

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

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Khmer Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Viet-Namene Distortion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TUK KHIMAU</td>
<td>Black waters</td>
<td>ÇÁ MAU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY SOR or MÈ SOR</td>
<td>Pretty girl</td>
<td>MY THO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SROCK KHLEANG</td>
<td>Village granary</td>
<td>SÔC TRANG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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-Namene who did not trouble to find out the original names, and they are "barbarisms" which are inadmissible in our national catalogue of toponyms.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name introduced by French</th>
<th>Mistranslation</th>
<th>Correct original name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLEUVE ROUGE</td>
<td>HỌNG HÀ</td>
<td>MHĨ HÀ or SÔNG NHĨ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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-Namese 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-Namese manner by our scholars and later romanized.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign name</th>
<th>Sino-Vietnamese transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LONDON</td>
<td>LUAN ĐÔN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARIS</td>
<td>BA LÊ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALIA</td>
<td>Y ĐAI LỘI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASIA</td>
<td>A TÈ A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign toponym</th>
<th>Transcription from documents in French</th>
<th>Transcription from documents in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROUE</td>
<td>RÔ MÔ</td>
<td>RÔ MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE CAIRE</td>
<td>LÔ KE</td>
<td>KÊ RÔ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA MECQUE</td>
<td>LA MÉCH</td>
<td>MÉCH CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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-NAMÊSE 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:

từ Vĩnh Thạnh đến Vĩnh 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-Vietnamese or non-Vietnamese origin care should be taken to avoid pleonasms and translation into the corresponding Viet-Namese names.

(a) Pleonasms (to be avoided)

Examples:

Correct transcription                          | Transcription to be avoided
---                                           | ---
HẢI BÌNH NAM                               | BÌNH NAM HẢI
HOÀNG LIÊN SƠ; or                          | NUI HOÀNG LIÊN SƠ
NUI HOÀNG LIÊN                              |

(b) Translations (to be avoided)

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Transcription to be avoided</th>
<th>Correct transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RIVER NA</td>
<td>SÔNG NA</td>
<td>NÂM NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIVER DAM</td>
<td>SÔNG DAM</td>
<td>ĐẠI ĐÂM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 | Original form which should be adopted
---                               | ---
RIVIÈRE CLAIRE                    | 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.