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WRITING SYSTEMS AND GUIDES TO PRONUNCIATION

ROMANIZATION

Romanization systems and the donor principle**

Paper submitted by the United States of America

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SUMMARY

Within the framework of the United Nations geographic names standardization efforts, the notion of the donor principle has played some role in the adoption process of romanization systems for international use.

In devising any romanization system for international use, two premises seemingly in conflict are encountered. One, the country whose natural alphabet (or syllabary or ideography) is being considered for romanization has a strong interest in determining the kind of system to be used. Two, another country would seek to devise for its use a romanization system which would most naturally convert a given alphabet (or sound system) into its own alphabet. Therefore, before such a romanization system can be attained, the conflict implicit in these premises has to be resolved. This particularly has been one of the major challenges facing the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Romanization Systems and the Donor Principle

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In regard to the conflict, one could define a "donor romanization system" as one officially advocated by a country for the romanization of place names within that country. A "receiver system" could be defined as one advocated by a user for the romanization of place names in the context of his own language and culture. Theoretically speaking, the donor principle can be viewed as the most expeditious and forthright way of achieving international standardization in the toponymy of a given country. However, it is acknowledged at the same time that no donor system can possibly satisfy all users employing the Roman-script writing system because of the considerable disparity among the various existing Roman alphabets (cf., e.g., the Roman alphabets of Turkish and Polish). The Hanyu Pinyin romanization system, for which a resolution was passed at the Third U.N. Conference in 1977, is a prime example of a donor system. Its application has not been confined to geographic names in the People's Republic of China but has also been extended to other areas such as the press, the educational field and personal names.

The Fourth U.N. Conference on Geographical Names has also taken a position on this issue. Resolution 15 of that Conference recommended:

1. ...that new romanization systems for international use should be considered only on condition that the sponsoring nations implement such systems on their cartographic products (maps and charts);
2. Further recommends that States should refrain from revising systems previously adopted for international use.

In addition, Resolution 16 said that appropriate consultations are desirable when romanization systems are proposed. This means that when a donor system is first proposed, the opportunity for proper exchange of views should be afforded between the donor and the receiver(s). In case an impasse is reached on a technical point during the ensuing deliberations, it would, of course, be desirable to obtain a compromise. (An example where a compromise might be desirable could be the choice of whether one Roman-script letter/digraph over another would result in a greater degree of unambiguous reversibility.) This compromise could be achieved then by accommodation on the part of the receiver(s) to the donor's proposal. One can cite the U.N. 1972 romanization system for Arabic as an example of work accomplished to mutual satisfaction.

One of the desiderata for any proposed romanization system is, of course, that it be scientifically adequate, i.e., that it is based on sound linguistic principles. In addition, there is another aspect to this issue which is of a most pragmatic nature. On a world-wide basis there are relatively few users (general and/or specialized) of internationally adopted romanization systems. The underlying factor for this situation is that few countries are engaged in extensive, systematic mapping of foreign non-Roman alphabet areas and thus may not have a continuing need to utilize romanization systems. On the other hand, there are some Roman-alphabet countries that engage in a full-fledged program of cartographic production in Roman script of non-Roman-alphabet countries.

Within the framework of the United Nations' endeavors of achieving geographic names standardization, those Roman-alphabet countries encounter a dilemma which warrants not only serious consideration but also an awareness of their position. If they were to utilize a new donor system adopted by the U.N. when they had previously implemented a receiver system best suited to their respective language context, orthographic conventions, and the requirements of the target users, they would be faced with prohibitive costs. A heavy investment in time and effort would be necessary to revise entire map series, charts, gazetteers, and related documents. In other words, because of the length of time in use and the range of application of such a well-established system within the country concerned (and which may even be recognized in other parts of the world), a valuable toponymic reference system of considerable continuity has been established. Moreover, in addition to expenditure, the proposal of a revised or entirely new system as an international standard carries with it potential confusion. Toponyms rendered in the new system would be at variance with the same toponyms rendered differently in an existing system. Even if such conversion would be undertaken, the ensuing confusion would persist for several years since revision of maps, etc., could not be programmed all at once. Besides, what is to prevent subsequent conversions once the precedent has been established?

Given these considerations, the ultimate goal of widespread names standardization seems to be best served when recognition is given to the needs, including the very pragmatic ones outlined above, of all countries contending with the many issues associated with devising and implementing international standards. Thus, receiver systems, which have already served and continue to serve the production needs for maps and charts at various scales, must not be easily set aside given the multi-faceted ramifications stated above.
