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**National standardization: treatment of names  
in multilingual areas**

**Toponymic culture of China's ethnic minorities' languages**

**Submitted by China\*\***

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## **Toponymic Culture of China's Ethnic Minorities' Languages**

Geographical names are fossil of history and culture. Many important meanings are contained in the geographical names of China's Ethnic Minorities' languages.

### **I. The number and distribution of China's Ethnic Minorities**

There are 55 minorities in China have been determined now. 53 of them have their own languages, which belong to 5 language families, but the Hui and the Man use Chinese (Han language). There are 29 nationalities' languages belong to Sino-Tibetan family, including Zang, Menba, Zhuang, Bouyei, Dai, Dong, Mulam, Shui, Maonan, Li, Yi, Lisu, Naxi, Hani, Lahu, Jino, Bai, Jingpo, Derung, Qiang, Primi, Lhoba, Nu, Aching, Miao, Yao, She, Tujia and Gelao. These nationalities distribute mainly in west and center of Southern China. There are 17 minority nationalities' languages belong to Altaic family, including Uygul, Kazak, Uzbek, Salar, Tatar, Yugur, Kirgiz, Mongol, Tu, Dongxiang, Baoan, Daur, Xibe, Hezhen, Oroqin, Ewenki and Chaoxian. These nationalities distribute mainly in west and east of Northern China. There are 3 minority nationalities' languages belong to South-Asian family, including Va, Benglong and Blang. These nationalities distribute mainly in Southwest China's Yunnan Province. There are 2 nationalities' languages belong to Indo-European family, including Russ and Tajik. They distribute mainly in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region. And the Gaoshan's language belongs to South-Island family. The Gaoshans distributes mainly in Eastern China's Taiwan and Fujian Province. And which the Gin's language belongs to has not been determined.

Among these minority nationalities' languages, some have writing systems, including the languages of Mongol, Uygul, Zang, Kazak, Kirgiz, Chaoxian, Zhuang, Dai, Yi, Hani, Lisu, Lahu, Naxi, Jingpo, Bouyei, Dong, Li, Wa, Tatar and Xibe. When used all over the country, the geographical names of these minorities written in Chinese on papers and maps. But they may also be written in local ethnic languages when used only in the minority nationalities' areas.

### **II. Some geographical names have association with the development of China's ethnic minorities**

Many ancient names of minorities come from place names. The Miao was called "Qianzhong Man" in Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.~206 B.C.), which means minority lives in Qianzhong Province, "Man" means minority. During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.~ 220 B.C.), Qianzhong Province was renamed Wuling Province, so the Miao was renamed "Wuling Man". And because there are 5 rivers in this area: Xiongxi, Manxi, Xixi, Yuanxi, Chenxi, so the Miao was also called "Wuxi Man". "Wu" means 5, "xi" means river, and "man" means minority. The Yi was called "Cuan". It is because the place near Dian Chi Lake and Hong He River was called "Cuan Di" from Jin Dynasty (A.D.265~420). So one tribe of the Yi living near the place was called "Cuan". There also some tribes' names come from geographical names. For example, "Huur", the name of one tribe of the Hezhen, comes from Huerha He River. "Sahalian" comes from Sahalian He River. "Mili" and "Edu", the names of two tribes of the Lhoba who live in Tibet, also come from local place names. Two Nu's tribes "Douhuasu" and "Dahuasu", their names come from two geographical names "Douhua" and "Dahua".

Some geographical names come from the names of ethnic minorities or their tribes. The name Simao County, which in Yunnan Province, comes from an ancient tribe's name "Simuo", which was used in Song Dynasty (A.D.960~1279). And the tribe was called "Simuo", "Sima" or "Simao" in the books of Ming Dynasty (A.D.1368~1644). Simao became the name of a village in early Qing Dynasty (A.D.1616~1911). The names of two rivers Dulong Jiang and Nu Jiang come from two nationalities: Dulong and Nu. Some place names come from ancient tribes' names. The name of Yiliang County in Yunnan Province comes from an ancient tribe Yiniang. The name of Songming County comes from a tribe Songmeng too. "Longchuan" County is written as "Longwan" County in Dai language. "Longwan" means sun. The name also comes from an ancient Dai tribe "Wan".

Some geographical names have association with ethnic distribution and migration. For instance, there are over half of place names along Tumen Jiang River in Northeast China's Yanbian Chaoxian Autonomous Prefecture is in Chaoxian language. This reveals the area is the habitat of Chaoxian people. The name "Suifenhe Shi" is a blend word of Chinese and Man's language. "Suifen" is Man's language means awl, "he" is Chinese means river and "shi" is also Chinese means city. "Mulan Xian" is a blend word of Chinese and Mongolian. "Mulan" is Mongolian means river and "Xian" is Chinese means county. This kind of place names is the result of nations jumble living. Some place names associate with ethnic migration. For example, after Yuan Dynasty (A.D.1206~1368) established in 13th century, many Mongolians were forced to migrate to Northwest China's Qinghai Province as herdsmen. So a lot of geographical names in Qinghai Province are Mongolian, such as Hodoonao'er, Yesunwolun, Halabeli, and Nalinhala etc. Some place names give the evidence and route line that how a minority had migrated. For instance, the migrating line of the Aching and the Jingpo (call themselves "Langwo") can be found from some villages' names as Achang, Langwo and Langsu (ancient name of "Langwo"). In Dai language, "Na" means paddy field; "Ban" means village, 'Bai' or "Bo" means river mouth. Many geographical names contain these words in South China's Guangdong Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Linking up these place names, which route that the Dais migrated along is revealed.

Some geographical names are related to important historical events. Making clear the origin and evolution of these place names is helpful to reveal where a historical event took place. "Gyangze" of Tibet is the abbreviation of "Gyangkarze". "Gyangkar" means palace. Beikuozan, the prince of the last Tibetan kingdom, built palace on a mountain. Parenba built more palaces on the mountain and called them Jiangzi, which means palace built on mountain. Bailing Miao Temple in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is called Beile Miao Temple too. The troops of Qing Dynasty (A.D.1616~1911) went by the area on a punitive expedition to fight with Gerdan rebellion troops of Mongolian Junggar tribe and built the Guangfu Si Temple, which also called Bailing Miao Temple, to prevent rebellion troops went south. Because the local highest rank officer was called Beile, so the temple was also called Beile Miao Temple. The temple name records the historic event.

Some geographical names are related to a nation's activity and vanishing. A nation's territory can be found through some special geographical names. There are a lot of villages were called "Tuhun" in Huzhu County and Datong County in west China's Qinghai Province. It shows that the area was the territory of the Tuyuhun, which was a vanished ancient nationality. The name Shatangchuan in Huzhu Xian County shows it was ancient Shatuo Tujue's territory. Yunnan Province was abbreviated as Dian. In War States Period (475 B.C.~ 221 B.C.) some Qiang's tribes lived near the lake (which is called Dian Chi now) are called Dian. These tribes established a country called Dian later. In Xi Han Dynasty (206 B.C.~ 25 B.C.), with the development of economy, Dian became more and more famous. Its horses were called Dian Ma ("Ma" means horse). Its slaves were called Dian Tong ("Tong" means slave or servant). And the name Dian is being used until today.

### **III. Geographical names reflect the characteristic of minority nationalities' politics, economy, geography and culture.**

A lot of geographical names are related to local social system. For instance, some places were named by ancient Lagu women's name as Nage, Nazhao etc. It signs the social was matriarchate in the area. There was no unified state in ancient Liangshan Yi Autonomous County in Yunnan Province. Slave owners set up their own regimes by force. So there are a lot of such geographical names as Jinkou (Yi language, means the Jinjus' domicile), Gandu (Yi language, means the Gans' domicile), Luohongjiagu (Yi language, means the Luohongs' field) etc. They are all named by the surname of local slave owners. Riyue Tan Lake in Eastern China's Taiwan Province was called Shuili Hu Lake in Qing Dynasty (A.D.1616~1911). It is because the Shuili Shefan (Shuili is the name of ancient Gaoshan's village) lived in the place. There is a word "Meng" in many geographical names, such as Menglong, Menghun, Mengzhu, Mengsuo, and Mengjiao etc in Yunnan Province. Meng is ancient Dai's language means village.

Some geographical names are related to nationalities' religion. Lhasa, the capital of west China's Tibet Autonomous Region, is Tibetan means Buddha's land. Songtsan Gambo, the king of Tubo (Tibetan kingdom) during the Tang Dynasty (A.D.618-907), built Dazhao Si Temple here to worship a golden joss of Sakyamuni that Princess Wen Cheng brought. So the place was named Lhasa. Before Buddhism was introduced to Tibet, Tibetan believed in Ben religion, which also called Hei religion. Ben religion is a kind of original religion calling on people to worship sky, earth, sun, moon, mountain, forest, lake and ghost etc. There are many place names are related to Ben religion in this area. Poinbib, in Nyainrong County, means shade slope of Ben religion. Poinhua means positive slope of Ben religion. Pointa, in Baqen County, means the land of Ben religion. Poinzetang means the dam with final of Ben religion. Manxinglong in Yunnan Province is the Bulang's language. "Long" is a god the Bulangs worship.

Some geographical names are related to ethnic economic life. There are a lot of place names have association with agriculture and stockbreeding because they are ancient China's major economic forms. Urumuqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uygul Autonomous Region, is Mongolian means beautiful rangeland. Elute Mongolian herded here. Altay Shan Mountain is the Kazak's language means a mountain producing gold. As for the name Qapqal Xibe Autonomous County, "Qapqal" is the Xibe's language means barn. It shows agriculture is the main industry in this area. The name Batang, a County in Southwest China's Sichuan Province, is Tibetan means the plain where sheep are braying. It reveals herding sheep is the main occupations of local people. There are many geographical names in Sichuan province and Yunnan province have a word "Tang" which means flat. It is because ancient Tibetan herded sheep here. Hohhot, the capital of Northern China's Inner Mongol Autonomous Region, is Mongolian means cyan city. It is because everywhere was verdurous here in ancient times.

Some geographical names are related to geographical feature. Dehong, a County in Yunnan Province, is the Dai's language means lower reaches of Nu Jiang River. "De" means lower reaches of a river, and "Hong" refers to Nu Jiang River. Luxi, also a County of Yunnan Province, means west to Lu Jiang River. Lu Jiang is another name of Nu Jiang River. Ulan hac of Inner Mongol Autonomous Region is Mongolian means a mountain with red peak. Ih tal is also Mongolian means a large meadow. Many Mongolian place names have such words as Der (it means up), Door (it means under), Hol (it means far) and Oir (it means near). Also many Mongolian place names use the organs' name of human body. For instance, "Tolgoi" means mountain peak in Mongolian, but its original meaning is head. "Tohai" means the curve of river in Mongolian, but its original meaning is elbow. "Am" means mountain pass in Mongolian, but its original meaning is mouth. "Nuruu" means the ridge of mountain in Mongolian, but its original meaning is the back of mankind.

Some geographical names are related to fairy tales. Not only would we get many interesting stories, but also get important references to minority nationalities' history and cultural through these place names. Muztagata, a mountain 7546 meters height above sea level in Xinjiang Uygul Autonomous Region, is the Uygul's language means snowy mountain. A legend says there was no snow on the mountain but trees and precious stones. There was a fairy watched here. One day a Tajik young man came here to pick some white and red flowers for his beloved girl. When he went down the mountain, the fairy found him and became a huge stone to stop him. After the man told the reason, the fairy was moved by his story and let him go. But the fairy violated the heaven emperor, so she was locked on the mountain. Her tears congealed into ice. Her hair became white and turned into snow. The mountain became snow-capped from then on. Qomolangma, the highest mountain of the world, the name is Tibetan means goddess. It is said there lived 5 syrens among the snowy mountains. They were taught by Lianhua Dashi (Lotus Flower Master) and became goddess. Qomolangma is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 5 sisters named Miyueluosangma, which means Quiet Wisdom goddess. Tianchi, a lake in Xinjiang Uygol Autonomous Region, is called Bogda in Monglian means saint lake. It is said that the lake is a mirror of heaven and divine pond, and even the bath piscina of Wangmu Niangniang, the empress of heaven.

Some geographical names are related to ethnic languages. This kind of place names are common used in language research, such as distinguish dialects or unscrambling ancient words. There is a Zhuang language word "𠬞" is made up of two Chinese word "那" and "田". "那" shows its pronunciation in Zhuang language and "田"

represents its meaning in field. The transliteration forms to some geographical names of ethnic language are different as time goes by because the original pronunciation in its language changed. Naqu River in Tibet is called Nakehe River in Qing Dynasty (A.D.1616~1911). Zhigong is called Biligong in Yuan Dynasty (A.D.12.6~1368). Dalong is called Sidalongla in Yuan Dynasty. Some geographical names have associations with the distributing area of ethnic languages. The Bai's language has dialects as Dali, Jianbei and Bijiang. The Achang's language has dialects as Lianghe and Hula. Dali, Jianbei, Bijiang, Lianghe and Hula are all geographical names. They are used representing dialects of minority nationalities.

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