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Report by the Chairman of the UK Division

Immediately following the end of the meetings of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, discussions were held between the United States and the United Kingdom on how to set about the task of introducing Pinyin into current usage. Further discussions have taken place with the USA by telephone and letter ever since. The subject was prominent in similar discussions with Australia and New Zealand later in the same year. In the period since the Group of Experts last met two years ago action on converting names to Pinyin has occupied a large proportion of the total UK work on geographical names.

This, I believe, highlights the gulf which divides Experts at our meetings and likewise divides delegates to international conferences when such matters are discussed. Many Experts and delegates speak and vote for the adoption of this or that system of transliteration or transcription secure in the knowledge that they will be more or less unaffected by the decision or else, in some cases, certain that they will never implement the decision themselves.

The adoption of Pinyin has, as we know it would be, proved to be very difficult. That is not to say that we are in serious contention with Pinyin per se. In the view of the UK it is a less clumsy system than Wade-Giles and whilst we would prefer not to have to use certain of the letters of the alphabet in the way they are used in Pinyin, the system has much to commend it.

The problems associated with Pinyin are not, therefore, to do with the system but rather with how to apply it. They arise from the linguistic problems in non-chinese language areas; from the relationship of local name to administrative name; from the recurrence of the same name in two or more places in close proximity; to the varying location of administrative centres all the way down to the commune level. All these difficulties were known to us from our work prior to the adoption of Pinyin. They have remained so since we adopted it. We simply understand them more fundamentally.

As evidence of our efforts at introducing Pinyin, all Wade-Giles names of the People's Republic of China were converted to Pinyin on all plates of the Times Atlas of the World and in the index to the Atlas.

In September, 1980 some aspects of these matters were discussed with a Chinese delegation which visited the UK and a certain amount of advice was received. The basic problems, however, remain.

Work on geographical names has not been confined to Pinyin. A great deal of work has been carried out in Arabic-speaking areas where the difficulties often far surpass those encountered in Pinyin.

In August, 1979 the Conference of Commonwealth Survey Officers provided an opportunity to confer with representatives of many countries including some not in the Commonwealth who attended as special representatives. During the Conference an arrangement was made to provide advice and assistance to the International Hydrographic Bureau in connection with charts of the Mediterranean area.

At the tenth session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in 1979, the UK Division Chairman reported on the initiation of a gazetteer at 1/50,000 for Great Britain. The compilation of this gazetteer is now complete and preparation for publication has begun.

The number of names is estimated at 275,000 which includes 5,000 names of antiquities. In the strictest sense of the word this is an index to place-names on the 1/50,000 scale maps. Further details will be given when we discuss gazetteers. All names have been fed to a computer and output will take the form of magnetic tape and possibly, later, microfiche as well as the printed book of over 560 pages. Revision continues as new maps are published.

In the past few months work has begun on the preparation of a small school atlas wholly in the Welsh language. This project is interesting in a variety of ways and is akin to the task confronting many countries in the world when preparation of maps in their own language is contemplated. Over the past years we have heard on a number of occasions accounts of similar experiences. Experts will have some idea of just how difficult such a project is when they consider that the names of many countries of the world have never before been written in Welsh. Since the Welsh alphabet is a phonetic alphabet and since also the Welsh language has a very limited range of vowels and consonants, it is no simple task to find a way of writing in Welsh, geographical names employing vowels and consonants which have no place in the Welsh language. Welsh being a phonetically written language requires that the name as written is pronounced as it would be were it a native Welsh name and this is clearly impossible in many cases. Added to this is the question of which name of, say, a country should be used to provide the Welsh equivalent. It may be added that the situation in Welsh is not altogether dissimilar from the situation confronting Chinese speakers where the writing of alien names in Chinese is concerned. There are many other such parallels.

In the Republic of Ireland, the printing of a new series of maps at 1:2,500 and 1:5,000 has begun. These map series are to be bilingual with all administrative and many other names given in both their Irish and English forms. In most cases, the Irish name represents the original name. The English names represent four centuries of anglicization of Irish. Over this period conventions of spelling Irish names in English have undergone many changes.

The Place Name Branch of the Ordnance Survey, Dublin is today the authority responsible for research into place-names. It is faced with the arduous task of establishing the original name in the Irish language. It is anticipated that it will be 2000 A.D. before this task is completed. The process is akin to that which has been taking place over many years in Norway and Sweden. Members of the Irish Place Name Branch have spent some time in Sweden studying Swedish methods.

Preparation of a national gazetteer whether prepared manually or by ADP methods cannot be contemplated until the basic work on names is complete.