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- Roma, XXV, Fascicolo 2, luglio – dicembre 2013

- Gino De Vecchis.....7
- The joint IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group on
Toponymy. A short introduction
Peter Jordan11
- Features of toponyms forming of Alakol basin of Kazakhstan
*Particolarità della formazione dei toponimi del bacino del
lago Alakol del Kazakistan*
*Caractéristiques de la formation des toponymes de la piscine
du lac Alakol qui se trouve dans le sud-est du Kazakhstan*
Stanislav Yerdavletov, Abdreeva Sholpan, Aizholova Gulzhan17
- Naming methods of folk agricultural plot names in
Japanese villages: a connection between geography and
cognitive linguistics
*I metodi di denominazione di piccoli appezzamenti nei
villaggi rurali giapponesi: un collegamento tra la geografia e
la linguistica cognitiva*
*Méthode de nommage des noms folkloriques des parcelles
agricoles dans des villages japonais – connexion entre la
géographie et la linguistique cognitive*
Satoshi Imazato27
- Is *exonym* an appropriate term for names of features
beyond any sovereignty?
*Esonimo è un termine appropriato per i toponimi utilizza-
ti in contesti extraterritoriali?*
*Exonyme est-il un terme approprié pour les noms des car-
actéristiques au-delà de toute souveraineté?*
Peter Jordan.....41
- The Changing Toponymy: The Place Names and their Vitality
*I cambiamenti della toponimia. I nomi di luogo e la loro
vitalità*
*Les changements de noms de lieux: les noms des lieux et
leur vitalité*
Cosimo Palagiano 55

- Degrees of precision in toponyms containing compass points
Livelli di precisione in toponimi contenenti i punti cardinali
Degrés de précision en toponymes qui contiennent des points cardinaux et intercardinaux
Riemer Reinsma73

- Travelling through place-names. A Methodological approach for the development of a geo-atlas of toponyms
Viaggio attraverso toponimi. Un approccio metodologico per lo sviluppo di un geo-atlante dei toponimi
Voyage à travers les toponymes. Une approche méthodologique pour le développement d'un geo-atlas des toponymes
Silvia Siniscalchi91

- Standardisation of Place Names in Countries Influenced by the Chinese Writing System
Standardizzazione dei nomi delle località nei Paesi influenzati dal sistema di scrittura cinese
Standardisation des Noms de Lieux dans les Pays influencés par le Système à écrire Caractère chinois
Hiroshi Tanabe, Kohei Watanabe115

- A study of the toponyms of places and areas in relation to the physical characteristics of the terrain of the province of Cuenca, Spain
I toponimi di luoghi e di aree in relazione alle caratteristiche fisiche del terreno della provincia di Cuenca, in Spagna.
Étude des toponymes en rapport à la nature du sol. Le cas de l'expression de "bourbier", "marais" dans la province de Cuenca (Espagne)
Emilio Nieto Ballester, José A. Rodríguez Esteban, Pilar Lacasta Reoyo123

GEOFRAME

a cura di Marco Maggioli

- Roma: visione o pre-visione sinottica?
Sandra Leonardi141

DIARIO

a cura di Riccardo Morri

- **I Bisogni Educativi Speciali. Verso una Geografia inclusiva**
Angela Caruso147
- **La Sicilia nell'assetto dello spazio euromediterraneo**
Liberata Nicoletti151
- **La Dichiarazione di Roma sull'educazione geografica in Europa. Una road map per la geografia**
Cristiano Giorda155
- **Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe. IV EUGEO Congress 2013**157

LO SCAFFALE

a cura di Riccardo Morri

- C. LOMBARDI-DIOP AND C. ROMEO (a cura di), *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity* (R. Noel Welch)161
- P. BONORA (a cura di), *Atlante del consumo di suolo, per un progetto di città metropolitana* (A. Mengozzi).....163
- **The Authors**
Gli autori
Les auteurs165

Standardisation of Place Names in Countries Influenced by the Chinese Writing System

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1. Introduction

In the 14th meeting of United Nation's Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) Working Group on Exonyms (Corfu, Greece, 23-25 May 2013), the authors briefly touched on the issue of translation and transliteration of toponyms in relation to ideogram scripts in their presentation (Tanabe and Watanabe, forthcoming). Issues related to ideogram scripts were also picked up by Choo (forthcoming) in the same meeting. In this paper, we would like to highlight the characteristics of ideograms in contrast to phonetic scripts, and point out some specific issues regarding place names in the East Asian region. We hope that this will be of help for our colleagues in the European language sphere to gain some understanding of the topic.

Universal road signs can be used as an analogy for ideograms. If you see a red round board with a white line in the middle, you will not drive into the street. This sign is used in most parts of the world. Although everybody understands its meaning, it is described and read in different ways. In Japanese it is “進入禁止”, in Chinese “不准駛入”, in English “No Entry”, and in French “Sens interdit”. Ideograms are just like universal road signs, in the sense that they are read differently around the world but mean the same thing.

Kanji (Hanzi) is an ideogram and so just like the road signs, they are mutually understood among Chinese and Japanese speakers, and also among many Korean and Vietnamese speakers. In all of the countries these languages originate from, historical documents are all written in Kanji, so the knowledge of Kanji is essential in learning the history of each country.

As a point of information, there are regions that use Kanji as phonogram. For instance, there is Hohhot City in Inner Mongolia (an autonomous region within China) which is officially written “呼和浩特” in Kanji. Hohhot translates as “Blue City” in Mongolian, the original language. The

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Kanji “和浩特” is attributed only to represent the sound, not the meaning. In minority regions in the current territory of China, many place names are given Kanji scripts in this way. This often applies also to foreign place names such as “巴黎” for Paris.

2. Countries Influenced by the Chinese Writing System

This cultural region is conceptualised by many authors by different names, such as “East Asian cultural sphere”, the “Sinic World”, “Sinosphere” etc. Basically it consists of China, Japan, the Korean peninsula, and Vietnam.

2.1. *China* – China is the centre of this cultural region. All place names in Chinese language is written in Kanji. However as described above, Kanji is not entirely used as ideograms. In Inner Mongolia, mixed usage of Kanji as ideogram and phonogram can be observed. The City of Ulanhadhot which means “red mountain city” in Mongolian, is written 赤峰市 in Chinese (meaning red mountain city) and pronounced Chifeng.

2.2. *Japan* – The written Japanese language consists of three types of characters - Kanji, Hiragana, and Katakana. The former is ideogram, while the latter two are phonograms. As in China, most place names in Japan are written in Kanji. The characteristic of the Japanese language is that one Kanji could be read (pronounced) in several ways. There are pronunciation imported from the original Chinese (On-yomi), and the pronunciation based on original Japanese translation of the meaning of the Kanji (Kun-yomi). One Kanji can have several on-yomi (based on regional dialects in China) and several kun-yomi (based on different translations). Historically older place names tend to have kun-yomi names, such as “大和” (Yamato) and “難波” (Naniwa), while newer names such as “東京” (Tokyo, formerly “江戸” Yedo) and “新宿” (Shinjuku) are on-yomi names. The etymology of kun-yomi place names is often a subject of discussion by linguists, ethnographers, and historians. On the other hand, on-yomi names tend to have clear meaning as ideograms. It is well understood that Tokyo means “east(東) capital(京)”, and Shinjuku means “new(新) post-town(宿)”.

In Japan as in China, there are place names where Kanji is used as phonogram. Those are names based on minority language such as Ainu, which can be seen widely in Northern parts of Japan such as Hokkaido. 札幌 (Sapporo) is thought to be based on “Sat” (dry) and “Poru” (big), describing a river in the area. The Kanji 札 (satsu) and 幌 (horo) were attributed according to the pronunciation. 国後 (Kunashiri) Island on the east of Hokkaido is based on either “Kune”(black) “Shir”(Island) or “Kina”(grass) “Shir” (Island) in the Ainu language. The two Kanji represent the sound. In Russian, it is written as Кунашир. Ainu place names that are incorporated

more recently into the Japanese gazetteer are not allocated with Kanji and are written in Katakana, as most foreign place names are. Recent property development and mergers of local districts have resulted in an increase of names expressed in Hiragana, although most of them could actually be written in Kanji.

2.3. *Korea* – The current official script in both countries in the Korean peninsula is Hangeul, which is a phonetic script system established in 1446 by the fourth King of Joseon. However until the mid-20th Century, Kanji was the official script. Hence almost all place names were originally written in Kanji. The Korean pronunciation of Kanji place names was transliterated into Hangeul. The origin of many place names predates the designation of Kanji place names by King Gyeongdeok of Silla in the year 757, and are probably based on ancient local languages,

For example, Suwon (水原) is known for its world heritage site Hwaseong (華城). In Japan and China, those place names will be written 水原 and 華城 and its meaning will be understood universally as “water field” and “brilliant castle”. However they will be pronounced “Suigen” and “Kajou” in Japanese, and “Shuiyuan” and “Huacheng” in Chinese. Suwon is a Kanji-based place name, but before 757 it was known as “Mehoru”, which means “water castle” in Goguryeo language. Suwon is a translated name for the Kanji script.

2.4. *Vietnam* – The Kanji script for Vietnam is “越南”. Most place names are transcribed from Kanji into the alphabet based Quoc Ngur (Vietnamese national language) script. The original Kanji for the capital city Hanoi, is “河内”, meaning “between rivers”. Hanoi is indeed located in the delta of Red River. Red River is an English translation of “紅河” (Hong Ha in Vietnamese). Hanoi was called 東京 (“Dong Kinh”) before 1831 (the name still remains in “Gulf of Tonkin”). 37 years later, the Meiji government of Japan used the exact same name (in Kanji) for renaming Yedo as their capital city (pronounced “Tokyo”, in Japanese).

Ho-Chi-Minh, the major city in the south of the country is named after “胡志明”, a personal name. The original name of this city is Saigon, written in Kanji as “柴棍”. It is thought that the name existed before the introduction of Kanji, and Kanji was used as a phonogram to correspond to the name in the local pronunciation. As seen above, place names in Vietnam are also strongly influenced by the Chinese Kanji culture.

3. *Features of Kanji based place names*

3.1. *The etymology of the place name can be understood easily across languages* – By using Kanji, all the people in this region can read and

understand the names, despite using different languages. If Tokyo is written in Kanji as 東京, the Chinese can read it as “Dong Jing”, Koreans as “Donggyo”, Vietnamese as “Dong Kinh”, and understand that it is the “Capital in the East”. Often the pronunciation is close enough it is not difficult to correctly guess the object even if it is pronounced in a different language.

3.2. *Kanji place names can serve the dual role of transliterated place names and translated place names* – When place names in this region is incorporated into western languages, the names will be either transliterated or translated, based on the pronunciation or based on the meaning of the Kanji. Translated names will be difficult to be understood in the country of origin. For example, a Chinese person may find it difficult to relate the translated name “North Capital” to the original “北京”(Beijing). Hence transliteration is more often used in incorporating Kanji place names into western languages, however transliteration has its limits as described below. Among languages that use Kanji, by sharing the Kanji names, the original script is preserved, and at the same time the meaning can also be conveyed.

3.3. *Limits of transliteration* – If place names were transliterated into Kana, Hangeul, or Quoc Ngur alphabets, it is virtually impossible to read and understand without the knowledge of the given language. Kanji cannot convey the original pronunciation, but still it could be mutually understood. Therefore communication based on writing is possible without the knowledge of the counterpart’s language. 東京 is common among all Kanji users, no matter how differently it is pronounced or transliterated into different phonetic scripts.

As not all sounds in one language exist in the other language, transliteration cannot accurately convey the original pronunciation, and sometimes mutual understanding cannot be achieved with transliterated names. The Chinese language is tonal, while Japanese is not (nor is Korean), thus more often than not, a Chinese person will not understand a Japanese reading out a Chinese place name transliterated in Kana. Moreover, due to the non-tonality of the Japanese language, many similarly pronounced place names that are distinguishable in Kanji will end up identical in Kana transliteration and thus become indistinguishable.

3.4. *Universality of Kanji* – In this region, until the 19th Century, place names had been always written in Kanji, not only in official documents, but also in general publication and maps. Place names in historical documents throughout this region could be understood with the knowledge of Kanji.

Still Kanji is in daily use by more than 1.5 billion people, which is equivalent to 90% of the people in the “Sinosphere”. Hence, Kanji expression of place

names is beneficial for international cultural and economic exchange and also for tourism in this region. For example, Kanji expression of station names was introduced in Seoul's underground railway system. This contributed greatly to the convenience of Chinese and Japanese tourists.

4. *Issues on Kanji*

In this section we would like to point out two items of concern regarding Kanji

4.1. *Simplification of Kanji* – The traditional Kanji typeset had been almost identical in China, Japan, and Korea. This highly international typeset which is known as Fantizi is still being used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Amoy, etc. However, as this traditional typeset has a rather complicated set of strokes, the authorities invented simplified versions with the intention of making it easier for the general public to learn how to write. After WWII Japan introduced its simplified Kanji typeset in the education system. China established their own simplification “jiantizi”, which is more drastically simplified and quite different from the Japanese one, and adopted it from 1960 onwards. This resulted in the emergence of some Kanji characters that are not mutually understandable. Around the same time, North and South Korea as well as Vietnam opted out of the Kanji system in their official orthography. These moves diminished the benefit of the common ideogram.

For some simplified jiantizi, it is not difficult to imagine the original fantizi. Tokyo東京 is written 东京 in jiantizi, and most people can comprehend the name in both typesets, although one may look a bit unfamiliar. However, Hiroshima which used to be 廣島 (fantizi) is now 広島 (new Japanese typeset) and 广岛 (jiantizi). The part (radical) “广” is also used in many other Kanji such as 慶應 which are now 慶応 and 庆应, thus just by using “广”, it is difficult to draw connection to the original fantizi, and therefore rather confusing. It has been told that people in China are again starting to learn fantizi, which will be advantageous in reading historical documents and books from Taiwan and Hong Kong, or when travelling in Japan. Apparently in 2009, Pan Qing Lin, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference proposed the revival of fantizi in mainland China.

4.2. *Confusion of identity and misappropriation of place names in trademarks* – Due to the common ideographic script, there are numerous place names that are written identically and pronounced differently. Earlier we have mentioned the example of 東京 (Dong Kinh, Vietnam) and 东京 (Tokyo, Japan). As an example of those in current usage, 河北 (Hubei) is a province in China as well as 河北 (Kahoku) a town in Yamagata, Japan.

One example of problems arising from this potentially confusing situation is that there have been attempts to take advantage of this in trademark registering. 青森 (Aomori) is known for quality apple production in Japan, but in China an application for registration of “青森 (qing sen) apples” was made which will in effect block the sales of Aomori apples in the country. Not only apples but any product with a regional name branding is vulnerable to this. Be it Valencia orange, or Bordeaux wine, if a similar application were made among countries with phonetic scripts, the problem will be apparent throughout the world. However, it is difficult for people outside the Kanji script world to be aware of such a problem, involving a common ideographic script which will appear differently when transliterated.

5. Conclusion

Currently, the standardisation of geographical names involves transliteration and translation in order to incorporate local names into the official languages of the United Nations, in particular, English. For languages with phonetic scripts, the general principle is the transliteration of local pronunciation. Each language has its own issues with customary names (differing from endonymic names) and rules for transliteration. Chinese is the only official UN language with an ideogram script, and here the principle for place names in the sinosphere is to adopt the original Kanji expression, and pronounced in Mandarin Chinese.

As Japanese and Korean languages have phonetic systems as well, there is a choice of transliterating the local pronunciation of the place name (into Kana or Hangeul), or adopting the original Kanji as it is and reading it in Japanese or Korean way. Transcription of Chinese into Kana or Hangeul produces something that cannot be understood at the original location. Even transcription between Kana and Hangeul is not straightforward, as there are consonants and vowels that only exist in one or the other script. By using place names based on the original Kanji expression, written communication is made much clearer, and the etymology can easily be understood among all sinosphere countries.

As seen above, there are specific issues for place names in the Kanji culture region, collaborative efforts are needed to solve those. China is the origin of Kanji, but this is a topic for all those under the culture influenced by Kanji, just like names in roman alphabets are not only an issue for Italy where they had originated. Each country has its policy on the usage of Kanji, such as simplification and designation of which Kanji to use (Japan has designated 1000 Kanji for education, and 2000 for regular use). But separately from such policies, we need to create a forum within the Kanji culture space for carrying out research on Kanji used for place names, and to identify what

need to be adjusted or harmonised to promote the common usage of Kanji-based place names.

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Riassunto - Standardizzazione dei nomi delle località nei Paesi influenzati dal sistema di scrittura cinese

La prassi attuale di standardizzazione dei nomi geografici mostra la tendenza a presupporre un sistema di scrittura basato su fonogrammi. All'interno di sistemi di scrittura basati su fonogrammi, si applica quindi il principio di traslitterare la pronuncia locale dei toponimi.

Tuttavia il sistema di scrittura cinese è basato su ideogrammi. Molte lingue asiatiche sono influenzate dal sistema di scrittura cinese, e quindi toponimi scritti in caratteri cinesi possono essere importati direttamente in altre lingue, ma la loro pronuncia può essere molto diversa (con definizione non esatta dei toponimi). La trascrizione resta comunque una possibilità in molti casi, dal momento che sistemi basati su fonogrammi sono (anche) in uso in lingue come il coreano o il giapponese. Se questo sistema è in linea con la prassi internazionale, l'attenzione al sistema basato su ideogrammi ha il vantaggio di conservare la forma scritta originale e l'etimologia dei toponimi.

Résumé - Standardisation des Noms de Lieux dans les Pays influencés par le Système à écrire Caractère chinois

La pratique actuelle de standardisation des noms de lieux apparaît d'avoir la tendance à présupposer le système à écrire le caractère phonétique, dont le principe est de translittérer la prononciation locale des noms de lieux. Mais le système d'écriture chinois est idéographique. Des langues dans l'Asie de l'est, comme coréen, japonais ou vietnamien sont influencées par le système d'écriture chinois. Par conséquent, les noms de lieux originaires écrits en caractère chinois peuvent être importés directement sans translittération dans autres langues. Mais leurs prononciations sont complètement différentes (paraissent les quasi-traductions). Et aussi transcription est possible dans beaucoup de cas, car les langues coréenne et japonaise ont aussi le système d'écriture phonogrammes. (hangul et kana). L'écriture phonétique peut suivre la tendance mondiale, mais l'écriture idéographique a le profit pour préserver la forme d'écriture originaire et l'étymologie des noms de lieux.