

Study on the usage of Chinese place names and Pinyin spelling

Zexia Zheng

Department of Language Science and Resources, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

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Abstract

Place names is one of the significant windows to understanding and exploring different language, different culture and different social development of a re-gion. In recent years, the naming, renaming, using and cultural protection of place names have increasingly attracted public attention, with relevant national and provincial laws being enacted one after another. This study centers on op-timizing the application of Pinyin in the standardization practices, with partic-ular emphasis on three critical dimensions. Additionally, in special cities mat-ters concerning the addition and modification of existing place names also de-serve our attention. Finally, the study proposes three suggestions: encouraging citizens to participate in policy-making, improving legal regulations for place names through moderate pilot programs, as well as strengthening the protec-tion of cultural heritage.

Keywords

Place Names; Pinyin Spelling; Dialect Pinyin; Language Landscape; Language Code Selection

1. Introduction

In recent years, the naming, renaming, using and cultural protection of place names have increasingly attracted public attention. The sign "I miss you in XX (a certain place)" has become much more popular than before. These signs not only serve as visiting spots for travelers, but also directly or indirectly boost the prosperity of the cultural tourism industry. On the other side, a train station in Guang 'an City, Sichuan Province, which named "Happy" is hailed by many tourists as an essential element of a joyful journey. Similarly, stations with healing effects include the "Shang'an" station on the Beijing Metro, the "Fanshen" station on the Shenzhen Metro, the "LiuXia" station on the Hangzhou Metro, and the "ZhuanYun" station on the Guang'an Bus Station.

In addition, the Conference of Chinese Place Name program have been produced three seasons and aired on CCTV Chinese International Channel in 2019, 2021 and 2022. This TV program uses place name knowledge as its foundation, exploring the vivid and diverse landscape of place names from dimensions such as geography, culture, society and

cultural tourism. Generally speaking, the scope of place names includes the names of natural geographic entities, administrative divisions, streets and alleys, urban parks and nature reserves, residential areas and buildings with significant geographical location, transportation and water power facilities with important geographical significance, as well as other geographical entities with significant geographical importance.

This study centers on optimizing the application of Pinyin in the standardization practices, with particular emphasis on three critical dimensions: first, the functional interplay between Pinyin Romanization and English translation conventions; second, the methodological differentiation of dialectal Pinyin adaptations within normative frameworks; and third, the systematic identification and phonetic reconstruction of historical pronunciations through interdisciplinary linguistic analysis. On the whole, this study aiming to review the legal provisions related to place name usage and Pinyin spelling, analyzing the major challenges in the actual use of place names and Pinyin spelling, and provide specific examples using places. More importantly, this study also put forward several suggestions for the future improvement.

2. Regulations on the usage of place names and Pinyin spelling

In recent years, various provinces and cities have issued multiple regulations and laws related to the usage of place names and Pinyin spelling, providing legal protection for the management of place names. In November 2021, "Actively Promoting the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Chinese Language and Culture," it proposes to "strengthen the protection of place name cultural heritage".

In March 2022, "Regulations on Place Names" was promulgated, which came into effect on May of the same year. The original regulations were issued in 1986, and the newly revised "Regulations on Place Names" provide detailed rules for the naming, renaming, usage, cultural protection and management of place names. According to Article Fifteen of Chapter III of the "Regulations on Place Names", the usage of place names should be standardized and regulated, and the Romanization of place names should follow the "Pinyin Scheme" as a unified standard.

In July 2022, the "Opinion on Comprehensively Promoting Standardization Work in Civil Affairs in the New Era" was released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Administration for Market Regulation. The opinion mentions that "focusing on the implementation of the newly revised 'Regulations on Place Names,' further improve standards in areas such as the naming and renaming, spelling and translation, sign setting and management, and cultural heritage protection, so as to provide technical support for strengthening and standardizing place names management and carrying forward excellent traditional Chinese culture."

The Ministry of Civil Affairs is responsible for the unified supervision and management of place names work. In recent years, a lot of books compiled by relevant personnel from the department have been published successively, including "An Overview of Place Name Standardization" (2010), "Practical Handbook on Place Name

Standardization Work" (2016), and "Empirical Study on Place Name Planning" (2017). In November 2023, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued a notice soliciting public opinions on the "Implementation Measures for the Place Name Administration Regulations (Draft for Public Comments)," widely soliciting opinions from all sectors of society. It mentions that standard place names and their spellings are part of the content for naming and renaming announcements. The Romanization spellings of both proper and common place names should follow the "Pinyin Scheme" as an unified standard. If there are errors in the Romanization spelling information of place name signs, the setting, maintenance, and management departments should promptly make corrections.

In addition, the Regulations on the Administration of Place Names published by Henan Province stipulate that standard place names should be read in Mandarin Chinese. "When using Pinyin, they should comply with the provisions of the Chinese phonetic alphabet scheme published by the state and the Rules for the Spelling of Chinese Place Names in Pinyin."

For all the issues above, it can be easily seen that all dimensions of place name management have corresponding legal provisions. The specific content covers various elements at different levels, including linguistics, sociology, cultural studies, folklore, urban planning and administrative management. The management of place names, especially the naming, renaming and cultural protection, calls for more joint participation and efforts of these various professional fields.

3. Aspects of the usage of place names and Pinyin spelling

There are still some practical problems and differences during using of place names and Pinyin spelling at present. This study intends to elaborate from the following four aspects.

3.1. The usage and non-use of Pinyin

The naming of subway stations in Hefei, Anhui Province, has drawn public attention. The stations are directly named using Pinyin, such as "Hefei Nanzhan" for Hefei South Station, which is uniformly translated in the station's directional signs and announcements. In contrast, Taizhou of Zhejiang Province, plans to change all Pinyin forms of subway station names to English. This issue is not unique to these two cities. As a matter of fact, other cities also facing the similar challenges nowadays. In addition, a host of high-speed rail stations also use a combination of Pinyin and English, like "GuangzhouNan Railway Station" for Guangzhou South Station. Comparing these two methods clearly highlights their differences, someone argued that changing "waiting hall" to "HOU CHE TING" and "EXIT" to "CHU KOU" is merely to remove English, which is an over-correction. In similar situations, whether to use or not to use Pinyin becomes a challenge. Specifically, should the character "Station" be represented by Pinyin "Zhan". The "Regulations on Place Names" and the "Notice on So-

liciting Public Comments on the Implementation Measures of the Regulations on Place Names (Draft for Public Comments)" do not provide direct and clear regulations on this issue so far.

3.2. The distinction between Mandarin Pinyin and Dialect Pinyin

Regarding the consideration of dialect pinyin schemes, Ling Feng (2023) uses the pinyin scheme for Wu dialect, mainly Shanghai dialect, as an example to elaborate on the characteristics of the Chinese Pinyin system and other issues, arguing that "a popular dialect pinyin scheme should be as close as possible to the Mandarin Pinyin system to reduce learning time cost". Qian Nairong (2023) proposes exploring the formulation of pinyin scheme for Shanghai dialect, emphasizing that proper pronunciation and character usage in social contexts is an effective way to scientifically protect and inherit the dialect. Zhang Hongnian and Guo Bizhi (2002) discuss the Min dialect and Hakka dialect components in the place names in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and based on historical literature analysis, they argue that the Latin pinyin used by Italian missionaries was transcribed from the Hakka dialect, which in turn influenced the naming conventions of place names across Hong Kong today.

In various dialect regions, the usage of dialect pinyin has brought convenience to the daily lives of local residents. Referring to the "Guangzhou Pronunciation Dictionary" (Zhan Bohui, 2002), taking the naming of subway stations as an example, Jiulong, Hongkan, and Youmadi in Hong Kong correspond to "West Kowloon, Huang Hom, Yau Ma Tei" respectively. There are differences between Mandarin pinyin and Cantonese pinyin. For instance, the Cantonese pinyin forms of surnames Wang and Zheng are "Wong" and "Cheng", which differ little from the Mandarin pinyin "Wang" and "Zheng" in pronunciation and spelling. However, surnames such as "Liang, Lin, Xu, He" show more pronounced differences. Taking Min dialect as another example, "Swatow" is the phonetic translation of the place name Shantou in Min dialect.

The Zhongying Street can be considered a special case. As a national key cultural relic protection unit, a national historical and cultural street, and a base for national education for Hong Kong, the Zhongying Street is located at the boundary between Shatoujiao Subdistrict in Yantian District, Shenzhen City, and the North District of the Hong Kong. Shenzhen and Hong Kong each occupy half of the street, which is divided by a boundary stone at its center. The street borders Hong Kong, and entry requires a pass, hence it is known as the "special zone within a special zone". The translation of Zhongying Street has three different forms nowadays. At sites within the street, such as ruins and old road signs, the name is translated as "Chung Ying Street". In places like museums, flower markets, shopping centers, and party-crowd service centers, the sign reads "Zhongying Street". On the government service website, such as "Shenzhen Government Online", the name is "Zhongying

(Sino-British) Street". The prefix "Sino-" indicates Chinese-related matters, while the Sino-British in parentheses mainly serves to provide additional explanation. The example of Zhongying Street also demonstrates that Pinyin for Mandarin and dialects complement each other and can coexist harmoniously.

3.3. Identification and analysis of ancient pronunciation of place names

Compared with others, place names retain characteristics of ancient pronunciation (Li Rulong, 1985). For example, some characters used in place names retain their ancient readings while others undergo phonetic changes when used in other words. Take the character "fan" in Panyu District, Guangzhou, which is pronounced pan in Mandarin, but reads fan in Cantonese words like "sweet potato" and "pomegranate". The former pronunciation of pan "is precisely a remnant of 'no light lips in ancient times' " (Li Rulong, 1985). However, there are still several place names whose pronunciations remain undetermined due to insufficient documentary evidence. For instance, the pronunciation of the character "tan(譚)" in the ancient Hunan, for whether it is pronounced as "xin" or "tan" has not been conclusively determined. This shows that the failure to determine the pronunciation of place names not only causes inconvenience in subsequent using, but also impacts pinyin spelling in geographical mapping, cultural tourism promotion, and other areas.

3.4. Alteration and addition of original place names

Geographical name changes have far-reaching impacts, affecting civil services, municipal management, geographic mapping, and cultural tourism promotion in a chain reaction. Examples closer to our daily life include the renaming of city and district names, which may cause many inconveniences for local residents when using ID cards. Therefore, frequent changes to geographical names should be avoided to maintain their relative stability. Shandong Province, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Chongqing Municipality, Haikou City in Hainan Province, Hefei City in Anhui Province, and Shenyang City in Liaoning Province have all successively issued regulations stipulating that old place names with historical and cultural value shall not be changed. Hefei City has also proposed plans to compile a list of protected geographical name cultural heritage. Considering the protection of geographical name cultural heritage, this approach deserves our recognition and support.

However, with the continuous changes in social conditions and the interaction of various factors, place names with strong political connotations may have gradually lost their historical and cultural value. Article Nine of the "Regulations on the Administration of Place Names" clearly stipulates that the naming of place names should follow certain rules, one of which is "not using foreign personal or place names as place names". Considering economic costs and practical needs, changing these place names may become an important task that cannot be overlooked in the future.

On the other sides, nineteen streets in Hong Kong lacking corresponding Chinese names has recently sparked public debate. These nineteen streets are distributed across five districts of Hong Kong, and one of which is located in Central and Western District, with a history of about 127 years, yet it still lacks a Chinese street name. For example, there is a road named Luen Yee Road in Wong Tai Sin District. In the old Chinese maps from 1957 and 1962, this section was known as "Lian Yi Road", but the Chinese name was later abandoned, leading to the current situation where there is no corresponding Chinese name. According to the analysis of this study, the "Luen Yee" in "Luen Yee Road" is the pinyin spelling form of "Lian Yi" in Cantonese, while "Road" corresponds to the Chinese and English translations of "LU".

Article Nine of Chapter I of General Provisions of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region stipulates that, "The executive, legislative, and judicial organs of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may use English in addition to Chinese, and English is also an official language." This statement affirms the primacy of Chinese in Hong Kong's linguistic life and confirms the use of English as an official language (Tian Xiaolin, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the lacking of corresponding Chinese names for Hong Kong streets is a flaw in the implementation of the language policy of the Hong Kong, which should be promptly investigated, supplemented and improved.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Encourage citizens to participate in policy-making

As we all know, before the Hangzhou Asian Games and Paralympic Games, the municipal government launched an activity called "All Contribute a Suggestion for the Asian Games", encouraging all citizens of Hangzhou to offer more suggestions for this grand sports event. Among these efforts, the naming contest of Xiaoshan District for the Asian Games Village opened up new ideas for naming 20 roads, 6 bridges, 1 river and 1 park within the area. Similarly, Guangzhou's first pedestrian bridge over the Pearl River also invited global submissions, ultimately being named "Haixin Bridge".

The general public is a direct participant and beneficiary in the use of place names. Naming, renaming, usage and cultural preservation should leverage societal wisdom and civic strength. On one side, we should harness the professional knowledge and skills of civil affairs departments and language experts. On the other side, it is equally important to listen to the voices of the people, ensuring the entire process is open, transparent and scientific.

4.2. Improve the laws and regulations on geographical names and carry out appropriate trials

As mentioned earlier, the state and various provinces and cities have successively issued several regulations on place name management in recent years. In addition to

legal and administrative aspects, the management of place name is also closely related to urban planning and mapping, dialect and foreign language translation, and language standardization, involving knowledge from numerous disciplines such as folklore, cultural studies, and sociology.

As a result, the legal regulations on place names will continue to be improved. The feedback period for Ministry of Civil Affairs of "Implementation Measures for the Regulations on Place Name Management (Draft for Public Comments)" has ended on December 8, 2023. It is hoped that this public consultation process will provide more extensive and practical suggestions for place name management.

During the implementation process, a pilot approach can be moderately adopted reasonably. For example, all subway stations in cities face the challenge of choosing between Chinese and English names. Therefore, several cities or subway lines can be selected as pilot projects for a certain period. During this time, public feedback and sample surveys should be conducted to compare satisfaction levels before and after implementation, using these data as a basis for broader or even nationwide implementation.

4.3. Effectively strengthen the protection of geographical name on cultural heritage

Place names carry the unique linguistic culture, historical traditions, and humanistic heritage of their regions, serving to showcase and disseminate cultural values and spiritual guidance. The Regulations on Place Names lists promoting socialist core values as one of its principles, further emphasizing the role of place names in cultural transmission. This also indicates that place name work needs to consider and address multiple aspects, such as enhancing national cultural soft power and fostering recognition of traditional culture.

Historical and cultural heritage sites, national scenic area names, and old place names are living specimens of language and text, recording the historical journey of these linguistic elements. Strengthening the protection of place name cultural heritage not only effectively helps to better preserve and transmit excellent traditional culture, but also provides ideas and references for the modernization of place names.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, place names serve as a vital window into the linguistic, cultural, and social fabric of a region. As public and regulatory focus on their standardization, usage, and cultural preservation intensifies in China, the effective application of Chinese Pinyin in normative practices presents key challenges. These include navigating its relationship with English translations, distinguishing it from dialectal romanization, and addressing historical pronunciations. Furthermore, the process of renaming in Special Administrative Regions during de-colonization demands careful consideration. To address these com-

plexities, the study advocates for enhanced public participation, refinement of legal frameworks through pilot programs, and strengthened protection of toponymic cultural heritage, aiming for a balanced approach to standardization and cultural preservation.

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