6-1-2000

In Need of a Total Plan: From Wade-Giles to Pinyin

Ju-yen Teng

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2000/iss121/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of East Asian Libraries by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
IN NEED OF A TOTAL PLAN: 
FROM WADE-GILES TO PINYIN

Ju-yen Teng
University of Washington

This essay focuses on two questions: One, how is the conversion of the romanization system of Chinese script from Wade/Giles to pinyin being carried out in North America? And two, what is the place of the CEAL libraries, and how should they fit, in the whole process of conversion?

Introduction

The long overdue conversion of the romanization system of Chinese scripts from Wade-Giles to pinyin in North America finally got its kick-off in November 1997, after two unsuccessful attempts in 1980 and 1990. LC has always been the leader and initiator of this conversion movement, and it now has the chance to collaborate with OCLC and RLIN to carry out the project. Although slow to get started, LC managed to come up with a “Conversion Timeline” in June 1999, lately updated on May 4, 2000, to become the “Coordinated Timeline,” spelling out its conversion activities in conjunction with those of OCLC and RLIN in a simplified and extremely succinct way.

The Timeline, however, was a product of the three agencies, produced from their point of view, and offered insufficient explanations and explicit rationale. The question as to how much and in what way a CEAL library as a partner of the endeavor of conversion may understand the Timeline has yet to be addressed. It is the purpose of this essay to try to understand it from the point of view of a CEAL library through the eyes of one East Asian librarian who is an outsider to the giant three--LC, OCLC, and RLIN. Through this effort this essay also hopes to clarify, partially at least, how the conversion is being carried out.

It goes without saying that the other important players of the game, the CEAL libraries, should receive as much attention as the major players, the giant three. The success and completion of the conversion project obviously need the full participation of the CEAL libraries, yet they do not seem to find a place in the Timeline. CEAL libraries need to be engaged and included in the actions of the project, even in its early stages. The CEAL Pinyin Liaison Group issued a “Final report on pinyin conversion” in March 2000, offering CEAL members options and advice as to how should they conduct their local conversions. But the gap between the work of the giant three and that of the CEAL libraries still needs to be bridged. This essay attempts to view the conversion project from the perspective of one librarian in the East Asian library community, and to argue for the need of a total plan which would integrate all the conversion activities of LC, OCLC, RLIN, and CEAL libraries.

Strictly speaking, no concrete and formal plan for the conversion project as a whole has existed in public. By concrete and formal plan, I mean a written, systematic scheme, with objectives, strategies, activities, etc. arranged in a logical sequence to show their inter-
relations, for the purpose of achieving a certain goal. This essay intends neither to create such a plan, nor to lament the lack of it. It only tries to understand who is doing what, what are the key elements in the process of conversion, what are the relationships of the giant three to each other and to the CEAL libraries, and what opportunities and choices that the CEAL libraries need in order to participate effectively in the process of conversion. It also attempts to articulate these matters in such a way as to be suitable for non-East Asian librarians and the public at large, and stimulate a healthy discussion in the CEAL community. It is to be hoped that someday this ideal of a total plan may be validated and become a reality.

I. The Conversion Project

LC’s announcement in its press release on November 19, 1997 that “[it] will convert to pinyin for the romanization of Chinese” may be taken as the goal of its conversion project. LC here speaks only for itself, but by implication it actually also speaks for the entire CEAL community in North America. For the conversion project makes sense only when the entire or the overwhelming majority of the CEAL libraries join in. And it did receive strong support from East Asian librarians this time.

LC also promised that “[it] … will soon draw up plans on how to carry out the conversion during the next two to three years.” In this, LC means to speak for itself as well as for OCLC and RLIN, but not for the CEAL libraries. The plans came out in the forms of a General Outline and a Conversion Timeline. The latter was revised later to become the Coordinated Timeline to incorporate the conversion activities of OCLC and RLIN.

LC may intend to include the CEAL libraries in the conversion project, but in reality it has not yet been able to take the CEAL libraries into consideration in its planning. LC as the leader will plan and go first, and then collaborate with RLIN and OCLC. The CEAL libraries have to wait and figure out by themselves who is doing what, what the conversion project is all about, and what it means to them.

The first question that may come to mind about the conversion project is what does it mean to say “[LC] will convert to pinyin for romanization of Chinese?” Where are the Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese script that will be converted to pinyin by LC? The General Outline of the LC Pinyin Conversion Project provides the answer to the question. LC will convert to pinyin all the Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese in subject headings, classification schedules, Chinese conventional place names, bibliographic records, and the authority file. Understandably LC will not do it alone. OCLC and RLIN will in general have a great share of the work under the coordination of LC, with some sort of division of labor among them. LC must provide OCLC and RLIN with the conversion specifications to be implemented and followed. It is unclear, however, as to what these conversion specifications are and whether they are going to be made public in the future.

The next question where to start the project, and who will do what? As it turned out, LC started with the Chinese Conventional Place Names (August 1998), then come the Subject Headings in the subject authority file, and the Classification Schedules (October 2000). OCLC will start with the Name Authority Records (NARs) (12 August 2000), and then the
LC Chinese serial records. RLIN will take on the largest job, converting the LC Bibliographic Records in RLIN databases (1 August 2000).\textsuperscript{11}

LC determined that Chinese conventional place names must be revised before the conversion project really begins because “many of the forms used for these geographic headings cannot be converted easily by machine manipulation.” This decision was initially aimed at “revising the Chinese place names currently established in a conventional English-language form to the form used by the United States Board on Geographic Names.” One year later, however, in July 1999, LC also began to revise other names. All these changes will be made to the name authority records. The CEAL libraries must pay very close attention to these changes because all new cataloging should use the changed form once the revision is made. LC has provided a very useful list of Chinese conventional place names with revision date attached to each revised name.\textsuperscript{12} Since OCLC is responsible for the conversion of the NARs, however, it is unclear whether LC by so doing will cause a “double conversion” problem for OCLC.

Conversion of subject headings in the subject authority file by LC will begin on the to-be-declared “Day 1 for subject headings,” and “henceforth new and changed subject headings will use new pinyin romanization guidelines.” Meanwhile, “changes to related classification schedules are [also] initiated.”\textsuperscript{13} It is unclear when Day 1 for subject headings will be. Is it possible that it may coincide with the “Day 1 for bib records, name and series authorities” which falls on 1 October 2000? CEAL libraries need to know this date so that they may not be bewildered when receiving converted subject authority records from the LC Cataloging Distribution Services (CDS) from this date onwards.

RLIN will first convert all LC Chinese language bibliographic records residing in the RLIN database (1 August 2000), then the rest of Chinese language records in the RLIN union catalog (September 2000), and then those of its member libraries. It will also take care of the bibliographic records created in LC gap periods I and II, and presumably will also provide similar services for its member libraries at a later time. It is assumed that RLIN will convert both the monographic and serial Chinese language records. The target date for RLIN to finish the conversion of Chinese bibliographic records in its own database is April 2001.

OCLC will begin with the project of massive conversion of Chinese language name authority records for LC (12 August 2000) and then try to find a way to convert the “related” authority records. It is not quite clear as to what the word “related” means here.\textsuperscript{14} The converted NARs will be delivered to LC (28 August 2000), and in turn to be distributed to NACO and CDS customers by LC (5 September 2000). OCLC then will convert all the Chinese language records in WorldCat on Day 1 (1 October 2000), including CONSER Chinese serial records, leaving the non-Chinese bibliographic records for a later date. The conversion of Chinese bibliographic records will also be completed in April 2001.

II. Some Specific Challenges

LC has declared that 1 October 2000 will be the “Day 1 for bib records, name and series authorities,” and “henceforth romanization of Chinese…carried out by the Library of
Congress...[and] new bibliographic and authority records created by other libraries will follow [new] pinyin romanization guidelines." According the wording of this statement, “Day 1” is designated as the beginning day of using pinyin romanization in the “creation,” and not in the “conversion,” of Chinese records. Any CEAL library is, therefore, free to choose any date as its “Day 1” for the “conversion” of its Chinese records. LC can do the same if it chooses to do so. One should avoid misreading “Day 1” as solely referring to LC “for bib records, name and series authorities.” Other libraries are also entitled to use the phrase “Day 1” for other purposes.

“Day 2” is another phrase that may cause some confusion. It does not appear in the Coordinated Timeline, but it was vigorously discussed in the Pinyin Conversion Planning Meeting on 7 October 1999 at LC and adopted by the CEAL Pinyin Liaison Group in its Final Report On Pinyin Conversion. It is defined as “a library declares that henceforth all of its cataloging will be done in pinyin,” where “cataloging” means “copy cataloging.” If “Day 2” is for copy cataloging to be done in pinyin, then when was the “Day 1” for copy cataloging to be done in pinyin? In my opinion, both “original cataloging” to be done in pinyin and “copy cataloging” to be done in pinyin should have a Day 1 and a Day 2.

LC has two “Gap Periods” in the conversion project: Gap Period I (1-30 August 2000) and Gap Period II (1-30 September 2000). Although LC will impose a “moratorium...on the contribution of new and changed Chinese headings (LC and NACO)” during Gap Period I, “LC staff will continue to create bibliographic records in RLIN.” It is unclear as to how to reconcile these two statements, since creating bibliographic records may inevitably mean in some way the contribution of new Chinese headings. Still, it is clearly stated that during Gap Period II, “[LC] catalogers will neither create nor change Chinese language bibliographic records,” even though “acquisitions staff will continue to create IBC records in Wade-Giles.” The plan is that “training begins for LC staff during Gap Period II” on 1-4 September 2000? What kind of training will it be?

RLIN and OCLC will complete conversion of Chinese bibliographic records in April 2001. The use of pinyin marker in field 987 will cease in October 2001, which means “changeover to pinyin by RLG and OCLC has been completed.” It also means that “conversion of Wade-Giles Chinese records in individual library’s OPEC is expected to be completed by October 1, 2001.” There are only six months for RLG and OCLC to convert all the Chinese records in all the CEAL libraries. How and when should the CEAL libraries begin to plan, in collaboration with RLIN and OCLC, for the occasion? Should they begin planning before or wait until RLIN and OCLC complete their conversion? The process obviously requires careful and detailed planning from each participant, involving each CEAL library and one of the utilities. The process goes beyond the Coordinated Timeline. A “total” plan that covers both the Coordinated Timeline and this process is urgently needed for each CEAL library and its utility.

Even though the timing and needs of each CEAL library may be different from one another, many similar characteristics in the process may still be used for the construction of the plan. It may be more efficient and beneficial for all the parties concerned if the plan is drawn from
the very beginning of the conversion project. The Coordinated Timeline has left much space between April 2000 and October 2000. LC, OCLC, and RLIN should invite the representatives of the CEAL libraries to work together to fill it with the objectives, strategies, activities, and detailed timelines in a logical sequence. It would be even better, more helpful and useful if the four parties chose to work together also to revise the Coordinated Timeline in the same manner in order to make it a real “total” plan.

III. The CEAL Libraries’ Turn

It is a challenge for the CEAL libraries to decide how to go about doing the conversion project. One way is to follow the LC model. But LC has revealed few details of its plan in the Coordinated Timeline. The CEAL libraries must work out their own plans almost from scratch. With CEAL Pinyin Liaison Group’s “Final report on pinyin conversion” in our hands, however, the job becomes much easier.

There are many ways to approach the task. One is first to draw up a local conversion plan, the goal of which may be the conversion to pinyin for the romanization of Chinese. It consists of two parts: online and off-line. The majority of online (NARs, acquisitions, bibliographic, check-in, and item records) part may be entrusted to a utility; but the off-line part (label changes and shifting of materials) must be handled locally.

Each of the above-mentioned categories can be an objective to be achieved on a certain date by certain strategies, with certain resources, and through certain activities. All components should be arranged in a logical sequence to show their inter-relations. The utility must then be contacted in order to find out the approximate cost of the conversion.

In the meantime, elements such as “Day 1 for bib records, name and series authorities,” Gap Periods, date for copy cataloging to begin using pinyin romanization guidelines, materials need to be converted manually, split files, cleanups, staff training, user education, etc., all need to be incorporated into the plan. It would be nice, of course, if a separate timeline can be devised. Doing this, however, demands much time and energy.

In the case of the East Asia Library, University of Washington, the matter is a little more complicated, for the library’s serials are shelved separately from the monographs and are shelved alphabetically according to the romanization of the titles, not by call numbers. For the sake of facilitating the workflow of sorting, shelving, and retrieving of the serials by student assistants who do not read Chinese, each bound volume is labeled with its romanized title. After the conversion to pinyin not only the serial volume itself will need to be relocated, but its romanized title label also needs to be replaced. It takes more time to type title than call number labels.

IV. Conclusion

The conversion to pinyin for romanization of Chinese is a long overdue, essential project in North America. It is at present under the leadership of LC with the collaboration of RLIN
and OCLC, and going very well. The three of them have produced a Coordinated Timeline outlining their conversion activities. The Timeline helps the CEAL libraries to understand most of the conversion project conducted by the giant three. It nevertheless did not include the CEAL libraries, and consequently hinders their ability to thoroughly understand the project. This essay sorts out through the Timeline the division of labor between the three giants and how do they will proceed with their various conversion responsibilities.

The Timeline is no substitute for a concrete and formal plan, which should function as a “blueprint” of the conversion project. This essay argues not only for a formal plan, but for a formal “total” plan which should includes the plan(s) for the CEAL libraries. For without the participation of the CEAL libraries, the conversion project will be incomplete. And without the integration of the conversion plan of the CEAL libraries, the conversion plan of the giant three, even if there is such a plan, will be at best a partial one.

The purpose of this essay is to stimulate discussion of the conversion project in the CEAL community. I am sure that there are many worthwhile points left unexplored by this essay. I am equally sure that some points in this essay are controversial and need to be explored further.

NOTES

6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
16 “Pinyin conversion planning meeting. October 7, 1999,” p. 7
17 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
18 Ibid., p. 4.
19 Ibid., p. 5
20 Ibid., p. 6.