CEAL Task Force on Pinyin Conversion: Executive Summary

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REPORTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CEAL TASK FORCE ON PINYIN CONVERSION*
Executive Summary

In May 1997, the Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) formed a Task Force on Pinyin Conversion in response to the announcement by the Library of Congress (LC) of its plan to adopt Pinyin as the standard romanization scheme for the cataloging of Chinese language materials in 1999. Even though the CEAL community has not been privy to the rationale behind LC's decision and is still awaiting an official explanation from LC, the CEAL Executive Committee asked its Task Force to study the impact of LC's decision on CEAL member libraries. This is a summary of the Task Force's findings.

At the onset, Task Force members all agreed that, in the publishing world, romanization schemes are used to transcribe the original Chinese script when it is not feasible to print the original script. In libraries, romanized Chinese has been used for bibliographic control, primarily as an indexing tool, and there has never been a plan to replace characters with a romanized-only scheme. Most of the Task Force members agreed that romanized access to Chinese will continue to be in demand as long as some users have no means to access materials except through a romanized scheme.

In addition, Task Force members all agreed that, during the last decade or so, gradually and steadfastly, Pinyin has become the predominant Chinese romanization scheme in North America and the world. Many library users in North America today know only the Pinyin version of Chinese names, and more and more academics have abandoned the Wade-Giles romanization system currently used in Chinese-language catalogs in this country. Today, few East Asian librarians and library users are against using Pinyin as a standard scheme for transcribing Chinese characters.

On the other hand, Task Force members find that the CEAL community has concerns and reservations about the ramifications of the adoption of Pinyin in library catalogs in North America. These concerns center on: 1) Technical issues, including the inconvenience of split files, the word-division question, and the need for changes in authority headings and call numbers; 2) cost and priorities of expenditure; and 3) timing for beginning the conversion.

1. Technical issues

   a. Split files

   The critical question is: what will become of the millions of records now in databases with Wade-Giles romanization? LC's current proposal does not address this issue; it does not include plans for a systematic conversion of all existing Wade-Giles records before the adoption of Pinyin, nor does it provide Pinyin access to these records through other means. This will cause confusion, as these two different romanization systems would be
mixed in one library database and users would have to search each entry twice. The majority of Task Force members feel most strongly that, if a CEAL member library decides to follow the lead of LC to adopt Pinyin, it should provide Pinyin access to all old Wade-Giles records before starting to catalog in Pinyin. Some Task Force members further recommend that CEAL libraries provide bibliographic access through both Pinyin and Wade-Giles rather than adopting one scheme over the other.

b. The word-division question

Task Force members unanimously recommend that the adoption of Pinyin follow the standard word-division guidelines in the Basic Rules of Pinyin Romanization promulgated by the Language Commission of the People's Republic of China in 1988. Indeed members further recommend that LC follow all of the Guojia Biaozhun guidelines when designing the LC scheme.

c. Related changes in authority headings and call numbers

In addition, Task Force members note that current authority files are inadequate in cross-referencing Chinese names. They recommend that, regardless of what romanization system is used, LC should take the lead as soon as possible in revising authority files to facilitate searching by means of vernacular, Pinyin, Wade-Giles, and other well-known forms of entries.

Task Force members assume that LC will update its classification schedules and shelflisting practices to follow the Pinyin scheme prior to initiating the conversion. As a result, libraries will probably need selectively to recatalog some authors whose work will need to be kept together in library stacks to facilitate browsing. Otherwise the conflict of the old and new romanization schemes will result in the separate shelving of works by the same author.

2. Cost

Cost is an important factor. It is estimated that by the time LC begins to switch to Pinyin in 1999, several millions of Wade-Giles records in different library computer systems in America will be waiting to be converted to Pinyin. The conversion surely will be substantial. Task Force members recommend that LC work with the CEAL community to do a careful cost analysis before embarking on this conversion.

3. Timing

Timing is also a critical issue. The majority of Task Force members feel that the time to change is the time when a library can instantly switch from a Wade-Giles catalog to a Pinyin catalog -- just as the Australian libraries did in 1996 after they had spent months
converting the old databases to Pinyin backstage, followed by a scheduled public database switch to Pinyin with an additional Wade-Giles counterpart over the course of a few hours. LC and the CEAL community libraries need to agree on a time in the near future when the switch to Pinyin as the romanization standard shall take place. Such a time need not be when everything works out to perfection, but Task Force members want to emphasize strongly the importance of collective planning in order to prevent disruption and confusion in our national services.

The impact of changing technologies

Task Force members also want to point out that there are various alternatives to a global conversion of library catalogs to Pinyin. Current technology can easily facilitate the conversion between Pinyin and Wade-Giles systems. Several low-cost or free desk-top computer programs for this purpose already exist to allow the conversion of different transcription systems at the user's front end. These programs often require little or no technical changes on the library databases, and can be used immediately. In addition, the next generation of library systems should be an integrated system that can provide access to bibliographic records in their vernacular form, thus reducing the need for using any one romanization scheme as the inter-medium for retrieving and displaying Chinese scripts in on-line catalogs. The recent emergence of Unicode has promised real hope in this direction. Task Force members recommend that individual East Asian collections consider all these options before deciding to switch from Wade-Giles to Pinyin.

In the past decades, the CEAL community has worked closely with LC in such landmark projects as the amendment to the "Rules for Descriptive Cataloging in the Library of Congress " and "Manual of Romanization, Capitalization, Punctuation, and Word Division for Chinese, Japanese and Korean". Task Force members unanimously hope that fruitful cooperation between LC and the CEAL community will bring about a successful change to a Pinyin standard that is satisfactory to all.

CEAL TASK FORCE ON PINYIN CONVERSION

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* The final, full report will be available at a later date.