

Endonyms/Exonyms and Writing Systems

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The following is a summary of a paper presented in Frankfurt in March 2000 at the Second International Symposium on Geographical Names (*Mitteilungen des Bundesamtes für Kartographie und Geodäsie*. Bd. 19. Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 137–140). It is submitted as a proposal for amending a UN resolution on the standardization of geographical names.

In the *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* (UN, 2002) it is stated under “exonym” that the officially romanized endonym Moskva for Москва is no exonym, nor is the Pinyin form Beijing, while Peking is an exonym.

There are some practical considerations that make the definition of endonyms/exonyms across scripts problematic.

1. Currently there are languages with non-Roman writing systems that do not have any official romanization systems or have several, competing ones. By definition, endonyms in the first case could only be represented by original-script name forms, all other forms should be exonyms. In the second case there would be multiple endonyms.
2. Some of the ‘official romanization systems’ adopted by the United Nations have not become official in their own country or are used only to a limited extent. In such cases endonyms represented by officially romanized forms, have little practical value.
3. It is not clear how to define endonyms/exonyms for those languages that use non-Roman writing systems. How would a Chinese exonym look like?

In order to avoid at least practical difficulties in compiling possible lists of exonyms, it is proposed to supplement Resolution III/19 (1977) which lists three categories of names that should not be included (1. those differing from the official name only by the omission, addition or alteration of diacritics or the article; 2. those differing from the official name by declension or derivation; 3. those created by the translation of a generic term). The fourth category should be *names that are converted from the original-script form using a currently valid fixed set of rules*. The words “currently valid” should exclude names that are traditionally rendered in obsolete systems of romanization (French *Chang-hai* ‘Shanghai’, German *Hoangho* ‘Huang He’, English *Kashgar* ‘Kaxgar’, etc.).

This addition leaves open the question whether such converted names are exonyms or not. When Russian *Ни́жний Но́вгород* is romanized *Nižnij Novgorod* (in the UN system), it is definitely not an exonym. Whether other currently used romanizations in different languages (e.g. English *Nizhniy Novgorod*, Estonian *Nižni Novgorod*, French *Nijni Novgorod*, German *Nishnij Nowgorod*) can be viewed as exonyms is perhaps even debatable (to the author they do not seem to be ‘proper exonyms’ at all) but nevertheless they should not figure in the lists of English, Estonian, French or German exonyms.