Advisory Opinion

Toward a Comprehensive Solution on the Issues of Geographical Names — A Three-Pronged Approach: Raising a Shared Awareness of the Issues, Creating a Geographical Names Database, and International Collaboration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Background

Geographical names are highly relevant to people's daily lives. In Japan, the naming, administration, and orthographic practice of geographical names have long been handled in a piecemeal manner by the individual authorities concerned. As a result, a range of problems has arisen: the absence of a unified policy for geographical name administration; inadequate arrangements for naming authority and for the sharing of information; the lack of established standards for the written forms of geographical names; and inconsistencies in the romanization of geographical names in Japanese and in the Japanese rendering of foreign geographical names.

As a consequence, confusion arising from the commercialization of geographical names (e.g., the sale of naming rights), the disappearance of cultural, traditional, and historical geographical names occasioned by the residential address indication system and by municipal mergers, and insufficient consideration for indigenous languages, cultures, and geographical names, have all become increasingly evident. Moreover, newly-developed geographical names that make it difficult to identify the locations they denote, may hinder interregional exchanges and economic activities. The principal cause of these problems is that no cross-sectoral organization spanning industry, government, academia, and civil society has existed to address comprehensively the building of shared awareness of geographical name issues, the development of geographical names databases, and international cooperation. As a result, norms for the expression and use of geographical names have never been firmly established.

A comprehensive solution to issues on geographical names therefore urgently requires: (1) the establishment of a cross-sectoral organization capable of providing integrated advice on naming, renaming, and written forms, together with the systematic training of specialists and due attention to education; (2) the standardization and digitization of address notation and the development of gazetteers that make it possible to trace historical change; and (3) active engagement in international discussions—particularly those of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—and the reflection of their outcomes in domestic policy.

II. Current Situation and Issues

The Heisei-era wave of local authority reorganization, most of which occurred during the 2000s, gave rise to many debatable new names, including municipal names that could only be written in katakana or hiragana or names representing a wide area that do not correspond to the territory they actually denote. Concerns were also voiced that historical

geographical names were being lost. Decisions on changes to municipal names are left to the municipalities concerned, and no guidelines exist to inform how such names should be chosen. Yet the use of a geographical name is not confined to the residents of the municipality in question: geographical names have a public character and are used throughout the country as a whole. It is therefore desirable to establish appropriate guidelines that the great majority of people can accept without discomfort. Confusion is also evident in the romanization of geographical names, and geographical names need to be presented in a manner readily understandable to foreign visitors as well. In addition, the commercialization of naming rights to geographical names has become an issue, heightening the need for a specialized standing organization able to deal with the full range of problems on geographical names.

Meanwhile, following the establishment of the Digital Agency in 2021, the sharing of address databases has begun to advance. Even so, coordination among ministries and agencies over their respective uses and expression of geographical names and addresses, can hardly be called sufficient. Here, too, integrated management — the standardization of geographical names — is required.

Internationally, many countries have specialized bodies responsible for the management of geographical names. UNGEGN works to spread the standardization of geographical names—the principle that geographical names should be managed by an appropriate national authority. Its main objectives are to develop scholarly theory for standardizing in this sense. It encompasses the written forms of geographical names and the conditions for naming in each country, and to promote the wide domestic use of the basic principles of geographical names management in political, diplomatic, economic, social, and cultural activities. Japan has participated continuously in UNGEGN meetings and is being counted among the member states possessing a national names authority. In reality, however, that authority is a liaison council between the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan and the Hydrographic and Oceanographic Department of the Japan Coast Guard, and it cannot be described as a cross-sectoral organization of industry, government, academia, and civil society that deals with issues on geographical names on a standing basis. In order to make Japan’s efforts toward geographical name standardization substantively adequate among UNGEGN and other international organizations, an organized and sustained response to these United Nations activities is urgently needed.

III. Content of the Advisory Opinion

To enable a sustainable governance on geographical names that simultaneously achieves consistency in geographical names management, international alignment, and the protection of historical geographical names, we propose that the following three measures be taken promptly and as an integrated whole.

(1) Establishment of a cross-sectoral organization of industry, government, academia, and civil society, and the training of specialists on geographical names

A standing cross-sectoral organization of industry, government, academia, and civil society should be established to provide advice, guidance, deliberation, and coordination on the naming, renaming, appellation, and written forms of geographical names. With the participation of local governments, the ministries and agencies concerned, research institutions, private-sector businesses, and local communities, this organization would set out nationwide policies and guidelines and provide expert support in individual cases. In parallel, specialists able to advise on geographical names management—practitioners versed in onomastics, geographic information, language and culture, and legal systems—should be trained in a planned manner, deployed in each region, and organized into a network. [Relevant bodies: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; National Governors' Association; Japan Association of City Mayors; National Association of Towns and Villages; the map industry; the textbook publishing industry]

(2) Standardization and digitization of address notation, and development of gazetteers

Variant and inconsistent renderings regarding address data are a major obstacle to promoting digital transformation (DX). Address notation should therefore be unified and put, as a matter of urgency, into forms suitable for digital processing. In parallel, gazetteers should be built with the function of recording the historical changes in the foreign-language (romanized) forms of geographical names in Japan, and that for geographical names outside Japan, containing information on the names in their original language, as well as romanized, and kanji forms. Furthermore, GIS-linked geographical name databases and geocoders — covering both current and past geographical names and addresses with emphasis on disaster-related geographical names and koaza (small subdivision) names — should be developed, published, and put to use as fundamental academic information and technology. Records of local governments' discussions and decision-making processes concerning the naming and renaming of geographical entities should also be systematically collected and preserved and organized as auditable metadata attached to these databases. [Relevant bodies: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism; Digital Agency; National Diet Library; National Institute of Informatics]

(3) Active engagement in international initiatives and their reflection in domestic policy

Japan should take an active part in international discussions within UNGEGN—on avoiding the commercialization of geographical names, on the appropriate use of exonyms, and on respecting Indigenous geographical names—and reflect them in the operation of domestic systems. The dispatch of Japanese specialists to international meetings should be placed on a permanent footing, and a system of monitoring developments and feeding them back should be established. In addition, due consideration for appropriate forms of geographical names should be sought in contexts such as UNESCO World Heritage nominations, and

the interrelationship between linguistic culture and geographical names in the East Asian Sinographic sphere including Japan should be institutionally established. Academic bodies such as the International Science Council (ISC) should likewise be urged to give due consideration to linguistic culture and geographical names. Japan should further cooperate with the organizations in fields where international practice is already well established, such as Antarctic geographical names and undersea feature names, and incorporate their proven approaches and methods into domestic arrangements. Finally, to forestall the international disputes now emerging with the spread of the geographical indication (GI) system and the trademark registration of geographical names, a framework should be put in place, in concert with the countries and international organizations concerned, to ensure the appropriate use of geographical names. [Relevant bodies: Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Agency for Cultural Affairs; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Japan Patent Office; Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)]