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English

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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names**

**2025 session**

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Item 4 (a) of the provisional agenda \*

**Reports: Divisions for the Group of Experts**

**Towards the establishment of a division of the Chinese  
Characters Cultural Sphere**

Submitted by Asia East Division\*\*

**Summary**

At the 2023 UNGEGN Session held in May 2023, Professor Emeritus Hiroshi Tanabe, Chair of Asia East Division, expressed his wish to establish a “Language-based Division by Asian Countries that share Chinese characters”, and the issue was passed on to his successor. In this summary report, as his successor, I will report on the preparations for the establishment of a division of the Chinese Characters Cultural Sphere (tentative name).

The following issues are considered in establishing a new division. The name of the division, the member countries, the purpose and issues, etc. are considered. As for the name, I would like to use the provisional name of “Hanzi or Chinese Characters Cultural Sphere”. Or, it is also good to list the pronunciations of Chinese characters in the three countries of People’s Republic of China, Republic of Korea and Japan, “Hanzi/Hanja/Kanji”. As for the member countries, I would like to invite Republic of Korea in the Asia East Division and People's Republic of China, the country of origin of Chinese characters, to participate, and then expand to other Asian countries.

The countries that use Chinese characters have the common characteristic of being influenced by Chinese characters culture, as well as their own unique characteristics. At the first meeting, we would like to discuss the name of the division, the countries that make up the division, its purpose, as well as issues common to all members and issues unique to each country.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1

\*\* The full report was prepared by (Akihiko Takagi, Japan,)

## **Towards the establishment of a division of the Chinese Characters Cultural Sphere**

The establishment of Hanzi or a Chinese Characters Division (tentative name) was proposed by Prof. Hiroshi Tanabe, Chair of the Asia East Division, at the 2023 session of the UNGEGN, held in May 2023. This proposal is mentioned in the “Decision 3/2023/20 on other matters related to geographical names” section on page 12 of the report (E/2023/84) of the 2023 Session of the UNGEGN, in which it is stated that “The Group of Experts: (c) Noted the stepping down of the current acting chair of the Asia East Division (other than China), and that his interest in establishing a language-based division in Asia (shared writing system of Chinese characters) will be passed on to his successor.”

In this divisional report, as his successor, I will report on the preparations for the establishment of a division of the Chinese Characters Cultural Sphere (tentative name). I would like to point out that this division report is not based on the divisional meeting, but is my personal opinion as the chair for the reference.

### **1. On the procedure for moving forward**

First, I will discuss the relationship between the form of division and Chinese characters. As mentioned above, the record of the UNGEGN 2023 session refers to "establishing a language-based division in Asia (shared writing system of Chinese characters)." In there, the division is assumed as a form of establishment.

Currently, there are 24 divisions in UNGEGN, and they are broadly divided into geographical divisions that bring together neighboring countries and linguistic divisions that bring together countries with a common language. Although the countries that share a language are not necessarily adjacent to each other, they use the same official language, so they are grouped together by country.

However, since Chinese characters are not a language but a set of characters, a division with a name of Chinese characters cannot be, strictly speaking, a language-based division. Nevertheless, Chinese characters are ideographic characters, which are different from phonetic characters such as the alphabet. For example, the author's name is written in the Roman alphabet as “Takagi Akihiko”, but when read in Chinese, it is “gāo mù zhāng yàn”. The two pronunciations are different, so they cannot be understood in conversation, but they can be understood if you look at the Chinese characters, even if you cannot read them. Because of these characteristics, Chinese characters have spread to surrounding language areas with different grammatical systems since their birth in ancient China.

In other words, because Chinese characters are sets of characters with meaning, when they spread to neighboring regions, they were accompanied by culture, including various institutions such as religion and customs. Therefore, when considering the establishment of a division that shares the Chinese characters writing system, it is necessary to include culture along with it.

Second, since Chinese characters are ideographic characters, there are a large number of them. Some dictionaries of Chinese characters have over 100,000 words. Since it is impossible for people to memorize such a huge number of characters, every country limits the number of Chinese characters used in primary education and daily life. For example, since the 1930s, Japan has imposed restrictions on the style, number of characters, and *kana* usage (the rules about how to use *kana*) of Chinese characters, thus reinforcing standardization in the use of Chinese characters. After Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War, the criteria for standardization were loosened, but the “*Joyo Kanji Hyō*, list of kanji for ordinary use” and “*Gendai Kana Dzukai*, Modern *Kana* usage” are still used today as a guide and reference for standardization. In other words, in terms of standardization, Chinese characters are subject to

greater restrictions on their use from country to country than are phonetic characters set of characters such as the alphabet. This is also true for the standardization of geographical names. What is the situation in the PRC and the ROK?

In Japan, the phonetic Japanese syllabaries *hiragana* and *katakana* were created based on Chinese characters, and are used in combination with Chinese characters. That means there are three types of Japanese characters. Most Japanese place names use Chinese characters, but a small number use *hiragana* or *katakana*. Since China does not use characters other than Chinese characters, when translating Japanese place names written in *hiragana* or *katakana* into Chinese, the characters are transliterated. In this case, there are rare cases in which a Chinese character is used that does not convey the original meaning of the Japanese word. For example, there is a municipality in Miyazaki Prefecture called "Ebino City," which takes its name from the "Ebino Plateau" in the city area, and the name means "grape-like color". However, in Chinese, the name is pronounced "xiā yě shì", and it means "shrimp". Both are read as "ebi" in Japanese, but they have different meanings. In this way, when Japanese place names written in *hiragana* or *katakana* are transliterated into Chinese characters in China, there are cases where the "transliteration" differs from the original meaning of the Japanese.

## 2. Name, purpose, and etc. to be discussed

Having discussed with other experts, it would be desirable to refer to the "division of Chinese Characters Cultural Sphere" rather than the "Chinese Characters Division", and when discussing the purpose of the division, we should also refer to these cultural aspects. Or, considering that the creation of the new division was initially proposed by the Asia East division, it is also possible to consider a name that includes the notation of "Hanzi/Hanja/Kanji", which is the notation of the three East Asian countries of People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan.

As an example of my proposal, I would like to point out "the protection of cultural, social, and historical heritage, including place names, in countries that use Chinese characters".

With the above in mind, I would like to hold an unofficial brainstorming meeting among the experts from three countries during the UNGEGN 2025 session to discuss the issues I have mentioned so far. After that, we would like to continue discussions on objectives, issues to be considered, etc. through online meetings and emails.