

Chinese speakers get easier access to Internet

July 13 2010, by Adrian Addison



The web will soon be a lot more accessible for more than a billion people after the body that runs the Internet's naming system gave the green light for the use of Chinese script. Registries in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong will soon officially start issuing domain names in Chinese characters following the announcement by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers.

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Registries in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong will soon officially start issuing domain names in [Chinese](#) characters following the announcement by the [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#) (ICANN).

"One fifth of the world speaks Chinese," said Rod Beckstrom, ICANN's

president. "That means we just increased the potential online accessibility for roughly a billion people."

The ICANN announcement follows an earlier decision to allow Arabic domain names, and other non-European writing systems are expected to follow.

Jonathan Shea, chief executive of the Hong Kong Internet Registration Corporation (HKIRC), one of the bodies that will implement the changes, says Chinese people currently rely on search engines to find sites.

At the moment, Latin alphabet script domain names can make it difficult for some Chinese people to remember or guess the domain names of websites.

But many companies and organisations are only well known by their Chinese names and their branding and identities are often lost in cyberspace, Shea said, as they are forced to have their domain names in English.

"The availability of Chinese domain names will solve these problems once and for all," he told AFP.

The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the government-linked domain name registry agency, lauded the change as "a recognition by the international community of the Chinese culture on the Internet."

A hotline operator at CNNIC said users had already been allowed to apply for and register Chinese domain names and some were already up and running.

He said more than 90 percent of Chinese government agencies, news media websites and universities already had Chinese [domain names](#), as well as more than 40 percent of China's top 500 companies.

But inputting characters can be more difficult than the current system of typing web addresses in pinyin, China's official system of romanisation, said Duncan Clark, Beijing-based chairman of tech consultancy BDA China.

"You've got to type the thing and then select it -- it's actually more key strokes," Clark told AFP. "If it involves more clicks, people won't do it. We're all lazy."

Popular Western brands will continue to use roman characters and Chinese brands will continue to use pinyin to seem more Western, Clark said.

"At the end of the day, 'pinyin something dotcom' is still the cool thing," he said. "Politically it will be wanted and desired by the government, but whether the people here really want it, we'll see."

The change reflects China having the world's largest online population estimated at more than 400 million, Clark added, as well as some of the most popular websites and biggest companies,

"The reality is China is naturally achieving its weight on the Internet as it has in population and with the economy," he added.

Liu Chin-ho, chief executive officer of the Taiwan Network Information Centre, which is in charge of Taiwan's domain name registration, also hailed ICANN's move.

"Local users who do not know English had been somewhat restricted in

their access to the Internet," he told AFP.

But the historical significance is greater than the practical significance, says Paul Denlinger, an Internet consultant who specialises in the Chinese market.

"Chinese learn pinyin, so they know how to write Chinese using Roman characters -- every educated Chinese knows that 'hulianwang' for instance means Internet," he told AFP.

"The biggest significance is that the Internet now more closely conforms to the real world in which people live.

"The period of exclusive Western-style communications and alphabets comes to an end, and a more multilingual, multicultural Internet begins to take shape."

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Citation: Chinese speakers get easier access to Internet (2010, July 13) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-chinese-speakers-easier-access-internet.html>

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