

## **"Just call me 'Ocean'...": how the Chinese practice of adopting English names facilitates, but sometimes violates, cross-cultural discourse**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A survey of Taiwanese perceptions of English names was conducted in order to discover which factors most influenced their decision to adopt an English name and to investigate why seemingly inappropriate choices are sometimes made. It was found that pragmatic reasons play a major role in the decision to adopt an English name. Apart from the recognition that English names were advantageous for learning English, the need to provide non-Chinese speakers with a name that was easy to pronounce and remember, as well as one which made communication easier and more comfortable were also found to be important factors. However, despite a characteristically East Asian willingness to recognise and accommodate the perspective of their non-Chinese speaking interlocutors, many subjects in this study appeared to adhere to deep-seated cultural beliefs about the role of names in identity construction. The results of survey suggest a number of areas for further study.*

**Keywords:** names, identity, appropriateness, perspective

### **INTRODUCTION**

Choosing our own name is not something most of us have had the liberty of doing. Our family names were decided centuries ago, and our given names are almost always chosen by our parents. Whether we like them or not, most of us are stuck with our names for life, since, apart from the now declining practice of married women taking the family name of their husband, few people ever change their family, let alone their given name. It is therefore interesting to note that the informal practice among Chinese speakers of adopting an English name is not only commonplace, if one is unhappy or bored with one's choice, it can be changed relatively easily. It has to be said that this is a good thing, for it is not uncommon to encounter Chinese speakers whose choice of English name would be considered inappropriate, if not downright bizarre, by many native speakers of English. Consider the Shanghai technology company which employed workers with names like Bison, Jekyll, Echo, Feeling and Seven (Lee, 2001), or the foreign English teacher in China who lists Ryne, Jarry, Rain Man, Swallow, Lucifer and Vivid among his class of graduate students (Reitz, 2010). Why do Chinese speakers choose such inappropriate English names for themselves? Why do they adopt English names at all? And how do they imagine foreigners' perceptions of their choice? In order to throw some light on these questions a survey of was conducted among a group of students at Taiwanese university,

all of whom were students of English and almost all of whom had an English name. This paper reports the findings of that survey.

Names have traditionally had an important function in Chinese culture. In ancient times the relationship between language and reality was not considered arbitrary, and so to prevent social disorder, Confucius (ca. 551 – ca. 479 BCE) considered it highly important that names be applied correctly since it ensured the successful carrying out of tasks in accordance with the reality that was implicit in all names and titles. As it is recorded in the *Analects*:

If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. (Slingerland, 2003, p. 139)

Later, Mozi (fl. ca. 430 BCE), who also saw names, as reflective of a certain ideal reality, distinguished between three types of names, including personal names, which were particular to the individuals who bore them (Fraser, 2012). Later still, Zhuangzi (fl. 350-300 BCE) argued that reality preceded language, and so the disputes over what names, and indeed all words, referred to were somewhat missing the point (Blum, 1997).

In contemporary Chinese society personal names may not be considered to be *reflective* of reality, but they are still seen as bearing some sort of relationship to reality that must be harmonised if misfortune is to be avoided. Great care is usually taken when naming a child so that the name, while connoting certain positive and auspicious characteristics such as beauty and intelligence, also matches the date and time of the child's birth. Despite the care taken by parents and grandparents in choosing a child's name, it is not uncommon for modern Chinese to assume a number of different names whose use depends on their relationship to the person who is addressing them (Blum, 1997). And when the context is communication in English with a non-Chinese speaker, it is very likely that the name will be an English one.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several reasons for this practice of adopting an English name have been put forward. It has been claimed that in the past an English name was a status symbol that showed one had received a Western education (Pocha, 2006). Another study found that among Chinese Singaporeans, being a Christian was a significant factor in choosing to adopt an English name (Tan, 2006, cited in Chiang, 2007). It has also been reported that adopting a second or third name is commonplace because Chinese people do not feel that any one name is reflective of their 'real' identity (Blum, 1997). Other research has shown that Chinese-speakers use English names as a tool for "identity management", as they enable the user to project certain personal qualities that they considered desirable (Cheang, 2008).

The most compelling argument, however, comes from Mathews (2006, cited in Cheang, 2008) who points out that the use of an English name solves the dilemma of having to choose between following standard Chinese practice of addressing people by their full name, which may be too formal for some foreigners, or allowing oneself to be addressed by one's Chinese personal name alone, which may create an uncomfortable feeling of intimacy, since in Chinese society bare personal names are normally only used among family members and close friends. Some evidence to support this view comes from a study by Edwards (2006). Based on responses to questionnaires and interviews with both Chinese students studying in the UK and their British teachers, Edwards found that by engaging in this practice, Chinese speakers are complying with

Western conventions of addressing others by just their personal names. Yet at the same time, they are successfully able to avoid breaking with the Chinese convention of using their personal name only when communicating with those with whom one has an intimate relationship.

The use of personal names is especially common in the English classroom. One reason may be that when teachers and students address each other using personal names, it establishes what Scollon and Scollon (1995) call "symmetrical solidarity". According to the pedagogy of communicative language teaching, this reduces the social distance between teacher and student, thus facilitating freer communication and improved language acquisition. While this may be true, why must *English* personal names be used? Evidence from teachers on the ground in China suggests that they address students using English names simply because the classes are large, the students' Chinese names are unfamiliar and English names help them remember who students are (Diary of a Foreign Teacher, 2006). However, it must be said that this still does not fully explain the phenomenon, since in Africa, where English classes are also typically large and the languages (not to mention the sounds of those languages) are often unfamiliar, students generally do not adopt new names. This suggests that any explanation for the practice must take into consideration characteristic Chinese cultural practices.

Recently, research in field of cultural psychology has pointed up several important differences in the way Westerners and East Asians view themselves and their relationship to their social and physical environments (Wu & Keysar, 2007). Specifically, studies have shown that representation of the self is more prominent among members of Western individualistic cultures, than it is for members of East Asian collectivistic cultures. (Markus & Kitayama, 2011). For Chinese, Japanese and Koreans, the self is "interdependent" rather than "independent", which means that members of these cultures are more accustomed to "taking the perspective of others, reading the expectations of others, adjusting to others, and using others as referents for action" (Markus & Kitayama, 2011, pp. 423-424). Thus, one of the factors contributing to the adoption of English names by Chinese speakers may be a characteristically East Asian willingness to assume a second or third person perspective on social interaction. But willingness does not necessarily translate into ability. The fact that inappropriate English names are sometimes chosen may suggest that adopting the perspective of others may be something that that Chinese are able to do more successfully than when interacting with other Chinese than with people from other cultures or speakers of other languages.

## **METHOD**

A questionnaire was designed using Survey Monkey, and all students in the researcher's classes at a Taiwanese university were invited to respond. The survey was designed to reveal information about the use and choice of English names from two perspectives: (1) the respondents' own perspective; and (2) that which they imagined is typically taken by non-Chinese speakers. Most items on the questionnaire were either five or seven point Likert rating-scale type items or yes/no questions. It was assumed that the distance between points on the rating scales were approximately equal, and so average scores calculated using Survey Monkey's built-in analytical tools were used to compare responses and find out which factors were the most important considerations in the use and choice of English names. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were also invited to answer an open-ended question on why they thought the practice of adopting English names was particularly prevalent among Chinese speakers.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

- All except one of the respondents had an English name in addition to their Chinese name. The one respondent without an English name seems to have wanted one, but stated that he/she did not know how to choose one.
- Although only 55% of respondents had chosen their English names for themselves, 73% of all respondents said that they liked their English name.
- 72% said that they had a English name that would normally be found on a typical list of English baby names, while a further 6% had names from other languages (e.g., Spanish or Japanese), leaving 22% with names that were "off-list".
- All but one of the respondents (98%) said that they "usually" or "always" use their English name in English classes taught by a foreign teacher. However, in English classes taught by a local teacher the number was somewhat lower, at 65%.
- There was overall agreement with the statements that "an English name is an advantage for learning English" and "an English name makes it easier for non-Chinese speakers to communicate with you".
- There was strongest agreement with the statements that an English name should be "easy for non-Chinese speakers to pronounce and remember", that it should be "different from the English names of your friends and classmates", and that it should be "personally meaningful". On the other hand, there was overall disagreement with statements English names should come from a standard list of names or conform to orthographical conventions.
- Examples of surnames (Beckham), off-list names (Venox, Gobby), out-of-date names (Fanny), and misspelled names (Samanfa) all scored more highly on the appropriate count than the inappropriate count.
- Opinions about the attractiveness of a number of off-list names tended to fairly neutral, However, there was slight acceptance of the surname, Bryant, and the unconventionally spelled name, Jassie, and least acceptance for the common noun, Snowball.
- There was overall disagreement with the statements that non-Chinese speakers should correctly pronounce the respondents' Chinese names or follow normal Chinese conventions of address (i.e., family name followed by given name).

## DISCUSSION

At 98%, the percentage of respondents who had an English name was considerably higher than the group surveyed by Edwards (2006), among whom 81% had adopted an English name. There are at least two possible explanations. One is that the practice may be more common among Taiwanese than it is among the Mainlanders who made up the majority of respondents in Edwards' study. A second explanation may relate to the fact that Edwards' study was carried out in the UK, where there may be some expectation among locals that Chinese use their Chinese name. If so, it may suggest that the widespread expectation among

English teachers that Chinese speakers use an English name is not something that is reflected in the English speaking society generally.

The one respondent without an English name appears want an English name, but does not want a common name. She explains:

I don't know how to pick what name as my English name. Also, most of the people use the same English name, for example: Jenny, Jane, Stephanie, Hannah, Amy, Crystal, Tina, Tiffany, etc....these English name are not special anymore. But I also don't know how to create a new English name.

This is consistent with the general agreement expressed by respondents with the statement that an English name should be different from those of one's classmates. It is also consistent with Chinese practices in general, where there is no standard list of baby names and a name can be newly created by combining any two suitable characters. It is not insignificant that the respondent said that she didn't know how to "create" a new English name. Of course, English names are not created, as Chinese names are, but chosen from a finite list.

The fact that respondents generally agreed that an English name makes it easier to communicate with foreigners is supported by some of the responses to the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. For example,

I think by using English names, we can communicate with English speakers more easily...

If you have English name which is easy for them to call you, you will have better communication with each other and I think it will be more friendly...

There was also strong agreement with the statement that foreigners feel uncomfortable if they cannot pronounce other people's names correctly, and many respondents mentioned the difficulty foreigners have with pronouncing Chinese names as another reason for adopting an English name. For example,

I think that because Taiwanese names are not easy to speak for non-Chinese speakers.

I think because foreigners can't pronounce our Chinese name clearly, so they might forget our name.

Taiwanese phonetic symbols is hard to be pronounce by foreigner, so Taiwanese need an English name.

These results point to a characteristically East Asian, willingness to appreciate the perspective of the others and accommodate their needs so that communication can take place more easily.

The fact that there was general agreement with the statement that having an English name was an advantage for learning English suggests that there was a considerable degree of what Gardner (1985) calls an "integrative orientation" towards the culture whose language they are learning. As one respondent stated:

It seems natural to have an English name when learning English. I used to have a Spanish name when I learned Spanish.

It is interesting that there was slight disagreement with the statement that foreigners should follow convention (i.e., use both family name and given name) if they happen to address the respondent using his or her Chinese name. In other words, there was a general acceptance that foreigners could follow the Western convention of using personal names in most informal situations. This suggests that Edwards' (2006) conclusion that the use of English names is a strategy of resistance against infringing on traditional rules regarding use of Chinese personal names among intimates only may already becoming a thing of the past and that, as part of their desire to integrate into English-speaking culture, the respondents *really are* willing to adopt Western conventions of address, even to the extent of using their Chinese personal names for general use. At least one Chinese student living in America has recently advocated the practice (Voice of America Student Union, 2013). Still, the fact that respondents always or usually used English names when communicating with non-Chinese speakers suggests that main issue driving their use still seems to be accommodating the needs and limitations of the other party in the conversation.

Although 78 % claimed to have conventional names themselves, albeit not necessarily English names, the figure of 22% who did not think that their names would be found on a traditional list of English names is surely much higher than would be found among a random sample of English native speakers, even allowing for the fact that respondents' own ideas of what names such a list would contain could well be mistaken. Apart from the fact that an English name should be easy to pronounce, respondents generally agreed that an English name should be personally meaningful. Together with the fact that, overall, respondents disagreed that an English name should come from a standard list, these results show that the respondents have somewhat different attitudes to names than do Westerners, for whom conventionality is likely to be as important, if not more important than meaning.

More significant is the fact that surnames such as Beckham, 'non-names' such as Venox and Gobby, out-of-date names such as Fanny (which would cause more than a few sniggers on both sides of the Atlantic), and misspelled names such as Samanfa all scored more highly on the appropriate count than the inappropriate count. In other words, even though the majority of respondents had conventional names, they did not seem to have an accurate awareness of what Westerners considered to be an appropriate name. In other words, the use of inappropriate names may not be the result of a deliberate defiance of Western conventions, but due to ignorance of those conventions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey suggest that the adoption of English names by Chinese speakers is driven mainly by a desire to make communication with foreigners easier through the use of a name that is easy to remember, easy to pronounce and accords with Western conventions of address. Despite such a desire, however, naming conventions are sometimes inadvertently broken when inappropriate names are adopted. The results of this study suggest this is due to a lack of awareness that in Western cultures names are usually chosen rather than created.

The fact that there was strong agreement with the statement that an English name should be personally meaningful highlights an important cultural difference regarding names and personal identity. In Western

culture, names are often chosen on the basis of their sound, family history, or simply popular trends. In Chinese culture, on the other hand, names are clearly distinguished from one another based on their meaning, not their sound. While Sean and Shaun are pronounced the same and might be considered two different spellings of the same name, 麗 and 莉 would never be considered as being the same name despite having exactly the same sound (li). The importance attached to the meaning of a name is consistent with Cheang's (2008) assertion that names play a role in identity management. The fact that respondents generally agreed that an English name should be unique within one's social group suggests that the role adopted names play in identity *construction* is an interesting avenue for further research.

Further research needs to be conducted into what exactly is wrong with having an inappropriate name. When native English speakers encounter a Chinese speaker with a name like 'Ocean' (海), for example, are they likely to think that the Chinese speaker is ignorant of the conventions of English language discourse? It is worth noting that in the past, Western culture has accommodated literal translations of names such as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, which were not only considered acceptable, but possibly even preferable to their native American originals. One therefore wonders what is stopping Westerners from finding literal translations such as Lotus (蓮), Beauty (麗) or Tranquil (靜) to be just as acceptable. Although there may be understandable objections to slogan-type names sometimes encountered in Mainland China such as Fight the US (抗美) and Aid North Korea (援朝), the results of this and other studies suggest that if such names could be conveniently changed if they stood in the way of communication.

Another area for research is to investigate whether English names really are an advantage for learning English? Do those Chinese students who have chosen not to adopt an English name make less progress in their studies of English than those who have adopted an English name? And since it has been found that examiners award significantly higher marks to students with popular names and to students whose name begins with A or B rather than C or D (Edwards, 2009), another worthwhile study would be to investigate whether there was any examiner bias against students with unconventional English "names" or those without an English name.

Finally, the results of this study are consistent with research in the field of cultural psychology that has established that, in their social interactions, collectivistic Chinese typically pay more attention to the perspective of others than do individualistic Americans. While decisions about how to act and what conventions of address should be followed are often made by using others as a point of reference may be unproblematic and even desirable within Chinese culture, in cross-cultural communication situations, the so-called 'outsider' perspective may not truly be that of the outsider, but one that carries with it many Chinese views regarding the constructive relationship between names and identity.

**APPENDIX: Tables of results****Table 1: Do you have an English name?**

	Percent	Count
Yes	98.2%	54
No	1.8%	1

**Table 2: How often do you use your English name in the following situations?**

	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Usually	Always	Count
In English classes taught by a foreign teacher.	0	1	0	7	43	51
In English classes taught by a local teacher.	3	6	9	12	21	50
When communicating with people who cannot speak Chinese.	2	3	11	7	28	51
When communicating with friends/classmates who can speak Chinese.	5	10	14	12	11	50

**Table 3: Does it change the relationship when teachers and students call each other by their personal English names?**

	Percent	Count
No, it doesn't change the relationship.	43.8%	21
Yes, it changes the relationship positively.	52.1%	25
Yes, it changes the relationship negatively.	4.2%	2

**Table 4: Did you choose your English name?**

	Percent	Count
Yes	54.9%	28
No	45.1%	23

**Table 5: Do you like your English name?**

	Percent	Count
I dislike it a lot	2.0%	1
I dislike it a little	3.9%	2
I neither like nor dislike it	21.6%	11
I like it a little.	15.7%	8
I like it a lot.	56.9%	29

**Table 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about English names?**

An English name...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Count
should sound like your Chinese name	18	5	6	10	6	1	3	2.92	49
should be similar in meaning to your Chinese name	18	7	7	10	5	0	2	2.69	49
should have two syllables	12	9	10	12	2	2	1	2.85	48
should be different from the English names of your friends and classmates	7	1	6	10	10	9	6	4.35	49
should be a "real" name (i.e., included on lists of English baby names)	7	10	7	15	4	2	3	3.35	48
should be spelled conventionally	0	9	9	18	7	3	3	3.90	49
should be easy for non-Chinese speakers to pronounce and remember	1	5	6	7	13	9	8	4.73	49
can be easily changed	13	7	9	12	5	0	2	2.94	48
should be personally meaningful	3	1	10	13	6	8	7	4.46	48

**Table 7: Do you think Westerners would consider the following examples to be appropriate?**

	Appropriate	Not appropriate	Not sure
Beckham	30	10	9
Samanfa	19	11	19
Fanny	28	12	8
Mango	16	26	7
Johnny	42	5	2
Venox	16	11	21
Tingting	17	18	12
Tina	42	6	1
Gobby	20	15	14
Lucifer	21	20	8
Orchid	19	14	16

**Table 8: What do you think of the following names? (1 means you don't like it at all. 5 means you like it a lot. )**

	1	2	3	4	5	Rating Average	Count
Jassie	2	7	19	13	7	3.33	48
Snowball	20	14	8	3	2	2.00	47
Queenie	6	7	14	15	4	3.09	46
Rock	18	7	15	5	3	2.33	48
Hero	17	12	16	1	2	2.15	48
Nono	18	14	13	3	0	2.02	48
Boner	15	10	18	3	1	2.26	47
Bryant	4	8	15	15	6	3.23	48
Sunshine	13	6	12	14	2	2.70	47

**Table 9: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Count
If a non-Chinese speaker calls me by my Chinese name, he or she should use my full name (i.e., family name plus given name.)	8	12	8	13	3	2	2	3.10	48
If a non-Chinese speaker calls me by my Chinese name, he or she should pronounce it correctly.	5	9	9	12	8	3	3	3.69	48
Westerners feel uncomfortable if they know they aren't pronouncing another person's name correctly.	1	3	9	12	10	8	6	4.63	48
An English name makes it easier for non-Chinese speakers to communicate with you	1	3	1	10	13	11	10	5.12	49
English speakers usually address each by their given names (i.e. David, Jenny, 0 etc.)	0	2	8	13	11	7	7	4.71	48
An English name is an advantage for learning English	3	3	8	15	8	7	5	4.29	49

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