When Dragon Met Jasmine: Domesticating English Names in Chinese Social Interaction

Eric S. Henry *Carleton University*

Abstract: The acquisition and use of English names in China is usually treated by scholars as evidence of growing Westernization by Chinese speakers, who are forced to acquire these names to successfully converse with foreigners. In this article, I draw on an ethnographic examination of Chinese English names and naming narratives to reveal the indexical connections between names and meanings. Rather than acting as simple indices of Western identities, English names are dynamic signifiers in a complex social field of interactions that are distinctly Chinese. The characteristics of desirable English names borrow from a cultural pragmatics of Chinese naming instead of foreign norms.

Keywords: language, China, names, English, domestication

Résumé : L'acquisition et l'utilisation de noms en anglais par des sinophones sont généralement considérées comme un indice de l'occidentalisation croissante des Chinois, qui sont contraints d'adopter de tels noms pour échanger avec succès avec des étrangers. Dans cet article, je m'appuie sur une étude ethnographique des noms sino-anglais et des histoires associées à ces noms pour montrer les liens indexicaux entre les noms et les significations. Plutôt que de simples marqueurs d'identités occidentales, les noms anglais sont des signifiants dynamiques dans un champ social complexe d'interactions qui sont distinctement chinoises. Les caractéristiques des noms anglais désirables empruntent à une pragmatique culturelle de dénomination chinoise plutôt qu'à des normes étrangères.

Mots-clés : langues, Chine, onomastique, anglais, domestication

Naming Baobao: English Names and Chinese Identities

On a return trip to China in the summer of 2010, I met Susan, an English teacher I had worked with extensively during my original fieldwork in 2005, and her husband for dinner. Both Susan and her husband are Chinese, but like many people of their generation (born in the 1980s after the end of the Cultural Revolution) Susan uses her English name in interactions with foreigners. This preference also extends to many "international" contexts, such as with the other Chinese teachers at the English school where she works. Susan and her husband were excited to introduce me to their one-year-old daughter, Baobao, born since the last time I had visited, with each taking turns holding her while the other ate and recounted the numerous milestones Baobao had reached in her infant development. Because of the limitations of China's one-child policy (Fong 2004; Greenhalgh 2008; White 2006), Chinese parents are characteristically competitive and highly invested in their child's development, noting intellectual and social cues that indicate early progression or advanced understanding. Parenting foregrounds Chinese discourses of individual *sùzhì* (quality), a concept that indexes the moral constitution of the individual, particularly as it is formed in childhood through the investment of the parents in both emotional and financial senses (Anagnost 2004; Fong 2007; Kipnis 2006). After Susan recounted their own investments in Baobao's future (high-quality infant formula as opposed to cheaper brands, her use of a protective radiation gown while using a computer or watching television during pregnancy) she asked me to make one of my own: Baobao, she explained emphatically, needed an English name.

This was not a rare request during my time working in China. As an educated representative of the English-speaking world beyond China's borders, I was often told that I had both the skill and insight necessary to help bestow an English name on a child. Nor is it strange

for parents, whose children might be years away from speaking their own language with any measure of fluency, to seek out English names for those children (or themselves—see also Duthie 2007; Matthews 1996; Tian and Zheng 2003). The English language industry in China is increasingly targeting younger and younger middle-class children with the language-learning mantra *yuè zǎo yuè hǎo yuè* (the earlier the better) to increase the size of the market (see Huang 2011:224; Lam 2005:114-5). With so much at stake in a child's educational future, where an English examination constitutes one fifth of a student's admission score in the all-important university entrance exam, many urban parents feel obligated to enroll their child in the best possible private language institutions with the best possible teachers at the earliest possible age. As in other East Asian nations, such middle-class desires percolate through the broader population, inciting even lower-class urban residents to consume less expensive versions of the same product, or to pool their resources to provide for a single child who will be responsible for pulling up the rest of the family (Kipnis 2011; Park and Abelmann 2004).

In this article, I argue that growing acquisition and use of English names by (and for) Chinese speakers represents an example of linguistic domestication, the importation of non-native speech forms along with an adaptation of those speech forms to conventional ideologies of use. This is a process long recognized in studies of language contact, often under the related terms "appropriation" or "indigenization" (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996; Park and Wee 2008). One drawback to these approaches, however, appears to be a simple equivalence between appropriation and "borrowing," as though the process involved merely trying on a new mask or identity (see for instance Edwards 2006; Li 1997). Such a view assumes that the identity being borrowed already exists in a pure, complete form, circulating as identical copies in cultural discourse. Adopting an ethnographic approach allows us to mine linguistic data for what it can reveal about the metapragmatics of naming, the linguistic ideologies underlying actual contexts of use, which may vary even where the form of the name appears stable and standardized (Rymes 1996; Silverstein 1993). In other words, even though a native English speaker and a Chinese might share the same name (George or Alice, for instance), the exact forms of signification, ideologies of use and means of bestowal will differ quite dramatically. Rather than merely serving as indices for already-constituted foreign identities, I propose that English names represent emerging transnational subjectivities that mediate in a dynamic fashion between local realities and global imaginaries. An English name in China becomes a key component of an emerging international and cosmopolitan identity, one shaped by the demands of China's emerging modernity, which parents hope they, and their child, will be able to claim in the future.

The title of this article refers to two common names —Dragon for boys and Jasmine for girls—that were either given to or chosen by Chinese students in English language classrooms during the period of my research. Below I will describe in more detail how such names are acquired, but in both of these cases conventions of naming and use follow Chinese rather than English norms. Although common in many English-speaking countries, the popularity of Jasmine as a female name in China derives less from its normalization as a Western name and more from its interlingual significance in Chinese (for example *mòli* or jasmine, as in jasmine tea, jasmine flower, and so on).[1] The case of Dragon appears to demonstrate, on the other hand, a complete disregard for English naming conventions in Western countries, and it might be tempting to assume that this name represents a failed or partial mimesis, either in the sense that Chinese students are incapable of choosing an appropriate or proper name (and thus representing a critique of their English fluency and, by extension, their global legitimacy) or that this represents a form of resistance to the hegemonic intrusion of English into Chinese communicative worlds, an accession to the demands of English pragmatic needs but a subversion of the exact norms of use (see Bhabha 1994:85-7; Canagarajah 1999).

I will argue throughout this article, however, that neither of these possibilities is true in this case and that they crucially assume Chinese speakers are attempting to mimic native English pragmatics in the use of names. First, even highly proficient speakers with experience living or studying abroad in English-speaking countries chose unique or Chinese-inflected names such as Dragon (or Sunny, Phoenix, Kitty, Luna, Stone, Thinker and Noodle, to cite some of the many other examples), indicating that their presence in China is not due to some deficit in linguistic knowledge of pragmatic norms. Several scholars have noted the presence of these non-standard or "fanciful" Chinese English names (Li 1997:496-7; Tan 2001:51-2), but to my knowledge none has been able to advance a convincing explanation as to their presence, an omission that is significant considering the typical association between English names and authentic Western identities. Second, as in the case of Susan's attempt to find a name for Baobao, English names are not sites of resistance or anxiety—that would only derive from the notion of *not* having an English name—but are actively sought

out and used by their owners. What I argue instead is that the pragmatics of English naming have been adapted to Chinese contexts of use and are therefore inflected by appropriate Chinese linguistic ideologies that adhere to names, rather than to foreign norms.

The name Baobao itself was only the baby's *xiǎomíng* (small name). Baobao also has a more formal given name and surname combination called the *dàmíng* (big name), which is listed on her birth certificate. This consists of a one character family name derived from the father's lineage in addition to a one- or two-character given name, meaning that, after their combination, Chinese speak of two- or three-character formal names.[2] As opposed to the small name, which is used by family members and may continue as a kind of pet name into adulthood, the formal name represents the public persona of the individual. It is the name through which the world beyond the tight family circle is engaged, carrying the status and position of the holder (see Mauss 1985). Small names are bestowed without a great deal of thought. They are usually two monosyllabic characters (often a single character repeated or a character modified by the adjectival *xiǎo* or *small*) chosen for their "cuteness" or "good sound." In contrast, *qǐmíng*, the process of giving a formal name, requires considerable thought. It is a social process rather than simply a parental responsibility, often achieved through consultation with family members, colleagues or close friends, especially those with a breadth of linguistic knowledge who can construct a name with elegance, poetic allusion and the promise of future fortune. To this end, some parents now also consult fortune-tellers or Daoist priests, who use divination practices based on the astrological information of the parents as well as the date and time of birth to select an appropriately auspicious name that will guide a child to a bright future.[3]

If the small name represents the individual's membership in a household, and the formal name represents that individual's engagement with the public, communal sphere, then the English name is a powerful signifier of a new cosmopolitan, transnational persona. Consequently, English names in China have become important sites for the formulation of new types of citizenship and identity. It is through English names that Chinese imagine themselves partaking and engaging with a global world of international flows of culture and capital, and capable of controlling them rather than being washed away in their wake. These conflicting possibilities are popularly represented through the figures of the rural migrant, wide-eyed and naïve about the ways of the urban environment, so lost about how to live in the world that he cannot secure a stable living; and of the cunning businessman, fashionably dressed, well-versed in the art of cutting deals, manipulating the system and getting what he wants (see Barker and Lindquist 2009). The rural migrant's name is stereotypically simple and unadorned, while the businessman's name is poetic and noble. And it is now the businessman who possesses, as well, an English name that manages his engagements with the world that transcends local space, a world the rural migrant can only imagine or experience vicariously as he haplessly wanders into a foreign retail outlet or walks past a foreign restaurant.[4]

English names are not simply picked out of thin air or haphazardly copied from people in movies, television and other forms of foreign media. Although many English names in China are self-chosen, the process of getting an English name borrows extensively from Chinese cultural norms of qǐmíng. English names are found through familiar processes, and their appropriateness is evaluated through familiar schema. The consultation of the foreigner for the purpose of obtaining a proper English name, for instance, is no less shrouded in mystical agency than that of the fortune-teller in providing for a child's future success. In other words, choosing a proper name demands thought, consideration, and sometimes the intercession of an appropriate expert with esoteric knowledge of a particular intellectual field: in this case, English. By receiving a name from a foreigner, a mediating figure who has access to the cosmopolitan world beyond the local, the name itself is magically invested with some of the same transnational efficacy that the foreigner possesses (see also Rutherford 2003; Taussig 1993). To be given a "good" English name is to reserve a space for the individual in a future social milieu of global significance, one that includes other English-speaking interlocutors who will encounter this person and evaluate his or her right to be there. Not to have an English name would close off the opportunities of this future space, effectively binding the individual to the limitations of the social present.

I begin by examining the form and function of Chinese names, how they are bestowed and how they are used, and what they represent in social interaction in China. I then provide an ethnographic description of related processes and features of English names. Ultimately, my task is to highlight the similarities between these processes. These are often most clearly evident when Chinese English names and naming practices differ significantly from the template they supposedly emulate: foreign names. I will argue that these practices are representative of a larger process of linguistic domestication, whereby foreign languages are adapted to local communicative norms and ideologies. The analysis is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork from January to December

of 2005 in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang, with several return trips totaling about six additional months. The research was largely conducted in several private English language schools within the city, although attention was also paid to practices in public schools and universities. My focus was on the dynamics of language acquisition and use, but the role of English names in social interaction was a constant topic of interest, and my essay here draws upon those interviews and discussions. While the phenomenon of English names in China is quite widespread, my observations are particular to this setting and the synchronic moment of China's ongoing modernization.

Chinese Names and Forms of Address

Names in China are no mere referential tokens to a given persona, but active, creative and efficacious semiotic resources. Significant trends in the Western philosophical tradition stemming from Aristotle have tended to imagine names as logical signifiers for given individuals (or objects) with set properties (Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck 2006:5-7). Names become a simple variation on the concept of a noun, maintaining the same logical connection between the word *John* and a person as that between the word *stone* and a piece of rock. In this view, the meaning of names is both given and fixed in the act of naming, which finds clearest expression in the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, who defines a name as "an unmeaning mark which we connect in our minds with the idea of the object" (1911:22). But for this to be true, the idea of the object—the person or thing named—must by necessity already exist in advance and remain constant through time. The work of Saussure, by questioning the very nature of signification, challenged this "nomenclaturist" paradigm. Whereas philosophers such as Mill may have felt that words were really just names for things, Saussure showed that the concepts signified by a given word (or "sound-image" to adopt his terminology) are inherently social, and thus mutable and relational (1966:65-78; Harris 1988). Nonetheless such ideas have remained alive in the popular imagination as a kind of folk ideology. Jane Hill (2008:58-84) has shown how this "baptismal" ideology underlies contemporary racial politics, as proponents of retaining the name of Squaw Mountain in Arizona pointed to the term's "original" meaning (an Algonquian loanword meaning "young woman") in arguing for its inoffensiveness: if a name once meant something, how can it now mean something else? In contrast, Chinese conceptions of naming are premised upon a dynamic which is simultaneously relative, relational and metonymic. I will address each of these factors in turn.

Whereas English's baptismal ideology appears to fix the meaning of a name at the moment of its bestowal, in China, the meaning of names-as-words is relative, tied to the particular contexts of use. Li (1997:490) argues that this stems from an Eastern philosophical tradition, particularly the Confucian notion of *zhèngmíng* (the rectification of names), wherein objects and people are disciplined to conform to the properties of their names.[5] Confucian principles describe a world of shifting properties in which people and objects must be constantly monitored and relations restored if the name is to retain its significance—if the emperor failed to maintain the blessings of heaven, for instance, he was no longer to be considered an emperor. There is, of course, a danger here in essentializing West-East dichotomies as somehow opposing cultural logics; however, my point is that the significance of names proceeds in each case from differing ideologies of language use.

In a study of a rural village near Hong Kong in the late 1970s, Rubie Watson argues that the practices and politics of Chinese naming exhibit an organizational habitus, a logic by which names are acquired and used and which point to underlying ideas and assumptions. Names separated those powerful individuals who were socially connected from those who were dependent and powerless, often literally "nameless" women. "Chinese personal names *do* things: they not only classify and distinguish but have an efficacy in their own right" (Watson 1983:622). More recently, Susan Blum (1997) has considered Chinese names from a perspective informed by linguistic speech-act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), arguing that the way in which names are "performed" for people (through processes of repetition and the affirmation of hierarchy) actually serves to create the relationships being referred to, rather than to simply index pre-existing ones. Some specific examples follow below but Blum notes, for instance, that marriage is not sealed through the verbal action of proclaiming "I do," as in a Western context, but by naming one's spouse's parents in a new and appropriate way (Blum 1997:361). These observations on Chinese names can be summarized as follows: naming incorporates popular ideologies of self and personhood, where the power to name indexes the authority of a person in social affairs; and the relations between people are in many ways enacted (rather than just reflected) through the use of names.

Second, and much more so than in English, Chinese names are relational, varying according to the professional, kin, or status relationships between speaker and addressee. As I noted above, the first names a child

receives are usually their small name and formal name. But as Chinese people progress in life through various status roles in multiple institutional settings, other names may accumulate. The situation is complicated by a proliferation of address forms that combine names and titles.[6] A teacher is nearly always addressed in professional interactions as, for instance, Teacher Guo by students, or a leader as Department Head Zhang by employees, instead of by a more general honorific. Additional names can include nicknames, such as a teacher at one English school who was teasingly known as *Duòduo* (lazy). They can also be pseudo-familial address forms—*gē* (older brother) or *jiě* (older sister)—used to create fictive kin relations, such as the oldest female teacher at the school who was addressed as Elder Sister Wen by her co-workers. Finally, there are relational names that derive from the status differentials of the speaker and listener, as when an older individual with the surname Liu is called Old Liu by someone much younger or of lower social position.

Addressing a person as "elder sister" is not simply an indication of affinity or informality. Rather, doing so both creates and marks an older sister/younger sibling relationship with the person, including attendant rights and responsibilities. I once accompanied an English teacher to the hospital to visit her ailing father, bringing with me a customary gift of fruit. Her father was scheduled for surgery the following day, and several other members of her family were gathered around his hospital bed visiting with him, including two people she introduced to me as her elder sister, who had flown up from the southern city of Shenzhen, and her elder brother. It was only several days later that I learned that "elder brother" was not her brother at all, nor even a relative, but one of her father's former students. He had maintained contact with her father after going to university and frequently visited with him long after graduating and finding a job. Before the surgery, it was he who had volunteered to pay the *hóngbāo* (red envelope), a gift of money to the doctor to ensure his proper care and attention during the operation. In a family with two daughters, it was this former student who had taken on the role of a son by acting in the appropriate way and providing financial support when required. This fictive kinship was created and maintained through address forms, and by taking on this role of "son" he also effectively became my friend's "elder brother."

To cite another example, the one-child policy has created a dearth of siblings among China's youth, as families formed after the policy came into effect in 1979 tend to have only one child.[7] In Shenyang, this has led to a shift in kin semantics as cousins are now referred to by the terms for siblings, a phenomenon that originally caused me some confusion as I could not understand why people growing up under the one-child policy had so many brothers and sisters. But this is not simply a terminological change. Siblings have long played crucial roles as resources in social networks, providing access to additional webs of personal and professional relationships unavailable to a single individual (Hanser 2002; Yan 1996:4). Cousins have become "siblings" not simply in name but because of a shift in the kin-based rights and responsibilities between cousins, who now act much as siblings did before the one-child policy: by finding jobs, investors, tutors, or marriage partners, lending money, dispensing advice, doing business and any of the other myriad conventional responsibilities between close kin. Additionally, in situations of multiple cross-cutting ties that include kin, professional, business and friendship relationships, Santos (2008:539) has shown how the use of kin terms shifts between the literal and the metaphorical. A person addressed as "elder brother" may be both a classificatory elder sibling and a person who has voluntarily taken on an elder sibling role, such that the referent of "elder brother" is conceptually ambiguous. Thus kin terms used as address forms do not simply name people related by blood, but identify the people who act in the capacity that a given relation should.

Finally, unlike English names which are primarily names and not other forms of signifier (although the origins and "meaning" of an English name are often discursively excavated) Chinese names employ, with few exceptions, characters with other denotational states, thus making each name a metonymic signifier for the individual him or herself. Because the components of names do have literal extrapersonal meanings as morphemes, Chinese names are also metacommunicative in the sense that they are a message transmitted to the child and reiterated with each spoken or written instantiation. Among the older generations, given names were often literal statements, such as *Wénxué* (Study culture) or *Bózhì* (Struggle for the future). During the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, when socialist ideology came to dominate all aspects of Chinese social life, revolutionary names such as *Hóngbīng* (Red soldier), were common. By the late 1970s, shorter one-character names became more fashionable, described as simple and unadorned and more in line with the form of foreign names. Whatever their style or content, however, each name is a message for the child: grow strong, love your country, be beautiful like a flower, and so on.

Two further observations are pertinent at this point in my description of Chinese naming practices. First of all, Chinese children are rarely named *after* another person;

given names are not meant to evoke familial or intergenerational connections, such as naming a child after a grandparent.[8] Rather, Chinese names should ideally be unique, even if they follow common patterns. In practice, of course, even the vast heritage of Chinese characters constitutes a finite resource for naming, and names often draw upon common auspicious characters such as peace, flower, bright, fortune, mountain, moon and so on. Nevertheless, Chinese parents rarely articulate that the name represents another person and generally seek names not already used by close relatives.

The second observation is that most comprehensive studies of Chinese naming assume both a homogenous cultural area and, therefore, common naming practices across Greater China (including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other nodes of the Chinese diaspora). This may be the result of the common practice of taking elite or urban individuals as characteristic of the whole, or, in the case of Chinese scholars, assuming that their own practices are representative of an undifferentiated Chinese culture (see Li 1997). In Shenyang, however, with the presence of long-standing urban households and rural migrants, standard and dialectal language users, striving middle class and neglected underclass individuals, along with the social processes that attempt to maintain the boundaries between these groups, naming is a process fraught with class, status, wealth and other hierarchical distinctions.

Highly prized names ideally represent a level of cultured refinement that sets them off from ordinary, common or low-class names. Most of my informants claimed that they could determine the class origins and educational backgrounds of an individual's parents by deconstructing his or her name, a process that not only requires saying the name but, because most Chinese characters are homophonous with several others, also identifying the characters that constitute it. Whereas low-status names tend to be descriptive—flowers, landscape features (mountain, sea), physical qualities (attractive, bright) and colours—high-status names are more explicitly metaphorical and "indirect." One person explained this difference to me in reference to a hypothetical child the parents hoped would be rich in the future. A low-status name would simply contain the character for *fù* (wealth) or *cái* (riches) and perhaps a descriptor like *dà* (big). But a high-status name would reference wealth more indirectly by using secondary collocations such as the character *róng* which forms the final half of words such as *fánróng* (prosperous), *guāngróng* (honourable) and *shūróng* (distinction). By stimulating the imagination of the listener and forcing them to also make the poetic or rhetorical connections that underpin the meaning of the name, the name welcomes both the hearer and the named person into a common status group of educated, high status, high *quality* individuals (in terms of the concept of sùzhì discussed earlier). Consequently, in China, names function both as referential markers for individuals as well as a kind of value or currency. With growing global economic integration (both in terms of tangible commodities like computers and cars, but also less tangible signifiers such as symbolic status objects), English names have entered into this new economy of onomastic signifiers.

With this knowledge of how Chinese names are given and operate within Shenyang, the question now is how English names for Chinese individuals are given, used and talked about. Typically, most studies (especially those that consider the effects of language acquisition on individuals) treat the presence of English names as an unproblematic index of a "foreign" cultural identity on the basis of an integrative motivation on behalf of the learner—the learner wants to be more Western and thus acquires a Western name. In this sense, there is no reason for the motivating pragmatics of discourse to be anything other than that of conventional Western usage as well. Where deviation exists from the norm, it must be due to lack of linguistic knowledge. However, as I will try to show below, the one-name-one-identity dynamic oversimplifies the complicated nature of self and identity in multilingual contexts (see also Norton 2000). English name usage in China borrows from the pragmatics of Chinese rather than English.

English Names and Naming

The acquisition of an English name is perhaps one of the earliest and most salient language learning experiences for many English students in China.[9] My informants were usually able to recall with ease, and often a degree of pride, how they had acquired their first English name: the circumstances, the giver and the reasons for its bestowal. Many Chinese students get their first English name in a childhood English class.[10] Most of the Chinese English teachers I talked to preferred to use English names when addressing their students in class, calling them *John* or *Helen* even though they might refer to them by their Chinese name outside of class or with parents. These early names are chosen on the basis of several different strategies, depending on the teacher. Sometimes names are randomly assigned. One of the things I did for teachers at one school was to compile a list of several hundred English names (sorted by gender) that they could then give to their students. On the first day of a beginner class for students aged 5 and 6, I watched the teacher move up and

down the rows of students, handing out a card to each one with a name printed on it—this would be their names for the next several years of the class.

Other times, teachers would give students English names based on their Chinese names. Some teachers translate students' Chinese given names literally into English, leading to classrooms full of students named Snow, Jade, Heaven and Candy for girls; Eagle, Pony and Red for boys; on one occasion I even observed a class where Apple, Pear and Banana all sat at the same desk. However, childhood names were not particularly salient beyond student-teacher interactions: students did not, for instance, typically call each other by English names unless the conversation specifically involved the teacher as either a listener or addressee.

Such early names might be used in elementary school and middle school, but by high school, and especially by university, many students are eager to name themselves. Students rename themselves in an attempt to find, as many put it, a name that better *biǎodá* (expresses) who they are, or is more *héshì* (suitable) to their identity or personality. When I was approached to assist in this process, the criteria I was usually given were as follows: the name should reflect the person's Chinese name, it should sound good, and it should have a good meaning. The idea of having a good meaning can reflect two sources of semantics in Chinese names—the meaning that is inherent to the name itself (in other words the characters that compose it) and the meaning created through a process of homophony or phonetic mimesis. That is, because Chinese only consists of a very limited set of phonetic combinations, meaning is often constructed on the basis of sound-similarity. A good phone number or license plate contains a great deal of *bā* (eights), which sounds like *fā* which is a component of the word *fācái* (to get rich). Similarly, the number *sì* (four) is undesirable because it sounds like the word for *sǐ* (death). This construction of meaning through homophony is extended to English, where, for instance, I quickly learned that Ben was a particularly bad choice of English name because the name sounds like *bèn* which means "stupid" in Chinese (and in fact one British textbook for children featured a regular character named Ben, and teachers always had trouble finding a child willing to fill that role in reciting the lesson).

Conversely, good names are supposed to reflect some kind of positive meaning, signifying the good qualities of the individual name-holder in a certain way. One of my informants recounted for me how her teacher had made her English class wait three months while she settled on names for everybody. She believed that the teacher had chosen a particularly good name for her.

> My last name is Gao, and the first letter of that is 'G,' so she started with the letter G to choose a name. She thought that I'm a graceful child, because I like literature. My speech was more bookish and formal compared to the other children. So she chose the name Grace. My teacher said this name suited me, and I've used it ever since.

This woman's Chinese given name also included a Chinese character meaning brightness and splendour, and so she considered the name Grace appropriate because it was evocative of three different elements: the sound of her family name, the meaning of her given name and her own personality.

While being named by others is often cited as ideal, students could also be quite creative in finding their own English name. Many of these names appear, at first glance, to be randomly chosen from the stock of standard and familiar English names as might be found in textbooks, news stories and literature: Bob, Lucy, Shirley, Mike, Casey, Ron. However, closer inquiry during interviews often revealed quite significant reasons for students to choose particular names. Many language learners sought English names that would signify in the same ways that their Chinese names would. For instance, after much reading, one of my informants whose Chinese name was the character for *wood* chose the name Sylvia because of its Latin root. Another, with the character for *moon* in her name, chose the name Luna.

A frequent name for Chinese men who studied English was Bill, a common name for Westerners but one also shared with a popular icon of American wealth and standing: Bill Gates, the billionaire founder of Microsoft. In describing why they had chosen this name, students often made the connections between their name and the qualities of the name's archetype explicit, as when one Bill told me, "I like this name, because Bill Gates, he is a rich man." A different Bill whom these names indexed was Bill Clinton, another powerful foreigner. By taking the name Bill, these students were drawing upon the power of the name to command the qualities these Bills possess, an appropriation by analogy. This could index political power but also, as one student reminded me, power of another kind as well. When I asked him why he had chosen the name Bill, he said, "I like Bill Clinton. Very strong man." His face then broadened into a smile and he gave me the thumbs up sign. Switching to Chinese he said, "You know *Láiwēnsījī*?" by which he was referring to the Chinese pronunciation of *Lewinsky*, the White House intern implicated in Bill Clinton's 1990s sex scandal. The name Bill for this student thus evoked both the power of the man, as former president, and an idea of sexual prowess, and

both of these qualities were indexed in his chosen English name.[11]

Names could also be intended to signify much more abstract connotations. Another student described for me in English how she chose the name Veronica.

> My name Veronica, I choose this name because when I say it, people hear how good is my English. The sound, you know, the 'v' sound, /v/, it's very hard for Chinese to say. /v/, /v/, /v/. Other people cannot say it. They say /w/, /w/, /w/. That's why you always can hear Chinese people say 'wictory' and 'wacation.' But I can say it. I practiced several years. So I want this name Veronica, just because of the sound.

Instead of evoking positive associations directly with her name (a relation of indexicality), the significance of Veronica's name only becomes manifest in its spoken form (a relation of iconicity), allowing the listener to perceive Veronica's proper command of the English phonetic system in the very act of introducing herself.

Sometimes, advanced English learners chose non-standard English names for themselves, names such as Summer, Spring, Sunny, Lucky, Young, Princess, Fable and Kitty. In fact, these kinds of non-standard names were common among Chinese English teachers and other fluent English speakers, much more so than among novices. Unlike children who are largely unaware of the context and practices of English naming, these learners readily acknowledged that their names did not conform to Western expectations. Many of these older learners talked about their desire to have a unique English name, one that differentiated them from the masses of Bills, Nancys and Peters who dominated English classrooms. Sunny, who had a degree from a British university, once told me, "Sunny is just my personality, like sunshine, happy day." An English teacher named Kitty also informed me, "Kitty is so different, nobody else have this name, just me. Years before, my name is Kelly, but we have three Kellys at our school. A student say 'Kelly!' and I don't know, is that me?" Recognizing that their names were not authentic (in the sense that very few native speakers would have these names), such learners nonetheless valued them for their distinctness.

Conclusion

To return to the terms within which I earlier framed this analysis, English names for Chinese language students have both pragmatic and metapragmatic components. In the pragmatic sense, names serve to identify the speaker or referential subject of discourse, acting as denotational placeholders in the normal flow of conversation ("John, can you answer the question?" or "John never listens to the teacher"). But this functional quality of names can be expanded, as Rymes (1996) has demonstrated, by understanding names within the particular cultural contexts of their use. In other words, at the metapragmatic level, names are indexical of certain qualities and attributes which attach themselves to the person named and are dependent upon wider cultural meanings and interpretations. As I have shown in this article, English names in China have been adapted to the metapragmatic functions of Chinese naming practices.

The acquisition of an English name for Chinese speakers builds upon already familiar processes of name proliferation, including the use of nicknames and multiple address forms. In this sense, an English name merely references an additional persona within each Chinese speaker's already vast repertoire of interactional stances (see Goffman 1979). However, we should not take such names as merely passive labels for pre-existing identities. As speech acts, names, both chosen and bestowed, act as creative signifiers. Within Chinese linguistic ideologies of name use, where calling someone *mother* for the first time seals the marriage or referring to someone as *brother* initiates a series of rights and obligations particular to siblings, using an English name activates powerful claims of legitimacy in terms of China's modernization.

Understanding that Chinese attribute value to names as clear indices of personal quality allows us also to explain the selection of unique, peculiar or distinctive names among Chinese learners. As I explained above, the first English names students obtain (perhaps symbolic equivalents of the small name) tend to be conventional English names picked from the stock of names circulating through foreign media or culled from the expertise of their teachers. It is only when students have more knowledge of English that they might choose to seek a "better" name, one more suited to their personality. The idea of this name accurately expressing some inalienable essence of unique personhood derives both from Confucian onomastic traditions, particularly the "rectification of names," and from Chinese naming practices which disfavour name duplication. Names should not reference other individuals in the sense of being named *for* a person, but should adhere to unique persons with individual qualities and attributes. In the cases where students do adopt names from others (Bill, for instance) it is not to evoke the person the name is borrowed from, but their individual qualities and sources of power. And in much the same way as all Chinese characters form potential name resources, Chinese speakers mine the lexical field of the English language for suitable names to perform this task,

allowing them to differentiate themselves from holders of more "common" low-status names.

English names should also ideally fulfill a particularly Chinese requirement of possessing a "good meaning," a provision largely absent in Western thinking about names because of their denotational singularity. But just as Chinese names are semantically polyvalent, both referring to a person and to a metacommunicative message encoded in the name's meaning, English names should function in the same way. This meaning may be straightforward (a name like Thinker, for instance, that belonged to a local graduate student), but as the value of indirectness discussed above implies, an English name which has significance that can be productively uncovered by a listener incorporates both the name-bearer and the listener in a common high status speech community. Thus Grace's story of how she got her English name satisfies the requirements of desirable Chinese name semantics. Even in the use of common English names, tracing the connections between name and personality becomes a highly strategic exercise of producing both meaning and modernity, with speakers asserting claims to fluency through names like Veronica, or to wealth and power with names like Bill.

My main argument here has been that English names are recruited to perform the same ideological and semiotic work as Chinese names, both as values in a political economy of name choice and as metacommunicative representations of the individual. But I also want to consider briefly the implications of this process for the broader field of foreign language acquisition and use. As knowledge of English sweeps through a post-Cold War landscape, spread as much by growing information connectivity as by formal educational initiatives, it bears thinking about the impacts of this language on new sites of acquisition. As Alexei Yurchak describes in his analysis of post-Soviet corporate naming in Russia,

> The generalized critique of cultural importation and Americanization tends to conceal the fact that cultural and linguistic forms, traveling across borders, often become comprehensively and unpredictably reinterpreted and re-customized to serve very particular local purposes. [Yurchak 2000:412]

English names may appear foreign, especially to outside observers (often possessing such a name themselves), but only because on the surface their form appears to conform to cultural expectations and a narrative of Westernization. Closer examination reveals, however, this persistent "re-customization," a refashioning of foreign linguistic forms put to very localized ends. As I indicated at the beginning of this article, English names represent new forms of social identity, where urban residents are increasingly turning to various modernizing strategies for producing symbolic value. But we should read such strategies within a more general attempt to differentiate themselves from their localized surroundings and "traditional" (read rural or poor) peers. The symbolic work of English names is directed, not at the visiting foreigner, but at a broad Chinese audience of like-minded individuals self-identified as civilized, sophisticated and high-quality.

Baobao now has an English name, Eve, which I suggested and that Susan embraced whole-heartedly; but only after I had explained its meaning and the rationale for my decision. Eve will likely take this name with her when she attends an English-Chinese bilingual kindergarten, now ubiquitous in the city. She will sing songs in English and learn to introduce herself with this appellation. It will become one important component of her persona, along with her small and big names. As China begins to look forward to a future of international travel, foreign brand consumption and global connections, Eve will become the sign which mediates these aspects of her identity.

Erik S. Henry, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa Ontario K1S 5B6, Canada. E-mail: eric_henry@carleton.ca

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Notes

1 The Social Security Administration tracks the popularity of various English names in the United States over time. Jasmine enjoyed a brief surge in popularity during the 1990s and early 2000s, rising from 95th most popular in 1986 to 30th in 1989, and remaining in the top 30 until 2007. It has since fallen to 62nd in 2010. Dragon is not to be found in the top one thousand names for either gender (SSA 2011).

2 A very small minority of Chinese people have two-character family names that derive from imperial decrees honoring prominent individuals. Today these are considered particularly desirable, much as hyphenated surnames are in British aristocracy.

3 Long popular in Taiwan, the practice of consulting fortune-tellers, spirit mediums and priests was frowned upon by the state during the socialist era as backwards superstition. With less intrusion and oversight by the state in the contemporary era, these practices are coming back.

4 My description draws on imagery from recent television shows that dramatize the contrasting worlds of these figures. Such shows as *Xiāngcūn Àiqíng* (Village Love) or *Mǎ Dàshuai* (named for the eponymous main character) base much of the plot on the encounters between honest but simple village folk and suave and savvy urban residents. These are not simple paeans to urban modernity, however, as they constantly remind the viewer of how callous and capricious urban life can be.

5 Gros (2004) applies this principle to an examination of the state's attempts to define and label China's ethnic minorities. Given that the state does not play a role here in the naming of persons, the relevance of *zhèngmíng* for my discussion is limited to the second of what he calls the two senses of this concept: naming as an object of social convention.

6 Heffernan (2010) explains the tendency of Japanese students to not adopt English names in terms of the differences between Japanese and Chinese naming pragmatics; specifically, that names are more closely tied to a core notion of identity in Japanese culture, whereas Chinese and Korean culture encourages a multiplicity of names to suit each social context. For Japanese students, English names represent a threat to this notion of self.

7 There have always been exemptions and exceptions to the policy with, for instance, ethnic minorities and impoverished farmers being allowed two children instead of one. Where monitoring was lax, especially in parts of rural China, excess births were common. The policy is also currently evolving and now if two single children are married, they are allowed two children, as are families where both parents have high professional qualifications, such as doctors or professors.

8 One exception was the traditional practice of "generational indicators" (Li 1997:494) where one of the characters in a series of two-character given names was shared among all members of a given generation, such as siblings who might be named *Wénxué* (Study culture) and *Wénshēng* (Foster culture). Although the younger sibling's name is therefore referential of the elder's, this is not a case in which the younger sibling is named for the elder. I thank one of the reviewers for drawing attention to this practice.

9 Chinese speakers tend to adopt only English given names. The surname, perhaps because of powerful notions of lineage and family encoded in it, tends to remain unaltered. Since Chinese women do not customarily adopt their husband's surname at marriage, this was also true when Chinese women married foreign men.

10 Curricular standards introduced in 2001 set the introduction of English in the 3rd grade (8 years old) of primary school at anywhere from 80-200 minutes per week. However, most urban children attend classes in private foreign language schools far earlier than this. In 2010, some schools were advertising classes for infants aged 0-6 months.

11 When I suggested to one student that he call himself George, a name that had phonetic resonances with his Chinese name, he vigorously shook his head and responded. "No, no, no. That's too much like Bush."

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