Nicknames in Urban China: A Two-Tiered Model

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Nicknames have been observed and analyzed in a variety of cultures and subcultures. In most cases an analysis will presuppose either a narrow definition of a nickname which includes only meaningful names, or a broader definition which includes hypocorisms and other informal names. By using the concept of a category which is focused on a prototype but which includes less than prototypical or "borderline" members, both kinds of definitions can be accomodated. Furthermore, this two-tiered concept of the nickname, applied cross-culturally, may help bring order into our understanding of the many different kinds of nicknames that can be found in various cultural and social groups. In the case of urban China there are two kinds of nicknames which match this two-tiered model.

Prototypical and Secondary Nicknames

Nicknames, according to popular usage, are names which are bestowed on individuals in addition to their given names and which, compared to these given names, are informal. Broadly conceived in this way, the nickname category would include such affectionate and hypocoristic forms as "Betsy" for Elizabeth and "Bill" for William.

Another view of the nickname holds that the concept should apply only to names which are meaningful in reference to the specific individual they designate. An example of such a restricted definition would be the following by Alford (82): "Nicknames are meaningful, usually descriptive, names, which are bestowed on

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individuals in addition to their given names, often at a later date." He further adds that they "are not formal or regularized name components, but rather are informal and unofficial names." Others who hold to this relatively restricted view are Wilson and Skipper, Smith (cited in Wilson and Skipper) and Holland.

At the risk of spilling an inordinate amount of ink over an issue which is in essence one of semantic boundaries, I would like to propose a two-tiered nickname concept which is based on the notion of the prototype as described in recent studies in cognitive anthropology and psychology (Berlin and Kay, Rosch and Mervis). This two-tiered concept will also speak to the concern that Holland (266) has raised about the psychological reality of categorization schemes that have been proposed for various kinds of nicknames.

I will call a nickname in its more exclusive and narrowly defined form a "true" or "prototypical" nickname. This kind of nickname is marked by the meaning it carries with reference to a particular individual. The nickname in the broader sense, including a variety of informal types, I will refer to as a secondary or derivative nickname.

It is my contention that the broad category of nicknames exists and has psychological reality for people in a number of cultures because it is linked to the common need to express feelings of intimacy and informality. The exclusive category of the nickname — a subset of the broader category — exists in a variety of cultures because it is linked to teasing and joking, which are ways of indicating specific and commonly occurring kinds of informal relationships.

I will take as my starting point the use of two different kinds of Chinese nicknames which came to my attention first during my sojourn in Hong Kong (1974-75) and more recently during my study of values among Chinese from the People's Republic (PRC) currently residing in the U.S. The informants in these two groups ranged in age from about 18 to about 70, with the majority being in their 20s or 30s.

The most widely spoken language in Hong Kong and the language in which my Hong Kong data are presented is Cantonese. All of my mainland informants spoke China's national language — a Beijing-based version of Mandarin. A few of these re-

spondents, however, were natives of southern China and spoke Cantonese as their first language and Mandarin only secondarily. The Mandarin and Cantonese forms used here are, respectively, pinyin and the Yale system as represented in the *Cantonese Dictionary* (Huang).

Chinese Formal Names

Chinese formal names have been well described in recent articles (Zhu and Millward; Lu and Millward) as have the variations on these names used by Chinese in English-speaking environments (Louie). Briefly we can say that the traditional Chinese formal name usually consisted of three syllables, each of which was represented in writing by a single, meaningful character. The first of the three names was the surname, which identified the clan or lineage into which the bearer was born. The second and third characters were given names, though the second character was often shared by the members (or, sometimes, the same-sex members) of one's lineage who were of the same generation.

To take *Liu Zhiwen* as a typical three-character name, the first character (*Liu*) identifies one's clan, the second (*Zhi*) identifies one's generation within that clan, and the third (*wen*) is individuating, and not shared with other kinsmen. This pattern, though typical, is by no means universal, and for the variations on it and on other kinds of formal Chinese names, the reader is referred to the works cited in the preceding paragraph.

There are quite a few title-plus-name combinations that are common in China but which will not be covered in detail here. Two of the more typical are *lao*-plus-surname (e.g., *Lao Zhang* 'Old Zhang'), usually used for one's elders, and *xiao*-plus-surname (e.g., *Xiao Wang* 'Little Wang'), usually used for one's younger friends and acquaintances.

Chinese Nicknames

As Holland has noted (262): "[n]icknaming is extremely common throughout Chinese culture...." In Mandarin, nicknames are usually referred to as *waihao* 'outside names' or *chuohao* 'extra names.' The former term is the one more commonly used

in the Beijing dialect and it is widely known throughout Mandarin-speaking areas. The Cantonese word for nicknames, used both in Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Canton), is *fa-meng* or 'flower name.'

These common nicknames are quite similar to what Zhu and Millward call "epithet" names. The main difference is that, in the epithet names they describe, the descriptive nickname element is attached to a surname. Both of these patterns (i.e., nicknames with and without surnames) are found in China, but the form without the surname is the one my informants described as most common in current everyday usage.

Usually nicknames are bestowed by peers in school or work settings. In addition to these peer-bestowed nicknames, there are nicknames which are used within families. These are referred to by completely different words: in Mandarin, *xiaoming* or *ruming* and in Cantonese, *yuh-meng*. The Chinese perceive these as distinct entities, and different from ordinary nicknames.

The peer-bestowed nickname can be considered a true nickname because it is meaningful and it is created in a specific context and with reference to a particular individual. The family nicknames are meaningful mainly because, due to the nature of the Chinese language, virtually every syllable is meaningful. In general, however, family nicknames are not created as meaningful elements that say something about those who bear them. In this regard they are similar to English hypocorisms and other altered versions of formal names. There are important ways in which Chinese family nicknames differ from English derivative nicknames and these will be considered below, following a discussion of the peer-bestowed nickname.

Common Nicknames

Chinese nicknames are most commonly created in the context of school, usually middle school or high school. In Hong Kong, young working-class bachelors also habitually use nicknames with their workmates. I observed this usage within a variety of occupations, including policemen, cooks and waiters.

Nicknames in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, are generally formed

on the basis of a character trait of the individuals named, an incident that occurred at some time in their life, or as a pun on their formal name. In a few cases a person was given a nickname based on a physical trait.

In Hong Kong nicknames are generally bestowed within the context of a friendship group, the focus of leisure time and play activity. A typical friendship group consists of a group of classmates or fellow employees and ranges in size from four or five members up to fifteen or twenty. In those groups which include both male and female members, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of two groups, one male and one female, which are closely bound by virtue of their common work site and their regular involvement in the same leisure activities.

Outside the school or workplace where it is formed, the group defines its boundaries in terms of regular entertainment activities such as movies and picnics, the establishment in practically all leisure contexts of an informal, jovial atmosphere, and the tendency to create and use nicknames. In fact, in Hong Kong (as well as in the PRC), nicknames for young people seem to be mainly an extension of the lighthearted joking, word play and all-around fun which typify friendly activities among young students and workers.

A prominent characteristic of Chinese nicknames is that they invariably include an element of irony or humor, as these examples from Hong Kong illustrate: a policeman was teasingly addressed and referred to as *Sahp-houh* 'Number Ten' because the last two digits on his police uniform were one and zero. *Mouh-baak* 'Uncle Mao' was always talking about Chairman Mao. *Baahk-fan-jai* 'Heroin Boy' had a pale, thin appearance, resembling that of a heroin addict. *Keih-wohng* 'Chess King' was an outstanding chess player. *Heung-jiu* 'Banana' was so named because she loved bananas, and *Fo-che-tauh* 'Train Head' or 'Locomotive,' was well known for his speed and power on the soccer field, as well as for his volatile temper.

A Hong Kong nickname based on a pun is *Da-yahn* 'Hits People.' Hits People was not really so prone to violence as his name suggests. He was merely given this sobriquet on the basis of his formal name, *Daaht-yahn*. One student, unfortunate enough

to be named *Kai-cheung* by his parents, was consistently referred to by his friends as *Gai-cheung* or 'Chicken Guts.'

In Hong Kong, nicknames are not restricted to Chinese words. However, they must be pronounced according to Cantonese phonemic principles. *A-fet*, for example, was named on the basis of his childhood chubbiness from the English word "fat." *Daaih-maau* 'Big Cat' was so named because her English name was Katherine. The "Cat" is based on the first syllable of that name. But this nickname was considered especially fitting for her because of her particular personality traits. It was said that when she set about to do a task she would complete it with cool, efficient determination, like a tiger. But she was also light and feminine, like a cat.

The process of nickname formation across the English-Chinese language barrier is typical of Hong Kong, where both of these languages are widely spoken. In fact, word games which cross the linguistic boundaries between English and Cantonese comprise one of the sources of the joking and fun which characterize Hong Kong friendship groups. A typical game involves uttering a sentence in English which, when translated into Cantonese, is a pun on an obscene phrase. Thus, the English sentence "Jump on your grandfather clock," when translated into Cantonese, sounds very similar to an extremely obscene reference to somebody's family tree.

Sometimes puns go from Cantonese to English, then back to Cantonese. The members of one group of restaurant waiters were in the habit of saying, "Hoh-laahn yuht," in reference to anything they considered boring. This, translated into English, means "Holland moon." The pronunciation of this English phrase sounds very much like the common but very obscene Cantonese expression, "So (expletive) boring!"

These word games, not all of which are bilingual, exemplify the kind of lighthearted joking that typifies interaction among friends in a young friendship group, the very type of group within which Chinese nicknames are usually generated.

According to my Mainland informants, virtually all of whom were college graduates, nickname creation is particularly common

among high school and middle school students. Nicknames are, however, often given at the university level as well. Nickname bestowal is not common in professional or white collar workplaces, but even here old nicknames may be used by longtime friends, particularly if those friends are former schoolmates who originally knew and addressed each other mainly by nicknames.

Nicknames in Mandarin are formed on the same general principles as those in Cantonese. Of those I collected, the majority referred to a personality or behavior trait. A university student in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution was called *Xiao Weida* or 'Little Great One' by his peers. Xiao Weida got his nickname because he was a leader in organizing his fellow students for political action. The adjective Little (*Xiao*) was appropriate because his leadership was on a small scale compared to those who are commonly referred to as "great" (*Weida*) and because he is physically a small person.

A leader of a competing political faction in the same school was called *Li Siling* or 'Commandant Li.' This referred to his rough domineering personality and the fact that he had an unusually large following among the students. Both of these nicknames were widely known throughout the campus and both carried an ironic tone.

At the same school a student with a reputation for being bookish and somewhat naive was known as *Yu Tou* or 'Yu Head.' *Yu* by itself refers to bookishness, the addition of *Tou* makes the appellation humorous. In fact the word for "head" is commonly used in creating humorous sounding nicknames in both Mandarin and Cantonese.

A high school student surnamed Gu was a serious sort and was called *Lao Gu* 'Old Gu' by his classmates. It is common and proper to address and refer to an adult older than oneself in this manner, but this usage for a young student is odd and humorous. The recipient of this nickname did not balk at it, though. He accepted it as something of a compliment since he was indeed a serious-minded and mature individual and he didn't object to being reminded of this or lightly teased about it.

A female high school student came to be known as 'Little Rabbit' because of her habit of jumping up and down when she was excited about something.

A high school student from Hangzhou who was an extremely cautious and serious type once wore an old and faded overcoat to school. As it happened the class had just finished reading a short story by Chekhov which featured a cautious, conservative character named Bielikov who also wore an old grey overcoat. Consequently this student was given the nickname *Bielikefu*, which is the Mandarin transliteration of the Russian name. He objected to this name, however, since he found the comparison with the Chekhov character unflattering. Out of consideration for his feelings, his fellow students shortened the name to *Abie*. This is a typical Cantonese and southern Mandarin form where a shortened form of one's name is prefixed with *A*. The feeling of names with this construction is somewhat intimate and often affectionate. Perhaps for this reason the bearer of this nickname did not mind being called *Abie*. In fact, even though he is a university instructor and is in his late thirties today, he is still known and addressed as *Abie* by his friends from his high school days.

Another high school student was noticed studying late into the night and one of his friends suggested calling him "Professor" because of his studiousness. However, this was in the 1970s during the Cultural Revolution, a time when official policy proclaimed that book learning was bourgeois and politically incorrect. Consequently, the student objected to this name because of the attention it would draw to his study habits, and so his friend dropped it.

A high school student in the Cantonese-speaking Mainland city of Guangzhou was known as *Mang-jang Gwai* or 'Hot-tempered Devil' because of her aggressive and capable performance on the basketball court. Another Guangzhou high school student, a young man named Ping, was known as *Seh Ping* or 'Snake Ping,' because he was said to lie around a lot doing nothing, like a snake.

The use of a play on words to create a nickname occurred in the case of a young man surnamed Zhang who was compared by

his friends to a eunuch named Xiao Dou Zhang portrayed in a Chinese movie about the Empress Dowager Cixi. This is another case where a nickname was modified in accordance with the wishes of its bearer. Originally he was called by the exact same name as that of the eunuch (*Xiao Dou Zhang*), but in the face of his objections, it was modified to the less offensive *Xiao De Zhang*.

Another student with a reputation for clowning around and joking a lot was called *Guaiguai*. This name is commonly used as a family nickname for little boys and suggests a desire on the part of the parents that the boy will be well behaved. Applied to a college age student, it takes on a very silly and humorous quality.

This name was based on the family nickname *Guigui* which this student had been given by his father. *Guigui* is an auspicious name which refers to the auspicious date on which this young man was born. When his friends at school got wind of his family nickname, they used it as the basis for his humorous nickname.

Chinese nicknames based on physical traits are not as common as those based on personality or behavioral traits. However, a few names referring to physical traits were noted, including: *Dianxian Gan* or 'Telephone Pole' for an unusually tall and thin male student, *Da Tou*, or 'Big Head' for a young man whose head seemed disproportionately large and *Jia Bao* or 'Family Treasure' for a middle school student of a large physical build. The humor in Family Treasure's name comes from the irony of referring to a large adolescent by a word (*Bao*) which is generally used to describe gems and similar precious items of small and delicate proportions. He had originally been called 'Family Treasure' by his grandmother, probably as a family nickname.

In general it can be said that Chinese nicknames have as their primary function the creation or validation of a sense of casual, good-natured fun in those contexts in which they are used. In this regard they resemble the nicknames described by Glazier for a group of Jewish immigrants of 1920s Indianapolis. Like Glazier's Jewish immigrants, young urban Chinese use nicknames often, usually in a humorous and gently teasing manner. In China, as in Indianapolis, nicknames help define a community in which egalitarianism, informality and fun predominate.

Insulting Nicknames

It is worth noting that in many of the communities in which widespread nicknaming has been described, the nicknames used are often so insulting that their use is restricted. Brandes, for example, says that in the village of Navanogal, Spain, nicknames tend to be seriously insulting and therefore are not used in the presence of those they designate except by their bearers' closest friends.

This is quite different from the way nicknames are used in urban China, Hong Kong or Indianapolis, though similar to nickname usage in a variety of other rural communities (Bernard; Cohen; Collier and Bricker; Dorian). It might be the case that in the rural communities where nicknames are seriously insulting there is a strong sense of long-term intra-village rivalry, an awareness that there is only a limited quantity of resources to go around, the so-called "limited good" (cf. Foster) and that one's neighbors, and rivals for these resources, will have to be dealt with until the end of one's days, like it or not.

In urban communities, on the other hand, one's nicknamed associates are rivals only temporarily and in the long term are seen primarily as potential friends and supporters. Along these lines Glazier emphasizes that the nicknames of the immigrants he studied were often used in old age to conjure up a feeling of nostalgia for the carefree days of youthful friendship.

The few examples of insulting Chinese nicknames that I recorded were, according to my informants, bestowed on individuals whose behavior was widely viewed as inappropriate. A pertinent example of this is *Youguang Tao*, 'Greasy Peach,' a male high school student who was said to be a trouble maker who didn't respect the teacher and whose close-cropped hair resembled peach fuzz. *Youguang* has negative connotations in Chinese similar to those the corresponding word "greasy" has in English.

Another such case is that of *Guilian Pangxie* 'Ghost-faced Crab,' one of a group of college students working in the country-

side under the supervision of an army unit during the Cultural Revolution. Guilian Pangxie was disliked because he made a special effort to ingratiate himself with the army officers. According to one informant, he had a weak character but managed to make himself very powerful by virtue of his contacts with the unit's leaders. His fellow students dubbed him "Ghost-faced Crab" because his face supposedly resembled the shell of a well-known species of crab.

The insulting Chinese nicknames such as "Greasy Peach" and "Ghost-faced Crab" resemble the Spanish nicknames described by Brandes in that they have a social control function; that is, they discourage deviant behavior by holding it up to ridicule. But the number of young Chinese who are given these insulting names is apparently very small and in the few cases that I recorded (including the two described above) the bearers of the names were not themselves aware of their nicknames.

Kehl, working with Chinese students studying in the U.S., also identified some nicknames that were insulting, most of which were not known by the individuals they designated. However, a nickname may in some cases be known to the person who bears it and may even bring about behavioral changes. In one case cited by Kehl, a girl was given a teasing and mildly insulting nickname because of her childish clothing style and she subsequently changed her style of dress.

Family Nicknames

The family nickname is a long-established feature of Chinese culture. What I am referring to here as the family nickname is called in Chinese either a "milk name" or "little name" and is called by Zhu and Millward a "childhood name." In the past the expression "milk name" (Mandarin: *ruming*, Cantonese: *Yuh-meng*) was used to describe a name given to an infant (Wu; Sung; Watson). Traditionally, many milk names had unpleasant meanings or associations which, it was believed, would keep away those dangerous spirits that were prone to take the lives of children. It was hoped, for example, that a child called *Shidan* 'Shit egg' or *Gouwa* 'Dog Baby' would be seen by those spirits

as having a "cheap fate" and would be considered not worth taking. In Mandarin-speaking areas the expression "milk name" has largely been replaced by "little name" (*xiaoming*).

I prefer "family nickname" to describe these names since, as I will argue below, their close association with the family is their most distinctive feature. These names are usually bestowed on infants or young children by parents or other older generation kinsmen, and they often have a diminutive quality. As Zhu and Millward have indicated, there are some common patterns according to which a formal Chinese name can be made into a diminutive name for a child and which parallel in some ways the transformation of English formal names into diminutives. One of the more common transformations in northern China is the duplication of a syllable from the formal name: thus, Wang Yuwen might be called *Wenwen*. Or the word "little" (*xiao*) might be prefixed to a character in the given name yielding, in this case, *Xiaowen*.

Additional diminutive affixes popular in Mandarin areas are *zhai* and *hou,* both of which serve as suffixes on names for boys. In Cantonese-speaking areas *jai* (Mandarin *zhai*) is a common diminutive for both family nicknames and peer-bestowed nicknames.

The most widely used form for family nicknames among Cantonese speakers consists of *A* prefixed to the final character of a given name to create a diminutive. Thus the formal Cantonese name *Wong Yu-mahn* would yield the diminutive form *A-mahn*. This prefix is also used in southern Mandarin-speaking areas. The case of Abie, described above, is one in which this prefix was used to create a peer-bestowed nickname.

A girl from the Hangzhou area was given the family nickname *Amo*, which is a local dialect pronunciation of the Mandarin word *mao*, preceded by *A*. This name is used by all the family members even today, though its bearer considers it not sufficiently dignified for an adult and would rather it be forgotten. Her brothers claim they have known her as *Amo* all their lives and they would be embarrassed to call her anything else, since anything other than *Amo* would seem contrived.

A widely used reduplicative family nickname is *Guaiguai*, which, as indicated earlier, suggests that the parents are hoping for a well-behaved child. The reduplication of a name gives it a kind of endearing, childlike quality. The names resemble those typically given to pandas, e.g., *Lingling* and *Yuyu*, to reflect (and encourage) the warm regard in which these animals are widely held. Lu and Millward also note that reduplicated characters suggest femininity (272).

Friendship vs. Kinship in Chinese Culture

Chinese nicknaming — Mandarin and Cantonese — parallels American nicknaming in that it includes both a meaningful nickname tradition and a tradition in which the nicknames do not have meanings that are specifically associated with their bearers. Thus in China we find true nicknames (*Chicken Guts* and *Snake Ping*) as well as derivative nicknames such as *Wenwen, Xiaowen* and *A-mahn*.

The main points of difference between American and Chinese nicknaming styles is the emphasis that is placed upon the uniqueness of the family in the Chinese system. In traditional China a man's first and most important duty was to marry a good woman and beget sons through her so as to continue the family line for the benefit of the ancestors. The spiritual importance of procreating descendants is not as important to young urban Hong Kong Chinese or among the educated classes in the People's Republic today. But the family obligations, particularly the obligations of the young to their elders, continue to be very serious matters quite distinct from the lighthearted stuff of which student and worker friendships are made.

The stark difference between the seriousness, permanence, and hierarchism which characterize the family as opposed to the high-spiritedness, impermanence and egalitarianism of the young friendship group is symbolized by the strict differentiation between the family nickname used within the former and the true nickname which predominates in the latter. One thing on which all informants — from both Hong Kong and China — agreed was that the family nickname and the peer group nickname were in no way the

same. In fact some informants were unsure as to whether or not the word *xiaoming* 'family nickname' should be translated as "nickname" at all. There was no such uncertainty about the correspondence of *waihao* to the English word "nickname."

Also, though friends might take a family nickname and use it with ironic effect for a *waihao* (as happened to "Family Treasure" and "Guaiguai" described above), under no circumstances would a family adopt a peer-bestowed nickname for use within the family.

One Hangzhou informant, when asked if his family members would ever call his younger brother by his *waihao*, "Da Tou," replied as follows:

> Native Informant: I would not call my little brother "Da Tou." *Waihao* and *chuohao* are never called among families.
>
> Interviewer: Why not?
>
> Informant: Usually it's given by outsiders.
>
> Interviewer: And so the family doesn't want to use the outsiders' name?
>
> Informant: (With great emphasis) Never!

Other informants answered similarly, though not always so emotionally.

The main function of the family nickname is to define membership in the kinship group within which intimacy and affection are expected to flourish. A basic principle which makes this affectionate intimacy possible is a very strong sense of family loyalty.

Common nicknames, on the other hand, are used among friends in contexts which are impermanent and jocular; that is, the opposite of the family context. Chinese culture differs from American in the strict segregation which it insists upon for these two kinds of nicknames, and the fact that it provides two completely different words for them.

Courting Couples

Courting couples who are on the way to getting married provide an interesting case where a relationship that starts out as one of friendship gradually evolves into one of kinship. Usually a

young man and woman will call each other by their full names — surname and formal given name — early in their acquaintanceship. It may happen that after they get to know each other a couple will switch to the use of a somewhat less formal construction: the given name by itself. Some couples eventually begin to address each other by their family nicknames.

In a variation of this pattern a couple may invent their own pet names which only they and no other family members or friends use. Some couples who follow this pattern refer to these special nicknames as a kind of *xiaoming* or "like a *xiaoming*."

An artist in Beijing reported that his wife gave him the pet name *Huhu* during their courtship. This name was not derived from his formal name and has essentially no meaning, but its duplication of a syllable gives it an endearing quality. Sometimes she would use an especially intimate one-syllable derivation of this name, *Hu*.

Most couples start to use family nicknames or pet names shortly before they actually marry. This transition in name usage seems to take place when two people decide to get married, and begin to think of each other as family members.

The succession of full name to given name to family nickname is by no means followed by all urban Chinese who get married. Some continue to address each other by their given names even after they are married, and a few even use the more formal surname with given name. But none of my informants knew or had even heard of any couples who addressed or referred to each other by a peer-bestowed nickname.

In one particularly revealing case a university student was given a playful nickname by his girlfriend-to-be which eventually evolved into a pet name used only by her. This young man habitually carried a green lunch box, and consequently, when he first began to approach the woman whose affections he sought, he was dubbed "Green Lunch Box" (*Lu Fan He*) by her and her friends. Eventually, as the two became romantically involved, the girlfriend continued to address him as "Green Lunch Box," while their other friends stopped using it in deference to the special intimacy that it now implied.

Single-character Names

Finally, there is a special name form that is used primarily by courting couples and husbands and wives. This is the single character name (without such prefixes as the *A* of southern China) which is usually derived from the formal given name or the family nickname. If a person has a two-character given name, the second character will generally be used. For a one-character given name that character by itself will serve. Thus a couple named Zhang Wenbao and Huang Ling would call each other, respectively, "Bao" and "Ling."

According to Lu and Millward "[t]he single-character given name is possible only within the confines of the family" (276). I would agree that this is essentially true. The only exception that I have found is its use by engaged couples.

The Beijing artist described above whose fiancée (eventually his wife) called him "Hu" is one example of this usage. Though "Hu" was not part of his formal name, the fact that it was a one-syllable element made it strongly symbolic of the special intimacy this couple shared.

Some of my informants speculated that this single character name might be used by same-sex friends for each other but only if they were extremely close and probably not even then if they were both male. However, no specific cases of single character name usage by ordinary (i.e., non-courting) friends could be recalled by those I interviewed. The only examples of single-character names that I found were those used by courting couples or husbands and wives. And, as one informant pointed out, the use of a single-character name by a male for a female who was not his girlfriend amounted to a kind of sexual harassment.

In Chinese, the reduction in the syllable count of a name implies an increase in intimacy, with the single-character form of the name symbolizing an individual's most intimate self. It's almost as though by trimming a standard, three-character Chinese name down syllable by syllable, one could gradually draw closer and closer to the person addressed. So just as *Bao* is more intimate than *Wenbao*, so is the latter more intimate than *Zhang Wenbao*.

It might be said that the family nickname symbolizes intimacy, and the single-character name used between couples symbolizes an even more exclusive kind of intimacy, one which can carry a connotation of sexuality.

Conclusion

The Chinese nicknaming system, though differing in some ways from the American system, is similar to it in that it is based on a two-tiered conceptual structure. That is, it includes two basic kinds of nicknames, one of which is perceived as indisputably a nickname, and another which is often referred to as a nickname, but which is seen as less than an ideal representative.

This two-tiered structure is reminiscent of the prototype-focused concept which has recently been developed in cognitive anthropology and psychology. This concept is described as being both focused on a prototype which best represents the category in question, and also including members which are less clearly representative. Concepts or categories which have been analyzed in this manner include colors (Berlin and Kay), and vehicles and furniture (Rosch and Mervis).

In each of the above-named categories, prototypes have been identified thus: Color:Red, Vehicle:Car, Furniture:Chair. In addition, non-prototypical members of the same categories may be identified, some of which are only ambiguously in the category at all, e.g., Color:Hot Pink, Vehicle:Raft, Furniture:Clock. Using this prototype-focused category model, we can view the meaningful nickname as the prototype and such forms as hypocoristic and affectionate nicknames as borderline cases.

The nickname, broadly conceived (i.e., including both the prototype and the borderline cases), serves mainly as a marker of informality. Contexts in which people call each other "Gracie," "Jamie," or "Slouch" (or "A-mahn", "Xiaowen," or "Snake Ping") are to some extent informal contexts. American culture is unusual in that it regards informality as democratic and therefore morally superior to formality, and consequently encourages a measure of informality in almost all contexts. This is especially true of the South which routinely gives the country presidents who are almost

never referred to by their formal names.

The existence of a prototype within a category also implies that there is a functional factor determining what the prototype will be. In the case of the nickname this function is joking and verbal aggression. This is suggested by the fact that in so many cases from so many cultures nicknames are associated with humor of either a good-natured kind, as in urban China and Hong Kong, or Jewish immigrants in Indianapolis (Glazier) or humor which seems aimed at gaining a real advantage over a social rival, as in rural Spain (Brandes) or Mexico (Collier and Bricker).

Where nicknaming is concerned, joking and verbal aggression can be seen as a single function. This is because the teasing of an individual with a humorous nickname may be motivated by feelings of either playful aggression or sheer hostility, but either way it is still teasing through the use of humor.

Other recognized functions of the true nickname are not as central to its essential nature. For example, where nicknames are used to positively identify their bearer because formal names are not adequate for this purpose, as in Malta (Boissevain) or Scotland (Dorian), the nickname is not serving a special "nicknaming" purpose at all. In fact, in this role it serves the same function as a formal name; it identifies the bearer, distinguishing him or her from others with whom he or she might be confused.

Another commonly observed nickname function is the signaling of one's membership in an in-group. But this function is nothing more than a necessary entailment of the informality-establishing function. In establishing group boundaries, nickname usage is merely doing what is necessary in order to make informality within a particular group or context possible.

In sum, we can say that the nickname (broadly defined) exists because people in all cultures have a need to express a sense of informality or closeness with some of their consociates. The true nickname exists as a prototypical form because one of the most typical features of informal interaction is humor — whether it be of the affectionate or the mean-spirited kind.

Perhaps by employing this two-tiered model of the nickname, we will be able to bring to light particular, culture-specific features

of different nicknaming systems. For example, in the Chinese system there is the family nickname or *xiaoming,* which, though a marker of informality and therefore a nickname of sorts, falls outside the universal, cross-cultural category of the true nickname. It can also be said that the family nickname is in some ways uniquely Chinese because of the special significance of the family in Chinese culture. The Chinese family nickname, by virtue of its stark contrast with the peer-bestowed nickname or *waihao*, helps reinforce the boundary which separates the family from the friendship group.

NOTE

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southeast Regional Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Athens, Georgia, January 16-18, 1992.

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