English Name Use by East Asians in Canada: Linguistic Pragmatics or Cultural Identity?

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This article reports on a naming practice that is taking place among young Chinese and Koreans: the appropriation of the English personal name. Most young Chinese and Koreans seem to have an English personal name alongside their ethnic personal name. Yet, in sharp contrast young Japanese seldom seem to adopt an English personal name. This article explores the reasons behind these differences in English personal name adoption, and tests the assumption that Chinese and Koreans adopt English personal names because Westerners have difficulty pronouncing ethnic personal names. My conclusions are based on the results of a survey on English personal name use given to university students of Chinese, Japanese and Korean ethnicity living in Canada. The results suggest that the adoption of English personal names by young Chinese and Koreans is as much a cultural phenomenon as a pragmatic one.

KEYWORDS Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Anglicization, identity

Introduction

Toronto is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. According to the 2001 census, approximately half of the four-and-a-half-million residents immigrated to Canada from another country. Of these immigrants, those that claim East Asian ethnicity are the largest visible minority. Anyone who has taught at the University of Toronto certainly appreciates the extent to which students of East Asian ethnicity make up the student body, as a cursory glance at any class list is bound to have a number of such names on it.

Such a survey of student names will also reveal a curious trend: Chinese and Korean students frequently list both an ethnic personal name and an English personal name, such as *Yunzhi Linda* or *Byungsuk Barney*. In contrast, students of Japanese ethnicity seem to seldom list an English personal name alongside their Japanese personal name. One commonly-held belief, even among Chinese and

Korean students themselves (as my results show), is that this difference in English personal name use is because Chinese and Korean names are more difficult for Westerners to pronounce. After all, who, without some knowledge of Chinese Romanization rules, can adequately pronounce a name such as *Qi Xu*?

In order to test the hypothesis that the tendency for Chinese and Koreans to adopt an English personal name is for pragmatic reasons, I conducted a survey on the use of and attitudes towards English names. The respondents were university students of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ethnicity. The results of the survey reveal that English personal name use is as much of a cultural phenomenon as a pragmatic one.

The rest of the article is laid out as follows. I first briefly introduce the survey and the respondents. I then present the results in four parts. The first part reports the results of a logistic regression analysis of the background information. The objective of the regression analysis is to determine the general characteristics that are significant in determining whether a respondent has a personal English name or not. The second part reports on the reasons why an English personal name is adopted. The third part reports on the adoption and usage of English personal names. Lastly, the fourth part reports on attitudes towards certain English personal names. I conclude with a discussion of the results.

The survey

The survey consisted of questions presented in four sections. The first section solicited background information such as immigration status, ethnic background, and age first lived in Canada. The second section asked if the respondent had an ethnic (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, or Korean) personal name and an English personal name, and in the case of the latter, who the name was given by. The third section asked which personal name was used in various situations, such as by friends, by parents, and in the respondent's signature. The fourth section asked for opinions towards various personal names, the reasons for taking an English personal name, and attitudes towards various Anglicizations of ethnic last names. This survey was customized according to the ethnic background of the respondent. An example survey (Chinese ethnicity) is provided in the Appendix.

The survey respondents were recruited from the University of Toronto undergraduate student body. Only students who claimed Chinese, Japanese, or Korean ethnicity participated in the survey. Altogether, 132 students participated. Five of these respondents reported that they did not have an ethnic name and were excluded from analysis, as my objective is to better understand English name use among students with ethnic names. The ethnic breakdown of the remaining 127 respondents is listed in Table 1.

Characteristics of respondents with an English personal name

This section reports the results of a logistic regression analysis of the background information of the respondents. Logistic regression models the relationship between a categorical dichotic outcome variable and several predictor variables that are either continuous or categorical. In this study, the dichotic outcome variable to be modeled

	TABLE 1		
NUMBER OF SURVEY	RESPONDENTS	BY	ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	Count
Chinese	71
Mainland	22
Taiwan	17
Hong Kong	32
Japanese	23
Korean	33
Total	127

is whether a respondent has an English personal name or not. The predictor variables are *ethnicity*, *gender*, *better spoken language*, *status in Canada*, and *age first lived in Canada*. The predictor variables are summarized in Table 2.

A forward stepwise logistic regression analysis was performed with the statistics package *SPSS*. The results are presented in Table 3. Of the predictor variables, only *ethnicity* and *age first lived in Canada* were selected as having at least a marginally significant relationship with possessing an English personal name. The other predictor variables were not selected as significant.

Consider first the relationship between the age a respondent first lived in Canada and having an English name. It is not surprising that almost all of the respondents

TABLE 2
THE PREDICTOR VARIABLES USED IN THE REGRESSION MODEL

Predictor variable	Categories
Ethnicity	Chinese; Japanese; Korean
Gender	male; female
Better spoken language	English; ethnic language
Status in Canada	citizen or immigrant; foreign student
Age first lived in Canada	0-15 yrs; 16+ yrs

TABLE 3
HAVING AN ENGLISH PERSONAL NAME OR NOT: LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS

Predictor variables	Logistic regression coefficient	SE	Odds-ratios	p-value
Constant	-0.45	1.75	0.64	.796
Ethnicity				
(Chinese = 1, other = 0)	5.80	1.19	330.4	<.001
(Korean = 1, other = 0)	4.49	1.17	88.9	<.001
Age first lived in Canada				
(1=0-15 yrs, 2=16+ yrs)	-1.41	1.75	0.24	.080.

Note: n = 127. Log likelihood = -27.06. Predictor variables not included: Gender, Better Spoken Language, and Status in Canada.

(61 of 65) who lived in Canada before the age of sixteen have an English name. This contrasts with 61 percent (37 of 61) of the respondents who first lived in Canada past the age of fifteen and have an English personal name.

The other significant predictor of having an English personal name is ethnicity. A vast majority of the Chinese respondents (68 of 71) and the Korean respondents (29 of 33) have an English personal name. In contrast, only one of the Japanese respondents (N=23) does. This difference is in part accounted for by age — the Japanese respondents on average began living in Canada at an older age. However, even if we consider only the respondents who began living in Canada after the age of fifteen, the proportions of Chinese and Korean respondents with an English personal name are still very large: 93 percent (28 of 30) and 82 percent (9 of 11) respectively. In comparison, none of the Japanese respondents (N=19) who came to Canada at that age have an English personal name.

The results of the regression analysis show that respondents with an English name tend to have lived in Canada at a younger age and tend to be either Chinese or Korean ethnicity. Those of Japanese ethnicity, on the other hand, tend to not have an English personal name. The following sections seek clues as to why some ethnic groups prefer to adopt an English personal name while other groups do not, and how English personal names are used.

Reported reasons for acquiring an English name

One of the survey questions asked the respondents to evaluate the following reasons for acquiring an English personal name:

Chinese / Korean / Japanese names are impossible for Westerns to pronounce.

It is the trendy thing to do these days.

It makes a person seem more educated and sophisticated.

People who are Christian take English personal names.

You need an English name for English class.

Each of these statements was evaluated as either "very true," "somewhat true," "somewhat not true," or "not true at all." Figure I displays the averaged ratings of each statement by ethnicity. As can been seen from the figure, both the Chinese respondents and the Korean respondents rated the statement about pronunciation difficulty as the most truthful, whereas the Japanese respondents rated the first statement as the most truthful. These results support the hypothesis that English name adoption is for pragmatic reasons. Thus, some of the difference between the Japanese group and the two other groups can be accounted for by the belief that Chinese and Korean personal names are difficult for westerners to pronounce. However, this is not the entire story, as the following sections will show.

English name acquisition and usage

Personal names are normally given to a child by a parent or other immediate family member. However, this is not the case for many of the respondents. Of the Chinese respondents who have an English personal name, only about half (35 of 68) reported

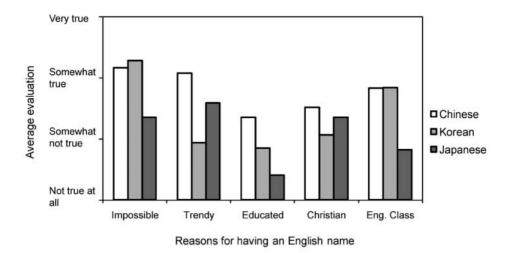


FIGURE 1 Average ratings of five statements concerning the reasons why English personal names are acquired by ethnic group

that their name was given to them by a family member. (Other reported sources of English personal names were "self-chosen," "English teacher," and "a friend.") Similarly, the proportion of Korean respondents with an English personal name given by a family member was also about half (14 of 29).

However, further examination of the Chinese data reveals an interesting pattern. One of the questions of the survey asked the Chinese respondents which region of China (Mainland, Taiwan, or Hong Kong) their family comes from. Although regional background is a complex, multifaceted issue, a first approximation was made by grouping each of the respondents according to how they responded to this question. The percentage of Chinese respondents with an English name given by a family member, broken down by regional background and age first lived in Canada, is shown in Figure 2. As expected, given the results of the regression analysis, age is a relevant factor for all regions, as those respondents that lived in Canada at a younger age have an English personal name given by a family member. However, region is also very relevant: the vast majority of the Hong Kong respondents (28 of 32) received their English name from a family member, whereas the majority of the respondents in the Mainland and Taiwan groups did not (29 of 36 for both groups combined).³ This suggests that the acquisition of an English personal name is more than simple pragmatics, at least among the Hong Kong respondents. This point is reinforced by the data on name usage.

One of the survey questions solicited personal name usage in five situations: by parents, in the name on the respondent's student identification, in the respondent's signature, by friends of the same ethnic background, and by friends of a different ethnic background. The possible responses for each situation are "English name," "ethnic (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, or Korean) name," and "both equally." An index score of English name usage was created by first assigning the following values to the responses:

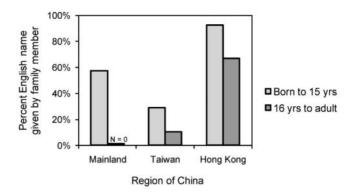


FIGURE 2 Percent of Chinese respondents with an English name given by a family member, by region and age arrived in Canada

o — Ethnic name

 $_{\rm I}$ — Both equally

2 — English name

The scores for each ethnic group were summed and divided by the number of respondents, resulting in an averaged value between zero and two.⁴ Figure 3 shows the average index scores for the Korean and Chinese respondents for the five situations.

The relatively infrequent use of their English names by the respondents' parents (as indicated by the lower scores) and the relatively frequent use of English names by non-Chinese / non-Korean friends is not surprising. However, why are the respondents' English names used relatively frequently by friends of the same ethnicity? It is certainly not because these friends have difficulty pronouncing the ethnic names. Nor is the frequent use of English personal names by friends of the same ethnicity because the respondents' ethnic names are not used; they are, as shown by the low index

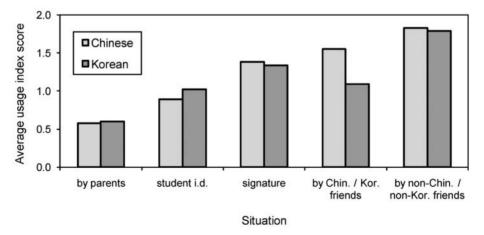


FIGURE 3 Average English name usage index scores in five situations for the Chinese and Korean respondents

scores in Figure 3 for the "by parent" and "student i.d." situations. This use of English personal names by friends of the same ethnicity is further evidence that the use of an English name by Chinese and Korean students living in Canada is not simply a matter of pronunciation difficulties.

As with the acquisition of an English personal name, an interesting pattern again emerges when we consider the Chinese respondents according to their regional background. Figure 4 shows the English name usage index scores averaged across the five situations by region. Again, the age first lived in Canada is included based on its relevance in the logistic regression model.

The average index score for the respondents from Hong Kong is greater than those of the other two groups,⁵ particularly among the respondents who arrived in Canada at an older age. So again we see regional differences. The presence of regional differences suggests that English name use among Hong Kong respondents is much more liberal (in that the English name is used in more situations) than among the respondents from Taiwan or mainland China. Again we see that English personal name use is more than simple pragmatics; if it was simply pragmatics, then there would not be any reason for regional differences such as this to emerge among the Chinese respondents.

Attitudes towards certain personal English names

Lastly, I report on attitudes towards specific English personal names and pseudonames. I have noticed the use of some unique English personal names by Chinese, such as *Butterfly*. An article on Chinese names, Tan (2001), directs the reader's attention to a *New York Times* article (Lee, 2001) on English personal naming patterns that seem to be unique to the Chinese, such as use of common nouns such as *Bison* and *Feeling*, the use of famous athletes' and sports franchises' names such as *Magic Johnson* and *Manchester United*, and the use of fictional and mythological characters such as *Skywalker* and *Medusa*. Tan proceeds to draw attention to the middle name of the author of the *New York Times* article, which is the arabic numeral "8."

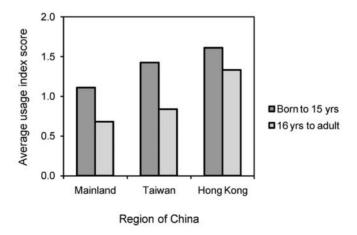


FIGURE 4 Average English name usage index scores by region and age arrived in Canada

In light of these examples, one wonders, "What is considered an acceptable English personal name?" There is a lot of variety and innovation in Chinese naming practices in general (Jones, 1997; Louie, 1998), and Chinese sometimes give personal names that contain part of the name of a famous individual in hopes that the named individual will acquire the attributes of the famous individual. This may be why Chinese use English personal names such as *Magic Johnson*, but to what extent is a name such as 8. considered a good choice? To that end, I elicited acceptability ratings of seven English personal names and pseudo-names that ranged from the ordinary to quite unusual. The names and pseudo-names used for this question were:

Sunny Winnie Magic Johnson Butterfly Happiness 8.

The last two names in the list are the numeral eight and the dollar sign. Their inclusion was motivated by Tan's (2001) discussion of English personal names. Each of these names was rated on a five-point Likert scale, with a rating of one indicating that the name is an "excellent choice," while a rating of five indicating that the name is a "very strange choice."

Once again, examining the ratings by region revealed notable differences. The mainland Chinese showed the least spread in their ratings of the names, while the Hong Kong Chinese showed the greatest spread. This difference between the mainland Chinese and the Hong Kong Chinese is illustrated in Figure 5. For the Hong Kong respondents *Sunny* is a very good choice for and English name and 8. is a very

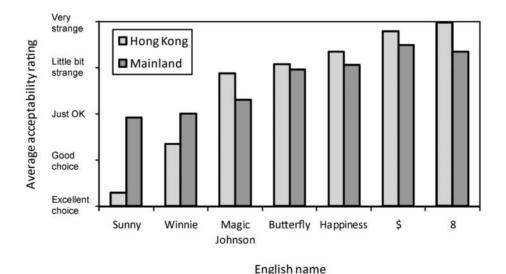


FIGURE 5 Average unacceptability ratings for the English personal names by the Hong Kong and mainland China respondents

strange choice, whereas for the Mainland respondents, the two names are not rated as different from each other. This larger difference in average rating between *Sunny* and 8. among the Hong Kong respondents seems to suggest that the Hong Kong community has a clearer idea of what is and is not an acceptable English name. In contrast, while the mainland Chinese do show preferences, they are more tolerant towards creative and bizarre English personal names, as I mentioned earlier. More examples of innovative English personal names used by mainland Chinese reported in an internet blog⁶ titled "How Chinese People Select Their English Name" are *Apple, Sea*, and *Stormy*.

Discussion

The results from the survey indicate that the use of English personal names by East Asian students living in Canada is more than pragmatics. That this is the case is suggested by the fact that a majority of the Chinese and Korean respondents have an English personal name, whereas only one of the Japanese respondents indicated that they have an English personal name. If English name acquisition were simply a matter of pragmatics, then presumably more Japanese with difficult-to-pronounce names would take on an English name.

Rather, there must be a cultural reason that explains the extreme reluctance of Japanese to take on English personal names. To solve this puzzle, we need to compare the personal naming practices of the cultures. Japanese parents give their children one personal name at birth. This is their official name, and it, or a diminutive of it, is used whenever it is appropriate to do so. Thus, normally a Japanese person only uses one personal name throughout his or her lifetime. In contrast, Chinese and Korean individuals use several different personal names throughout their lifetime. Louie (1998: 46) lists five different types of personal names that Chinese use, such as a milk name, a school name, and an adult name. Which name is used depends on the age of the individual and the relationship with the addresser. Koreans follow a similar practice. In an internet article⁷ titled "What's in a Korean name?" Choi Soon Yong reports that because he went by a different personal name as a child, he did not even know his legal birth name until he was in sixth grade. So we see that, to a Chinese or a Korean, the adoption of an English name is just an extension of the pre-existing cultural practice of using several personal names throughout one's lifetime. Social innovations, such as the adoption of an English name, that are compatible with pre-existing sociocultural values and beliefs are adopted at a faster rate than those that are not (Rogers, 2003). The adoption of an English personal name is compatible with Chinese and Korean naming culture but not Japanese naming culture, and this is most likely the reason why Japanese do not adopt an English personal name.

The argument for a cultural component in the respondents' use of English personal names is further supported by the fact that among friends of the same ethnicity, English personal names are used at least as often as ethnic names. Obviously, the Chinese respondents are not favoring the English personal names of their friends over their Chinese personal names because they find the Chinese personal names difficult to pronounce. Rather, most likely English personal names are used even among friends of the same ethnicity because this is one way the respondents are signaling their affiliation with western culture.

Furthermore, when we compared English personal name use by regional background, we see that the Hong Kong respondents use their English personal names in a wider variety of situations than the respondents from Taiwan or mainland China. This is not surprising given that Hong Kong was historically a British colony and English was an acrolect (Bolton, 2000). A similar split between Hong Kong and the other regions was seen for the source of the English personal names. The English personal names of the Hong Kong respondents tended to be chosen by a family member, whereas the English personal names of the Mainland, Taiwan, and Korean respondents tended not to be.

Finally, a comparison of attitudes towards certain English personal names again revealed regional differences among the Chinese respondents, with the Hong Kong respondents making a sharper distinction between an acceptable English personal name and an unacceptable English personal name. Thus a name such as 8. is unanimously unacceptable to Hong Kong respondents, whereas only 59 percent (13 of 22) of the mainland Chinese respondents rated it as "very strange." Collectively, these results suggest that English personal name use among Chinese is gradually becoming conventionalized, with the Hong Kong community leading the way.

In conclusion, contrary to the original hypothesis, English personal names are used by Chinese and Korean students living in Canada not just because their ethnic names are hard to pronounce. Although one cannot deny the convenience of having an English name, this is clearly not the only factor. Thus even a Chinese student with a relatively easy-to-pronounce personal name such as *Man Li* may still adopt, or for that matter already have been given by their parents, and English personal name. In conclusion, the adoption of English names among East Asians is not only pragmatically-driven, but also culturally-driven.

Notes

- The survey originally used a six-way distinction in age first lived in Canada. However, this was collapsed into two categories in order to ensure adequate cell counts in the cross tabulations with regional background.
- ² A one-way Analysis of Variance of the truthfulness ratings for this statement with ethnicity as the factor shows that the differences in ratings are statistically significant, Welsh F(2,39.1) = 5.434, p = .008. However, Games-Howell post-hoc contrasts show that while the Japanese ratings are significantly different from the Chinese (p = .020) and Korean ratings (p = .008), the Chinese ratings are not significantly different from the Korean ratings (p > .10).
- These differences are statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 31.45$, p < .001.

- Only respondents with both an English personal name and an ethnic name (N=98) are included in the analysis.
- ⁵ A one-way Analysis of Variance of the respondents' usage index scores averaged across the five situations with region as the factor showed that the between-group differences are statistically significant, F(2,97) = 16.05, p = <.001.
- The internet address for the blog is http://www.madaboutshanghai.com/2005/12/how_chinese_peo.html. I accessed the webpage on April 5 2008.
- 7 The internet address for the article is http://www. unsu.com/names.html. I accessed the website on April 25 2008.

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Appendix: A sample survey (Chinese ethnicity)

Chinese People and English Personal Names Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out the survey. Please fill out as much of the survey as possible. If you cannot answer a question, then leave it blank. Check off one answer box for each question.

Secti	on I:	Your Background Information						
ı.	You	ır gender:				Male		Female
2.	Wh	ich do you speak better, Chinese	or En	glish?		Chinese		English
3.	You	nr status in Canada: 🛭 citizen	, imm	igrant		foreign student	/ fo	reign worker
4.	Who	ere are you / is your family from: Mainland China		Hong K	ong			Taiwan
5.	Who	en did you live in Canada (not vi I was born in Canada. Between 6 and 10 years old. Between 16 and 18 years old.	sit) fo	r the firs	t tim	under the age Between 11 and I left as an adu	d 15	years old.
Secti	on II	I: Given Names						
6.	Do	you have a Chinese personal nam	ne (fir	st or mid	dle 1	name)?		
		yes		10				
7•	Do	you have an English personal nat yes				name)? en please proce	ed to	o Section IV.
8.	Wh	o gave you the English personal r	name?					
		parents		other fam	ily n	nember		
		I choose it myself		friend				
		a teacher		other:				

Section III: Personal Name Usage

9. Which of your personal names is used most often in the following situations?						
	both equally, then check b	oth. If not app	olicable, the	n leave that	t line blank.	
		English Na	me C	hinese Nam	e Both	
	Your Student I.D.					
	Your signature					
	With non-Chinese friends			П		
	With Chinese friends			П		
	By your parents					
	by your parents	_				
Secti	on IV: Your Opinion					
10.	For each of the following	coccupations,	how do yo	ou feel abou	it them using a	n English
	personal name at work in	the area check	ed in quest	ion 4?		
		Absolutely	Probably	Is OK	Probably	Very
		should use	should use	e if uses	shouldn't use	strange
	A movie star					
	The president					
	A college English teacher					
	A science fiction author					
	A businessman					
	A Beijing Opera actor					
	An Olympic athlete					
II.	Sometimes Chinese people Times Chinese American the following English pers An excel	journalist is 8. onal names use llent A g	(pronounced by Chine good	ed "eight"). ese individu It's just	How do you fals? A little	feel about Very
	choic	_	oice	OK	bit strange	strange
	Sunny		_			
	\$					
	Magic Johnson					
	Winnie					
	Butterfly					
	8.					
	Happiness \square	ı				
12.	Rate these statements for	why people in	China take	an English	personal name:	
			Very	Somewh	at Somewhat	Not true
			true	true	not true	at all
	Chinese names are imposs	ible for				
	Westerners to pronounce.					
	It is the trendy thing to do	these days.				
	It makes a person seem m	ore				
	educated and sophisticated	ł.				
	People who are Christian	take English				
	personal names.					
	You need an English name	e for English cl	ass.			

					01.1	. 11			1		~ ~ .
I3.	How	do vou	teel	about a	1 Chinese	Canadian	changing	their	ast name	trom	Xia to:

	An excellent	A good	It's just	A little	Very
	choice	choice	OK	bit strange	strange
Shah					
Shanon					
Smith					