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# The Adoption of Non-Heritage Names among Chinese Mainlanders

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When studying English or through the medium of English, some mainland Chinese students adopt non-heritage names. This phenomenon has arisen as a result of language contact in an increasingly interconnected world. Our paper investigates reasons for the adoption of non-heritage names among Chinese students and the kinds of functions that these names are seen to fulfill. We surveyed 156 English linguistics majors. Our findings indicate that most of those surveyed use non-heritage names. These appear to serve interrelated roles and can also be associated with Chinese nicknaming. In addition, the names in our sample seem to reflect aspects of students' lives that are relevant in specific contexts, and these contexts both shape and are shaped by participants' use of given and non-heritage names.

KEYWORDS adopted names, mainland Chinese students, language contact

## Introduction

This article investigates naming practices among a sample of Han Chinese. The Han Chinese comprise around 95 percent of China's mainland population and are therefore both the world's largest national population and the world's largest diaspora. Our aims are to address the extent to which Chinese students have non-heritage names (NHNs), examine the reasons for these onomastic choices, and explore perceptions regarding the functions of all NHNs, including temporary ones. Like Cheng (1985), we acknowledge the challenges related to classifying adopted names that are seemingly not of Chinese-language origin and that generally appear in pinyin. We use NHN to label the monikers featured here. These came about largely as a result of contact with the English language, although they cannot all be confirmed as being English.

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The phenomenon of adopting non-Chinese names has been considered in relation to Chinese students abroad (e.g., Li, 1997; Song, 1997; Edwards, 2006; and Heffernan, 2010), although not in China as far as we know. Contact between Chinese and English speakers has long been underpinned by economics and politics (Tai and Chan, 1999), as exemplified in the ex-British colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore. In these locations NHNs are relatively common, along with other language borrowings (Heffernan, 2010; Li, 1997). NHNs are often perceived as being both less formal and less intimate in social interaction than Chinese names (Mathews, 1996). Hong Kong and Singapore blend cosmopolitan modernity and Chinese tradition; in both places, NHNs can appear in official documents and adoption of NHNs has increased in recent years (Wong, 2006).

## Background

Names encode information about a person (e.g., gender); bestow a unique identity on the name-holder (Cheng, 2008); imply or indicate cultural affiliation (Lévi-Strauss, 1972; Adler, 1978; Joseph, 2004; Anderson, 2007; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2008; Powell, 2010); and thus introduce "order into the mass of human relationships" (Adamic, 1942: 93). Chinese given names are selected for their positive sounds and associations and are seen as central to personality and fate (Li, 2011). They are generally bestowed on a person at a young age by close relatives.

Borrowings into Mandarin have included proper names and their transliteration, e.g., *yinggelan* as England (Gao, 2000: 65), although there are fewer borrowings into Cantonese (Cheng, 1985). Li (1997: 490) also posits that mainland Chinese adopt names that tend to reflect "the dominant political ideology of the time," e.g., *wensheng*, meaning "born during the Cultural Revolution" (Li, X. 2011: 6).

Mainland Chinese have been described as having a "deep-rooted sense of belonging to a unified civilization" (Wu, 1994: 149), but Reid (2009) and Yao (2009) warn against homogenizing the Chinese people, arguing that they are as diverse as other groups (Tu, 1994; Shi-xu, 1997; Clark and Gieve, 2006). China has "the largest number of learners of English as a foreign language in the world" (Crystal, cited in Yong and Campbell, 1995: 377). There are also increasing numbers of Chinese students at universities outside China. In the UK alone there are around 50,000 Chinese university students (UKCISA, 2012).

English has been compulsory in Chinese schools since 1949, the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since then there have been considerable social changes (Fang and Heng, 1983). Hsu (2009) reports: "Duthie [. . .] traces the

TABLE 1

SOURCE AND STRUCTURE OF CHINESE NAMES

| Name type | Source of name | Characters | Origins | Ways used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Surname | Passed down through male hereditary line | Usually one | Passed down family through generations | Surname and given name combine to be usual address form by a person's parents or those of an older generation |
| Given name | Parents or grandparents (generally) | One or two characters | Represents auspiciousness and parents' or elders' aspirations for their offspring | |

popularity of English names in China back to the influx of foreign investment following Deng Xiaoping's market reforms," which was accompanied by expatriates working in China.

Adopted NHNs can be linked to linguistic diffusion, the spread of new language forms, contact with non-Chinese, or even contact with other Chinese, themselves influenced by contact with speakers of other languages. Tan (2001: 52) suggests that in Singapore Chinese names with their unique morpheme structure (Cheng 1985) are becoming hybridized, e.g., *Johnny Yong*. This may, perhaps, be occurring as a result of greater literacy in English, increased Christianization, and closer correlations between home language and Christianity, as suggested by Tan (2001).

Among naturalized British Chinese in the UK, Hua refers to the development of *interculturality* which is manifested in name choices: "the choice made by the speaker during an interaction is significant and meaningful. [. . .] [It] symbolizes the social and cultural membership the speaker would like to evoke" (2010: 195).

## The study

We began with two pilot stages in the UK. The first stage comprised informal diary accounts over a three-day period at our university. This phase was intended to show how often names arose in interaction, for the purpose of address, and if the names used appeared to be connected to particular language functions, e.g., as part of, or preceding, a personal request.

The four researchers found that we were explicitly addressed by name relatively little. Overall, names occurred comparatively rarely in interaction, other than in specific reference to non-present individuals. Wong (2006) obtained similar results from a diary study. She describes the relative rarity of name use in the UK for addressing others, especially people with whom one is familiar. Blum (1997) has also reported this, tentatively implying that names appeared to be less pivotal in setting or maintaining relationship parameters among English-speakers in a small pilot stage. At least, this is what we noticed in the relatively small number of interactions in this initial period.

The diary accounts were followed by a second stage of semi-structured interviews with eight UK-based mainland Chinese student volunteers. Interviews were conducted over a period of one week. This was to see which students had an NHN and why, as an indication of how common NHNs are beyond our initial impressions. During these interviews, Chinese nicknames were reported to be in regular use. Interviewee 8, for example, claimed to have nine nicknames, regularly used by friends and family, echoing Sung (1981) and Wong (2006), that "it is the relationship that determines how to address each other" (Li, 2011: 12; Blum, 1997). It emerged that Chinese names and NHNs have distinct functions. These functions are differentiated by degree of formality as well as association with foreigners, i.e. someone who does not speak Chinese (Li, 2011). High personal value is placed on both Chinese given names and NHNs. Interviewees valued the former more than the latter, and none had replaced their given name (Wu, 1994). NHNs also have no official role for mainland Chinese. Where used, NHNs had mostly been self-selected by interviewees or given by an English teacher. Furthermore, NHNs tend to have similar pronunciation to a Chinese

name or nickname, or may be based on a direct translation of Chinese characters. NHNs also have positive associations; they should "sound nice" and have a "positive meaning," criteria that emerged from our survey data. They are stimulated by state policies: "being open to western culture" (Li, 2011: 10). Among respondents, 51.3 percent said that an NHN can bring them some benefits for English learning. An NHN was perceived as an "expression of openness," a way "of reducing psychological distance between Chinese students and their non-Chinese teachers." This can be seen as a form of "cultural accommodation" (Wu, 1994; Yao, 2009). For example, interviewee 3 said that she used "*Sophie* as an informal name when making friends at England," a catalyst for establishing and maintaining relations with non-Chinese.

However, one interviewee (aged twenty-five, from Shanghai) said of her NHN that a "name is just a name, it does not represent anything," a reminder of the varying perceptions of the value of an NHN.

These initial forays revealed salient survey themes for investigation among a larger sample: for example, how NHNs are selected, and if there is significant variation in NHN use between the settings of China and the UK. Even though the use of NHNs in the UK is likely to be different from the ways they are used in China, we have noticed many Chinese students in the UK use an NHN, adopted or bestowed, following their arrival in the UK. Questionnaires were distributed to volunteers, all BA English Language and Linguistics majors volunteers, at Xi'an International Studies University (XISU), in the summer of 2009, all Han Chinese. Our sample size for returned questionnaires was: n = 156 (136 females = 87.2%; 20 males = 12.8%); 91 (58.3%) of our questionnaires were completed in Chinese and 65 (41.7%) in English, depending on each participant's choice. All participants had been studying English for at least ten years. XISU is one of the earliest established universities in the PRC, and is also ranked among the top four language universities in the country (<http://www.xisu.edu.cn/>).

## Survey results of Chinese students and their non-heritage names

As students make the transition to a new context, they have some element of choice as to how they make use of resources (e.g., social networks) to engage with the higher education experience (Montgomery, 2010). Furthermore, Lemke claims that formal education is critical "in catalysing future possibilities" (2008: 10). Conducting our survey at XISU gave us access to a group of participants pursuing a common course of study, all of whom have Chinese parents and have grown up in China, using a form of Mandarin as a first language.

The vast majority of responses, 97.4 percent, reported having an NHN.[1] Findings also indicated that the adoption of NHNs is not seen as replacing Chinese given names. A total of 31.4 percent of respondents reported that an NHN is less important

TABLE 2

DO YOU HAVE AN ENGLISH NAME?

| | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number | 151 | 5 | 156 |
| % | 97.4 | 2.6 | 100 |

than their Chinese nickname. One open comment was that a "Chinese giving name cannot be changed but my English name is my choice so I can change it at my will."[2]

Participants volunteered fifty-nine NHNs, seven of these being male and thirty-nine female, on the basis that they were overtly recognizable as given names, e.g., *Sarah* and *Edgar* (and these both appeared in our data). However, some had no obvious links to social categories (e.g., gender): *Acla*, *Alile*, *Brayna*, *Fish*, *Ins*, *Keen*, *Seven*, *Sunny*, *Syloia*, *Traytine*, and *Vino*. NHNs seem to have largely referential roles (i.e. roles are assigned in terms of associated value) and serve mostly denotational functions (as self-selected, NHNs appear to reflect what students wish to impart about themselves). An NHN may be imbued with connotations that are meaningful to an NHN-holder, but these connotations may not be understood by other people; as was written in an open response: "calling my English name makes me feel that I am a friends of him or her" (i.e. an expatriate teacher). Watkins suggests: "According to Chinese tradition, the relationship between a teacher and his students is akin to that of a parent and his sons" (cited in Clark and Gieve, 2006: 62). This relationship is an integral part of a long-standing and hierarchical education system, of which the imposition of English names, in the case of TEFL, is but one dimension.

Respondents were allowed to select more than one option for each question, but none actually did. NHNs were seen to have certain desirable functions or characteristics: having a "likeable sound" (90%); being "similar to one's Chinese name in terms of sound or meaning" (67%); there being a homophonic link between a Chinese given name and an adopted variant, e.g., *Dong* → *Don* (cf. Hsu, 2009); being "easy for foreigners" (67%); making one appear "international" (35%); and being "fashionable" (30%). Sound and meaning relate to personal preferences, while accommodating foreigners (Yao, 2009) makes explicit a wider purpose. Notably, reasons for the adoption of NHNs included their perceived ease of recollection by non-Chinese. "When English is taken as a tool during communication, a Chinese person can introduce his or her English name to another person for the sake of sparing the trouble of pronouncing and remembering a foreign name" (Li, 2011: 4–5). Among participants, the idea that NHNs have a "positive meaning" was very common. An NHN was perceived as an "expression of openness" and a "means of reducing psychological distance between Chinese students and their non-Chinese teachers." English teachers

TABLE 3

SOURCES OF NON-HERITAGE NAMES

| | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| From a dictionary | 29 | 19.1 |
| Friend's suggestion | 16 | 10.5 |
| Teacher's suggestion | 30 | 19.7 |
| From an English movie or TV series | 19 | 12.5 |
| From a celebrity's name | 2 | 1.3 |
| From the Bible | 2 | 1.3 |
| Sounds similar to the pinyin form of your Chinese name | 10 | 6.6 |
| Other | 34 | 22.4 |

were reported to address students with NHNs inside and outside classrooms 67 percent of the time, one student explaining this as "for the convenience of teachers." Just under 54 percent of open responses suggested NHNs can increase closeness between students and teachers, creating what some respondents refer to as a "sense of intimacy," or perhaps what Mathews describes as a kind of "superficial harmony" (1996: 404).

As Kramsch notes, "the global spread of English challenges learners of English to develop both a global and local voice" (1999: 131). Adopted names seem to exemplify a form of accommodation. However, a new name need not be compensatory, but actually a means of gaining linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990), a form of investment (Norton, 1997), through innovatory practices. The adoption of an NHN can reflect what Cheng describes as "hybridity" (2008: 53), mixing the traditional and the new (Burke, 2009). Yao also suggests that "through 'doing' and 'acting', one becomes [. . .] what one wants to be" (2009: 255). Thus, an NHN "opens up the opportunity to take on other, more sophisticated forms of Chineseness" (Yao, 2009: 257). Yao cites Ong (2003) who suggests that the use of an NHN exemplifies "global exchange" and "cultural flow," besides expanding one's identity repertoire.

NHNs seem to be used much more frequently in English-speaking settings such as the ESL classroom than elsewhere (Tan, 2001). They thus appear to have temporally and spatially indexed functions, as a representative open answer suggests: "even if I have an English name, I seldom use it except in foreign teachers' class." It was reported that both 25 percent of Chinese and nearly 39 percent of expatriate (L1) English teachers see NHNs as important and use them in classrooms to address students. Over 55 percent of respondents actually reported feeling more English and over 80 percent less Chinese when using an NHN. This also suggests how use of a particular name can reflect and shape context (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992).

## Perceptions of the value and functions of adopted names

Satisfaction with their NHNs was reported by 79.4 percent of respondents. An NHN is seen by many as both of positive and functional value, but without deeper associations. A representative set of comments included: "English name for me carries little cultural weight;" a "name is just a signal which identify from the others, it should be easy to remember and unique;" "helpful for learning English;" "easy to recollect for non-Chinese speakers;" and can "help one fit into the role of English language learner more easily."

Use of NHNs is seen as making a class appear more English, by creating a new context conducive to language learning. We asked the respondents if they would ask their own (future) students to adopt an NHN, given that many of these students will go on to become language teachers. A total of 40 percent said they would make such a request. Accompanying comments included: "choosing an English name will give them more English feeling, knowledge and curiosity," and, "having an English name can create an atmosphere of learning English." It was said by 52.6 percent of respondents that these names should be voluntary, and 25 open comments stated that this is a personal matter, so the respondents would grant autonomy and thus agency to their students.

## Discussion

Adopting names from a language unrelated to one's own can be seen as having clear roots in broader processes of language and cultural contact. Edwards refers to the adoption of non-Chinese names by Chinese students as indicative of "difficulties encountered when East meets West" (2006: 90) in English-medium contexts. Students may well select or be given names in response to perceived structural demands, "repositioning themselves in relation to what they perceive is expected of them" (2006: 96). Edwards attributes this phenomenon to a form of "linguistic imperialism" in which students are treated as passive subjects, a view also expressed by J. Edwards (2009).

Edwards' (2006) emphasis on structure over agency is not necessarily revealed in our investigation. Agency can be decentered and "can discursively recreate new discourses and dialogues of self-identity and embodied agency" (Caldwell, 2007: 782). Agency may be linked to short-term, contextual demands, while structure is less relevant to a single performance but is more related to habitus (Lemke, 2008: 25). An NHN's use appears to have facilitating functions, by accommodating to speakers unfamiliar with Chinese names (especially those Chinese names beginning with *Q*, *X*, or *Z*). To gain greater affinity with interlocutors, 41 percent of respondents reported they self-selected NHNs (Milani, 2010), and this illocutionary function of names may promote a sense of stakeholdership in the language (Norton, 1997). Thus, one can infer that NHNs are additive, a way of engaging with non-Chinese. They do not detract from Chineseness but add a new layer to it, given that the use of NHNs is largely informal. English has taken on global significance and students aspire to be part of that significance. Consequently, younger Chinese, who see English as something needed to get on in the world, "may develop hybrid identities" (Jackson, 2010: 9) through NHN use.

As one student commented, the adopted name can "help [her] switch into another role." By doing this, she can develop "both a global and local voice" (Kramsch, 1999: 131). While NHNs appear mostly English, it is their semiotic value as emblems (Blommaert, 2010) of learners as global citizens that lend them value (Anderson, 2007). A new name adds to one's repertoire and "presupposes knowledge" of, in this case, English (Blommaert and Backus, 2011: 3). An NHN evidences this knowledge to others, informing interlocutors about how a Chinese student may wish to represent her or himself (Lemke, 2008), reflecting a fluid self-image. Students can be seen to be "scale-jumping" (Uitemark, cited in Blommaert, 2010: 35), in that names become "*statements that index social order*" (Blommaert, 2010: 35; Blum, 1997).[3] However, "linguistic resources change value, function, ownership [. . .] because they can be inserted in patterns of mobility" (Blommaert, 2010: 34). In this way, people are not only formed by "their sociohistories," but also "shape their sociohistories" (Block, 2007: 27), further evidence of agency.

An additional point relates to Yong and Campbell's suggestion that the "primary function of English in China is not one of international communication [. . .] but one of social and economic mobility" (1995: 377), and is part of a national aspiration "to increase status by having as many citizens as possible learn English" (Qiang and Wolff, 2011: 12; Stasch, 2011). The Xinhua News Agency reports: "More Chinese are

giving their children western style names or directly transliterating western names, according to a survey on the use of Chinese language" (2007). Based on a 2006 report from a survey conducted by the Chinese Ministry of Education, "The Language Situation in China," the Agency states that some Chinese are employing the westernized style of placing their family names after their given personal names. Hua (2010) also observes that adoption of an English name is fashionable for young Chinese living in metropolitan parts of mainland China, but remains largely informal and unofficial (Song, 1997), while NHNs are also linked to socioeconomics, space, and temporality (Stasch, 2011).

On the other hand, the adoption of new names is not an unusual practice. It should be noted that adoption of an NHN fits with various traditional Chinese naming practices, including milk names for babies, and those for public use once a child commences school (Hsu, 2009). Children may be addressed mainly by nicknames (Blum, 1997). This indexes Han Chinese parents' aspirations for their offspring (Sung, 1981; Wong, 2006; Blum, 1997), and is a phenomenon that appears to predate Confucianism (arising around 2500 years ago), with nicknames having heteroglossic functions (Wong, 2006). A Chinese person may have different nicknames over a lifespan, their use depending on the nature of relationships with others, as earlier mentioned. Blum suggests that "in China, choice about which name to use (or not) commits one to a particular position" (1997: 371). At Hsu's (2009) workplace in Shanghai, the staff are 90 percent Chinese and nearly everyone reportedly uses an English name, even when speaking in Chinese. English names seem to offer a means of reducing status differences, altering how relationships are performed and introducing some level of intimacy, as some participants reported. Hsu (2009) argues:

> Taking an English name isn't kowtowing, nor is it simply utilitarian. Rather, it's essential to being Chinese and achieving Chinese goals [. . .]. English names they take on in the process are as patriotic as Cultural Revolution-era monikers like Ai Guo (Loves China) or Wei Dong (Mao's Protector).

Adopted names seem to result from distinct yet interrelated processes. These include ways in which China can be advanced, which is a structurally collective function. Simultaneously, name selection reflects agency, as a route to greater personal fulfillment. Adoption of new names is one dimension of a process of reconfiguration. NHNs are language forms, but their value lies in their emblematic functions, "signalling a complex of associative meanings" (Blommaert, 2010: 29), salient at points of semioticized space and time, even if (seen as) only superficial, or temporary, monikers.

## Conclusions

This is largely a metalinguistic study insofar as it considers how "proper names are taken to be tools for the communication of [...] concepts" (Powell, 2010: 38), in which surface use might reveal other levels of significance, even if concepts may not be shared by non-Chinese interlocutors. We show that adoption of NHNs appears to be common among the students we surveyed. However, the term adoption should be used cautiously, since NHNs are not necessarily permanent, as participants comment

(this being the opposite to what borrowing generally means in the field of linguistics, whereby features are generally retained and often localized). Proficiency in English empowers individuals, suggests a positive image to other Chinese, indicates a degree of cosmopolitanism and reflects China's increasing and desired involvement in the world market. NHNs are a symptom of this growing involvement, a state aspiration. Motives for a Chinese person's adoption and functions of NHNs are diverse, interrelated and linked to the established Chinese practice of nicknaming. However, one can posit that use of NHNs is indicative of the nature of a relationship being invoked, nearly always in a positive way, such as a wish to be more accommodating to non-Chinese. The extent of the adoption of NHNs reflects increased contact between China and other parts of the world, and not just those that are English-dominated. Furthermore, the use of NHNs by younger generations of urban Chinese actually appears to be increasing the pool of English names beyond China (Lee, 2001). This phenomenon of adopting NHNs among Chinese, additional to those inherited or ascribed, reflects the increased and increasing interconnectedness among peoples of the world, that is, increasing globalization, while also relating to what it currently can mean to be a modern Chinese person.

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## Notes

[1] Due to the high number of female respondents in the survey, we do not make gender comparisons. Wong notes that "men tend to receive more nicknames than women and that female nicknames tend to be more appearance-oriented, male names derived more from surnames" (2006: 18).

[2] Quotes from students are given verbatim.

[3] This quote is in italics, as in the original.

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## Notes on contributors

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