Snack Names in China: Patterns, Types, and Preferences

Dan Zhao
Hunan Normal University, CHINA
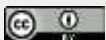
Abstract

Previous studies of snack names have focused on their psychological impact on consumers in different cultures but have tended to ignore their onomastic features. This study helps to address this gap based on a corpus of 121 snack names extracted from the book *Chinese Famous Local Delicious Food and Special Products*. This study explores the patterns of syllables, sounds, and name types of snack names compiled in this small-scale corpus. In this investigation, it was found that descriptive names were the dominant type in the corpus and the most frequently described type feature was the food ingredient. Interestingly, metaphorical names in the corpus were in general found to be related to shape similarities. Contrary to previous findings on dish names and drinking brand names in China, the snack names examined in this corpus showed a preference for three-syllable patterns and "light" or "flat" tones. After discussing these and other findings of this research, this paper discusses what insights this study may provide for other name investigations that utilize corpus linguistic approaches.

Keywords: snack names, corpus linguistics, name preferences, culinary onomastics, China

Introduction

Previous Research on Food Product Names

Many studies have demonstrated that an attractive product name can help to promote sales by heightening consumer interest and purchasing readiness. According to Algeo & Algeo (2000), product names may have a significant influence on people's psychological perceptions. These impressions may in turn influence consumers' purchasing behaviors. For example, a study by Verrill et al. (2020) discovered that the food brand names containing the noun *vita* were perceived by consumers to be healthier than those that did not include *vita* even when the two products contained the same nutritional content. To have such a positive effect on spending habits, it has been determined that "a successful commercial name must be memorable, distinctive, and positive in association" (Algeo & Algeo 2000, 266). However, as Algeo & Algeo (2000) go on to caution, the qualities that make a product name successful will "vary from culture to culture" (266). In Chinese culture, people often consume foods that have auspicious names to obtain good fortune. The noodles traditionally eaten in China on birthdays are called "longevity noodles" and a porridge that is made of eight different ingredients is called "eight-treasure porridge". According to many Chinese, the act of eating foods with such fortuitous names imbues the consumer with good luck. Eating foods with good names is a way to obtain the powers associated with those names. Therefore, in China, what a food is called is just as important as what ingredients a food contains.

The importance of food names is not limited to China, of course. For this reason, the names of foods and food-related items have also been studied frequently in onomastics. In the field of culinary onomastics, for example, previous studies have examined the brand names of beers and energy drinks in the United States (Nuessel 2018, 2010; Krueger 1964); food and beverage names in the United Kingdom (Ashley 1968); and naming patterns of cuisine in India (Fatihi 2014). These studies focused on the origins, types, and linguistic features of names. There are other investigations in culinary onomastics that have examined food names from a sociolinguistic or phonological perspectives. For example, on the basis of an analysis of Japanese cookbooks, Tsujimura (2018) concluded that recipe names can be a gateway to interpersonal communication. Alternatively, food names may also communicate information about the products themselves. According to Jurafsky, "sometimes the sounds of a name are in fact associated with the tastes of food" (2014, 169). This assertion is corroborated by Crisinel & Spence (2010) who discovered that bitter tastes were related to food names with low-pitched sound patterns, while sour and sweet tastes were related to names with high-pitched sound patterns.

Another area of culinary research has involved studying the naming practice used for labelling food products. In China, a major concern of the food industry is successfully translating the names of cuisine items into foreign languages, especially into English. Therefore, many culinary onomastic studies involving Chinese food products have focused on translation strategies and name adaptions for Chinese food in other countries (Chen 2018; Yang 2017; L. Zhu 2011; He 2010; Sun & Yan 2008). In addition to these translation studies, there are other studies of the names of Chinese foods that examine other important aspects. For example, Li (2002) examined the rhetorical and psychological functions served by the phonetics, semantics, and grammar of food names, while Tang & Gu (2017) used cognitive linguistic theory to look at the metaphors and metonymies that characterize Chinese dish names.

Despite this large body of research into food names, there is still more research needed in Chinese culinary onomastics. The area of snack names in China has been completely neglected, for example. Given the popularity of this food product category alone, snack names are more than worthy of investigation. In addition, comparative studies of food names across different cultures and languages are sorely lacking. Such comparative research would be helpful to deepening our understanding of the cross-cultural naming similarities and differences. Apart from these two aspects, there is also a lack of name investigations that use corpus techniques and statistical testing. As Motschenbacher advocates, "corpus linguistics provides powerful empirical methods for studying names in actual language use through frequency-based evidence" (2020, 98). And as Nick (2020) pointed out, modern technological tools for digital storage and automatic tagging make it easier than ever for today's onomasticians to take advantage of corpus techniques in their research.

Definitions of the Term "Snack"

Before reporting on the results of this investigation, it is important to examine the definition problem posed by the term "snack". In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the term "snack" is defined as a small meal usually eaten in a hurry. In *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, the term "snack" is defined as a simple meal that is quick to cook or a food product like a chocolate bar that can be eaten between meals.

Aside from these formal dictionary definitions, the term "snack" has been operationalized by different scholars in terms of caloric consumption, social interaction, consumption time, and the motivation of eating. Chaplin & Smith (2011), for example, make the point that "not all snacks contain extra calories" or are "necessarily a predisposition to obesity" (2). However, this understanding of the term "snack" is contrary to the general perception that the prototypical "snack foods" are cookies, cakes, and chips, which are all high in sodium, sugar, and/or fat (Hess et al. 2016).

From the various definitions given by the above dictionaries and investigations, as these examples show, people have different understandings about the sense and the reference of the term "snack". In fact, Chamontin et al. (2003) even argue that people in the UK stop using the term "snack" because of its ambiguity in British usage. Confusion over what constitutes a "snack" is not limited to the English language, however. In Chinese, the term "snack" can also be variously understood. There are *xiaochi* 小吃 'local snacks', *kuaican* 快餐 'fast food' and also *dian xin* 点心 'dessert'. Which Chinese term is used depends on the context.

In this study, the term "snack" is restricted to *xiaochi* 小吃 'local snacks'. Representing different cooking styles and possessing unique tastes, *xiaochi* often function as symbols of local food culture. For example, *Guilin* is a city well known for its rice noodles. A popular Chinese snack capitalizes on this cultural fact and is called *Guilin rice noodles*. Using this definition, this study examines Chinese snack names with a frequency-based comparative analysis. In the following methodological section, I explain the data source and the tagging process. I then present the results of syllable pattern, sound pattern, and type classifications in the result section. In the discussion section, I compare the results of this research with previous findings on dish names, brand names, and food-related items across different cultures. Finally, I summarize the overall findings and draw my general conclusions.

Methodology

Data Source

The snack names used in this study were extracted from the book *Chinese Famous Local Delicious Food and Special Products*. This book was published in 2008 by Foreign Languages Press in China. The aims of the publication were to introduce foreigners to Chinese food and products and teach them about Chinese food culture. The English translations used from this book were proofread by an English native speaker. The snack names were then classified into different groups based on their regions: North China, Northwest China, East China, South China, Central China, Southwest China, Northeast China.

Tagging Process

In Mandarin Chinese, there are four common tones. Among the four tones, the first tone and the second tone are categorized as "high-pitched" while the third tone and the fourth tone are categorized as "low-pitched". In addition to these four basic tones, there are "light tones" and "rhotic accent". The so-called light tone is toneless, flat, and without emphasis. The rhotic accent refers to the final vowel of some Chinese characters that is produced by a rolling-tongue movement.

For this investigation, the tones were automatically tagged with the Pinyin Tagger APP. This software was developed by the Institute of Applied Linguistics and China's Ministry of Education. It can be downloaded from the website: http://corpus.zhonghuayuwen.org/resources.aspx. In the Pinyin Tagger APP, the four basic tones were automatically tagged as "1", "2", "3", and "4". Both the light tone and the rhotic accent were automatically tagged as "5". After the automatic tagging process, on the basis of the tone of the last word in the snack name, the sound patterns were manually classified into the following sound groups: high-pitched, low-pitched, light, and rhotic.

Types of Statistical Tests

In this research, statistical tests were performed to determine whether the differences and the results were significant. Specifically speaking, frequency distributions were tested to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in the categories devised. All of the statistical tests for this study were computed via RStudio (https://www.rstudio.com/)

Results

Of the 121 names in the corpus, 17 (14.05%) names consisted of two syllables; 43 (35.54%) consisted of three syllables; 35 (28.93%) consisted of four syllables; and 23 (19.01%) consisted of five syllables. Of the 3 remaining cases, 1 (0.83%) name had six-syllable pattern and 2 (1.65%) names were seven-syllable patterns. As for the sound patterns, 48 (39.67%) names ended with high-pitched sounds and 47 (38.84%) names ended with low-pitched sounds. The frequencies of the light tone and the rhotic accent were respectively 23 (19.01%) and 3 (2.48%). As for the types of snack names in the corpus, I identified five different types: (1) descriptive names; (2) metaphorical names; (3) names referring to Chinese folktales; (4) names expressing wishes or religious beliefs; and (5) other. The following table shows the five types with their frequency counts and percentage values.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage for the Category of Snack Names

Name Types	Frequency	Percentage
Descriptive	90	74.38
Metaphorical	17	14.05
Chinese folktales	6	4.96
Wishes/Religious Beliefs	4	3.31
Other	4	3.31
Total	121	100.00

A Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test was performed to determine whether the proportion of name types was equal between the five groups. The proportions differ significantly: Chi Square (df = 4, N = 121) = 228, p = 2.8e-48. Similar statistical tests were performed on the proportions of syllable patterns and sound patterns. The proportions of syllable patterns and sound patterns also differ significantly. As for the syllable patterns, Chi Square (df = 5, N = 121) = 72.24, p = 3.501e-14. As for the sound patterns, Chi Square (df = 3, N = 121) = 45.975, p = 5.741e-10. The results indicated that statistically significant differences existed in the categories devised. In addition, it should be noted that there is a possibility of overlapping name types. For example, *mi dou fu* 米豆腐 'rice tastes like tofu' is categorized under "Metaphorical names". However, it can also be categorized under "Descriptive names" since it includes "description of food ingredients". For names like this, I put them into the "Metaphor" category because their metaphorical characteristics were relatively more prominent and special than the description of food ingredients. In the following section, the findings obtained for each of these different name types are provided.

Descriptive Names

As reported in Table 1, there were 90 descriptive names in the corpus, accounting for 74.38% of the total data in the snack name data. This name type could also be called "literal names" or "factual names" because they use plain language to simply describe characteristics of the snack food products. These names described seven different aspects: (1) food ingredients; (2) cooking methods; (3) production places; (4) brand founders; (5) tastes; (6) shapes; and (7) colors. In some snack names from the corpus (57.78%), more than one characteristic was named. For example, *Beijing chao gan* 北京炒肝 'stewed liver, Beijing style' describes three aspects: the place name 'Beijing', the cooking method 'stewed', and the food ingredient 'liver'. Another example of a snack name in the corpus that described more than one feature is *chao hefen* 炒河粉 'stir-fried rice noodles'. This name not only indicates the food ingredients, but also the cooking method. By contrast, there were other snack names (42.22%) that only labelled one of the above features. An example here was *ji si dou fu nao* 鸡丝豆腐脑 'tofu jelly with shredded chicken' which only names the two main ingredients (chicken and tofu). Taken as a group, of the 90 descriptive names, the most frequently described feature is food ingredients (64 times), after which comes place names (27 times), cooking methods (26 times), brand founders (17 times), and tastes (8 times). Colors (2 times) and shapes (1 times) are rarely mentioned.

Metaphorical Names

A total of 14.05 % (17) of the snack names in the corpus were identified as metaphorical names. As opposed to the literal descriptive names, this name type utilizes imaginative language such as analogy to describe snacks. Of the 17 metaphorical cases, 15 names involved shape comparisons. For example, the snack *ji zai bing* 鸡仔饼 'cake in the shape of a chicken' earned its name because its shape is similar to a small chicken. The snack *you ta zi* 油塔子 'oil tower' was named because its shape looks like a tower. Of the remaining two cases, the snack *lv da gun* 驴打滚 is of interest here. This snack is made of sticky rice filled with red beans and covered with soybean flour and sugar on the surface. Its name literally means *lv* 'donkey' + *da* 'hit' + *gun* 'roll' = lit. 'donkey roll around'. Its metaphorical name is taken from the fact that the soybean flour looks like yellow sand. and the rolls of rice, according to the snack namers, look like a donkey rolling on that yellow sandy ground. The other case, *mi dou fu* 米豆腐 'rice tastes like tofu', is made of rice but tastes like tofu, which is soft and tender. So, the snack is called 'rice tofu'. This snack name may sound more like a simile than a metaphor. However, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured. "Metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, 117). This name reflects that people understand the taste of this snack in terms of another food. So, there is also a good reason to put it into the metaphorical name category.

Names Associated with Folktales

Of the 121 snack names, 4.96% (6) of the names were associated with Chinese folktales. An example was *da jiu jia* 大救驾 'saving the emperor soundly'. This name was derived from a Chinese folktale about Zhao Kuangyin, the founding emperor of the Song Dynasty in ancient China. It is said that after winning a war as a military general, Zhao Kuangyin became seriously ill and lost his appetite. In order to make Zhao Kuangyin feel better, a cook made him a snack to eat. Zhao ate the snack which he said was delicious. Later, Zhao rose to become the emperor of the Song Dynasty. As the imperial leader, he said it was that snack that had saved him. The snack the Emperor reportedly ate is called *da jiu jia* 'saving the emperor soundly' in memory of this legend.

Names Expressing Personal Wishes or Religious Beliefs

Of the 121 snack names, there were 3 (2.48%) names that expressed wishes and 1 (0.83%) that expressed religious beliefs. The three snack names indicating personal wishes were *de yuan bao zi* 德园包子 'Deyuan steamed stuffed bun'; *gui fa xiang ma hua* 桂发祥麻花 'Guifaxiang fried dough twist'; and *yang yu xing miao tiao* 杨裕兴面条 'Yang Yuxing noodles'. The name 德园 literally means *de* 'virtue' and *yuan* 'garden'= lit. 'virtue garden'. Its implied meaning comes from an ancient Chinese proverb that says if a king is virtuous, he can make his people happy. When the people are happy, the country will have lasting peace and stability. The name 桂发祥 is composed of three phrases: (1) *gui zi piao xiang* 桂子飘香 'the fragrance of the laurel blossoms filled the air'; (2) *fa fen tu qiang* 发愤图强 'work hard'; and (3) *ji xiang ru yi* 吉祥如意 'good luck'. The first phrase indicates the sweet smell of the snack. The second phrase conveys the wish of achieving prosperity through

hard work, and the third phrase expresses the anticipation of good luck. Similarly, the name 杨裕兴 is created by combining the character 杨 'surname of the brand founder' with two auspicious characters 裕 'richness' and 兴 'popularity'. Also included in this category was the snack name *ren yi li zheng jiao* 认一力蒸饺 'Renyili steamed dumplings' which is inspired by a religious belief. The name 认一力 literally means 'recognize one force' and makes reference to recognizing God as the one and only infinite force. These names reflect the brand founder's wishes for happiness, peace, fortune, popularity, or personal religious beliefs.

Other

It was found that 3.31% (4) of the snack names were categorized as "Other". The snack *chun bing* 春饼 'spring roll' is related to the local custom of eating snacks at the beginning of spring to pray for a good harvest in the new year. The snack *yang chun mian* 阳春面 '(lit.) ten noodles' is based on a dialect. This snack used to sell for ten cents and in the Shanghai dialect, the word 阳春 means 'ten'. Of the remaining two snacks in this category, *gua ta* 呱嗒 'clip-clop' is onomatopoetic and labels the sound generated when eating this snack. The other snack name *pa er mu ding* 帕尔木丁 'a snack similar to baked samosa' is transliterated from the Uyghur language.

Discussion

Syllable Features

With regard to the syllabic patterns, the snack names in the corpus showed a preference for the three-syllable pattern. This finding is an interesting contrast to previous studies, for example, dish names that were found to more often have a four-syllable pattern (S. Zhu 2011) and brand names for drinks that more frequently had a two-syllable pattern (Chan & Huang 2001). In Chinese, syllable patterns are related to name length in that one syllable is equal to one character. So, the shorter the syllable pattern is, the lower the number of characters and name length are. Chan & Huang (2001) argue that the two-syllable pattern in brand names is not only more memorable but also more popular than the four-syllable form because to be successful, product names must be simple and easy to remember. To determine if this assertion is correct, more research is needed.

Sound Features

The snack names in the corpus showed a preference for the high-pitched sound pattern, but this preference was not strong. Contrary to this finding for this corpus of snack names, other investigations have found a pronounced preference for the high-pitched sound pattern in dish names (S. Zhu 2011) and brand names of drinks (Chan & Huang 2001). Qian (1985) claims that the light tone and the rhotic accent are widely used in dialects of North China and are more popular among senior citizens; men with comparatively low levels of education; and in casual conversation. Furthermore, Xiong (2005) argues that the light tone is associated with gentleness, beauty, harmony, and light-heartedness. The fact that snacks are commonly eaten in informal occasions or for entertainment may help to explain why this pattern was common among the snack names investigated here.

Type Features

Description is an important function for naming snacks not only in China but also in other cultures. Fatihi (2014) therefore argues that descriptive names are the most embraced name type for Indian cuisine because they "require little thought, little explanation, little effort to build understanding of what the offering actually is" (2014, 109). With reference to US American cuisine, Wansink et al. (2005) suggest that descriptive food names can help inform people about unfamiliar foods. As was found in this study and in other investigations in culinary onomastics (Tsujimura 2018; Fatihi 2014; Wasink et al 2005), the advantage of descriptive names is that they easily convey information about a product and make consumers more likely to try them.

Conclusion

This study involved an empirical analysis of snack names in China using corpus techniques, modern digital technologies, and the automatic tagging tool. The approach heightened the research efficiency and reliability of the investigation. However, this work was not without its limitations. The sample size of the snack name corpus was not large enough to make reliable inferences about Chinese food names in general. Also, the lack of other snack name corpora makes it difficult to compare the results gained here with other languages, cultures, or even food types. The fact that the snack names selected in this study are all taken from one cuisine book, no matter how extensive, means that insights might have been missed that could have been gained from other sources like the internet and restaurants. Moreover, more information might have been recovered if the snack names had been classified into more sub-categories such as breakfast snacks, lunch snacks, and bedtime snacks. Other interesting findings might also have been yielded if different corpora composed of types of food names or other languages had been used. However, these points only underscore the importance of continuing research in this area. The current study is but one of many research possibilities. It is hoped that the findings presented here can make an important contribution to the field of culinary onomastics, both inside and outside Asia.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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Notes on the Contributor

Dan Zhao is a PhD student of linguistics at Foreign Studies College of Hunan Normal University. Her areas of interest are culinary onomastics, cognitive linguistics, and corpus linguistics.

Correspondence to: Dan Zhao, Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, No. 36 South Lushan Road, Yuelu District, Changsha, Hunan, China 410081. Email: hdzhaodan@foxmail.com.