



Adopting French Names as Identity Markers among Second Foreign Language (L3) Learners in China

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Abstract

Using foreign names has become common practice for Chinese students who are learning a foreign language to develop a special identity in multilingual contexts. French is one of the most studied foreign languages in China. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the practices learners follow when adopting French names as their identity markers. The current study addresses this gap by investigating twenty-nine French names adopted by Chinese university students who are learning French as the second foreign language (L3) in a Chinese university. Drawing on data collected through interviews, the motivations, and features behind the respondents' name choices were examined. The qualitative and quantitative analyses show that the practice of adopting French names for these L3 students was primarily motivated by phonetic features and the study participants' positive associations. The L3 learners deliberately selected a French name to create a multilingual and multicultural identity for themselves. The pedagogical implications regarding teachers' development of cultural instruction materials as well as teachers' potential influence on French language instruction overall are also discussed.

Keywords: anthroponymy, French, identity, Chinese students, second foreign language, multilingualism

Introduction

The practice of adopting new names from languages other than one's own mother-tongue language does not sound odd in many Asian regions (Cheang 2008). The probable motivations for adopting a foreign name, especially a name from a Western¹ language, are both complex and practical. For instance, this naming practice can help to establish effective intercultural communication, provide the name-bearer with special privileges in religious or political domains, or afford them better opportunities for international trade and commerce (Duthie 2007). In educational contexts, when Asian students meet their peers from non-Asian cultures, one of the difficulties they may encounter is related to the cultural differences these students have as reflected in the names they have chosen to address themselves. Often the names used are for the purposes of learning knowledge and enhancing cultural exchange (Edwards 2006). Blum (1997, 365) asserts that "Chinese people are accustomed to being addressed and referred to by an assortment of names, and they do not necessarily retain any of them as their 'real name'. In Chinese culture, naming practices, including adopting new names and making changes, are intricate and frequently involves various factors and concerns that may differ greatly from non-Chinese cultures (Edwards 2006).

Aware of these difference, some Chinese people are inclined to adopt English names to enhance their intercultural communication as English is one of the most widely used languages in the fields of business, education, science, and technology. This may be particularly common amongst Chinese people who receive their primary and higher education in curriculums where English is defined as the first foreign language (L2). For them, English is often perceived as a gatekeeper for better education and employment in China (Haidar & Fang 2019). By opting for foreign names, they can identify themselves as having an affinity for the "other" cultures. As a result, Western personal names are becoming increasingly used by certain Chinese professionals who are work in foreign-investment corporations or Western educational circles. Although English and French are both official languages used in the United Nations and serve as popular international languages, the number of Chinese people who have English names still surpasses the number of Chinese people who have a French name as their foreign identification marker (Cheang 2008; Wang & Yao 2018).

Nevertheless, French has also gained in popularity, especially among teenagers who are increasingly selecting French as a university major or minor field of study (Chen et al. 2021). In fact, French has become one of the most popular second foreign languages in China in recent times (Zhang 2020). Since the policy to encourage the investigations of languages other than English (LOTEs) in China has been instituted (Chen et al. 2021), growing academic attention has been given to examining LOTE practices. Despite this trend, literature on French learners' linguistic practices remains scant. In light of these linguistic and educational developments, and given China's very close commercial relations with France and Francophone countries in Africa, this study seeks to explore how mainland Chinese students who are learning French as a second foreign language (henceforth L3) adopt their French names. Attention is paid to analyzing the onomastic patterns and the name-bearers' motivations. Also, the linguistic properties of the adopted French names are investigated to shed light on how these French names are used by L3 Chinese students in their identity establishment.

Previous Studies

Name and Identity

Personal naming is a frequent focal point in onomastic investigations (Chen 2015; Chen 2021; Henry 2012; Sercombe et al. 2014; Shanmuganathan et al. 2021). As Alford (1988) asserts, names can signify many things because they not only differentiate one person from another, but they also give individuals a special identity to mark their distinctiveness. A person's identity can change along with the varying roles played at any specific time and place. Hence, an individual portrayal of identity is dynamic and cannot be divorced from the context. People's concepts of themselves are intimately bound with naming practices which lie at the very center of identity construction (Norton 2000). The establishment of identity is a social process in which individuals explore and identify their relationship with the world through social interactions. As a consequence, in addition to its social characteristics, identity formation is also conscious process for individuals (Chen 2021). Names are multifunctional in that they can affect the psychological development of individuals. According to Cheng (2008, 47), in Chinese culture "names are magical and can have a 'self-fulfilling' effect. Hence a good name leads to a good life and vice versa". Given this importance, it stands to reason that the foreign names Chinese people adopt for themselves may play a crucial role in how others behave toward them.

Adopting Foreign Names by Chinese Students

With the continuous provision of bilingual education worldwide (Wei & Feng 2015), there has been growing interest in identifying strategies to strengthen the effectiveness of bilingual education in China (Kong & Wei 2019). The most prevalent form of foreign language studies in China is commonly called "Chinese-English Bilingual Education". This method involves the use of English as a medium of instruction and is common in academic circles. Given its prevalence, this phenomenon has gained much scholarly attention over the past few decades (Zhao & Quentin 2017). This research has revealed that as the numbers of Chinese students studying English has increased, the use of English names has also become an extremely wide-spread practice (Henry 2012). This trend is particularly strong in the context of classroom-based interaction among students (Cotterill 2020).

Regarding English language instruction, research has also shown that language teachers are very influential in Chinese students' decisions to adopt non-Chinese names (Chen 2015; Chen 2021; Edwards 2006). In selecting and embracing their new names, Chinese students have also been found to modify their identities to accommodate to the foreign language classroom (Cotterill 2020; Wang & Yao 2018). At the same time, Chinese students often attempt to find an English name that suits their personality (Cotterill 2020; Henry 2012). This tendency, according to Norton's (2000), reflects students' making an "investment" in the target language. Using Norton's theory, the concept of "investment" refers to the fact that language learners use a language to not only exchange information with target language speakers, but also to organize or re-organize a sense of who they are and how they are connected with society. Hence, the process of target language learning often involves an investment in learners' innovative identity (Norton 2000, 10–11). Chinese students' preference for using English names is also discussed by other studies. Li, Fox, and Almarza (2007) observed that the use of English names by foreign language learners can make classroom interaction less troublesome; and the students they investigated reportedly enjoyed the feeling of having a fresh start which was symbolized by taking on a new name. Cheang (2008) found that by actively selecting particular English names, some Chinese students also attempt to communicate to their teachers that they possess particular characteristics. Blommaert and Backus (2013) explained that one of the significant functions of using an English name in the foreign language classroom is to indicate students' English language capacity. In the case of some English linguistics majors, Sercombe et al. (2014) discovered that mainland Chinese university students also tend to actively adopt English names as their non-heritage monikers. According to this study, the reason behind this name adoption was that the names were perceived as reflecting "increased contact between China and other parts of the world, and not just those that are English-dominated" (Sercombe et al. 2014, 73).

Regarding other multilingual contexts, Chen (2021) examined the adoption of non-Chinese names among Chinese international students during their study abroad in Japan. The investigation suggests that the cultural and linguistic similarities between China and Japan with regard to not only shared norms of hierarchy and solidarity, but also pronunciations, influenced the naming practices of the Chinese students who participated in the research. The findings also indicate that two naming patterns originating from Chinese culture are highly related to Chinese students' foreign naming: "(1) retaining multiple names to explore philosophical connotation of oneself; and (2) following Chinese conventions for terms of address for better communication" (Chen 2021, 17). Furthermore, Chen (2021) found that Chinese students tended to actively seek foreign names that would suit their perceived personality traits and personal identity facets across different social arenas. Studies on non-

indigenous or foreign names further exemplify the necessity of understanding naming practices as they vary across differing multilingual contexts and social roles (Besnier 2002).

French as a Second Foreign Language in China

In China, languages other than English (e.g., French, Japanese, Russian, etc.) are classified as a second foreign language (L3). In the transition era of contemporary China (2003 and onward) (Liu 2015), many higher education institutions that offered foreign language studies provide language courses not only in English, but also in French and other minority foreign languages, called “xiao yu zhong” in Chinese mandarin. According to statistical data, English (93.80%) is the most prevalent foreign language in China. Other foreign languages that are commonly studied, although less frequently, include Russian (7.07%), Japanese (2.54%), French (0.29%), and German (0.13%) (SGO 2006, 119)².

French is considered a popular minority foreign language in China (Zhang 2020). The beginning of French education in China dates back to the Qing Dynasty in 1863 (Hao 2013). At the end of the 19th century, Catholic missionaries came to China to set up schools and promote French. In 1937, initial French-language textbooks were published by Mr. Reclus at Peking University (Pu et al. 2005). Teaching French as a foreign language experienced another growth spurt after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Zhang 2020). Since then, French studies have continued to increase in China. Since 2000, with the development of the internet, globalization, and the rise in China’s internal prominence, learning French has become even more popular. Since 2014, aside from secondary schools and special French language institutions, there are more than 140 Chinese universities that offer either a French language program or have a French department³. French can also be studied as a second foreign language for English majors—which is called “er wai” in Chinese mandarin. Normally, for two to four hours per week, English majors pursue three or four semesters of a second foreign language at the undergraduate level (Zhang 2020). Usually, English majors select French, Japanese, Russian, or German. These languages are far more commonly studied than minority languages such as Malay (Zhang 2018). According to Zhihu (2020), the largest Chinese social question-and-answer website in China (similar to Quora in the United States), French is commonly considered to be a favorable second foreign language for English majors because of its potential usefulness later on when graduates seek employment and because of its close linguistic ties with the English language.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected at a public normal university in Hebei Province, China, in semester 1 of the academic year 2021/2022. Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this investigation, as this qualitative approach allows complex social practices to be explored in depth. In this university where this study was conducted, the French language, along with Japanese, is offered as the second foreign language for English majors. In total, at the time of this investigation, there were forty third-year students who were enrolled in the French language program at the beginner levels. Of this group, the 29 who had French names participated in this study. These 29 third-year students⁴ ranged in age between 20 to 21. There were 28 (96.55%) females and 1 (3.45%) male in the study.

The research participants were interviewed individually by one of the researchers. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 20 to 25 minutes, was conducted in the Chinese language, and was held alone with each individual participant. During the interview, two main questions were posed to the respondents: “What is your French name?” and “Why was your French name chosen?”. After the participants had provided their answers, some follow-up questions were posed to seek clarification and more insights. The interviews were audio-recorded. All participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidentiality. The interview data were transcribed into an Excel document by two researchers for analysis.

Results

Factors Influencing the Adoption of French Names

Of all of the students who were enrolled in the French language program at the beginner levels, twenty-nine out of 40 (72.50%) of the French learners reported using a French name. This finding fits the overall trend reported earlier that Chinese students majoring in English commonly adopt French names during their foreign language studies. The findings in this investigation also demonstrated clear support for previous claims that

the factors determining Asian naming practices are diverse (Cheng 2008). Three participants out of twenty-nine (10.34%) provided one reason for their chosen French names. Two participants (6.90%) gave a maximum of four reasons. The majority of the French learners asserted that they had two (n=13/44.83%) or three reasons (n=11/37.93%) for selecting their French names. Four macro categories of influential factors and “other reasons” were identified. They are presented below in Table 1. As can be seen, the concrete reasons that were given are related to: (1) phonetic motivations, (2) positive associations, (3) ease of memorization, (4) cross-cultural awareness; and (5) other reasons (e.g., external motivations, the perceived uncommonness of the name).

Table 1: Influential Factors in the Adoption of French Names by L3 Chinese Students

Influential factors	Freq. (n=29)	FR	%	PR	Mean position	MR	Salience	SR
Phonetic motivation	24	1	82.76	1	1.625	2	0.509	1
Positive associations	22	2	75.86	2	1.773	3	0.447	2
Ease of memorization	7	4	24.14	4	2.268	5	0.106	4
Cross-cultural awareness	5	5	17.24	5	1.600	1	0.108	5
Other reasons	9	3	31.03	3	2.167	4	0.191	3

Note: FR = Frequency rank; PR = Percentage rank; MR = Mean position rank; SR = Salience rank.

French naming in this study was therefore found to be in line with previous investigations. Here, as elsewhere, the respondents indicated that considerations like thinking that the name sounded nice or that it carried positive meanings or social connotations were important to them when seeking and adopting a foreign language name (Chen 2015; Chen 2021; Sercombe et al. 2014). Though adopting a new name is a basic and extremely common practice in foreign language learning, variations do exist in the specific factors that affect language learners’ decisions. In this investigation, for example, it was found that the French names selected by the L3 learners were not arbitrary labels; instead they were motivated by a variety of factors which will be presented below.

Phonetic Motivations

Phonetic motivations was the dominant factor (n=24/82.76%) in the L3 Chinese students’ decisions to select a particular French name. This finding should come as no surprise. It has long since been discovered that the sound of personal names can be mapped to particular senses, experiences, or identities in the world around individuals (Baresova & Pikhart 2020; Chen 2015). In this study, the participants generally preferred a name that evoked positive reaction when pronounced in French. Drawing on the concept of “phonetic symbolism”, Lowrey and Shrum (2007, 406) concluded that the mere sounds of names, apart from their actual definitions, can convey meanings that can systematically bias people’s perceptions and judgments toward the name bearer. The concept of phonetic symbolism may help to explain why the participants indicated that the top consideration given by the respondents when seeking a positive French name was that it “sounded nice”.

Table 2: Phonetic Motivations for French Names Adopted by L3 Chinese Students

Phonetic Motivations	Freq. (n=24)	%	French names
Sounds nice	14	58.33	Clementine, Mathilde, Chloé, Elisa, Eva, Clara, Calista, Lorna, Lago, Aline, Félicie, Meredith, Louisa, Aina,
Related to their English name	7	29.17	Amy, Eté, Lorna, Aline, Délicate, Mila, Joanna
Ease of pronunciation	5	20.83	Carine, Aina, Kaitlyn, Lorna, Inès
Resemblance to their Chinese name	2	8.33	Léa (participant 13), Louisa

Fourteen out of the 24 respondents (58.33%) chose their French name because they felt it “sounded nice” (*hao ting* in Chinese mandarin). Though the students in this investigation were found to hold many different stereotypes of France, their most prominent association with the French language was “romance”. Accordingly, the participants’ name adoptions seem to be largely inspired by a romanticized version of the French language. For many of these participants, a pleasing French name was one that sounded “nice” and was perceived as conveying a feeling of romance.

In terms of syllabicity, Table 3 shows that eight names (27.59%) were trisyllabic, one (3.45%) monosyllabic, and one (3.45%) quadrisyllabic. The disyllabic French names were the ones most frequently regarded as “sounding nice” and were selected by nineteen students (65.52%). These findings may reflect the underlying Chinese preference for personal names that consist of Chinese-mandarin characters, with each

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character constituting a syllable. This practice is called “ming zi” in Chinese society. This strength of this Chinese naming tradition might explain why study participants in previous studies have reported that two-syllable Western names sound better and described them as “more friendly” and less “abrupt” than names with other syllable structures (Duthie 2007, 64). In the current study, as Table 3 indicates, 25 (86.21%) of the French names selected had open syllables word-initially; and 4 (13.79%) had closed syllables. Where the final syllables were concerned, 21 (72.41%) were classified as open syllables, while 8 (27.59%) were closed syllables. Consequently, the French pronunciation of open syllables that end with a vowel (for example, *Amy* /a-mi/ [mean proportion=0.79]), were connected with the quality of “sounding nice”. More detailed findings about the frequency of certain phonological features in study participants’ French names are presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Syllabic Features of French Names Adopted by L3 Chinese Students

Features		Freq. (n=29)	%	Mean Proportion	SD
Number of Syllables	1 Syllable	1	3.45		
	2 Syllables	19	65.52		
	3 Syllables	8	27.59		
	4 Syllables	1	3.45		
Type of Initial Syllable	Open	25	86.21		
	Close	4	13.79		
Type of Final Syllable	Open	21	72.41		
	Close	8	27.59		
Type of Syllables	Open	55		0.79	0.30
	Close	12		0.21	0.30

Table 4: Vowels and Consonants of French Names Adopted by L3 Chinese Students

Features		Freq.	Mean Proportion	SD
Vowels		67	0.52	0.12
High Vowels /i/, /y/, /u/		18	0.27	0.25
High-Mid Vowels /e/, /ø/, /o/		17	0.26	0.32
Low-Mid Vowels /ɛ/, /œ/, /ɔ/		6	0.09	0.19
Low Vowels /a/		23	0.34	0.27
Nasal Vowels /ɜ̃/, /ɛ̃/, /ɑ̃/		3	0.04	0.12
Consonants		68	0.48	0.12
Semi Consonants /j/, /w/, /ɥ/		0	0.00	0.00
Oral Consonants /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /f/, /v/, /k/, /g/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʎ/, /l/		52	0.73	0.33
Nasal Consonants /m/, /n/, /ɲ/, /ŋ/		16	0.27	0.33

Previous studies have also focused on vowels and consonants in names to offer a more comprehensive understanding of phonetic symbolism effects on naming practices (Lowrey & Shrum 2007). Across languages and cultures, similarities have been found in the way certain vowels and consonants are associated with particular attributes and can affect perceptions of the the name-bearer (Yorkston & Menon 2004). In this study, it may be concluded that the majority of participants may have had little linguistic awareness of the vowels and consonants present in the French language given their beginning language learning status. This factor was only rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, Table 4 above shows that they preferred French names which include low vowels /a/, followed by high vowels /i/, /y/, /u/, and high-mid vowels /e/, /ø/, /o/. In contrast, low-mid vowels and nasal vowels occurred less commonly in their names. Regarding consonants, the preference for oral consonants surpasses nasal consonants. Semi consonants /j/, /w/, / ɥ/ were not included in any of the participants' adopted French names.

Ease of pronunciation or “hao du” in Chinese mandarin was also an important factor in the respondents' choice of French names. It was reported by five (20.83%) participants. This finding is interesting considering the fact that the selection and adoption of a French name adoption may have been generally more difficult than selecting an English name, where pronunciation is concerned. This difference in difficulty may be due in part to the fact that the study participants were learning French as a second foreign language and were at a beginner's level. For instance, *Aina* selected her French name because “it is easy to be pronounced. It just sounds like /ai/. The mouth just opens slightly when pronouncing the sound”. The relative ease of pronunciation was also seen as being essential to being friendly and polite to others. In the Chinese culture, mispronouncing someone's name, whether it be in Chinese or in a foreign language, can be offensive to the name-bearer and cause unnecessary embarrassment (Chen 2021; Cila & Lalonde 2019). At the same time, the act of addressing someone by name is considered to be a key to polite etiquette in New China (Gu 1990). Therefore, using a foreign name that is easy-to-pronounce was a respondent strategy for decreasing the probability of embarrassment for classmates and other social contacts who wish to address the name-bearer.

Another influential factor mentioned by the study participants was related to the predominant status of English in China. Seven participants, or 29.17%, explained that their English and French names were adopted because they exist in both languages. Examples include a respondent with the adopted English name *Amy* [/'ermi/] who has the adopted French name [/'ami/]. Another participant was called *Delicate* in English and *Délicate* in French. Six of these seven students, however, admitted that most of the time, they just use their English names in the French-language curriculum contexts, despite the slight differences in spelling and pronunciation. Another variation came from a female student who explained that her English name is *Summer*. When she began studying French, she decided to use *Eté* ‘summer’ as her French name. English plays a crucial role in contemporary China (Zhang 2021). The importance of the English language was reflected in the study participants' foreign language competence. As mentioned earlier, all of the Chinese participants in the current study were English majors. During the semi-structured interviews, many revealed their tendency to utilize various linguistic resources in their French studies. Despite the strength of their English skills, the participants did not manifest a strong preference for either their French or English names based on their personal likes or dislikes of the two languages. Using their adopted English names to identify themselves in French settings was simply due to convenience. However, there were a few respondents who admitted that they valued their English-major identity and name more than their French ones.

Almost every English major student in this university gets an English name and uses it not exclusively for their English studies. Their English names also spread to everyday interactions with peers even outside the classroom. Therefore, it is probably natural that they decide to use the English name, in addition to their Chinese one, to identify themselves. Those who consider their English names to be more important to them than their French adopted names emphasized that, in their opinion, English was the most important foreign language in China. This privileging of English over French is reflected more broadly. Across China, English has gained unprecedented popularity and has helped to fuel the current political and social development of the nation (Bolton & Graddol 2012). This might suggest a low level of motivation among those learners without a particular French name to integrate their French studies into their sense of self. It may also mean that they do not consider French to be a must-have skill.

Two students (8.33%) chose their French name for its homophonous relationship to their Chinese name. For instance, the respondent with the adopted French name *Léa* (participant 13) has a Chinese surname, 李 (*li*), that is very similar in sound. The study participant with the French name *Louisa* adopted a name that is morphophonologically similar to their Chinese given name, 璐 (*lu*). Investigations of naming practices involving other languages indicate that such preferences may serve as a constant reminder of the name-bearer's ethnic or national identity (Chen 2015; Chen 2021). In this study of French name adoption, these two examples demonstrate that close phonological relationships with a name-bearer's Chinese name can influence, though minimally, the Chinese French learners' naming practice.

Positive Associations

Twenty-two participants (75.86%) indicated that the reason for their name choice was positive associations. Previous studies indicate that different name types (for example, personal names and brand names) may carry positive associations in different social contexts (Duthie 2007; Ranchhod et al. 2011). Past research has also shown that an individual's names may have differing meaning potentials (Bruning et al. 1998). Particular lexical units may be adopted as names when they are believed to carry and communicate certain symbolic meanings that represent an individual's cognitive associations and expectations about themselves (Ranchhod et al. 2011). Names may be used to portray special ethnic or social identities. In this study, the participants' naming preferences were related to the connotative meanings they associated with the names. This result was not unexpected. Findings have shown that the positive associations of a name are mediated by psychological connotations and may therefore have implications for the bearer and others (Wang 2010, 10). The students in this investigation tended to use their adopted French names as a creative means for sculpting their personalities or shaping their unique identities. As shown in Table 5, the majority of the students (n=15/68.18%) attempted to convey at least one positive belief, value, and personality trait through their adopted French name. For example, a female student used *Rosé* to signify herself as a person who had an "enthusiastic attitude toward life". While some students (n=7/31.82%) in this study sought to convey up to four different personality traits through their adopted French names, one of the respondents used the name *Délicate* to express up fourteen different positive traits. That was the highest number of associations found in this study.

Table 5: French Names with Positive Associations

Number of Meaning Potentials	Freq. (n=22)	%	French Name	Positive Association(s)
1	15	68.18	Clementine	fresh
			Mathilde	optimistic
			Luna	simple-hearted
			Eté	alive
			Aimee	adorable
			Léa (P13)	exquisite
			Clara	bright
			Aina	optimistic
			Kaitlyn	simple-hearted
			Lago	smart
			Mila	honorable
			Rosé	enthusiastic
			Joanna	confident
			Louisa	brave
			Léa (P36)	exquisite
2	3	13.64	Eva	sexy, tactical
			Calista	prettiest, confident
			Inès	simplehearted, holy
3	2	9.09	Carine	energetic, talented, capable
			Meredith	smart, independent, wealthy
4	1	4.55	Amy	elegant, quiet, calm, educated
14	1	4.55	Délicate	soft, delicious, pleasant to smell, tender and lovely, feeble, exquisite, unmanageable, noble, upright, softhearted, considerate, ingenious, cultured

Note: P13: participant 13; P36: participant 36

For these L3 French learners, their adopted foreign name was chosen to match their self-perception and reflect their individual personality traits. However, given the fact that French is still a minority language in China, the associative meanings implied in their adopted names might not be easily interpreted by others. Thus, the naming practices of Chinese students who are learning minority languages, such as French, may be quite different from those of Chinese students learning the highly prevalent English language. It is also important to point out that the students' act of adopting French names for themselves is unusual as it is an autonymic process which is different than the widespread Chinese cultural norm of "qi ming" which is exonymic. In China, naming is a highly socially-mediated act: "choosing a proper Chinese name demands many thoughts, considerations, and sometimes the intercession of an appropriate expert with esoteric knowledge in a particular intellectual field" (Henry 2012, 109). In Chinese naming practices, there are always new conceptualizations of citizenship or definitions of future success. These outside forces all affect Chinese naming practices. However, in this study, "good French names" were mainly judged by their ability to reflect some good personal qualities, attitudes, and desires of the individual name holder.

Ease of Memorization

Seven participants (24.14%) chose French names on the basis of their being easy to remember. This was the motivation, for example, of the female students who preferred simplistic or "nice sounding" names, such as *Amy*, *Eté*, *Chloé*, *Elisa*, *Clara*, and *Lorna*. The way a name is pronounced is often connected to its impact on memory. For instance, foreign language names are frequently harder to remember (Valentine et al. 1996). The disyllabic French names listed above were generally considered to be both easy to pronounce and remember. The only male participant in this study chose *Napoléon* as his French name. In his opinion, adopting a renowned French historical figure's name increased the memorability for his interlocutors in conversations.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Culture-associated norms or factors were taken into consideration by five students (17.24%) when selecting their French names. Previous studies on multilingual development offer empirical evidence that culture-related aspects of a target language country play prominent roles in shaping language learners' mental perceptions of the language and influence their linguistic awareness (Nikitina & Furuoka 2019). The reasons given by the participants in this study suggest that their cross-cultural awareness of France is generally concerned with Western myth, history, and customs.

Luna was reportedly chosen by one respondent because it is the divine embodiment of the moon or the name of the moon goddess in Western mythology. The choice of *Napoléon* was chosen from French history. *Calista* was selected by another participant because it does not violate any French social norms. *Mila* and *Meredith* were both chosen by study participants because of their cross-linguistic awareness. *Mila*, as one student explained, was chosen because it is related to her adopted Spanish name, *Milagros*. Similarly, the name *Mila* was chosen by another respondent because of its closeness to the Slovak name, *Milena*, and the Czech name *Milanka*. Such naming practices reflect the multilingual identity as foreign language learners who are very interested in multilingual and multicultural studies. The same can be said of the respondent who selected the French name *Meredith* because it reminded the student of the Welsh name *Meredudd* which refers to the Great Lord or the Patron Saint of the Sea. Motivated by a fondness for this Welsh name, the student chose the corresponding French name *Meredith*. According to the student, her adopted French name *Meredith* "shows cultural uniqueness" and "the patron saint of the sea is associated with being smart, independent, and wealthy".

Other Reasons

In this study, nine students (31.03%) gave other reasons for selecting their French names. These reasons included external factors like the popular media, and recommendations from friends. There was one particularly interesting set of respondents (n=5/17.24%) who chose uncommon names because they were rare. In their words, they wanted names that were not too common or in mandarin "bu yao tai chang jian". These students appreciated the fact that their adopted names (*Carine*, *Aimee*, *Lorna*, *Lago*, *Rosé*) were unusual in China and therefore stood out. Foreign name adoptions that prioritize being special, unique, and more cool, may be explained by the drive for distinctiveness in the sociolinguistic sphere (Irvine 2001).

Five students (17.24%) elaborated on the effect of popular media in their name-selection practices. For instance, TV dramas and movie characters inspired the naming practices of some of these respondents. According to the semi-structured interviews conducted, both French and non-French video media served as name sources. *Lorna's* favorite TV series is "The Gifted", a US American superhero television series. In the

study interview she reported that she picked the name of the leading character from that series. *Lago* is a super fan of the Disney film “Aladdin”. So, she picked the name of the clever scarlet macaw; and, in doing so, attempted to express her self-expectation to be smart. Similarly, while studying French, *Amélie* became a big fan of “Emily in Paris”, a US American tv comedy-drama. Inspired by the series, she used one character’s name to identify herself. An online celebrity was the inspiration for *Mathilde* who decided to adopt this name in her French studies. Lastly, only one (3.45%) student had taken her friend’s suggestions and selected the name *Aline*. She chose the name after asking her close friend who was very proficient in French about French names. She took this friend’s recommendations into consideration with other factors when she decided upon the name *Aline*.

Discussion

The preliminary findings of this investigation confirm that the naming practice is “not an arbitrary process” (Cornetto & Nowak 2006, 379). The choice of a foreign name—in this case an adopted French name—for Chinese students who are learning a second foreign language (L3) or a minority foreign language is a practice that they consciously and creatively craft to portray their self-identity (Hassa 2012). Their decision-process is subjected to the intertwining forces of multiple sociolinguistic norms (Xu et al. 2020). This finding aligns with many studies on onomastics and language acquisition in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Linguistic behaviors and identity constructions usually appear together in naming practices (Cila & Lalonde 2019). However, social-cultural factors, including gender, ethnicity, religion, and even assimilation into immigrant societies, were found to minimally affect French as L3 learners’ naming processes in this investigation. Instead, other factors were of particular importance here.

Generally, the group of French as L3 learners showed an openness and willingness to adopt French names and consider features of French language in their naming. Thus, their self-naming process showed their affection for L3 learning. This kind of integrative motivation is defined by Gardner and Lambert (1959, 267) as being motivated by a desire to “learn more about the language group, or to meet more and different people”. Gardner and Lambert (1956) also emphasize the importance of this “instrumental motivation” in the second language learning process. This assertion was supported by participants in this study who mentioned that having a specific French name was beneficial to their language learning or class activities. It appears then that multilingual students also think about the utility of their naming to their language learning goals. However, as compared with other previous onomastic studies on L2 (for example, Cila & Lalonde 2019), the integrative and instrumental motivations found in this study were still appeared to be less influential on the L3 naming practices. This inference is based on the fact that the respondents relatively infrequently mentioned these aspects in the study interviews. Instead, the L3 learners emphasized the fact that they had chosen their French names primarily to create a favorable identity for themselves. To achieve this aim, the intentionally selected names that had meaningful, positive associations and also sounded nice.

Phonetic motivations can be viewed as a salient marker of the “affinity between sound and self-identity” (Chen 2015, 208). We propose that selecting names that are phonologically pleasing can be seen as a linguistic device for making a positive impact on hearers. They are in a sense creating a positive brand for themselves. This is in line with previous discussions on brand naming activities (Lowrey & Shrum 2007). As research has shown, sounds connote meanings and evoke emotions (Whissell 2006; Argo et al. 2010). For minority language learners like the French as L3 students in this study, a name that matches the unconscious favorability attached to certain syllables and phonemes can have a positive “branding” effect. The students’ French name adoptions conform to the findings about creating new brands in the marketing domain (Bao et al. 2008; Fox 2002). Just like brand names, the respondents gravitated towards French personal names that were simple, easy to pronounce, memorable, carried positive associations, and were distinctive and highly memorable.

Unlike in the English naming practices (Chen 2015; Cotterill 2020), teachers did not have a big influence on the French names adopted by the L3 students in this investigation. According to the study participants, their French lecturers have never compelled their students to use a French name in the class. The reason they decided to select a French name for themselves was their own desire to build a multilingual identity and to express their enthusiasm for their French language studies. This finding suggests that the Chinese students were willing to embrace France (or other Western cultures). This result was mirrored by other research that has investigated Chinese students and their preference for English names in previous studies (for example, Huang & Ke 2016). Outside of education, the use of French names by these participants reflected the impact of globalization in their lives and signified their interest in international communication.

Nevertheless, it was surprising that cross-cultural awareness did not significantly affect the students’ name adoptions. Many other studies reveal that foreign language learning also involves learning about the target language country, its culture, and its society. This cultural awareness is recognized as a valuable resource for developing linguistic competence through a foreign language instructional program (Nikitina & Furuoka 2019).

This kind of cultural embeddedness can involve teaching students about the literature, philosophy, and history of a country. However, for the L3 students in this study, learning French as a second foreign language did not involve learning much about French culture. When asked whether they were acquainted with French culture, all interviewees responded that they had very little socio-cultural knowledge. This lack of familiarity did not stop them, however, from adopting a French name and attempting to make a personal connection with the French language and culture.

Conclusion

This study examined the naming practices of Chinese students who are learning French as the second foreign language (L3) at a public university in China. The findings have primarily shown that names should not be seen as mere referential tokens, but rather as creative linguistic markers of identity. Personal naming, even in minority foreign language contexts, appears to be connected with diversified motivations and features. This qualitative study on the French naming practices of Chinese L3 students seeks to add to the existing body of literature in onomastics and linguistics studies with findings. The findings of this study could benefit language students in China by helping them to extend their knowledge of French names. Some pedagogical implications can also be drawn from the findings of this study. The first of which is that name adoption can be an effective heuristic device that language educators could employ to motivate learning among Chinese students. Using a foreign name in L3 could also be a way to introduce students to the linguistic properties of the target language. Based on the findings of this investigation, we would also like to propose language learners be actively encouraged to increase their cross-cultural awareness. A culture-related curriculum could be effectively used to facilitate minority foreign language education in China.

Although this study has revealed some interesting insights in the fields of onomastics, linguistics, and language learning, particularly for Chinese L3 students, the findings cannot be generalized primarily because of the limited data size. For this reason, it is suggested that future studies could be conducted on a larger scale. This work may provide more information regarding naming practices followed by students across a variety of minority foreign languages. Studies on naming practices of L2 or L3 students in various social, cultural and educational contexts are also suggested. As this study has shown, the names adopted by students may convey important information about language learners' identity. For this reason, more research could be conducted on identity construction and foreign name adoption. Furthermore, more controlled laboratory experiments could be carried out to examine sound symbolism, perceptions of brand names, and the possible connections with personal brand naming. Finally, as was shown in this study, a single student's English and French naming practices may be distinct. Therefore, more cross-linguistic naming observations could be done, especially to compare the identity creations between L2 and L3. This kind of research could enrich our understanding of onomastics, linguistics, and identities.

Notes

¹ The term "Western" in this paper describes things, people, ideas, for example, that are associated with the countries of North America and Western, Northern, and Southern Europe. Anything related to politics or social controversies is beyond the scope of this study.

² Updated statistical data about minority foreign languages (xiao yu zhong) or second foreign languages (er wai) remains scant. SGO's official statistics are one of the most comprehensive and reliable surveys. They are therefore used in this study. Other valid Internet data are also available to substantiate the assertion that these foreign languages are the most selected choices in foreign language education in China. One internet information resource is China's popular foreign language learning platform Duolingo (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IQ761GVRRDyJev3GkuC89w>, Accessed August 25, 2022.); another online information resource also shows the popularity of French language learning in China, which is found in a report from a website promoting French culture, Faguowenhua.com (<https://www.faguowenhua.com/sites/default/files/2019-03/dp-franco-en-ch.pdf>, Accessed August 25, 2022.).

³ This is cited in the study by Zhang (2020), and the original information is available from <https://www.afpc.asso.fr/La-langue-francaise-dans-les-universites-chinoises>

⁴ Data was only obtained from third-year students for two reasons: (1) all the fourth-year students were doing internships off-campus and therefore were not readily available for interviews, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) at the time of the data collection, the second-year students had not started their French studies; therefore there was a lack of awareness of and experience in adopting French names.

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