



## Historical Narratives and Public Memory in Urban Space: Street Names and (Re)Naming Practices of the Hankow Concession

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## Abstract

This study examines street names within the Hankow Concession. More specifically, it focuses on investigating street naming and renaming practices during and after the Concession Era. The findings reveal that during the Concession Era, the most frequently used strategy in street naming was the use of compatriots' names, while the least common strategy involved the use of toponyms from the colonial powers' own territories. The current street naming practices within the former concession area show the reverse: the use of Chinese toponyms is, at present, the most commonly used naming strategy. Some street names in the former British Concession that were originally named after Chinese places have been retained. The street names in the former Japanese Concession are associated with the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (WRAJA). Together, they construct a historical narrative that contrasts with the original intent of the Japanese Concession's establishment. The street renaming practice within the Concession has changed the original street names in the Concession Era greatly while emphasizing Chinese national and cultural identity. This practice represents a reconstruction of public memory through two approaches: (1.) reinforcing or removing the historical narratives selectively; and (2.) reshaping historical narratives to align with the shared values and contemporary mainstream cultural ideologies.

**Keywords:** street names, naming, hodonym, renaming practice, toponymy, Hankow Concession, China

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## Introduction

Place names, as part of the sociolinguistic system, are an essential element of a region's cultural landscape, carrying rich natural and historical information (Duncan 2022; Feng et al. 2019), with symbolic and performative power in shaping spatial identity (Rose-Redwood 2008). As crucial components of urban toponymy, street names serve as a medium that brings the history into the present, graving historical traces of urban cultural memory, acting as containers in preserving collective memory and social emotions in different eras (Rusu 2020; 2020). The historicity and culture of street names are particularly evident in the former Concession areas, which are historical imprints of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal past (Wang & Wu 2017). During the Concession Era, street names could reflect the dominance of various colonial powers. The renaming practices after the Concession Era, as tools for creating new spatial governmentality and reconfiguring local identity, reveal how colonial power can be systematically removed and reinterpreted by the succeeding authorities in the post-colonial period. For former colonies, changing street names given by colonial powers is a subtle but potent means of signaling political and diplomatic messages. The decolonization of street names, through the commemoration of Indigenous historical figures and events, can be a "slap in the face" to the former colonizers, working as a "dual domestic-international agenda" (Birnbaum 2023, 683) while reshaping local residents' public consciousness and constructing the new national identity and narrative to the other international actors.

The Hankow Concession, a historically significant foreign settlement in Wuhan, China, presents a compelling case for examining the interplay between street names and public memory reconstruction. This study investigates the street names and renaming practices in this area, focusing on both the Concession period and the post-Concession Era. Through a sociolinguistic and historical lens, this study explores how street names function as vessels of public memory and analyzes how public memory is reconstructed by reshaping historical narratives in alignment with dominant ideological frameworks.

## *Street Naming and Renaming Practice of Former Colonial Areas*

Street names can define a geographical location in a specific urban area with distinct spatial identifiers. Once a name is assigned to a street, it cannot be duplicated for another street within the same city (Ai 2024). This inherent uniqueness of street names indicates that they function as locational markers and symbolic representations of the distinctive identity of a region (Rusu 2022; Azaryahu 1997). Due to their informational and functional value, as well as their symbolic significance, street names may be regarded as living monuments (Tuan 1977), helping to remind people of particular places by anchoring historical events, figures, and ideologies within physical spaces.

Street names can be tools for social control in urban landscape (Eróss 2017). In former colonial or Concession areas, the changing of street names is informational, linguistic, and ideological, reflecting shifts in social norms and cultural consciousness. During the colonial period, the names of streets in colonial cities often showed strong characteristics of the ruling nation. In former French colonies, street names frequently commemorated colonial figures and events, indicating a particular colonial narrative (Jørgensen 2021; Njoh & Chie 2019; Bigon 2008). For example, in Saigon, Vietnam, street names mainly honored French military leaders and clergymen (Njoh & Chie 2019). In Dakar, Senegal, the emphasis of street names was placed on national luminaries, particularly those figures of metropolitan France (Njoh & Chie 2019; D'Almeida-Topor 2016). In China, German colonists in Qingdao tended to foreground military and imperial figures in street naming practices, conveying German imperial ideology (Mühlhahn 2000). Furthermore, street names in the former Japanese Concessions were often read and written in Japanese Kanji, directly showing Japanese linguistic and cultural conventions (Liu 2024; Feng et al. 2019). In contrast, street naming in British colonies was less systematic. While names of British royalty and colonial officials were also used, a significant portion of street names reflected local characteristics, including geographical features or functional descriptors, with an emphasis on practicality (Górny 2023). Around the world, street names have been used to reflect colonizers' sense of superiority and governing ideology, indicating the dominance of foreign powers and serving as instruments of colonial authority within the host country. Such practices are often political in nature, revealing the values and priorities of ruling elites (Light & Young 2017; Mitchell & Alderman 2014), while attempting to legitimate a particular power structure or ideological stance (Górny & Górna 2024).

In the postcolonial period, the practice of renaming streets in many former colonies became a form of symbolic decolonization, national identity reconstruction, and expression of political resistance (Graham & Healey 1999; Wang 2015). This practice often aims to remove colonial legacies, reclaim national and cultural identity, and reflect the values of the emerging political order, challenging the historical narratives of colony and reasserting local identities (Feng et al. 2019; Luo 2018). Renaming streets after Indigenous leaders, revolutionaries, or historical figures associated with resistance is a way to assert a new national identity and contest the legacies of colonialism (Simungala & Banda 2025; Matamanda et al. 2021). Through the systematic renaming practices, former colonies seek to construct a new public memory that aligned with postcolonial ideals, which can signal ideological shifts and efforts to renegotiate power relations (Górny & Górna 2024; 2020). Renaming is a form of symbolic break from the past, and new street names are markers of ideological renewal and the desire to reshape and reframe national and public memory (Azaryahu 1997).

## *Analytical Framework: Critical Toponymies and Public Memory*

This study adopts critical toponymies as its analytical framework, with a particular focus on the role of public memory in the (re)naming of streets within the Hankow Concession. Since the 1980s, Western geographical research on toponyms has increasingly emphasized cultural and political dimensions, highlighting how toponymic practices are shaped by power relations, historical narratives, and ideological forces (Feng et al. 2019; Ji et al. 2016; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). This shift has given rise to critical toponymies, linking place-name analysis with broader studies of power and social structures (Myers 1996). As Light and Young (2015) argue, place names are not neutral representations but embedded with political and cultural value systems. The process of naming can thus become a battleground where dominant ideologies and marginalized discourses compete, revealing the contested nature of spatial authority (Azaryahu & Kook 2002). Examining toponymic struggles within society offers a way to probe the dominant power structures, ideological conflicts, and the construction of symbolic identities (Shang & Yang 2023). Although rooted in geography, critical toponymies often necessitate interdisciplinary investigations that combine insights from sociology, anthropology, political science, and cultural studies.

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Memory is a key concept in critical toponymies (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). Language in cityspace involves a unique geography of public memory, represents a particular interpretation of history, and reflects the commemorative priorities and dominant narratives of past eras (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). Street names can be a mechanism through which the state exerts control over public space, shaping the urban experience and public memory (Azaryahu 1996). Streets named after specific figures, events, or symbols are often embedded with distinct cultural and historical significance to create streets as “lieux de mémoire” that foster collective identity (Nora 1989). Naming and renaming practices become spatial manifestations of memory. In this way, these names show the power transition within a region into concrete symbols, distilling fluid histories into sanitized narrative, while solidifying the connection between national identity and physical territory. The practice of naming place is a way to control public memory (Yurchak 2000). Therefore, this study applies the theory of critical toponymies by utilizing the concept of public memory to explore the underlying mechanisms in the naming and renaming practice of streets in the Hankow Concession.

## Methods

### Research Site

The Hankow Concession is located in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in central China. The Hankow Concession’s spatial boundaries are delineated by the Yangtze River, Jiangnan Road, Zhongshan Avenue, and Liu Jiaqi Road. Situated along the Yangtze River from west to east, Hankow became a treaty port in the mid-19th century, when the Qing government, under foreign pressure, granted rights for international trade and foreign settlement (Wang & Wu 2017; Wuhan Municipal Archives 2016; 1999). Spanning 3.63 kilometers in length and approximately 1.87 square kilometers in area, it comprises the Concessions established by five foreign powers: Britain (0.533 square kilometers); Germany (0.425 square kilometers); Russia (0.415 square kilometers); France (0.324 square kilometers); and Japan (0.425 square kilometers) (Wang & Wu 2017).

The British Concession was the first to be established, in 1861, followed by the French Concession in 1896 and the Japanese Concession in 1898. These three Concessions were not formally reclaimed by the Chinese government until after the victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (WRAJA) in 1945. The German Concession, established in 1895, was officially reclaimed in 1921, while the Russian Concession, established in 1896, was declared reclaimed in 1925.<sup>1</sup> Many originally connected streets were divided into different parts under the control of various colonial powers, resulting in different street names during that period.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Although the Hankow Concession was partitioned and governed by various foreign powers, restrictions were not imposed on learning or dissemination of Chinese language. Chinese could be taught in schools, and Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals were permitted to circulate (Editorial Board of Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003). As a result, the Chinese names of streets, alongside their foreign counterparts, could be traced and used for the present investigation. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a three-step approach was adopted to collect the street names of the Hankow Concession. First, *The Local Chronicle of Hankow Concession* (Editorial Board of Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003) was read to identify all verifiable street names from the period of foreign occupation. A list of these street names was then made by systematically mapping. Second, the current names of the mapped streets were documented to produce an additional list for comparison. Finally, field trips were conducted to verify the present-day locations of these streets within the concession area. This third step helped ensure that both historically verifiable names and existing street names within the Hankow Concession were incorporated into the study.

Following the data collection, both the historical and current street names were categorized according to the strategy of naming practice and conducted statistical analyses. The classification of street names during the Concession Era is based on a general typology and descriptions provided in *The Local Chronicle of*

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*Hankow Concession* (Editorial Board of Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003). The post-Concession street name classification draws on the framework proposed by Yao and Cai (2012).

However, due to changes in urban planning and the development of transportation infrastructure, some streets have been merged over time, leading to variations in the number of street names across different historical periods. For instance, *The Bund* in the former British Concession, *Nicholas Skaia* in the Russian Concession, *Quai De France* in the French Concession, *Prinz Heinrich Ufer* in the German Concession, and *The Bund* in the Japanese Concession were all consolidated into a single thoroughfare, now known as *Yanjiang Avenue*.

Results and Findings

Street Names during the Concession Era

Table 1 presents the number of street names and the naming practices in the Hankow Concession during the foreign occupation period. The percentages were calculated based on the total number of street names across the entire Concession area as the denominator. The data reveals that the foreign powers favored naming streets after notable individuals from their own countries. Specifically, 23 out of 68 streets (33.82%) were named in this way. Other naming strategies included making reference to Chinese elements, geographical features, representative buildings or factories within the Concession, and city, region, or colony of the respective nation.

An examination of naming preferences by country revealed that Great Britain exhibited the highest frequency of street names that incorporated Chinese elements. This finding is most likely the result of colonial regulations that mandated the use of certain Chinese place names within the British Concession in Hankow (Editorial Board of Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003; Wang & Wu 2017). By comparison, Russia and France favored street names that reflected their own nation. Germany showed the strongest preference for naming streets after individuals, with 11 out of the 23 (47.82%) following this pattern. Japan tended to name streets after Japanese geographical locations.

Table 1: Classification of Street Naming Strategies during the Concession Era

Naming Practice	Concession Area					
	British Freq (%)	Russian Freq (%)	French Freq (%)	German Freq (%)	Japanese Freq (%)	Total Freq (%)
Compatriots of the Foreign Nation	0 (0)	6 (8.82)	4 (5.88)	11 (16.18)	2 (2.94)	23 (33.82)
City, Region, or Colony of the Foreign Nation	1 (1.47)	0 (0)	4 (5.88)	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (7.35)
Buildings, Factories, or Companies	5 (7.35)	1 (1.47)	4 (5.88)	0 (0)	1 (1.47)	12 (17.65)
Geographical Locations in the Concession Area	2 (2.94)	1 (1.47)	1 (1.47)	0 (0)	10 (14.71)	14 (20.59)
Chinese-referenced Street Names	9 (13.24)	1 (1.47)	0 (0)	4 (5.88)	1 (1.47)	15 (22.06)
Total	17 (25.00)	9 (13.24)	13 (19.12)	15 (22.06)	14 (20.59)	68 (100)

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The following tables include the original street names in the colonial powers' native languages, their translated Chinese and English names, the respective concessions to which these streets belonged, as well as the meaning of these names.

**Table 2:** Streets Named for Compatriots during the Concession Era

Original Name	Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
Nicholas Skaia	尼古拉大街	Nicholas Avenue	Russian	Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918)
Vahovitch Skaia	鄂哈街	Eha Street	Russian	Aleksandr Stepanovich Vahovitch, a Russian Consul in Hankow
Mariin Skaia	玛琳街	Malin Street	Russian	Tsaritsa Maria Feodorovna, (1847-1928)
Alexandrov Skaia	亚历山德罗夫大街	Alexandrov Avenue	Russian	Tsar Nikolay Aleksandrovich Romanov (1868-1918)
Nerpin Skaia	列尔宾街	Nerpin Street	Russian	Russian Tea Merchant, Mikhail Grigoryevich Shevelev (1844-1903)
Alexeyev Skaia	阿列克谢耶夫街	Alexeyev Street	Russian	Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev (1843-1917), Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Forces in Manchuria
Rue Dubail	吕钦使街	Dubail Street	French	The French Consul General in Shanghai, Georges Dubail (1845-1932)
Avenue De Marcille	玛玺理大街	Marcille Avenue	French	Henri Chassain de Marcilly (1867-1942), the French Consul in Hankow
Rue De Joffre	霞飞大将军街	Joffre Street	French	the French Marshal, Joseph Jacques Césaire Joffre (1852-1931)
Rue De Mare Chal Foch	福熙大将军街	Foch Street	French	the French Marshal, Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929)
Prinz Heinrich Ufer	海因里希亲王大街	Heinrich Avenue	German	Albert Wilhelm Heinrich (1862-1929)
Wilhelm Straße	威廉大街	William Avenue	German	the German Emperor, Wilhelm II (1859-1941)
Friedrich Straße	腓特烈大街	Friedrich Avenue	German	the German Emperor, Friedrich Wilhelm Nikolaus Karl von Preußen (1831-1888)
Heyking Straße	海靖街	Heyking Street	German	Baron Edmund Friedrich Gustav von Heyking (1850-1915), the German Minister to China
Struebel Straße	师妥博路	Struebel Street	German	Otto von Struebel (1846-1921), a German Consul General in Shanghai
Augusta Straße	奥古斯塔大街	Augusta Avenue	German	German Empress, Auguste Viktoria von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg (1858-1921)
Victoria Straße	维多利亚大街	Victoria Avenue	German	German Princess Victoria Adelaide Mary Louise (1840-1901)
Luisen Straße	路易莎大街	Louisa Avenue	German	Prussian Princess, Luise Auguste Wilhelmine Amalie von Preussen (1808-1870)
Sophien Straße	索菲亚大街	Sophia Avenue	German	Sophie Luise von Mecklenburg-Schwerin, (1685-1735)
Charlotten Straße	夏洛特大街	Charlotte Avenue	German	The Prussian Queen Sophie Charlotte von Hannover (1668-1705), the first Queen consort in Prussia
Dorotheen Straße	多萝西大街	Dorothy Avenue	German	Dorothea von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg (1636-1689)
San-Chi Road	山崎街	Yamasaki Street	Japanese	Yamasaki Katura (1865-1903), the Japanese Consul in Hankow
Taishō Road	大正街	Taishō Street	Japanese	the Japanese Emperor Taishō (1879-1926)

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

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As the reader will note, the table does not include any examples from the British Concession Area. This is not an oversight as this particular category of naming practice was not observed in this area. The uneven distribution of street naming practices for compatriots suggests differing colonial ideologies and symbolic strategies among foreign powers in Hankow. Foreign powers in the Concessions during the late 19th and early 20th centuries often named streets after notable figures from their own countries (Nield 2015). However, preferences for street naming practices varied across regions, with some nations tending to avoid personal names (Zhang 2015). During the Concession period, more than one-third (33.82%) of the streets within the Concessions were named after individuals. A chi-square test was conducted and the result showed a statistically significant difference ( $p = .000 < .05$ ), indicating that the observed distribution was unlikely to be due to chance.

Generally speaking, the street names played “a critical role in shaping the interactions between European missionaries and colonialists” (Simungala & Banda 2025, 7). The street naming practice served a dual function. First, it reinforced internal cohesion. Such symbolic familiarity may have helped settlers feel “at home” in a foreign land, creating topological nostalgia (Driver & Gilbert 1998). The psychological comfort may have fostered a sense of belonging among colonial inhabitants. Second, this naming practice may have helped to establish an external demarcation, serving as a symbolic assertion of the foreign power’s cultural and political dominance (Bancilhon et al. 2021; Azaryahu 2011), as well as a visual and linguistic reminder to outsiders, including other colonial powers and local Chinese residents, that this space was under foreign control. Accordingly, these names were emblems that served to legitimize imperial authority of the foreign powers within the Concessions. At the same time, they functioned as symbolic affirmations of national pride. Moreover, by adopting names rooted in their own national histories, the foreign empires also drew linguistic borders.

**Table 3:** Streets Named after Cities, Regions, or Colonies of Controlling Foreign Nations during the Concession Era

Original Name	Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
Lockerbie Road	洛克比路	Lockerbie Road	British	A Small Town in Scotland
Rue De Saigon	西贡街	Saigon Street	French	Former French Colony
Rue D’Hanoi	河内街	Hanoi Street	French	Former French Colony
Rue De Paris	巴黎街	Paris Street	French	The Capital of France
Quai De France	法兰西大道	France Avenue	French	Name of France

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

Streets named after a local region or colonies were relatively rare, with the French Concession notably having more of such streets than other concession-holding nations (Hunter 2017). This prominence of this practice may be due to France’s extensive colonial presence in Asia during that period. These names highlighted the concession as a part of the foreign nation’s global reach, giving it an aura of legitimacy as a representation of their homeland or empire within China.

**Table 4:** Streets Named after Names of Factories, Buildings, or Companies during the Concession Era

Original Name	Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
Consulate Road	领事街	Consulate Road	British	British Consulate in Hankow
E-Wo Road	怡和街	Ehe Street	British	The Name of a British Bank
Fau-Cheong Road	阜昌街	Fuchang Street	British	The Name of a Russian Bank
Wa-Cheong Road	华昌街	Huachang Street	British	The Name of a British Company
Pao-Shun Road	宝顺街	Baoshun Street	British	The Name of a British Bank
Consul Skaia	领事街	Consul Street	Russian	Russian Consulate in Hankow
Rue De La Banque	银行街	Bank Street	French	“Bank” in French
Rue De L’Ecole	学堂街	School Street	French	French School
Rue Du Chemin De Fer	铁路街	Railway Street	French	Near the Beijing-Hankow Railway
Rue De La Mission	教会街	Church Street	French	Catholic Church
Sei-Chang Road	燮昌小路	Xiaochang Path	Japanese	The Name of a Match Factory

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

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Concessions were initially products of Western countries' pursuit of maximizing economic interests, presenting the economic interests of Western powers (Dai 2010; Moran 1974). Naming streets after foreign companies, firms, or factories directly reflected the central role of Western-led economic activities within the Hankow Concession, representing the industrial development within the concession area brought by the Western power. Such naming practice was a practical consideration that made it easier for concession residents and foreign merchants to identify the address of these institutions and conduct economic activities. It also reflected the Western powers' intention to transform economic control into spatial symbolic power.

**Table 5:** Streets Named after Geographical Locations during the Concession Era

Original Name	Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Location
The Bund	河街	River Street	British	along the Yangtze River
Kai-Shien Road	界限街	Boundary Street	British	on the border between the British and Russian Concessions
Pogranichnaia	界限街	Boundary Street	Russian	on the border between the Russian and British Concessions
Rue Nouvelle	新街	New Street	French	in an area that came under the jurisdiction of the French Concession in 1902
The Bund	河街	River Street	Japanese	along The Yangtze River
Middle Road	中街	Middle Road	Japanese	on the central axis of the Japanese Concession
East Road	东小路	Little East Road	Japanese	east of Middle Road
West Road	西小路	Little West Road	Japanese	west of Middle Road
South Road	南小路	Little South Road	Japanese	south of Middle Road
North Road	北小路	Little North Road	Japanese	north of Middle Road
Upward Road	上小路	Little Upward Road	Japanese	north of the Japanese Concession
Middle Road	中小路	Little Middle Road	Japanese	in the center of the Japanese Concession
New Road	新小路	Little New Road	Japanese	in an area that came under the jurisdiction of the Japanese Concession in 1907
Liangko Road	两国路	Liangguo Road	Japanese	on the border between the Japanese Concession and the Chinese Area

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

The reader will note that table 5 has more examples from the Japanese Concession than any other area. There is a reason for this fact. The Japanese colonial authorities systematically employed place-based toponyms as part of a standardized and administrative-oriented naming strategy (Kim et al. 2023), which contrasts with the more personalized or symbolic naming practices observed in other concession areas.

Naming by geographical location was relatively straightforward. Compared to other naming strategies, the political connotations were not so much reflected in the choice of name-sake, but rather in manner in which the names were presented. For example, in the British and Russian Concessions, *Boundary Street* was divided into two segments. One was written as *Kai-Shien Road* in Wade-Giles Romanization, a more accessible format for English speakers attempting to pronounce Chinese. The second was directly written in Russian as *Pogranichnaia* 'edge'. Similarly, at the border between the Japanese Concession and the Chinese area, the street name 两国路 'Liangguolu', lit. "two countries road", was inscribed as *Liangko Road* which was a form more familiar to native Japanese speakers. These orthographic choices were indicative of the group that held the most dominant position in the space. Hence, although the names appeared neutral on the surface, the manner in which they were written and read showed deeper geopolitical hierarchies.

At the same time, these orthographical choices also had many practical advantages. They make identification and management more efficient while reducing the complexities of translation or cultural adaptation and avoiding ambiguity. They may also have facilitated more effective communication between the foreign colonizers and the local population. Moreover, Chinese citizens might have resisted the use of

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foreign personal or place names in concession street naming. By using geographical names that appeared more neutral and natural on the surface, the institutional powers may have made these street names easier for the native Chinese population to accept—thereby helping to mitigate nationalist tensions.

**Table 6:** Streets Named after Chinese Elements during the Concession Era

Original Name	Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
Tung-Ting Road	洞庭街	Dongting Street	British	Chinese Lake
Po-Yang Road	鄱阳街	Poyang Street	British	Chinese Lake
Hunan Road	湖南街	Hunan Street	British	Province of China
Hupei Road	湖北街	Hubei Street	British	Province of China
Tai-Ping Road	太平街	Taiping Street	British	“Peace” in Chinese
Peking Road	北京街	Beijing Street	British	The Capital City of China
Tientsin Road	天津街	Tianjin Street	British	Chinese City
Yang-Tsze Road	扬子街	Yangzi Street	British	“Yangtze River” in Chinese
Sing-Sheng Road	歆生街	Xinsheng Street	British	the Name of a Chinese Comprador, Liu Xinsheng (1857-1941)
Kitai Skaia	开泰街	Kaitai Street	Russian	“China” in Russian
Tsingtau GaÙe	青岛路	Qingdao Road	German	Concession City in Shandong, China, Occupied by Germany
Kiautchao GaÙe	胶州路	Jiaozhou Road	German	Concession City in Shandong, China, Occupied by Germany
Shantung GaÙe	山东路	Shandong Road	German	Concession City in Shandong, China, Occupied by Germany
Pinhsiang GaÙe	萍乡路	Pingxiang Road	German	Coal Mines in the German-Occupied Concession in Shandong, China
Cheng-Chong Road	成忠街	Chengzhong Street	Japanese	Ye Chengzhong (1840-1899), a Chinese Capitalist in the late Qing Dynasty

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Wuhan Municipal Archives 2016; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

Although concessions were semi-colonial territories controlled by foreign powers, they remained, in essence, part of China’s land (Zhang 2022). The British Concession featured the highest number of streets incorporating Chinese elements, likely influenced by the regulations established at the inception of the concession (Wang & Wu 2017), or the British colonists’ *laissez-faire* approach to planning colony and handing over the task of naming to Indigenous surveyors (Bigon 2009). Whatever the reason may be, this naming practice helped to blur the distinction between the British Concession and the rest of China. Consequently, potential resistance from the Chinese government and public may have been avoided. Moreover, this naming practice may also have lent a more legitimacy to the controlling foreign British authorities. In this way, this naming approach can be seen as a means of “localizing” and “rationalizing” foreign dominance over the Concessions.

Using Chinese elements in street names may well have facilitated spatial recognition and public memory for both local residents and merchants operating within the concessions, ultimately aiding foreign rule. This practice might also have evoked a sense of familiarity among the local population, thereby weakening anti-colonial sentiment. However, at the same time, foreign powers might have deliberately associated Chinese city names with specific streets to symbolize their broader influence over China. This power was particularly evident in the German Concession where streets were named after cities in China’s Shandong province that were under German occupation. Thus, while these names incorporated Chinese elements, they still also subtly reinforced imperialist claims over a wider Chinese territory.

*Street Names after the Foreign Occupation Period*

This section examines the street names given by the Chinese government after reclaiming the Hankow Concession. Some streets that had been given separate names within the different Concessions were in fact physically connected. After the Hankow Concession was reclaimed, these streets were later merged into single thoroughfares. Examples include 沿江大道 ‘Yanjiang Avenue’, named after its geographical location

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along the Yangtze river; 中山大道 ‘Zhongshan Avenue’, named after Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the Chinese physician and founder of the Republic of China; 洞庭街 ‘Dongting Street’, named after Dongting Lake, a lake in China, 鄱阳街 ‘Poyang Street’, named after a Chinese lake; and 胜利街 ‘Shengli Street’ or ‘Victory Street’.

These streets ran across at least two, and sometimes all five, former Concession Zones. For statistical purposes, each street name was recorded according to the Concession where it originally began. This strategy was helpful in those instances in which smaller roads had been integrated into larger ones due to urban development. As a result of the classification method, the total number of renamed Concession streets is significantly lower than that of the original Concession-era street names. As in the previous section, the percentages were calculated using the total number of street names across the entire area of the Hankow Concession, which served as the denominator. Note that the category “geographical location” refers to the streets’ spatial position, such as its orientation, proximity to landmarks, or relative location within the urban space. By comparison, the category “city or region in China” specifically refers to street names derived from the names of Chinese cities or regions that are geographically distinct from the streets’ actual location.

**Table 7:** Classification of Street Naming Strategies after the Concession Era

Naming Practice	Concession Area					
	British Freq (%)	Russian Freq (%)	French Freq (%)	German Freq (%)	Japanese Freq (%)	Total Freq (%)
Names of Chinese Historical Figures	1 (2.22)	1 (2.22)	3 (6.67)	0 (0)	5 (11.11)	10 (22.22)
City or Region in China	9 (20.00)	3 (6.67)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (13.33)	18 (40.00)
Geographic Location	1 (2.22)	1 (2.22)	1 (2.22)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6.67)
Auspicious Chinese Words	2 (4.44)	0 (0)	2 (4.44)	10 (22.22)	0 (0)	14 (31.11)
<b>Total</b>	<b>13 (28.89)</b>	<b>5 (11.11)</b>	<b>6 (13.33)</b>	<b>10 (22.22)</b>	<b>11 (24.44)</b>	<b>45 (100)</b>

Sources: (Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003; Wang & Wu 2017)

Table 7 presents the number of street names and the naming practice in the Hankow Concession after it was reclaimed. It can be found that streets within the former concession area were mostly named using Chinese toponyms, with 18 out of 45 streets (40.00%) following this practice. And the naming strategy incorporated auspicious Chinese words, which became the second most common strategy, occurring in 14 out of 45 (31.11%). A chi-square test was conducted and the result showed  $p = .000 (< .05)$  indicating that there are significant between-group differences.

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**Table 8:** Post-Concession Era Streets Named after Notable Chinese Figures

Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
中山大道	Zhongshan Avenue	British	Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the Chinese physician and founder of the Republic of China
黎黄陂路	Li Huangpi Road	Russian	<i>Li Huangpi</i> , the nickname of Li Yuanhong (1864-1928), the first Vice President of the Republic Of China
岳飞街	Yue Fei Street	French	Yue Fei (1103-1142), a General of the Song Dynasty
蔡锷路	Cai E Road	French	Cai E (1882-1916), a Chinese Military Strategist, and democratic revolutionary
黄兴路	Huang Xing Road	French	Huang Xing (1874-1916), a leading figure in China's Modern Democratic Revolution
张自忠路	Zhang Zizhong Road	Japanese	Zhang Zizhong (1891-1940): a general in the National Revolutionary Army
张自忠小路	Little Zhang Zizhong Road	Japanese	Zhang Zizhong (1891-1940), a general in the National Revolutionary Army
陈怀民路	Chen Huaimin Road	Japanese	Chen Huaimin (1916-1938), one of China's first-generation military pilots, who became the first aviator in aerial warfare to ram an enemy aircraft during the Japanese bombing of Wuhan
郝梦龄路	Hao Mengling Road	Japanese	Hao Mengling (1898-1937), a famous Chinese army commander
刘家祺路	Liu Jiaqi Road	Japanese	Liu Jiaqi (1894-1937): a native of Wuhan, anti-Qing revolutionary, lieutenant general

Sources: (Büttner 2023; Du 2024; Li & Tao 2008)

A chi-square test indicated that streets adopting this naming practice were significantly more numerous ( $p = .000 < .05$ ) in the former Japanese Concession than in other former concession areas. Thus, a significant portion of the renamed streets in the former Japanese Concession are dedicated to national heroes in the WRAJA. This naming strategy reflects a clear decolonization intent, aimed at removing remnants of colonial history and reasserting national Chinese identity within the spatial memory of the city. Although the establishment of the Japanese Concession was not directly linked to the War, this renaming practice honors those who sacrificed their lives for national independence. It also reinforces nationalist narratives and patriotic education within public spaces. Besides anti-Japanese heroes, other streets that are named after historical figures who carry distinct political and historical significance. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Huang Xing (1874-1916) and Cai E (1882-1916) represent the revolutionary spirit of the Xinhai Revolution and the National Protection Movement to the Chinese people, emphasizing the rejection of feudal autocracy and the pursuit of democratic ideals (Büttner 2023).

Li Yuanhong (1864-1928), a key figure in the Wuchang Uprising, highlights Wuhan's pivotal role in modern Chinese revolutionary history. 'Li Huangpi' is the nickname given to him by the Chinese people. The nickname is derived from combining Li 黎, his surname, and Huangpi 黄陂 is the name of the district in Wuhan where he was born (Li & Tao 2008). Yue Fei (1103-1142) is a symbol of loyalty and resistance against foreign invasion in the Song Dynasty. The use of his name connect traditional Chinese patriotism with modern nationalist sentiments (Du 2024). This renaming strategy reflects a holistic recognition of China's historical struggles, constructing a continuous historical narrative of resistance from ancient times to modern national independence. By anchoring these historical references into urban spaces, the renaming practice reinforces a collective historical consciousness that links past and present struggles for sovereignty and national identity.

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**Table 9:** Post-Concession Era Streets Named after Chinese Cities or Geographical Features

Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Referent
洞庭街	Dongting Street	Britain	a Chinese Lake
鄱阳街	Poyang Street	Britain	a Chinese Lake
江汉路	Jiangnan Road	Britain	the convergence of the Yangtze (江) and Han(汉) Rivers
上海路	Shanghai Road	Britain	a Chinese City
南京路	Nanjing Road	Britain	a Chinese City
青岛路	Qingdao Road	Britain	a Chinese City
北京路	Beijing Road	Britain	the Capital City of China
天津路	Tianjing Road	Britain	a Chinese City
扬子街	Yangzi Road	Britain	“Yangtze River” in Chinese
兰陵路	Lanling Road	Russian	an ancient name for Hubei, the Province where Wuhan is located
珞珈山路	Luojiashan Road	Russian	a mountain in Wuhan
洞庭小路	Little Dongting Road	Russian	a Chinese Lake
长春街	Changchun Street	Japanese	a Chinese City
山海关路	Shanhaiguan Road	Japanese	a strategic pass at the eastern terminus of the Great Wall, which was historically significant as a military checkpoint
卢沟桥路	Lugouqiao Road	Japanese	the place where the WRAJA began
沈阳路	Shenyang Road	Japanese	a Chinese City
旅顺路	Lvshun Road	Japanese	a Chinese City
大连路	Dalian Road	Japanese	a Chinese City

Sources: (Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003; Wang &amp; Wu 2017)

Many streets in the former British Concession that were originally named after Chinese cities or regions have been largely retained. In other Concessions, a different practice was common. For instance, a striking example of transliteration-based renaming can be found in the Russian Concession. Here, the thoroughfare 珞珈山路 ‘Luojiashan Road’ was derived from a phonetic adaptation of *Lockerbie Road*. This street originally marked the border between the British and Russian concessions. After the Russian Concession was formally and fully reclaimed in 1929, Lockerbie Road was informally renamed 洛加碑路 ‘Luojiabei Road’, a phonetic adaptation (Wuhan Municipal Archives 2016; Editorial Board of Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003).<sup>2</sup> The name was linked to a Russian real estate merchant named J.K. Panoff, who was a cousin of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Although his dates of birth and death remain unknown, he is believed to have resided in Hankow between 1869 and 1902 (Hu 2024). In 1946, however, the authorities decided that the name *Luojiabei* not only retained undesirable traces of the previous Russian influence, but also carried inauspicious meanings. Therefore, the street was re-named 珞珈山街 ‘Luojiashan Street’, drawing inspiration from Luoji Mountain in Wuchang, on the opposite side of the Yangtze River (Wang & Wu 2017; Wuhan Municipal Archives 1999). The new name preserved the phonetic resemblance of the name *Lockerbie*, but carried positive associations with jade [洛加], an auspicious Chinese symbol. The name change then not only replaced the previous toponym with negative colonial associations; it also yielded a Chinese toponym with more favorable, traditional, cultural meanings.

Similarly important changes occurred in the former Japanese Concession, where every street was deeply intertwined with historical events in the WRAJA. *Lvshun Road*, *Dalian Road*, and *Shenyang Road* all recall Japan’s invasion of Northeast China. Lvshun and Dalian were strategic ports that had been long occupied by Japan after the Russo-Japanese War, while Shenyang was the site where the “September 18 Incident”<sup>3</sup> erupted. *Lugouqiao Road* directly references the “Lugouqiao Incident”. This event marked the outbreak of war between China and Japan. *Shanhaiguan* was a critical battleground for the Northeast Anti-Japanese

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United Army and was a key invasion route for Japanese forces advancing into North China. *Changchun*, as the capital of Manchukuo (1932-1945), symbolized Japanese colonial rule (Zhang 2016).<sup>4</sup> Taken all together, the renaming practices evidenced in this area were found to serve a strong patriotic educational function. By inscribing symbols of anti-Japanese resistance into urban spaces, these names served as constant reminders of China’s national humiliation, and reinforced the public spirit of resistance.

By comparison, streets named after geographical features or historically significant buildings carries weaker political and cultural connotations compared to other naming strategies (Azaryahu 2011). Such names merely help residents and visitors to quickly gain spatial orientation. Their informational function far outweighed their political function. Post-Concession Era examples include 沿江大道 ‘Yanjiang Avenue’ in the former British zone that gained its name from its location along the Yangtze River; 车站路 ‘Chezhan Road’ in the former Russian zone which is near the Beijing-Hankow Railway; and 天声街 ‘Tiansheng Street’ in the former French zone and was located near a Hubei Opera Stage Named ‘tian’ [天].

**Table 10: Post-Concession Era Streets Featuring Auspicious Chinese Words**

Chinese Name	English Name	Concession Area	Meaning of Auspicious Chinese Words
胜利街	Shengli Street	British	Shengli ‘victory’
合作路	Hezuo Road	British	Hezuo ‘cooperation’
友益街	Youyi Street	French	Youyi ‘partnering to achieve wealth’
海寿街	Haishou Street	French	Haishou ‘longevity and prosperity’
一元路	Yiyuan Road	German	Yiyuan ‘the beginning of life’
二曜路	Eryao Road	German	Eryao ‘light and hope’
三阳路	Sanyang Road	German	Sanyang ‘good fortune’
四唯路	Siwei Road	German	Siwei ‘courtesy, righteousness, integrity, and honor’
五福路	Wufu Road	German	Wufu ‘longevity, wealth, health, virtue, and fame’
六合路	Liuhe Road	German	Liuhe ‘heaven and earth’

Sources: (Wang & Wu 2017; Editorial Board of the Local Chronicle of Hankow 2003)

Chinese auspicious words in street naming reflect Chinese cultural values and represent an assertion of cultural sovereignty (Huang 2011). They reaffirm China’s right to define space within its own territory. Following the end of the WRAJA and the War of Liberation, Chinese society experienced widespread post-war trauma. Naming streets with words showing prosperity, unity, and optimism served as a means of national psychological healing and social reconstruction. This naming process helped to foster renewed confidence in the country’s future. The importance of street naming in nation-building is not unique to China, however. Internationally, street names have been found to play a crucial role in the construction of public memory (Ayatac & Araz 2016). In Post-Concession areas, the use of auspicious Chinese words in naming streets helped to connect urban spaces to positive historical narratives. This linguistic act then helped to emphasize post-war recovery and national rejuvenation.

### Summary and Discussion: Street Names as a Carrier of Public Memory

Street names carry public memory in shaping spatial and social order (Oto-Peralías 2018). Public memory, in turn, preserves local culture and fosters a sense of place-based identity (Ji et al. 2016). The changes in street names reflect the prevailing political and cultural dynamics, making the renaming practices in the Concession areas more than linguistic changes. They are acts of resistance in which colonial dominance is rejected and overturned. These onomastic practices effectively helped to weaken colonial identities, while integrating historical ties to the new, shared values aligned with contemporary sociocultural contexts and local communities. During the period in which the Concession Zones were established, street naming was a powerful tool for foreign powers to reinforce their presence and authority. In doing so, they embedded their

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national identity into the respective jurisdictions (Simungala & Banda 2025). After the Concessions were reclaimed, and administrative control over these areas was fully restored, China asserted its legitimacy as the controlling governmental power. This transfer of power is exemplified in the naming of Shengli Street 胜利街 'Victory Street' which runs through almost the entire concession area and intersects with several streets named after other Chinese national heroes. Similarly, streets renamed after notable Chinese figures and historical events from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the integration of Chinese auspicious words, all help to inscribe historical memory and traditional culture into the urban landscape. Together, these street names convey historical narratives, virtues, and shared values, gradually shaping a public consciousness among residents, while reinforcing China's governmental authority. By permanently linking streets to pivotal facets of Chinese culture and history, these onomastic acts help transform the urban landscape into enduring historical monuments (Li 2010).

At the same time, these acts of renaming served as a powerful sign to the former colonial powers. Through street naming and renaming, the Chinese government authorities worked to "redefine and reshape the cultural and historical landscape based on their perspectives" (Simungala & Banda 2025, 11). For that reason, nearly all the street names in the former Japanese Concession are associated with the WRAJA. For the former colonial powers, this renaming strategy can be seen as a symbolic "slap in the face", a deliberate act of defiance through which local communities criticized past invasions and colonial domination. However, given the diminished political relevance of the Hankow Concession in contemporary times, this symbolic "slap" no longer carries strong diplomatic or geopolitical weight. Its audience has shifted toward the domestic public. Today, these names may help to strengthen nation's "own sense of self" and "weaken the other's sense of self" (Birnbbaum 2023, 672). Through sustained daily encounters, generations of people passing through these spaces may internalize and identify with these histories and events, integrating them into the core of public memory.

The power of these messages lies not only in the new names that were introduced, but the old names that were removed. By deleting the urban landscape of street names related to foreign colonial powers or military involvement, it was possible to diminish memories of painful historical events (e.g., Germany's occupation of the cities in Shandong province; and France's global colonial holdings in China). In the Post-Concession Era, renaming can be seen as an act of selective forgetting or the reinforcement of public memory. Through the manipulation of street names, certain historical events or figures could be marginalized or erased, while other memories and values were highlighted and encouraged to become an integral part of the collective societal perception. In this way, as this and other investigations have shown, street naming and renaming serve as powerful mechanisms for managing public memory and shaping social identity (Ramón, 2024; Rusu 2022; Houssay-Holzschuch, 2018).

## Conclusion

By analyzing the street names and renaming practice across different historical periods in the Hankow Concession, this study has shown how control over naming rights reflects the dominance of specific political forces over space. It has also demonstrated how ruling classes, within various historical contexts, can manipulate and reconstruct public memory through public linguistic symbols. When street names function as carriers of public memory, urban planners who engage in naming and renaming streets are not only altering language. They may also help to reinforce or remove certain historical narratives, thereby reconstructing official history in alignment with the interests of the ruling class and the contemporary mainstream cultural values. For this reason, changes in street names often coincide with shifts in societal values, positioning both the names and naming as tools for the reproduction of power structures which can influence public perceptions. In the future, more ethnographic studies and personal interviews on street names could be conducted to gain more insights into how this influence affects the public's perception of historical events, both past and present.

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**Notes**

1. The administrative remnants of the German and Russian Concessions did not fully disappear from Hankow until 1928 (Crawford 2018; Wang & Wu 2017).
2. A stone tablet inscribed with the characters 洛加 Luo Jia in a street garden preserves this name.
3. The “September 18 Incident”, also known as the “Mukden Incident” was a staged event in 1931, when Japanese forces invaded Manchuria, initiating a period of intensified Japanese influence in northeastern China (Zhang 2016; Yamamuro 2006; Duara 2004).
4. The city was extensively redesigned and modernized according to Japanese urban planning, and government buildings, military installations, and infrastructure were constructed to consolidate Japanese political authority (Yamamuro 2006; Duara 2004).

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