

Choice of Foreign Names as a Strategy for Identity Management

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Regardless of the fact that Macau's dominating population are Chinese, English names, or to be more exact, foreign names, are favored and widely used, be it in the businesses, the government, or education institutions. Though Chinese (Cantonese) is spoken by most in the city, local Chinese people's favor in the use of English/foreign names, whether they are students, civil servants, or working in the business, does reflect their taste and their desired image to be displayed to others. Interviews are conducted showing that people's choice of English/foreign names are somehow a strategy for identity management – certain names are chosen to show a pleasant personality, or other desirable qualities that they wanted to project to others. It is interesting to note that, other than English names, people would choose Portuguese names, Japanese names, names of things (non-proper names), or even people's own creation for use.

A Chinese saying: "One does not fear if he/she has a bad fate; what one fears most is to be given a bad name." Rather than a Chinese saying, this should also be a universal consideration when most parents all over the world are finding names for their children. Most people get their names when they are born, and very often they themselves are not involved in the decision-making. What if we get a chance to decide on our own name?

To get a name by oneself is probably a very unique trend in Asia, and especially, the Chinese communities. We often see in English-language documents, business cards, or hear people addressing each other using English names instead. Although statistical findings are yet to come, still it seems that comparatively more Chinese people would have an English or foreign name, rather than Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos, or Thai. Why Chinese people prefer to have an extra English or foreign name other than their own Chinese one, and that probably out of their own choice may be an interesting topic of enquiry. This paper attempts to initiate this enquiry by examining ethnic-Chinese naming practice of foreign names in Macau.

Why Get a Foreign Name?

The practice of getting another name for oneself may not sound odd; in many countries which have had a colonial past, people often get another name in another language other than their native language.

The reason for getting a foreign name especially a Western one can be complex yet practical: to enhance better intercultural communication, to receive some form of privilege (e.g. religious or political), or to create better chances for trade and business, not to mention the political or colonial influence. In a study of Hong Kong Chinese people's preference on English names, Mathews (1996) observes some interesting points explaining why Hong Kong ethnic-Chinese people favor the use of Western first names. He points that people feel it may sound too formal if they are addressed by their full Chinese name, yet they have a tendency to restrict being called only their Chinese first names as it may sound too intimate, which is normally restricted for the use in family. Western names serve the convenience of being in the

middle – not too formal, not too intimate, yet they can maintain “superficial harmony” which is mostly practiced in educational or commercial settings where deep human relations may not necessarily be opted or developed (Mathews, 1996, p. 404).

It is not difficult to understand why Hong Kong people would opt for Western names and English names in particular, given its British colonial history. However, for Macau, when people choose a Western name they would also opt for English names, though certain people would choose Portuguese ones. Although Chinese and Portuguese are the two official languages of the special administrative region, Chinese people in Macau would choose to have an English name as their foreign name. This is explainable because of Macau’s educational and commercial settings. Most Chinese people receive their primary and secondary education in a Chinese-medium school or an English-medium school; only very few would go to a Portuguese-medium school, which many of those are ethnically Portuguese or Macanese¹. With the government’s very lenient language policy in the education sector, the Portuguese language is generally not forced into the curriculum. With such a language education background, and the very close commercial relations with Hong Kong and other regions where English is widely used, certainly an English name would help more.

Names and Identity

Naming practice has been widely studied in the sociological (Mathews, 1996), linguistic (Li, 1997; Tan, 2001; Wang & Micklin, 1996), and psychological field (Joubert, 1985; Levine & Willis, 2001). Such research supported that people do care about how they are addressed, how they conventionally present their first names, and that they form different impressions over different names (Joubert, 1985; Levine & Willis, 2001). Although the very thought of having a name may not be traceable, it should be widely agreed that a name serves as a label for people to recognize, acknowledge, and remember one another. Instead of being called “You” or “He” and “She,” a name gives a unique identity to people.

A name also gives other information except being a unique label. Many names do tell the gender of their owners, as in Amy, Emily, Judy, Mary, and Susan for women and Mark, Richard, John, Ken, and George for men. Of course there are some that are unisex such as Leslie, Jamie, Julian, Frances, Chris, and Terry, to name a few. Names can also show people’s preferences on color like Scarlet and Pinky or seasons or time of the year as in April, May, June, etc. Names, as presented in various languages, can be very culture-specific as we can tell the cultural background from a Portuguese name Sidonio, a French name Françoise, a Hebrew one Priel, or even from the transliteration Ming-fai we get to know the Chinese identity of the owner. Also, there are cases where different names were addressed to fit for different settings, though this is not planned by the name owners. Some Macanese people claimed that as they studied at an English-medium school, most people including teachers would pronounce their Portuguese names as English, such as Carmen, Sandra, and Claudia, or would even address them with an English counterpart of the Portuguese name, e.g., Candi or

¹ According to information provided by Macau Government Education and Youth Affairs Bureau (DSEJ), the number of school sections in Macau as of November 2006 is: 106 Chinese-medium schools, five Portuguese-medium schools, and 14 English-medium schools.

Candy rather than Candida. For others, the reasons may be as simple as taking advantage of a more easy pronunciation and for themselves, they do not mind mingling with people at school or work with a school/work identity where English dominates and at home back with their Portuguese identity where daily conversation is conducted in Portuguese.

Names and Self-Presentation

Self-presentation, or impression management are terms that are used interchangeably since Erving Goffman's seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published. Goffman (1959/1980) explicates a wide range of "performances" people would do consciously or unconsciously to present an image of themselves. Other psychologists and sociologists join hands in exploring more related issues (Bilbow, 1997; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; McFarland et al., 2005). Generally, self-presentation, or impression management, refers to the situation when an individual tries to control his or her impression given to others, whether it be consciously or unconsciously. More aspects of the notion was studied and more layers were uncovered, for example, impression management is a two-sided process, which while an individual attempts to control his or her image, the others' impression formed may not necessarily be consistent with the initiator (Bilbow, 1997). Research also suggests that tactics used to manage impression are multi-layered, ranging from verbal and nonverbal tactics, self-focused and other-focused, assertive and defensive (McFarland et al., 2005).

Although impression management tactics have been extensively studied, there seems no attention paid on the use of names to manage impression. Borrowing from McFarland et al.'s (2005) adaptation and summary of impression management tactics definitions, names can be said to fit the category of "self-promotion" under the category of "self-focused." Based on McFarland et al.'s (2005) chart of definitions, "self-promotion" is to "verbally demonstrate the possession of desirable qualities, such as competence, reliability, conscientiousness, and so on" (p. 953). A name, if it is chosen on the sole decision of the owner, seems to well serve this function.

Note that identity management is used also in this paper for its broader sense that includes the study of self-presentation or impression management but also with a consideration that identity details can be conveyed in names, as discussed earlier.

Discussion

The data analyzed in this paper is collected from a combination of surveys and personal interviews. A simple questionnaire is designed to be distributed among two second year classes in the University of Macau, one from the Marketing major and one from the Communications major. 120 questionnaires were collected. Short interviews were also conducted between March and June, and about 10 people were interviewed.

Out of the 120 questionnaires received, 62 people claimed they make the decisions on their existing foreign names. Others stated that their names were given by parents when they were born, by their English teachers at high school, or by recommendations from friends. All but one person stated that they like their existing names, even if they were given the names. There are several reasons for their like of foreign names. Some claim that they like the pronunciation of the foreign names, or that the names sound closely as their Chinese names.

For example, a girl named herself Yuki because it sounds closely to her Chinese name “Yok Kei” in Cantonese. There is no corresponding name with similar pronunciation in English so she chose a Japanese one instead. Also, a girl called Jenny simply because of her Chinese name “Chen Ling,” and another named Queenie as she has a Chinese name “Kwun Neng.” Other reasons include naming after an idol such as Eason as from Eason Chan, a Hong Kong Canto-pop singer, as well as Keita, a name from one of the singers in a famous young Japanese idol group W-inds, or naming after a character from a novel or movie they like or they watched, e.g., Rebecca, Ivan, Kammy, and Ethan. Besides, there is one interesting case that an individual would choose from non-proper names such as Bingo as it sounds loud and special.

There is some indication to illustrate the ability to exercise self-control and self-decision in using names with a purpose linked with impression or the like, and if they feel the name is not good anymore in any way, they feel they can change it. One of the respondents states that she does not like her English name because it sounds too common now, that many people have the same name. She felt the name was special some years ago, but is probably going to change soon. Yet another case shows an individual just changed after using her previous English name for some years as she was fed up with the many mispronunciations or enquiries for correct pronunciation so she ended up getting a new one.

Although no one admitted they chose a name to purposefully project an image of themselves towards others, when asked about impressions they form of their own names, they were able to verbalize the impressions they have, and all of these impressions are generally desirable and positive, such as lovely, elegant, feminine, friendly, mature, intelligent, calm, quiet, stylistic, special, etc. These impressions do match with their own desired image to be projected to others in general (e.g., by other means such as mannerism, appearance, etc.). Also, when asked if they feel people who gave the name wanted to help project an image for them, some gave a positive answer. For instance, one interviewee said his grandfather tried to name him after a hero, a general the grandfather met during WWII when he was also involved in the battle. Another interviewee mentioned she was named after the character of a princess in a movie her mother watched. The mother wanted her to be as beautiful and nice as the princess. There is also another reason such as a father naming his child with a Portuguese name so it creates convenience for handling Portuguese passport and documentation.

Other than forming impressions of their own names, people also stated in the survey and interviews that they do find some names from other people that they consider special, and even unusual, and they do form impressions of these people bearing an interesting or unusual name. Some interesting examples include Tobias, Sky, Destiny, Ocean, Wisely, Doggy, Magic, or a girl named Jack and another named Ken, or Ball, Stop, Party Boy, CU, and even AK47. One interviewer mentioned a friend of hers who has two different foreign names, one English and one Portuguese. Although the real intention is not sure as the person is not contactable, it may serve the function to choose and show a different face at different settings. It is also common for students to have two English names in Macau as they have to get an additional “real” English name to please their English teacher and be used for that English class only while they can keep the original English name, which was considered not appropriate or bearing negative connotations, for work or gatherings with friends.²

² A student was named “Scar” to follow her Chinese name “Si Ka” but was suggested by her

Conclusion

Other than simply being a label, names do tell a lot more information and bear the mission in portraying a person's image. People's choice of name is getting more and more diverse, and even creative, as uniqueness and memorability are considerations and trends for contemporary naming practice³. Unusual and even make-up names are the trends. It is not difficult to find names such as Bamboo for a girl as she has the Chinese character meaning bamboo in her Chinese name. Similarly, Apple is a girl's name whose Chinese name contains a character meaning apple, or Piano for a girl having a Chinese name "Kam" which means the musical instrument. And as Lee (2001) mentioned, Chinese people especially the younger generation are extremely creative so names such as Medusa, Skywalker, Feeling, Seven, Three, and Potato will be popular as people reach out for names unique and memorable. With the flourishing of interesting names and the need to use names to project image to excel in workplace or at school, more systematic and longitudinal studies of foreign names adopted in the Chinese community should be carried out.

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English teacher to change to a different name.

³ See (Dizon, 2005).

- center exercises: The role of competency demands. *Personnel Psychology*, 58, 949-980.
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