English Names and Chinese Learners

By Anthony Steward

> If names are not correct, language will not be in accordance with the truth of things.
>
> From *The Analects of Confucius*, Book 13, Verse 3

It is now a widespread practice for Chinese students of English to adopt an English[1] name and this article will examine how and why the students choose their names within the context of today's increasingly globalised world. It will also discuss how names can affect the learner, the teacher and the classroom.

Chinese names are constructed using two elements. The first is the family name or "xing". In China, there are 100 family names, used by just under 90% of the population. Typically, this name is monosyllabic, represented by a single character. The second element is the "ming", the given name that can be one or two syllables long. One of these syllables may be shared by siblings or close relatives of the same gender and generation in a family, although it has been reported that this practice has declined recently in mainland China because it has been seen to be related to "patriarchal feudalism" (Feng and Heng, 1983). In contrast with many European naming practices, the family name is placed first in Chinese, followed by the given name. A second important difference is that Chinese names can be constructed, in theory at least, from any characters – there are no words set aside exclusively for use as given names, unlike, for

example, "Anthony" or "Diana". Chinese parents will take great care in the choice of the "ming" name as meaning is paramount, and this can contrast with Western parents who may be more concerned with other features of a name and not semantics.

There are a number of reasons for Chinese students choosing to adopt an English name. Scollon and Scollon (1995) note that there are strict and complex protocols for using names in Chinese society and breaches of these protocols can cause face problems threatening either party's status by amplifying an ambiguity in the relationship. Students might choose an English name for the benefit of their foreign teachers who may be unaware of the complexities involved in using Chinese names. In addition, Chinese is a tonal language; Mandarin has four tones and the Cantonese variety has seven, and a change in tone will change the meaning of a syllable (Y'ung and Pollard, 1982). A foreign teacher using the wrong tones in pronouncing a student's name could have several consequences from a lack of response from the student to causing embarrassment to the student. A common reason given by many Chinese adopters of English names is that they wish to assist the

[1]*An "English" name in the context of this discussion will be a name chosen by students that is not necessarily considered a conventional name within western naming practices.*

foreigner by providing them with a more easily pronounceable name—a suitable strategy to avoid potential problems caused by non-Chinese speakers. This reasoning may also counter a dichotomy that Li (1997) reports: the conflict an individual may face in having to choose an English name while feeling that its use might pose a threat to their cultural or racial identity.

At this point, it is worth noting that when addressing Chinese teachers, students normally use one of a number of honorifics, denoting the teacher's status, as well as the teacher's family name. From personal observation, many foreign teachers tell students to address them by their given names. If the students also use an English name, this will suggest a different student–teacher relationship. Between Chinese teacher and Chinese student, there is a clear hierarchy with the use of the deferential honorific emphasizing the power of the teacher and distance between the two parties. In the case of the foreign teacher and student both using less formal names, the relationship will still be hierarchical but ameliorated by a narrowing of the distance and lessening of the power dimension, at least on the surface. Edwards (2006) suggests this is actually more democratic, establishing equilibrium in classrooms where communicative teaching practices are being pursued. However, more evidence might be required to prove this assertion.

While many teachers will encourage students to take an English name, few seem to think it should be mandatory. This imposition of a name could have negative consequences, both in the classroom and on the student's attitude to learning the language. Assuming a new name can bring a language learner into a new community; the new identity this membership endows should act as a positive motivator. Enforced naming could both reinforce resistance to learning and pose a threat to the student's existing cultural identity. Thompson (2006) suggests that both language learners and immigrants face complex choices when faced with taking a new name. These are associated with the individual's construction of several identities and investment in a number of communities of practice.

Throughout this paper, the new names will be described as "English". This is because as well as selecting conventional names, many Chinese students adopt a range of names from the colourful to what might be considered bizarre. McPherron (2009) identified five categories for describing the students' choice of a name. Some names are based on their Chinese names, either through meaning or sound; secondly, they may identify a personality trait or future ambition; thirdly, they may be taken from personalities; fourthly, they can be newly created names; and finally, they may be chosen from lists or supplied by a teacher. As Lee (2001) notes, some names are also chosen to express individuality, playfulness and creativity. Occasionally, students choose names that may cause teachers to intervene. One student chose "Liquid Luck". Although a seemingly implausible choice, it appears in a "Harry Potter" novel as a potion that can bring good fortune. This student has since adopted another name. "Adolph" chose his name based on rather limited knowledge of the associations it carries. Many male students choose names of basketball or football players (Kobe, Beckham or Rooney being popular choices), while others use characters in computer games. Again, teachers may initially be surprised by the selection but subsequent investigation can often reveal the importance of these names to the students.

Adoption of English names is not a universal practice throughout Asia. Although many Chinese are willing to take an English name, Silver and Shiomi (2010) point out that this is not so with Japanese students. This may be because, according to Sugimoto (1997), the Japanese have a strong belief that their country is unique and therefore are perhaps more resistant to adding to their identity. Silver and Shiomi suggest the Chinese are more accepting of English names because of the use of English as a lingua franca and, as Kirkpatrick (2007) notes, it is perceived as a passport to social and economic improvement. From anecdotal evidence from other teachers, it appears that the practice of adopting an English name is more prevalent in China than other countries in the region.

Writing on identity, culture and critical pedagogy, Hinkel (2005) suggests that notions of identity and culture are in a constant state of change in response to evolving social status and education, shifts in ideology and reflecting

political and historical legacies. This can account for students changing their English names, particularly at times of transition. There may be a realization that a name used in an EFL setting may not be as appropriate in an ESL classroom. This may happen when a student moves from China to a university abroad, moving from one speech community to another, and re-identifying themselves to adapt to their new environment.

In China, the students will have shared identities in terms of age, ethnicity, language and social attitudes. Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) will, almost by definition, have little in common with their students and both must work to overcome uncertainties and create a positive learning environment. By adopting new names, at least for use in the classroom, the students will have taken a conscious step to creating a new, albeit artificially constructed, community. For teachers, tolerance of the variety of names would signal their acceptance of the students' right to create their own new identities and this should contribute to the evolution of a new community embracing every member of the classroom. However, students should also be warned of the possibility of an inappropriate name causing embarrassment. Teachers should be aware that even though their status in the classroom is not disputed, imposition of names could be seen as hostile, an external threat to the group. Equally, as Dornyei and Murphy (2003) stress, it is important for teachers to know and address the students by their names – this also reinforces the sense of community. By creating a new identity, students can be seen to be taking a positive interest in their target language community, described by Gardner and Lambert (1972) as an "integrative orientation".

An informal survey was carried out in March 2012 in a class of first-year students at a joint-venture university in Eastern China. Fourteen students gave written responses to ten questions about their English names. Most had adopted English names before entering the university, one-third having had these names for at least ten years. Only two students reported that they were required to take names by their teachers and another two reported that they did so because of peer influence in high school. One of the girls, Laura,

mandated to take the name by her teacher, admitted she was, and still is, totally unaware of her name's meaning although she had been using it for ten years. Tibby, who chose her name while in primary school from a character in the film *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants,* did so because "most students in my class had one English name, and having a name in other languages was a kind of fashion" adding: "I really liked the role Tibby, and my friend told me that that girl Tibby in the movie and I had a lot of similarities." She also uses this name on social media sites. She mentioned liking the name because she felt it is easy to pronounce and spell, and surprisingly, "my Chinese name is a little difficult to pronounce, many people (including my Chinese teacher in elementary school) even don't know (sic) how to pronounce my family name." She also gave the most forthright response to a question about the use of English names in English classes: "I got a feeling like 'I am communicating with the native speakers!' It's a little difficult to describe, just like being involved…In a word, it will be good if my English name is used in class." This seems to indicate that she does feel as if she has membership of the particular community that should exist in the language classroom.

Like Tibby, all but one of the students use social media. Several said that they used the same English name for their online identity but just over half chose other names, often a different name, either Chinese or non-Chinese, for each social website they subscribed to. None of the students felt their online names were more important than their real-life English name and all but one said they would never stop using their English name. Most would keep it because they saw it as being useful in communicating with foreigners, especially if they were to study abroad or conduct business internationally. The one student who saw his new name as transitory observed: "If one day I don't need to use English any more, I will stop using it". He appeared to be the least accepting of the class of an English name, only taking one during his first term at university and choosing, at his parents' suggestion, a name that sounded like his Chinese name. Over half the students in fact chose single or two syllable names that reflected the structure of the syllable in Mandarin Chinese (Ross & Ma, 2006), that of

an initial consonant and a final - names such as Cathy, Vicky and Maggie.

Overall, the responses from this group of students bore out the pragmatic reasons discussed earlier for taking an English name. Communicating with teachers, use in English-language classrooms and contact with foreign friends were the predominant reasons, but many of the students also saw the name as an investment for their future. For Katherine, "a name can be a symbol of each person. It is necessary for us to have an English name as English has been (sic) widely used all over the world." The students perhaps reflect the growing awareness in China of the nation's role in the world and the need for individuals to develop global identities.

A sampling of Chinese students in late 2013 who were spending their final undergraduate years at a British university yielded some interesting results, some going counter to expectations. Out of one hundred responses monitored, only fifteen had modified their English names after arriving in the U.K., while others had retained their original, and still somewhat exotic, names such as Vager, Barbossa and Pope. Identity seems to have played an important role with some like Haki, Kuroki and Yuqing retaining their names, while David, Veronica and May changed to Vector, Fay and Dan because they reported these new names felt more Chinese even if it meant, as in May's case, adopting a name more associated with another gender. In all these cases, it seems retaining a measure of oriental identity in an occidental environment was preferable to assimilation.

A number of reasons were given for making changes, from the realization that the old name (Perfect) was "weird" and might make its owner "a laughing stock", to the adoption of a new name (Katrina) in order to reflect the transition to a new country and a new life. Echo was retired because of its association with a local newspaper, and Dennis became Nathan partly because the former name had been imposed by an English teacher (presumably a NEST) back in China and the new name was in honour of a favourite TV show character as well as in celebration of a new experience. The students were not asked to report at what stage they decided to change their names and it may well be that several of the respondents will "re-brand" themselves in

the future. The need to retain a sense of "Chinese-ness" is perhaps for many an act of cultural solidarity within the group when confronted by a very alien environment, perhaps reflecting the stage of culture shock that follows the initial honeymoon period described by both Oberg (1960) and Brown (1980).

Finally, it should be noted there has been little research into the value of the use of English names by Chinese learners. It does appear that the voluntary adoption of these names may be of value to the individual in helping build multiple new identities, and also in protecting existing identities and removing potential barriers in communication between non-Chinese teachers and their students. This also contributes to the narrowing of what Schumann (as cited in Holliday et al., 2010) described as the social distance between the learners and the target language personified in the teacher, creating greater solidarity between the two parties and facilitating acquisition of the target language. Future surveys might yield more data regarding students' perceptions of how a new name could contribute to a change in attitude in the classroom. The issue of the teacher's name might also be a fruitful topic to research as some might feel that a NEST teaching in China should adopt a Chinese name to show solidarity with the students, whereas others could argue that all names in the classroom should be English in order to establish a single communal identity.

References

Brown, H. D. (1980). The optimal distance model of Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly, 14*(2), 157–164.

Dornyei, Z. and Murphy, T. (2003). *Group dynamics in the language classroom.* Cambridge: CUP.

Edwards, R. (2006). What's in a name? Chinese learners and the practice of adopting 'English' names. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 19*(1), 90–103.

Fang, H. and Heng, J. (1983). Social changes and changing address norms in China. *Language in Society 12*, 495–507.

Gardner, R. and Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in Second-Language Learning.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Holliday, A., Hyde, M., and Kullman, J. (2010). *Intercultural communication: An advanced resource book for students*. London: Routledge.

Hinkel, E. (Ed.). (2005). *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). *World Englishes: Implications for international communication and English Language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.

Lantolf, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: OUP.

Lee, J. (2001, February 11). Chinese youth take names from West: Hi Medusa! *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2 February, 2012, from http://www.nytimes.com.

Li, D. (1997). Borrowed Identity: Signaling involvement with a western name. *Journal of Pragmatics, 28*, 489–513.

McPherron, P. (2009). My name is Money: Name choices and global identifications at a South Chinese university. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 29*(4), 521–536.

Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 177–182.

Pavlenko, A. and Lantolf, J. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (Re) construction of selves. In Lantolf, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (pp. 155–177). Oxford: OUP.

Ross, C. and Ma, J. (2006). *Modern Mandarin Chinese Grammar: A practical guide.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Riley, P. (2007). *Language, culture and identity*. London: Continuum.

Scollon, R. and Scollon, S. (1995). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach.* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Silver, R. and Shiomi, K. (2010). Crossing linguistic boundaries: When students use English names in English classes. *Language and Cultural Studies, 22*(2), 181–199.

Sugimoto, Y. (1997). *An introduction to Japanese society.* Cambridge: CUP. In Holliday, A., Hyde, M., and Kullman, J. (2010). *Intercultural Communication*. London: Routledge.

Y'ung, P. and Pollard, D. (1982). *Colloquial Chinese*. London: Routledge.

Anthony Steward is currently an English Tutor at XJTLU. He has an MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL but spent most of his working life in television news before entering the teaching profession.

anthony.steward@utoronto.ca