

HOW BRAND NAMES WORK IN CHINA

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THE TRUTH IN NAMING SERIES
VOLUME 5

.....

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DOUBLEBIT

**HAVING A NAME
THAT WORKS
GLOBALLY IS ONE
THING.**

**OWNING A NAME IN
CHINA IS... UH...
SOMETHING ELSE.**

China's trademark rules are different.

To do business in China, you need a Chinese name, in Chinese characters. And that Chinese name has to be trademarked separately from the global name.

This is the law.

In some countries, if you're the first to use a name (in association with goods and services), you are the rightful owner. In China, your protection comes from being the first to register. That allows people in China to register names without necessarily using them, or using them in association with anything they're selling.

This also lets people pounce on the best Chinese translations of global brand names before the brands themselves, leaving a lot of businesses with translation options that are...not good.

**FIRST, YOU HAVE
TO UNDERSTAND
CHINESE**

Well, understand how it works.

“Do I need to own my name in both Mandarin and Cantonese?”

There are a lot of important Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Wu, Cantonese, Hakka...the list goes on). Even the “small” ones are spoken by millions of people.

There is good news: While there are lots of Chinese dialects, there’s just one written character system that your brand name needs to be concerned with.

You’ll still want to make sure you get input from speakers of multiple dialects, but you’ll only need one Chinese name to do business in China.

Smell that? That's the smell of nuance.

Nearly every word has the potential to carry a multitude of associations with different cultures around the world (trust me, there is no word that isn't at least a little offensive, to someone, somewhere).

But Chinese characters, unlike Roman letters, carry both phonetic sound and conceptual meaning. So when you create a Chinese name that adapts the exact sound of your name, each syllable carries a small story with it—the combination of which might be anything from spot-on to hilarious to irredeemably disastrous.

**READY TO
NAME?**

Your options generally follow one of four paths

1. Literate
2. Translate
3. Transliterate
4. Transcreate

But, given that you'll probably have to consider a lot of names before landing on one that you can successfully register a Chinese name, it's best to have an open mind about possible paths. Translated and transliterated names might get taken off the table right away.

One final note...

As we look at some examples, it might help to clarify two terms:

Chinese characters: The way the name is presented in writing in Chinese.

For example, Coca-Cola in Chinese characters is:

可口可乐 (we're showing examples in simplified script)

Pinyin: A standardized way of presenting romanized spelling for transliterating Chinese.

For example, Coca-Cola in pinyin is:

kěkǒu kělè

LITERATION

Get a name with identical sound

This is the obvious place to start—no one needs to learn a second way to say your name! Glorious! But it might also be a dead end.

In almost zero cases is your name, phonetically mapped to Chinese characters, going to mean the same thing as your name does in its language of origin. And that's fine—you can build meaning in other ways.

But you do need to do your homework to figure out what your global name conveys in Chinese—what does the average speaker think of when they see the name?

- Does it carry an association that supports your brand, even tenuously? Hey, that's great! This might work!
- Is it nonsense? You might be able to work with that. You'll need to invest in communications that connect it to the brand proposition, but it's been done (*cough* Google *cough*).
- Is it deeply offensive in such a way that even the most jaded teen would go, “Whoa, not cool”? Friend, it's time to move on.

Let's look at what Disney does

Disney is named for the last name of its creator, Walt Disney. Sure the brand stands for imagination, but you could argue that there's nothing about the name itself to translate. So it makes sense that Disney chose a pretty nonsensical Chinese name, prioritizing a pronunciation that gives it a pretty similar sound to its original English pronunciation.

Chinese characters: 迪士尼

Pinyin: dí shì ní

What it means: dí means to enlighten; shì has meanings that include member of the senior ministerial class, bachelor, honorific, and soldier; ní means Buddhist nun.

All told, the name doesn't say much, but it's absurd and inoffensive enough to earn associations what the Disney brand stands for around the world (magic, imagination, and paying too much for parking).

TRANSLATION

Get a name with identical meaning

Doubtlessly, you put a lot of thought into the strategy behind your brand name. It conveys something true about who you are and what you stand for, and you'd like to carry that meaning through to your Chinese name.

There are some brand names that just aren't going to be candidates for this type of name adaptation. Think family names (like Dixon Ticonderoga Company, S.C. Johnson, Pfaltzgraff...Pfaltzgraff's really winning in the consonant department, though), ultra-coined abstract names(Luxottica,Hulu, Häagen-Dazs)...basically anything that doesn't have an entry in an English-to-Chinese dictionary. If this is you, you can skip right to the next step.

This strategy has a lot of the same allure as real-world naming in English—who doesn't want to own something as clear and accessible as Apple or Dove? But that doesn't mean a direct translation of your name is going to be A) distinctive in Chinese culture or B) available from a trademark perspective. Worth the investigation, but chances are, the final two strategies in our bag of tricks will be where you find the right name.

Let's look at what Facebook does

A name with clear, descriptive meaning is a good candidate for translation. Facebook (let's break it down: face + book) communicates pretty much the same thing in Chinese.

Chinese characters: 脸书

Pinyin: liǎnshū

What it means: liǎn means face; shū means book (as well as letter; document; to write).

While the brand has made the effort to localize its name, it's fun (for us, not Facebook) to note that it's not widely available in China, but is accessible in Cantonese-heavy Hong Kong and Macau, and Mandarin-speaking Taiwan.

TRANSLITERATION

Get a name with similar sound and meaning

In this approach, you look for a name with relevant meaning in written Chinese, but that feels comfy, cozy, and loosely connected (in pronunciation, anyhow) to the name you use in the rest of the world.

Sure, it's not as directly connected to your original brand name as a literated or transliterated name would be, but this starts to open up more possibilities in terms of what your name communicates in Chinese, and what's available in the wild world of trademarks.

Let's look at what Nike does

To English speakers familiar with Greek mythology, Nike conjures associations with a winged goddess of victory. To others, it stands for its now-legendary brand theme: “If you have a body, you are an athlete.” It nailed down a Chinese name that balances its English pronunciation with a meaning that favors its earned athletic associations over its mythological origins.

Chinese characters: 耐克

Pinyin: nàikè

What it means: nài means capable of enduring; able to tolerate; patient; durable; and hardy, while kè means to be able to; to subdue; to restrain; to overcome.

The result is a name that's both clearly a match to its Roman-character name phonetically and a strong alignment with the inner-athlete themes it emphasizes in its global communications.

TRANSCREATION

Get a name that is based on the same creative idea

Let's get the "con" of this naming style out of the way: it means you're probably going to break with your international name in some way. That can be hard to imagine (you love your name!). But transcreation, which adapts your name's intent and style but adapts to the cultural context of where it will appear (i.e., China), can mean you get to choose from names that are going to actually make meaningful sense to Chinese audiences. That should matter.

Thankfully, there are a number of terrific transcreation agencies that specialize in doing just this. They can take the original naming brief for your Roman-character name and explore ways to bring it to life that will be distinctive and memorable. And because this will open things up to more original ways of adapting your name, it might just be the way to landing a name that's not already been registered by a trademark squatter.

Let's look at what Pizza Hut does

Pizza Hut is one of the most successful foreign fast food chains in China. While not all credit goes to the name (unlike Domino's, they tailored their restaurants to local tastes, ingredients, and preferences), they picked one that told a bold story in Chinese. It doesn't sound like or communicate anything related to its global name, but maybe that's because we should be asking why we're getting pizza from...a hut?

Chinese characters: 必胜客

Pinyin: bì shèng kè

What it means: bì means certainly; must, shèng means victory, wonderful, success, kè means customer; visitor; guest.

It suggests that guests are certain to experience something superb. Hey, taste is subjective.

MAKING CHINESE NAMES

Call in the experts

Unless you're fluent in one of the major dialects (with familiarity in others), you are going to want to work with a transcreation agency, if not also a naming agency that specializes in Chinese names (as the author of this booklet and someone who has managed Chinese transcreation projects, I wouldn't even consider myself a specialist—it's tricky stuff).

But if you're managing a project like this and want to get smart, here are some basic resources that might let you at least check on things that are being presented to you, or to make your own suggestions.

Google Translate: It definitely has its shortcomings, but it's a quick and simple tool for understanding what certain words might mean.

YellowBridge: A guide to Chinese language and culture for English speakers, it is a great resource for getting the Chinese name, translation, and pinyin for many global brands.

**BASICALLY, YOU
NEED TO NAME
YOUR BRAND
AGAIN NO
MATTER WHAT.**

SORRY.

About the author

Caitlin Barrett likes to do creative things. Strategically.



Caitlin Barrett is a writer, namer, and brand strategist based in Brooklyn. As a partner in Doublebit Narrative, she spends all day bossing words around.

In her spare time, she lifts heavy things, restores antique axes, and tells jokes to herself on Twitter @badnewsbarrett.

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