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# Branding in China: Alternative Brand Strategies Branding in China: Global Product Strategy Alternatives

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**BRANDING IN CHINA:  
GLOBAL PRODUCT STRATEGY ALTERNATIVES**

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# **BRANDING IN CHINA: GLOBAL PRODUCT STRATEGY ALTERNATIVES**

## ***ABSTRACT***

This article reviews and discusses issues in translation of international brand names to Chinese, and provides a framework for international brand managers who want to expand into China. Linguistic differences between Chinese and English are wide and deep, making translation of brand names difficult. Cultural context, pronunciation, written vs. oral language, and meaning of characters are just a few examples of such difficulties. We discuss four global-product-naming strategic alternatives available to country/brand managers, along with their usage, and give examples of brands utilizing the different approaches. The four approaches we discuss include (1) dual extension, (2) brand meaning extension, (3) brand feeling extension, and (4) dual adaptation.

***KEYWORDS:*** *brand names, Chinese language, translation, transliteration, localization*

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## **BRANDING IN CHINA: GLOBAL PRODUCT STRATEGY ALTERNATIVES**

### **THE CHINA BRANDING CHALLENGE**

Branding in China is a challenge for Western firms. A well-known (and classic) example of brand naming in China is Coca-Cola's. When Coca-Cola first entered the Chinese market in 1928 they had no official representation of their name in Mandarin Chinese. They needed to find four Chinese characters whose pronunciations approximated the sound of the brand without producing a nonsensical or adverse meaning when strung together as a written phrase. While written Chinese employs thousands of different characters, there are only about 200 pronounced sounds that can be used in forming the name *kǒ-kǎ-kǒ-là*. While Coca-Cola was searching for a satisfactory combination of symbols to represent their name, Chinese shopkeepers created signs that combined characters whose pronunciations formed the string *kǒ-kǎ-kǒ-là*, but they did so with no regard for the meanings of the written phrases they formed in doing so. The character for wax, pronounced *là*, was used in many of these signs, resulting in strings that sounded like *kǒ-kǎ-kǒ-là* when pronounced, but conveyed unflattering, nonsensical meanings such as "female horse fastened with wax," "wax-flattened mare," or "bite the wax tadpole" when read in Mandarin.

When Coca Cola first entered the Hong Kong and Shanghai markets, the Cantonese-based brand name chosen which emulated the original English sound but meant "pleasant to mouth and wax" in Mandarin, which was rather strange. So when Coca Cola entered the mainland China market, it used a revised name which appealed more to the ideographic sense than the original English sound. The name chosen was *kě-kǒu-kě-lè* which meant "Can-Be-Tasty-Can-Be-Happy", *hó-háu-hó-lòhk* in Cantonese (Li & Shoostari, 2003). Coca-Cola had to avoid using many of the 200 symbols available for forming *kǒ-kǎ-kǒ-lè* because of their meanings, including all of the characters which were pronounced *là*. They compromised by opting for the character *lè*, meaning "joy," and approximately pronounced as *lùh* or *lèr* depending upon the Chinese dialect. For the transliteration of the name Coca-Cola they finally settled on using the following characters: Traditional Characters: 可口可樂, Simplified Characters: 可口可乐. This representation literally translated to "to allow the mouth to be able to rejoice," and it acceptably represented the concept of "something palatable from which one receives pleasure." Coca-Cola registered it as its Chinese trademark in 1928. The process is a classic example of careful and successful brand naming in the Chinese context.

What the Coca Cola story exemplifies is that linguistic nuances in Chinese can affect brand sound and brand meaning which, in turn, can affect consumer perceptions and brand identity. Marketers to China must have realized prior to entry that the market is culturally distinct, requiring some degree of localization (Alon, 2003). One area of such needed localization is in the brand name strategies. With several major dialects, and with the standard Chinese language characters having different oral pronunciations, brand names must be modified carefully to relate to local consumers. With general linguistic principles of Chinese brand naming being investigated and discovered (Chan and Huang, 1997, 2001a & 2001b), how to use linguistics, especially sound symbolism to create meaningful and easy-to-remember brand names, and how to pronounce these brand names are among the most important elements in the transfer of information between and among manufacturers, products and customers (Klink, 2000).

Brand naming is a product element that contributes to brand equity, positioning, unique advertising and competitive advantage of a firm. Toyota's Chinese branding of the SUV Prado, launched by Saatchi & Saatchi, Beijing, was translated to *bà dào* which roughly translates to "the mighty rule," or "rule by force." This masculine depiction of the Japanese SUV was also accompanied by advertised media that showed two stone lions saluting and bowing to the car. This cultural blunder evoked association of Japanese occupation of China during WWII and attracted government censorship, public outrage, and a call for a boycott of the company (Li & Shoostari, 2007).

In China, advertising amounts to about US\$16 billion of annual spending (globally 5<sup>th</sup> after USA, Japan, Germany and the UK), and China's ad spending is predicted to grow by more than 63% between 2007 and 2010 (ZennithOptima, Press Release, June 2008). International branding has

contributed and will continue to contribute to advertising spending and the ongoing integration of China into the global marketplace.

Cross-cultural translation of a brand name, in both content and context, needs to appeal to the local market, and, at the same time, stay true to its global image. In China, this is particularly difficult to do. The Chinese language is radically different from the Roman-alphabet-based languages (with which the majority of the Chinese population still has little familiarity) and direct translation is not easily achievable. In addition, the meaning of the chosen characters plays an important role and may communicate product attributes, benefits, country-of-origin, traditional/modern values, beliefs and customs, or even patriotism (Fan, 2002). Through the prism of both sociolinguistics and the standardization/adaptation theories, we review some differences in the Chinese language (particularly in the commonly used Mandarin language) in relation to cross-cultural branding literature, and offer a 2x2 novel framework that distinguishes among four discrete international branding strategies in China for multinational Western firms interested in the Chinese marketplace.

### **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT BRANDING IN CHINA**

While some studies have provided insight into the China branding mystery, few managerial frameworks exist for dealing with translating Western brands into Chinese. The need for creating effective brand names across languages has academic research support (Klink, 2000). All firms that expand abroad face decisions as to whether their brand names should be standardized or localized to adapt to market conditions (Francis, Lam & Walls, 2002). But, in China, where linguistic and cultural differences are immense, the decision to adapt the brand is much more daunting. Li and Shooshtari (2003), for example, examined the challenges of brand naming in China, and suggested that the Chinese language, which exemplifies the sociolinguistic features typical of high-context cultures (Hall, 1976) and a unique institutional environment, is key to understand for successful branding. High context cultures are those which generally communicate more opaquely and which take into account circumstantial cues and signals to interpret the meaning of a message. Most Western countries and, in particular, Anglo-Saxon cultures possess a low-context culture (compared to the Chinese) which communicates messages and cues more directly and openly. A strong socio-linguistic difference between Chinese and English, for example, makes brand transference across the two cultures especially daunting, as shown in the Coca Cola example described above. While English belongs to the Indo-European language group, Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language group. The two languages groups share few commonalities.

Language forms a map in the mind that filters experience to form impressions; it forms identities around linguistic roots which inform our understanding. Simply said, different languages experience and perceive different realities (Lee, 2006). Marketing strategies, including branding, that rely simply on mere translation of language when transferring advertising messages into cross-cultural markets run the risk of being culturally incongruent (Valencia, 1989). Besides faulty language translations, common errors made by multinationals in message development include insensitivity to cultural values and beliefs (Ricks, 1993; Ricks, Arpan, & Fu, 1974; Valencia, 1989).

Chinese has about 9,400 morphemes, which are the smallest, meaningful units of language, typically corresponding to one syllable. Modern Chinese combines different morphemes, rather than using them independently, with over 70% of the modern Chinese words made up of two morphemes, or two syllables. Because of this feature of the language, brand names have to consider the two-syllable prosodic structure of words (Chan & Huang, 1997 & 2001b).

Since names in Chinese are all formed through compounding morphemes from an inventory of 3,500 frequently used morphemes and because the majority of nouns are disyllabic, Chinese nouns have two very distinguishing features. First, since every morpheme in Chinese has its own original meaning, nouns (which combine morphemes) create new and unique meanings. Second, the formation of Chinese nouns is more complicated than the corresponding English activity. Due to its alphabetic system, English allows for the creation of words to express meaning; however, Chinese does not have a corresponding freedom (Chan & Huang, 1997).

Chinese names (including brand names) usually consist of a combination of characters. The importance of names is best exemplified by significance of choosing names for Chinese children – it is the name-giver's augury for the future of the child (Li & Shooshtari, 2003). When translating business cards, a savvy international business person chooses carefully the characters that represent the name, heeding similarities to the corresponding English name either in meaning or sound (or both



if possible). In a sense, international executives working in China can “re-brand” themselves by choosing characters for their Chinese name. Those tasked with branding decisions are advised to choose characters with positive Chinese meanings.

Thoughtful translation of a company’s brand name is critical to success as translation of a brand name is an adaptation not only of a symbol that represents ideas or attributes by its sound and/or meaning, but also a translation of the foundation of a product and company’s image. A carefully created and chosen name can bring value to the brand, provided that the brand name has desirable properties within the target market. As firms internationalize, their brand-names are tested in different cultural settings, and usage of linguistic assets, such as phonetics, etymology and rhetoric, to translate or transform a brand name has become critical (Usunie & Shaner, 2002).

In order to analyze the linguistic component of a brand name, one may adopt a framework that consists of semantic, phonetic, and morphological components of the name. The semantic component is the actual meaning of the name and the associations it has built up through use over time. The phonetic factor is the pronunciation of the brand name, which should be easy to pronounce and should be pleasing to the ear. The morphological component deals with the length of the brand name. While English speakers prefer simple over compound nominals, the Chinese language uses compounding to a greater extent (Chan & Huang, 1997, Francis, Lam, & Walls, 2002). And Chinese consumers prefer visual images provoked by linguistic symbols (Li & Shooshtari, 2003).

Practical advice abounds. Research indicates two-syllable brand names and modifier-noun compound names are the easiest ones for people to pronounce and remember in China (Chan & Huang, 2001a and 2001b). Li and Shooshtari (2003) have suggested that (1) Chinese brands should be easy to say, easy to spell, easy to read and easy to remember; (2) simplicity in choices of Chinese characters is preferred; (3) brand names should benefit from intuitive thinking and knowledge of the target market. Chan and Huang (2001a and 2001b) have suggested that Chinese brand translation should relate to the syllabic, tonal, compound structure, and semantic preferences of the Chinese (following an adaptation strategy), and used the beverage industry to show how Chinese branding principles have been applied. Francis, Lam and Walls (2002) found that as far as connotation is concerned, most of the brand names in both English and Chinese had positive or neutral connotations, and that localized names generally had a more positive connotation than the original/foreign names (57.85% vs. 24.33%). In their study of 49 companies, 26 took cultural issues into account, which resulted in 61 of the 189 localized names.

Some in Chinese society analyze the “luckiness factor” of a name (Ashton Brand Group, 1999), considering, for example, the characters’ balance of *yīn* (even number of strokes) and *yáng* (odd number of strokes), which is of course complicated by the use of simplified vs. traditional writing systems discussed later. Others consider the balance and harmony of the characters, placing much emphasis on aesthetics, calligraphy and style of Chinese writing.

A number of suggestions have been given on how to translate a brand name into Chinese, but conceptual models for international branding strategies are mostly absent. Our paper contributes to the guidance given to managers about translating the brand from English to Chinese by providing a new and innovative model, utilizing a 2x2 framework which distinguishes between Chinese written (meaning) and pronounced (feeling) forms. Now that we have established the importance of brand translation and the China challenge, we turn our attention to why Chinese is unique before we develop our framework.

### **WHY IS CHINESE SO HARD?**

Chinese is difficult, particularly for a Westerner who comes from the Proto-Indo-European language group with different socio-linguistic identity. Readers who are interested in knowing why Chinese is so hard for a Westerner to learn are advised to examine Moser (2008). To illustrate this point from a sociolinguistic perspective, we will concentrate on a few of the key issues unique to the Chinese language and, therefore, to brand translation in China: (1) contextuality, (2) written forms, and (3) spoken forms.

#### **Contextuality**

The Chinese language is contextual. The contextuality of a language is one of the distinguishing features of a culture. Hall (1976, p. 91) noted that a “high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.” A low-context

communication is just the opposite; that is, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Low-context communication is relatively common in the USA while China has a high-context culture. With respect to message strategy, low-context communication cultures tend to use more copy, argumentation, facts and data than high-context cultures (De Mooij, 1998). High-context cultures can be recognized by the use of indirect communication, using less copy and more symbols. The brand aesthetics, trademark, characters, written strokes, and sound combination affect Chinese consumer perceptions, more than they would Americans'. Li & Shooshtari (2003) suggested that consumers' sociolinguistic backgrounds shape their responses to brand names.

### **Written Forms**

Language is the key medium through which marketing communications (including brand names) are delivered. A major difference between English and Chinese is the way in which each is written. While Western languages are based on an alphabetical phonetic system, the Chinese language is based on ideograms, written symbols that represent objects rather than simply a particular word or sound. Because of this difference, a reader of English may be able to pronounce a word without understanding its meaning, while a reader of Chinese may be able to understand the meaning of a word without knowing its pronunciation. One key linguistic difference that would affect the decision whether to standardize or localize brand names from English to Chinese, for example, is located in the writing system itself (Francis, Lam, & Walls, 2002).

The basic building blocks of the Chinese writing system are its characters. These characters are composed of one or more strokes, carry meanings, and have pronounceable syllables. There are more than 50,000 Chinese characters in record, but only about 7,000 are in general use, and, of those, only 3,500 are frequently used. A given sound in Chinese may have multiple characters. Sometimes, when independent characters are paired, they transform meanings and create new, synthetic characters (which may or may not be related to the base characters in meaning or sound). By combining characters one can change both meaning and pronunciation.

Chinese people perceive and evaluate writing differently than do Westerners. For the Chinese, a written name can be viewed as a work of art stemming from the long history of written communication in China. Beautiful renderings of characters can assist in positive brand associations. Characters and radicals (combining characters) themselves can carry meaning. Therefore, the connotations and meanings of a two/three-character name must be analyzed at different levels.

Modern written Chinese is also available in traditional and simplified forms. The traditional form is older and is still used in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the simplified form was introduced by the Mainland China government in 1949. Marketers wishing to target the 1.3 billion consumers in the Mainland may opt for a simplified version of the name, but some brands that want to communicate trust and wisdom may still use traditional characters. While the simplified written form is popular and widely used in the mainland, it is generally believed that the representation of Chinese character stems in the traditional written forms, which can always be decomposed and explained, can reflect a deeper meaning and wisdom incorporated within the characters. In China, therefore, it is still popular for people to use traditional characters on name cards.

### **Spoken Forms**

While Chinese writing is standardized, using either "Traditional" (primarily outside Mainland China) or "Simplified" (primarily within Mainland China) characters, depending upon where a Chinese consumer comes from, the spoken language and cultural practices can be quite different. Culturally and linguistically speaking, China is more like the EU than it is like the US. There are more than a dozen major Chinese oral dialects within Mainland China, but the dialect that is most common is "Mandarin" (*pǔtōnghuà*, or common speech), from Beijing and surrounding Hebei Province. A comparable European analogue would be the "Romance Languages", the Latin-derived Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. An added complication in translating a brand to Chinese is that it will sound different in various dialects, making it difficult to transliterate.

Chinese has seven major language groups of which the Mandarin language is only one, albeit the largest. Even within the Mandarin group, there is a wide range of dialects in the northern, central, and western regions. Another large group consists of the Cantonese dialects, which are spoken in Hong Kong, Guangdong, Southern Guangxi, Zhuang Autonomous Region, parts of Hainan, Macau, and in many overseas settlements. The Hakka (Kejia) languages are spoken in Guangdong, southwestern Fujian, Jiangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hainan, Taiwan,

Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, many overseas Chinese communities, and in pockets throughout Southeast Asia. Most of the inhabitants of the south central region in Hunan use the Xiang dialects, also known as Hunanese. The Min dialects are spoken in most of Fujian, large areas of Taiwan and Hainan, parts of Eastern Guangdong and the Leizhou Bandao Peninsula, and in areas of Southeast Asia. Most of the people living in Jiangxi, the eastern part of Hunan, and the southeastern corner of Hubei use the Gan dialects. The majority of the inhabitants of Zhejiang, as well as people living in southern areas of Jiangsu and Anhui, speak the Wu dialects. The Wu dialects share marginal mutual intelligibility with the Mandarin and Gan dialects. The Chinese people are very heterogeneous and their differences can be quite subtle to a non-Chinese person.

The linguistic and cultural diversity in China underscores the difficulty of making a universal Chinese branding strategy that emulates sounds and meaning. The variety of sounds for a character creates a situation where reliance upon standardized phonetics is impossible for a “universal” Chinese brand name, and Mandarin phonetics must be used if a company’s marketing operation deems the sound of the brand name to be important. Mandarin Chinese is strongly promoted by the Government as the official dialect, but local linguistic preferences and customs still prevail.

Since Chinese characters can be pronounced differently (in different dialects), companies must examine their names to insure they sound pleasant and are easy to pronounce in all major language markets, especially in the cities or provinces that comprise the target markets for the brand. Due to the large number of homonyms, it is possible that a spoken name has a homonym with a negative meaning. Thus, the full spectrum of sound associations must be carefully examined to uncover the various messages a name may hold.

All Chinese dialects/languages have a large number of homonyms (words which are represented by different characters but have identical pronunciations). For example, the Chinese pronunciation of *gōng* can be represented by at least ten different characters with meanings that include work, bow, public, meritorious service, attack, supply, palace, and respectful. Chinese is also a tonal language, meaning the same phonetic pronunciation will have different meanings dependent upon the tone used when it is pronounced; also, the context in which the word is said will affect meaning.

What the above discussion suggests is that Chinese is unique from Indo-European languages, and particularly English, in both style and form. Written and spoken variations suggest that an approach which takes both the meaning of the characters and their pronunciation is needed. We now turn our attention to developing our framework.

### **TRANSLATING YOUR BRAND TO CHINESE**

The Chinese market poses challenges to brand names that rely on phonetic appeals. In order for Chinese consumers to fully accept brand names, the brand names should be translated into ideographic characters. Although there are some examples of English words (like “email”, “cool”, and “party”) where linguistic universalism has crept in, the brand will ultimately be judged in the local Chinese context, and will need a Chinese identity. Even universal words such as the word “cool”, for example, which is popular among Chinese youth and has a universal appeal, is transliterated as *kū* in Chinese has different meanings, both positive and negative, mostly associated with Western individualist values (Moore, 2005).

Four brand translation methods that can be generally observed in China:

- (1) *Transliterations without meaning* -- the brand sounds similar in Chinese and English, but the characters shown in the brand have no discernable meaning.
- (2) *Transliteration with meanings* -- the brand sounds similar in Chinese and English, and the characters shown in the brand provide a meaningful combination (like the Coca Cola example discussed above).
- (3) *Interpretive* -- the sound of the brand is different in Chinese and English, but the meaning of the brand stays about the same.
- (4) *Transliteration with an interpretive component* – some part of the brand English sound remains, but an additional character is used to provide some meaning.

These categorizations are closely related to previous research, for example, the work of Rosecky, Smith, and Zhang (2003). Similarly, Fan (2002) offered three translation methods, including transliteration, meaning translation, and mixed translation. Our study uniquely contributes to the literature of international product standardization/adaptation by building on the previous works of

Chinese sociolinguistics and classifying brand translations into 4 generic strategies relevant to the international marketing manager.

Few studies exist about brand translation in the Chinese context. Fan (2002) found that almost half of international brands (46%) in his 100 international brands sample used a mixed transliteration and meaning based translations in the newly chosen brand name (29% used meaning translation and 25% used transliteration). A study by Francis, Lam, and Walls (2002) found that the majority of international brands were adapted to local markets, and only 10% (21 brands) used an English brand name. Overall, 143 brands (67%) attempted to leverage their names by linking them to the sound (transliteration, 44%), meaning (translation, 22%) or both (1%) of the original name (Francis, Lam & Walls, 2002).

In our own study of 122 randomly selected international brands available in Shanghai, we found that 62% used transliteration without meaning, 22% used transliteration with meaning, 15% used interpretive, and only 2% used both transliteration and interpretive translation. The ability to transfer both a similar sound and a favorable meaning of the brand is clearly difficult. The Coca Cola example in the beginning is a notable example of a successful translation. While transliteration without meaning was the most popular translation mode, foods, automobiles, cosmetics, and other consumer goods were more likely to use an interpretive or meaning-based brand name, suggesting that the type of industry may have an impact on the strategy used. Services and high technology were most likely to use straight transliteration. In the context of China, this makes sense since a Western image unconnected to the long history of the Chinese characters, may communicate the modernity/foreignness of the product (Chan and Huang, 2001b).

We follow Francis, Lam and Walls' (2002) suggestion to study international branding through the lens of the standardization/adaptation framework. According to standardization advocates, brand standardization is preferred when economies of scale are accrued, message consistency is possible, and the firm pursues a global strategy. On the other hand, due to diversity in cultural realities, socioeconomic factors, market structures and stages of products life cycles among different products, adaptation can be a viable international branding strategy.

To avoid choosing Chinese characters for the brand is to allow others to choose part of the Chinese identity for your brand. If, for example, a foreign marketer does not translate the brand name, Chinese distributors/consumers will "invent" their own terms and will influence the identity of the brand (Li & Shooshtari, 2003). The Coca Cola discussion in the opening also illustrates this point. For this reason few savvy marketers in China keep their Roman-alphabetized name. Few exceptions exist, such as M&M and IBM (Fan, 2002).

As discussed in the previous section, Chinese written and spoken forms are different, and the ability to match the meaning of the written form and the sound of the Mandarin spoken form is a challenge. To face this challenge, we developed a 2x2 framework which examines two central dimensions of branding: the brand sound (spoken) and the brand meaning (written). See Table 1 for the visualization of the model, showing the 4 generic alternatives available to a brand/country manager:

- (1) Dual extension branding
- (2) Brand feeling extension
- (3) Brand meaning extension
- (4) Dual adaptation branding

#### **Insert Table 1 About Here**

**Dual extension branding** strategy in its pure form rarely happens in China. The closest equivalent to dual extension is transliteration, "keeping it safe" by maintaining the sound of the brand but using characters without relevant meaning. Virgin Air (维珍航空), for example, has used *wéi zhēn háng kōng*. *Wéi zhēn* is the transliteration of Virgin and *háng kōng* means airlines (with which most airlines brands end). Other interesting examples include: Buick, *bié kè*, 别克; Chrysler, *kè lái sī lè*, 克莱斯勒; Martell, *mǎ diē lì*, 马爹利; Kodak, *kē dá*, 柯达; Adidas, *ā dí dá sī*, 阿迪达斯; KFC, *kěn dé jī*, 肯德基; McDonald's, *mài dāng láo*, 麦当劳; Walmart, *wò ěr mǎ*, 沃尔玛. Because there is no direct sound equivalence between English and Chinese, even transliteration is more of an art than a science. Pronunciation similarities between English and Chinese brand names are low. Although

many brands attempted full or partial transliteration, the difficulty of finding phonetic equivalence in both languages has resulted in few examples of similarity (Francis, Lam & Walls, 2002).

The dual extension strategy attempts to capture the sound of the brand in Mandarin while not changing the meaning of the brand through the selection of particular characters. This strategy is typical of strong global brands that use integrated marketing communications. Brands seeking a global identity, not a context-specific one, tend to choose *transliteration without meaning*. Thus, preservation of sound equivalence is stressed. These brands typically rely on advertising to shape consumer perceptions and to convey meaning. The context and meaning of the brand is thereby carefully controlled by global marketing managers.

Overreliance on transliteration without meaning as a branding strategy in China has its limitations. Socio-linguistic differences in contextuality discussed earlier, for example, may impact consumer perceptions of the brand. One major difference between Americans and the Chinese is the American preference for sound appeal in a given brand name. In contrast, Chinese consumers rely on ideographic features to make sense of the brand names because characters are integral to their culture and ontology. Remember that Chinese rely on the cultural traditions, including the use of personal names, in forming one's identity, or "personal brand." International marketers are advised to seek alternatives to the dual-extension branding model, which is so prevalent among Western multinationals today.

**Brand meaning extension** is a strategy in which the marketer uses Chinese characters, which have different sounds, to convey the meaning of the product/brand. Being ideographic in nature, Chinese allows marketers an opportunity to convey a mental map of the brand through meaningful characters. This strategy is especially suitable for those firms that pursue a multi-domestic strategy that recognize the cultural differences in the country's environments and, at the same time, allows for a standardized identity throughout the Chinese market, irrespective of local dialects. While pursuing this strategy detracts from a global brand-name strategy using standardization and integrated marketing communications, the strength of this approach is that the meaning can be standardized even though the sound isn't. Notable examples include: General Motors, *tōng yòng qì chē*, 通用汽车, meaning general motors; Mustang, *yě mǎ*, 野马, meaning mustang; Triumph, *kǎi xuán*, 凯旋, meaning triumph, GE, *tōng yòng diàn qì*, 通用电气, meaning general electricity; Holiday Inn, *jià rì jiǔ diàn*, 假日酒店, meaning holiday hotel; 7-UP, *qī xǐ*, 七喜, meaning seven happiness.

Firms wishing to extend the meaning regardless of the sound in Chinese often use *interpretative* translations. Sometimes, sound equivalence makes little sense. When Procter and Gamble (P&G) entered China, in order to avoid using the original "P&G" brand name, which can have a vulgar meaning in Chinese because of the "p" in P&G, the name was changed to *Bǎo Jié*: "precious cleanness" (Li & Shoostari, 2003).

International marketers should heed the dual notion that meanings are important to the Chinese and that characters have meanings. Paying attention to this crucial duality is a wonderful opportunity in the world of branding, but a great challenge to Western companies. Brand meaning extension can be appropriate to firms seeking a poly-centric strategy, which takes advantage of some international coordination, selective adaptation, and integrated marketing communications, but shapes meaning in the local context through linguistic positioning consistent with the brand global image.

**Brand feeling extension** occurs when the brand sound is preserved, but the newly chosen characters now convey a new meaning. *Transliteration with meaning* typifies this strategy. In our own study of 122 readily available international brands in Shanghai, this translation method was the second most popular (after transliteration without meaning). Opel, for example, is transliterated as *ōu bǎo* and means "European treasure." Equal is transliterated to *yí kǒu* and means "joyful mouth"; Dove transliterates to *duō fēng* and means "much fragrance." Brands using this strategy seek to simulate the sound of the product, but also pay attention to the characters employed to define the meaning. Pepsi-Cola translated to Chinese characters has a meaning of "a hundred happy things" transliterated to *bǎi shì kě lè*.

Creativity and due diligence is needed to preserve some aspect of the brand sound, yet assign new favorable meanings in the local market. But many Western firms are successful in developing local meaning to a brand whose sound roughly follows the Western pronunciation: Jaguar, *jié bào*, 捷

豹, Swift panther; Head & Shoulders, hǎi fēi sī, 海飞丝, Ocean flying silk; Benz, bēn chí, 奔驰, Dashing speed; Lay's, lè shì, 乐事, Happy event; Maybelline, měi bǎo lián, 美宝莲, Beautiful precious lotus; Reebok, ruì bù, 锐步, Sharp steps/paces; Dove, duō fēn, 多芬, Much fragrance; Rolex, láo lì shì, 劳力士, Working giant; Budweiser, bǎi wēi pí jiǔ, 百威啤酒, Hundred strength beer. It is interesting that in the case of the BMW brand, for example, which uses the sound bǎo mǎ (宝马) meaning Treasure horse, local market variants exist for the sound equivalence, for example, *Bié Mō Wǒ*, which means "Don't Touch Me."

Examining the difference in socio-linguistic connotations in two competing companies using this strategy, Li & Shoostari (2003) suggested that the Chinese brand name Mercedes Benz – *Bēn Chí* (dashing speed) – and BMW -- *Bǎo Mǎ* (treasure horse) – embody masculine (dashing speed) and feminine (treasure) traits in Chinese socio-linguistics. BMW is among the leading sellers to wealthy Chinese women.

In their analysis of top firms in China, Francis, Lam and Walls (2002) found that there were more brand names with meaning than without meaning. At the same time, there was a significantly greater proportion of Chinese brand names (84.6%) than English brand names (61.1%) with meaning. Chinese brands try to emphasize product benefits in the characters selection. More international firms should seek advice on the appropriate characters for their brand, even when transliteration is desirable.

**Dual adaptation** occurs when neither the meaning nor the sound integrity is preserved. This strategy allows the marketer to create a totally new local brand, one with its own local identity. Local responsiveness is emphasized over global standardization. This can be a good solution when the brand in English does not carry meaning, or when it is difficult to locate Chinese characters which sound like the original brand. As long as a relatively localized market strategy in China is allowed, dual adaptation is a good compromise.

In China, brands can be recreated and old, tired brands can be given a new identity. By divorcing the new Chinese brand name from the old one, in both meaning and sound, the marketer has the opportunity to create idiosyncratic local brand identity. Some brands attempt to identify the benefits of the product: for example, Sheraton, xǐ lái dēng, 喜来登, willing come step on/visit; Pizza Hut, bì shèng kè, 必胜客, Guarantee win guest. Other brands may attempt to provide new connotations for the brands in the local context: for example, Marlboro, wàn bǎo lù, 万宝路, ten thousand treasure road; Yoplait, yōu nuò, 优诺, quality promise; Glade, kǎi dá, 凯达, victory/reach; Duracell, jīn bà wáng, 金霸王, golden powerful king; Skippy, sì jì bǎo, 四季宝, four-season treasure; Bacardi, bǎi jiā dé, 百加德, 100 plus morality.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this article, we have attempted to identify four global brand strategy alternatives for the creation of brand names in Chinese and, in this way, provide global marketing managers another tool for understanding the branding translation options in this unique and upcoming market. They are, namely, dual extension, brand-meaning extension, brand-feeling extension, and dual adaptation. Obviously, brands going into the China market have to observe many market characteristics including the Chinese language and its consumer responsiveness. Attendance to local market considerations should also involve consideration of the firm's global brand strategy, which inevitably involves a spectrum of possibilities: globalization on one end, localization on the other or a strategic combination of both.

As we have noted, referencing previous brand researchers, the Chinese language is contextual, complicated, and rooted in a different language family: Sino-Tibetan vs. Indo-European. Additionally, there are many major dialects within China and numerous localized dialects within each of the major languages. The same characters ("words") can be pronounced very differently in different dialects. Therefore, a Chinese brand name pronounced in one dialect might sound similar to the original name when pronounced in English, but may be meaningless or problematic when pronounced in another Chinese dialect. The classic case of Coca-Cola when pronounced in Mandarin and Cantonese is an example. In extreme cases, a brand could have more than one version of a Chinese brand name to cater to consumer markets in different dialects. The four strategy alternatives we have identified are therefore general ones that reflect current practices and possible alternatives for

brands targeting the Chinese market. The popularity of Mandarin Chinese has added to the applicability of this general model of four Chinese brand naming strategy alternatives.

The examples that we have cited are not meant to represent the totality of the respective firms' global branding strategies; they have been interpreted according to what has been presented in current choices of wording in the Chinese brand names universe. It should also be noted that the entire exercise of global brand strategy identification and implementation is a journey comprising market research, creative work (especially in the specific process of actually creating the Chinese brand names), international coordination, marketing investments, judgments, and decisions at all stages. The journey may not always be a smooth one, but it is definitely challenging, and – to professional marketers and brand managers – interesting and rewarding.

Reciprocally, given that Chinese and English come from different roots, Chinese brand names going global are likely to also encounter the same translation problems. Future research may investigate how the reliance on ideographic language or phonetic translation of its ideography in brand naming can affect the performance of Chinese companies in Western countries. An example of a failed brand name is *Jiànlǐbǎo*, a Chinese soft drink that was very successful in China and more than 20 countries but failed in English-speaking America (Li & Shoostari, 2003). Non socio-linguistic variables can also affect translation/transliteration of a brand as Legend found when it attempted to register its name in the USA. Legend, which later bought the PC division of IBM, had to change its name to Lenovo when it found that the Legend brand name was already registered to someone else. Future research can look at the reverse of name translation from Chinese to English and also at other environmental variables impacting the transfer of a brand name across cultures/nations. Other dyadic translation issues can be explored between Western based brands and other Asian countries and among Asian brands. As far as future research is concerned, case-based research would also be useful in looking at the impact of different translation strategies on the performance of the brand. How would, for example, brands from Japan, which share linguistic characteristics with Chinese, be impacted differently across the 4 generic international brand naming strategies discussed?

For international brands, the influence of different cultures on consumers in different markets will affect their perceptions of a brand's standing vis-à-vis other competing brands, both local and international. While today's consumers do not have to leave home to be affected by globalization's homogenizing influence, the meaning of the brand is still often deciphered in a local context. As far as the near future is concerned, we are all likely to continue to be a bit lost in translation. Superior talent must unite with market opportunity for successful cross-cultural branding.

When Rollins College (the lead author's institution) decided to work more intensively in China and with Chinese universities in 2005, China scholars have gathered to find an appropriate brand name translation. They first examined official documents signed with Chinese institutions to see how current partners translate our name. The Memorandum of Understanding between Shanghai University and Rollins College (translated by Shanghai University for local documentation sake) showed Rollins College translated as "洛林学院," transliterated as 洛 luò 林 lín college, where luò are rivers in Shaanxi and Henan Provinces and lín means forest/wood. While descriptors of nature are commonplace in Chinese names, the committee did not feel that this was the optimum translation/transliteration of the Rollins College brand name. This also underscores the need to take control of the brand Chinese translation because if your company does not translate its name, the competitors, suppliers or partners will. Rollins College China Center's colleagues felt that there needs to be a consistent name when dealing with Chinese partners, and decided to go to the task of finding one. Several suggestions arose that resembled "Rollins" sound: "罗林斯大学," "劳林斯大学," "儒林学院," and "荣林斯" (罗 [luó] means net or collect, 劳 [láo] means work or service, 儒 [rú] means scholar/Confucianism, and 荣 [róng] means flourishing/thriving). Among the 3 translations, colleagues have agreed that "罗林斯" sounded best in Chinese because "罗" is a common surname, thus giving a Chinese character to this otherwise transliteration of a Western name (the other two sound too "western," too "generic," thus lack of idiosyncrasy); 2) Theodore Walter "Sonny" Rollins is a well-known American jazz sax player, and his last name sometimes is translated in Chinese as "罗林斯", so the name is recognizable. "儒林" ("Confucian Scholars") is a creative translation, but if someone says "儒林学院", it may be mistaken as "Confucius College" – a Chinese official backed language-cultural learning institution network.

In the US, Rollins College is #1 among masters-level comprehensive colleges and universities of the South, according to US World and News Report. It is the oldest and most prestigious liberal arts college in Florida with a nationally ranked MBA professional program. The first thing brand name crafters needed to settle is whether to call our school a College 学院 or a University 大学. The College translation was a direct one, but did not convey the meaning of a comprehensive college in the category. In China, comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities are referred to as "daxue," whereas specialized universities are referred to as "xueyuan," such as Beijing Film Academy (Beijing Dianying Xueyuan) and Shanghai Conservatory of Music (Shanghai Yinyue Xueyuan). But as China now is experiencing a rapid growth of higher education, some of the specialized universities have grown out from "xueyuan" and become "daxue." Some examples include: 1. Beijing Languages Institute (Beijing Yuyuan Xueyuan) now is called Beijing Languages and Culture University (Beijing Yuyan Wenhua Daxue) 2. Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (Beijing Waiguoyu Xueyuan) is now upgraded to Beijing Waiguoyue Daxue (Beijing Foreign Studies University); 3. Central Institute for Nationalities (Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan) is now called Central University for Nationalities (Zhongyang Minzu Daxue). These universities not only stretched their structures (consolidating several relevant departments into a single college), but also established new disciplines and subject areas. At the end, Rollins College opted for a "University" translation of the name because this is more culturally-attuned to comprehensive, multi-disciplinary schools in our category and because our peer institutions are regarded as "regional universities". At the end, the College has settled on the final name of 罗林斯大学 which captured the sound of our name "same sound" and positioned our brand with new meaning related to an American star with brand name recognition "new meaning". The positioning in the US as a prestigious and old college has been, therefore, recast in the Chinese context as a fresh and American-style of university education. Rollins College, thus, employed brand feeling extension (new meaning, similar sound).

A company's brand is part of its intellectual property. Since China is not known for its safekeeping of intellectual property and since theft of such property is still rampant, companies are advised to register the likely translations for their Chinese brand names as soon as possible. Reid and MacKinnon (2008) publication in the Wall Street Journal exemplifies this point: "Most products sell better in China if they are given a Chinese name. Some companies in China register trademarks that would be suitable translations of the names of foreign products, again either to sell a competitive product or to negotiate the rights with a foreign company" (p. R4).

Our article discussed some of the issues confronted by international marketers in determining the appropriateness of brand names in China. The concern is with the impact of China's rich and diverse cultural environments upon conventional wisdom in relation to the brand-naming process and related marketing policy pertaining to operations there. Successful market entry or product launch can be seriously damaged by inadvertently failing to recognize the complications involved in a Chinese naming strategy. Issues in Chinese brand naming can lead to not only questioning marketing policies, but more generally identify a need to question ethnocentric corporate structure and decision-making process and other internal mechanisms as well to become more effective in foreign markets.



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<sup>i</sup> In here, we use the standard PinYin pronunciation italicized; e.g., <http://www.chineselearner.com/pinyin/>. The simplified Chinese characters are used for the Chinese character examples. This writing style is used in the mainland.