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Nice Work, WINKY!
Roll call gets crazy when Chinese students choose English nicknames

—By *Samantha Culp, the BlowUp*
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On a cold, gray morning in China's Hunan province, I met a Unicorn. And then a Pepsi and a Strawberry. Next, an Angel King, and a No Foot Bird. These middle school students all stood around me in their red-white-and-blue uniforms, smiling sweetly, launching questions like cannon fire.

Do you like basketball?

"Well, Jackrary, I am actually very bad at sports . . . "

Do you watch Friends?

"Yes, Killer, sometimes I watch Friends-it's a pretty funny show!"

In American high school, do girls and boys go out on dates?

"It really depends, Small Bat. Some American teenagers date, but not all of them . . . "

What is your favorite thing in China?

Their eyes shone a little brighter in pride and expectation. I rattled off the standard litany of history, culture, food, but I thought to myself: "Well, Fashion Words, at this moment it might just be your name."

In the same way you might have been dubbed Dominique in a middle school French class, all the little Jiangs and Ziao Weis also get new monikers for their study of English. Yes, there is still an abundance of Janes and Jacks. But then there are the wild cards: Bison, Feeling, Lawyer Yo-Yo, Wiance, Blackhorse, Waterman, Shaq, None, Superdonkey, Beyond, Yuki Juice, Rubbin, Viva, Felix, Santemillion, Bear, Leg, Lala, Lalala, Icy Cat, Civic, Captain, Lettuce, Coker, Win Kids, Email, Renus, Vitality, Panday, Double, Landfill, Square, Jekyll, Snakie, Orange, Do Do, Shiny.

Despite the strangeness of these names, there is some method to the madness. For one thing, unlike the Pierres who were christened with a teacher-scrawled name card, the English students of China mainly pick their own names. And considering that they learn foreign languages sooner than Americans, this means 6-year-olds sometimes are left to choose their own names.

Diana Lin, a teacher at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, recalls the self-chosen toddler names she encountered working at a Montessori preschool in Beijing: "I had a Flying Tiger, Dragon, Happy, and Hamburger-from her Chinese name, Han Bao Bao [which happens to mean hamburger, too]-an unfortunate name for a cute little girl." But the most popular name was Monkey King, inspired by the classic Chinese tale Journey to the West. "I'll have to say it was rather fun running after a kid screaming, 'moooonkeeeey kiiaiiiiiiiiiiiiing!! Come back, Monkey King!'"

The many Monkey Kings of Lin's class won't necessarily stay Monkey Kings. After a few years, they may move on to something else, perhaps equally as zany. Part of the fun of these names seems to be their malleability. While the students' Chinese names were chosen after much deliberation by a convocation of parents and grandparents, students can try on and then abandon English names as if they were trendy T-shirts. Like Han Bao Bao/Hamburger, some students do choose English names that are linked either by sound or meaning to their Chinese name-Tao ("cherry" in Chinese) becomes Cherry, Luo Man Xi becomes Romancy, Luo Yi becomes Roy (even if she is a girl). Most students, however, go with names that have little connection to their Chinese identity and are that

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much easier to mix, match, and trade in.

Besides sports (Michael Jordan, Beckham, even Manchester United), other realms of Western pop culture are ripe fodder for name choices. Current favorites include Rachel (due to the wide availability of Friends on bootleg DVD), Draco, and Harry Potter; young girls might add the surname Di Caprio to another name (Yoki Di Caprio, for example). Though celebrity names can be deceiving. Keanu, a 20-year-old history student at Zhongshan University, chose her name not so much because she loves Keanu Reeves but because she wanted to have a boy's name since her Chinese name, Xiao Lan, is so "typically female," she says.

Even some of the most nonsensical names contain hidden personal meanings. No Foot Bird, for example, named himself after a Chinese proverb that describes how a bird with no feet will have to keep flying. Flying Bird, on the other hand, says she looks like a bird and thinks flying is great. Truth claims he finds it hard to tell the truth, so he chose the name to remind himself to be truthful. Cactus, a geography student, likes how cacti can thrive in harsh conditions, and she wants to share that quality.

Others are chosen (or made up) mainly for the way they sound-and this is where people occasionally run into trouble. While Jackrory (an unlikely combination of January and February), Disney, and Lalala are fairly uncontroversial, names like Syphilis, Vagina, and Cancer can be more problematic. Though they are mellifluous to the nonnative ear, when the young people are studying abroad or working with foreigners, these names simply will not fly. Neither will Satan nor Willing. And definitely not Gas Chamber or Hitler. Teachers usually try to persuade kids away from the more inappropriate names, with mixed results. Mariko Hirose, a teacher at Yali Middle School in Changsha, relates her attempt to reform a Killer. "Killer used to be Jason but in J2 Oral English he learned that 'killer' could also mean 'cool,' and so he changed his name." She tried to get him to change his name at the beginning of the year but it didn't work: "He said that I needed to respect his opinion." Inside the classroom, anything goes, but as China becomes increasingly international, younger generations have a bigger chance of using their "English" name out in the world: on documents and correspondence, and in business deals. The potential for embarrassment is high, but so is the likelihood of self-correction before it gets to that point.

In the meantime, maybe we should just respect their opinions. Teenagers everywhere strive to be unique, but in a nation of more than a billion, wouldn't it be nice to be the only Winky? Teenagers crave independence, and in a culture where filial piety is still the rule, at least you can subvert the Fang family name by adding Cobra to the front. Teenagers dream of rebellion, and under the rule of a government that discourages it, the safest option might be the personal revolution of becoming Dangerous. And in schools where dating is prohibited, unisex uniforms are the rule, and studying for exams occupies every hour when you are not taking them, perhaps you cannot have fun, but you can *be* Fun.

Then again, these are Western values talking. We may appreciate the names because they seem rebellious or subversive, but they may be subverting more than their own culture. Language is an instrument of power, and it can be challenged from the bottom up by something as simple as a name. The ability to choose or even create one's own name is empowering, especially in the process of negotiating a new language ("the international business language") and the new ideals that come with it. Names like Genius Jefferson, Ice Wolf, and Celery turn the English language upside down and inside out, simultaneously deconstructing and celebrating it. They're playing with "our" language until it is "their" language too, and are carving out elastic new identities for rapidly changing China. Every day, in classrooms across the nation's 23 provinces, these students turn morning roll call into pure, surrealistic poetry.

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