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Ronald W Teague, PhD, ABPP

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The role of Chinese names in identity formation: a primer for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists

Ronald Teague
California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University Sacramento

There have been many important psychoanalytic studies on the importance of names on the development of identity. None of these studies, however, have specifically examined Chinese names and their effect on development of identity in Chinese patients. Chinese names differ in many important ways from names used in Western cultures. This paper provides a basic description of the nature, structure and meaning of Chinese names and suggests ways that these names help form a sense of identity in the Chinese.

Keywords: Chinese names, transcultural psychology, identity, cross-cultural, China, psychoanalysis

The first thing that any psychoanalyst, indeed any psychotherapist, knows about his or her patient is their name. Upon contacting the analyst for the first time, the prospective patient always leaves his or her name. Hearing the name, the analyst begins his or her speculations about the experienced world of the prospective patient. Ethnic sounding names will lead the analyst to the formation of certain hypotheses about the nature of the early childhood experience of the individual as well as the possible range of experiences he or she has had as an adult, hypothesis that can be confirmed or disconfirmed when the analyst examines the patient.

Often this is the last time that the analyst gives much thought about the patient’s name and the role that it has in the development of the patient’s identity. Some analysts will be familiar with the work of Flugel (1930), Murphy (1957) and Feldman (1959), which show that individuals’ names play an important part in the creation of a patient’s sense of self. A psychoanalytic exploration of a patient’s name can be quite fruitful in ascertaining the nature and effect of early parental fantasies about the patient.

If the analyst is familiar with the work of Ellis and Beechley, *Emotional Disturbance in Children with Peculiar Given Names* (1954) will know that males who have unusual given names will be more likely to be emotionally disturbed than males who have common names.

If the analyst knows the work of Koole and Pelham (2009) he or she will know that the first letter of a person’s name is often associated with a preference for objects and people whose name has the same first letter. Koole and Pelham made the case for Implicit Self-Esteem and name letter preferences, i.e. individuals have the unconscious tendency to identify with things which are similar to their own familial as well as given names.

What happens, however, when the prospective patient is Chinese? Often the analyst will know a Chinese patient by his or her ‘Western’ name not their Chinese name. He or she will know their patient as ‘Mary Wong’ or ‘Peter Liu’ and have no idea about what the patient is called by his or her family, friends and coworkers in China or a Chinese community. The analyst will thus not have any access to the rich imaginative world that surrounds the Chinese name and have little or no access to this important aspect of his or her Chinese patient.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the psychotherapeutic community with a brief introduction to the structure and meaning of Chinese names and to suggest possible effects these names have on Chinese patients. Most of the

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Ronald Teague, Clinical PsyD Program, California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University, 2030 West El Camino Ave. Suite 200, Sacramento, CA 95833. Email: rteague@alliant.edu

Author note: Ronald Teague, Clinical PsyD Program, California School of Professional Psychology, Sacramento.
psychoanalytic studies into the meaning of patients’ names have focused on patients who are not Chinese. As a consequence these formulations are not as useful in developing clear clinical hypotheses with Chinese patients.

In order to understand the Chinese experience of their personal names and surnames it is important to examine how Chinese names are formed and how they are understood inside the Chinese culture. Chinese names differ from names as used in the Occident in several important ways.

Firstly, and possibly most importantly, everyone in the Chinese culture knows the meaning of each Chinese name. Chinese names are composed of words that are used in everyday language whereas in the Occident names are not composed of typical everyday words. For example, most people in the Occident do not know what the names ‘Bill’, ‘James’, ‘Mary’ or ‘Jones’ mean. While it is true that a few people in the West know the etymological basis of their personal or familial name, others will not share this knowledge. This is not true in China where everyone knows the meaning of almost every name. The names ‘Fuxi’ means ‘good luck and happiness’, ‘Junxian’ means ‘pretty and virtuous’ and ‘Shouren’ means ‘adhering to benevolence’.

Another important difference in Chinese names is that the Chinese surname is always the first name whereas in the Occident it is placed last. The Chinese rarely change their surnames, although they will often change their personal name. It has been estimated that over time there have been approximately 22,000 surnames used in China, although currently there are only 3500 surnames in common use. Additionally, only about 100 surnames are used by 87% of the Chinese. The surname is very important for the Chinese, as it believed by many Chinese that the surname or ‘Clan’ name is derived from a single common ancestor. There is some evidence that in early China there was a close relationship between family names and totem worship (Ning & Ning, 1995) (Golden, 2000). Most Chinese are aware of the historical meaning of their surname.

Often an adopted child will continue to use his or her original surname as well as his or her adoptive surname. Women will typically keep their original surname as their exclusive surname, although some women adopt their husband’s surnames as a secondary surname. One of the few times a Chinese person will discard their surname is when he or she enters into a Buddhist order since one of the requirements for admission is the total renunciation of everything in one’s past life (Jones, 1997).

The fundamental experience of identity for the Chinese is his or her membership in the family or clan. It is not surprising that the first name used by the Chinese is always the family or Clan name. A Chinese person is always a ‘Wu’, ‘Li’ or ‘Shang’ first and a particular person second. The Chinese experience themselves as a particular ‘Wong’, ‘Li’ or ‘Shang’. The Chinese surname always precedes honorific titles so ‘Doctor Li’ is always as addressed as ‘Li Doctor’ in China.

Asking a Chinese patient the meaning of his or her surname will often evoke an enthusiastic discussion about the long history of his or her family or clan. The idea that an individual can have any sort of identity independently of membership in the family or clan typically does not occur to the Chinese.

The Chinese sense of personal identity will always be subsumed under the identity of the family or Clan, as if standing behind each Chinese person is a single ancient ancestor or ancestress of which he or she is simply the modern embodiment.

To know the meaning and history of an individual Chinese’s surname is to know his or her fundamental experience of their identity.

Whereas the Chinese surname has a long and ancient history, the Chinese personal name can be quite unique. In the West there are thousands of surnames, but relatively few personal names. As a consequence the surname in the West will be used as the discriminated name used by the culture. Often an individual will be referenced by the use of the surname only. Sigmund Freud is usually referenced by only his surname. There may be thousands of ‘Sigmunds’ but very few ‘Freuds’. In China the reverse pattern is true. The discriminated name is the personal name not the surname.

The use of personal names in China differs from their use in the West. The Chinese will often adopt or be given different personal names throughout their life. The first name that is given to the Chinese is called a ‘milk’ name, i.e. an infant name. In certain parts of China, although this practice is dying out, this ‘milk’ name (jiu ming) will also be a ‘mean’ name (cho ming), a name that is insulting and deprecatory. In traditional China it was thought that evil spirits would become jealous or desirous of the spirit of the neonate. Giving the infant a name that indicated that the child was worthless kept evil sprits from harming the child. Feldman (1959) rejects the idea that names have any magical significance but rather reflects the ambivalence the person has toward the object he or she names.

I would like to suggest the idea that names are an expression of the antagonism which people feel to the objects they name and, at the same time, are among the means by which one accepts, comes to terms with unwanted, resistant objects. The person who is named, on the other hand, reflects the hostility of the name. He feels imposed on, tends to regard the name as an alien imprint on his personality and, at the same time, admits the name and identifies with it.

He further states that nicknames represent derision and concealed contempt. This is certainly the case with Chinese ‘mean’ names. Examples of ‘mean’ names include trivial creatures and insulting words. A child could be called ‘Dog’, ‘Carp’, ‘Rotten’ or ‘Excrement’.

‘Milk’ names reflect the parents and extended family’s positive feelings toward the child. Examples of these names include ‘Sweetheart’, ‘Little Beauty’ and ‘Happy Face’.
It can be easily seen that the selection of either a 'mean' or 'milk' name reflects the parental and extended family's unconscious feelings toward the newborn. A clinical investigation of these early names will reveal much about the early mirroring experiences of the Chinese patient.

When the viability of the child has been established, usually around the age of locomotion, he or she will be given a more proper name. The Chinese agree with Plautus' opinion that nomen atque omen, i.e. a person's given name will affect their future fortune. The Chinese spend much effort in creating names for their children and grandchildren that will ensure a prosperous future not only for the named individual but also for that individual's future progeny.

The Chinese have known for generations that names can influence how others experience the individual. Ellis and Beechly (1954) showed that 'there was a significant tendency for boys with peculiar first names to be more severely emotionally disturbed than boys with non-peculiar first names'. These findings would not be at all surprising for the traditional Chinese.

The personal name, therefore, is very important for the Chinese. Much effort is made by the parents and extended family to choose 'just the right name'. Indeed, in China there is an entire 'science' of devising specific fortunate personal names. The methods of this 'science' many include 'the five elements' theory, Chinese astrology, Chinese numerology, cultural traditions, physical characteristics of the child or hopes and expectations of the parents and extended family.

Some examples of this more formal personal name are Hao Szu 'Good tempered and Healthy', Wang Bi 'Jade Disk', and Taofen, 'Concealing One's Capacities and Never Gives Up' (Ning & Ning, 1991). The Chinese will often select names for their children that indicate their aspirations for their children. Frequently they will use names that incorporate the Chinese words for 'happiness', 'longevity' and 'wealth'. They may also select names that commemorate an important event or are similar to people of distinction, thereby attaching the child's experience in some magical way to the good fortune of others.

Occasionally the parent or extended family will select a name that is less than flattering to the child which expresses unconscious as well as conscious contempt for the child. The parents will justify this by stating that they want the child to develop a sense of modesty.

Often, if the child is a girl, the parents will give her a name that expresses disappointment that she is not a boy. Such names as 'Waiting For Little Brother' or 'Making Way for Little Brother' are not all that uncommon, especially in the countryside.

Feldman's (1959) formulation that 'the name is a stamp that the parents place on the unformed ego' is quite useful in understanding the impact that the parents' and extended family's efforts to create 'just the right name' for their children has on the formation of the experience of identity in Chinese patients.

When the child enters school he or she might be given a new name called 'Book Name' or the 'School Name' (Shiu Ming or Hsueh Ming) that will be given either by the teacher or by the father or both. This name often reflects some unique physical or psychological characteristic of the child that has become apparent as the child has matured. Often the child will use this 'Book Name' for all public uses for the rest of his or her life. This name is intended to announce the uniqueness of the child as opposed to a reflection of parents' and extended families' aspirations. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the 'Book Name' reflects the projective mirroring of the important authorities in the child's life, typically, the teacher and/or the father. As such, it often forms the basis of an individual's experience of himself or herself in the larger public world and informs the child about the nature of the larger social expectation of him or her.

Once a male child has finished school and developed into adulthood he may adopt for himself a new persona name that is called the 'Fancy Name' or 'Flowery Name' (1 Ming or Hua Ming), which he himself creates. This is a subtle form of rebellion against the authority of the father, family and teacher and is an attempt to create a unique identity that is his and his alone. The psychoanalyst will gain a good deal of insight into the individual's rebellion against the cultural and parental mirroring of him by examining the development of this particular name. Jones (1997) gives an example of a Hokkin boy whose name was 'Ugly' who changed the pronunciation of the name just a little to mean 'Knight Errant' (Khiap-Si to Khiap-Sui) a clear example of the rebellion of an individual against the negative mirroring of his parents. This 'Fancy Name' may also reflect the Ego Ideal of the individual, i.e. what he aspires to be. Females typically do not take one of these names.

Falk (1975–76, p. 665) identified the effect on identity caused by name changes.

Names have strong affective value and symbolize an important part of a person's identity. The cultural and social value of a name may be secondary to the personal meaning of that name to the individual who in changing it will reveal an inner change in his sense of identity or an inability to integrate a diffuse sense of identity. The answer to 'What's in a name?' may be 'identity is in a name.'

This point of view is confirmed by the work of Flugle in which she demonstrates with clinical examples how a name change can change the essential identity of patients. Chinese patients, with their 'Fancy Names', also change much of their essential experience of themselves.

The Chinese may also adopt 'Pen Names' or 'Stage Names' which further extend the psychological attempts to resist early infantile mirroring.

Many patients who are seen by Western-trained psychoanalysts have been educated in Western universities. These patients often adopt a 'Western Name'. The patient creates this 'Western Name' himself or herself without consultation with others. While many of these 'Western Names' have a
phonetic similarity to the ‘Formal Name’ many of them are an attempt to resist the early infantile mirroring. The author of this paper once met a young Cantonese woman whose ‘Western Name’ was ‘Unique’. When asked about this name she said that she had thought of ‘Eustace’ as it sort of sounded similar to her Chinese ‘Formal Name’ but she liked the meaning of ‘Unique’ better.

If the patient is a Christian, he or she may adopt a biblically based ‘Western Name’. If asked about this, the patient will discuss how the biblically named reflects his or her spiritual Ego Ideal, much in the same way that Catholics choose a ‘Confirmation Name’.

Perhaps a few examples might be helpful to elaborate the association of a Chinese personal name and the experience of identity. While it would be more helpful to use actual clinical examples, this cannot be done due to ethical considerations. For the most part Chinese personal names are unique and to explore them in a public forum would be to violate the APA ethical principals regarding clinical confidentiality.

What can be done is to examine the personal names of graduate students who have given the author permission to explore this in print.

The first name is of a Mandarin speaking male psychologist from the People’s Republic of China who is taking advanced psychoanalytic training in China.

When I was little my mother called me ‘Smelly Candle Holder’ because I wet myself often. I was given the name 春芳 (Chun Fang or Fragrant Spring) as I was born in the spring and they wanted to give me a girls name to protect me from bad spirits so that I would be humble and survive. Later, when I was in school, I was a tame and gentle person and the other students made fun of me saying that I was like a girl so I changed my name. I cut the ‘head’ off of the character 芳 (feng or fragrant) to 方 which has the same pronunciation as 芳 but means ‘square, just or direction’. The character is a picture of a plow or two ships tied together. To me it sounded more masculine. Later I found out that my new full name 春方 meant ‘aphrodisiac’ as 方 can mean ‘drug’ and 芳 can mean ‘sexual arousal’. I really liked this meaning of my name but I don’t discuss this with others.

When I needed a ‘Western’ name I wanted to use the sound of my Maternal Grandmother’s family name which was 汤 (Tang) so I looked for a ‘Western’ name that started with the sound of ‘T’. I loved my grandmother and missed her and wanted something to remember her by. The word 汤 also means ‘soup’ and I added the sound ‘mmy’ to it to make the ‘Western’ name Tommy. ‘Mmy’ in Chinese is 米 (rice) so my ‘Western’ name means ‘Rice Soup’ a basic material for living. ‘Tommy’ also reminded me of a ‘Tommy Gun’, which really sounded masculine to me.

The second example is from a female psychologist from Shanghai.

My parents gave me the name of 嘉茹 (Jia Rui) which means ‘More Eating’. They were poor when I was born and they hoped that I would have a lot of good things to eat when I grew up. For the Chinese having good things to eat equates with good fortune and happiness. They hoped that I would be fortunate and have a happy and enjoyable life.

Later when I was older my mother gave me my ‘Western’ name of Flora because it was the God of Flowers and my mother loved flowers. It was also picked as it is a girls name and my mother wanted me to be a leader of girls.

The last example is the name of a Cantonese female psychotherapist in Hong Kong.

My father gave me the name of 潔茹 (Kit Yee). Kit means ‘pure or clean’ and Yee means ‘virtuous’. My father wanted me to be a pure virtuous queen. I was called 潔潔, Kit Yee, as a child and I am still called ‘Ah Kit’ by my uncles and aunts.

When I went to Anglican school the teacher gave me the name ‘Mi Mi’, which I did not like as it sounded too babyish. When I was baptized as a Catholic I took the Communion name of Magdalene, which was the name of the founder of missionary sisters who ran the school. ‘Magdala’ is the name of a mountain in Israel. I wanted to be strong and sturdy like that mountain.

In the first example, the early parental ambivalence toward the child can clearly be seen as well as the individual’s rebellion against that ambivalence. Early attempts on the part of his mother to feminise the subject and his efforts to neutralise these are reflected in his struggle to find his own name. His use of violent images in his description of his thinking about his name, ‘cutting the head off’ and ‘Tommy gun’, also point to a phallic rebellion against the castration attempts by his mother. There is further evidence of his ambivalent attachment to his mother in his selection of his ‘Western’ name as he is looking to find a way of keeping his grandmother alive, not his mother.

Were this individual in psychodynamic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, the therapist or analyst would have ample material to explore about the nature of his early attachments simply by asking him about his name. As mentioned above, in China everyone knows the meaning of every Chinese name. This individual, during the formative years of his life, was called ‘Fragrant Spring’. Now while it is true that after a while he heard consciously simply the sound of the name Chung Fang as his name, unconsciously he continued to recognise the attempts to feminise him with this name. So each day he heard ‘Good Morning Fragrant Spring’, ‘Fragrant Spring come over here’, ‘Fragrant Spring don’t do that’ and so on. We can see that his rebellion was only partially complete as he kept the name Chung Fang but only changed how the second word was written in Chinese. The pronunciation is exactly the same in the two Chinese characters 方 (Fragrant) and 方 (Just or Square). His parents
would be unaware of this ‘transformation’ of his identity as they keep calling him ‘Fragrant Spring’ while he hears ‘Square Spring’. His experience of ‘rebellion’ has had no real effect in his interpersonal relationships. Never the less, in his own experience he became a different person from the one that the parents think he is.

In the second example the subject does not rebel against the parental fantasy. She is named 潔懿 (Kit Yee) or ‘Pure Virtuous’ by her father. It turns out that she lived up to his fantasy, as she never married and prior to her becoming a psychologist she became a Roman Catholic nun for many years. She became a ‘Pure Virtuous’ woman in both the Chinese and Catholic sense. It is only in the selection of her ‘Western’ name, ‘Magdalene’, that we get some rebellion against this paternal introject. The figure of Mary Magdalenae, as she is often portrayed, is just the opposite of a ‘pure and virtuous’ woman. The legends that surround her claim that she was a reformed prostitute or the ‘woman taken in adultery’ in the New Testament. The subject would have certainly known about these legends when she took the name ‘Magdalene’. Her additional associations to the name ‘Magdala’ being a name of a mountain in Israel shows a bit of defiance toward the paternal introject. She wanted to be strong, solid and possibly sexual. We can also see evidence of psychological rebellion in her rejection of the Anglican School teacher’s naming her ‘Mi Mi’.

In our last example we see no evidence of any ‘rebellion’ against the early parental introject. The subject does not mention any attempt at changing her name but rather an acceptance of it. Were the subject to enter psychodynamic psychotherapy, the therapist would want to explore whether or not the subject was teased about her name at communal meals with family or friends which are so common in Chinese culture about being called ‘More Eating’. Her ‘Western’ name ‘Flora’ which was given to her by her mother when the subject entered latency, seems to be a development of the mother’s attitude about the subject. The shift of the name ‘More Eating’ to ‘Flora’ might indicate that the mother’s anxieties about the difficulty in providing basic nourishment to the subject when she was an infant gave way to the mother’s concern that the subject would be seen as a beautiful woman who would outshine other young women. In this case the subject didn’t change her name, her mother did it for her. The mother herself changed the way she thought about the subject and this was reflected in the creation of the new ‘Western’ name.

In each of these examples it can be seen that aspects of the subjects’ identity development are strongly related to his or her experience with their personal name. In one case, attempts at negating the development of male characteristics is resisted by a ‘reframing’ of his name in his imagination. In another the subject uses imagery from Christian legends to stand up to the parental introject. In the last example the subject’s mother tried to correct early anxiety about the viability of her child with new images which confirmed the subject’s health and encouraged the subject to develop further.

To the extent that this is true, it is important that psychoanalysts and psycho-dynamically trained psychotherapists discover the rich meaning in their Chinese patients’ names. It is a simple matter to inquire about the meaning of a Chinese patient’s Chinese name. This inquiry can lead to positive clinical consequences. Failure to do this might very well keep the analyst or therapist at an unnecessary distance from his or her patient and might result in serious empathic failures. Understanding of meaning and significance of Chinese names needs further investigation by psychoanalytic authors. Most of the psychoanalytic investigations on the significance of names on the development of identity are based upon Western experiences, where the surname is the important name in identity formation. In China, as has been demonstrated, the given name, which may be changed over a lifetime, is much more important in the experience of personal identity.

As more Chinese patients enter into psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical psychotherapy it is clear that analysts and therapist need to familiarise themselves with the specific differences between patients who come from a Western culture and those who come from elsewhere.

References


