

An Investigation into UK University Students' Identity Negotiation through Naming Practice and Choices: the Case of Chinese International Students

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Abstract: This article explored how Chinese international students negotiated identity options via naming practice and choices in the UK. The existing literature has mainly discussed the Chinese students' practice of adopting English names, and scant attention has been paid to the identity construction of international Chinese students through choosing between their English and ethnic names in an English-speaking context. In this case, this research was situated in the UK, a less studied context, to gain a holistic understanding of students' identity negotiation. Using a qualitative approach, this research conducted four semi-structured interviews among Chinese international students studying in the UK. The findings demonstrated that when they selected an English name which can present their authentic selves, uniqueness, or wishes. Besides, when deciding whether to adopt their English names or Chinese names in the British academic community, they hold different interpretations of contextual needs, cosmopolitan identity, as well as cultural identity and ethnic belonging. The implications and limitations were also discussed in the end.

Keywords: identity, naming practice, name choice, English as a Foreign Language, Chinese international students

1. Introduction

Names serve various functions in educational and social contexts such as indicting gender, personality, familiarity, group membership, and cultural affiliation, assisting students to construct their individual identities and interpret the surrounding world [1]. As such, naming practice is closely linked with identity negotiation. With references to the existing literature, plenty of attention has been paid to the associations between the naming practice among Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and their identity construction [1, 2, 3, 4]. The main finding is that they make agentive choices when adopting their English names and these choices are closely linked to their perceived identities. However, although studying abroad has become increasingly popular in China, [3] pointed out that insufficient research has focused on the group of international students. To the best of my knowledge, probably only [3] and [4] undertook empirical studies examining Chinese international students' complex process of identity negotiation through choice-making between English and ethnic names in a foreign context. They found that while abroad, many Chinese learners might choose to adopt an English name for purposes such as catering to foreign teachers and accelerating acculturation. However, these studies are constrained within the US context. Given this research gap, the current

study sets about investigating Chinese international students' naming practice and how they negotiate their identities through choosing between their ethnic name and English name in the UK context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Chinese Students' Naming Practice

Since China introduced the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, it has transformed itself into an active player in the global market [5], and recent years have witnessed an unprecedented status of English learning to facilitate modernisation and globalisation [5, 6]. In addition, an increasing number of students choose to study overseas, pursuing first-hand knowledge from the developed world and enhancing linguistic competence [6]. As indicated by [1], the naming practice is significant because it not only helps people construct their individual identities but also affects how others perceive their identities. In addition, international students are highly likely to encounter an identity crisis or identity modification, consisting of contrasting social behaviours, cultural norms, and linguistic habits [7]. As such, it is therefore of great necessity to examine international students' naming practice to investigate how they negotiated their identities when using English or ethnic names in another context. [3] claim that most Chinese students receive their English names during their EFL learning experience during primary to secondary education, and there are several different ways to obtain an English name. Primarily, English names can be self-assigned [3]. Then, English names can also be imposed or largely determined by the suggestions of EFL teachers while enabling students to choose their own names [2, 7]. Whether negotiable or unnegotiable, the naming practice can have significant impacts on students' sense of self. For instance, when Chinese students were coerced to adopt an English name, a negative change in identity might occur since the new English name is a reminder that their personal-cultural identity was ignored. Nevertheless, the existing studies have mainly focused on how Chinese EFL learners obtained their English names rather than what challenges they might encounter when using these names [2]. Additionally, there is also limited research investigating how they use their English names when they are abroad [3].

2.2. Chinese Students' Agency in Naming Practice

Except for nominal imposition, [1] found that most Chinese students have various degrees of agency in choosing their names. Agency, defined by [8], is the abilities of choice-making and self-control aimed at pursuing personal or social goals. In addition, with agency, students could imagine and perform new identities, including those of proficient L2 learners [8]. For example, [4] pointed out that Chinese students are agentive beings who are actively constructing their sense of identity through names, and three main practices have been recognised as follows.

Firstly, a name can be selected to match one's personality or reflective self [4]. When there is a mismatch, the agency could drive students to adjust their names, helping them resist certain unfavourable positionings and identities [8]. Secondly, a name can be adopted to differentiate themselves from peers [2, 4]. For instance, students might choose an unconventional English name or keep using their Chinese names in Anglophone contexts to show their distinctiveness and uniqueness. Finally, a name can also be chosen to echo the imagined self or investment in the future [4]. Investment describes a social construct seeking to explain the connections between learners' commitment to learning a language and their evolving identities [9]. In other words, there is a focus on the future perspective in terms of agency and identity when students link their investment to their ambitions to an imagined self or imagined community [1, 9].

However, when these Chinese international students move to a new context such as the English-speaking host country, their agency is limited since it seems necessary for them to have an English name in the UK context [1]. For example, since the Chinese phonetic system is different from that of

English-speaking countries, some English teachers may fail to memorise and pronounce Chinese students' ethnic names [3]. Therefore, to avoid mispronunciation and embarrassment, plenty of Chinese students tend to compromise and adopt an English name to promote intercultural communication [1, 2, 7].

2.3. Theorisation of Identity

2.3.1 Dynamic and Contextual Nature of Identity

Identity, according to [11], describes 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future (p.91).' This definition underpinned by poststructural perspective emphasises that people's identities are diverse, dynamic, and context-dependent changing over time and space [9]. Identity is rather fragmented than fixed, allowing people to achieve suitable and comfortable identities in a certain time and space [10,11]. In addition, the choice of names could help people construct their identities in different stages, reflecting the fluid nature of identity [1]. In other words, Chinese international students' choice of identity among English or ethnic names is always socially meaningful, emerging from their negotiations of the past and now [9]. For instance, when Chinese students entered an American academic community, they found that most of their Chinese peers employed English names, which may urge them to refashion their identities with an English name to integrate into the target community [3]. Therefore, Chinese international students might make the socially meaningful decision between their English and Chinese names based on the belief that a shared practice could help them move from legitimate peripheral participation toward central membership [12].

2.3.2 Acculturation and Cosmopolitanism

Besides, Chinese international students' naming choices could also be understood from the angle of acculturation and cosmopolitanism. Acculturation, referring to the process of adaptation and socialisation to the host culture, can be exemplified by the acquisition of the target language and culture and the participation in social activities [13]. As mentioned, acculturation is often accompanied by adopting a Western name [7]. However, acculturation does not linearly signify westernisation owing to the emphasis on globalisation [4]. For example, students who adopted an English name might simply want to construct a cosmopolitan identity, presenting their willingness to blur ethnic boundaries or a sense of 'otherness' and openness to western culture [2]. In contrast, being cosmopolitan can be also interpreted as embracing ethnic diversity and cultural identity. Indeed, adopting a foreign-sounding name might weaken students' cultural identity, which referring to one's sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group [10]. Arguably, international students' sense of identity, belonging, and mobility could be reflected by their naming practice and choice-making. However, though identity construction has been an extensively studied topic among international students, rare studies have analysed it in line with naming practice and name choices [2]. Here naming practice refers to how Chinese students adopted their English names and name choices mainly discuss how international students chose between English and ethnic names in the British academic community. As such, this paper is designed to answer: In what ways do Chinese international students' naming practices reflect their identity negotiation? In what ways do Chinese international students' name choices between their English and Chinese names reflect their identity negotiation?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Participants

The design of this research is a multiple case study based on four cases. Specifically, this report looked at the qualitative data within each case in-depth, allowing thorough exploration of research questions [14]. Then, a cross-case analysis was followed to seek differences and similarities between the cases [14]. In this case, this multiple case study not only established a comprehensive and holistic picture but also illustrated the nuance and complexity of Chinese international students' naming practice and name choice in the British academic community.

There were four participants in this qualitative and exploratory research, and they all were Chinese international students studying in the UK. Their detailed information can be found in Table 1. The selection of interviewees for this interview relied on convenient sampling, referring to a non-probability sampling technique in which samples were selected from the population due to the principle of convenience and the researcher's ties to them [15]. Though this method was cost-effective and accessible, it bore the risk of generating biased results with an under-representation of the population [16]. However, the already existing relationship of trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants helped to improve the responsiveness and truthfulness, and it is not the purpose of this study to obtain a generalised finding [15].

Table 1: List of participants

Name	Gender	Age	L1	Have changed English names?	How to get English names?	Chinese/English name in the classroom?
Dereck	Male	21	Chinese	Yes	Self-assigned; co-create with his EFL teacher	English name
Meg	Female	20	Chinese	Yes	Given by her foreign teacher; self-assigned	English name
Erin	Female	21	Chinese	Yes	Given by her EFL teacher; self-assigned; self-assigned	English name
Ella	Female	20	Chinese	Yes	Self-assigned; self-assigned	Chinese name

3.2. Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth and holistic data regarding participants' personalised feelings and experiences of naming practice when studying in the UK [17]. During these interviews, flexibility was guaranteed by creating follow-up questions and probes to encourage active and open conversations between the researcher and the interviewees [17]. In addition, one-to-one interviews were used to ensure confidentiality and feasibility [16].

Before the data collection, two pilot studies were carried out with two other Chinese international students studying at UK universities. Five questions were asked including 1) Do you have an English name? 2) How did you get your English name? 3) Have you ever changed your English name and why? 4) Which name do you prefer to use in academic settings and why? 5) In what ways does using an English/Chinese name influence your identity? However, the results suggested that they seldom

thought about the relation between name and identity, leading to a blank mind. Therefore, clarifications were provided in the main study whenever appropriate. Additionally, I added another question concerning how they perceived using the other type of names to probe further their underlying thinking process of name choice and identity negotiation.

Subsequently, the formal interviews were carried out online via Microsoft Teams. Approximately, each interview lasted for 30 minutes, enabling a rich and detailed body of data while preventing interviewee fatigue [15]. Besides, the interviews were implemented in Chinese as the capabilities of respondents in terms of English language proficiency must be considered to ensure the validity and reliability of their responses [16].

3.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study employed thematic analysis, defined by [18] as a method for evaluating qualitative data that enables researchers to recognise, analyse, and report repeated patterns, known as themes, from a data set concerning participants' perspectives and experiences. The rationale for choosing this approach lies in its flexibility. It not only enabled the researcher to conduct deductive or theory-driven analysis but also allowed new findings to emerge, contributing to the latent assumptions and ideologies from specific examples [19].

The data analysis followed the guidelines proposed by [19]. Firstly, the verbal data were transcribed and reviewed. Secondly, initial codes were generated based on open coding by segmenting raw interview data into meaningful expressions and creating categories where necessary [15]. Finally, the themes, the patterned responses capturing something significant regarding the research questions, were found out, revised, and defined [18].

4. Results

4.1. Dereck

When Dereck was in primary school, his EFL teacher suggested him adopting an English name to boost language learning. Therefore, he self-assigned a name, "Transformer", to fulfil his wishes to be as cool as the transformers in the movie. However, cultural mismatches occurred when he entered junior high school as this name seemed childish. Consequently, he asked his EFL teacher for advice and co-created a new name, Dereck, the name of a previous student with outstanding performance.

Dereck kept using this name after he arrived in the UK. For him, speaking English and adopting an English name is the cultural norm for the local people and the prerequisite to facilitating intercultural communication. English names also act as significant markers of his cultural openness and cosmopolitan identity [1, 2]. In addition, identity is a social construct that the interactions between name and identity are context-based and dynamic due to different times and spaces [1, 2]. Nevertheless, though Dereck expressed rationality in using English names in an English-speaking context, he internally preferred to use his Chinese name as stated:

I am Chinese and my Chinese name carries symbolic meanings. Alternatively, I can change my English name whenever I want to.

Here, emphasis was placed on his cultural identity as Chinese. As his English name is only used when he is studying in the UK, it fails to give him a sense of security and belonging. Besides, the special meanings conveyed in his Chinese name cannot be equally reflected in his etymological English name. Thus, the connection between his English name and self-concept or identity is weaker. His Chinese name tends to play an indispensable role in shaping his individual and sociocultural identity.

4.2. Meg

Meg's first English name, Sophia, was assigned by her foreign English teacher in primary school. However, when she came to junior high school, she decided to change her name and she gave the following reasons:

Sophia is a Greek goddess, which is inconsistent with my personality. Thus, I changed my English name to Meg because this name sounds more energetic and optimistic.

A name can also be incompatible with one's sense of self, leading to name changes [4]. On that account, the chosen English names should be one's self-presentation, matching their personalities and perceived selves. Besides, Meg presented an overt inclination towards the adoption of an English name in the UK, and she explained:

Most of my foreign teachers failed to pronounce my Chinese name correctly, and the mispronunciation made me awkward and uncomfortable. Moreover, we should use English names in the UK to show our willingness to embrace the host culture.

The phonological nature of Chinese names makes it hard for English speakers to pronounce [2, 3, 4, 7]. Therefore, most Chinese international students choose to use English names to bring convenience to their English-speaking tutors and peers. It can not only be a successful way to avoid the embarrassment caused by mispronunciation but also ease the native speakers' burdens and facilitate the process of acculturation or cultural accommodation by blurring the ethnical boundaries [1, 7]. But acculturation is not equivalent to assimilation or westernisation [4], and the adoption of English is just a symbol of cross-cultural identity, being one of the diverse identities based on complex personal and social histories.

4.3. Erin

Erin's first English name was Andy entitled by her kindergarten EFL teacher, but she later changed it to Christina in junior high school as Andy sounded bossy and mismatched her personality. When she came to the UK, she altered her English name to Erin as she mentioned:

Christina is so common and ordinary. Moving to Erin, it contains the meaning of elegance and is convergent with my perceived identity.

A name change can happen when there is a mismatch between self-perception. The stereotypical assumptions underlying certain English names are prevalent among Chinese students. Besides, the name change can also be attributive to keep away from English names that are too ordinary and prevalent like Amy and Sam to exhibit uniqueness. Nevertheless, name change bears the risks of identity confusion and inconsistency both for themselves and others as people might associate them with different names. In the UK, Erin utilised her English name in classrooms while leaning toward using her Chinese name intrinsically as illustrated:

I was born with my Chinese name which was ingrained into my DNA. Deploying Chinese names can avoid duplication of names and show great uniqueness.

Uniqueness is rather significant for Erin to refrain from any cases of duplication of names. In addition, the employment of English names could blur the ethnical boundaries and prevent Chinese

international students from being too intimate with their local peers at the same time. Arguably, whether to tell others their English or Chinese names is possibly dependent on the relation of proximity [4]. Furthermore, since China has gained more power on a global level, more and more Chinese international students prefer to use their ethical names to foreground their cultural identities and display cultural confidence and belongingness.

4.4. Ella

Before Ella came to the UK, she selected a Spanish name, Yolanda, which was less common. Nonetheless, after she arrived in the UK, she was aware of the cultural mismatch and the generational gaps conveyed in this name as Yolanda was a non-English and old-fashioned name. Ella is the only student who adopted her Chinese name in British academic communities. Still, she self-assigned another English name, Ella, because she found her foreign roommates cannot pronounce her Chinese names. Furthermore, she added:

I feel uncomfortable when I saw my friends with English names receiving weird looks in the first meeting with their classmates. Moreover, using Chinese names can help me easily find Chinese peers, facilitating a sense of belonging. Finally, though it is hard for international students to be fully accepted by the natives, using my Chinese name helps me to be more confident.

The situational use of names can sometimes lead to inconvenience and misunderstanding affected by the identification names evoke. For Chinese international students who deploy English names, the names fail to act as an authentic representation indicating their cultural backgrounds [4]. However, whilst this index allows students to integrate into their ethnic group, it might prevent multicultural integration with an isolated identity from the host country.

Besides, there might be a cultural relationship between Chinese names and confidence. If the local teachers and peers were reluctant to remember Chinese international students' ethical names and force or hint them to have an English name, this probably denotes refusal, exerting unfavourable influences on students' cultural confidence and an assertion of identities [7]. In other words, the acceptance of the identity of overseas students might enhance self-concept and self-efficacy.

5. Discussion

Many Chinese students indeed obtained their English names during their EFL learning experience [3], and the English names can whether be imposed by teachers or self-assigned. Although the agency of whether to have an English is limited owing to the growing importance of EFL education in China or the emerging need of studying in an English-speaking country, it is marked in students' choice of English names. Additionally, the following part will discuss the underlying meanings attached by Chinese international students to their English names and how these students constructed their identities through names, accompanied by an examination of these Chinese international students' name choices between their English and Chinese names within an academic community in the UK, and how they interpreted the meanings of their choice and negotiate their identity options.

5.1. Names Could be Representations of Students' Authentic, Unique, or Idealised Identity

The results proved that when Chinese students chose their English names, they emphasised the match between the connotation of the names and their self-perceived identity [4]. The mismatch between English names and the reflective self might lead to a name change, and it is rationalised by the fluid and functional nature of names depending on different time, space, and circumstances [1, 2]. For

instance, Erin who is tender thought her previous name, Andy, sounds masculine and is irreconcilable with her personal history.

Moreover, the results also demonstrate that some Chinese international students might choose a distinctive name with an emphasis on unique self-representation and identity. Since Chinese names can consist of any morpheme in the Chinese language, it is less likely to result in repetitive names as English names [2]. Therefore, to make English names as distinguished as their Chinese names, Chinese students tend to pick English names that they think are less conventional. An example could be that before Ella came to the UK, she selected the Spanish name, Yolanda. Nevertheless, when she realised that this obsolete name can no longer represent her modern and fashionable identity, she altered it.

Finally, some students might also choose their English names that echo their expectations and idealised self. This idealisation could be analysed in line with the concept of investment, which refers to learners' engagement in the target language which might help them acquire cultural capital and symbolic power [1, 2, 9]. Dereck's investment in his ambitions for the future to be a competent English language learner has reflected his imagined identity in the imagined community as a top student [1, 9]. Arguably, both investment in the contemporary and future worlds should be explored to envisage the students' complex and evolving hopes and identities.

5.2. Names Could be Reflections of students' Dynamic and Contextual Identity

International students usually experience a complex process of identity negotiation when they move to another social community. Informed by the poststructuralist perspectives, individuals' identities are fluid and dynamic changing over historical time and social space [1, 2, 9]. This theoretical assumption can be reflected in the results. For example, both Dereck and Meg have pointed out that since the UK is an English-speaking country, international students "should" use English names when they study there. However, while Dereck linked this decision to "Do in Rome as Rome does", Meg attributed it to openness or willingness to embrace the western culture. In addition, Dereck added that all his Chinese peers in the UK used their English names, which can be understood under the community of practice (CoP). Arguably, Chinese students' name choice is not an individual choice but a social practice with social meaning located in the academic community that they belong to, confirming their membership [3].

Besides, Erin also associated name choice with relational intimacy in different contexts. She was addressed by her English name in the classroom, but simultaneously, she preferred to use her Chinese name among her intimate friends. Again, having an alternative name indicates that students can perform various identities in different contexts which are socially meaningful [3]. Moreover, the hypothesis here is that while using an English name helps to reduce the feeling of "otherness" among the native students, not informing the Chinese personal name assists to keep a safe distance and ethnic boundary that suggests avoidance of being too close with them [2]. Nevertheless, this kind of temporary and fluid identity based on contexts might lead to difficulties in identity switch or identity crisis [10]. From both their own and others' perspectives, there might be an incongruence between their multiple identities, resulting in confusing social representations.

5.3. Names Could be Portrayals of Students' Cosmopolitan and Cultural Identity

The results also suggest that Chinese international students' name choice may be associated with their divergent perceptions of being cosmopolitan. One may claim that English names can express acceptance and openness to the local culture [3]. For instance, Dereck argued that the use of English names is a symbol of his global and English-speaking identity while revealing the international mobility between the Chinese and English worlds. However, others might consider that using Chinese

names in a foreign country can reveal ethnic inclusiveness and diversity. For example, Ella claimed that being cosmopolitan is equivalent to being inclusive and this inclusiveness encourages people from different countries to maintain their ethnic names and identities, creating a diverse, multilingual, and multicultural society. Besides, students using Chinese names might also want to retain a sense of their own personal and cultural identity by mitigating the possibility of repeated names and manifesting cultural confidence [1].

Moreover, using Chinese names could also help get rid of linguistic imperialism and imposed identity [2, 7, 10]. Possibly, the foreign-sounding name may create a psychological distance from students' cultural identities. Arguably, a culturally inclusive environment in which diversity and each learner's cultural or personal identity are valued should be established [7]. Showing respect for their ethnic names by spending some time learning and memorising the pronunciation is helpful to increase Chinese students' academic engagement and establish rapport [1]. Besides, the results designate that the emotional proximity between identity and Chinese/English name is varied. For example, Dereck stated that an English name is just a name that can be changed without legitimation, and the stronger connections between his identity and Chinese name may be attributed to cultural confidence and the importance attached to cultural identity. [4] argue that since China has gained more power around the globe, an increasing number of Chinese international students tend to use their ethnic names in the western world to show their "Chineseness" and national pride with abundant cultural confidence.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study mainly investigated two questions. In terms of Chinese students' naming practice, it is found that if the chosen names failed to match their perceived, unique, and idealised identities, their growing agency might encourage them to change the undesirable names to new ones to align with their identity construction. Secondly, the study also explored how Chinese international students adopted Chinese or English names in the British academic community to negotiate their identity development, providing fresh insights into a less studies context in the UK. The results indicated that more students preferred to use their English names. Arguably, students emphasised that there was an established assumption that they needed an English name and an English-speaking identity in an English-speaking context so as to promote multicultural communication. Besides, an English name can be helpful to form a cosmopolitan identity by facilitating the process of acculturation. However, different students had divergent interpretations of cosmopolitan identity as some students propose that being cosmopolitan means that people should embrace diversity and inclusivity with a highlight on ethnic maintenance. Furthermore, students using their Chinese names in the UK might also want to reveal their cultural confidence, placing great importance on their cultural identity.

However, there were some limitations to this research. Owing to the nature of convenience sampling, this research only included sophomore students. In other words, since the naming practice and identity negotiation may be relevant to the evolving relations with the host country, this research was unable to capture the dynamic and comparative picture. In addition, since this research was small-scale and qualitative, future research ought to examine the correlations between international students' naming practice and identity based on a larger sample of participants and conduct statistical analysis to obtain generalized findings. Besides, international students from the same language family as the host country should be also included to establish a holistic understanding as they were more likely to be aware more than linguistic and social factors contributing to one's identity (i.e., German and English both belong to the West Germanic languages, and it will be helpful to evaluate the identity negotiation of the German students studying in the UK). Arguably, since the growing prevalence of multiculturalism, multilingual learners' name choices should also be investigated in line with their

identities. Besides, future research should address this difference by including participants from more diverse backgrounds and in various academic communities in Anglophone countries.

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