

The Weight of Tradition in the Formation of the Name Signs of the Deaf in China

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Traditional Models of Legal Names in China

The Chinese are probably the most particular people in the world when it comes to their names. As the Chinese proverb says, "worse than being born under a bad star is to receive a bad name."¹ For this reason it is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the role of name signs in China without a certain knowledge of the Chinese tradition regarding the attribution of names. A legal Chinese name is made up of a family name, monosyllabic with some exceptions, followed by a monosyllabic or disyllabic first name.² Theoretically, the 50,000 characters that make up the Chinese lexicon are potential choices for the composition of a first name. Due to the great number of homophones included in the Chinese language, it is difficult to identify the graphic form of a Chinese name by its pronunciation alone. Hence the custom of specifying the characters by writing them in the air or by indicating their signification,³ or even by simply presenting a calling card.

The choice of a first name often expresses the parents' wishes.⁴ Hence the literal signification of the first name of Mao Zedong is "to favor + East," while that of his prime minister Chou En-lai is "grace, favor + to come," and that of the "real" first name of Deng Xiaoping is Xian-sheng, "ancient + sage."⁵ There is, however, another level of interpretation of Chinese first names. The first character often serves to indicate the generation to which the bearer of the name belongs. Most families have a poem in which the succession of characters marks the succession of generations in their geneological register. A common character, or an element of

a character, is thus found among all the brothers and cousins in a family. The first names of the brothers and cousins of Mao Zedong, Chou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping all have a common character, Ze, En and Xian, respectively.⁶ Sometimes, such as is the case in my own family, the middle name includes a radical common to members of the same generation.⁷ The family tie is thus expressed by two out of the three elements that make up the legal name and by a part of the third one.

In a country in which familial hierarchy and clan relations are of such great importance in the establishment of social contacts, even an ordinary name can sometimes serve as an introduction. When two Chinese businessmen meet for the first time, they often ask each other if they are related to someone else with the same last name and the same first name. In such a context, with the force of inertia that characterizes Chinese society, it is hard to imagine how the deaf community could succeed in imposing its own system of names in the face of a tradition thousands of years old. Furthermore, the deaf never take the initiative to introduce themselves by their names in sign language and are often reticent to sign it even when asked to do so, probably assuming that it is only a nickname that is being requested.

It is to this tradition that the development of name signs of the deaf refers. This article describes the general formation of these name signs and explains why the population of deaf Chinese, contrary to their Western counterparts, has remained so profoundly attached to the tradition of the legal name.

The Education of the Deaf in China and the Development of Chinese Sign Language (CSL)⁸

Although signs can be the invention of the individual, the formation of a sign language requires the presence of a small community at the very least. And this is often a school for the deaf. In Asia, these schools were not developed until the end of the nineteenth century, just after the Congress of Milan approved of the adoption of the oralist approach.⁹ Oralism then spread into China, as it did into the rest of Asia, through the intermediary of Western

educators. Consequently, the use of sign language was discouraged, even prohibited, in the schools for the deaf, to the extent that CSL was still officially unknown at the beginning of the nineteen fifties (see Yau 1993).

In spite of the straight jacket of oralism, CSL developed at the heart of the deaf community regardless, particularly in the specialized schools where deaf children learned signs from the older children. Furthermore, the repeated failures and frustrations undergone by the teachers and deaf children, as well as the lack of auditory aids, slowly forced most of the Chinese educational authorities to accept CSL as the principal mode of teaching.

General Characteristics of Chinese Name Signs

Since specialized education reaches only the deaf in urban zones – in the 1980s only 6% of deaf children were enrolled in specialized schools – the great majority of the deaf population escaped its influence. Most of its members lived as deaf people isolated within the hearing community. They found themselves forced to adopt the customs of their peers.¹⁰ This scattering of the deaf throughout the hearing world explains the weakness of the specifically deaf culture in China and consequently the modest role played by name signs.

The urban deaf, when they do have the chance to go to school, receive their name signs at school and usually keep them for their whole lives, because it is these same schools that introduce them as workers into certain state-run businesses. A teacher accompanies the young graduate to his job interview and informs the future employer of his name sign. Since the deaf person is unlikely to change jobs, he therefore continues to see himself designated by this name sign until he retires.¹¹ These name signs, given to the young deaf people in their first days of school by their older schoolmates,¹² are for the most part monogestural and descriptive, and their formation is inspired by a physical characteristic or the bearing of the deaf person involved. It also happens that these name signs are based on the literal translation of one of the characters of the legal name. The family name Bai, for exam-

ple, is often designated by the sign for “white,” corresponding to its literal meaning, while a name that includes the character “dragon” can inspire the creation of a name sign with the sign for this mythic animal.¹³

Sometimes a name sign is the result of a false interpretation, intentional or not, of a character in the legal name. Hence the character *yong*, 永 “forever,” is rendered as *shui* 水 “water,” either because “forever” is too abstract to be visualized in gesture or it is misread as *shui* because of the graphical resemblance between these two characters. Similarly, the family name Zhu can be rendered in sign by “pig,” which is pronounced in the same way. As a general rule, the deaf person prefers to express an abstract idea through the intermediary of a concrete idea. He can also create a few digital imitations of the characters of his name. The *Lexicon of Chinese Sign Language* (1990) showed fifty-nine imitations of this sort (see appendix for a few examples).¹⁴ Lastly, the deaf in China may also trace the characters of their names in the air or on their palms. Since Chinese writing is not alphabetic, they are quite reticent to accept the initial signs, meaning the signs designating a word by its manual initials in alphabetic transcription. They find, among other things, the configurations of the manual letters difficult to recognize.

The deaf who are isolated within the hearing community, for their part, have no need for a name sign, since no one around them uses signs except in their presence. Of all the isolated deaf people I have met in China or elsewhere, none had a real name sign, even a woman who had created over a hundred of them for the members of her family and the people around her (Yau 1982; 1992). The name signs created for their families and friends by these isolated deaf people, on the other hand, are similar to those created by the pupils in the schools for the deaf for their peers. They are generally:

- descriptive lexical sequences including, usually, a sign indicating the direction of the home or workplace of the bearer of the name. These pantomimed name signs are often temporary forms destined to be condensed by use into monogestural signs.¹⁵

- the pantomining of physical characteristics. The name sign for an invalid, for example, is “to bend the upper part of the body forward two or three times.” In CSL, on the other hand, a similar sign is executed by bending the forearm laterally within the natural signing space.
- or, for the members of the family, the synonyms for “old man,” “old woman,” (for the father and mother) and the “oldest,” “second,” “youngest” (for the children), executed by pointing at the tip of the thumb, index finger and little finger, respectively (see Yau 1992).

Two Types of Mechanisms in Chinese Name Signs

One can distinguish two types of mechanisms in the formation of Chinese name signs: external (sociolinguistic) and internal (cognit-olinguistic). These two types of mechanisms often involve their own forms of constraint. The generic affixes of name signs acquired in school belong to the external type and are either rapidly rejected, or partially tolerated and finally assimilated.¹⁶ The internal type includes, for example, an economy of gestures and a location limited to the torso-facial area, the natural site of execution. Unlike the American, and to a lesser extent French sign language, in the Chinese system the initial signs are still considered an external convention, introduced under the influence of the West, and are only accepted in particular circumstances. On the other hand, the Chinese system does not provide ways to detect the differences between the name signs of the deaf and those of the hearing signers, as is the case in American sign language. In the latter, “... the deaf invented them [name signs] for the hearing as a label or a flag to show who is a stranger to the community. [...] Manifestly, they [the deaf in America] tend to give the hearing a ‘different’ type of sign” (Mindess 1988: 48-49, 56).¹⁷

In spite of the inertia of the signers,¹⁸ the Chinese authorities continue, within the framework of the national campaign against illiteracy, to promote the use of initializaion to render proper names and some other items. Almost five hundred initial signs (15% of the lexicon), ranging from politico-philosophical or techni-


cal terminology to terms of kinship or names of provinces, have been recently introduced. But as far as proper names are concerned, initialization is completely unused by the deaf community.¹⁹ For example, the popular name sign for Mao Ze-dong is a surname based on the literal meaning of his family name, or "hair," with the sign being to brush the back of one hand with the fingers of the other, plus the gesture of placing the tip of the index finger in front of the chin (an allusion to his mole). This sign, considered disrespectful by the authorities, is supposed to be replaced by the manual spelling out of the letters M-Z-D in Chinese standard sign language, often preceded by the sign *president*, which is none other than the sign for *royal crown*. But given the lack of familiarity with the alphabet, it is not surprising that these efforts have not met with great success, all the more since the physical characteristics of Mao Zedong and other high dignitaries are well known thanks to their portraits exhibited all across the country.

The most significant of the internal constraints in the formation of Chinese name signs is found in the context of location. Since the location of the name sign must be within the natural signing space, the choice of a physical characteristic is usually facial. It is significant that a popular sign for "name sign" in CSL is "(facial) appearance + sign."²⁰ A name sign that includes a component executed outside the natural signing space would be quickly recentered. For example, the hand placed above the head, which was used to suggest great height within a name sign, was lowered to the level of the chin less than a month after its creation. According to my longitudinal study, classified by age, of the creation of name signs at the School of the Deaf in Canton, the lower part of the face is the preferred final location. In a total of twenty-one name signs, twenty were located in the facial area in the initial phase, of which thirteen were in the area of the lower face, meaning the space defined by the nose, the earlobes, the jaw and the chin.²¹ This relative spatial delimitation in Chinese name signs implicitly confirms the observation of Siple (1973; 1978), according to which the deaf do not look at the hands of their interlocutor during the course of a conversation, but seem to fix their eyes in the lower portion of his face.²² On the other hand, it seems that the name signs in CSL are subjected to restrictions of place much less severe

than those in American sign language in which “no [arbitrary] name signs are executed on reference points specific to the face (eyes, nose, mouth, ears, hair), which are all possible locations for gestures in ASL” (Supalla, MS 1983; 1990: 103).

High Rate of Illiteracy and the Cult of Ideo-Pictograms

In spite of the high rate of illiteracy, Chinese deaf people have great respect for Chinese characters. The Chinese civilization is not a civilization of speech but rather a civilization of written words. Something reported by two well-known Chinese journalists is indicative of this point: “During the Cultural Revolution my son repeated all day long, ‘President Mao said, president Mao has taught us.’ Finally I told him that, ‘President Mao has such an accent that if he spoke to you, you wouldn’t understand a word.’”²³ In fact, very few people heard Mao speak. Many older people still consider that even bits of paper should be treated with respect and should not be trampled under foot. In the eyes of the profane, whether they are deaf or not, “education” means “knowledge of characters.” The deaf have the custom of introducing themselves by writing their names or stamping them with their seals. Not only do they recognize their written names as their only formal and legal identities, but they are proud of this and happy to make use of them when they are able to write them or explain their graphic components.

We should specify that Chinese writing is relatively independent of speech, with each character corresponding to a word. Its ideo-pictographic nature allows for a reading and an understanding independent of phonetic variations. Let us take for example the character , “to learn.” In Mandarin (standard Chinese) it is pronounced *xué*, in Cantonese *hok*. Someone from Peking would not understand someone from Canton speaking his mother tongue, but they could easily understand each other in writing. From a socio-psychological point of view, even the deaf can feel equal to their hearing compatriots when it comes to ideo-pictograms. Their attitude to some extent is similar to the ideas expressed by those who, like Leibniz, considered Chinese writing as a possible candidate for the status of universal language. At the

beginning of the century, Bernhard Karlgren, the famous Swedish phonologist described Chinese writing as "an esperanto for the eyes." Although such praise is certainly exaggerated, it has helped draw attention to the particularities of this Eastern writing.

Other factors can likewise lead the deaf in China not to consider Chinese writing as foreign to their sign language. Since it is by nature pictographic, Chinese writing naturally looked out for objects and actions of a visual nature as formational referents. There are at least three types of visual referents in this writing: manual actions, conventional signs and objects. This linguistic utilization of referents is familiar to all the deaf signers. Another aspect of the characters that might allow a deaf person to feel familiar with them is the selection process for the features. This process is comparable to that by which a gestural sign whose components have been chosen from among a number of pertinent gestures. In short, we should underscore that the use of his legal name by a deaf person implies an ability to recognize a few characters as graphic signs, but not to read written Chinese, whose syntax is based on that of spoken language.

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For over 2500 years, Chinese culture (Han) has become so monolithic that it left no room for the development of minority cultures. It is perhaps sad to compare the situation of the deaf in China to that of women in contemporary China (Yau 1994a). In the 1940s, the women's liberation movement was completely eclipsed and integrated into the common cause by the Sino-Japanese war and the revolution of 1949. All in the name of national cohesion, other minority or underprivileged groups were constantly constrained to sacrifice themselves. In such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine the development of an independent deaf culture in China as is praised in the West today (Mottez 1985). At the same time, the Chinese, deaf and hearing alike, have a general tendency to refuse to identify themselves with individuals or underprivileged groups.²⁴ This philosophical stance explains in part the moderate attitude of the Chinese deaf in their social demands and the low profile they have adopted with regard to

the current status of their name signs. Since cultural nationalism is stronger than ever, particular interests continue to blend into the Chinese melting pot and the social consciousness of the deaf slumbers beside the fire.

Notes

1. Popular etymology associates the words "name" and "fate," since both are pronounced *ming*, with a difference in tone.
2. Since 1949, monosyllabic first names have been on the rise, especially in Northern China.
3. Often I introduce myself by saying, in Chinese, "My name is Yau, the 'swimming' Yau."
4. It can also express their beliefs. According to a widespread superstition, a child can lack one of the "five elements" (water, fire, metal, wood, earth) at birth. In such cases, the parents choose a first name for the child bearing the graphic elements semantically linked to the element the child is supposed to lack. The last character of my first name 金, for example, was chosen according to this principle since it includes the grapheme 金, which means "metal."
5. Deng Xiaoping adopted the first name Xiaoping only after his joining the Communist party. The popular Chinese sign for Deng Xiaoping is: hands, palms against the two cheeks, moving away laterally. This is intended to designate his large, round face.
6. The first names of their brothers and sisters are, respectively, Mao Ze-min (*min*, "people") and Mao Ze-tan (*tan*, "deep"); Zhou En-pu (*pu*, "vast") and Zhou En-shou (*shou*, longevity); Deng Xian-lie (*lie*, "integrity") [his older sister], Xian-xiu (*xiu* "to cultivate oneself"), Xian-zhi (*zhi*, "to govern"), Xian-fu (*fu*, "lotus" [his younger sister], Xian-qing (*qing*, "clear"), and Xian-qun (*qun*, "people, masses") [his youngest sister].

Deng Xiaoping's teacher thought that his parents had been too pretentious in giving him the first name Xian-sheng (ancient/first - sage), which is in fact the title usually reserved for Confucius. His first name was thus changed to Xi-xian (hope - virtue), a first name he was still using during his studies in France in the twenties.

The current practice in China is to join the two syllables of a first name in a transcription while they are separated by a hyphen in the other Chinese communities. I have chosen to add the hyphen to the first name being analyzed here to underline the signification of each syllable in a first name.

7. My father and my uncles, as well as all the males of the same generation, have the word "great" 宏 as their first name. As for their middle names, they all contain the same graphic element, the radical "roof, shelter." The eight characters chosen are: 富 (wealth), 寬 (magnanimity), 寧 (tranquility), (peace), 容 (tolerance), 宜 (appropriateness), 寶 (treasure) and 宇 (great space).
8. The term "Chinese" here designates the Han ethnic group which includes 90% of the population of China.

9. The education of the deaf began in China in 1887 at the initiative of two American Presbyterian ministers, Annetta Thompson Mills and her husband C. R. Mills.
10. In rural zones, being deaf does not necessarily constitute as great a handicap in and of itself as it does in town. The many isolated deaf people I met in the Chinese countryside in the eighties all led independent and dignified lives and did not exhibit any signs of inferiority complexes in relation to their hearing neighbors (Yau 1992).
11. With the development of the market economy in China, one might expect the State to become less involved with the deaf as with other handicapped people.
12. See the description of the process of attribution of name signs in the Guangzhou School for the Deaf in Canton in Yau and He (1989).
13. The case of Mao Zedong, discussed in the following section, is an excellent illustration of the use of interpretation of characters in the creation of Chinese name signs.
14. The digital imitation of characters, which often includes a great number of strokes, is limited by the physiological possibilities of the hand. This is why few of these characters are considered imitable.
15. It is noteworthy that a monogestural sign contains more information than a monosyllabic Chinese word. For example, the sign "verruca" indicates its location, which the corresponding Chinese word cannot. The multiple parameters of the gestural modality allow for such subtlety of meaning.
16. During my research on the Guangzhou School for the Deaf in Canton, I was able to observe that the name signs of the deaf students contained the component *little brother* for the boys, and *little sister* for the girls, made with the hand, palm lateral, end of the index hooked on the chin for the boys, and the end of the little finger, tip against the chin for the girls. These two elements were originally terms of affection, introduced under the influence of the oral tradition, but quickly became very distinctive characteristics that served as generic indicators, according to the schema: "personal characteristic + *little brother*" for the boys, and "*little sister* + personal characteristic" for the girls. Subsequently they became merged with the components indicating the personal characteristics, the localization near the chin becoming the final gesture of the sign names for boys and the beginning gesture for that of girls (Yau 1992: 212-214).
17. There is to some extent a similar phenomenon in the transcription of foreign names in Chinese. The transcription is made systematically in such a way that the non-Chinese status of the bearer of the name appears immediately.
18. Personally I have used the word "gestant" in French since the beginning of the sixties to designate someone who uses a gesture or sign in sign language. However, for a few years now, influenced by the Americans, the French deaf communities use the word *signeur*, adapting the English "signer."
19. In some schools for the deaf in China, such as the one in Shanghai, the use of manual letters is encouraged. But it is doubtful that spelled out signs would one day be adopted by the whole of the Chinese deaf population, since the manual alphabet is not rooted in CSL as it is in European and American sign languages.
20. The sign for "appearance" is made by a circular movement of the hand, with the palm inside.

21. Yau and He (1989). In this particular study, the literal signification of the only name sign situated outside this area is "piano."
22. The position of the two generic affixes mentioned in note 16 constitute a further reason to keep the location of the name sign within the facial area.
23. *Le défilé* (translated from Geneviève Barman's French translation) in Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye (1987), p. 263.
24. In China, unlike what has happened in France or the United States, the deaf try by all means to have a mixed marriage in the hope of having hearing children who will join the majority community (Yau 1992: 70-71).

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