Brand Name Translation as a Decisive Factor in Positioning Foreign Brands On Chinese Market (I)*

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Determining the brand name is always a crucial aspect in the development of a brand’s image and its correct positioning in the consumers’ mind. As the ideal name for a brand is always demanding to find, it becomes even harder to translate its original form in order to synchronize it to the culture and personality of the consumers of new, international market. It is even a more labyrinthine process to transfer a brand name from a phonographic language system to a logographic-based language system, such as Chinese, as Chinese writing is fundamentally different from other writing systems, in the way that it allows the interpretation of a word only at the broad level of the grapheme.

The purpose of this study is to examine and discuss the relation between translation approaches, cultural peculiarities and brand personality. In order to do this, 20 international brands, from five different categories were chosen through a focus group and analysed in order to show how and why Chinese consumers choose to adopt (or not) different foreign brands.

Keywords: brand image, brand personality, Chinese logographic system, cultural translation, phono-semantic translation

I. INTRODUCTION

As the global community is in closer connection than ever, marketers and philologists have shown an increasing interest in finding the best method to translate brand names (Aaker 1991, Javed 1993, Schmitt and Simonson 1997, Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Developing a brand name into another language is
more than a thoughtful translation work, it is, of course, an implication of linguistic structure of the language, but primarily, it is a matter of cultural appropriation, an exercise of cultural identity and acceptance. More than any other culture, China is the ground for the most meaningful names, imbued with deep significance and cultural tracks. Translation of brand names in Chinese is especially perceived as a mutual interdependence of the Self and the Other, where negotiation becomes necessary. Through this process of creation of the identity of a new brand, identity construction is accomplished by negation of the conflicts that might emerge from cultural and social differences.

Arthur Lovejoy (1940) explains that in this process of comparison to Otherness, the Other is guided by some basic ideas (“unit ideas”) which are the “pieces” that build social life throughout history. These basic ideas are constant in importance, but they have the capacity to re-incorporate into new intellectual configurations. Lovejoy proposes that, in order to know the Other, we should use the History of Ideas, which aims to pursue these ideas as manifested throughout time and in different languages. Thus, although Lovejoy begins in philosophy, he concludes by claiming that there are ideas embedded in the language, and implicitly in the brand names, which guide the construction of their reality, whether or not people are aware of them. The perception of these new brand names, thus also involves the discovery of these “unit ideas” in the text, and implicitly in the source culture.

II. LANGUAGE STRUCTURE - AS A DECISIVE POINT IN TRANSLATION METHODOLOGY

Unlike alphabetic languages, Chinese is most well-known for its characters – as components of speech; in the case of brand names translation, it is particularly difficult to transfer the entire background of the original brand name into characters. Needless to say that it could be a catastrophe to leave the original name of the brand at it is, without translating it, as the consumers will definitely fail to remember, understand and even recognize the products. The importance and gravity of a correct and well-researched translation should be deep-rooted in the strategy of every company intending to transfer its brand in China.

Since both the writing and pronunciation systems in Chinese differ a lot from that of alphabetic languages, it is impossible to have an exact and exhaustive phonetic equivalence of any foreign brand name. Linguistic factors in Chinese language system play an important role especially due to the restriction of the inventory of Chinese phonemes – which has a fix number of possible combinations, fact that results in an impermeability of the phonetic system. The phoneme in Chinese is characterized by a restrictive autonomy, being closely tied to its position in the syllable. Besides, the structure of the Chinese syllable is also very precisely fixed as it cannot allow exceptions in terms of the initial, medial and final position of the phonemes. There are three types of restrictions of phonemes in Chinese (Balázs, 2002): restriction in terms of (1) combination of consonant and consonant (“aspirin” is translated as 安司匹林, so sp = se +pi; “trust” = tuō lā sī 托拉斯, where st is transformed in s;坦克 = Tōn kē坦克, where the second consonant forms a second syllable in combination with a vowel: k becomes ke), (2) combination of diphthongs and consonants (“cartoon” = ka tong卡通, where n is transformed in ng) and (3) combination of consonant and vowels that help the formation of diphthongs (coffee = Ka fei咖啡, fi is transformed in fei).

Although the translation of the brand should pay close attention to both the meaning and the pronunciation, there has been observed a tendency in Chinese to have the brand names translated based on their original pronunciation, i.e. the name is transferred into characters with similar sounds to the original pronunciation. The reason behind this could have its explanation back in the culture and personality of Chinese people, who would like to remain as close as possible to the original name, triggering memories to the foreignness of the brand - usually considered better than the local counterpart.

To draw an analogy, this characteristic can be seen also in literature translation, where, the dilemma of literary translator - the bearer of cultural identity - is being challenged, as he/she has the difficulty of choosing to orient his/her literary translation strategy towards foreignization or to domesticate - processes of assimilation or non-assimilation of a translated work. These two choices are closely related to the two images of culture mentioned by Featherstone (2003) who noted that the process of globalization shows the simultaneity of two images of the same culture. The first is the image embracing the extension of a culture to the outside world; heterogeneous cultures become embedded and integrated into a dominant culture that eventually covers the entire world. The second image shows crop compression; things that were once separated were now in contact or juxtaposed. The first picture, says Featherstone, suggests a process of conquering and unifying the global space; world becoming one tamed space, a space where all are assimilated into a common culture (Featherstone, 2003, p. 349-352). China showed greater support for the foreignization of westernization strategy of translation, through which the importance of source culture is emphasized, the translator having the responsibility to highlight the difference between the source culture and the target culture, using a "resilient
A synopsis of Chinese language structure and its influence on the translation of brand names

While a comprehensive description of the structure of Chinese characters and pronunciation norms is beyond the scope of this paper, the most relevant aspects, which influence the brand translation, will be shortly outlined.

The image that Westerners have, starting with the 16th century on Chinese writing is still valid at the present, oscillating between different cliché labels, such as ideographic – the graphic symbol could have a relation with the sense, but the writing is completely isolated from the pronunciation; thus, the difficulty of this type of writing is exacerbated. The difference between the Chinese writing system and the alphabetic one is drawn from the relation of control between the linguistic unit and the written sign: the phoneme for the alphabetic writing and the morpheme for Chinese writing. A more accurate description for Chinese writing is morphemic writing or syllabic writing. If we analyse the evolution of Chinese graphemes, we can even say that Chinese is ideophonetic – as the most recurrent method of development of Chinese characters is the one which combines the image (the semantic radical) and the pronunciation (the phonetic component) – these characters are called pictophonetic (形声). The semantic radical carries meaning which bears a semantic relationship with the corresponding character, such as radical 女 (nǚ, female) in its corresponding characters 姐 (jiě, elder sister), 妹 (mèi, younger sister), 媧 (yí, aunt).

The traditional Chinese writing system contains 214 semantic radicals and 1,100 phonetics, which recur in the Hanzi script to form the thousands of Chinese characters. On the other hand, the phonetic component conveys the pronunciation of the corresponding characters, such as phonetic 青 (qīng, blue or green) in the characters 情 (qīng, feeling), 请 (qǐng, request), 母 (mǔ, mother), 清 (qīng, clear).

The level of relation with the oral form, Chinese writing is fundamentally different from other writing systems, as it allows the interpretation only at the broad level of the grapheme, which corresponds to a syllable that embodies meaning (this could be the equivalent of a monosyllabic word or of only one component of a polysyllabic word). Besides being a simple instrument of communication and memory fixation – functions of every writing system – Chinese writing is the embodiment of a special mode of perception of the surrounding world, of decoding of its significances and of space (Vișan, 1999). Each character is the symbiosis of synthetic and integrated knowledge which assures an incredible connection with the traditional believes and cultural values of the ancestors; and due to this, Chinese characters become, more than any other writing system, a veritable source of meaning and understanding, a liaison with the ancestral cultural.

Translation methods from a phonographic language to a logographic-based language system

Besides the uniqueness of the structure and linguistics norms of Chinese, the abundant number of characters (50,000, with 7,000 used in general) is also another reason why choosing a Chinese name for a foreign brand is so difficult. Recent research in cognitive psychology has shown that the difference in language structure may affect mental representation (Tavassoli & Han, 2001). Thus, Chinese – speaking consumers, having a logographic writing system that require image processing, tend to judge brand names especially by their form and image, as they can map the visual codes directly to semantic meanings, with no need for phonological assembly (Perfetti and Zhang, 1991). On the other hand, naturally, Westerns – who speak a language that mainly requires phonological processing, which involves rehearsing the pronunciations of words in memory before storing them in a phonological code (Tavassoli and Han, 2001) – place greater importance on the sound and musicality of the name. The resulting assembled pronunciation is thought to determine meaning by subsequently activating the reader’s lexicon where word meanings are represented mentally (Schmitt et al., 1994).

With regards to this peculiarity, closer attention should be paid also to the category from which the component characters belong, for example a radical depicting female/feminine should not be used in a name of a masculine brand which would like to communicate the idea of physical force and manliness. This is especially recommended in a country like China which, according to Hofstede (2016) is a masculine society (this aspect will be further detailed below). A careless translation or even a translation without a strong cultural and linguistic background can easily lead to a bad reputation, loss of sale power or credibility on the Chinese market, even for a much appreciated company with reputation abroad.

Thus, for a well reception of a foreign brand, the name translation should be done taking into account at three approaches: linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural, as both structural features of the language and the lexical-semantic and phonologic ones are equally important, to the point that it can seriously affect the way consumers perceive the brand. The linguistic part involves the semantic, phonetic and morphological components of the name, while the sociolinguistic part
recognizes linguistic competences, advances symbolic values imbedded in linguistic forms, and renders attached social valence to cultural scrutiny” (Li & Shoshitari, 2003).

A. Linguistic approach

A similar approach to that of the assimilation of borrowings and neologisms in Chinese should be followed also in the translation of foreign brand names. According to their form, borrowing in Chinese and consequently, brand name translation methods can be categorized as:

2.1 Phonetic calques are those words translated from their original phonetic form in a way that they are adapted, though a complex and structured process, to the phonetic configuration of Chinese. Examples of foreign brand names that followed the phonetic structure of the original name, which can also convey a sense of exoticness and extravagance: 阿迪达斯 (A dì dà sī) – Adidas, 路易威登 (lù yì wēi déng) – Louis Vuitton, 耐克 (Nài kè) – Nike.

2.2 Structural calques imply borrowing the internal form of the word. Generally, a complete phonetic calque is not very well satisfying for Chinese as it is a strange, unusual phonetic construction for the regular norms (most frequently, Chinese words have two syllables, while the calqued words have usually more than two). It is for this reason that the semantic calque and explanatory translations are preferred over the phonetic calque.

2.2.1 Semantic Calque. Western languages influenced little Chinese language in terms of meaning borrowings. Even if Chinese translate all the morphemes, they look for words which can be formed through natural methods of formation of Chinese words. E.g.: (1) 微软 (Wēi ruǒ) Microsoft – “wei” means little & “ruǒ” means soft; (2) 国家地理学会 (Guójiā dìlǐ xuéhuì) – National Geographic Society – “Guójiā” means country, “dīlǐ” means geography and “xuéhuì” means learned society; (3) 家庭影院 (jiātíng yīn yuàn) – HBO – “jiātíng” means home and “yīn yuàn” means theater; (4) 美国运通 (Měiguó yùntōng) – American Express – “Měiguó” means USA, “yùntōng” means motion, transport and “tōng” means connect, lead to.

2.2.2. Explanatory Translation is the method which calques neither semantically nor phonetically the original foreign words, but it finds in them inspiration to enrich the native vocabulary. This can be categorized into information which reinforces the product type or nature and information that strengthens the product’s characteristic or benefits to customers. E.g.: (1) 联合包裹 (liánghé bāoguó) – UPC – “Liánghé” means to unite, alliance and “bāoguó” means package; (2) 欧莱雅 (Ouláiýà) – L’Oreal – “Öu” means Europe (explaining the place of origin), “lái” is a type of plant and “yà” means elegance.

The structural calque can also be categorized in total calque and partial calque; the former involves complete borrowing of the internal form of the word, while the original pronunciation is lost (e.g. 微软 (Wēi ruǒ) – Microsoft). The partial calque, similar also to the phono-semantic approach, is the result of a process of borrowing only one part of the word, while the other is calqued or translated through a vernacular term. E.g.: (1) 奥斯卡电影节 (Aósīkē diànhýīng jié) – Oscar – Aósīkē is a phonetic calque from the original name “Oscar” and the second part “diànhýīng” – movie & “jié” – festival are the translated morphemes which explain what the name stands for; (2) 斯坦福大学 (sīfángfù dàxué) – Stanford – the first part “sīfángfù” is the phonetic calque and the second part “dàxué” is the added vernacular term which means university. (3) 汉莎航空 (Hànshā hángkōng) – Lufthansa – “Hànshā” has no clear meaning, being just the phonetic calque for “hansa”, “hángkōng” means fly, to navigate by air – the explanation for the nature of the company.

B. Cultural translation approach

Besides the phonologic and semantic features that translation of brands has to follow, the cultural peculiarities are another vital part of a successful translation. This cultural translation of brand names is connected with the social, economic and political image and is surely informed by them. In the way that the “image builders” (in this case - the translators and brand specialists) usually respond not only to the phonologic and semantic factors, but also to social, economic and political circumstances. This is to be seen during cultural approach to translation, because through the new brand name one can understand the ideas and answers given by the brand to the socio-political and economic events of the source and target culture.

Compared to the linguistic approach of translation, the cultural one has fewer clear-cut restrictions, as in today’s multicultural environment, to look for one single best approach in international communication, and consequently, translation, is counterproductive and futile. What is important to do, even in brand name translation, is to raise the awareness on a global scale of the urgency for cross-cultural understanding and deep respect for diversity. This is a matter not only of labelling but also of recognizing that national cultures do differ dramatically. We must understand and bear in mind that cross-cultural communication implies the interlocutors’ awareness of the differences between the ways people understand a particular situation. Culture awareness is the key to solving the problems and
dilemmas between different societies, farther or closer in terms of geographical placement. In an international context, in which we find ourselves regularly, we have to discern more than what people do in a situation but what their gestures and words mean to them and to their co-cultural members. The translated brand name is not just a work-of-the-pen but also a means of international communication, being the representative of the cultural expressions of the source language in the target language, the carrier of SL's identity and values. Thus, a cultural-aware translation of brand names is a golden tool for avoiding miscommunications and for promoting respect for diversity.

III. CULTURE – A NATION'S PERSONALIZED LENSES IN EVALUATING THE CONSUMPTION PROCESS

Of course, we are all individuals, and many other characteristics except our cultural and language background shape us. Thus, culture is distinguishable from human nature on one side and from personality on the other side. Not even two individuals belonging to the same culture can guarantee that they will respond in exactly the same way. According to Geert Hofstede (Hofstede and Minkov, 2011, p. 107), there are three levels of "uniqueness in mental programming" – at the bottom of the pyramid; there is the human nature – which is a universal and inherited characteristic. Above it, there lays the culture – which is specific to a group or category and it is learned through one's life. On the top of all it is personality – which is specific to individual characteristic, both inherited and learned. Even if generalizations are not always valid, in this case categorization of members of a culture is valid to the extent that it provides clues on what one will most likely encounter when communicating with a member of that society – and how the differences arisen impact the process of communication.

As part of the exogenous influences, culture is a variable that makes an essential contribution to the mechanism of forming consumer behaviour in general. Culture can be defined as "the totality of learned norms, beliefs, values and habits that determine a particular behaviour of consumers of a particular society" (Schiffman, L.G., Kanuk, L.L., 2012). Although we are witnessing an increasingly acute process of globalization, culture - through the two categories of values by which it is defined - tangible (food, clothing, art etc.) and intangible (language, edification, social norms, traditions etc.) - still proves its strong influence, creating major differences in trade trends across countries. The way the consumers act and react in an environment is strongly influenced by culture, in the sense that each experience that contributed to the learning process was itself shaped by culture. As the culture dimensions put specific lenses on each individual's eyes, the endogenous processes of the consumer are also influenced by culture (Ueltschy L.C., Krampf, R., 2001).

E. Karahanna, J.R Evaristo and M. Strite propose through the "Theory of Cultures and Individual Behavior: An Integrative Perspective", a theoretical model of the influence of the woven culture and the personality on the behavior, synthesizing the point of interest of the present work.

An interesting direction imprinted on the study of culture in relation to the behaviour of the individual was given by Geert Hofstede proposing six cultural-national dimensions, each with two opposite faces. This concept allows a thorough knowledge of global behavioural trends, facilitating a differentiated management and marketing system. Thus, Hofstede argues that on the basis of cultural influences, each nationality can be characterized differently, the individuals belonging to that nationality pursuing a behavioural pattern described by the six dimensions

- Power distance;
- Individualism vs. Collectivism;
- Masculinity vs. femininity;
- Uncertainty avoidance;
- Long-term vs. short-term orientation.
Indulgence vs. restraint

In analysing China and the Chinese people from the point of view of the 6 dimensions of Hofstede, the following graphic shows conclusive findings, which are going to be detailed in the following part.

Power Distance: In China’s case, there is a considerable dependence of subordinates on superiors, of weaker people on powerful ones. In this case, the “emotional distance between subordinates and their bosses is large and the former are unlikely to approach and contradict their superiors directly” (Hofstede G., Geert Hofstede Center, 2016). Chinese expect and accept that power is distributed unequally and that there is nothing that can be done; one could only either accept it or leave it.

Individualism: In terms of the individualism vs. collectivism dimension, China scored low, which means that they are collectivist culture. An obvious difference is noticed from the way people in these two dimensions do business. The individualists do business with a company, while the collectivists business is done with a person whom one has learned to know and trust. That is why, in marketing terms, it becomes vital to connect with the consumer at a personal level.

Loss of face or losing face, in the sense of being humiliated, is an expression that entered the English language from Chinese (Dīù miànzi丢面子); the English had no equivalent for it. David Yaou-Fai Ho, a Hong Kong social scientist defines losing face as follows: “Face is lost when the individual, either through his action or that people closely related to him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies” (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). The Chinese also speak of “giving someone face,” in the sense of honour or prestige. The importance of face is the consequence of living in a society that is very conscious of social contexts. Considering the equivalent of mīânzi – dignity, prestige and reputation, we can conclude that Chinese people will easily engage with brands that offer them these social benefits.

Masculinity: As China is a masculine society, we can find prevalence for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. For the masculine pole, due to its assertive and competitive social rules, there is an important attachment for earning, recognition for a good job, advancement to higher-level jobs and challenges both in personal and professional life. The society, as a whole, is more competitive and men are supposed to be tough and women a supposed to be tender.

Uncertainty avoidance: In China, people who behave emotionally or noisily meet social disapproval. This means that stress cannot be released in activity but rather internalized. In comparison with the high uncertainty avoidance countries, Chinese are less precise and more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to unknown situations, people and ideas. In these societies, rules are more flexible and the world is seen as basically benevolent, and not as a hostile place. When it comes to the relation with brands, this finding shows the openness of Chinese people to new, innovative products, without having the fear of incompatibility with their standard values.

Long-Term Orientation: Based on Chinese Value Survey, “in long-term orientation cultures, the main work values include learning, honesty, and adaptiveness”. Leisure time is not important for long-term societies, and the good or evil are open to interpretation based on different circumstances. It is not surprising, then, that business decisions in China are made in a different way from the West. If a Westerner can make a quick decision or make a deal on its current situation, regardless of any past event, an Asian will not be able to do this. Chinese - as we can see in the chart from Geert Hofstede Center, 2016 are long-term oriented society and they must think long term, but in contrast to the timelessness of other Asians
such as Japanese where Hinduism and Buddhism is predominant, Confucianism and Taoism promote a time vision based on harmony. Thus, for Chinese, time is very concrete and it is perceived as an aspect of dynamic, living systems that needs to be explored qualitatively. Hence, this time vision is inter-subjective since it takes into account the perceptions of others in the society, as well as the individual (Carol Saunders, 2004). Chinese consider each second as valuable and they are mono-chronic in their focus on working on one task at a time.

Indulgence: China scored lowest in Indulgence index, being a restrained society having a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. The general perception is that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong. Also, they do not consider freedom of speech as a primary concern. That is why, they will tend to opt for brands that offers them the possibility of choices in terms of functions, usages etc.

IV. CONSUMERS’ PERSONALITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON BRAND NAMING PROCESS

The theory of personality based on traits appears to be originated from the well-known Freudian and Neo-Freudian theories, minimizing qualitative study and focusing on quantitative research, namely measuring personality through specific psychological characteristics called traits (any distinctive and relatively sustainable form through which an individual differentiates himself from another) (Schiffman, L.G., Kanuk, L.L., 2012).

Tests based on a single feature analysis have been developed and used in consumer behaviour research and propose for examination features such as consumer innovation, materialism or ethnocentrism. Other researchers add features such as the need for knowledge, self-awareness and frugality as being important for the field of consumer behaviour (Solomon, M.R., 2004).

On a closer look at the structure of traits that are under the influence of the feature-based personality theory, one can observe the existence of common points of this theory with the cultural dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede. Thus, the cultural dimension individualism vs. collectivism can be regarded as a variable of forming an egocentric personality (idiocentric) or, conversely, of a group-oriented, social personality (allocentric).

Based on the two facets that make up the notions of individualism and collectivism, different behavioural patterns have been identified. Thus, self-centred people tend to be more satisfied with their financial level and are more likely to spend more time working. On the other hand, group-oriented people pay increased attention to the content of food, spend more time in the kitchen, and also prefer lyrical art to a greater extent. All these examples, correlated with the idea that each individual tends to prefer goods (brands) with a personality congruent with his own, certifies the incontestable utility of personality theory based on features for consumer behaviour through the possibility of modelling the brand personality in such a way to coincide with that of the target market. In China’s case, a collectivist culture, it is important to know that they are willing to spend time and money on hedonic products and brands that have a pleasant personality.

Dogmatism, as a personality trait that measures prudence to the unknown or to information that opposes the individual’s beliefs, can be considered part of the “innovative” feature and can be analysed as a result of a certain cultural conformation from the point of view of uncertainty avoidance dimension. From the point of view of applicability in marketing, it was found that people with high level of dogmatism are more receptive to promotional messages received from famous people, whereas people with low dogmatism tend to be receptive to advertisements that highlight items of novelty. Chinese people, having a low uncertainty avoidance and being low dogmatic, will therefore be easy influenced by novelty characteristics of brands and always curious to try new products that might develop their position.

In the context of a period under the sign of globalization, consumer ethnocentrism becomes a personality trait of special importance. Ethnocentric persons may find the purchase and consumption of foreign products as being wrong, focusing on the economic effects that these actions would have, while those with low ethnocentrism will evaluate the goods objectively in terms of their extrinsic characteristics, and, as in the case of China, will be opened to foreign products (Yufang, H, Wang B., Qiaoyi, G). Also, it has been shown that the inhabitants of developed countries tend to have greater confidence in local brands, while those in developing countries appreciate international brands. Proving once again the interdependence of influence variables on consumer behaviour.
graphically portrayed the causal relationship between foreign products, involvement, attitude, and the intention of adopting foreign brands.

Note:

* This research includes equal contributions by the authors.
1. Chinese characters are classified in six types (六书liùshù): pictographic (象形xiàng xíng), indicatives (指事zhǐshì), associative compounds (会意huì yì), pictophonetic (形声xíng shēng), mutual explanatory (转注zhuǎnzhù), and phonetic loans (假借jià jiè). It was first done by Xu Shen in his book Shù wén jiè zì (数文解字) in the year 100.
2. The Chinese Value Survey (CVS) was developed by Bond and his colleagues as a complement to survey instruments constructed by research workers such as Rokeach (1973) and Schwartz (1992).

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