



Names and Selves: Transnational Identities and Self-Presentation among Elite Chinese International Students

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Abstract

What accounts for name choices in a transnational context? What does the choice of ethnic or English names reveal about global identities and the desire to fit into a new culture? Drawing on the sociology of culture and migration, we examine the intersection of naming, assimilation, and self-presentation in light of international student mobility. Based on 25 semi-structured interviews with mainland Chinese students enrolled in an elite Midwestern university, we find that these students make name choices by engaging in both transnational processes and situated practices. First, Chinese international students negotiate between multiple names to deal with ethnic distinctions. While ethnic names can signal distance from other ethnic communities, they also distinguish individuals from others. For these students, names are multi-layered and temporal: their name choices evolve throughout school lives, shaped by power relations in American cultural contexts and channeled by images of their home country. Second, multiple names allow these students to practice situated performance, incorporating the reflective self, the distinctive self, and the imagined self. We address “cross-cultural naming” that accounts for identity in transnational social spaces.

Keywords Naming · Assimilation · Identity · Transnationalism · International students · China

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Introduction

If a name is not rectified, then what is said cannot be followed. If what is said cannot be followed, then nothing can be accomplished.

Confucius, 551–479 BC, *The Analects*

Naming an infant is one of the most salient decisions of new parents. Names selected before a child is known as a *person* affect life choices and chances. These designations reveal gender, often race, sometimes social class, and even cultural preferences (Liebersohn 2000). The choice of moniker can honor family, celebrities, or fictional characters, or may be something that just sounds right. Although most people keep their natal names, name changing occurs for a variety of reasons, including a new personal self or revised public identity. Confucius argues that the name must correspond to the thing itself, and this reminds us that we often learn a name before we know the person; the name shapes how we know the person.

But what happens when one migrates? Does a new environment with different naming practices require a new appellation? Further, under what circumstances does global linguistic hegemony impel the creation of an “English-appropriate” name? Mostly based on quantitative analyses, a growing literature in cultural sociology treats personal names as an ideal site to examine assimilation and taste (Gerhards and Hans 2009; Liebersohn 2000). Ethnic names reveal gendered patterns (Sue and Telles 2007) and affect occupational achievement (Goldstein and Stecklov 2016). Additionally, naming reflects fashion, or “trends in tastes” (Crane 2002, 43; Obukhova et al. 2014).

We contribute to this existing literature in two ways. First, we examine naming and assimilation through a transnational lens, foregrounding identity negotiation when one uses *multiple names* at a given time, rather than a single name, and when one is more of a *transnational actor*, rather than a permanent immigrant. Second, we focus on *self-naming*, instead of name-giving patterns or parental naming, examining how individuals negotiate name choices in their public presentation, a form of impression management.

To understand the socio-politics of global identity through naming choices we examine the decisions of Chinese international students, especially those attending American high schools and colleges. Among the one million international students in American colleges and universities, an estimated one-third are from mainland China (IIE 2019). Compared to other communities, Chinese international students are more likely to adopt, use, and change English names, either before or after they come to study in the United States (Hsu 2009).¹

Synthesizing insights from cultural sociology and migration scholarship, we examine naming practices in transnational contexts. We first investigate how Chinese international students negotiate their ethnic names and multiple English names, dealing with ethnic boundaries, assimilation, power dynamics, and temporality. Additionally, we show how these students use their multiple names across social groups and settings, and how they construct a sense of self by assigning symbolic meanings to their English names. In this, we speak of the process of “cross-cultural naming.”

¹ The dominance of the English language and American culture is such that few American students in China or international workers create unique Chinese language names, identify with the names that they are given, or see these names as anything other than functional for communication. Many “Chinese” names are merely transliterations of English language names, thus, functionally the same name.

Naming, Assimilation, and Transnationalism

Sociologists of culture and migration have treated first names as indicators of ethnic belonging and cultural assimilation (Lieberson 2000; Watkins and London 1994). While choosing first names from the host society indicates a desire for assimilation among immigrant parents, giving names common in the homeland suggests ethnic maintenance. In contrast to classical assimilation theories that posit an eventual breakdown of ethnic boundaries, more contemporary theories emphasize the possibility of maintaining ethnic identity in this process. Among them, “segmented assimilation” (Portes and Zhou 1993) recognizes a pluralistic and fragmented environment in the host society, which permits ethnic maintenance in the adaptation to nondominant segments of the society. Similarly, Alba and Nee (2003) consider the possibility that the “mainstream” evolves in the process of assimilation. For immigrant parents, choosing personal names involves a negotiation between competing influences of two cultural contexts that coevolve (Drouhot and Nee 2019).

In his seminal study of naming patterns of ethnic and racial groups in the United States, Lieberson (2000) finds that various immigrant groups—Asians, Jews, Mexican Americans, and African Americans—adopted “American” names for their descendants, although pre-migration dispositions (i.e., linguistics, religion) continue to influence name giving practices in the host society. Later studies focusing on Mexican Americans suggest that ethnic boundaries will decline due to assimilation, but ethnic markers persist in personal names. Sue and Telles (2007) find that, compared to immigrant Hispanics, US-born Hispanics are more likely to adopt translatable English names for their sons, which indicates rapid assimilation as well as maintaining ethnic ties. They suggest that a “different kind of assimilation” is at play, providing a bridge between Old World practices and new ones. As a result, ethnic and cultural boundaries in naming practices can be crossed, shifted, and blurred, as in the case of immigrants in Germany (Gerhards and Hans 2009).

Building on this literature, we theorize how individuals make name choices in a transnational context through multiple cultural repertoires. Naming informs identity and belonging in light of international student mobility. While closely tied to their homelands, international students develop networks and identities in a new cultural space (Brooks and Waters 2011). As such, international students are embedded in what Levitt and Schiller (2004) call “transnational social fields,” in which they incorporate cultural repertoires located both in the host country and transnationally. The case of international students allows us to explore how ethnic boundaries are negotiated in those in-between spaces.

Multiple Names, Taste, and Performativity

Examining names in a transnational context foregrounds a less-discussed social phenomenon: individuals can own multiple names. Illustrations include nicknames (Bierbach and Birken-Silverman 2007) and parallel names used in Asian and Jewish immigrant communities (Lieberson 2000; Zhang et al. 2016). The use of multiple names is a linguistic choice, as well as a social one. Unlike many immigrants whose home languages use the English alphabet, Chinese and Jewish immigrants often have two sets of given names in different alphabets. Parallel names create more space for signaling identity to multiple ethnic audiences (Diao 2014; Zhang et al. 2016). In a complex transnational space, however, name choices are not

limited to the boundaries within or beyond ethnic communities. Rather, we propose a broader group-based name use, emphasizing the negotiation of multiple names.

To examine changes in taste, Lieberson (2000) proposes a multilayered approach that recognizes external changes, internal mechanisms of taste, and historical underpinnings. For immigrants, ethnic naming preferences reflect external influences and internal mechanisms. Obukhova et al. (2014) clarify how exogenous factors influence endogenous factors in trends of taste; in particular, politics in authoritarian regimes, such as the Cultural Revolution in China, shapes the popularity of boys' given names by elevating politically desirable names and by constraining individuals' choice of offending names.

However, the extant literature mostly uses names as indicators of tastes of name givers and, in the case of immigrants, parental attitudes toward assimilation and ethnic identity. Scant attention has been paid to self-naming practices. However, adults change their names for reasons of adjustment, as was true of assimilating American Jews (Fermaglich 2018), or for increased informality, as in the wider public use of nicknames among politicians, reporters, and celebrities (Lieberson 2000). Focusing on self-assigned name choices in a cross-cultural context offers an opportunity to theorize self-naming and transnational identity. To achieve this, we shift the focus of the study from the "taste of name givers" to the "taste of name owners," and from "trends of taste" to the "meaning of taste." This brings us to the domain of Goffmanian presentation, in which people manage impressions (Cheang 2008; Goffman 1959). In this, we identify three domains of selves, which complicate existing assimilation models.

English Names among the Chinese

While people in the West typically see names as defining, the Chinese view names as more amorphous. Rather than a static system, Chinese naming is an active set of practices: a system with fuzzy boundaries and performative functions (Blum 1997, 358). Multiple personal names are consistent with traditional Chinese naming practices, although the degree to which Chinese students adopt and change English names in a transnational context is unprecedented. Literature in education and linguistics has well documented English naming practices among domestic Chinese students, attributing those practices to global identifications (McPherron 2009), practical reasons (Gilks 2014), and the influence of Chinese nickname culture (Sercombe et al. 2014). Similarly, business professionals in China, positioning themselves as modern Chinese, use English names as a device to negotiate status in the global capitalist system (Duthie 2012). English names do not necessarily signify Westernization, as their meanings are locally constructed and thus distinctly Chinese (Henry 2012).

Names travel easily and, sometimes, flow back to the country of origin, as in the case of Chinese students studying in the United States. Lieberson (2000, 114) anticipated an "internationalization of tastes," which has been intensified by student migration over the past two decades. Name choices of Chinese international students can be pragmatic, as well as related to Chinese naming cultures, English learning experiences, and socio-political contexts (Edwards 2006; Heffernan 2010). However, little is known about how assimilating Chinese students vary their use of names by negotiating tastes in names from both the home county and the host society. Guccini (2017) suggests that Chinese international students prefer a distinctive name to create "a sense of recognition," highlighting the requirement of uniqueness in their name choices. Our findings echo such an emphasis on uniqueness.

Name choices carry social consequences, as they are often tied to recruitment (Kang et al. 2016), occupational achievement (Goldstein and Stecklov 2016), and racial discrimination (Pinsker 2019). Moreover, psychologists argue that adopting English names among Chinese international students is negatively associated with self-esteem and other psychological outcomes (Zhao and Biernat 2018). As such, understanding cross-cultural naming practices sheds light on transnational identity and challenges facing international students.

Data and Methods

We draw on semi-structured interviews with 25 Chinese international students at an elite private university in the Midwest, a major hub for Chinese students. To recruit interviewees, we contacted the university's International Office to send a recruitment survey email to over 1,000 current Chinese international students in late 2017. We received 204 responses, which allowed us to analyze general patterns of using ethnic and English names among Chinese international students (see Table 1 in Appendix).

We then selected 25 informants from these 204 responses with whom to conduct in-depth interviews in early 2018. Participants had to meet two criteria. First, they must originally be from mainland China. This excludes students from Hong Kong and Taiwan, whose English naming practices are grounded in their local histories, including colonialism. Second, they must have come to study in the US during high school or as undergraduates.² This excludes students who initially arrived for graduate programs because students who came before graduate programs were more likely to encounter the issue of name choices due to a greater need to interact with others on campus socially. Unlike Chinese graduates who come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds, over 90% of these undergraduates use family funds to cover their education in America (Ma 2020). This research design focuses on elite students. However, this class-based selectivity seems inevitable since our goal is to reveal the meanings in taking English names and how they relate to transnational mobility—most salient among elite students.³ We aimed for diversity in gender, academic level, area of study, home city, and current status of English names (see Table 2 in Appendix). Each interview lasted around 1 hour, conducted in Chinese. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. We coded this data in ATLAS.ti with an inductive coding scheme. We asked how and why they adopted or resisted English names; how they used names in academic, social, and professional settings; how and why they changed names; and how naming practices affected their experiences in the United States.

Multiple Naming and Ethnic Distinction

Most Chinese international students in our sample have multiple personal names: Chinese given names, several self-assigned English names, and nicknames developed from English

² Since 2014, undergraduate enrollment among Chinese international students in the United States has surpassed that of graduates. The number of those Chinese students attending high schools in America rose from 637 in 2005 to 46,125 in 2015; these families are often in the top 5% or even the top 1% in China (see also Tu 2020).

³ Only one of our interviewees is from the working class. At an earlier age, she believed that English names could help “elevate one’s class” in social interaction. According to a survey conducted by Purdue University’s Center on Religion and Chinese Society in 2016, the majority of the Chinese students in America were from well-off families, as more than 90% of the respondents’ fathers had high-paying jobs.

names. Situated in transnational social spaces, they make name choices by negotiating among multiple naming repertoires, rather than simply selecting names from an ethnic/nonethnic dichotomy. The negotiation of multiple names reveals two socio-cultural transformations: (1) a unique form of cultural assimilation in the early stage of studying in American universities, and (2) an evolving, multi-layered identity channeled by life choices during college that are influenced by the rising power of their home country.

Cultural Assimilation in a Transnational Space

Most interviewees (68%) currently use English names as their preferred personal names, and the rest dropped English names after coming to the United States. Among the 204 students surveyed, 88% use or have used English names. Their wide use of English names seemingly indicates a general trend of rapid assimilation common for East Asian immigrants, but the case of Chinese students reveals different dynamics. First, for those who favor Chinese given names, they diverge by whether to signal ethnic identity or not. Additionally, the majority of our informants adopted English names in China and have used these English names for years.

We begin by analyzing a group of interviewees who dropped their English names. Within this group, some students emphasize ethnic boundaries in assimilating into a new culture. While such simultaneity is possible for these students, naming practices in their home country often clash with complex ethnic cultures in the host country. Their name choices involve constant negotiations between their ethnic identity and other ethnic communities. Consider the transformation of Dawei, who adopted the name David when he first came to the United States at age 15. Dawei recalled:

Back then I knew little about the American culture, or about Americans. I had an assumption that Americans couldn't pronounce my Chinese name correctly, so why not just use a name that others could pronounce? I had this assumption until I graduated from high school and came to study in the US. In college, I realized many Davids I knew are Jewish. I think David is a very Jewish name. Many Asians are called David, too, but if you don't count these Asians, most Davids in the US are Jewish. I don't want my name to have such cultural connotations.

The issue of pronunciation—or the assumption of the difficulty of American pronunciation of Chinese names—is an important reason for assimilating students to go by English names.⁴ Out of convenience, Dawei became David, which is a perfect fit due to its similar pronunciation with his Chinese given name (*Dà Wei* is also the phonetic Chinese translation of David), but the implication that it is a Jewish name made him rethink this choice. Dawei drew symbolic boundaries between himself and Jewish people because of their different ethnic cultures. However, another incident served as the catalyst for name change. Dawei continued:

During a summer school at UPenn, a guy next to my dorm was an ABC [American Born Chinese], and his name tag on the door was also David Wang. One time, I walked into his room accidentally. Since then I realized my last name, Wang, is so common among Chinese people; so is my English name, David. On Facebook, there are so many people called David Wang. I had the idea that I needed to change my name. After that program,

⁴ Over 70% of students surveyed report that their Chinese names contain letters or sounds such as “x, j, q, r, c, z, zh, ch,” which are difficult for Americans to pronounce. Around 50% suggest pronunciation is one of the reasons why they adopted an English name.

I began to call myself Dawei.... At the beginning I was a bit intimidated. I thought I had to assimilate myself in all aspects, including my name. But after living in the US for years, I'm more confident about my own identity. I am Chinese, not American.

In Dawei's case, his English name overlaps with two ethnic communities. While he is not Jewish by appearance, he is more troubled by the association with Chinese Americans who share the same full name. The boundaries in the latter case are subtle: Chinese international students are culturally different from Chinese Americans, even though they share racial similarities. By switching back to Dawei and foregrounding his Chineseness, his name both avoids cultural mismatch and creates symbolic boundaries between himself and many American born Chinese called David Wang. The maintenance of ethnic identity tied to the home country is shared among contemporary Black immigrants in the United States, as they similarly distance themselves from African Americans, their "proximal hosts" (Imoagene 2017), by drawing distinctions through personal names (Girma 2020; Waters 2001). To add more nuance, Dawei goes by David, or *Dà Wei* as a nickname, among his Chinese friends in college (but not among Americans) because in the Chinese context some would assume his English name is David. In this case, English naming practices from China constitute a dimension of multiple naming in the host country.

A subgroup, however, favor Chinese given names not to signal ethnic identity and distance from other ethnic communities. Instead, they do so to distinguish themselves from all other people, including Chinese students who prefer English names. For these students, rejecting English names helps maintain uniqueness in a transnational context. For instance, Yuchen, who used to go by Robin, insists on using his Chinese name exclusively since he came to the US for college. "There are so many people called Peter or Kevin," Yuchen continues, "but only one person here is called Yuchen. Also, it's not difficult to pronounce my name and my family isn't Westernized." Yinzi keeps her Chinese name even in business school, where English names are more common. "It's easier for Americans to remember my name [compared to her former English name Linzy], because it's special and they will take more time to process and memorize it. I want to keep my Chinese name. If I'm Yinzi, I'm the only Yinzi." Similarly, Suwei doesn't want to pick "a very common English name." "So many people are called Tiffany. No personality at all." Suwei suggests, "But when they say Suwei, there is only one Suwei around them. That is me." For these students, keeping their Chinese names is not necessarily a sign of identification as Chinese nationals, nor a way of resisting Western hegemony. Rather, it signifies a sense of self that champions individuality in cross-cultural experiences.

Refuting the assumption that nationalism is at play when Chinese given names are favored, our findings support a taste-based explanation that is driven by endogenous processes. This group of students can be seen as "innovators." This echoes what Obukhova et al. (2014) find in the case of naming during the Cultural Revolution: people might claim to choose a name for its content, but in fact they might choose it for its uniqueness or commonness. This challenges assimilation theories, given that retaining ethnic names does not necessarily equate to maintaining ethnic identity.

Cultural assimilation for Chinese international students usually involves personal name changing to avoid being seen as un-American, different from immigrant parents who give their US-born children a legal "American" name. Name changing takes two forms: changing from English names used in China to ones that are more "American"; or, dropping English names adopted in China to go by Chinese given names exclusively. The first scenario is illustrated in

Yunling's transformation. Before she began to call herself Lynn during high school in the US, she went by Windy in China. Lynn recalled, "Every time I introduced myself as Windy, people would ask if I'm Wendy. Wendy is normal. ... Later I realized Windy isn't good. It's an adjective, not commonly used in American TV shows or films. It's very Chinglish. I wanted a real American name." Lynn was the only informant in our sample who used the phrase of "American," while others typically used "English" names that refer to cultural-linguistic domains, rather than national boundaries. Her pre-migration desire for distinctiveness ("Wendy is normal," while Windy stands out) is soon contested by the naming practices in the host country, thus driving her shift from a Chinglish one to a mainstream "American" name.

The second scenario of dropping English names is due to cultural mismatch, including generational gaps or undesirable cultural connotations. Ziyi, for example, went by Lucy from kindergarten to high school in China. She dropped her English name in college when she learned from her American friends that Lucy is not a common name among her generation. Similar cases are George, Mary, and Betty. This temporal gap is also common among Asian immigrant groups in Lieberman's (2000) study, as their name choices usually lag behind those in the dominant white culture. As assimilation progresses, we predict that these dated choices will be corrected. Additionally, with greater immersion, students may drop English names with undesirable connotations, overriding the personal appeal of those names. These include names that might suggest counterculture or sex work, such as Candy, Cherry, or Rainbow. Chen, for instance, dropped her first "cute" English name, Kitty (first adopted in kindergarten from "Hello, Kitty"), when she enrolled in an American summer camp during middle school. She explained, "I realized it's so childish to call myself Kitty in America. Few people around me are called Kitty." The anxiety of being culturally inappropriate by using a "childish" name was so strong that Chen considered her time going by Kitty as "a period of shameful history." She later became Katie and Katherine before she dropped English names for good. By conforming to the existing naming practices in the United States, these students avoid the risk of being outsiders or ignorant.

This reminds us of Jewish name changing in twentieth-century New York City, where Jewish immigrants petitioned to change their names due to their desire to fit in the workplace (Fermaglich 2018). Our case is different in two ways: firstly, even with the adoption of English names, Chinese students cannot pass as White, which means such practices are more culturally oriented; secondly, name changes for Chinese students are often informal, rather than legal, which offers more room to shift between the cultural boundaries of sending/hosting societies.

Multi-Layered Naming and the Authentic Self

For Chinese international students, identities are fluid. Among the 204 students surveyed, 42% changed English names at least once. Among our interviewees, one-third changed their English names more than once. Name change is rationalized by recognizing that one's identity has changed. After all, the self evolves throughout one's life course, so why not a name?

Naming is multi-layered for most Chinese students. After they come to study in the United States, their Chinese given names do not disappear, although their significance may alter. Many continue to use Chinese given names on occasion, and many connect to their past on an emotional level. Other names, including multiple English names, play an important role at certain life phases but fade over time. For instance, Yiqi has used different names at different

time periods: Alice in kindergarten and middle school, Giselle in recent years, and Amanda in between. “They represent different parts of me temporally,” Yiqi summarizes. Lamenting that her Chinese given name, “a very important part of my life and self-identification,” is rarely used these days, she suggests that she might make it into a body tattoo, in the shape of a traditional Chinese seal. The temporal negotiation is evident in a cheesecake analogy made by Isis:

My Chinese name Shenghao represents the period of my life before I came to the US. Isis represents my life from then to present. It’s like a cheesecake. The crest in the bottom is Shenghao. It’s solid there, but you don’t use it. The upper part of the cake is my English name, Isis, the true essence of the cake. The crest is still important, but not necessarily to be shown. It’s a solid foundation.

Instead of suggesting a sharp temporal break between her two names, she indicates a multi-layered understanding: a solid foundation and current usage.

Given this multi-layered temporality, Chinese given names and multiple English names are often channeled by life experiences and deepening “cultural confidence.” We find a tendency of preferring English names among *meigao* students, those who first come to study in US high schools. For instance, Xinwen chose to go by her English name Coco when she first attended a high school in Connecticut. She emphasizes that using an English name would make her “similar to others who all go by English names.” She adds, “If I had chosen to use a Chinese name, it’d make me look like an international student. It’s me who came to a country I’m not familiar with, so I should be actively trying to fit in.” For some, the urge to “fit in” is especially salient among those *meigao* students and thus English names are favored. According to Shiwei, who also goes by Jeffery since he was young, such preference might be attributed to a lack of cultural confidence. As a sophomore, Shiwei wonders if he should drop the name Jeffery, given that more and more people in college address him using his Chinese given name. Expecting to do a PhD in California in the near future, he concludes, “Maybe I’ll go by Shiwei exclusively by then.”

The multiplicity of names is particularly evident at critical life moments, such as graduation. Despite their heterogeneity, most Chinese international students share common characteristics: they are ambitious and anxious, swinging between cosmopolitan membership and Chineseness (Fong 2010; Ma 2020). With the current political climate and job market, one key issue driving their anxiety is the value of studying in the United States. Upon graduation, they must decide whether to stay, a choice reflected in their names. Evelyn believes her English name helped her reconstruct a new identity after she came to the US: she joined the most prestigious sorority and interned at a Hollywood studio. As a senior, she recalls her college life:

Upon graduation, I feel my names/identities are overlapping. I have to think about who I really am, not simply restricted to college life, but about the future—where I want to live and work. I have to think about my parents, who are getting old, and about issues of living as a first-generation immigrant. What I’m considering is entirely from the perspective of my Chinese name Yao, nothing to do with Evelyn. Evelyn only focuses on making American friends and doing jobs that Americans do. Evelyn is to prove herself. Yao considers practical concerns.

In Evelyn’s narrative, her identity choices are rationalized through names. Her identity as Yao was set aside during her first 3 years of college life when she was busy developing her “key identity” as Evelyn, but it becomes salient upon graduation. She must decide how to balance

those identities embodied in her names. Names, as a window into identity, make sense of life changes. The “study-to-migrate” notion, mostly supported by data on graduate students, may no longer apply to these undergraduate students. Our findings illuminate the growing influence and allure of a rising China. Looking ahead, with the rising number of overseas Chinese students, Xudong, who also goes by George, believes Chinese international students are less likely to adopt English names because of Americans’ difficulty of pronouncing Chinese names; he notes that Hispanic names, such as José and Juan, are now commonly known by all Americans, so will Chinese names. Many male informants carefully consider their choice of returning to China after graduation. In contrast, female students may be more uncertain when making name choices at those critical life moments, as shown by assimilating female students like Evelyn.

Meigao students, also known as the “parachute generation” (Larmer 2017), most struggle to negotiate name choices and construct identities throughout their school lives. Little attention has been paid to this group of young students (i.e., Tu 2020), since scholarly works primarily focus on Chinese graduate students and, most recently, undergraduate students. For them, pre-migration tastes of naming and ethnic identity may challenge cultural contexts in the host country (i.e., racism, political correctness) at an early age, posing challenges to their developing selves. For instance, Alice attended a high school in Canada and went by her English name. A teacher of hers, however, refused to call her Alice because he believed one should stick to her own name and identity and should not change names for others. Alice complains, “He assumed I did this for others. For me, respecting someone is to respect her choices.” For these students, naming practices involve complex decisions driven by multiple identities. Taking on English names does not necessarily reveal insecurity. Rather, it can signify rich self-meanings that cannot be reduced to Western assumptions concerning decolonization and power relations (Teng 2019).

However, power seeps in whenever cultural repertoires in the host society are imposed on these students. The example of Si, who goes by Cece, illustrates how names are conceived differently in the West (where everyone has one name) and China (where multiple names are common). Originally from Guangzhou, her parents call her *Sisi* in Cantonese, which sounds like Cece in English. In a transnational context, her Chinese origin (*Sisi*) and her American identity (*Cece*) become one. Cece enrolled in a high school in Wisconsin before college. She recalls:

When I introduced myself “My name is Cece Wong,” sometimes people would ask “What is your real name?” And I’m like [*she rolls her eyes*]. That really gets me. Cece is my name too, and it’s fucking real. The question is offensive. It assumes the name I prefer is fake. But it is real! I think perhaps it’s a form of microaggression. Regarding things they are not aware, people assume they’re wrong. For me, both names are real.

What is at issue here is how Chinese students understand the authenticity of the self. For Cece, her English name blurs the boundary between her Cantonese background and a global context. Our findings show that most Chinese international students do not consider any one of their names as their only authentic name, consistent with Blum’s (1997, 365) study of Chinese people. Multiple identities, embodied in different names, co-exist and allow for different future paths, each authentic. There is no one “real” name.

Their understanding of the authentic self is shaped by students’ evolving relationships with the two countries. Raised in a working-class family, D. [family name] Ying used to go by Diana, Penguin, and Denise before college, and thought her Chinese name was “provincial.” Now majoring in journalism and gender studies and sensitive to power relations, she has

dropped all her English names to pursue a “more authentic self” in global contexts. The resulting choice is the name Ying: on the one hand, it signals her “cultural roots” and her “anti-White supremacy” stance; on the other, the name Ying used in college, not entirely a Chinese name for her,⁵ reflects a crucial time period when she became critical of China’s political system and other social problems. With “double critiques,” the name Ying becomes “a middle ground” and “a compromise” made between two political discourses, indicating her multi-layered identities.

In sum, Chinese international students practice cross-cultural naming that is multi-layered and changeable. Their naming practices respond to their life choices with identities embedded in those names. In transnational spaces, their naming can be contested by the power relations of the US cultural contexts, as well as are shaped by the status of their home country.

Names as Situated Intimacy and Performativity

Group Belonging and Identification

With multiple names available, Chinese international students strategically use their personal names in various contexts, shaped by how much they identify with those names. First, their selection is based on how they perceive the relational intimacy of the groups to which they belong and the formality of settings. As mentioned, Dawei goes by David or the nickname *Dà Wei* among his Chinese friends in college, and Dawei [pronounced in the American way] among his American friends. Today, his Chinese given name is mostly used by his grandparents, as “Dawei [in Chinese] is a very intimate name.” His parents prefer his courtesy name, Shihao, which was recently given by his father. Dawei notes, “These names represent different communities and groups. They co-exist and they are very compatible.” As such, names are used differently, depending on the relational context.

Naming preferences vary, but they always cater to specific contexts and spaces. Our survey data reveal that some students prefer Chinese names in academic settings (i.e., classroom, office hours) and English names on social occasions. Nearly 56% of students surveyed (undergraduate and graduate) use Chinese names exclusively in academic settings; the percentage decreases to 46% on social occasions. In contrast, the use of English names primarily rises from 23% in academic settings to 36% on social occasions. Our interview data confirms this use of names across social spaces: 5 of our 25 interviewees use English names exclusively in academic settings, and the number rises to 11 on social occasions.

Surprisingly, when Chinese undergraduate students socialize among themselves in a large group, many use English names, rather than their ethnic names. Such practice contrasts with the existing literature on the use of ethnic names to signal symbolic group bonds within the immigrant communities (Liebersohn 2000). As Jeffery recalls, at his first social gathering with Chinese friends in college almost everyone exchanged English names. He explains, “Taking English names in the US is a gesture, one that shows your

⁵ For those whose given names consisting of solo Chinese character, they must be addressed using the full name or along with another character—the latter case often becomes an intimate nickname. As such, one cannot simply call someone “Ying” or “Si” in Chinese contexts; it has to be “D. Ying” (family name + given name) or “Sisi.”

willingness to be integrated into the American mainstream culture.” For many, such a gesture seems “natural.” Robert explains, “We don’t want to call each other’s Chinese name. Everyone else addresses your English name, so it’s just more natural to call his or her English name. If someone addresses my Chinese name abruptly, I would think if he’s angry or something.” We suggest three possible reasons. First, English names in this context are neither too formal nor too intimate, maintaining “superficial harmony” without involving deep intimacy (Mathews 1996), especially when the ethnic bond is less salient within a group culture. Second, for close friendship groups, favoring English names may indicate their stronger identification with those names. Lastly, such a choice may be driven by the desire or pressure to fit into the new environment. Using English names in this context signals their affiliation with Western culture (Heffernan 2010), which may both reflect their global ambition and ease their social anxiety.

In a transnational context, group boundaries may be ambiguous. Consider Ziyi, called Lucy during high school in China but who now goes by her Chinese name exclusively.

I don’t like to be called Lucy here. I now identify myself as Ziyi. Some of my high school friends also study at this university, so they keep calling me Lucy. The name Lucy indicates intimacy and reminds me of our high school life. But I changed it into Ziyi after I moved to the US. I want to keep it consistent. When I’m called by Lucy, I would pause a bit and then realize they are referring to me.

One of Ziyi’s high school friends realized this inconsistency at a gathering where Ziyi’s current friends all addressed her using her Chinese name. “He rectified it after that.” Ziyi adds, “He might feel awkward because no one else calls me Lucy.” The two social groups (high school friends and college friends) do not usually overlap, so different names rarely pose a problem.

Second, the situational use of names is affected by the identification those names evoke. For those who have dropped or consider dropping their English names, an English name is a *daihao*, or code name, indicating the distance from their English names at both emotional and representational levels. As Chen suggests, “An English name doesn’t tell who you really are.” In this case, English names are convenient, such as when ordering fast food. Shiwei uses his Chinese name exclusively in academic settings and his English name Jeffery occasionally in social settings. For him, the name Jeffery is only “instrumental.” Usually mispronounced as *You* by Americans, Yu goes by Andrew exclusively to avoid inconvenience. “A name is merely a representation,” he reiterates. More extreme, Yuxing thinks her former English name April is “a mask that you put on when needed and ditch when it is not necessary.” Although these students do not identify with their English names, it is noteworthy that they believe they are expected to have multiple names. This fact could be caused by many reasons, such as the difficult pronunciation of their Chinese names for Americans, but it is this self-perception of social expectation that draws our attention. Further, it is not surprising that many informants identify more with their English names that are usually self-assigned, so it is reasonable for them to use English names on most occasions. Sherry, for instance, has had her English name for 16 years. “Back in China, Sherry was a more private identity, a personal name I would put on the cover of a diary. It is one of my names and identities.” Due to such emotional proximity, it is “natural” for her to go by Sherry in any English language environment. Additionally, a few students suggest their given Chinese names are relatively distant, so it is more likely for them to use English

names to match their perceived self. In all these cases, the selection and use of names are determined by their identification.

Symbolic English Names and Self-Presentation

In what follows, we consider the symbolic meanings assigned by Chinese international students to their English names, examining how these students construct a sense of self through names. The linkage of self and naming foregrounds the performative nature of cross-cultural naming, enabling individuals to produce a distinctive self. We identify three practices of adopting English names: (1) matching (the reflective self), (2) differentiation (the distinctive self), and (3) idealization (the imagined self). Although these practices are analytically separable, they are empirically intertwined. For example, a name can be adopted both to fit one's own personality *and* to differentiate oneself or to project both a unique me *and* an ideal me.

Matching: The Reflective Self

Most of our informants choose English names that they feel match their personalities or personal histories. According to Alice, "A name should be your own self-presentation." When a name is perceived as a mismatch, it complicates interactions. Most informants suggest their current English name is the best fit and they lack a second choice. For Andrew, when he first saw the name, he knew immediately "it was *the right one*." Such a strong attachment is based on the alignment between their character and the meanings assigned to names. This includes the symbolic meanings that often result from peer socialization or popular culture. Yunling, who goes by Lynn, clarified that in her case Lynn is not a diminutive of Linda. For her, "Lynn is more goal-oriented and independent. It's a strong name. It suits me better." In contrast, "Linda is like a female figure in elementary textbook. It is provincial." In other words, the name Lynn both fits her strong personality and projects a more distinct image, while the name Linda fails to match her style. The stereotypical image of certain English names is commonly shared among Chinese students, although specific meanings associated with these names are embedded in group cultures (Fine 1979).

However, personality mismatches occur occasionally, as when a name is incompatible with one's self. For instance, Yiqi "used to have a very stupid English name; it was Amanda." Amanda was a fine name when Yiqi came to attend college in Iowa, but within 2 years she realized the image of Amanda did not match her self. "When you hear 'Amanda,' the image that comes to your mind is usually of a white girl, very loud, bossy personality. I'm not like that." When a mismatch is perceived, it usually drives the student to change the name, often strengthened in peer socialization. Yiqi recalls, "My American friends couldn't believe it! They said Amanda couldn't represent me." For this reason, the name becomes "stupid." Yiqi later transferred to another university. "It was a chance to be reborn." She adds, "I can give myself a new English name that matches my personality."

More surprisingly, English names are also a device by which Chinese students can correct the mismatched meanings associated with their birth names, especially gendered

ones. Gendered names indicate parental attitudes toward assimilation, with a general trend that immigrant parents are less likely to give ethnic names to daughters (Lieberson 2000; Sue and Telles 2007). The Chinese case offers a different cultural context for the role of gender in naming. Most Chinese names are comprised of meaningful characters, and different combinations of characters convey special meanings. Traditionally, Chinese parents select delicate and feminine characters for daughters and characters representing masculinity and strength for sons. However, some female students in our sample suggest their names are “a bit masculine” or “too feminist,” implying that these gendered names don’t fit their personality. English names provide an opportunity for them to fix this mismatch. Alice’s Chinese name is Guannan, in which *Guan* means champion and *Nan* means men.

My parents gave me this name because they think I can be more successful than guys. I don’t like the word *Nan* in my name; my parents use it to force me to show my determination to compete with men. Being called Guannan, I have to bear in mind that I need to be better than guys all my life. The issue of gender is unconsciously in me. I’ve never felt connected to my Chinese name.

Alice chooses not to use her Chinese name because “it isn’t aligned with my personality at all,” despite her parents’ expectations. Instead, her English name Alice, given by her father when she was age 4, “presents who I am in a better way.”

I really like the values connected to Alice. I like the character’s personality in *Alice in Wonderland*. She’s risk-taking, optimistic, and courageous. Not very feminine, nor reckless. I’m happy with this presentation of myself.

Compared to her Chinese given name, the name Alice “isn’t that rough and radical, not right in your face.” By preferring Alice, she picks an image that is courageous but, in her words, “not very feminist.” Fitting English names allow these students to construct new identities, as opposed to their parental expectations.

Differentiation: The Distinctive Self

Chinese international students also choose English names that help differentiate themselves from peers. Given that Chinese names often are distinct and even unique, Chinese students tend to pick English names that they believe are less common. Many emphasize that they didn’t want “repetitive names.” “My only concern was not to have the same name as my classmates,” explains April. Evelyn likes “names that are more special,” as she would avoid names common in her sorority, such as Mary, Alice, and Shirley. Giselle picked a German name that is relatively uncommon in the US, claiming that “there are so many Amys, Lilys, and Tiffanys.”⁶ Being common or not, of course, is *subjective*, as people often misjudge a name’s popularity (Lieberson 2000). Robert, for instance, believes he picked an uncommon name “by chance.” “In my mind, common English names are Kevin, George, Mike, Eric, etc. I haven’t met many Roberts after I came to the US.” Although in reality Robert has long been a popular American name, always in the top 100 male names, it is his belief in distinctiveness that matters in constructing an identity.

⁶ This reminds us of the role of belief. Giselle is currently more popular than Tiffany.

Distinctiveness is often not measured by the actual popularity of names but embodied in unique meanings assigned to those names. For instance, when Shenghao met her English-savvy boyfriend in a middle school in Shanghai, she asked him to give her a new English name. She had three criteria: it must start with the letter “I,” because “it’s more special”; it must relate to Egyptian culture since it’s her passion; and it must be simple, easy to spell and pronounce, but not common. Given these criteria, her boyfriend suggested Isis. She liked this “special and perfect” name and has used it exclusively over the past decade. Her identification was so strong that she decided to keep this intimate name, despite its association with the militant group ISIS.

To be unique among peers, some students create uncommon English names while others choose to go by “English” names that are actually foreign. Hongjia, for instance, began to call himself Plaido in middle school, but it has nothing to do with Plato (or Play-Doh). He explains:

It’s very simple: a combination of “play” and “do,” two choices you could make as a middle school student. “Playdo” doesn’t look nice, so I changed it into Plaido.... Creating a name is like writing a book. It is my own creation with a unique connection.

Plaido is content that his name is unique. Similarly, Mengqi goes by Miki, a name with Japanese origin, as she grew up with stationery her father bought from Japan. “In written Japanese, Miki means three trees,” she appreciates its unique meaning. Others turn to French names, such as Julien, Chantelle, and even Parfait. The motivation of seeking the uniqueness of a name has been identified in other populations, such as African American children beginning in the 1960s (Lieberson 2000).

As Zhang et al. (2016) argue, before they feel secure as members of the host country, even immigrants with high cultural competence may shy away from using their cultural capital to choose unconventional names. Our findings partially support this argument, as the English names of about 20 informants (of 25 interviewees) are common English names, including the ones dropped by eight interviewees. However, as we have discussed, for these students, the distinctiveness of names is less about popularity than the distinctive meanings that they assign to those names.

Idealization: The Imagined Self

Some students select English names that project an imagined self. To some extent, the imagined self echoes the notion of the ego ideal, an image of the perfect self that one aspires to become. In other words, it is about the future self. The practice of idealizing the self is often shaped by cultural landscapes or networks. Yao, for instance, adopted her English name Evelyn from TV shows. “Most Evelyns in American TV shows are usually rich, old ladies. Bad, evil, powerful, and rich! Upper class. I think this is my future [*she laughs*].... This is the life I aspire to live. I’m a funny person, not very serious, so I hope my English name has a personality, too.” For Yao, adopting the name Evelyn has a sense of playfulness; more important, the name projects a future of upper-class life to which she aspires.

The *imagined* self in a name can convert into the *reflective* and *distinctive* self. For instance, Yiqi called herself Alice and Amanda before settling on Giselle, a name indicating her determination to be an independent woman.

I had a summer internship in Beijing after my sophomore year. My direct boss Giselle was a woman in her 30s. She's very smart, strong-minded, and career driven. For me, she's a real model. If I can reach her level when I'm 30 and become a woman like her, I will be very happy.... This name [Giselle] is like my parents' expectations on my Chinese name [*Yiqi* means unique]. I had similar expectations for myself.

Besides her boss, the only Giselle she knows is a German Brazilian supermodel. This becomes a nice "conversation starter" with American men, which ironically constitutes a form of gendered identity. Her friends believe Giselle is a good fit for her: "independent, a bit hippie, playful, casual, strong-minded, outgoing, very distinctive." When the interview was conducted, it had been 7 years since she adopted the name. Being asked if she has become *the* Giselle she wanted to be, she replied:

More or less.... I think [adopting an English name with expectations] is really helpful, just as how Chinese parents give their kids names with beautiful meanings.... The name Giselle indicates my 1/8 German heritage, and it shows who I wanted to become—it sets an example. I think it has a gradual impact on me. It helps me set a long-term goal. I keep telling myself and others. When people around you know what kind of person you want to become, they will help you and encourage you.

An English name that conveys an ideal image can function as self-talk that drives the name owner to realize her expectations. It sets a goal, so the ideal self a name presents can gradually become the actual self. However, gender norms embedded in social expectations from "people around you," mixed with self-talk, can shape how one performs identity (Goffman 1959)—in this case, through English names.

Not everyone chooses an English name that implies high expectations because an *ideal* name also must *fit*. Ziqi learned from her friends that she is "so not Helen," because her personality is not as elegant as Helen implies. She considered taking her friends' suggestion to be called Allison, which is "more active." But there was another name on her list:

I like a character in *Grey's Anatomy*. Her name is Christina. I really like her personality. I hope I will become someone like her.... Christina knows what she wants. She's determined and not easily disturbed by others.... But I think the name Christina indicates a stronger personality than I actually have. I wish to be very independent, but that's not all I want to be. Those Christinas I've seen on TV shows or in life are a bit "bigger" than I am. It gives others a feeling of toughness.

Although Ziqi wants to become an independent woman like Christina (her ideal self), the name suggests a stronger personality than she feels she has. She is more comfortable as Allison ("vivacious but not too strong"), which is close to her actual self. Balancing between ideal and fitting, Ziqi chooses the latter. Her choice of Allison over Christina, however, is not entirely channeled by internal mechanisms. She worries that going by Christina "gives others" a feeling of toughness that does not fit into their expectations. As Ziqi explains, she wants to avoid "being a forceful woman" who brings others "a sense of frightening," as her friends all believe she is "relatively accessible." As such, a new form of

femininity that fits into gender norms is implied in the conflict between the reflective self and the imagined self.

Cross-Cultural Naming and Identity

In this article, we endorse Levitt's (2005) call for building bridges between cultural sociology and migration scholarship, emphasizing both the dynamics of meaning-making and boundary construction in the migration experience and the processes that blur multiple cultural repertoires for identity negotiation and presentation. By focusing on how Chinese international students use their names on US campuses, we examine *cross-cultural naming* that accounts for the multiplicity and performativity of naming.

Multiplicity Situated in transnational contexts and with multiple names available, transnational actors (in this case, Chinese international students) deal with ethnic distinctions through multiple cultural repertoires. As they assimilate, they blur boundaries between their ethnic names and names in the language of the host society (Gerhards and Hans 2009; Sue and Telles 2007). Ethnic names can highlight identity and distance from other ethnic communities, and at the same time they distinguish individuals from others. This reveals a mechanism of transnational identity that is unique to those young global citizens. Additionally, cross-cultural naming indicates multi-layered identity channeled by their experiences in the host society. In this, we recognize that name changes are often triggered by critical life moments, such as graduation and decisions of whether to remain in America or return to China. Multiple names provide options for an authentic self.

Performativity The second aspect of cross-cultural naming refers to the performative nature of self-naming, revealing how the meanings of names are constructed locally to signal situated intimacy. Individuals use their personal names in social groups and spaces that are regulated by the interaction between relational intimacy and desired identity. While distinct names can signal group bonding with their ethnic communities (Zhang et al. 2016), our empirical case supports a broader sense of group belonging that extends beyond ethnic/nonethnic divisions. Moreover, the performativity of names reveals the desire to produce distinctiveness. A sense of self is based on connections among the reflective self, the distinctive self, and the imagined self. Since personal names are usually informal, rather than legal, they open space for presenting a persona and identity in a variety of scenes and settings. As such, we not only explore naming in the domain of taste, but emphasize the importance of presentation of self.

Regarding our empirical case, we raise several issues in the naming of international students that may have implications for transnational identities, gender, and class. First, the pursuit of distinctiveness in naming seems particularly salient among Chinese international students, as indicated in either their intention of keeping ethnic names or assigning distinctive meanings to English names. Compared to the three domains of the self (the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self) identified by Higgins (1987), we add a new domain: the distinctive self. The pursuit of uniqueness by Chinese students is a combined result of external influences (i.e., a rising China, relatively well-off families,

possibilities of traveling between the two countries in an interconnected world) and internal mechanisms (i.e., the desire to express individuality, naming practices in both countries, gendered names). Multiple names make it more convenient to produce the distinct self. We do not directly link the rise of the individualism embodied in distinctive names to modernization or the extension of citizenship rights (Obukhova et al. 2014). Instead, we speculate that it may be connected to their ambition (and/or anxiety), thus reflecting the demand of constructing global selves.

Moreover, our findings support the relationship between gender and naming, as girls' names are more varied and volatile (Liebersohn 2000). Unlike the existing literature that demonstrates parental tastes of naming their daughters to aid in assimilation (Sue and Telles 2007), we suggest gender may affect *self-naming* practices as well. Compared to males, female informants are more likely to share richer and more personal stories. Male informants tend to comment on macro-level discourses, such as how US-China relations and Chinese culture influence naming practices. We speculate that female students may have encountered more issues of identity negotiation in their cross-cultural naming, although we recognize the relatively small sample and the possibility of self-selection. Additional studies are needed to examine how gender and naming are intertwined.

As mentioned, we focus on elite students, which may affect the generalizability of our conclusions. Social class matters in shaping name-giving patterns (Elchardus and Siongers 2011), but previous studies ignore the specific forces affecting self-naming. As surveys have shown, over 90% of Chinese undergraduates in the United States use family funds to pay for their college education (Ma 2020). We need empirical studies on Chinese undergraduates from working-class families, especially those in less prestigious public colleges. We expect similar processes of multiplicity and performativity in cross-cultural naming among this small group of students. However, given their potentially lower cultural competence in the host country, they may less actively pursue distinctiveness. Further, ethnic maintenance is often a byproduct of downward assimilation among immigrants from lower social classes, as suggested by "segmented assimilation" (Portes and Zhou 1993). However, our case reveals that maintaining ethnic identity can also be a deliberate choice made by the upper-middle class.

While the case of mainland Chinese students has distinctive qualities, the cross-cultural naming approach offers analytical tools better to understand the naming practices of other communities of international students (i.e., Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan). Comparative studies among these communities can be beneficial as they examine influences from colonialism, Christianity, and modernity.

The rectification of names, for Chinese international students, connotes contemporary adjustment to group belonging and as global selves. When these conflict, obstacles to successful social interaction or self-integration may result. To value Chinese international students is not to insist on their Chinese given names, but to respect their choices, whether this is an English name or a Chinese one. Western instructors should manage pronunciation as best they can, and make corrections when, inevitably, they err.

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Appendix

Table 1 Survey descriptive statistics ($N=204$)

Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	
Male	47.1
Female	52.9
Current Academic Level	
Bachelor's	23
Master's	41.2
PhD	33.3
Other	2.5
First US Education	
High school or earlier	9.8
Undergraduate	35.3
Graduate	54.9
Academic Area	
Natural Science	43.1
Social Sciences	22.5
Humanities & Arts	5.9
Business	12.3
Other	16.2
Home City Tier	
1st tier	51.5
2nd tier	29.4
3rd tier or lower	19.1
English Name Status	
Now uses	56.4
Has dropped	32.4
Never owns	11.3
Times of English Name Change	
Never	52.3
Once	29.1
More than once	17.6
English Name Sources	
Self-named	69.8
English teachers	21.5
Friends	8.7
Time When Current English Name Was Assigned	
Back in school in China	79.7
Right before coming to study in the US	8.0
After coming to study in the US	12.3
Name Use in Academic Settings	
Chinese name only	56.4
Chinese name mostly	13.2
Chinese and English names equally	7.4
English name mostly	14.2
English name only	8.8
Name Use in Social Settings	
Chinese name only	46.3
Chinese name mostly	10.8
Chinese and English names equally	6.4
English name mostly	17.7
English name only	18.7

* Because of rounding, not all figures sum to 100%

Table 2 Demographic information and English name use of interviewees ($N = 25$)

Age		First U.S. Education	
Mean	22	High school	8
		College	17
Gender		Home City	
Male	9	1st tier	17
Female	16	2nd tier	8
Current Academic Level		English Name Status	
Bachelor's	17	Now uses	17
Master's	4	Has dropped	8
PhD	4		
Academic Area		Times of English Name Change	
Natural Science	6	Never	11
Social Sciences	8	Once	7
Humanities & Arts	6	More than once	7
Business & Medicine	5		

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