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## What's in a name? A language barrier

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BEFORE moving to Shanghai last month, I asked my Mandarin teacher to help me choose a Chinese name. My surname, Ford, became Fu - a common family name - without too much difficulty. Finding a first name proved more difficult. I was conscious of the experience of my friend Emma, whose literal transliteration of her name landed her with the unfortunate "e-ma," or hungry horse. My teacher's first suggestion was Mei Li - "beautiful." I liked the sound but felt it could come across as immodest. Eventually I settled on a different Mei, with a character signifying "rose."

A Chinese name is hard to get right and embarrassing, even devastating, if chosen wrong. For luxury brands attempting to crack the promised mainland, having the right local name can be the key to success or failure.

But difficult as it is, having a Chinese name is essential. Western brands can be hard for many Chinese consumers to read and pronounce - leading them to rely on initials like "LV" or recognize logos, such as Cartier's cursive letters on a red background. These are of no use when searching for information for brands online.

Regulators can demand foreign companies adopt a Chinese brand name for registration purposes. Perhaps, most pressingly, if brands don't decide on a Chinese name themselves, they might find one chosen for them.

"Almost all luxury brands have several Chinese phonetic translations of their names circulating online," says Laurence Lim Dally, a branding expert and founder of Hong Kong-based consultancy Cherry Blossoms. Once this happens, it's usually too late to change.

### Tricky to navigate

Western brands have been slow to realize the importance of a Chinese name, but they are starting to catch on.

However, the path is fraught with difficulty. Only yesterday, the international auction house Christie's was forced to withdraw posters listing its new Chinese names for 61 of its fine French wines. Intended to strengthen links between the wine estates in Bordeaux and China, the proposed names "regrettably caused confusion in the market place," the auction house said. Some of the chateaux objected to the names being published while they were in the middle of the complex Chinese trademark process, while others were deemed too long.

Jenny Li of Wine Intelligence, a European consultancy, said: "Wine producers [are starting] to realize how important it is to overcome the language barrier when penetrating a market with substantial cultural differences."

With its 10,000 or so characters, myriad homonyms and endless shades of meaning, the Chinese language can be a tricky terrain to navigate.

"It is critical to ensure that no negative or misleading associations can be made with a name," Li says.

She points to the unfortunate case of wine label Chateau Haut-Brion, which had a popular tag Hongyan Rong, "a poetic, elegant name with a feminine touch." In an attempt to target male consumers, the wine producer introduced the name Hou Bowang, meaning "nobleman" or "lord." This led to jokes by microbloggers, posting on Sina Weibo that the wine had undergone a sex change.

So how do you get it right? "A good Chinese name should be easy to read and pronounce and have a meaning resonating with the brand identity," Lim Dally says. "A meaningful name is essential to be easily memorized, and beyond, to generate positive mental images and associations. Symbolic and even spiritual interpretations are fundamental."

There are three basic ways of choosing a name. The first is simple phonetic transliteration, such as the sparkling wine Freixenet, known as Fe-Se-Ne-Te. Phonetic names can be long, hard to pronounce and lack deeper meaning, but they have the advantage of consumers knowing that the brands are Western.

The second way is to pick a name based on the original meaning. Another wine, Chateau Cheval Blanc, is translated as Bai Ma Zhuang Yuan, or "white horse manor." The positive overtones of nobility and romance associated with white horses in Chinese culture have led to high, unprompted awareness of the brand, Li explains.

The third route is to start from scratch - a good approach if the original has no particular meaning or is difficult to pronounce. Procter & Gamble has had some success with renaming its products for the Chinese market, as well as its corporate identity: Bao Jie.

The holy grail of cross-cultural branding is to find a name that resembles the original and carries a strong meaning. This is the most difficult to get right, but also the most rewarding, experts say.

Balenciaga, the Spanish luxury house, struck gold with Ba Li Shi Jia, meaning Paris and "noble family," instantly evoking a prestigious Western brand. Rolex, however, did less well. Its Chinese name, Lao Li Shi, which translates as "labor force man." The name can, therefore, evoke working class people, and possibly convey the idea of a brand dedicated to the "nouveaux riches," Lim Dally says.

### 'First to file'

Even if they find the perfect name, companies increasingly face a headache when it comes to gaining the rights to use it. While the US has a "first-to-use" rule - brands have to show they were the first to actually use a name - in China, it's a question of "first to file." That has led to some enterprising local firms becoming "trademark squatters," registering possible names before the Western brands can get there.

Last month Hermes lost a court battle to retain the trademark for its Chinese name Ai Ma Shi, a name also owned by a menswear company in Guangdong using slightly different characters.

Hermes was not the first. Sotheby's and Starbucks had both previously been embroiled in trademark wrangles. Fortunately for Hermes, it has another Chinese brand name, Shang Xia - or "up down" - which is gathering such traction that it announced this month that it is even opening its first overseas boutique with the name in its native Paris.

As far as Fu Mei Li is concerned, I'm not aware of any attempts to trademark my hard-chosen Chinese name on the mainland. But perhaps I should register it anyway, just in case.

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