

# **BRAND NAMING PRACTICES OF CHINESE ENTERPRISES: A TENTATIVE MODEL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Literature review suggests that Western researchers adopt the stepwise approach to investigate the brand naming process and develop models and tenets for brand naming practices. Notably, however, management researchers query the applicability of the broad Western brand naming principles in a Chinese socio-cultural context. This paper examines the brand naming practices of Chinese enterprises. Eleven Chinese managers were in-depth interviewed. The research results reveal that Chinese managers tend to follow a four-step approach in choosing brand names. They are: 1) generating brand names, 2) screening brand names, 3) choosing brand names, and 4) applying for registration. Chinese managers tend to use 'good luck' and 'foreign-sounding' frequently to evaluate brand names. Advertising agencies and brand consultants are involved in the evaluation process. Interestingly, government officials are influential in the brand naming decision of Chinese enterprises. However, few enterprises undertake formal research such as consumer surveys to evaluate brand names. Most Chinese enterprises, to play safe, register for more than one brand name to establish a name pool. The research findings suggest that the Eastern and Western brand naming processes are different and there is a need to develop a Chinese brand naming model.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A brand's name is the core indication of a brand as it plays an important role in identification, communication and legality (Murphy, 1987). Specifically, it is a complex symbol that can influence a consumer's attitude towards a product by its literal meaning or the way it sounds (Leone, 1981). The brand naming task thus has been extensively studied from the consumer (e.g., Peterson and Ross, 1972, Schloss, 1981; Janiszewski and Van Osselaer, 2000) and corporate (e.g., Kohli and LaBahn, 1997) perspectives. Western researchers attempt to develop models and tenets for brand naming practices. Notably, however, management researchers (McDonald and Roberts, 1990; Schmitt and Pan, 1994; Chan and Huang, 1997; Huang and Chan, 1997) query the applicability of the broad Western brand naming principles in a Chinese socio-cultural context. Since 1978, China has adopted a series of reform measures and opened its doors to the rest of the world. However,



the marketing environment is still not favourable as the performance of Chinese enterprises is determined not only by environmental factors, for example transition from a socialist country to a market economy, but also by institutional factors such as government intervention (Li, 1998). Also, the legal protection for brands is inadequate. Specifically, the Trademark Law was first drafted in 1982, and modified in 1993 and 1995 according to the Agreement on Trade-related Aspect of Intellectual Property Rights. However, revised legislation related to the Trademark Law will have to be introduced before 2002 (China Daily, January 1999). Given the turbulent marketing environment of China and also the queries about the transferability of Western branding naming principles to a Chinese socio-cultural context, there is a need to research into the brand naming behaviour of Chinese managers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Selecting an effective brand name is crucial to the development of a new product as it helps give new products a head start in facilitating consumer recall and conjuring up favourable product image (Aaker, 1990; Charmasson, 1988; Keller, 1993). Researchers (Zinkhan and Martin, 1987) indicate that consumers form instant non-neutral attitudes about the product based on a brand name alone and it is difficult for them to change through subsequent communications. Other researchers (Ang, 1997; Schloss, 1981) argue that consumer attitude formation is not only based on the literal meaning of the name, the way the name sounds, the alpha-numeric structure, but also due to company promotion or individual usage. Interestingly, however, most brand managers realize that a carefully created and chosen name will bring inherent and immediate value to a brand (Kohli and LaBahn, 1997).

Given the significance of brand name, researchers (e.g., Collins, 1977; Kohli and LaBahn, 1997) try to provide guidelines for managers to choose the 'right' brand name. Linguists (Newmann, 1933; Sapir, 1929) first initiated research into brand naming practices, as they perceived brand name as the label of language for communication between product and consumer. Researchers (Heath, Chatterjee and France, 1990; Vanden Bergh, *et al*, 1984; Vanden Bergh, *et al*, 1987) attempt to use experiments to identify the relationship between linguistic characteristics and consumer perception. On the other hand, marketing scholars (Boulvin and Szekely, 1971; Dogana, 1967) point to the significance of adopting a stepwise approach to investigate the brand naming process. As Collins (1977) argues that the brand naming process should be one of the components in marketing strategy formulation, this paper identifies and reviews the existing literature on brand naming process and examines the brand naming practices of Chinese enterprises.



### **The Approaches to Brand Naming Process**

The development of the stepwise brand naming research can be divided into three stages: introduction, theory building and verification. At the introduction stage, researchers (Boulvin and Szekely, 1971; Dogana, 1967) argue that both semantic and symbolic values are of equal importance and thus semiotics and consumer research approaches are complementary. Progressing into the theory building stage, researchers (Collins, 1977; de Charnatory and McDonald, 1992; Murphy, 1987) point to the importance of applying marketing theories and put forward some tentative brand naming principles from a strategic perspective. At the verification stage, researchers try to use empirical studies to refine and modify the tentative brand naming principles. Researchers (Boulvin and Szekely, 1971; Dogana, 1967) first suggest that the brand naming process consists of three steps: 1) identifying the qualities that the name should convey; 2) generating words forms and screening them to a short list; and 3) undertaking consumer research to find out the most suitable name. They also recommend using books, brainstorming techniques and computers to generate ideas, and suggest that a name should be pronounceable in several languages. Besides, Dogana (1967) divides brand names into four categories according to the symbolic or phonetic value of a name and find that consumers' are more satisfied with brand names having both semantic and symbolic values. Boulvin and Szekely (1971) suggest three criteria, namely 'visual relevance', 'auditory satisfaction', and 'pronounceability', to evaluate brand names. Apparently, at the introduction stage, researchers place emphasis on the dynamic relationship between consumers and the linguistic characteristics of brand names.

Collins (1977), on the other hand, points to the importance of incorporating marketing theories and undertaking consumer survey on brand names selection. In response, Murphy (1987) proposes strategic marketing perspective to develop tentative branding naming guidelines and to seek advice from advertising agencies and brand consultants. Researchers (de Charnatory and McDonald, 1992) recommend a 7-step approach to select brand names: 1) setting marketing objectives, 2) brand auditing, 3) setting brand objectives, 4) setting brand strategy, 5) specifying brand name criteria, 6) generating brand names, and 7) screening and selecting brand names. McNeal and Zeren (1981) conduct an open-ended questionnaire survey to explore the brand name creation process of American consumer products companies. They attempt to identify 'where' do the names come from, 'why' and 'how' they are chosen, by 'what' means and by 'whom'. The results of their survey show that brand names are usually generated by brainstorming, not computers. The parties involved in the brand naming task include potential consumers, brand consultants, advertising agencies, and executives from the company's marketing and brand/product departments. The survey results reveal that American companies tend to use 13 criteria to evaluate brand names, while 'description of the product benefits', 'memorable', and 'appropriate to the company's image' have been used most frequently. Besides,



most companies undertake trademark search before making final decisions. Based on the survey findings, McNeal and Zeren suggest a brand name selection process model: 1) identifying brand naming objectives or criteria, 2) generating brand names, 3) screening brand names to match with the image of the firm or the product, 4) conducting consumer survey, 5) undertaking a trademark search, and 6) selecting the final brand name. Shipley, Hooley and Wallace (1988) replicate McNeal and Zeren's (1981) study in the UK. The research findings suggest branding objectives (for examples, establishing a particular image, fostering brand loyalty, and market segmentation) from brand name criteria (for examples, compatibility with product image, memorability, and trademark availability) be distinguished in the brand naming decision. Also, branding strategy (for examples, the use of individual vs. family brand names, the choice of producer's name, and dealer's name or generic name) should be determined before specifying brand name criteria.

McNeal and Zeren (1981) identify a standardized and structured brand naming process and point to the importance of adopting the market orientation in selecting brand names. However, they do not determine how and to what extent brand name selection is a critical task for a marketer. Also, Shipley, *et al*, (1988) do not reveal in detail how companies actually perform the brand naming task, nor the contribution of the model to company performance. Kohli and LaBahn (1997) attempt to advance the brand naming theory by investigating to what extent managers follow the prescriptive steps suggested by brand naming researchers. Specifically, their research findings reveal that companies adopting the formal brand naming process are more satisfied with their brand names and also are more successful in the marketplace. Also, consumer goods companies adopt the market orientation in brand naming while industrial companies place relatively more emphasis on legal components of brand names. Most companies ignore branding objectives and rarely undertake consumer tests in choosing new brand names. Notably, all researchers using the stepwise approach to investigate the brand naming process and develop brand naming models.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The above literature review suggests that Western researchers tend to adopt a stepwise approach to select brand names. Interestingly, however, Hsu (1970, 1971) argues that Chinese tend to use a holistic, rather than linear, approach to solve problem. Would Chinese managers adopt a stepwise approach to select brands names? The socio-cultural environment of China is different from that of the Western countries. Li (1998) acknowledges the profound effects of environmental and institutional factors upon the marketing environment in China. Researchers (for examples, Siu and Kirby, 1995; McDonald and Roberts, 1990; Schmitt and Pan, 1994) query the applicability of Western approaches to the Chinese socio-cultural context. How and to what extent do Chinese socio-cultural factors affect the brand



naming practices of Chinese enterprises?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to the absence of prior empirical research into Chinese brand naming practices, an exploratory research is adopted. Also, quantitative research, which is mainly used to verify the relationships among developed variables, is perceived as not appropriate for this research. Fan (1995) argues that Chinese managers do not make marketing decisions in a standardized manner as their Western counterparts do. To better understand the brand naming decisions of Chinese managers, personal interview is selected to collect data. The grounded theory approach is used to analyse data. Marketing researchers (Collins, 1977; Kohli and LaBahn, 1997) find that delivery, price and trademarks are the compelling aspects for industrial products, whilst consumers are more sensitive to brand names of fast moving consumer goods. Thus, manufacturers of consumer goods were chosen as samples. The report of State Statistics Council in 1998 reveals that local brand name products are mainly food/drink/cigarette; clothing/cosmetics; and electrical appliances. According to the 1997 Most Famous Consumer Products Brand Names in China, evaluated by the National Statistics Bureau, consumer products manufacturers are mainly located in Shanghai and Guangdong provinces. Thus, Shanghai and Guangzhou (which is the municipal of Guangdong province) were chosen as the cites for conducting interviews. Quota sampling methods was used and twelve cases were selected based on three levels of employment size (less than 200; 201 to 500; 500 and more) and two types of ownership (state-owned enterprise; collective/private enterprises).

The enterprises were contacted with the recommendations of marketing professors in Guangzhou and Shanghai. One interviewee was not able to offer interview after several follow-ups, 11 interviews were conducted. The small sample size of this study is justified by the preliminary nature of the investigation. Marketing managers or executives who involved in or having knowledge about the brand naming decisions were chosen as interviewees. All interviews were conducted in the respective interviewee's meeting room or office. This arrangement allowed the interviewers to observe the interviewees' behaviors in their business settings and to collect as much information and material about the respective enterprise as possible through observation. Mandarin, the official language in China, was used in the interviews. Each interview lasted around one hour. All of the interviewees agreed to have the interviews taped, which facilitated subsequent analysis.

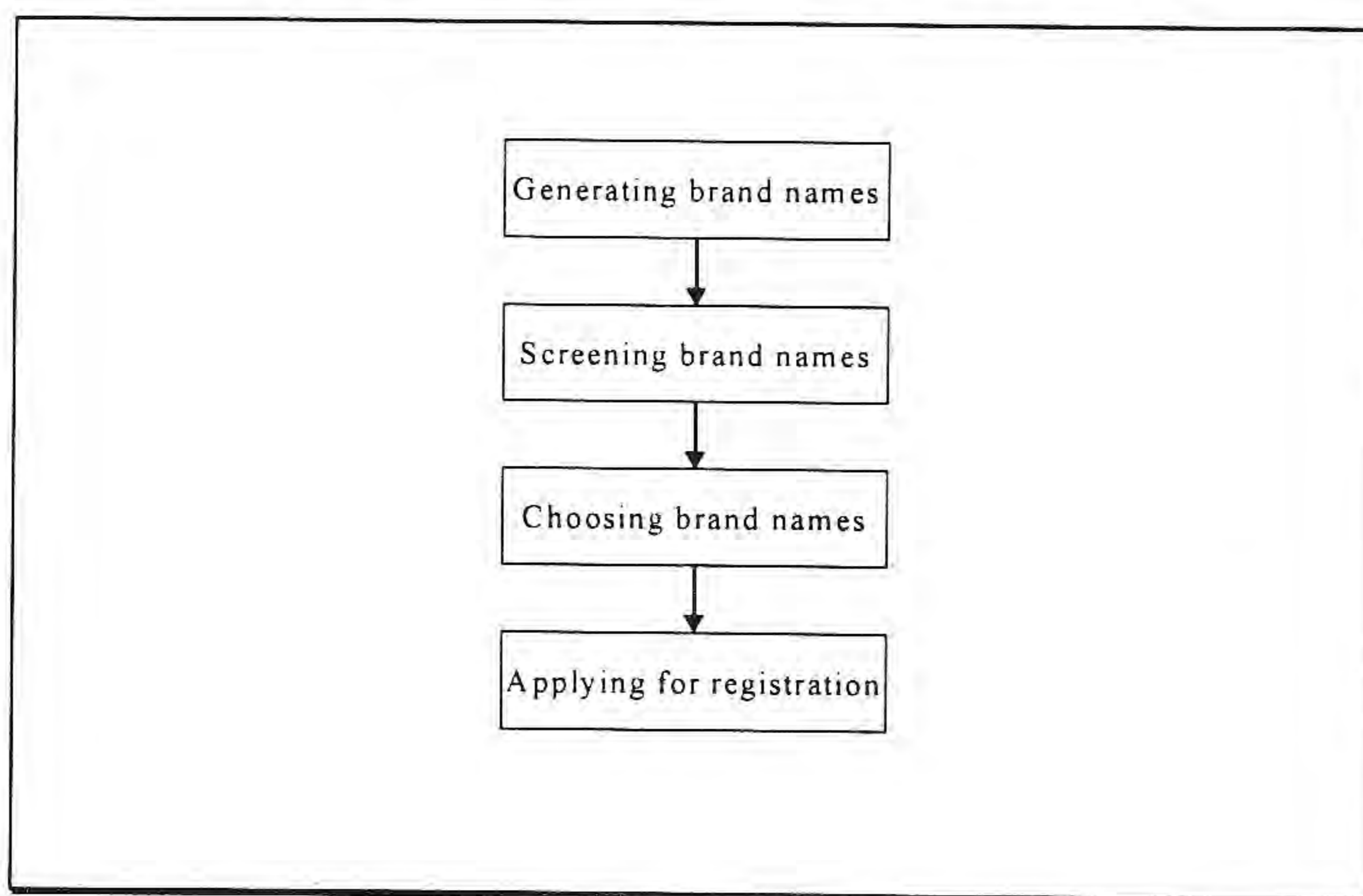


## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Brand naming Process Model

Reviewing the interview scripts suggests that the Chinese brand naming process consists of four-steps (see Figure 1): 1) generating brand names, 2) screening brand names, 3) choosing brand names, 4) applying for registration.

**Figure 1: The brand naming process of the Chinese managers**



### Generating Brand Names

Compared with the American research findings (Kohli and LaBahn, 1997), Chinese managers do not specify any brand naming objectives in choosing brand names. Respondents claimed that they did not specify any objectives before generating brand names. One respondent explained that they wanted to generate a variety of potential brand names freely. Instead, creativity and inspiration were encouraged. Further probing revealed that the brand naming process of some Chinese enterprises can be divided into two phases: 1) generating and registering a list of brand names to form a name pool for future use, and 2) selecting a brand name from the name pool for a new product. The following excerpts from the interview scripts help understand why Chinese managers do not specify brand name objectives as their Western counterparts do at this stage:

*"We develop many new products, so we need individual brand names for the new products. However, there are not much available brand names that suit our products. Other manufacturers will register them if we do not. Therefore, we*



*need to register more brand names in our name pool. So far we have (registered) about thirty brand names. We regularly generate brand names and register them every several months. Besides, I think inspiration is very important in brand naming. When I happen to think of a good brand name, I jot it down in my notebook immediately. Otherwise, I will forget the name. If we merely sit there thinking about brand names, there are less chances to find good names. Therefore, we do not plan or set any objectives before generating brand names”.*

Analysing the transcripts shows that most of the new brand names (90%) were generated by brainstorming or creative thinking. Besides, managers and executives from the departments of product development and marketing (sales) participated actively in making brand name decision. Discussions among managers and executives and also an open-invitation of suggestions from employees were approaches used frequently for generating brand names.

### **Screening Brand Names**

When asked criteria for evaluating brand names, 3 respondents confessed that they had never thought about this issue. Nevertheless, most of the Chinese enterprises (72%) claimed that they set various criteria to screen brand names. Table 1 shows the naming criteria. ‘good luck’ (82%), ‘description of product feature’ (64%) and ‘easy to pronounce’ (64%) are used most frequently in choosing a brand name. Other criterias are ‘foreign-sounding’, ‘attractive to consumers’, ‘memorable’, and ‘neutral connotations’. Besides, ‘simple’, ‘identical’, and ‘related to family brand name’, were also mentioned by Chinese managers.

The criteria are further classified into three dimensions according to their attributes, namely marketing, linguistic and cultural. The marketing dimension includes five criteria: ‘description of product feature’, ‘neutral connotation (easy to extend)’, ‘attractive to consumers’, ‘related to family name’ and ‘easy to identify’. The linguistic dimension includes the phonetic requirement (‘easy to pronounce’, ‘pronounceable in different language’, and ‘pleasure to read or listen’), the morphological requirement (‘simple’ and ‘short’) and the semantic requirement (‘memorable’). ‘Good luck’, ‘foreign-sounding’, ‘convey traditional idiom’ and ‘quotations’ are grouped into the cultural dimension (see Table 1). Compared with the evaluation criteria used by American companies (Kohli and LaBahn, 1997), Chinese enterprises did not use the criteria such as ‘ease of recognition’, ‘profane or negative connotations’. Instead, they emphasised the criteria of ‘luck’, ‘foreign-sounding’, ‘traditional cultural connotations’, and ‘neutral connotation’. Interestingly, most of these criteria used by Chinese managers are related to the cultural dimension.



**Table 1: Classification of brand naming criteria of the Chinese enterprises**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Criteria used in the brand naming practice</b>	<b>Frequency In percentage (N=11)</b>
<i>Cultural dimension</i>	Lucky, no unlucky connotation, the number of strokes is lucky	82
	Foreign-sounding name, English name	55
	Convey traditional idiom, custom or literary connotations	45
<i>Linguistic dimension</i>	Easy to pronounce, pronounceable in different language, pleasing to read or listen	64
	Memorable	45
	Simple, not more than three characters	27
<i>Marketing dimension</i>	Description of product feature, reflect product function and benefits	64
	Attractive to consumer, persuasive to target market	45
	Neutral connotation, versatile among products and countries, exceed epoch limitation	45
	Relate to family brand name	18
	Easy to identify from competitors	18

Six managers said that they would avoid using any brand names that conveyed an unlucky connotation, as they were concerned about consumers' belief in 'good luck'. 3 respondents mentioned that they deliberately chose lucky brand names because the manager considered it to be very important. Surprisingly, when being asked whether they consulted Master Fengshui in making brand naming decision, few enterprises gave a positive answer as they did not believe that a lucky brand name could bring good luck to their enterprises. The research findings do not support the suggestions of using Master Fengshui in Chinese brand naming (McDonald and Roberts, 1990; Schmitt and Pan, 1994). Instead, 3 enterprises remarked that they consulted Master Fengshui only when they chose the date for establishing their enterprises or moving offices or factories, but not naming brands.

To most Chinese consumers, imported products represent reliable quality, good taste, and high price. Chinese consumers are attracted to "foreign-sounding" brand names because of the trendy and high-tech images linked with the names,



specifically in the cosmetics industry (Chan and Huang, 1997). The findings of this research support this argument. When the respondents were asked about whether they used foreign-sounding brand names for their products, six respondents from the electrical appliances, cosmetics and clothing industries gave positive answers, while others said that they did not as it was not necessary. Advertising agencies and brand consultants were involved in screening brand names. Although most of the enterprises emphasized the importance of understanding consumer behaviour, they did not conduct consumer surveys when evaluating brand names. One respondent claimed that:

*"It is not necessary to spend money on conducting consumer surveys, I believe that expert opinion is adequate for choosing a good brand name."*

Another respondent further remarked:

*"Chinese consumers lose themselves in the transition economy in China, they do not know what they want. They need more guidance."*

Findings of this research suggest that the influences of the transitional marketing environment upon the brand naming decision of Chinese managers are profound.

### **Choosing Brand Names**

Though it is believed that the chief executive officer or factory director should be the final decision maker in brand naming decision, the interview results reveal that governmental officials of the local Administration of Industry and Commerce Office, the Handicraft Industry Office, and the Trademark Division of the State Administration of Industry and Commerce are influential in the decision process. A respondent described how they chose their brand name:

*"This brand name was originated from the name of our enterprise. It was suggested by one of our workers. The factory directory thought that the name was good, so he decided to adopt it. Then the Administration for Industry and Commerce Office advised us to change our trademark to this name so that it would not be registered by other enterprises."*

Another respondent explained how the government officials influenced the decision:

*"It is the suggestion of the Administration for Industry and Commerce Office. They said this traditional and famous name*



*was very valuable, it would bring us profit.”*

Some respondents complained that the articles related to the use of the words in the Trademark Law of China were rather vague. Specifically, the last two items in Article 8 of the General Provisions of the Trademark law prohibit the use of the following wordings:

*“Those having the nature of exaggeration and deceit in advertising goods; those detrimental to socialist morals or customs, or having other unhealthy influences.”*

As there are no clear definitions, the interpretation and explanation of the article could be highly varied. Besides, the Trademark Review and Adjudication Board, established under the Administrative Authority for Industry and Commerce of the State Council, is responsible for handling trademark disputes. Therefore, Chinese enterprises would have to follow the suggestions of government officials of the Administration for Industry and Commerce Office, in order to register the brand name smoothly. Apparently, the political and legal environments influence the brand naming decision of Chinese managers to a great extent.

### **Applying for Registration**

Only one enterprise had not yet applied for trademark registration, and the respondent claimed that they planned to choose and register a new brand name shortly. 7 enterprises registered more than one brand name and 3 enterprises only registered one. Brand name registration is a complicated and time-consuming process in China. It normally takes more than one year for approval. Thus, some respondents chose brand names and applied for registration regularly (for example, every several months) in order to stockpile brand names in advance. They selected one brand name from the pool when they developed a new product. Low registration fee (1,500 Reminbi Yuan for each) facilitated Chinese managers to register as many names as possible to build a name pool.

A pharmaceutical manufacturer registered more than two hundred individual brand names. The brand manager explained:

*“We are in the pharmaceutical industry and a brand name should function like a product name. Names that could reflect the functions and features of the product are most preferred. Besides, we like to choose short names that are composed of two to three characters. Moreover, there are many legal rules and regulations to govern the registration of pharmaceutical products. Because of these reasons, there are not many appropriate brand names available. We try to register more*



*brand names. Otherwise, the good names will be registered by our competitors. Also, the registration process for pharmaceutical products is very complicated, we need to apply for registration two or three years in advance."*

A manufacturer of electrical appliances also disclosed that he would rather buy brand names whenever necessary, as he did not want to waste time on the complicated registration procedures. Thus, the research findings suggest that severe competition; industry nature and the legal system of China affect Chinese brand name registration.

## DISCUSSION

In selecting brand names, Chinese managers tend to follow a four-step approach: 1) generating brand names, 2) screening brand names, 3) choosing brand names, and 4) applying for registration. Though Chinese enterprises try to generate a list of potential brand names, they do not set brand naming objectives. New brand names are created mainly through brainstorming by employees, such as executives of the marketing and product development departments. Few enterprises use computers to assist brand name generation. Siu (2000) suggests that under the influence of Yuarn (fatalism) and the doctrine of harmony with nature, Chinese managers tend to respond to what has happened in the business environment, rather than to take control over their business environment. Thus, Chinese enterprises are not able or willing to set specific targets in formulating brand objectives.

Chinese enterprises use cultural, linguistic and marketing evaluative criteria to select brand names. Notably, cultural dimensions such as 'good luck' and 'foreign-sounding' are important in brand name evaluation. Also, advertising agencies and brand consultants are involved in brand name evaluation. However, few enterprises undertake formal research such as consumer surveys to evaluate brand names. Thus, unlucky brand names in terms of connotation, sound and structure should be avoided in China. The implications of colour, number and trademark need to be considered thoroughly. When using 'foreign-sounding' brand names, it is better to consider the education level of the target customers. Chinese managers should select brand names that could convey foreign (modern) images with Chinese traditional cultural connotations.

Besides advertising agencies and brand consultants, government officials are influential in the brand naming decision. Most Chinese enterprises register for more than one brand name to establish a name pool. The findings suggest that the interference of institutional determinants have to be acknowledged. However, seeking advice from government officials may bring benefits to the company in brand name registration. Given the low registration charges, Chinese enterprises should register as many brand names as possible in respond to severe competition



for suitable brand names and the registration procedures hedged about with red tape. The findings of this research provide an in-depth evaluation of brand naming practices of Chinese enterprises. The results also provide a detailed description of how, and to what extent, these Chinese enterprises set brand objectives. Interestingly, the findings tend to suggest that the readily broad marketing principles, specifically generated from the Western economies, may not be fully suitable for some specific politico-economic contexts, for example enterprises in China operated under the socialist market economy. Thus, care should be taken before making generalizations about marketing in Western situations and in assuming that marketing tools and techniques are equally applicable across all places. Socio-cultural influences should be considered when attempting to understand the brand naming practices of Chinese enterprises.

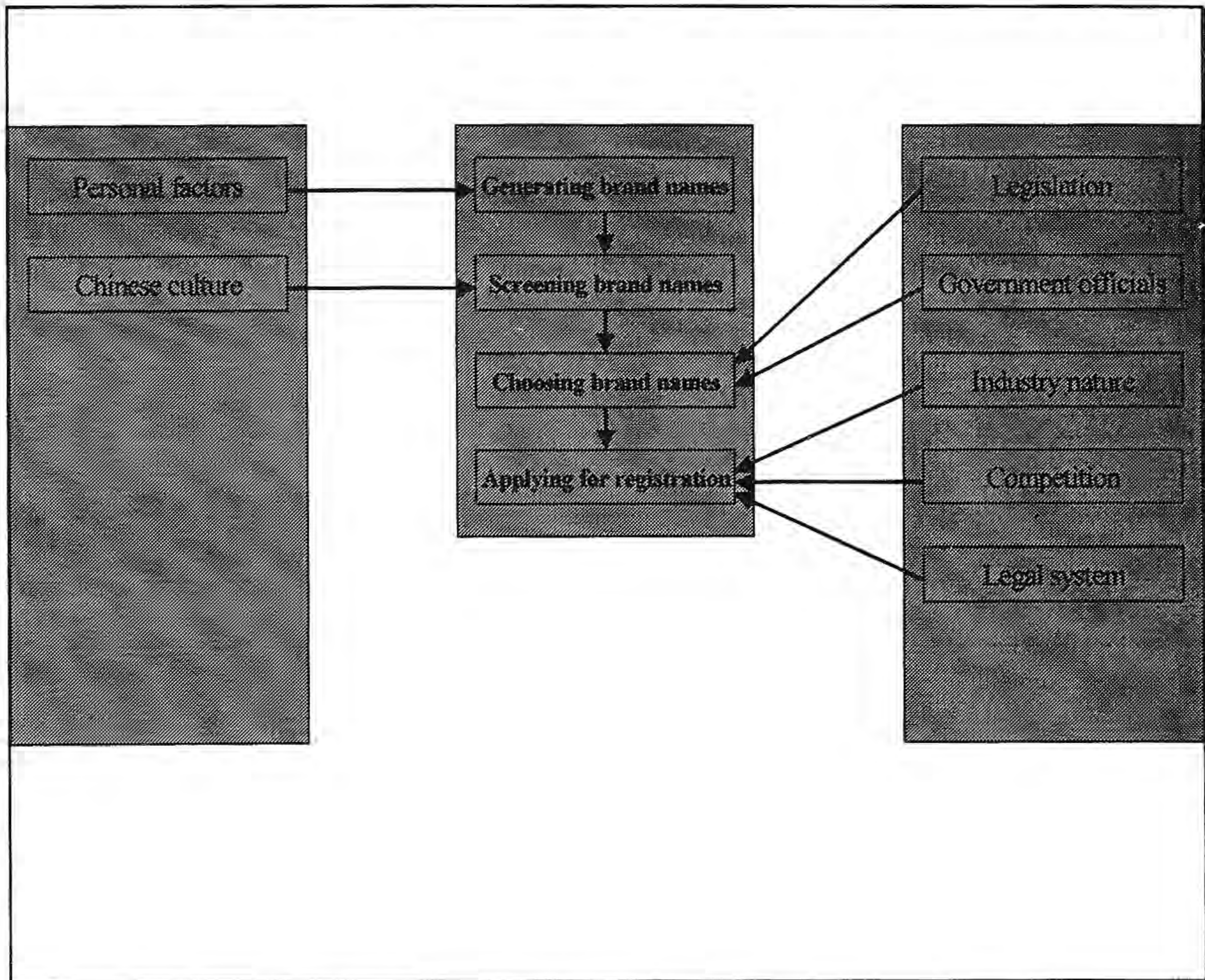
## CONCLUSIONS

The research findings suggest that the Eastern and Western brand naming processes are different. Reasons for these differences are unknown. Be that as it may, there are differences in institutional factors, for example, legal systems (Xiao, 1995) and government control (Li, 1998), and also socio-cultural values (Siu and Kirby, 1995) between Eastern and Western marketing environments. Figure 2 shows a tentative model explaining the brand naming practices of Chinese enterprises.

The research findings suggest that Chinese brand naming process is different from that of the Western. Further research thus should attempt to examine exactly, and in greater depth, how and to what extent Chinese brands manage to survive, grow and succeed in China. Also, a number of more pragmatic considerations specifically related to Chinese branding decisions should be addressed, for example specific branding naming decisions to improve brand performance. The research results reveal the brand naming process of Chinese enterprises and indicate that the brand naming practices of the Chinese managers are different from that of their Western counterparts. Specifically, the results seem to suggest that the Western marketing tenet is not fully applicable in China. The results presented here are part of an ongoing program of research into the brand naming decisions of Chinese enterprises. As such, they are intended to provide a sound foundation for further hypothesis development and testing and permit direct comparison between Western and Eastern brand naming decisions and allow specific environmental factors to be considered. Thus, a brand naming theory specifically for the China market could be developed to assist Chinese managers.



Figure 2: A tentative model for brand naming process of Chinese enterprises



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