

TRADEMARKS IN CHINESE

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Translating trademarks into Chinese is a superhuman challenge. The sound structure of Chinese (Mandarin, the standard dialect) and the use of thousands of characters rather than an alphabet mean that creativity and imagination are the key.

Imitating foreign words for their sound is tricky because Chinese syllables always end in a vowel, -n, -ng or -r. They never end in a consonant, and there are no consonant clusters like st-, pr-, fl-, etc. Also most if not all characters have a meaning as well as a sound, so it is essential to avoid characters with negative or unpleasant meanings or associations even if their pronunciation fits the English word.

Some well-known names are fairly easy to write in Chinese. For example Coca-Cola is known as "ke kou ke le" which imitates the sound fairly well (it has no final consonants or consonant clusters, luckily!) and the characters used can be translated as "tasty and enjoyable". No wonder Coca-Cola has become extremely popular in China in recent years!

Other names can be translated quite easily, eg Microsoft, which is known as Weiruan in Chinese. "Wei" means "tiny/micro" (as "wei bo" "microwave", bo is Chinese for wave) and "ruan" means soft (as in "ruan jian", software, "jian" means goods/ware). So Weiruan is a perfect translation, and the fact that it doesn't sound at all like Microsoft really doesn't matter.

The Chinese trademark journal is full of dubious applications, for example for marks like Dawei Beikehanmu which is the nearest anyone can get to writing (and saying) David Beckham in Chinese, while the Taiwan journal has published applications by a toy company for "war for domination among the stars" - Star Wars - and Zhanmusi Bang (for spectacles), which believe it or not is James Bond!