

# UNDER OTHER SKIES: ARTICULATORY HABITS AND CULTURAL INTERFERENCE IN THE FORMS ONE'S PERSONAL NAME TAKES ABROAD

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**Abstract:** Persons who live other than in their country of origin often find their personal names mispronounced, and acquiesce in this, or even adopt that pronunciation of their names to make their integration smoother. Some other times, they may change name. Or then, they may propose such a modification of their personal name, that it phono-semantically matches some sense in the recipient language. Some other times, the phono-semantic match is combined with mispronunciation in how others come to call them. In this article, our main exemplification is from a Singaporean context or a Chinese context for the family name of one of the authors, and an Italian context or a British context for the family name of the other author. Oliviu Felecan had previously discussed a Singaporean identity card for a young man, Batman bin Suparman, who was ethnically Malay but whose names are inspired by superheroes in American popular culture. Ghil'ad Zuckermann found himself called *Zulkarman* while teaching in Singapore, and apparently that name exhibits interference from *Zul Karnayn* (from Arabic *dhul-Qarnayn* 'he of the two horns', i.e., Alexander the Great). Zuckermann also adopted a Sinified, punning form of his name while in China. Ephraim Nissan, too, relates interesting experiences with his own name, including his being mistaken for a Japanese by a future collaborator of many years, his delight for there being a Nissan Institute in Oxford (that must be the ultimate accolade for a scholar), and his recognising his own name in the abbreviation EPH.NIS. used in a famous Syriac dictionary he was browsing, in order to refer to the prominent patristic author Ephrem Nisibenus, i.e., Ephrem Syrus, Ephrem of Nisibis.

**Keywords:** cultural recontextualization, onomastic modification, onomastic perception, name bearer acquiescence vs agency.

## Background

Felecan (2014: 147–148) signalled the name of a man born in 1990, Batman bin Suparman, jailed in Singapore, and also signalled a young man in Romania whose first name is *Superman*. Concerning the man from Singapore, Felecan (2014) quoted the first sentence of a BBC Trending report (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>

magazine-24911186) authored by Cordelia Hebblethwaite, dated 12 November 2013, and entitled “Batman bin Superman Jailed in Singapore”. The man about whose name the BBC report revolves apparently made news more than once. The third paragraph in that same report explains:

Back in May 2008, a Singaporean ID card belonging to one Batman bin Superman began being widely shared on social media. It was picked up by the blog Gizmodo and ran from there. Since then, the picture has been re-posted over 300 times, there have been more 15,000 tweets using his name, and a Facebook fan page has been set up in his honour. It has more than 11,000 followers.

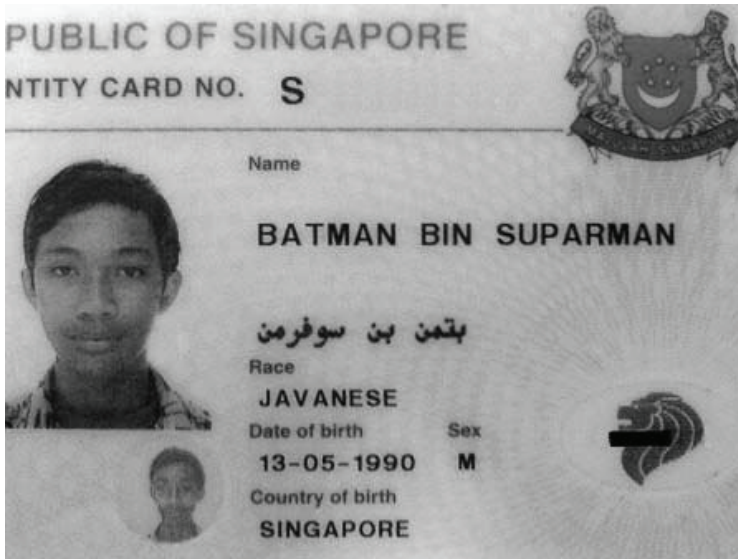


Figure 1. The identity card, released by the Republic of Singapore, of Batman bin Superman.

Tweets quoted in Hebblethwaite’s BBC report included this one: “You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain”. The BBC report attempted an onomastic and linguistic explanation:

Batman bin Superman’s family appear to be originally from the Indonesia island of Java — where the name Superman is very common, explains Ben Zimmer, a language columnist for the Wall Street Journal, who has worked in Indonesia and who has written about Superman. “Su” has Sanskrit origins and is a common prefix in Indonesia, featuring in a whole rung of Indonesian presidents’ names — including the current one Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. “Bin” means “son of” in Arabic, making it very likely that Batman’s father was also called Superman.

The Batman part is a bit harder to explain, however says Zimmer, as it’s not a traditional name in the region. The most likely explanation is that his parents chose it as a joke — Batman the superhero is popular there, and Indonesians are often playful in the names

they choose, says Zimmer. “I see the name as this interesting juxtaposition of local naming with Western pop culture”.

### **Onomastic distortion by semantic remotivation in Singapore**

One of the present authors, Ghil'ad Zuckermann, is an Israeli-born linguist, the son of the Roman-born artist Scipione Zuckermann, and was educated in both Israel and Italy, eventually earning a doctorate (D.Phil.) at the University of Oxford, moving to the University of Cambridge (where he was able to add the title “Ph.D. (Cambridge), titular”), and then taking an academic post in Singapore, before moving to Australia. While in Singapore, Zuckermann found himself called *Zulkarman* while teaching in Singapore, and apparently that name exhibits interference from *Zul Karnayn* (from Arabic *Dhū-l-Qarnayn* ‘he of the two horns’, i.e., Alexander the Great).

As being part of the Islamic sphere, cultures (other than Chinese) the Malay archipelago and peninsula possess lore about *Dhū-l-Qarnayn*, directly based on the *Qur'ān*, but historically, they also possessed a local variant of the Islamic versions of the gests of Alexander.

*Dhū-l-Qarnayn* ‘he who has two horns’ is an epithet found in the *Qur'ān* 18:83–98, and is taken to refer to Alexander the Great (Iskandar). The two horns are variously interpreted, in traditions from Islamic lands: Alexander reigned over both the West and the East, or then he supposedly toured the world twice. The Persian form of the epithet is *Zo l-Qarneyn*. A discussion of the two-horned image of Alexander the Great, from Greek symbolism to Islamic apocalyptic literature, is found in de Polignac (1984). Alexander the Great as *cosmocrator* (universal sovereign) and the Islamic reception of that role are the subject of another article by François de Polignac (Polignac 1996a).

The origin of that epithet of Alexander the Great apparently originated because Hellenistic coins were available, in which Alexander was represented with the horns of a ram (actually, one horn could be seen, because the face was shown in profile). This was because Alexander’s propaganda promoted his divinisation, and in Egypt he reportedly visited the temple of Ammon, and afterwards he claimed that his real father was Zeus–Ammon (a conflated deity). Apparently his mother, Olympias, had early on inflated his ego by claiming to him that he was the son of a god. At any rate, a claim developed according to which Alexander was the son of that Egyptian deity. Therefore, Alexander was represented with the horns of the ram, an animal associated with Ammon.

Interestingly, once Greek Hellenistic rulers in the area comprising what is now Afghanistan had themselves represented on their coinage with the skin of the head of an elephant over their head (as though it was their helmet), and in Republican Roman coinage, that headgear was associated with the head of the female personification of Africa, the tusks of the elephant came to replace what in Hellenistic coinage had been Alexander’s ram horns. In that manner, a visual element was retained: a horn (or tusk) being positioned near the temple or above the forefront of the ruler represented on the coin.



Figure 2. A coin (a silver tetradrachm) of Demetrius I Anicetus (Aniketos, 'Invincible'), a Hellenistic King of Bactria,<sup>1</sup> shown wearing the scalp of an elephant. If this reflects his real-life practice, arguably that must have been an elephant calf, or (more likely) even a foetus, as the skull and trunk are so small. It may be however (and actually this is more likely) that the headgear was only symbolic, not real. It was suggested that this was perhaps a posthumous coin. The elephant headgear symbolised Demetrius' conquest of India, and the association between conquering India and elephant symbolism dates back to Alexander the Great. The model for an elephant headgear may have been the iconography of Heracles wearing a lion's hide and scalp. Choking the Nemean lion was the first of Heracles' twelve labours. For such coins, cf. Osmund Boppearachchi's (1991) *Monnaies Gréco-Bactriennes et Indo-Grecques*. Also see Narain (2003 [1956], 1976).

Clearly, Hellenistic coinage showing Alexander with the horns of Ammon presupposed that Alexander was Ammon's son, rather than the Alexander subnarrative popular in the Middle Ages, according to which he was born because of "the machinations of Nectanebus, the astrologer-king of Egypt who fled to Macedonia, won the confidence of Queen Olympias, had relations with her and through the art of magic made her believe that she was impregnated by the god Ammon and that Alexander was the fruit of this conception" (Kazis 1962: 41). Cf. Lecco (2008), concerning medieval French versions. Iranian pride instead inspired a narrative (known from Islamic times) about Alexander's birth, according to which Iskandar (Alexander) was the son of a Persian kind, who sent him to the Macedonian king Faylaqūs (Philip) so he would raise him. Historically, Philip was Alexander's father, as far as we can tell.

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Demetrius\\_I\\_of\\_Bactria](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Demetrius_I_of_Bactria); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Demetrius\\_I\\_MET\\_coin.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Demetrius_I_MET_coin.jpg)



Figure 3. The two faces of a Hellenistic Greek coin from 305–281 B.C.E., showing the head of Alexander with a ram's horn. Athena is shown on the reverse of the same coin. From the website of the British Museum, London. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/cm/s/coin\\_with\\_head\\_of\\_alexander.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/coin_with_head_of_alexander.aspx)





Figure 4. Left: Head of Africa, with an elephant trunk, tusks, and stylised (triangular) ear. This is a coin of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio, commander-in-chief of the Pompeians. He committed suicide after Julius Caesar defeated the Pompeians at Thapsus on 6 February 46 BCE. Was the triangular ear made to match the shape of an Egyptian *ankh* (an equilateral triangle with an angle pointing upwards) which the hand of a standing lion-headed Genius of Africa holds in another coin of the same Scipio? (coin from Sear 2000: 262). Also see Nissan (2013a).

In Islamic texts, rather than showing Alexander as defiantly flying into the sky (the motif of a tyrant assaulting the heavens by flying, carried by eagles, was developed in a fable by Hans Christian Andersen), one finds Alexander carried into the sky by an angel who shows him the earth; this is a form of initiation, and it is also an investiture as a legitimate universal sovereign. François de Polignac remarked (1996b: 140, our added brackets):

En Islam cependant, Alexandre, rapproché de et parfois même assimilé à la figure eschatologique de l'«Homme aux deux cornes» qui avait reçu de Dieu pouvoir sur la terre entière et avait édifié le mur destiné à contenir les peuples de Gog et Magog jusqu'à l'accomplissement des temps (Sourate XVIII, vv. 83–98), ne pouvait être associé à un procédé désormais jugé détestable. A l'image de la montée conquérante, s'opposait une autre tradition tout aussi ancienne, celle des ascensions initiatiques vécues ou rêvées où le voyage céleste en compagnie d'un envoyé divin est l'occasion du dévoilement d'un savoir réservé à l'élu et source de sa mission prophétique; cette révélation revêt généralement la forme d'une vision des cieux, du trône de Dieu et/ou de la fin des temps. Ce type de récit jouit d'une grande faveur dans de nombreux écrits apocalyptiques, en particulier dans les Pseudépigraphes de l'Ancien Testament: Apocalypse grecque de Baruch, Livre des secrets d'Hénoch, Testament et Apocalypse d'Abraham, et débouche en Islam sur le récit du voyage nocturne de Muhammad, le *mi'rāj* [i.e., his ascension to Heaven for a visit while alive]. A première vue, la version arabe de l'ascension d'Alexandre se rattache à cette tradition initiatique: c'est en effet en vue d'une révélation, celle de l'universalité du pouvoir que Dieu lui accorde ici-bas, que l'ange emporte le roi pour lui montrer toute l'étendue de la terre.

Giulio Soravia (2008) discussed a short “chronicle” from Indonesia, concerning Alexander the Great. In a book review of the book in which Soravia published his

article (Saccone 2008), Nissan (2010) discussed Soravia's chapter (2008) as follows (brackets in Nissan 2010):

Alexander the Great, for sure, never reache[d] as far as the Malay Archipelago, whose very existence he quite possibly even ignored. And yet, there are Indonesian versions of the romance of Alexander in Indonesia, and the best-known version is *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*, an edition of which (by Khalid Hussein) was published in Kuala Lumpur (by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) in 1967. The manuscript (Leiden, University's Library, Cod. Or. 1696) is from 1830. This Malay version is considered to be of Sumatran origin. Curiously enough, there is almost nothing in it of Alexander's historical or even mythical biography. It is just at the beginning that we are told that King Iskandar was the son of Raja Darab, a Rum [Greek, Byzantine] from Macedonia, and that he travelled in order to visit the East, and reached India's border. His army defeats a local ruler. Iskandar requests that he joins the true (Abrahamic) faith, and the defeated king complies. Much of the Indonesian romance of Alexander is about the negotiations for Alexander to marry the daughter of the defeated Indian king. The intermediary is none else than the fabulous Nabi Khidir (Khivr), the enigmatic Islamic character associated by Eastern Jews with Elijah, and by Eastern Christians with St. George. Eventually, Alexander's father-in-law asks Alexander to leave his wife with her father, when he departs. She is pregnant, it turns out, and much of the rest of the Indonesian romance of Alexander relates a genealogy descended from Alexander's son born to this princess.

### **Zuckermann's personal onomastic experience in the Malay archipelago and in China**

When Ghil'ad Zuckermann was Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore, he often travelled to Malaysia and Indonesia. Due to the Apollonian tendency, the wish to create order and meaningfulness, many Indonesians and Malaysians analysed my surname *Zuckermann* as *Zulkarman* (< *Zulqarnen* < *Dhu-l-Qarnain*). After 9-11 it felt safe to travel in those countries as a Muslim, or at any rate as one believed to be one.

In Singapore Zuckermann also coined his own Chinese name *Zhu<sup>1</sup> ge<sup>3</sup> man<sup>4</sup>*,

# 诸葛漫

– a phono-semantic matching of *Zuckermann*, echoing *Zhuge Liang*, the name of famous Chinese wise strategist, and *langman* 'romantic', itself a phono-semantic matching of the internationalism *ROMAN*(*tic*).

Thus, the coinage *Zhu<sup>1</sup> ge<sup>3</sup> man<sup>4</sup>* 诸葛漫 stands for a romantic wise person.

### Sinifying foreign personal names punningly in China

As a linguist, Zuckermann is conversant with both Chinese and Japanese, and his wife is Chinese. For use while in China, he adopted a Sinified, punning form of his name, as seen in the previous section. Let us further explore this onomastic phenomenon.

In Chinese, the family name of Karl Marx was made (by phonetic approximation) into three ideograms, that are read  $ma^3 k'o^4 ssu^1$

$ma^3 k'o^4 ssu^1$  (马克思)

where literally,  $ma^3$  means 'horse',  $k'o^4$  means 'conquer' or 'overcome', and  $ssu^1$  is a final particle that also (as a pronoun) means 'he', 'this', 'they'. Therefore, Marx is associated with the idea of a tamer of horses, or perhaps with that of a horse rider.

Consider for comparison the Chinese adaptation of the brand name *BMW* into *Baoma*

*Baoma* (宝马)

which literally means 'precious horse'. Contrast that Chinese name, being a phonetic adaptation, to these other names, which are not: the Chinese name for *Mercedes* is *Benchi*

*Benchi* (奔驰)

that is to say, 'swift and quick', whereas the Chinese name for *Wolkswagen* is *Dazhong*, i.e., 'big masses'. Zuckermann is an expert in phono-semantic matching (e.g., Zuckermann 2003, 2006). Concerning Sinified Western brand names, see Fleming and Zuckermann (2013).

From the first syllable in the Sinified names of Marx and Lenin, the name for 'Marxism-Leninism' was made:  $ma^3 lieh^4 chu^3 i^4$

$ma^3 lieh^4 chu^3 i^4$  (马列主义)

(this is a Chinese Communist term, rather than Taiwanese), where  $chu^3 i^4$

$chu^3 i^4$  (主义)

means 'doctrine', 'theory', or 'principle'. Because of homophony (a syllable in the given tone as indicated by the given digit may correspond to various lexemes, each being written as a different ideogram), it was all-important that the Sinified name of Lenin was made to begin by the  $lieh^4$



## *lieh*<sup>4</sup> (列)

ideogram that means ‘arrange’, ‘put in the proper order’, or ‘row / file’, and neither by the *lieh*<sup>4</sup> ideogram that means ‘vile’, ‘bad’, ‘low’, ‘mean’, ‘poor’, ‘inferior’, nor by the *lieh*<sup>4</sup> ideogram that means ‘fierce’, ‘violent’, such as in *lieh*<sup>4</sup> *hsing*<sup>4</sup> for ‘vicious horse’.

### **Italy’s 1948 elections: what could have been (a sloganeering fantasy)**

Semantic remotivation took place, in Chinese, with regard to both the adapted form of those iconic ideologists, and to the acronymised name for the given doctrine. Let us consider how this *could* have happened in Italy, but did not happen. The general elections of 1948 were fateful, in Italy. They saw the victory of the clerical camp, against the bloc of the Left. Posters and slogans appealed to the metaphysical dimensions, in the Christian Democrat propaganda; e.g., “G-d sees you” (even though the ballot is secret).

The following is a playful fantasy. Just suppose what use Alcide De Gasperi, or whoever among his subordinates who had a hand in the campaign, could have made of the acronymised Chinese name for ‘Marxism-Leninism’ (*ma*<sup>3</sup> *lieh*<sup>4</sup>), had they been aware of it (which they were definitely not). Just imagine the poster that was not to be:

Dite di NO al MALE! / Dite di NO / al MARxismo-LEninizmo!

[Say NO to EVIL! / Say NO / to MARxism-LEninizm!]

This shows how syllabic acronyms yielding an alternative semantic motivation may result in opposite effect: conveying an appealing image of the referent or of the denotatum, or quite on the contrary, conveying a very negative image. This all depends on the intentions of the wordsmith, and on the alternative semantic motivation that can be afforded by the constraints of the lexical or onomastic input.

### **Not always a Sinified Western personal name is semantically remotivated**

It is important to realize that not always the Sinified version of a Western personal name is made to be punning, or semantically remotivated. Consider the following example. Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), whose full name was Paul Eugène Pelliot, was a French Sinologist and Orientalist. He explored Central Asia, and discovered many important texts (Chinese and non-Chinese items) among the Dunhuang manuscripts inside the Mogao caves in northwestern China. He was co-editor of an important journal for Sinologists.<sup>2</sup> His Chinese name with the respective Pinyin transcription is as follows:

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Pelliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Pelliot)

*Bó Xīhé*  
伯希和



Figure 5. Paul Pelliot.

Nissan inquired with Zuckermann about the word-formation of Pelliot's Sinified name. Nissan wrote, concerning the pinyin rendition *Bó Xīhé*: "I guess that adapting 'Paul' as 'Bó' (that in his days would have been transcribed as 'Po', isn't it?), would have been appealing to him, because 'Bó' is like French 'beau', i.e., 'handsome'. But how would you explain his Chinese name?"

Zuckerman in turn inquired with a Chinese linguist, Dr Chunlin Yao, that is, Dr YAO Chunlin (Mr), as in Chinese it is usual to place the family name first. This is why at the time when Nissan was sharing an office with a Chinese scholar, Jixin Ma, he once answered a phone call in the latter's absence, and the caller was his mother phoning from China. As she could not speak English, she asked: "Ma Jishin? Ma Jishin?" which sounded like the word *magician* in English.

In an email to Zuckermann, Yao stated the following (we enlarge the ideographic words, and set them in a line of their own, for clarity):

I think the name you mentioned "Paul Pelliot"

(保罗 伯希和)

doesn't have the special meaning. *Paul* should be translated into

保罗

which is only a name. *Pelliot* is translated into

伯希和,

which is a band of some cloth. I don't think it has some special meanings.

In China we have the regulations about how to translate a foreign name in to Chinese (pls check the attachment). For example, your family name *Zuckermann* (you translated it into

诸葛漫)

should be

楚克曼,

which has no special meaning. In fact the language management authority has said that the added meaning cannot be added to the translated name. If we read the attachment we can find that the translated name often use the character

弗、卡、迪、斯,

which nearly has no meaning in Chinese.

### **An aptly named scholar: *Miao* for a specialist in the origins of mammals**

D. Miao is a palaeontologist, specialised in the origins of mammals. In Italian, *miao*, which in the Chinese script one would write as

喵

reproduces the mewling of a cat, so for Nissan, raised in Italy, the following bibliographical entry, it was easier to see onomastic aptness, as cats are mammals indeed:

Miao, D.: On the Origins of Mammals. In: H.-P. Schultz and L. Trueb (eds.), *Origins of the Higher Groups of Tetrapods: Controversy and Consensus*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY (1991).

Nevertheless, different languages express mewling by means of different words: in English it is *mew*, whereas in Israeli Hebrew it is *myau*. Moreover, if we are to consider the apparently Chinese background of that scholar's family name, then it is necessary to take notice of the fact that in Mandarin Chinese, the noun *miao*<sup>4</sup>

*miao*<sup>4</sup> ( 庙 )

(the numerical exponent stands for the tone, 4 being high-pitched) has the acceptations 'temple, fair'; the noun *miao*<sup>2</sup>

*miao*<sup>2</sup> ( 苗 )

has the acceptations 'sprout, descendant, Southwestern Chinese tribe'; the adjective *miao*<sup>2</sup> *t'iao*<sup>2</sup>

*miao*<sup>2</sup> *t'iao*<sup>2</sup> ( 苗条 )

has the sense 'graceful' (Quo 1960: 128, s.vv.); whereas the noun denoting "cat" is *mao*<sup>1</sup>:

猫

The compound *mao*<sup>1</sup> *t'ou*<sup>2</sup> *ying*<sup>1</sup>

*mao*<sup>1</sup> *t'ou*<sup>2</sup> *ying*<sup>1</sup> ( 猫头鹰 )

denotes "owl", (because of a metaphor of this being a cat-headed bird: *t'ou*<sup>2</sup>

*t'ou*<sup>2</sup> ( 头 )

denotes "head". The noun *mao*<sup>2</sup>

毛

has the acceptations ‘feather, hair, dime’; the adjective *mao*<sup>2</sup>, which is written by using the same ideogram,

毛

has the acceptations ‘coarse, rough’; the verb *miao*<sup>4</sup>

*miao*<sup>4</sup> (冒)

has the acceptations ‘risk, pretend, counterfeit’; whereas the noun *miao*<sup>4</sup>

*miao*<sup>4</sup> (帽)

has the acceptations ‘cap, hat, headgear’ (Quo 1960, p. 126, s.vv.).

Even so, when, while living in Italy, Nissan heard the radio announce the death of Mao (Mao Tse Tung), it occurred to him that if on the same day, or, still better (I almost wished it happened) right after the new, Rita Pavone’s humorous song about a dead cat, *Mio mio Mao*, had gone on air, it may well have caused a diplomatic incident (“Mio mio Mao, perché sei morto?”, i.e., ‘O my, my Mao, why did you die?’).

We discussed puns in East Asian scripts, in the paper by HaCohen-Kerner, Cohen, Nissan, and Zuckermann (2013) “Graphemic Puns and Software Making Them Up: The Case of Hebrew vs Chinese and Japanese”, in Felecan and Bugheşiu (2013).

### **Did a name inspire its bearer to undertake a particular profession?**

We don’t know what the correct tone of the personal name *Miao* is in Chinese in the given palaeontologist’s case, as discussed in the previous section, but even so, lexical semantics is removed from the domain of cats. This is not likely to have been a personal name that inspired his bearer to choose a career path.

Consider instead the case of Prof. Leo Pardi, an Italian zoologist, who was a member of the editorial board of the series *Piccola Fauna Italiana*, published by Martello in Milan. Is it too much to suggest that being given such a zoological name, later on in life had a strong impact on his professional interests? At present, a university department bears his name: it is the Dipartimento di Biologia Animale e Genetica “Leo Pardi” at the University of Florence.

Christopher Faraone, a scholar whose family names means ‘Pharaoh’ in Italian,

is a specialist in the magical practices documented in the magical papyri from ancient Egypt (Faraone 2005).

*Bunni*, a fish-name in Iraqi Arabic (for the barbel of the species *Barbus sharpeyi*), is the family name of an Iraqi ichthyologist (e.g. Banister and Bunni 1980). The *bunni* fish is the most highly appreciated freshwater fish in Iraq, and also quantitatively it takes first place on the market. (Also in the *Babylonian Talmud*, the fish called in Aramaic *bīnīta* features prominently, relatively to other fishes.)

Martin Woodcock is an ornithologist (e.g., Kemp and Woodcock 1995). Both *martin* and *woodcock* are bird names in English. Apt personal names are the subject of Nissan (2013b), “On a Few Categories of Personal Names Considered to Be Apt or Paradoxical”, in Felecan and Bugheşiu (2013).

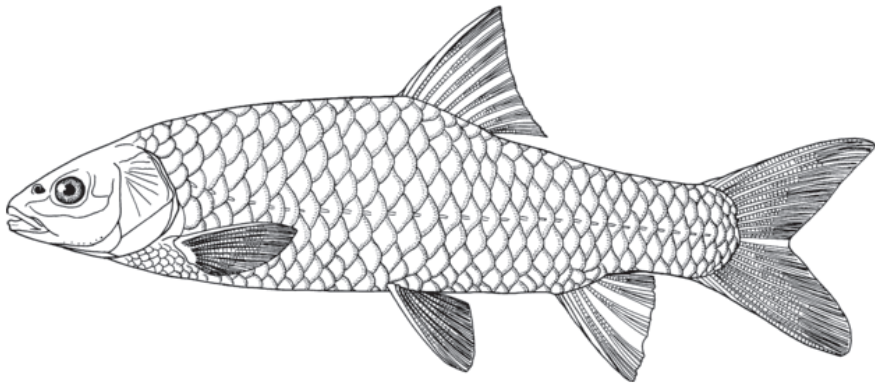


Figure 6. The *bānī* (*bunni*) fish, i.e., *Barbus sharpeyi*.<sup>3</sup> By kind permission of Brian Coad. ©Canadian Museum of Nature.

### More on “de-zoonymic” personal names being apt in context

The opening entry in the Winter 1994 issue of the *Asian Theatre Journal* was Tian Han’s Chinese drama of 1922, *The Night a Tiger Was Captured*, translated and introduced by Randy Barbara Kaplan. Now, whereas *Kaplan* is usually promptly identified

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Coad (2010). The species *Barbus sharpeyi* does not have a filament in the oral region, or anywhere else in its outer morphology, so (by assuming that this was the same species referred to by the Aramaic name *bīnīta* in the *Babylonian Talmud*) one may discount Jastrow (1903: 163, s.v. *bīna* III) appearing to relate *bīna* “a thin thing, hair” to *bīnīta*. Nevertheless, note that Jastrow (1903: 163, s.v. *bīnīta*) has, apart from the main acceptance as a fish name (which he believed to be a collective name for “a small fish”), also an acceptance “name of a worm” (as in the *Babylonian Talmud* at *Makkot* 16b, one finds *bīnīta de-ḥei kerabba*, literally “*bīnīta* of the house of a cabbage”, which Jastrow renders as “a worm found between cabbage”. There also is a third acceptance of *bīnīta*, “hair”, a more usual term for this being *bīnta*. As for Jastrow’s third lexeme for *bīna* “a thin thing, hair”, he also gives a compound *bīna demayya* (i.e. ‘a thin thing/hair of water’) which Jastrow translated as “leech”.



as a last name belonging to the Jewish onomasticon of Eastern and Central Europe (and understood as related to ‘chaplain’), in the context of the particular bibliographic entry a coincidence can be detected: *kaplan* means ‘tiger’ in Turkish. The weakness with that is that there seems to be no justification to think of Turkish, unless you are being using that language, or unless you were told (and moreover it may only be of little relevance that in the early part of the 20th century Poliak, a proponent of Khazar antiquities as a source for a segment of the Jewish onomasticon, claimed that a Turkic etymon is appropriate for the family name *Kaplan*).

In an article in the history of medicine, Bynum (1990: 398–399) wrote the following, and quipped (emphasis added) about a paper by Richard R. Fox, on medical experiments conducted on rabbits (Fox 1984, our added emphasis):

Among the results which [David Ferrier] demonstrated at the 1881 [London] Congress was a monkey in whom he had produced, by careful ablation of the motor area of the left hemisphere, a unilateral paralysis of the right arm and leg. As the monkey limped across the stage, J. M. Charcot was so struck with the gait that he was heard to exclaim excitedly, “C’est un malade!” Ferrier had produced in the laboratory a condition which could be commonly seen in any hospital ward or neurological clinic; his work on cerebral localization in monkeys had important implications for understanding strokes in human beings. [p. 399:] In the century since the interchange between Ferrier and Charcot, the place of animal models in studying literally hundreds of human diseases has, of course, become well established and the literature on them is enormous. [...] **Occasionally, we must worry about the motive behind this work, as when we find an article on “The Rabbit as a research subject”, written by a Doctor Fox.** More seriously, of course, animal rights groups have challenged the relevance of what in the end can only be analogous information, and even from within experimental medicine itself, some people like Sir Thomas Lewis, the pioneer cardiologist and clinical scientist, have argued that preoccupation with animals had deflected concern with what after all was the ultimate purpose of human medicine, i.e., humankind. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that much of what we know about the etiology and pathophysiology of many diseases rests on what we have learned from animals.

### Nissan’s personal “autonomastic” experience

As could be imagined, the “autonomastic” experience (i.e., the experience with one’s own name) of the other author of this study, Ephraim Nissan, has not infrequently had to do with Nissan Motor Corporation. When he was about to retrieve his degree diploma from the university where he studied in Milan, the city where he grew up, two employees told him: “Ah! You are the one of the cars”. He does not look Far Eastern at all, and nevertheless was quite careful to disabuse them of their misconception, because of the at the time apparently almost ubiquitous presence of gangs kidnapping people for ransom. This was in the early 1980s.

And then, during the 1990s, he was to attend for the first time a workshop (one in a series) in Pisa, one that was going to be also attended by an Italian scholar who afterwards became a frequent co-investigator of Nissan. After they had exchanged a

few emails, the Italian scholar asked him: “How come you, who are Japanese, are so proficient in Italian? The email in reply disabused him of that misunderstanding, and he soon had the opportunity of seeing Nissan in person.

At a conference in Paris in 1999, after a chat with a German scholar, the latter, chairing a session, referred to Nissan, and with a deadpan face added (as he had heard from Ephraim Nissan himself) that he was unrelated to Nissan Motor Corporation. The audience responded with laughter.

On another occasion, a namesake in the United States, apparently of Iranian, ultimately Iraqi Jewish background, established contact by email with Nissan and referred to trouble he was having concerning the name of his car dealership, because Nissan Motor Corporation was objecting.

Once at an airport, and another time at a conference, Nissan had the opportunity to refer to his name while chatting with a group of Japanese men. To their delight, he pointed out that his father’s name sounds like Japanese *hayái* ‘swift’ (or ‘fast’, or ‘quick’, or ‘early’):

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so they could remember their interlocutor as “a fast / swift / quick / speedy Nissan car”. (Japanese has the first name *Hayao*.) Nissan’s father’s first name is *Həyyáwi* or “Hayawi”, a typically Iraqi Jewish variant of a name that for Christian Iraqis as well as for late antique Babylonian Jews was *Hīyya* (semantically akin to names of the type of Italian *Vitale*, Spanish *Vidal*). Muslims tended to replace it with *Yahya*. Nissan’s father went by the first name *Həyyim* in Israel (a first name meaning ‘life’). His business card had the Ashkenazi variant *Hayman* as an ophthalmologist in New York (according to a networking practice capitalising on ethnicity, typical of immigrant societies such as New York); he explained that had he retained *Hayawi*, potential Jewish patients would mistake him for a Japanese, but he would not attract the Japanese community, as it had its own medical doctors.

A different kind of experience Ephraim Nissan has had with his family name is his (tongue in cheek) delight for there being a Nissan Institute in Oxford — as indeed having a scholarly institute named after oneself must be the ultimate accolade for a scholar: think of the Pasteur Institute, Planck Institute, Weizmann Institute, Turing Institute, and so forth.

Yet another funnily interesting “autonomastic” experience, typologically of a different kind, is Ephraim Nissan recognising his own name (in the 1980s or early 1990s) in the abbreviation EPH.NIS. used in a famous Syriac dictionary he was browsing, in order to refer to the prominent patristic author Ephrem Nisibenus, i.e., Ephrem Syrus, Ephrem of Nisibis.

And then, in September 2015, Nissan received two emails (in English, with the

occasional Hebrew word) from an erstwhile collaborator at an Israeli university. Both emails were of greetings for the Jewish new year, and they only differed because one of them began with “Ephraim, Shalom”, whereas the other one stated with “Ephesians, Shalom”.

At first, Nissan mistook this other email for a circular, but then realised that there were details in the email that suited his personal circumstances. What happened can be reconstructed with certainty. The sender of the email had typed “Eph” and before he could complete the name, the spelling system of its own accord completed “Eph” into “Ephesians”, as though this was the abbreviation for *Ephesians*, the name of a book from the New Testament. Then, upon realising that he had sent out an email with the wrong name for the addressee, the sender sent a second email, which was identical, except that this time, the correct personal name appeared there.

### Concluding remarks

In this study, the starting point has been an article by Oliviu Felecan, considering in particular the name of a Javanese man from Singapore, *Suparman bin Batman*. When one of the present authors, Zuckermann, was teaching in Singapore, he travelled to Indonesia and Malaysia, and sometimes people referred to him as *Zulkarman*, and apparently that name exhibits interference from *Zul Karnayn* (from Arabic *dhul-Qarnayn* ‘he of the two horns’, i.e., Alexander the Great).

Zuckermann also adopted a Sinified, punning, flatteringly remotivated form of his name while in China. This led us to discuss other instances of how Western names (or persons or corporations or brands) are sometimes adapted into Chinese punningly, by semantic remotivation. And yet, it is by no means the case that onomastic adaptations to Chinese are not always semantically remotivated. We then discussed examples of apt personal names of scholars, especially in relation to zoonymy.

We concluded this study by relating several situations which involved Ephraim Nissan, too, having some awkward or funny experience with his personal name. Table 1 shows the structure of this article.

**Table 1. Structure of this article**

Abstract
Onomastic distortion by semantic remotivation in Singapore
Zuckermann’s personal onomastic experience in the Malay archipelago and in China
Sinifying foreign personal names punningly in China
Italy’s 1948 elections: what could have been (a sloganeering fantasy)
Not always a Sinified Western personal name is semantically remotivated
An aptly named scholar: <i>Miao</i> for a specialist in the origins of mammals
Did a name inspire its bearer to undertake a particular profession?
More on “de-zoonymic” personal names being apt in context
Nissan’s personal “autonomastic” experience
Concluding remarks
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<sup>4</sup> Jastrow's dictionary has often been reprinted by various publishers. It can now be downloaded for free.

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