

Background

The Origin of “Delicious Happiness”

The Joyful History of the Coca-Cola Trademark in Chinese

Coca-Cola was first launched in China in 1927. To ensure the new product would be easily identifiable, it was obvious to The Coca-Cola Company that a version of its famous trademark was needed in a Chinese written language, to connect with the estimated 500 million Chinese consumers at the time.

Even before the first taste of Coca-Cola was enjoyed in China, officials of the Company already were working on a Chinese rendition of the trademark. The task was daunting, since no Chinese translation of the name “Coca-Cola” existed. Instead, the Coca-Cola trademark in English had to be transliterated – somehow represented or spelled in the characters of a completely different alphabet.

Company employees in China decided to focus on the sound of “Coca-Cola” and work toward a solution from there.

Finding the nearest phonetic equivalent to “Coca-Cola” required a separate Chinese character for each of the four syllables. Of the roughly 40,000 Chinese characters at that time, there were only about 200 that were pronounced with sounds the Company needed, and many of these were not useful because of their meanings.

While conducting research of China’s official Mandarin language for four suitable characters to verbally match the four syllables of Coca-Cola, Company representatives discovered that a number of local shopkeepers – preparing to stock their shelves with the renowned new product from the West – likewise had been frantically looking for Chinese equivalents to the name Coca-Cola, with curious results. Some makeshift store signs adopted any group of Chinese characters that sounded remotely like “Coca-Cola,” without much consideration for the meaning of the symbols used to achieve the desired auditory effect.

For example, to articulate the final “la” syllable of Coca-Cola, the character meaning “wax” in Chinese was sometimes used. One homemade store sign sounded generally like “Coca-Cola” when pronounced, but the characters literally meant “bite the wax tadpole.” Anyone who knew Chinese would recognize such signs as a rudimentary attempt to make up an arbitrary phonetic combination for Coca-Cola, but already the drink was lifting spirits in a manner not originally contemplated.

Although The Coca-Cola Company was primarily concerned with the phonetic equivalent of Coca-Cola when spoken in Mandarin, its employees also sought relevance in the meaning of the Chinese characters, individually and collectively.

The closest Mandarin parallel to the spoken “Coca-Cola” that could be found was the combination of four characters that are enunciated “ke kou ke le” by the Chinese people. There actually was no suitable character for saying “la” in Chinese, so a compromise was reached with “le,” which is more or less pronounced “ler.”

Most Chinese characters have more than one meaning. Depending on the context, the four characters that were joined to voice “ke kou ke le” commonly broke down into any of the following individual interpretations:

可 (“ke”) – to permit, be able, may, can

口 (“kou”) – mouth, hole, pass, harbor

可 (“ke”) – to permit, be able, may, can

乐 (“le”) – joy, to rejoice, to laugh, to be happy

Whether it was a stroke of luck or a flash of genius, when “mouth” made the translation list and it was realized that “le” could mean “to be happy,” Company staff believed they also had descriptors that somewhat fit the desired appeal of their sparkling beverage product. They began playing with translations of the individual characters and selectively interpreted one combination for the Chinese Coca-Cola logo as “to permit mouth to be able to rejoice,” expressing the pleasure that comes from drinking Coke. And so the first trademark registered for Coca-Cola in Chinese was born.

What happened next transcended any remaining language barriers.

It probably should have come as no surprise that local residents in China automatically had their own interpretation of the new trademark – vaguely similar to “permit mouth to be able to rejoice,” but, in hindsight, even more appropriate to the nature of the Coca-Cola beverage.

To the Chinese citizenry, it was almost too obvious that putting together the first two Chinese characters in the logo could form a word meaning “delicious” and that the second pair of characters could be construed as “makes you happy,” or “happiness.” Within a short time, the new trademark for Coca-Cola throughout China was ubiquitously summed up in two divine words: “delicious happiness.”

The fortuitous connotation of delicious taste and emotional happiness from the name Coca-Cola in written Chinese could hardly be surpassed. The pronunciation, the visual logo and the physical and emotional benefits associated with the soft drink took on legendary proportion in the annals of modern Chinese transliteration.

Recounting part of the remarkable turn of events, N.F. Allman, a former legal counsel for Coca-Cola in China, wrote in 1957: “Not once in 10 million times could a company literally pronounce their trademark in English and have the sounds mean something desirable in the Chinese language.”

Sales of Coca-Cola in mainland China ceased in autumn 1949 – when the People’s Republic of China was founded – and restarted in January 1979. During that nearly 30-year absence, the written language on the Chinese mainland underwent significant transformation. Notably, a national movement to “simplified Chinese characters” was initiated in the 1950s, a development that mostly streamlined the look of the last character (pronounced “le”) in the Chinese trademark for Coca-Cola.

Coupled with the new national usage standards has been a switch to reading Chinese characters from left to right, instead of the traditional right to left or even top to bottom. Meanwhile, a remodeling of the phonetic system has affected English spelling for the pronunciation of Chinese characters, but not how the characters are actually vocalized.

In early 2003, the graphic appearance of Coca-Cola packaging in China was updated to a refreshing modernity. The visual identity that was unveiled featured a bold adaptation of the iconic English Spencerian script associated elsewhere around the world with the Coca-Cola trademark. The new Spencerian-style typeface in Chinese – created by internationally acclaimed Hong Kong designer Alan Chan – accentuated the lucidity of the logo and integrated well with its counterpart English script, to convey a contemporary look. Even though the Chinese characters are completely different from the English lettering for Coca-Cola, both versions of the trademark today have a very similar and familiar appearance.

And despite all the recent changes, the meaning of “Delicious Happiness” has not been lost in translation.

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