

My Word**For your name's sake**

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On Feb. 28, 2010, I searched for papers authored by Smith J* on the ISI Web of Knowledge and obtained 38,026 results; a search using Wang X* gave 57,792 results.

Science is a community enterprise in which individual scientists contribute to, and draw from, the collective effort and knowledge. A contribution can only have an impact if it can be accessed by fellow scientists, and in this age of information explosion, the access had better be easy! A recent informal survey of 123 researchers found that author name (often combined with a rough date of the research work) is the most frequently used information 'handle', with more than three quarters of the respondents employing this to look up — for example, in databases or using search engines — or tell colleagues about a piece of work they have heard or seen. Good luck finding a particular paper by Dr X Wang — or worse yet, Dr Wang without the first initial — if you have forgotten other useful handles, such as a distinctive subject keyword, that can be used to retrieve it. If this paper has only a single author, and this author has such a non-distinct common name, 43% of the surveyed researchers reported that they would be less likely even to look up or communicate the paper.

"Earning a name for yourself in science can be a struggle" began a recent *Random Samples* article in *Science* [1]. Scientists' careers depend not only on the impact of their published works, but also on their name recognition. If an author whose name is not distinctive is a co-author on a paper with someone having a more distinctive name, and if their paper is retrieved or communicated by author name, 46% of the survey respondents reported that they would be more likely to use the more distinctive author name, while only 8% reported a preference to use the more common author name. A colleague told me that his shy Chinese PhD student is not as recognized as he should be,

because people tend to associate their co-authored papers to him only, a problem exacerbated by the student sharing the same last name as another Chinese author, better known in the same research community.

"Imagine how much harder it would be if your name was routinely confused with several others. That often happens to researchers with Asian names..." continues the *Random Samples* article. For example, the name "Lixin Wang" is a transliteration of at least 1600 possible Chinese names [2]. I applaud the American Physical Society for letting authors with Chinese, Japanese, or Korean names include the Asian characters on papers in the society's journals, but this does not help those unable to read Asian characters and these characters cannot yet be used to search most useful databases.

The Annual Meeting of Society for Neuroscience regularly attracts more than 25,000 attendees. My friends used to find it difficult to find my presentations, since the meeting program book usually includes many presentations sharing my author name "Z Li", as "Li" is also a very common Chinese surname. I therefore decided to use the pen name "Li Zhaoping" (leaving my legal name unchanged), with the apparent surname "Zhaoping", which is actually the way the name is communicated in Chinese in any case. I am recommending this solution to my Chinese colleagues, noting that my newer publications can now be easily searched for in databases by author name. Unfortunately, many journal and database publishers tend to "help" me by editing my pen name "Li Zhaoping" into "Z. Li" or "Z.P. Li". Apparently some journals and databases have a policy, which some authors have strongly advocated [3], of editing Chinese names to keep the family name last. Fortunately, Thomson Reuters allow me to correct their mistakes in editing my pen name.

ResearcherID (www.researcherid.com) is a system introduced by Thomson Reuters (who run the ISI family of databases) in January 2008 to assign a researcher a unique number, like a telephone number, as an identifier. This system should make it easier to find whole series of papers by a single researcher, especially papers by authors having non-distinct names or those who have changed names or affiliations during their careers [4]. However, this idea is not

designed to address the social problem of non-distinctive author names in science communication. Suppose I saw a poster at a conference, and a week later I mention it to colleagues. It would be difficult to recall the multi-digit ResearcherID number; I am surely more likely to say "I saw this interesting work by Andy Smith" than "here is an interesting work by A-1234-5678". One might also wonder if my colleagues could in turn remember this eight digit ID number when chatting to their colleagues even later.

Of course, in this internet publishing age, I can simply publish the list of my publications on my webpage so that others can trace all my publications, even those by "Z. Li" or on seemingly unrelated subjects. This webpage solution does not help that shy Chinese Ph.D. student so much, who is still at a stage in his career when people are unlikely to notice him enough to look for his webpage.

A perfect solution is yet to be found, though hopefully progress will be faster when we are more aware of the problem. I hope this will also increase awareness of related problems, such as when a single author has his/her name appearing in different ways in different databases. For example, the name Müller could appear as Miller, Muller, Miller or Mueller. Many databases do not allow searches of European names with umlauts or accents, and many researchers are from countries not using such diacritical marks and find them difficult to remember. Variations and uncertainties in the transliteration and pronunciation of non-English names also cause problems. If a speaker mentions a nice work by "King Sung", most people may not know that they may have to use the spelling "Qing Xiang" to look up the work. Worse yet, what can be a good solution for author John Smith, or Robert Zhang when some Asians anglicize their names after moving to the West?

References

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