

By MICHAEL WINES

BEIJING — After a hard day's labor, your average upscale Beijinger likes nothing more than to shuck his dress shoes for a pair of Enduring and Persevering, rev up his Precious Horse and head to the pub for a tall, frosty glass of Happiness Power.

Or, if he's a teetotaler, a bottle of Tasty Fun.

To Westerners, that's Nike, BMW, Heineken and Coca-Cola, respectively. And those who wish to snicker should feel free: the companies behind these names are laughing too — all the way to the bank.

More than many nations, China is a place where names are imbued with deep significance. Western companies looking to bring their products to China face a dilemma not unlike that of Chinese parents naming a baby boy: little Gang (刚, "strong") may be regarded quite differently than little Yun (云, "cloud"). Given that China's market for consumer goods is growing by better than 13 percent annually — and luxury-goods sales by 25 percent — an off-key name could have serious financial consequences.

And so the art of picking a brand name that resonates with Chinese consumers is no longer an art. It has become a sort of science, with consultants, computer programs and linguistic analyses to ensure that what tickles a Mandarin ear does not grate on a Cantonese one.

Art "is only a very, very tiny piece of it," said Vladimir Djurovic, president of the Labbrand Consulting Company in Shanghai, which has made a business of finding names for Western companies entering the Chinese market.

Maybe. But there is a lot of artistry in the best of the West.

The paradigm probably is the Chinese name for Coca-Cola, 可口可乐 (kekoukele), which not only sounds like Coke's English name, but conveys its essence of taste and fun in a way that the original name could not hope to match.

There are many others. Consider Tide detergent, 汰渍 (taizi), which literally mean "gets rid of dirt." (Characters are important: the same sound written differently — 太紫 — could mean "too purple.")

There is also Reebok, 锐步 (rui

Who wouldn't like a tall, frosty glass of Happiness Power?

bu), which means "quick steps." And Colgate — 高露洁 (gao lu jie) — which translates into "revealing superior cleanliness." And Lay's snack foods — 乐事 (le shi) — which means "happy things." Nike, 耐克 (nai ke), and BMW, 宝马 (bao ma, echoing the first two sounds of its English and German names) also have worn well on Chinese ears.

Still, finding a good name involves more than coming up with clever homonyms to the original English.

"Do you want to translate your name, or come up with a Chinese brand?" said Monica Lee, the managing director of The Brand Union, a Beijing consultant. "If you go for phonetic sounds, everyone knows where you are from — you're immediately identified as a foreign brand."

For some products, having a foreign-sounding name lends a cachet that a true Chinese name

would lack. Many upscale brands like Cadillac, 凯迪拉克 (ka di la ke), or Hilton, 希尔顿 (xi er dun), employ phonetic translations that mean nothing in Chinese. Rolls-Royce, 劳斯莱斯 (laosi-lai-si), includes two Chinese characters for "labor" and "plants" that more or less have become standard usage in foreign names — all to achieve a distinct foreign look and sound.

But on the other hand, a genuine Chinese name can say things about a product that a mere collection of homonyms never could. Take Citibank, 花旗银行 (hua qi yinhang), which literally means "star-spangled banner bank," or Marriott, 万豪 (wan hao), "10,000 wealthy elites." Or Pentium, 奔腾 (ben teng), which means "galloping." Asked to introduce Marvel comics to China, the Labbrand consultants came up not long ago with 漫威 (man wei) — roughly phonetic, foreign-sounding and eminently suited to superheroes with the meaning "comic power."

To introduce Clear dandruff shampoo to young Chinese, who already are inundated with foreign brands, Ms. Lee's firm decided to focus on the shampoo's image. "It's not about where this product comes from; it's about the benefit it can bring to you," she said. The ultimate choice, 清扬 (qing yang), combines the Chinese words for "clear" and for "flying," or "scattering to the wind."

"It's very light, healthy and happy," Ms. Lee said. "Think of hair in the air."

"Clear" (清) is one of a select number of Chinese words that carry unusually positive connotations, and find their way into many brands names. Others include "le" (乐) and "xi" (喜), or happy; "li" (力), meaning "strength" or "power"; "ma" (马)

or horse, and "fu" (福) translated as "lucky" or "auspicious."

Thus the name for Heineken beer, 喜力 (xi li), and the many automobile brands — Mercedes (奔驰), BMW (宝马), even Kia (起亚) — that include a horse in their Chinese names (one Kia sedan is named 千里马 — qian li ma — or "thousand kilometer horse," an allusion to strength).

Precisely why some Chinese words are so freighted with emotion is anyone's guess. But Denise Sabet, the vice general manager at Labbrand, suggests the reasons include cultural differences and the Chinese reliance on characters for words, rather than a phonetic alphabet. Each character is a collection of drawings that can carry meanings all their own.

Then again, some meanings are best avoided.

Microsoft had to think twice about bringing its Bing search engine here because in Chinese, the most common definitions of the character pronounced "bing," 病, are "disease," "defect" and "virus" — rather inauspicious for a computer product. The revised name, 必应 (bi ying), roughly means "responds without fail."

Peugeot (标致, or biao zhi) sounds enough like the Chinese slang for "prostitute" (biaozi, 婊子) that in southern China, where the pronunciations are especially close, the brand has inspired dirty jokes. And in China, the popular Mr. Muscle line of cleaners has been renamed Mr. Powerful, 威猛先生 (weimeng xiansheng). The product's maker said in an e-mail that it had forgotten why.

But it could be that when it is spoken, the name Mr. Muscle has a second, less appealing meaning: 鸡肉先生, or Mr. Chicken Meat.