

## Personal Names in Chinese

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To most people reared in Western traditions, Chinese personal names are a mystery, additional evidence of the fundamental inscrutability of the Orient. The more sophisticated are aware, perhaps, that "they put their last names first" - a cliché more revealing of Eurocentrism than of an understanding of Chinese onomastic practice. Conversely, the Chinese find it ridiculous that Europeans put their surnames - obviously the most important part of the name - last. We hope to clear away a bit of this confusion by explaining the system of personal names in Chinese, showing some of its similarities to and differences from Western conventions of personal naming.

The typical Chinese name, like the typical English name, consists of three parts. Because of the nature of the Chinese language, these three parts normally also comprise three syllables, three morphemes, and, in writing, three characters. However, whereas the typical English name consists of given name + middle name + surname, in that order, the typical Chinese name consists of surname + generation name + given name.\* Some people have a two-syllable (and two-character) surname or a two-syllable given name; others (like the first author) have no generation name. Still others have four-syllable names, consisting of a two-syllable surname and either (a) a two-syllable given name or (b) a one-syllable generation name and a one-syllable given name. But the three-part, three-syllable name is the rule. In addition, Chinese may have other names, corresponding roughly to Western childhood names, nicknames, and pen-names. In this

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\* We might note, for what it is worth, that this Chinese principle of going from the general to the specific in personal names is paralleled in their writing of addresses, where the order is country-province-city-street-individual's name, in other words, exactly the reverse of European conventions.

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paper, we will discuss each of the three component parts of personal names in turn and then will examine briefly the category of "other" names.

## Surnames

As in European tradition, the Chinese surname, or *xing-shi*, is normally used today to identify the father's family. In ancient times, the *xing* and the *shi* were separate, with the *xing* being the tribal or clan name and the *shi* representing a subdivision of the clan.<sup>1</sup> During most of the Zhou Dynasty (11th c. B.C. - 256 B.C.), only the nobility had *xing-shi* names. As time went on, the *xing* portion of the name came to indicate marital relationships and the *shi* portion social rank. However, beginning with the Warring States period (476 B.C. - 221 B.C.), the difference between the *xing* and the *shi* gradually disappeared as clans increased in size and members moved to other areas and used just their *shi* to form new surnames. By the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220), the distinction was completely gone, and all people, from emperor to peasant, had their own *xing-shi*.

The development and use of surnames in China apparently came after the invention of writing, but many surnames are so ancient that their meanings cannot be ascertained from the usual, non-onomastic senses of their characters. Rather, the non-onomastic meaning of the characters today postdates the use as surnames; that is, the characters were assigned their non-onomastic meanings because of their homophony with the surname, instead of the other way about. Some scholars believe that the fact that the characters for so many ancient surnames contain the radical for 'woman' implies that the tribal system was originally matriarchal, but there is no solid proof of this.

During the several millenia of surname use in China, some surnames have died out and new ones have arisen. Nonetheless, the total number ever used is surprisingly small: One source reports that only 5,652 Chinese surnames have been recorded throughout history.<sup>2</sup> Today, modern dictionaries list only 930 surnames in contemporary use. Nor are these evenly distributed. Some are very rare. On the other hand, the most common surname, *Zhang* (张), is held by over 70 million people in China today.<sup>3</sup> (This is as if, for example, everyone in the United Kingdom and Australia had the same surname.)

Some common surnames, such as *Zhang*, *Li*, *Wang*, *Liu*, *Chen*, and *Zhao*, are found everywhere in China. Others are characteristic of specific ethnic or religious groups; for example, *Ruan* is typical of some minority

groups, *Piao* and *Jin* of Koreans, and *Bai* of Moslems. Many two-character surnames are "phonetic" transliterations of non-Chinese names.

As we have suggested, the original meanings of many Chinese names cannot be determined; they are simply names without any particular lexical content. Others do have a known origin and meaning. Superficially at least, most of these seem to fit into one of Matthews' four major classifications of English surnames (Locality, Relationship, Occupation, and Nickname).<sup>4</sup> But closer examination reveals important differences. First, let us group the most common types of surnames; to Matthews' four categories, we add the fifth category of transliterated non-Chinese names.

#### I. Locality

- A. The state where one lived: Most of these originated during the Zhou Dynasty; the states no longer exist under these names today. Examples include the names *Qi*, *Lu*, *Zhou*, and *Chen*.
- B. The city where one lived: Again, many of these cities have different names today. Examples are *Zhu*, *Lin*, and *Han*.
- C. The locality where one lived: *Xi-men* 'west gate'; *Dong-guo* 'east outer wall.'

#### II. Relationship

- A. There is no Chinese equivalent at all to such Indo-European patronymics as *Johnson*, *MacDougall*, or *Fitzsimmons*. However, some Chinese surnames were originally an ancestor's given name: *Shan* 'mountain' or *Neng* 'ability.'

#### III. Occupation

- A. Rank in nobility: *Gong* 'duke', *Hou* 'marquis.'
- B. Official position: *Si-ma* 'defense minister,' *Si-kou* 'minister of public security.'
- C. Occupation per se: *Tao* 'potter,' *Bu* 'fortune-teller,' *Qi* 'lacquerer.'

#### IV. Nicknames

- A. Plants: *Yang* 'poplar,' *Liu* 'willow,' *Song* 'pine,' *Mai* 'wheat,' *Su* 'millet.'
- B. Animals: *Yang* 'sheep,' *Niu* 'ox,' *Ma* 'horse.'

- C. Minerals: *Jin* 'gold,' *Shi* 'stone,' *Yu* 'jade,' *Xi* 'tin,' *Tie* 'iron.'
  - D. Colors: *Bai* 'white,' *Huang* 'yellow,' *Qing* 'green (blue, black).'
  - E. Emperor's favors: These originated as names granted to favored individuals by an emperor: *Zhang, Li, Wang*.
- V. Phonetic transliterations of non-Chinese names: *Hu-yan, Yu-wen*.

Of these categories, that of Locality corresponds closely enough to such English surnames as *Lancaster, Church,* and *Field* to be easily comprehensible. As noted, the Relationship category does not parallel the European tradition of "son of" names. On the other hand, as we shall show later, Chinese has a complex system of showing family relationships through its generation names.

Under the classification of Occupation, the Chinese subcategories have their parallels in such English names as *Earle, Chamberlain,* and *Potter*. However, it should be noted that the subcategory of "Occupation per se" is sparsely represented in Chinese. There is no equivalent at all to the ubiquitous English *Smith*, though Chinese does of course have common nouns for such occupations as goldsmith, stonemason, carpenter, and the like. This absence is probably explainable by the traditionally low social status of smiths in Chinese society. The lack of a Chinese equivalent to the very common English *Mills, Miller, Millward* and their cognates is explainable by the fact that rice is the staple grain; mills are not used in processing rice because the rice normally is not ground.

The category of Nicknames requires some further comment. First, note that surnames from plants are more common in Chinese than in English. Second, while English has a number of common surnames taken from animal names, these are usually the names of wild animals (e.g. *Wolf, Bird, Fox, Hart*). Chinese, on the other hand, takes its common animal surnames from domestic animals like the ox, the horse, and the sheep. Third, English has parallels to the Chinese mineral names *Jin* 'gold' and *Shi* 'stone.' Europe is not rich in jade, so the absence of an English surname *Jade* is predictable. Though England once had rich supplies of tin, the industry apparently never provided a surname, even in Cornwall; China has a long and glorious tradition of bronze work, and tin is one of the two major components of bronze.

Fourth, while color nicknames as surnames are familiar in both cultures, in English the most common of such names - *Brown, Black,* and *White* -

refer to complexion or hair color. (The other common color name, *Green*, is probably often a locality name in origin.) There is no such rationale for color nicknames in China, where everyone has black hair and eyes. The color surnames in Chinese were probably originally related to totems, because the ancient Chinese had a special reverence for colors. The most common Chinese color name is *Huang* 'yellow.' It derives from the Yellow Emperor, according to legend the earliest tribal leader in China - the color here is probably related to the sun and sun worship.

Fifth, there is no obvious parallel in English to the Chinese category labeled Emperor's Favors; the closest cultural parallel would probably be the granting of armorial bearings by English monarchs. In one sense, however, the two situations are alike in that both represent a favor with visual representations. Perhaps an actual example will make the point clearer. According to Chinese legend, one of the Yellow Emperor's grandsons was called *Gong Zhen* (弓正). The emperor "favored" him with a new surname by combining the two characters thus: 张. The result was the surname *Zhang*.

Listed below are twenty of the most common surnames in China today, aside from *Zhang*.

*Zhao*. The family name of the Emperor of the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1280), and also the surname of the present premier of China, Zhao Zi-yang. Some say it originated as a state name, but others attribute it to the Yellow Emperor's favor.

*Li*. The surname of the present head of state in China, Li Xian-nian. Some attribute the name to an emperor's favor. Another legend says that a man saved his life by eating a plant called *mu-zi* (木子) and in gratitude changed his surname to *Li* (李) a combination of the two characters for *mu* and *zi*.

*Wang*. Some attribute the name to the Yellow Emperor's favor, but another popular explanation is that, after a prince (a *wang*) named *Bi-gan* was murdered by the king, his descendants took his title as their surname in his memory.

*Zhu*. The surname of the royal family of the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644) and also the surname of Zhu De, the Marshal-General of the People's Liberation Army. It originated as the name of a state.

*Lin*. The best-known recent holder of this surname was Lin Biao, the former defense minister who died in an airplane crash while fleeing to Outer Mongolia in 1971. The name originated as the name of a state.

*Ma.* The name means 'horse.'

*Kong.* The surname of Confucius. One legend says that the descendants of a person named Yi ( 纣 ) added the character 子 'child' to her name and thus formed the new surname *Kong* ( 孔 ). If this is true, then it is formed on a principle similar to that of English surnames in *-son*.

*Huang.* The name means 'yellow' and refers to the Yellow Emperor.

*Zhou.* The surname of Zhou An-lai. It originated as the name of a state.

*Hu.* The surname of the former Secretary-General of the Communist Party in China, Hu Yau-bang. It also originated as the name of a state.

*Qian.* The surname originated as the name of an official position.

*Jin.* The name means 'gold.' As was mentioned, it is a very common surname among Koreans.

*Chen.* It originated as the name of a state.

*Shi.* The name means 'stone.'

*Tian.* The name means 'field.'

*Si-ma.* The surname of Si-ma Qian, first-century A.D. author of the famous *Records of the Historian*.

*Yang.* The surname of Yang Kai-hui, Mao Zi-dong's first wife. The name means 'poplar.'

*Jia.* The surname of Jia Bao-yu, hero of the well-known Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. It originated as the name of a state.

*Lu.* Another surname originating as the name of a state.

*Mao.* The surname of Mao Ze-dong. It originated as an ancestor's given name meaning 'hair.'

As we mentioned earlier, children have traditionally taken their fathers' surnames. However, since Liberation, a child may be given either its father's or its mother's surname. For instance, the first author's surname, Zhu, is that of his mother. His brother, Qian Yi, has his father's surname. In this case, siblings with the same parents do not have the same surname.

Even in pre-Liberation China, a woman never truly lost her "maiden name" upon marriage, although in formal situations she might be

addressed as *Madame, (Lady, Mrs.) Wang* (if *Wang* were her husband's surname). Today, a woman never uses her husband's surname on any occasion. Nor is there any equivalent to the Western hyphenated surnames.

One final point about surnames deserves mention here. As indicated in footnote 4, not only are there very few Chinese surnames, but many of the ones that are used are homophones, though not homographs (i.e. they are pronounced the same but are represented by different characters in writing). This phenomenon has several sociological results. The first is extensive use of name cards in areas that employ the Chinese writing system; the purpose is to let the person to whom one is being introduced know how one's name is written. In less formal situations, the name may be explained in one of several ways. In some instances, it is "spelled" by identifying the radicals that comprise the character. For example, if one has the very common name *Zhang*, one may say "*Gong chang zhang*," where *gong* is the name of the first part of the radical and *chang* the name of the second. In other instances, one may disambiguate the name by giving a familiar word or phrase which contains the same character. Alternatively, people often "write" the character with their right index finger on the palm of their left hand so that the other person can see what character represents it.

### Generation Names

The second part of a Chinese personal name, the generation name, has no equivalent at all in the West and thus requires some explanation. In China, the appropriate forms of address are determined (a) by age if the people involved do not have the same surname or (b) by the generation if the people have the same surname. Hence, in a village where several hundred people have the same surname, one might hear an old man address a small child as "uncle," for example. Violation of the rules of address is a serious social offense, so a complex system of naming was devised long ago to help people keep track of generations. Essentially, all members of a given generation share a unique name or element in a name.

At some stage, the ancestors of a tribe or large family would select a group of words (characters), chosen for their auspicious or favorable meanings, e.g. *de* 'virtue,' *zheng* 'uprightness,' *zhong* 'loyalty.' Each later generation would then be assigned one of these characters. For our example, all members, male and female, of the first generation would use *de* as their generation name, the second generation would use *zheng*, and so on. Sometimes the sequence of characters forms a poem. For instance,

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the generation names of the first author's grandfather's family are

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|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Zhong</i> 'loyal'    | 5. <i>Guo</i> 'state' | 8. <i>Cheng</i> 'become'   |
| 2. <i>Zhen</i> 'faithful'  | 6. <i>Shi</i> 'serve' | 9. <i>Xian</i> 'immortal'  |
| 3. <i>Ju</i> 'occupy'      | 7. <i>Li</i> 'rites'  | 10. <i>Zong</i> 'ancestor' |
| 4. <i>Shang</i> 'superior' |                       |                            |

Taken in sequence, these words form a poem that can be translated roughly as, "Those who are loyal and honest will become rulers, and those who follow rites will become immortals after their death."

Sometimes the generation is represented, not by a separate name common to all members of the generation, but by a common radical in the written forms of their given names. In the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the fifth generation of the Jia family are named Jia *Qin* ( 芹 ), Jia *Qiang* ( 蔷 ), Jia *Yun* ( 芸 ), and Jia *Rong* ( 蓉 ). Here, all the given names are different, but all contain the so-called plant radical (the top element in each name), and this radical is the generation marker. This example also illustrates the intricate relationship between the naming system and the writing system of the language\* - one must know the written forms of the names to determine the generation and the generation marker.

In contemporary China, generation names are no longer universally used, particularly in larger cities. However, the convention is still observed in villages, where most or all of the inhabitants have the same surnames. Large families keep *zu-pu*, or generation books, that record generation names, vital statistics, and outstanding events.<sup>†</sup>

### Given Names

Neither one's surname nor one's generation name is truly personal in Chinese; both are predetermined. True individuality is expressed by the given name. Indeed, the opportunities for creativity and originality in the given name are much greater than in English name-giving tradition. In English today we have an extensive pool of hundreds of recognized

\* This relationship is so intricate that sometimes a given name is made by a kind of graphic punning on elements of the character representing the surname. Unfortunately, a clear illustration of this requires some knowledge of written and spoken Chinese on the part of the reader.

† A peasant from Hei Longjiang Province recently presented to the government his family's *zu-pu* of about 100,000 characters. This peasant is said to be the 72nd-generation descendant of Mencius (372-299 B.C.), Confucius' most famous disciple.



male and female given names, but it takes parents of exceptional defiance (or callousness) to venture beyond this pool and assign their offspring names like *Stamina*, *Saturday*, or *Selfless Worker*. Even though the month names *May*, *June*, and perhaps *April* are used for girls, and at least *Julius* and *Augustus* are not impossible for boys, a child named *February* or *November* would have a lot to put up with.

Partly because English has a defined set of given names, these names are rarely treated as lexical items; rather, they are simply names. Few people know - or care about - the etymology of *Richard* or *Anne*. Our responses to them are not to their origins but rather to our feelings about others of the same name (e.g. *Adolf* or *Marlene*, or names with more private associations), or to our feelings that the names are old-fashioned and thus funny (*Egbert*, *Gladys*).

In Chinese, on the other hand, given names come from lexical items, are chosen for their lexical meanings, and retain their lexical meanings as names. Parents choose names for their children to express their own aspirations for these children. Eight broad groups cover the majority of semantic fields represented by most given names.

1. *Fame, achievement, ability.* Typical examples are *Wei* 'achievement,' *Zhe* 'wisdom,' *Shao-qi* 'rare, unusual,' and *Ying-cai* 'great talents.' The late Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek named his sons *Jing-guo* and *Wei-guo*. The *guo* in each name means 'country, nation.' *Jing* originally meant 'warp [in weaving]' and *Wei* meant 'weft.' Taken together, the two mean 'to manage.' Thus each name means 'to run the country.' (The father's desires have been at least partially realized, for *Jing-guo* is the President of Taiwan, and his brother *Wei-guo* is a high official there.)

2. *Intellectual and moral qualities.* There are many possibilities: *Zhi* 'intelligent,' *De* 'virtue,' *Yong* 'courageous,' *Xiao* 'filial piety,' *Gang* 'indomitable,' *Shu* 'kind and gentle,' *Zhen* 'chastity' - the last two used primarily as female names.

3. *Money and wealth.* Among the frequently found elements in names of this sort are *Bao* 'treasure,' *Jin* 'gold,' *Yin* 'silver,' *Yu* 'jade.' Combinations include *Da-fu* 'very rich' and *Jin-lai* 'gold comes.' Given names referring to wealth are used less frequently today than formerly.

4. *Longevity.* Examples include *Chang-sheng* 'long life,' *Ming-quan* 'complete life,' *Bai-sui* 'one hundred years old.' Like the names suggesting wealth, names expressing the desire for longevity are being given less frequently today.

5. *Physical beauty.* Primarily used for females, these include names like *Mei* 'beautiful,' *Xiang* 'fragrant,' *Li* 'pretty,' *Hua* 'flower.'

6. *Symbolic qualities.* These given names often resemble what would be nicknames or epithets in English: *Ying* 'eagle,' *Hu* 'tiger,' *Long* 'dragon,' *Feng* 'phoenix,' *Shan* 'mountain,' *Hai* 'sea,' *Fei* 'to fly,' *Chi* 'to run,' *Gang* 'steel,' *Mei* 'plum.'

7. *Desire for additional children.* Psychologically damaging to the holder as these may seem to Westerners, such names were once fairly common in Chinese. Examples are *Zhao-di* 'ask for a brother,' *Pan-di* 'hope for a brother,' *Meng-mei* 'dream for a sister.'

8. *Commemorative names.* The Chinese normally do not assign their children the given names of their parents, relatives, or close friends. Nor are children named after celebrities. On the other hand, given names frequently commemorate an event of some kind. For example, the given name *Ya-fei* 'Asia-Africa' commemorates the unity of Asian and African peoples. *Bei-sheng* means 'born in Peking.' A girl was named *Ye-ling* 'also antelope' because she was born in the year of the sheep as were both of her parents. (An antelope is regarded as a variety of sheep in Chinese; *yang* means 'sheep'; *ling-yang*, the full name for an antelope, is literally "antelope-sheep.") Or the child might be named for something associated with its birth. For example, if a father saw a flower when he heard his daughter's first cry, he might name her *Hua* 'flower'; if he heard a thunderbolt, he might name a son *Lei* 'thunder.' Even more whimsically, the parents may open a dictionary at random and assign the child the first or last character on the page as a given name.

"Fad" names do appear now and then. During the 1950s, when Sino-Soviet relationships were excellent, many Chinese female given names ended in *-na* (e.g. *Lian-na*, *Li-na*, *Qin-na*) in imitation of such Russian names as *Anna Karenina*. Now that relations between the two nations are much cooler, this element is rarely used.

Because English both graphically and psychologically makes a sharp distinction between proper names and other words, people with such potentially embarrassing names as *Fanny*, *Peter*, and *Dick* experience surprisingly little ridicule. But Chinese given names do retain their lexical meanings, so one consideration in assigning a given name is that of avoiding folk etymologies or deliberately distorted interpretations based on identical or similar sounds. For example, a person named *Ai Qian-si* 'like to think' was called *Ai Qian-si* 'die for the love of money' (the tones in the original name were deliberately altered to obtain the

pejorative meaning). Even more painful is the case of a girl named Yang (楊) *Fen* (芬), where *Yang* is a surname meaning 'poplar' and *Fen* means 'fragrance.' Her unfortunate nickname is *Yang* (羊) *Fen* (糞) 'sheep's dung' - *Yang* means 'sheep' and *Fen* means 'dung' with a different intonation.

Within a nuclear family in China, the given names of siblings of the same sex are usually assigned according to a meaningful pattern. Thus, the eldest son may be named *Long* 'dragon,' the second son is *Hu* 'tiger,' the third son is *Ying* 'eagle,' and so forth. In the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there are four sisters, the eldest of whom is named *Yuan Chun* 'first spring' because she was born on the Chinese New Year. Her three younger sisters are named *Ying Chun* 'welcome spring,' *Tan Chun* 'visit spring,' and *Xi Chun* 'cherish spring.'

### Other Names

*Courtesy Names.* Prior to 1911, a child was assigned a *ming*, or one-character given name, at three months of age by his or her father; the father made the final decision, though usually after consultation with the mother and other senior family members. Then, when girls reached fifteen years, and boys twenty, they were assigned an additional name, a two-character *zi*, as a sign of respect for their newly achieved adulthood. Thereafter, the *ming* was used by the person himself or herself or by a senior, and the *zi* was used by juniors, those of the same generation, or strangers. It was considered a breach of etiquette to address seniors or strangers directly by their *ming*. The *ming* and the *zi* were not totally independent, however. There was some sort of semantic relationship - a kind of mnemonic - between the two. Thus, for instance, in the novel *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, one character is called *Jiang Ting*; *Ting* is his *ming* and means 'thunderbolt.' His *zi* is *Zhen-ging*. *Zhen* means 'to vibrate' and, in writing, shares its major radical element with *Ting* (*ging* is simply a term of endearment). Or, to take another example, Mao Zedong's *zi* was *Run-zhi*, in which *run* 'moist' shares the radical element for 'water' with *dong*. Today, the system of a separate *ming* and *zi* is obsolete, and the term *ming-zi* means simply 'given name.' The courteous form of address is the *ming-zi* + title, or, still more respectfully, the title alone. Thus, people addressed *Mao Zi-dong* as "Chairman" - very similar to the American usage "Mr. President."

*Assumed Names.* Prior to 1911, some people, especially men of letters, had still a third given name, the *hao*. This was self-assigned and was often associated with the place where the person lived. Hence *Zhu-ge*

Liang's *hao* is *Wolong* 'sleeping dragon' because he once lived at Sleeping Dragon Hill. Or, sometimes, the *hao* might reflect the person's aspirations, character, or other features. For instance, the Song Dynasty poet Lu You adopted the *hao* of *Fan Weng*, meaning 'unlimited old man' - an apt sobriquet for China's most productive poet, who wrote nearly ten thousand poems during his lifetime. Addressing a person by his *hao* was, if anything, even more respectful than addressing him by his *zi*. But, like the *zi*, the *hao* is no longer used in China today. Nevertheless, writers still very often employ pen-names that have characteristics similar to those of the old *hao*; to this extent, the principle of the *hao* survives.

*Childhood Names.* Primarily because Chinese given names are regular lexical items, there are no traditional, standard hypocoristic or short forms parallel to English *Bob* from *Robert*, or *Liz* from *Elizabeth*. Nevertheless, most young children do have a childhood name, usually based in some way on the given name. The majority of these consist simply of a reduplication of the final syllable of the given name. Hence *Zhang Jian-ping*'s childhood name was *Ping-ping*. Sometimes the word *Xiao* 'little' precedes the given name as when *Ming* becomes *Xiao-ming*. Or the childhood name may not involve the given name at all; such is the case with a little girl whose given name is *Dan-giu* 'red autumn,' but whose aunt gave her the childhood name of *Jing-jing* 'crystal' simply because she liked the sound of it.

In large families, offspring may be given childhood names expressing order of birth. Thus the first child will be *Da-mao* 'eldest child,' the second *Er-mao* 'second child,' the third *San-mao* 'third child,' and so on. In such cases, only birth order, and not sex, is significant. In poor families, children may be given pejorative childhood names such as *Xiao-gou* 'little dog' or *Shao-hou* 'fool' because of the folk belief that humble creatures survive easily and thus such names help insure longevity.

Childhood names may last into adulthood, but, if so, they will be used only by one's parents, grandparents, or other senior relatives and close friends. One's peers rarely use one's childhood name after one has grown up.

*Epithet Names.* A final type of name used very extensively in China, unofficial though it is, is what might be called the epithet name. It consists of a person's surname plus a descriptive term based on such characteristics as one's physical features, temperament, intellectual abilities, habits, hobbies, and the like. Typical examples (in translation) are *Wang the Pockmarked*, *Zhang the Fish-eyed*, *Liu the Monkey*, *Zhu the Hot-Tempered*, *Zhao the Tall*, *Mao the Gentleman*, *Hu the Poet*, *Li the Genius*.

Epithet names have a long history in Chinese. In the novel *Water Margin* (c. 1578), for instance, each of the 108 peasant rebel leaders has at least one such nickname. Normally, epithet names are not used in one's presence, but they may be so employed between intimates if the epithet name is not insulting.\*

## Summary

In sum, Chinese personal names form a rather complex but efficient subsystem of the language as a whole. They are less distinct in form from the regular language than are personal names in most European traditions. Except for some surnames, most Chinese names retain lexical meaning; further, in writing, no graphic device such as capitalization distinguishes them from other words. They may function together to form or include grammatical phrases or even entire sentences. For example, the personal name *Ma Shi-tu* can be literally translated as 'the horse knows the way.' (It comes from the Chinese proverb "The horse knows the way," i.e. an old hand is the best guide.)

Chinese names normally convey more genealogical information than do Western names. As in English, the surname both unites the members of one family (usually patriarchally) and at the same time distinguishes the family from other families. The generation name distinguishes generations within one family and unites the members of that generation. The given name distinguishes the individual but, because it is usually meaningfully related to the given names of the individual's siblings of the same sex, it unites the siblings within the nuclear family. Further, the generation name and the given name often form a meaningful unit when taken together.

The system was even more intricate in the past when the *xing* and the *shi* were separate "surnames" and when the category of given name was divided into the *ming* and the *zi*. Moreover, additional information could

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\* The use of the epithet name is so pervasive as to be almost contagious. When the second author was one of a small group of Americans teaching at a Chinese university, she found herself and other Americans adopting the practice as a way of nick-naming students, especially students with the same surnames. We did this without consulting the Chinese. As we became better acquainted with the Chinese, we found, to our surprise, that some of our epithet names (in English) were exact translations of the students' Chinese epithet names. Others were entirely different.

be provided by the *hao*, which often identified the locality where one lived.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of the information about earlier naming practices has been compiled from Wang Li, *Classical Chinese*, rev. ed. (Beijing: China Publishing Bureau, 1981), III, 267-71.

<sup>2</sup> Hang Jingti, "One Hundred Family Names Are Not Sufficient," in *A Brief Study of Language*, ed. Yu Gengyuan, Zhang Chaobin, and Hang Jingti (Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing Co., 1981), 223.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 226. Except for one or two names that are well-known to English readers in another spelling system, we use here the *pinyin* system of romanizing Chinese names. Because Chinese has many homophones but few homographs in its writing system, this use of phonologically based transliterated forms entails a loss of many distinctions that exist in the Chinese written forms of names. The problem is only exacerbated by the fact that the *pinyin* system normally does not indicate tonal distinctions. Finally, what is actually the same name may be spelled in various ways by American Chinese. For example, the name we have written as *Zhang* may also appear as *Chang, Jang, Jong, Chong, Jeung*, etc. In some instances, we have included the Chinese character in order to distinguish one homophone from another. For example, there are at least five different surnames *Yu* with a rising tone, and at least three more if tone is disregarded. This problem of vast numbers of homophones is the major stumbling block to romanization of the Chinese writing system.

Just before this article went to press, the Chinese newspaper *People's Daily* (May 3, 1987) published new statistics on surnames based on the 1982 census. According to two experts, Du Ruopu and Yuan Yida, the three most common surnames in China today are *Li* (7.9 percent of the Han population), *Wang* (7.4 percent), and *Zhang* (now relegated to third place with 7.1 percent). Hence there are at least 80 million Chinese with the surname *Li*. Du and Yuan report that such major surnames as *Li, Wang, Zhang, and Liu* are most common in the north, whereas major surnames like *Chen, Zhao, Huang, Lin, and Wu* are most common among southerners. The authors also report that they have collected a total of 1,066 surnames thus far, but estimate the actual total to be much higher, perhaps as high as 3,000. Du Ruopu is compiling a new dictionary of Chinese surnames, both ancient and modern, and suggests that the combined total will be as high as 8,000.

<sup>4</sup> C.M. Matthews, *English Surnames* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).