

Name Styles and Structure of Chinese American Personal Names

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Abstract

Chinese Americans, the largest and most diverse of the Asian American groups, range from sixth generation, English-speaking only families to recent immigrants speaking various Chinese dialects and other languages (from different countries). Their name styles are a unique synthesis of American and Chinese languages and cultures, closely tied to the number of generations in this country and the understanding of American ways, revealing, in addition to individual taste and sense of history, intimate ties to history and to feelings of nationalism.

One of the traditional celebrations occasionally reported in Chinese American English-language newspapers is the "Red Eggs and Ginger Party." In Chinese communities this is known as *man yue* or "month-old" baby party. It is given by a family to proudly introduce to relatives and friends their newest family member after it is one month old. Red-dyed hard-boiled eggs and thin slices of sweet pickled ginger are customarily included in the festivity, eggs being the ubiquitous offerings in traditional Chinese observances. In very ancient times in China, this debut of an infant was also the occasion for conferring its name.

Here in the United States, the observance of the *man yue* celebration, with its American-style announcement in the newspaper, enables us to read about the debuts of Chinese American infants with such names as *Marissa Rebecca Wong*, *Kendrick George Dea*, and *Brittany Ngon Lee*.

What these "Red Eggs and Ginger Party" announcements indicate is that some Chinese American parents are in the mainstream of American name practices. Their children will usually have two Euro-American given names, the prevalent form of names in the United States,¹ and most of these will be the same names that are repeated over and over in any age group (as Kelsie Harder, our authority on the popularity and repetition of names, has so often pointed out²). The fact that the *man yue* tradition is observed is often a clue that the honorees

will have Chinese given names as well; only baby Brittany's middle name hints at this.

Because the "Red Eggs and Ginger Party" announcements identify parents and grandparents, the reader gets a glimpse of names spanning three generations, although these names are never mentioned in the same formal style as that for the infants. For example, the parents of little Christopher Michael Woo are the Bryon Woos and his grandparents are the Howard Woos and Mr. and Mrs. Hom Gok. Limited as the name styles are in these announcements, we can clearly see the influence of both Chinese and American cultures on Chinese American personal names.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the popular name styles used by Chinese Americans and what these can tell us about this ethnic American group. The influence of Chinese and American English languages and cultures leads to a unique synthesis of name styles not generally found in Chinese communities in other parts of the world. Moreover, these name styles are closely related to length of residence, the number of generations born in the United States, and to the level of acculturation and understanding of the American way of life.³

The Chinese American population, representing less than one percent of the United States total, is the largest of the various Asian American groups.⁴ It consists of 1,500,000 persons, according to the 1990 census ("1990 Population Counts" 1). By comparison, 800,000 of Chinese descent were counted in the 1980 census, sixty-three percent of these of foreign birth. No doubt the native-born continue to be outnumbered because of the steady flow of immigrants from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, each with its own annual quota (Gardner et al. 5, 9, 37).⁵

The foreign-born, the first or immigrant generation, from these countries have brought their various dialects, such as Cantonese, Taiwanese, Shanghainese, and Mandarin—the Chinese national language. The foreign-born also include ethnic Chinese from different parts of the world: Southeast Asia, Europe, South Africa, and South America. They have brought, in addition to their Chinese dialects, other acquired cultures and languages.

The smaller segment of the Chinese American population that consists of the native-born includes the second, third, fourth, and later generations.⁶ Not surprisingly, they are mostly English speaking. Finally, there is a subgroup of individuals who are part-Chinese in ancestry. They are the product of either interracial marriages, where one of the

couple is non-Asian, or outmarriages, where “one partner [is] not of the specific nationality group” (Kitano et al. 180).

Because of this wide variation in geographical and linguistic backgrounds, as well as the differences in acculturation, Chinese Americans are the most diverse group of Asian Americans. Yet, as a group, they tend to keep their Chinese family names and, more than likely, they have Chinese given names. At the same time, their dissimilarities contribute to a wider variety of name styles than found among Americans in general.

According to Elsdon C. Smith, in *Treasury of Name Lore*, there are seven distinct American name styles (134–36). For instance, if Stephen Louie has only one given name, he may write his name as 1) *Stephen Louie* or as 2) *S. Louie*, or he may call himself 3) *Steve Louie*. If he has a middle name, such as *John*, he has three more options in structuring his name: 4) *Stephen John Louie*, 5) *Stephen J. Louie*, or 6) *S. J. Louie*. Finally, he could decide to be known by his middle name instead, as in 7) *S. John Louie*. Style 5, involving one middle initial between the given name and the surname, is particularly an American custom (Smith 118, 135).

To facilitate the discussion of name styles among Chinese Americans, I will divide their personal names into three main categories, one of which has four subcategories:

1. names consisting of Euro-American given names only;
2. names consisting of Chinese given names only—
 - a. written as separate words,
 - b. written as initials,
 - c. written as hyphenated names,
 - d. written as one word;
3. names incorporating both Western and Chinese given names.

In the first and third categories, the surname always follows the given name(s), as in Euro-American name tradition. But in the second category, the surname may appear after the given name or it may appear before it, according to Chinese custom. In addition, the structure of the Chinese given name varies when it is transliterated into the roman alphabet.⁷

Names Consisting of Euro-American Given Names Only

The practice of having two Euro-American given names seems to occur with a high level of acculturation, and, since there are more foreign-born than native-born, the majority of Chinese Americans today

do not have these two names. When I was growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown during the 1930s and early 1940s, most of us who were second generation native-born had only one American given name and no middle name. Our parents relied on a doctor, a missionary, or an older child to select an American name for a new-born baby. The parents of most of my friends held on to their Chinese names. Both of my parents, who had immigrated from China, selected American names for themselves to make it easier to interact with non-Chinese people at their work. But Chinese-speaking relatives and friends always called them by their Chinese names.

Having two Euro-American given names was so unusual for my generation that when an older Chinese American friend who grew up in Los Angeles told me that she has two, I expressed surprise. She confessed that during her junior high school days in the 1930s, she and a few friends adopted second American names because they thought that Americans had to have two given names.

In a recent posthumously published autobiography, a Chinese American author charmingly relates how she received her second American name. Her name at birth was *Mamie Leung*. During the 1920s, when she was in college, her best friend was Eleanor Chan, another Chinese American. As the author writes: "Eleanor's full name was Eleanor Ransom Chan, which I thought sounded most elegant. She said I must also have a middle name; we finally, after much argument, settled on 'Louise.'" This later became the name she used professionally instead of *Mamie* (Larson 124–25).

Even though an American of Chinese ancestry may possess a Chinese given name, there are few occasions to use it or write it. These might include attendance at a Chinese language school or class, listing in a bilingual or Chinese publication, engraving on a birth or wedding announcement, or carving on a tombstone. Only a person with Chinese language skills would inquire after someone's Chinese name; it has no relevance otherwise. Moreover, English-speaking parents do not call their children by the Chinese name, and Chinese-speaking parents often call their children by their American names. It is in the two other name categories that the Chinese name is used more frequently.

No doubt the same experiences regarding names that my parents and their generation faced over half a century ago are being repeated among the new immigrants of today. Not long ago, a young college student who was born in Vietnam told me that, after living in the United States for

several years, he finally decided to call himself "Craig." When I asked why he didn't choose a second American given name, he said that having one was enough. No family member or relative would call him by his American name, and certainly none of his friends would call him by two names.

Chinese American married women, like other American women, often use the maiden name as a middle name. Actually, for Chinese American women, this is in keeping with ancient tradition. While a woman in mainland China today would not add her husband's surname to her full name, a Chinese American woman may or may not do so, depending on her traditional leanings (Zhu and Millward 13–14).

Names Consisting of Chinese Given Names Only— Written as Separate Words

Before proceeding further, I should give a brief review of the composition of a Chinese personal name. Chinese given names among Chinese Americans are mostly disyllabic; that is, a name consisting of two characters, each character expressed by one syllable. Single-character or monosyllabic given names are not unusual but occur less frequently.⁸ Surnames, though, are overwhelmingly monosyllabic, which is true of Han Chinese family names in general—Han referring to the ethnic group to which most Chinese belong. *Lee*, *Chen*, and *Wong* are examples of single-character surnames. The most common two-character or disyllabic family names for Chinese Americans are *Soo Hoo* and *Ouyang*.

Transliterated Chinese names among Chinese Americans may range from two to five words, depending upon the combination of surname and given name. A name such as *Lei Lai* consists of a monosyllabic family name and a monosyllabic given name. A name like *Ow Yang Wai Ling* could involve a disyllabic surname and a disyllabic given name. Or such a name composed of four words could belong to a woman who has added her husband's surname to her full name. For example, the characters in the name *Chow Kwan Kam Oi*—seen on a tombstone—indicate that *Chow* was the husband's surname, *Kwan* the woman's maiden name, and *Kam Oi* her disyllabic given name. The usual length of a Chinese personal name for Chinese Americans, however, is three words: one syllable for the family name and two for a disyllabic given name.

When Chinese immigration began during the mid-nineteenth century, the prevailing name style was to write each syllable of the Chinese name as a separate word, as shown in the examples above. It is still in popular

use today. However, of all the name styles for Chinese names, this one has generated the most confusion over the surname—whether the first or the last word in a name represents the surname. The early immigrants tended to keep the family name first, according to tradition. Certainly the literature on early Chinese American history is replete with names such as *Ng Poon Chew*, *Joe Shoong*, and *Soo Hoo Nam Art* (*Ng*, *Joe*, and *Soo Hoo* being the surnames). Today the surname is often placed after the Chinese given name in conformity with Euro-American custom, but the traditional position is more commonly seen. Chinese Americans are not of one mind on this and the placement may be related to the level of acculturation to American life. One still cannot be sure which is the surname.

In former years, the Chinese custom of putting the surname first, was not well known to Americans in general. The Soundex to the 1900 federal census, an alphabetical listing by surname, offers numerous examples of how Chinese names were misunderstood. One clerk played it safe by listing *Soo Hoo Toy*'s name under *Soo*, under *Hoo*, and under *Toy*. The card for *Chow Tai* says "See also *Tai*." Consequently, the number of surnames listed for the Chinese in the Soundex is greatly exaggerated.

Still, understanding Chinese name customs is no guarantee that one would know where the surname lies from merely looking at the name. One knowledgeable person made this observation in 1932, evidently alluding to the Chinese in America: "Until very recently, the family name was always placed first and there was, therefore, no trouble in recognizing it. Recently, however, many Chinese have adopted the Western plan of placing the family name last" (Bostwick 868). For example, if you saw a name like *Yee Wah Tong*, you would be hard-pressed to tell which is the surname, *Yee* or *Tong*. A name like *Chi Li* can keep you guessing as well.

This dilemma over the surname lies in the ambiguity of Chinese names: many given names have the same spelling as family names that bear the same or nearly the same sound. And the number of characters having the same spelling can be quite large. As an indication of this, the Chinese desk accessory for my computer has fifty-three characters for the spelling *Yi* (three of these are surnames) and twenty-nine characters for the spelling *Wu* (seven are surnames). The Chinese language is extremely rich in homophones, but context and use of tones in the spoken language helps to distinguish homophones of different meanings.

Therefore, it is necessary to see the Chinese characters in order to determine the surname in a transliterated name. As Dr. Yuen Ren Chao (1892–1982),⁹ the internationally known Chinese linguist, once pointed

out, most systems of transliteration “work only one way and are not reversible” (47).

Not surprisingly, those who keep their surnames in the traditional Chinese position are often called by the given name or by the second syllable of a disyllabic name. This reminds me of a photographic exhibit on display several years ago about Chinese Americans in a small California town. One old gentleman was alternately identified as *Wong Buck* and *Mr. Buck*. His wife was *Mrs. Buck*. But, according to the captions—written in English and Chinese—*Wong* was his family name.

Names Consisting of Chinese Given Names Only— Written as Initials

It was quite a fad among the early students and scholars who came from China to use only initials for the Chinese given name: *Y. R. Chao*, *P. K. Ng*, and *T. Wen*. Perhaps this Western name style was adopted for the sake of convenience so as to avoid spelling out the Chinese given name in full. It also spares one the pain of hearing one’s Chinese name being constantly mispronounced.

In a 1905 publication, *The Dragon Student*, most of the given names for foreign-born students are in initials only. A list of names in *The Chinese Students’ Monthly*, published in 1920, indicates that this was still a popular name style. But twenty years later, a 1943 Chinese student *Directory* shows that the use of initials alone had lessened in popularity among the foreign students. This may have been due to severe criticism about students adopting Western name customs and the intense feelings of nationalism that occurred in the two decades following the 1911 Chinese revolution (De Francis 217–20).

In 1936, a handbook on China had this to say: “Certainly the use of initials in place of the given name is a most un-Chinese custom, while the adoption of a foreign given name may be regarded as an evidence of denationalization, a despoliation of the country’s spiritual heritage” (T’ang 117). Evidently the writer was castigating those students who were attending schools sponsored by foreign Christian missionaries, since he went on to comment: “For more than anything else is the name an index of nationality, and the fact that this practice of using foreign names arose in connection with missionary education merely makes matters so much worse” (T’ang 117).

Earlier, in 1933, the Ministry of Education in China had issued an

order, according to this handbook, forbidding students from using initials before the surname and from adopting “foreign” names. Moreover, they were to romanize their names in full according to Mandarin pronunciation. These orders were made to “obtain uniformity in the English rendering of Chinese names, and to preserve the wholly satisfactory and logical method of Chinese nomenclature” (T’ang 117).

In the 1943 Chinese student *Directory* mentioned above, it is quite evident that most foreign-born students who had Mandarin-sounding surnames also had fully romanized given names. But instead of romanizing the disyllabic name as two separate words, the prevailing method was to connect them with a hyphen. We see this in the name *Sun Yat-sen* (1866–1925, founder of the Republic of China in 1911). The hyphen also applies to disyllabic surnames, as in *Ou-yang Yi*.

Names Consisting of Chinese Given Names Only – Written as Hyphenated Names

This use of the hyphen has been attributed to Herbert A. Giles, co-author of the Wade-Giles system of romanization and author of the *Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, published in 1898 (Hummel 1006). Because monosyllabic family names greatly outnumber disyllabic ones, the hyphen aids in distinguishing between family name and given name in a romanized Chinese personal name. One should be aware, though, according to the method used in this dictionary, that the initial letter of the name following the hyphen is in lower case, as in *Sun Yat-sen*, not in upper case.

However, capitalizing the initial letter of the second name, after the hyphen, is an equally popular practice among Chinese Americans today, as in *Di-Hwa Liu*. Sometimes we even see the hyphen placed between the two initials of the Chinese name, as in *S.-Y. Pi*. The Chinese writer just quoted thought that capitalizing the initial letter of the second name was “more logical and in accordance with the nature of the Chinese characters” (T’ang 119).

Names Consisting of Chinese Given Names Only – Written as One Word

What then exactly is the nature of a Chinese disyllabic given name? Is the first of the two characters a middle name and the second character the first name? (Chinn 224) Can it be the other way around? Is it a “dithemic”

name—a name composed of two elements—as one author describes it? (Seeman 130) In 1935, Lin Yutang (1895–1976), the widely acclaimed author, wrote: “The mystification over Chinese names is entirely due to our own making”—“our” referring to the Chinese themselves. Dr. Lin, as his own name reveals, regards the two characters of his name as two syllables of a single name, as in any polysyllabic name. It makes for easier name recognition, he advised, to write a Chinese disyllabic name as one word. As an analogy, if one were to write *David* as *Da Vid*, *Johanna* as *Jo Han Na*, or, as Dr. Lin pointed out, the first name of Indian poet Sir Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) as *Ra Bin Dra Nath*, we would see the “immediate loss of word-individuality” (366).

At the same time, Dr. Lin strongly advocated keeping the surname in its traditional position as he himself has done. Dong Kingman (born 1911), the noted Chinese American artist, also follows this precept. *Dong* is his surname and *Kingman* his Chinese given name.

In the People’s Republic of China, although structuring the disyllabic name as one word is not officially sanctioned, it is currently used when romanizing personal names.¹⁰ Like the hyphenated name, which is favored in the Republic of China in Taiwan, the combined disyllabic name is useful for differentiating between surname and given name. But this name style is infrequently seen among Chinese Americans. Perhaps, as more people from China’s mainland emigrate to the United States, it will appear more often. However, according to the latest news, we may see an increase in monosyllabic given names instead, names that once predominated in previous centuries (Lu 275–77).

Names Incorporating Both Western and Chinese Given Names

Since the 1970s, due to the increase in Chinese immigration, the juxtaposition of an American and a Chinese given name has become a very popular name style. It clearly expresses a desire to maintain a Chinese identity while conforming, at the same time, to Euro-American name traditions. Sometimes the Chinese given name comes first, as in *Vi-Kyuin Wellington Koo* (1887–1985), who was the first diplomat to sign the United Nations Charter in 1945. Dr. Koo also wrote his name as *V. K. Wellington Koo* or as *V. K. W. Koo*.

Mostly the Chinese given name serves as a middle name, as in the following names: *Perry Peng Chang*, *John Kuo Wei Tchen*, *Paul Kuang-pu Huang*, *Janet Jen-ai Chong*, *Kenneth Chiache Sze*, *Leslie T. C. Kuo*, *Ginger*

Y. Chiu, and *William S-Y. Wang*. (The initial *S* in Dr. Wang's name does not have a period after it, he once informed me.) All of the names in this sampling reveal the various methods discussed in structuring the Chinese disyllabic name.

In the name style represented by the name *Leslie T. C. Kuo*, it is safe to assume that a Chinese name lies behind those two initials when the surname is obviously Chinese in origin. But using one initial for the Chinese disyllabic given name, as in *Ginger Y. Chiu*, is just as popular. When Mrs. Chiu mentioned that the *Y* in her name stands for *Yiu-Kum*, I asked why she didn't use the two initials instead. She replied that although she would prefer to do so, legal forms in America allow room for just one initial. This points out that in this distinctly American custom of initialing the middle name, that single initial in a Chinese American personal name may represent a Chinese monosyllabic name, a Chinese disyllabic, an American middle name, or a surname.

Summary

Because of the influences of both Chinese and American cultures, Chinese Americans observe, in addition to the seven name styles mentioned by Smith, ten more name styles, listed here with typical examples:

1. Chinese given name with the surname first: *Lou Sheng*;
2. Chinese name composed of three or more separate words: *Jeoh Ming Pei*;
3. hyphenated Chinese disyllabic name, with the initial of the second word in lower case: *Wing-cheung Ng*;
4. hyphenated Chinese disyllabic name, with the initial of the second word in upper case: *Han-Sheng Lin*;
5. disyllabic Chinese name as one word: *Renqiu Yu*;
6. combination American given name and a Chinese middle name: *Jean Yun-Hua King*;
7. combination Chinese given name with an American middle name: *Sao-Ke Alfred Sze*;
8. three initials for the American and Chinese given names: *V. L. C. Chuan* (*V* is for *Victor*, *L. C.* for *Lu-Chi*);
9. two initials for the disyllabic Chinese given name: *Tracy S. Y. Wong*;
10. one initial for the disyllabic Chinese given name: *Robert T. Poe* (*T* is for *Ta-Pang*).

This variety of name styles can be attributed to the diversity of the Chinese American population and to a better social climate in America that allows for multiple expressions in name selection. Prior to World War II, when social and legal discrimination was quite harsh against the Chinese in this country, the trend among the older established families was to have American given names and anglicized surnames. Today's popular name style of juxtaposing an American given name and a Chinese given name is more in keeping with the concept of cultural pluralism. Yet regardless of name style, Chinese American personal names on the whole symbolize the desire of Chinese Americans to participate fully in American society and to also observe their Chinese traditions which are part of a heritage that is rightfully theirs to claim.

Los Angeles, California

Notes

1. Ninety-five percent of American men and ninety-two percent of American women have a middle name, according to Leslie Dunkling (24).

2. A couple of years ago Kelsie responded to my letter inquiring about the repetition of given names among Americans. He said there is an astonishing repetition of names in his collection of wedding announcements taken from the local newspapers in his neck of the woods. I was especially interested to learn that Kelsie has known bunches of Emmas in his lifetime. There were Emma Bunch, Emma Broadway, Emma Lineberry, and "probably some others," he said.

3. All the name examples in this article belonged to or belong to real people. Some are relatives and friends. Some came from bilingual materials such as club membership lists, Chinese student directories, and gravestones in cemeteries I have visited. Names from "Red Eggs and Ginger Party" are usually found in the *Asian Week* newspaper column "Bay Area Merry Go Round," by Carolyn Gan.

4. The six largest groups within the Asian American population are those of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese descent, in this order. Together, they form the third largest and fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States (Gardner, Robey, and Smith 3). According to the 1990 census, the total population in the United States is 248,709,873 (from information obtained at the Los Angeles Central Library).

5. The census year 1980 marked the first time that the highest proportion of immigration came from Asia (Gardner et al. 4). Chinese immigration will be increasing because the Immigration Act of 1990 has given Hong Kong an annual quota of 10,000. And this will increase to 25,000 per year by 1995, in anticipation of the time when Hong Kong becomes part of mainland China (Ng 6).

6. The late Rose Hum Lee, a Chinese American sociologist, wrote in 1960 that the fifth generation was "just emerging" (see Lee 117). However, at a Chinese American Family History Workshop held in October 1989 in San Francisco, Him Mark Lai, a Chinese American historian, stated that fifth and sixth generation Chinese Americans are rare in number.

7. Dr. Yuen Ren Chao once wrote that "to transliterate Chinese writing, in which each unit is a syllable, it will have to be first transcribed in some phonetic or phonemic form, and if this is done in roman letters, then the romanization will at once be a transcription and a transliteration" (46). Chinese Americans may spell their Chinese names according to a linguistically devised method, such as the Wade-Giles system of romanization or the current Pinyin system. But other names were simply transcribed

according to the way the person writing the name heard it pronounced. Still others are spelled according to personal whim.

8. Consul Ning Wen of the People's Republic of China, in a conversation at the Los Angeles Consulate General Office (12 May 1989), stated that the trend in mainland China is toward monosyllabic given names. More and more parents are bestowing this type of name on their children (see Lu 275).

9. Dr. Chao used two name styles: his disyllabic given name was written as two separate words—which was always followed by his surname—or else it was represented by initials, as in *Y. R. Chao*.

10. This information came from Consul Ning Wen (see note 8). I have personally met some newly arrived Chinese from mainland China who wrote their disyllabic names as separate words or with a hyphen.

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Apronym

Early this year the Governor of South Dakota, George S. Mickelson, celebrated his fiftieth birthday. When he was born on January 31, 1941, his father, George T. Mickelson, who later, from 1947 until 1951, was also governor, was Speaker of the House in the South Dakota Legislature, which was then in the middle of its session. Although his parents first named him George T. Mickelson, Jr., the House intervened with a resolution: "Be it Resolved, that ... the new son be named George Speaker Mickelson, Jr."

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