

Reviews

Chinese American Names: Tradition and Transition. By Emma Woo Louie. McFarland & Company, Inc. Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640. 1998. Pp. vii-230. \$32.50.

Chinese American Names consists of four parts and nineteen chapters, which can be divided into two major sections: Chinese naming traditions, and the transition from those traditions to new naming practices among Chinese in the United States. The book is unique, it is interesting, and it contains a wealth of information.

This book is the first serious, comprehensive study of Chinese American names. Louie's is a special perspective from which to examine the complicated problem of how Chinese immigrants gradually integrate into the new society while retaining their traditional naming legacy. She illuminates the underlying conflict of how American Chinese have struggled to remain distinctive culturally and ethnically while trying to reduce excessive xenophobic feelings towards them. American Chinese as a group would not exist without their heritage nor would they succeed in the new society without a certain degree of self-identification with mainstream American culture.

A number of factors which influence American Chinese naming practices have been carefully considered by Louie, including Chinese and Western writing systems, pronunciation in several Chinese dialects and English, family ties, orders of generations, name givers' wishes, and even mistakes. The author's discussions help readers understand immediately why there are so many hybrid names among Chinese Americans, in particular how a Chinese surname is often placed next to a Chinese American name, as with Henry Fong Wah Ung, in which Fong is the surname, placed after Henry, a Western given name, yet before Wah Ung, a Chinese given name, a practice that demonstrates a sophisticated way to retain both the Chinese and American names in their original order.

Chinese American Names is engagingly written, and often amusing. Louie tells stories in which families with European backgrounds are confused with Chinese families because both share the same spelling. As

to the number of Chinese surnames, Louie discusses the *Bai Jia Xing*, a Chinese book on names compiled during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), which she correctly translates as *The Hundred Family Names* and identifies *bai xing* as 'the people' or 'the people of a hundred surnames'. After observing a good number of Chinese family names (of which only a hundred are popular), the author writes: "It seems that the Chinese could be accurately described, after all, as the people of a hundred surnames!"

Many of Louie's observations are quite insightful; she notes, for example, that Chinese seldom name a child after a hero or a famous person, for this act is considered presumptuous and disrespectful. However, this does not mean that Chinese parents do not hope the qualities of those famous names that led them to such fame or wealth will not rub off on their children. To get around the problem, parents often select one character from an illustrious name for a namesake. We do not see such names as *Zhang Zedong* or *Li Zedong* after Chairman Mao, but we do find *Zhang Xuedong*, meaning 'to learn from (Mao Ze)dong'.

The author also discusses generation name poems, a very special mnemonic found in Chinese culture in which each word in the poem represents one generation of men, i.e., all men of the same generation within a clan would have the same generation name. In addition, Louie gives a perceptive explanation of why more and more children have one syllable given names: after the Chinese government tightened the "one child for each family" policy, there was no longer a need for generation names.

The most important feature of *Chinese American Names* is its rich details on Chinese naming practices, both traditional and modern. Louie examines Chinese traditions from the beginning of Chinese written history all the way to the present. In terms of space, she covers many naming problems from the East to the West. Louie possesses a profound knowledge of Chinese and Western cultures. She discusses many issues in depth: the differences between two kinds of Chinese surnames, *xing* (a name indicating lineage) and *shi* (the original surname of a married woman), the convention of *paihang*, or generation names, literally 'ranking in rows', the sources of Chinese family names, meanings of

family names, the causes for new surnames, the distinction between two kinds of given names *hao* and *zi* (adult or “courtesy” names), and the vocative *Ah* in southern Chinese naming customs. The author also does an outstanding job in revealing the complicated relationship among Chinese characters, dialectal pronunciations, and the spelling methods that give Chinese names a Western look. Louie’s information on this complex subject came from consulting friends, working through ancient books, immigration documents, census records, telephone books, marriage certificates and family benevolent association documents, and even reading inscriptions on gravestones.

The author has left few areas for improvement. However, I would like her way of presenting Chinese characters to be more consistent, either by attaching a character to its romanization at its first appearance or always giving the Chinese character whenever it was mentioned. It also seems that the author has a slightly better mastery of Chinese naming problems in the United States than in ancient China. My surname, Yu, for instance, should be related to medicine. According to the section “Yiwen zhi” in the famous history book *Han Shu* (History of the Han Dynasty) by Ban Gu (AD 32-92), Yu was the name of a famous doctor who practiced in the time of Huang Di (the Yellow Emperor). In many traditional Chinese medicine books, the word *yu* means ‘acupuncture points’. Louie attributes Yu to a title, but does not give enough information about its source. I noted this lack of detail in several other instances as well.

In sum, Louie provides insightful explanations for many unique developments in Chinese American names. Although these explanations come from a number of different directions, including linguistics, sociology, politics, and culture, they all interact and are coherent with each other. *Chinese American Names* constitutes one of the most important sources for studying Chinese American history and naming practices.

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