

Reflections on Names

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I am forever grateful to Elsdon C. Smith for inspiring me to research and write about American names of Chinese origin. My first acquaintance with his name studies was when my supervisor at work handed me Smith's *Dictionary of American Family Names*. My boss thought it would help me in my assignment to compile lists of surnames belonging to various Asian American Pacific Islander groups for his cancer research studies. I was more intrigued by the fact that the book contained many surnames of English and other nationality origins that also belong to Chinese Americans. Moreover the book made me realize that in addition to having surnames in common with other ethnic groups, Chinese Americans also have unique name practices because of their cultural traditions. Thus began many trips to the Los Angeles Public Library to read all of Smith's books and other books on names.

When I finally wrote to Elsdon Smith for advice about writing what I know about Chinese American name practices, he responded that it was necessary to first explain Chinese name traditions. My initial reaction was "Oh no, I should've paid more attention when I attended Chinese language school as a kid!" He was right, of course. And he invited me to join the American Name Society so that I could read the latest in name studies. That was in 1977.

Mr. Smith's books are eloquent examples of meticulous research and practical use for real life situations. I've quoted him many times both in my writings and presentations, and in casual conversations. Once at a luncheon party, one of the ladies asked me to spell my surname. Another guest, who taught ESL at a local college, overheard my reply and said, "Actually Emma should be spelling it as 'L-e-i' or 'L-u-i,' depending on whether she wants to spell it in Mandarin or Cantonese sound." I responded by quoting Mr. Smith about the correct spelling and

pronunciation of a name being according to the owner's wishes. I also referred to his comments about names belonging to Americans as being American names and that every name is a name in its own right.

George R. Stewart, author of *American Given Names*, is another scholar whom I admire greatly. I especially like his use of the term "given name." It used to be that "Christian name" was commonly used in this country. Perhaps this term fell out of favor when it was realized that many Americans do not have this type of name. Evidently the term "given name" was substituted. Elsdon Smith wrote in 1967 that "given name" is commonly heard in the U.S. and Scotland whereas it is rarely heard in England. What happened to cause "first name" to appear instead on most official forms today?

I was therefore very happy to see that a recent issue of *Names* included an article about "given names;" I was afraid this term was dying out in deference to "first name" and the more academic "fore-name." The fact that another article in the same issue is about "fore-names" raises the question that has been in my mind on whether ANS can be of influence in deciding upon personal name terminology for overall use in America. I believe ANS should play a prominent role as an arbiter in matters pertaining to name terminology.

Since many people in our multiracial and multicultural society come from cultures that do not have "first names" according to American usage, perhaps the time has come to return to using "given name." It seems to be of more practical use. It would allow such names as *Ah Toy* and *Dar El* to be included within the same space without separating them into "first name" and "middle name."

I believe name studies should be responsive to the needs of real people in real life situations. Surely George R. Stewart and Elsdon C. Smith would applaud efforts to update name terminology to reflect our multiethnic and multicultural society.