Remarkable Similarities between Traditional Chinese and Anglo-Saxon England's Naming Customs

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The Chinese given name that is composed of two characters is one name: two words put together to form one name. This knowledge is in danger of becoming lost since recent explanations state that the two characters are two separate given names. Two particular name styles also contribute to this misunderstanding. Because of the tendency to equate Chinese names with Western names, the best comparison is the two-worded Anglo-Saxon name of Old English or Old Germanic origins. Name customs in China and Anglo-Saxon England, prior to the Norman Conquest in 1066, were remarkably similar despite the geographical distance between the two countries and the differences in language and culture.

Seventy years ago, the author Lin Yutang commented that the "mystification of Chinese names" was due to the Chinese themselves and the lack of consistency when spelling their names into English (1935,366). One never knew, he wrote, at which end the surname would appear. (When a name is written in Chinese, the family name appears first, followed by the given name.) It should be mentioned that the term "Chinese" in this article refers to the Han Chinese who are the vast majority of the people in China.

Since most Chinese personal names consist of a one-character family name and a two-character given name, Lin believed that the two characters of a given name are similar to the syllables of any polysyllabic name and therefore should be spelled as one word. This would also help to distinguish it from the one-character family name. Unfortunately, the fact

that the two-character given name is one name may be in danger of becoming lost because recent explanations equate it with the two separate given names that appear in most Euro-American personal names.

Conflicting explanations

For example, Zhu and Millward stated in their article in Names (1987, 8): "The typical Chinese name, like the typical English name, consists of three parts." This gives the impression that each of the three characters in the Chinese name is a separate name. Two writers describe the last two characters as "first" and "middle" names but they disagree on which is which. One explained that in his Chinese name *Chinn Ying Tom*, the second character *Ying* is the "middle name" and the third character, *Tom*, is his Chinese "first name" (Chinn 1972, 224). The second writer, who is from Southeast Asia, labels the second character as a "first name" and the third character, a "middle name" (Lip 1988). The latest explanation states that the second character is a "middle name" and the third character, a "last name" (Kwee 1998, 51).

All these explanations are based on viewing the order of the three characters in the usual Chinese name instead of looking at it as consisting of a family name followed by a given name. Moreover, it is confusing and misleading to apply these Euro-American oriented terms—"first name," "middle name," and "last name" to names in which the family name comes first. It is like comparing oranges and apples. In addition to China, several countries, such as Japan and Hungary, place the family name first in a name. This points out the need for terminology that has the same meaning for all personal names.

Interestingly enough, there has never been any confusion over the two-character family name being one name; surnames such as SooHoo and Ou-yang. It is never described as consisting of a "first" family name and a "second" family name.

From time immemorial, Chinese given names have been composed of ordinary words taken from the written language. A child is bestowed a name that consists of either one or two words (or characters) and a name of two characters is simply two words that were put together to form one name. This was also how the Anglo-Saxons, a people of old English and old Germanic stocks, selected names.

Anglo-Saxon name customs, an excellent comparison

A far better comparison and explanation for the Chinese two-character given name, therefore, is the two-worded Anglo-Saxon name, such as *Edward* or *Robert*. The Anglo-Saxon period in England took place between the fifth and eleventh centuries; the period of time when the Chinese were still perfecting what would become their traditional name customs (Louie 1998, 47-48).

The following description of Anglo-Saxon name customs also describe Chinese naming traditions (Dolan 1972, 3; Matthews 1966, 19-21; Norman 1999, 9; Stewart 1979, 4):

1. A child was not named after relatives.
2. Every child had a unique name, completely different from any other in a village.
3. Names were part of the language; the majority of words chosen for names were ordinary nouns and adjectives.
4. Words selected for names expressed noble qualities or symbolic objects for inspiring a child in his or her growing-up years.
5. There was no clear way to distinguish between names of men and women.
6. Names, at first, were composed of one word. As time went on, two-worded names became more popular.
7. A name composed of two words was regarded as one name.
8. Definitions of the two words did not always have to make a meaningful combination. However, they often

did combine well.

9. Because new names were continually created, Anglo-Saxons had an enormous number of names.

As a Dithemic Name

The Anglo-Saxon two-worded name is considered a "dithemic" name because it consists of "two elements"(Stewart 1979, 3) and each element was like a theme word to be paired with other words to create new names. Most words could be either the first or the second word but some words had to be either first or last in a name (Matthews 1966, 19-20). The word "bright" (originally "beorht") was a favorite theme word that could be placed in either position. *Bertha* means 'bright.' *Bertram* means 'bright, raven' and *Robert* means 'fame, bright.'

The Chinese also like "bright" or *Ming* for a name. *Ming* can be a one-character given name, the first or second word in a two-character given name, and even a family name. Seeman (1980, 130) may be the first to describe the Chinese two-character given name as a dithemic name.

When citing the meaning for an Anglo-Saxon name, the correct way, according to Smith (1973, xix), is to state the meaning for each word without embellishment. For example, *Edward* means 'rich' (or 'fortunate'), 'guardian,' not 'a guardian who is rich.' The meaning of a Chinese two-character name should be treated the same way. The given name of Lin *Yutang* means 'language, hall,' not 'Hall of language.'

Family relationship and names

In addition to creating unique names for individuals, both Chinese and the Anglo-Saxons wanted names to indicate family relationship. Anglo-Saxons bestowed siblings with names that began with the same initial letter or the same sound (Smith 1967, 165; Norman, 9). During the tenth century, Eadweard of Wessex (an old Germanic kingdom in England) named his sons *Eadred* and *Eadmund* and named his three

daughters, *Eadburg*, *Eadgifu*, and *Eadgyth*. The theme word *Ead* (meaning 'rich', 'prosperity,' or 'wealth') appeared in all their names (Smith 1967, 166).

While the Chinese also repeat the same theme word in the names of siblings, it is unlikely to appear in the names of family members belonging to different generations. The whole purpose for having names to indicate kinship is to be able to distinguish members of one generation from previous and succeeding ones. Hence the theme word in the names of siblings is called a "generation name." It is not a separate name but an integral part of the two-character name. In traditional China, knowing the generation name enabled proper observance of mourning rites for the dead and prompted proper behavior and respect toward all persons older than oneself (Zhu and Millard, 14; Louie, 51-54).

Traditionally, brothers and sisters had different generation names. In the famous Soong family that was closely tied to events in modern Chinese history, the three sisters were named *Ai-ling*, *Ching-ling*, and *Mei-ling* (she was Mme. Chiang Kai-shek). Their brothers were *Tse-vung*, *Tse-liang*, and *Tse-an* (Louie, 56). These names demonstrate that the generation name can be either the first or second word of the two-character name.

By the early 1900s, modern-thinking parents began giving the same generation name to their sons and daughters but this practice took several decades before gaining in popularity. For example, the Chinese names of the son and two daughters of Chang-lin Tien, the late Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, are: *Chihan*, *Chihping*, and *Chihyih*, respectively.

Effects of the Norman Conquest

Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons would have developed a similar generation name custom had it not been for the Norman Conquest of 1066. Within two generations after William, Duke of Normandy, conquered England, Anglo-

Saxon names practically all disappeared. English parents adopted the Norman French name custom of repeating the same given name over and over, handing it down from one generation to the next. As a result, the number of given names in England was drastically reduced (Dunkling 1977, 50-51; Matthews, 18). While the French language is mainly of Latin origin, many French names were of old Germanic or Saxon origin. (Names of old Germanic origin were found in other European countries as well but that is a topic for discussion by those who are experts in that field of study.) The most popular ones that were taken to England included *William*, *Richard*, and *Henry* (Hanks 1990, xv-xvi).

Anglo-Saxon names that survived the Conquest were respelled as the English language adapted to a changing society (Norman, 18). For example, Aelfraed became *Alfred* and Eadgyth was respelled as *Edith*. Some names survived by becoming family names. The paucity of Norman given names led to the use of Biblical names even though Anglo-Saxons had been Christians for several centuries (Matthews, 17-18, 25). The Norman Conquest indeed changed English name customs completely.

Some Chinese American naming customs

It took centuries longer for Chinese naming traditions to change. Some practices had eroded by the time the 1911 Revolution ended the imperial dynasty system but it was the rise of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that finally brought them to an end. Only the use of the given name to indicate family relationship remains strong.

Like immigrants of other ethnicities to America, Chinese immigrants have been bringing their name traditions since the mid-nineteenth century. While acquiescing to American naming practices, some early immigrant parents applied the generation name concept to the selection of Western names. For example, the three sons of a family in Los Angeles were named *Stanley*, *Stanton*, and *Stanford*. In San

Francisco, three brothers received names that ended in the same sound: *Raymond, Edmund,* and *Gilman.* The daughters of a Wing family in Evanston, Wyoming, were bestowed names that began with the letters Li: *Lily, Lilac, Lillian,* and *Lilia.* Adapting the generation name custom has occurred wherever the Chinese people settled: a couple living in Paris, France, named their first-born son *Victor* and their second child, *Victoria.*

During the huge influx of Chinese immigration to America during the 1970s and 1980s, it became popular among new immigrants to use the Chinese given name as a middle name, as in *Kristal Elun Lui.* To be sure, there were misunderstandings of Western name customs in earlier decades: in a Sacramento, California family, two brothers were named *Bill* and *Billy.* In a San Francisco family, two brothers were named *Ed* and *Eddie.*

Names Styles

Misunderstanding the two-character given name as being two separate names could also be due to names styles. Since the 1980s, Chinese Americans observe four name styles in particular when transcribing the two-character given name into English:

1. Transcribing it as separate words: *Ng Poon Chew,*
2. Initializing the two characters: *I.M. Pei,*
3. Placing a hyphen between the two words: *Yo-Yo Ma,*
4. Transcribing it as one word: *Shuilan Lee.*

The first and second name styles, observed since the early decades of Chinese immigration, give the impression that the two-character name is two separate names.

Recently, during attempts to update our family tree, it was discovered that the computer thought so too. Relatives who spelled their Chinese names as separate words ended up having a "first name" and a "middle name." Fortunately, the hyphenated name was accepted in the space for "first name." I had hesitated to use the one-word name style because it is

used in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and some relatives have strong political views. Spelling for the one-word name style is usually in Pinyin, the romanization system that was adopted in the PRC in the late 1950s for transcribing Mandarin, the national language.

The hyphenated name style originated earlier; it was devised during the late nineteenth century as part of the Wade-Giles romanization method for the Mandarin dialect that became the national language by 1920. Wade-Giles was in popular usage before Pinyin was officially recognized by the U.S. State Department in 1978. Because Wade-Giles is still used in Taiwan, this name style also carries political overtones.

But the hyphenated name style has one great advantage over the one-word name style. It is an aid to pronunciation, especially when the first word of the two-character name ends in a vowel and the second word begins with a vowel. For example, my Chinese name *Yauh-oi*—meaning 'friend, love,'—is pronounced in Cantonese as it is spelled. If it were transcribed as one word, as *Yauhoi*, it looks as though the second word should be pronounced "hoi." If it were transcribed in Mandarin Pinyin as *Youai*, one might sound like a cat making a noisy protest.

Conclusion

In this global and computer age, the Chinese themselves must adopt a name style that will preserve the knowledge that the two-character name is one name. At the same time, owners of Chinese names should be free to spell their names as they wish. Even though Pinyin spelling is officially recognized, it is not meant that every name of Chinese origin should be spelled accordingly. There have never been any name laws in America or other English-speaking countries that force people to spell their names according to officially approved lists. A name of Chinese origin in this country is an American name and, as Patrick Hanks, editor of *Dictionary of American Family Names* (2003,

xi), pointed out "...origin must not be confused with correctness" in the spelling of personal names.

Citing the dithemic names of *Edward* and *Robert* gives the best explanation for the Chinese two-character given name being composed of two words to form one name. These names also explain the generation name concept because *Ed* is the first word in several dithemic names, such as *Edwin* and *Edith*, and *Bert* is the second word in such names as *Albert* and *Hubert*. It is remarkable how similar thinking about names in China and England, two countries widely apart geographically and in language and culture, led to similar naming practices during a particular period of time in their histories.

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