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THE ART OF NAMING IN CHINA
AND TRANSLATING WESTERN NAMES INTO CHINESE

Hailun He

What a Name Means to the Chinese.

A name in China is much more than a code of a certain person to distinguish him from another. It often associates the person with many interesting things, such as a line of a poem, a picture, a song, or a famous person. Judging from these clues, one can tell where a person was born, how old he is, what kind of cultural background he has, and even why he was named so. Based on this particular cultural background, many writers have made good use of the art of naming, giving significant names to the characters in their novels. The master of this art in China is probably Tsao Xueqin, author of **The Dream of the Red Mansions**. There are over a hundred characters in the novel and each of them has a significant name that helps the readers to understand the theme.

How to Name a Person?

There are some basic rules and avoidances. After the birth of a child, naming is an important matter. Usually it is done by the grandparents, because the young parents want to show their respect for the older generation. If the grandfather does not have much schooling, he will ask somebody else who is more educated to do it. Whoever is entrusted with the job would look up dictionaries or poetry books to find a good name. In the old days when many people were superstitious, they thought that a good name would bring good luck to the child but a bad one or an unfit one might bring bad luck. So, as a rule, a name should embody good will and be sonorous. For example, “fú” in Chinese means blessing, or happiness. Therefore, many men have names with the character “fú.” For example, Hóngfú means “many happinesses,” Tiēnfú means “more happiness,” and Fúshèng means “born lucky man.” In the countryside, now there are people who still name their children this way. In Guangzhou where I am from, there is a very prosperous restaurant, Guangzhou Restaurant, and the manager’s name is Wen Qífú, who is known to everybody in the city. His name means “begging for happiness.” Some day if you go to Guangzhou Restaurant and say you want to see Wen Qífú because you heard about him at Brockport, maybe you would be given a special treat!

I don’t mean that good will is superstitious; there are plenty of non-superstitious good names, for instance Zili and Ziqiang. The former means “depending on oneself” and “to be established.” In Guangzhou, a famous violinist has this name. The latter means “depending on oneself” and “grow up to be a useful man.” These names always remind the bearers of their motto in life. A former classmate of mine at college is named Tiētúng. “Tiēn” means “the sky” and “Túng” means “equal.” Her father was a professor of English who married an American woman, so my friend is half American. There is no difficulty for us in seeing what an ideal the late professor cherished in his daughter’s name, that is, under the sky, everybody, despite his race, should be equal.

The Chinese characters “Méi” and “Lì” both mean “beautiful.” “Méi” means the plum blossom, which is not only beautiful but can also bloom in cold weather. It symbolizes good personality. These names are often used for girls. “Xiù” means “graceful,” while “Chiáo” means “bright” and “capable of making things with one’s hands.” “Zhù” and “Yù” mean “to be treasured” like pearls and jade. These are typical female names. Professor John Killigrew at Brockport has a Chinese name both sonorous and good: Ke Qiangwei. “Ke” comes from the translation of Kil-, and the name means “strong and imposing.”

The first avoidance in naming is a similar pronunciation that might associate with something bad. For instance, I know a man by the name of Láo Shù. “Láo” is a family name, and “Shù” means “tree.” The

meaning is all right, but “rat” in Chinese is pronounced as “láoshú,” so when he was a schoolboy this man received the nickname “rat” in Mandarin. Some national minorities have the habit of naming a child after the first thing the father saw after the child was born. Therefore they might have strange names of things, but the name would never be a thing as frightening as “coffin.” Incidentally, Tennessee Williams’ father was named Coffin, that terrible word.

Another avoidance is repetition of kings’ and queens’ names or those of ancestors. In the feudalist society when there were kings and queens, the law forbade people to use the same name as the rulers. Later, when there were no more kings and queens, people still avoided such names. They thought that these names were too “noble” for ordinary people, because it was said that an unfit name might bring trouble. A friend of mine is named Zhènyè, meaning to “rebuild the prosperity of the family,” but his elder brother was named Zhenjū, meaning “rebuild the world.” My friend told me that his brother died an untimely death because he was “overwhelmed” by an over-ambitious name. Although this is superstitious, it does remind people of the fact, more or less, that one should be modest instead of being too ambitious.

Information Seen in a Name.

There are more than a hundred family names in China. As a family name, it means nothing, but when it is collocated with another name it becomes very meaningful, because almost every Chinese character is a word. For instance, Lú is a family name, but it also means “willow tree.” Qíng means “green,” so “Lú Qíng” becomes a very picturesque name, a green willow tree, which reminds people of spring. Chén is the most popular family name in China; it has the same pronunciation of the word that means “morning.” Xī means “the first light at daybreak.” Therefore the name Chén Xī tells you that the bearer was born at dawn and that this person’s parents must hope that she or he will always be as hopeful as the light at daybreak, which will grow brighter and brighter. “Yú” has the same pronunciation as the word meaning “fish,” and “Déshuǐ” means “getting into the water,” so Yú Déshuǐ becomes an interesting name – a fish in water. Of course, when a fish is in water, it will not die, so the name is also a metaphor, suggesting that one works in the circumstances under which his talent can be used to the full. My family name is Hé. It is a question word and an exclamation as well. “Héqǐ” means “what a...” and “Fāng” means “fragrance,” so Hé Qí-fāng, the name of a late Chinese writer, a very famous scholar, means “What a fragrance!” “Hébi” is a question word meaning “why should...” I once met a woman by the name of He Binan, which means “Why should [she] be male?” This name aroused interesting speculations among friends. My guess is that her father must have had many daughters before the birth of He Binan and thought he might never have a son. Therefore, when the new-born child turned out to be a girl again, he might cynically have named her “Why should [she] be male?” The unspoken part is that a female can be equally capable. However, the woman told me that her father was so anxious to have a son that, before she was born, he forenamed her Binan, meaning that the coming baby *must* be male. He was not as imaginative as I was, though.

I once had a student named Riyuan, meaning a “round sun.” Her name is associated for me with two lines from Wangwei, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty:

I see in the endless desert a wisp of smoke rising from a house straight upward,
And the round setting sun seems to be bathed in a long river. (My translation)

I asked her if she was the youngest child in the family, if her father had begun to enter his old age when she was born, and if her father was well educated. I received all affirmative answers, and learned also that her father is a teacher of Chinese in high school.

Besides poetic color, names also show time color. In 1949, when our country was founded, many people named their new-born children Jiefang, meaning “liberation,” to show their delight at this big event. In

1945, when the Japanese fascists surrendered, many children received the name Shengli, meaning “victory,” or Chungguang, meaning “light comes back at last.” When the Cultural Revolution ended at last in the 1970s, some people also named their new-born babies Chungguang. However, during the Cultural Revolution, many young people changed their names to Weidong, meaning “protect Mao”; Wei Hong, meaning “protect the red color”; Zhi-gong, meaning “my ideal is to be a worker”; or Zhijun, “my ideal is to be an army man.” If you come across a name like these, you will make no mistake about the bearer’s age.

In China, each province and city has an abbreviation, such as “Sui,” standing for Guangzhou, “Hu” for Shanghai, “Jing” for Beijing, etc., so a name such as Suisheng tells you this person was born in Guangzhou, Husheng must have been born in Shanghai, and Jingsheng in Beijing. This is the local color that a name reflects.

Translating Western Names into Chinese.

Translating Western names into Chinese is equally interesting. There have been two opinions about translating Western names. One tends to give each Westerner a Chinese family name according to a similar pronunciation. In Taiwan and Hong Kong they are still doing so, because it is easier to memorize for Chinese readers. The other system translates only according to the pronunciation, because a Westerner should not have a name that sounds Chinese. Each method has its reasons. United States presidents like Lincoln, Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy all were accorded Chinese family names like Lin, Hu, Lo, Du, and Gan in translation. Among them, Roosevelt’s and Kennedy’s names sound more like Chinese. Margaret Thatcher’s name (Prime Minister of England) is translated on the mainland as “Shacher,” which is only a name, without meaning, but in Hong Kong it is translated as Dai Checkyi. Dai is a Chinese family name, the word itself meaning “putting something on top”; for instance, “daimao” means “put on your hat or cap,” and “checkyi” is another word meaning “very outstanding,” so the name exactly suggests her character and is a very impressive name. In fact, there may be somewhat of a pun, since “thatch” is also put on top of something, a roof.

Dr. Bethune, the great Canadian friend of the Chinese people, had his name translated as “Bai Jiuen,” which sounds very Chinese. It must be easy to remember, especially for those Northern peasants whom he had given so much help.

The older generation in China are not likely to forget the Hollywood stars Shirley Temple (“Tambo”), Vivien Leigh (“Weiwen Li”), and Henry Fonda (“Fangda”), not only because of their outstanding performances on screen but also because of their Chinese-like names. “Bo” is a dear name for children, so “Tambo” is exactly right for a child star. “Weiwen” is a typical female name meaning “intelligent and graceful like a speck of cloud,” and “Fangda” sounds exactly like a Chinese name.

The most interesting example might be Ridgeway, the Pacific Commanding General after MacArthur near the end of the Korean War. His name was translated both on the mainland and in Taiwan as “Li Qiwei,” but just one character different and the association is entirely different. In Chinese several characters have the same pronunciation as “wei”; on the mainland they used the one that means “very inconsiderable,” while in Taiwan they used another that means “very imposing or magnificent.” What a difference a single character makes!

Let me close with a couple more interesting examples of translation. There is a kind of skirt called mini-skirt; the prefix simply means that the skirt is very short. But in Chinese it is translated according to the pronunciation as “miniqun”; “qun” means “skirt,” but “mini” communicates much more in Chinese, since it means “attract you or lure you,” which is certainly one function of a mini-skirt. Finally, a famous avenue in Paris called Champs Elyssées is translated into Chinese as “Xiangxielishe.” “Xiangxie” means

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“pavilion on a river or a pond in the fragrance of flowers,” and “lishè” means “lovely house,” so when the two parts are put together it becomes a very poetic name, suggesting a street with beautiful houses and lovely pavilions in the fragrance of flowers on both sides.

Name-giving in China has elements of art and tradition. From Chinese names a great deal of information can be gleaned, together with a large amount of poetry.

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