

# THE INSCRUTABILITY OF CHINESE NAMES, FAMILY AND GIVEN

by Jason B. Alter

Five million Chinese could be Wong, or Huang, or Hwang, of Ng, or even Wee; all of these being variant spellings or pronunciations of the same Chinese character. The teacher of English as a second language naturally seeks to get to know his students' names as soon as he can. Currently in Singapore, on leave from the University of Hawaii, and having spent eight years teaching ESL in Taiwan, I would like to report in

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brief on the vagaries of Chinese names--vagaries that may tend to feed the stereotype that the Chinese are inscrutable.

In any Chinese environment, the Chinese family name is stated first: "Au Jye Sheng". Chinese characters (not words) are all monosyllabic. The practice in Singapore is not to hyphenate the given name. For example, in the name above, "Au" is the family name, while "Jye Sheng" is, in effect, a two-part given name. The "Jye" is definitely not thought of as a middle name.

In Taiwan this same name would appear as either "Au Jye Sheng" or as "Au Jye-Sheng". There would be a hyphen, and the first letter of the last part of the name might or might not be capitalized.

In Singapore, a cosmopolitan crossroads, there are many people who also have an English given name; staying with our example, we would then have "Jake Au Jye Sheng" with given names bracketing the

family name.

For married women, the plot thickens, since in business and professional circles they often retain their maiden name and add the English title of 'Madam'. Thus, Mr. Au's wife would be "Madam Sz Mei Li" with "Sz" being her maiden name. Or the same woman might choose to be recognized as "Mrs. Mary Au Sz Mei Li"; here the four characters represent her husband's family name, (and her own married name), her maiden name, and her two-character given name.

The following are the major varieties of Chinese spoken in Singapore: Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Mandarin. Mandarin is taught as a second language in the English-stream schools and as the first language in the Chinese-stream schools. The name "Tan" is among the most common in the 1973 Singapore Telephone Book. Here is how "Tan" would be read or pronounced in the above varieties: Hokkien - 'Tan'; Teochew - 'Tan'; Hakka - 'Chin'; Cantonese - 'Chan'; Hainanese - 'Tan'; Mandarin - 'Chen'. The point is that the multi-dialectal factor adds another complication.

Where English uses "John Doe", Chinese uses "Jang San, Li Sz" (Jang three, Li four). In Singapore it is not uncommon for a person to have an alias. In the recent graduation program at Nanyang University, I noticed several cases listed, with both variations given.

Next we should mention the matter of the romanization system used to transcribe the Chinese names. The Wade-Giles system uses apostrophes, for example to indicate aspiration, while the Yale system and the Pin-yin systems do not; the systems vary in other

(continued on page 13)

## CHINESE NAMES

*( continued from page 3 )*

ways as well. Then, according to Wade-Giles "Tan" would be more correctly spelled "T'an".

Above we stated that most Chinese names, family plus given, consist of three characters; but occasionally you find a one-character given name. This semester, in my class of twenty-two students, I have one such example.

The other day I had a conversation with a lady named Mrs. Wu, whose husband is of Shanghai origins. When she took a trip to Hong Kong, people there wondered why she didn't spell her name "Ng", which is the Cantonese equivalent of this name, which happens to mean "Five". Thus there seems to be some nebulosity even among the indigenes.