

Questions to Gao Rong about Chinese Names:

When your author was preparing an article called "What's in a Chinese Name?", he asked a Chinese friend, Gao Rong, several questions about Chinese names.

Here are the questions and Gao Rong's answers:

1) Regarding the custom, among peasants, of calling daughters by their number: Yimei, Ermei, Sanmei, etc., when did that stop?

"It stopped after 1949, when new China was built by Chairman Mao. After that, the parents could name their children by themselves.

"The eldest daughter used to be called *Damei* (*Da* means big, oldest), not *Yimen*; the 2nd daughter is called *Ermei* (No. 2); the third daughter is called *Sanmei* (No.3)..., etc. The youngest daughter is called *Yaomei* or *Xiaomen* (*Yao* means the last; *Xiao* means the smallest or youngest).

"According to Chinese tradition, giving names to children is a very serious step and must be thought about carefully, because the name may influence the life of the person. The family will pay or ask some well-educated one, or a grand old man or a fortune-teller to give the name according to the date & time of baby's birth: year, month, day and hour of one's birth time (The [4 Pillars of Destiny](#), [Sheng Chen Ba Zi](#)). So the given name is given after the baby is born. Many of persons get their given name when they will formally use their name such as going to school or working somewhere outside of their villages.

"When baby is born, the family (rich or poor) may not be ready to find the right person to give the name to the baby, so they name the baby by a sequence of number by themselves. If eldest daughter, she is called *Damen*, eldest son is called *Da-er* (*Er* means son)...etc.

"According to Chinese tradition, it is rude to call given names in family. Given names are used for people outside of family. I can only call my brother *GeGe*, and my elder brother can only call me *MeiMei*, not *Gao Rong*. My Mum has 2 brothers but I cannot call my uncles by their given name either. I can only call them *Da-jiu*, *Er-jiu*. (*Jiu* means uncle on mother's side). Only the elder generation can call younger generation people by their name, e.g. my grandpa can call my uncle by his given name, or call me Gao Rong or Rong. If my brother calls me Gao Rong, that means he is angry with me. If a father calls his daughter "*Mei*", that means he loves her. If father calls his daughter by her given name, that means, he is not happy with this daughter or he has serious thing to talk to her about. -----Note that this tradition changed after the "[one child policy](#)" started [1979 - it was phased out in 2015].

"In olden times, peasants were not educated or they thought it was not necessary to name a daughter seriously, so the daughter would use the name that her family called her as her given name.

As an example, actually, *Qimei* of Wen Qimei (mother of Mao Zedong) is not a formal given name at all.

“However, all these old traditions changed after Chairman Mao built the new China and he lead Chinese to break all old tradition including given names”.

2) Now, you have a single given name, 'Rong', when did the given names become double names?

“It seems after 1990s. During 1950s to 1980s, parents named their children by themselves, so many of the given names were simple but with good meaning. (During that period, most parents were not well educated at all in China). After 1979, that is the first year when the “one parent, one child” policy started, from then on, parents paid great attention to their valuable and only child. So the parents wanted to have really good meaning in their child’s given name, and they also wanted to avoid the same given name as someone else’s name. With a single given name like mine it is very easy to find the same ones! So, many Chinese parents returned to Chinese old traditions for given names, then double-word given names become popular again”.

3) Many Chinese also have an 'English' name. When is that name given, at school or at college?

“An ‘English’ name is given when the child has a foreign teacher to teach English class, or when he / she works in a company which has to speak with foreigners who call them by ‘phone, for example. This will usually happen in College, rather than school. One reason is that it is hard for foreigners to call/pronounce/remember Chinese names!

“Many college students up to now do not have English names if they do not have foreign teacher to call them.

“My son’s classmates all chose or were given an English name because their oral English class was taught by a foreigner. Otherwise, this teacher would never figure out who is who in one class, among 54 students.

“If a Chinese teacher teaches the English class, no student needs an English name at all”.

Gao Rong (Dec 2016)
MD of [China \(Fujian\) Stones Inc.](#)