

MODERN CHINESE NAMES

Compiled by Jonathan Walton

NOTES

Westerners encounter Chinese names in a variety of different formats, based on 1) which transliteration system (pinyin, Wade-Giles, HK government, some improvised system) is being used, 2) which dialect the name is being transcribed from (Mandarin, Cantonese, Fukien), 3) which order the various parts of the name (surname, given name, English name) are put in. Let's deal with the last issue first, since it's the most complex.

PARTS OF A CHINESE NAME

1) Surname

There is a limited list of commonly-encountered Chinese surnames, numbering around 500. Most of these are a single character, but two-character surnames do exist and are especially popular for dramatic personae because of their unusual flavor. The 20 most common surnames account for around 50% of the population, which is why you encounter so many people named Wang, Li, Zhang, Liu, Huang, Zhao, Ma, etc. The 100 most common surnames account for about 85% of Chinese people everywhere.

2) Given Name

Chinese given names are either one or two characters and can be almost anything. However, in practice, most character combinations don't make good names. Developing a sense of what is and isn't a good name can be difficult if you are not in an environment where you know thousands of Chinese people and can infer good names from those you already know. There are names that are clearly female, those that are clearly male, and those that are ambiguous. Generally, female names are often related to flowers, birds, beauty, and other "feminine" things. Male names are often abstract virtues (strength, diligence, wherewithal). Some given names either are or sound like verb-object combinations or other grammatical phrases, like "seeks truth" or "bright future." Not all of them make that kind of grammatical sense. My Chinese name means "strong life," but no one would actually use that character combination in a sentence.

a) Generational Names

Traditionally, all family members of a specific generation (you, your siblings, and your cousins) might share the first character of their given name. Li Mubai, for example, might have a cousin named Li Murong. The next generation would have a different generational character in their name. Sometimes these characters, when written together, form a poem or admonition. Generational names are not especially common in modern times (partially due to the One Child Policy), but you do run into them occasionally, with cousins. Soon, however, most urban people won't have cousins.

b) Birth Order Names

Way, way back, the first character of your given name was often an indication of what order you were born in. This practice is even less common than generational names, but sometimes a family will decide to be old fashioned. Still, let's not deal with it.

3) English Name

Many Chinese people have adopted or been given English names, especially those living abroad, those living in Hong Kong or Macao, and those who regularly interact with Westerners. Usually, the names chosen are common, somewhat old-fashioned, and diminutive (often ending in "-y" or "-ie") Anglo-American names, so they sound ultra-Anglo, even more Anglo than the Anglos.

Story-Games Names Project

Hence the prevalence of Jackie, Jay, Faye, Sammi, Jimmy, Kelly, Johnny, Tony, Andy, etc. The names of Chinese people born on foreign soil (and, thus, native citizens of non-Chinese countries) are not always so cutesy, but Chinese parents do seem to pick names that are especially common and familiar, trying to stand out as little as possible.

ORDERING A CHINESE NAME

Traditional: Surname + Given Name = Liang Jiawei / Leung Chiu-wai

Traditional HK Style: Anglo Name + Surname + Given Name = Tony Leung Chiu-wai

Short Flipped HK Style: Anglo Name + Surname = Tony Leung

Long Flipped HK Style: Anglo Name + Given Name + Surname = Tony Chiu-wai Leung

Space, No Space, Hyphen, Apostrophe?

If you have a two-character given name (or a rare two-character surname), you can either 1) put a space between the characters and capitalize both (Chiu Wai), 2) hyphenate them and capitalize just the first one or both (Chiu-wai / Chiu-Wai), 3) not have any divider between them at all (Jiawei), or, 4) if there's the possibility that running them together might cause them to be read incorrectly, you can put an apostrophe between the two characters (Ji'nan vs. Jin'an). Which method you use also has cultural considerations.

People from HK and Taiwan (and Macao, and Singapore) love hyphens. Hyphenate that bad boy and be done with it. But they're not always consistent, so you could do it another way, if you prefer. People from the mainland tend to run the characters together and use apostrophes in the rare cases where they might be necessary. Usually you don't need a divider (Mao Zedong, Zhu Rongji, Deng Xiaoping). Some people prefer to space all the characters out (Deng Xiao Ping), but this is much less common.

Chinese people in other parts of the world (the diaspora) are not especially consistent. Look up a bunch of Chinese names in the area you want your character to be from and punctuate your name accordingly.

COMMON SURNAMES 1
(Pinyin / Wade-Giles / HK/Cantonese)

1. Li / Li / Lee
2. Wang / Wang / Wong
3. Zhang / Chang / Cheung
4. Liu / Liu / Lau
5. Chen / Ch'en / Chan
6. Yang / Yang / Yeung
7. Huang / Huang / Wong
8. Zhao / Chao / Chiu
9. Zhou / Chou / Chow
10. Wu / Wu / Ng
11. Xu / Hsu / Tsui
12. Sun / Sun / Suen
13. Zhu / Chu / Chu
14. Ma / Ma / Ma
15. Hu / Hu / Woo
16. Guo / Kuo / Kwok
17. Lin / Lin / Lam
18. He / He / Ho
19. Gao / Kao / Ko
20. Liang / Liang / Leung

COMMON SURNAMES 2
(Pinyin / Wade-Giles / HK/Cantonese)

1. Zheng / Cheng / Cheng
2. Luo / Lo / Lo
3. Song / Sung / Soong
4. Xie / Hsieh / Tse
5. Tang / T'ang / Tong
6. Han / Han / Hon
7. Cao / Ts'ao / Tso
8. Xu / Hsu / Hui
9. Deng / Teng / Tang
10. Xiao / Hsiao / Siu
11. Feng / Feng / Fung
12. Zeng / Tseng / Tsang
13. Cheng / Ch'eng / Ching
14. Cai / Ts'ai / Choi
15. Peng / P'eng / Pang
16. Pan / P'an / Poon
17. Yuan / Yuan / Yuen
18. Yu / Yu / Yue
19. Dong / Tung / Tung
20. Yu / Yu / Yee

COMPOUND SURNAMES
(Pinyin and HK/Cantonese)

1. Baili / Pak Lee
2. Dongfang / Tung Fong
3. Duanmu / Tuen Muk
4. Gongsun / Kung Suen
5. Guliang / Kuk Leung
6. Helian / Hak Lin
7. Huyan / Fu Yin
8. Linghu / Ling Wu
9. Murong / Mo Yung
10. Nangong / Nam Kung
11. Ouyang / Au Yeung
12. Shangguan / Sheung Kwun
13. Sima / Sze Ma
14. Situ / Sze To
15. Taishi / Tai Shi
16. Ximen / Sai Mun
17. Zhangsun / Cheung Suen
18. Zhuge / Chu Kok
19. Zhurong / Chok Yung
20. Zuoren / Tso Yan

Story-Games Names Project

FEMALE MANDARIN GIVEN NAMES 1

1. Yandong
2. Jianxiu
3. Luli
4. Xiulian
5. Sheng
6. Fangchun
7. Jie
8. Chunmei
9. Guoying
10. Jingzhen
11. Yiping
12. Ling
13. Pingyan
14. Shiyu
15. Jinhua
16. Dan
17. Xiuli
18. Lili
19. Yinting
20. Paihong

MALE MANDARIN GIVEN NAMES 1

1. Zhongyu
2. Hui
3. Jin
4. Siqin
5. Guoming
6. Lichen
7. Haocai
8. Kehui
9. Tienong
10. Kuiyuan
11. Kuangdi
12. Zhaozhuo
13. Mengfu
14. Xuan
15. Meng
16. Lei
17. Zhaoguo
18. Tieying
19. Huaren
20. Jialu

FEMALE MANDARIN GIVEN NAMES 2

1. Lihua
2. Huirong
3. Mei
4. Hongwu
5. Hui
6. Cunxiu
7. Zhuanrong
8. Ya
9. Shaoming
10. Jiaohua
11. Yun
12. Zhenzhen
13. Chenghua
14. Xiaonan
15. Zhisheng
16. Hua
17. Qin
18. Li
19. Luming
20. Xianglan

MALE MANDARIN GIVEN NAMES 2

1. Shisun
2. Yongxiang
3. Qide
4. Bangguo
5. Jiabao
6. Peiyan
7. Liangyu
8. Yongkang
9. Jianmin
10. Zhili
11. Caihou
12. Ji'nai
13. Guanglie
14. Bingde
15. Qingchen
16. Dingfa
17. Zhiyuan
18. Xilong
19. Yang
20. Chunwang

Story-Games Names Project

HK/CANTONESE FEMALE GIVEN NAMES

1. Shuk-Yee
2. Chung-Yee
3. Sau-Tung
4. Mei-Mei
5. Bee-Lung
6. Cheuk-Wa
7. Kin-Wo
8. Wai-Lee
9. Yat-Fan
10. Mun-Kit
11. Yen-Mah
12. Ho-Kwan
13. Kwai-Hing
14. Man-Wai
15. Kar-Mei
16. Yuk-Yin
17. Chun-Chi
18. Fung-Ying
19. Lei-Kuan
20. Ai-Kyeu

HK/CANTONESE MALE GIVEN NAMES

1. Si-Yan
2. Ming-Yueng
3. Ying-Yen
4. Yan-Lung
5. Chi-Ping
6. Kwok-cheung
7. Shu-Kwan
8. Si-Hang
9. Sui-Lung
10. Siu-Kwong
11. Yat-Ngok
12. Chun-Ying
13. Yok-Sing
14. Yiu-Tong
15. Cheung-Sing
16. Kwok-Po
17. Yeh-Kwong
18. Che-Hung
19. Kin-Tung
20. Hung-Ling

COMMON FEMALE HK ENGLISH NAMES

1. Selina
2. Sarah
3. Denise
4. Kelly
5. Samantha / Sammy
6. Connie
7. Stephanie
8. Cecilia
9. Vivian
10. Maggie
11. Teresa
12. Ella
13. Sandy
14. Tiffany
15. Karen
16. Janice
17. Sally
18. Isabella
19. Mandy
20. Rachel

COMMON MALE HK ENGLISH NAMES

1. Donald / Donny
2. Henry
3. Michael
4. Joseph / Joe
5. Patrick
6. Stephen
7. Andrew / Andy
8. Charles / Charley
9. Ronald / Ronny
10. David
11. Victor
12. William
13. Jackie / Jacky
14. John / Johnny
15. Daniel / Danny
16. Eason
17. Edison
18. Aaron
19. Anthony / Tony
20. Nicolas