

Chinese Corner

Things to consider when choosing a Chinese name

Ex-pats living and working in China often adopt a Chinese name, which shows a certain respect for the local Chinese language and culture. But what sort of name to choose?

The obvious choice is simply to use the phonetic translation of your given name, which will usually translate into two or three characters emulating the Chinese style. You can find the phonetic translations of common western names in the back of most Chinese dictionaries, and you may find that your school has already adopted it for its Chinese paperwork anyway. Examples include *Bǎo Luó* (保罗) for “Paul”, *Mǎ Kè* (马克) for “Mark” and *Mǐ Xuě* (米雪) for “Michelle”. Adopting a phonetic translation of your name is useful as it allows Chinese people to refer to you in a more recognizable form, i.e. emulating Chinese characters.

Chinese parents usually choose names for their children which reflect the aspirations they have for them. Sometimes the family name contains part of the meaning, such as *Zhāng Yì Fēi* (张翼飞), “Open Wings Fly”, and *Fù Qiáng* (傅强), “Rich Strong”, while sometimes the family name carries no meaning, for example *Lǐ Tiān Yī* (李天一), “(surname) Sky First” (i.e. “No.1 in the world”). This habit of conferring aspirational or meaningful names may also be why you sometimes get students choosing English names such as “Perfect”, “King”, “Beauty” or “Sky”, emulating the Chinese naming method or even their own Chinese names.

You can adopt this method of naming by choosing a similarly meaningful moniker. An example is the famous (in China) Canadian called *Dà Shān* (大山), or “Big Mountain”. However, for a Chinese name to be considered proper, rather than just a nickname like *Dà Shān*, it needs to include a Chinese family name, such as *Wáng* (王), *Lǐ* (李) or *Zhāng* (张), usually from the *bǎi jiā xìng* (百家姓), “100 family names”.

Also, when choosing a name you also need to consider the kind of impression you wish to make. A name such as *Mǎ Xiāo Yáo* (马逍遥), “Horse Wild Free”, sounds “cool/funny/silly” (Chinese person’s words), which is fine if you are young and want to come across as “cool/funny/silly”. However, if you want to be taken seriously, a more serious name is probably more appropriate.

So, in conclusion, if you want a “real” Chinese name it should include a family name, and a meaningful given name. It would probably be advisable to get a Chinese person to help you navigate the subtleties of meaning that Chinese characters contain (see the problem translating *Lǐ Tiān Yī* above). Alternatively, you can choose the simple translation of your own name, which is functional if a little boring.

¹ The character for *fù* (富) which means ‘rich’ is a different character to the character for *Fù* (傅) used as a surname. However, because they are the same tone, the meaning can be implied.

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