WHAT'S YOUR NAME? (in Chinese and English)

by April Lou (NE) Non-English Coordinator, P. S. 1 (also P. S. 23)

"What is your name?" For a Chinese child, two images would be visualized — a Chinese name and an American name. Names are very important to the Chinese and are usually chosen with care. First and second generation Chinese in America choose the Chinese name first because they consider it the more important of the two. The name is usually chosen by the child's paternal grandfather or an old granduncle of the family. As for the American name, it is most often chosen by the child's parents.

The problem of giving a Chinese child an American name is sometimes related to his Chinese name because of a similar phonetic sound (Ray-min becomes Raymond); Wei-lin becomes Whalen). In other cases, children are named for the month or season in which they were born (April, Snow, Spring). Others are named for precious jewels (Jade, Crystal, Pearl). More recently Chinese parents have been giving their children American names in the same way American parents do— because they like the sound of a particular name.

A Chinese who follows Chinese traditions believes that a name can guide or alter a person's destiny. Because of this belief, a Chinese uses many methods to determine just the right name for each person. Eight of the most common methods are explained below. (Wherever possible, these are used as guides for the translation of Chinese names into American names).

1. A name can contain words of good omen as good wishes for the child. For example, (gway)-expensive, (gim)-gold (fook)-happiness.

2. A name can contain words used for astrological purposes. When a child is born, a wise man skilled in interpreting astrological symbols and formations foretells the child's destiny and looks to see if any of the important five elements are lacking in his future. One needs a balance of all five for a good life. The five elements are (gim)-gold, (mook)-wood, (faw)-fire, (suey)-water, (nye) - earth. By putting one of these elements in a name, one hopes to eliminate the imbalance.

3. A name may contain words indicating a special occasion at the time of the child's birth, like Spring or New Year's Day or Grandfather's birthday. This usually indicates good luck.

4. A name may contain words indicating the parents' wish for the child. For example: (sur) - scholarly career; (bing) - military career; (shur) - writing career.

5. A name may contain words indicating respect for a forefather. This would be similar to the "namesake" in the American custom where one is named after a relative.

6. A name may contain words indicating the virtues of the sexes. For example: (may) - girl - beauty, gentleness, gracefulness; (ying) - boy - hero.

7. A name may contain words indicating generations in a class. For example: Every person born in the third generation must have this character in his or her name (mon).

8. A name may contain words indicating the order of brothers (eldest, 2nd, 3rd, youngest).

The last two methods are used among many, to give information about each child so that relatives will know exactly where he belongs in the family tree. This is necessary because a family in China is not just the immediate one, but one which includes Aunts, Uncles, and Cousins, many times removed.

With special thanks to Professor Loo, Department of Chinese, Columbia University, and to Mr. S. Seid of our Parents' Association.

Toby K. Kurzband, Principal, P. S. 1, Manhattan

P. S. 1 - 8 Henry Street, N. Y. 38, N. Y.
PARENTS' ASSOCIATION
President - Mrs. Beatrice Chu

親愛的家長,

有一個問題是因為我們的中國兒童在学校未有英文名,其中有多数欲取一個英文名,今年在P.S.1我們已幫那些未有英文名的兒童取擇一個.

所以我們預定在下星期一日即(十一月九日)係某一日欢迎父母參加兴祝那些兒童之英文新名,故以校長很希望各位家長尽量抽空時間来參加这個兴祝会,兴祝会完後,欢迎各位家長參观兒童之学習情形及先生那天有中國人在以幫助那些不会講英文之家長,時間:星期一日上午九時十五分,開始兴祝会。

TRANSLATION: Dear Parents: One of the problems for Chinese parents in our public school is that some of them have only a Chinese name. Many of them voiced their desire for an American one, so this year at P. S. 1, we took on the project of helping parents choose an American name for their children. We, at the school, felt that Monday, November 9th, first day of Open School Week, would be a wonderful opportunity to have a little celebration for the newly-named children and to invite all Chinese parents to visit the school. Dr. Kurz-band extends his invitation to all of you to come. After a short assembly program, you are welcome to visit your child's class and teacher. We are looking forward to greeting you on Monday, at 9:15 A.M.

Chinese text by
Mrs. Helen Lee, Parent of Pupil, P. S. 1

Miss April Lou, Teacher P. S. 1 and P. S. 23, assigned to work with Chinese children and parents.