

4.5 Names in detail

Some basic information about names and titles was presented in Unit 1 (§1.6.1 and 1.9.1) and Unit 2 (§2.6). This section adds further details.

4.5.1 The form of names

Chinese names are usually either two or three syllables long:

Wáng Mǎng Dù Fǔ	Lǐ Péng Cuī Jiàn	Liú Bāng Jiāng Qīng
Dèng Xiǎopíng Jiāng Zémín	Lǐ Dēnghuī Zhū Róngjī	Lǐ Guāngyào Máo Zédōng

Names of four or more syllables are usually foreign:

Zhōngcūn Yángzǐ	(Japanese)
Yuēhàn Shímìsī	John Smith

Notice that two-syllable *xìng*, like two-syllable *míngzi* are, by convention, written without spaces. (English syllabification practices are not suitable for pinyin; so, for example, a name like, Geling, will by English syllabification rules ‘wrap around’ as Ge-ling rather than the correct Ge-ling.)

4.5.2 *Xìng*

Xìng are rather limited in number. In fact, an expression for ‘the common people’ lǎobǎixìng ‘old hundred names’ suggests that there are only 100 *xìng*, though in fact, there are considerably more (and bǎi in that expression was not intended literally). Most [Chinese] *xìng* are single-syllable (Zhāng, Wáng, Lǐ), but a few are double-syllable (Sīmǎ, Ōuyáng, Sītú). Sīmǎ, you should know, was the *xìng* of China’s first major historian, Sīmǎ Qiān (145-86 BC), who wrote the Shǐ Jì, a history of China from earliest times to the Han dynasty, when he lived.

The character primer called the Bǎijiāxìng ‘Multitude of Family Names (100-family-names)’, that first appeared in the 10th century, gives over 400 single-syllable surnames and some 40 double. In modern times, rare surnames would enlarge those numbers, but relatively few surnames account for a large percentage of the population. It has been estimated that 20 surnames account for about 50% of the population; people named Lǐ alone may number as many as 100 million. Some *xìng* have meanings: Bái ‘white’, Wáng ‘king’. But others are (now) just names, eg Wú (of persons, as well as the name of several historical states). Some names are homophonous, differing only in character (eg the two Lù’s [路, 陆] cited in an earlier example); others differ only in tone, eg: Wáng (王) and Wāng (汪).

4.5.3 Other names

In addition to their public names (xìng), Chinese traditionally had (and some still have) a number of other names, including the zì, a disyllabic name taken (mostly by males) for use outside the family, and hào, adult nickname (again, more for males). Still other names were given in infancy (rǔmíng or xiǎomíng), in childhood (míng), or, at the other extreme, after death (shìhào). In modern times, the míng and the zì combine to form the míngzì ‘given name’; rǔmíngs are still common, eg xiǎobǎo ‘little treasure’.

It is worth examining the first lines of traditional biographical entries to see how names are cited. Here are two examples, one about a modern leader, Dèng Xiǎopíng (from an exhibit in the Hong Kong Museum of History), the other, from an entry in the *Cí Hǎi* (‘word sea’), one of the more comprehensive of modern Chinese-to-Chinese dictionaries. It is introducing Confucius, who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Both entries are rendered in pinyin, with underscoring and highlighting to make the correspondences clearer:

- i) Dèng Xiǎopíng yuánmíng Dèng Xiānshèng, xuémíng Dèng Xīxián, 1904 nián 8 yuè, 22 rì chūshēng....

Deng Xiaoping former name Deng Xiansheng, school [formal] name Deng Xixian, 1904 [year] August 22 [day] born....

- ii) Kǒngzǐ (**gōngyuánqián** 551 – gōngyuánqián 479): Chūn Qiū **mòqī**, sīxiǎngjiā, zhèngzhìjiā, jiàoyùjiā, Rújiā de **chuàngshǐzhě**. Míng Qiū, zì Zhōngnǐ. **Lǚguó** Zōuyì (**jīn** Shāndōng Qǔbù dōngnán) **rén**.

Confucius (BC 551 – BC 479): End of the Spring and Autumn period; a philosopher, statesman, educator and founder of the Confucian School. His ‘míng’ was Qiū, his ‘zì’ was Zhōngnǐ. He was a man from Zōuyì in the state of Lǚ (near modern southeast Qǔbù in Shāndōng).

4.5.4 Míngzì (‘name-character’)

Given names, míngzì, are more various than xìng and often selected for their meaning (along with well the appearance of their characters): Cài Qiáng ‘Cai strong’; Cài Pǔ ‘Cai great’; Cáo Hóng ‘Cao red’ [red being an auspicious color]; Lín Yíxī ‘Lin happy-hope’; Zhāng Shūxiá ‘Zhāng virtuous-chivalrous’; Luó Jiāqí ‘Luo family-in+good+order’. In many cases it is possible to guess the sex of the person from the meanings of the name. (Of the 6 names mentioned in this paragraph, #3,4,5 are female, #1,2,6 are male, as it turns out.)

It is common practice to incorporate generational names in the míngzì by assigning a particular syllable (often chosen from a poem) to each generation. So for example, Máo Zédōng’s younger brothers were Máo Zémín and Máo Zétán; his younger

sister was Máo Zéhóng . All contain the syllable Zé (泽). Such practices allow people from the same district to work out – and remember - their kinship when they meet.

4.5.5 Usage

At pre-arranged meetings, people will introduce themselves and immediately present a business card. But at other times, people may wait to be introduced. If you do ask a stranger a name (say, someone seated next to you on a train) you would – as noted in Unit 2 -- use the polite form, guìxìng, often with the deferential pronoun nín. And generally, the response would supply xìng and míngzì:

[Nín] guìxìng? Wǒ xìng Liú, jiào Liú Shíjiǔ.

In Taiwan, and sometimes on the Mainland, people may answer with humble forms:

(Taiwan) Guìxìng? / Bìxìng Wèi. (Lit. ‘shabby surname...’)
(Mainland) Guìxìng? / Miǎn guì, xìng Wèi. (Lit. ‘dispense with guì...’)

4.6 Years

4.6.1 Dates

As noted in §1.3.4, years in dates are usually expressed as strings of single digits (rather than large numbers) placed before nián ‘year’. The only exception is the millennium year, 2000, which is sometimes expressed as ‘two thousand’ (making it, at a stretch, potentially ambiguous with 2000 years [in duration]).

2002	èrlínglíng’èr nián
1998	yījiǔjiǔbā nián
1840	yībāsilíng nián
2000	èrlínglínglíng nián or liǎngqiān nián

The question word used to elicit a year as a date is něi nián ‘which year’. [Recall něi is the combining form of nǎ ‘which’, just as nèi is the combining form of nà.] But asking about dates in the past introduces some grammatical features that will have to wait until a later unit.

In the Republic of China – Taiwan, years are numbered formally from the establishment of the Republic, with 1912 as year #1. Here are the dates on two newspapers, one from the Mainland, and one from Taiwan:

<u>Zhōngguó Dàlù [PRC]</u>	<u>Táiwān [ROC]</u>
èr líng líng èr nián	jiǔshíyī nián
shíyuè	shíyuè
èrshíyī rì	èrshíyī rì
xīngqīyī	xīngqīyī

Observe the year: Mainland 2002 - Taiwan 91. If you subtract the Taiwan year, 91, from 2002, you get 1911, the date of the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a republic (gònghéguó). In Chinese, the official name of Taiwan is still Zhōnghuá Mínguó ‘The Republic of China [ROC]’; the Mainland is called Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó ‘The People’s Republic of China [PRC]’. So to translate the ROC date into the PRC, or western calendar date, you add 1911 years. In speech, the ROC year is only used on formal occasions in Taiwan, but it is still usual in official writing.

4.6.2 Historical notes on dating

In Unit 1, you were introduced to a set of 10 terms of fixed order, the tiāngān or ‘heavenly stems’, which the Chinese use to designate members of a sequence. Traditionally, these tiāngān were used in combination with another set of 12, known as the dìzhī ‘the earthly branches’. The two sets formed a cycle of 60 gānzhī.

tiāngān	甲 乙 丙 丁 戊 己 庚 辛 壬 癸	(10)
	jiǎ yǐ bǐng dīng wù jǐ gēng xīn rén guǐ	

dìzhī	子 丑 寅 卯 辰 巳 午 未 申 酉 戌 亥	(12)
	zǐ chǒu yín mǎo chén sì wǔ wèi shēn yǒu xū hài	

A sequence of 60 is achieved by combining the two sets in pairs, 甲子 jiǎzǐ, 乙丑 yǐchǒu, 丙寅 bǐngyín, and so on until the tenth, 癸酉 guǐyǒu, at which point the tiāngān begin again while the dìzhī continue: 甲戌 jiǎxū, 乙亥 yǐhài, 丙子 bǐngzǐ. After six repetitions of the tiāngān and five of the dìzhī, ending on 癸亥 guǐhài, all 60 possible combinations of the two sets will have been used, and the cycle begins again.

The gānzhī sets are attested as early as the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 BCE) on oracle bone inscriptions, when they were apparently used to count days (Wilkenson: 176). But the sets, individually as 10 or 12, or in combination as a set of 60, also came to designate other temporal units, such as years and hours. The 60 gānzhī were used to specify the dates of specific historical events. This was done by specifying the ruling emperor, either by name, or more usually, by reign name (niánhào), and then by counting from the first year of his reign using the gānzhī pairs.

Reign names of which several were often used over a single reign, were chosen for their auspicious meanings. The better known emperors are often known only by their reign names. Thus, Kāngxī, meaning ‘vitality and brilliance’ is the reign name of the great Qing emperor who ruled from 1661-1722. The well-known dictionary compiled during his reign is referred to, in English, as the *Kangxi Dictionary*. It contains almost 50,000 entries, and is still sold in Chinese bookshops. Kangxi’s grandson, the Qiánlóng emperor (also known by his reign name) is also well-known in the West. His long and eventful rule from 1736 - 96 just exceeded a 60 year gānzhī cycle. Some historical events are still commonly referred to by their gānzhī names, eg the Xīnhài Gémìng ‘the 1911 Revolution’ (xīnhài being year 48 of the 60 cycle).

The 12 dìzhī were also used to designate time of day, each one being assigned a two-hour period, beginning with 11pm to 1 am. These ‘hours’ (or shí) also correlated with the shēngxiào, the 12 animals of the zodiac (§4.6.4), so that the first dìzhī, 子 zǐ, linked to the first animal shǔ ‘rat’, designated the two hours from 11 pm to 1 am, the second, 丑 chǒu, linked with niú ‘ox’, designated the ‘hour’ 1 am to 3 am, and so on. The five ‘hours’ that fall in the night (at least in the most populated regions) were also called the wǔgēng, or ‘five changes’ or ‘shifts’ (yìgēng to wǔgēng). In cities, daytime ‘hours’ were announced by rhythmical beats from the official drum (gǔ), often lodged in drum towers (gǔlóu) of the sort that survive in cities such as Xi’an and Beijing. The drumming would then be repeated in more distant neighborhoods.

In addition to the dìzhī ‘hours’, from very early times time was also kept by means of water clocks or ‘clepsydra’ (a word derived from Greek roots for ‘steal’ and ‘water’). Water clocks measured time by the flow of water through a small aperture. Chinese water clocks traditionally divided the day into 100 equal divisions, called kè. The root meaning of kè is ‘to inscribe’, suggesting markings on a gauge; the usage survives in the modern terms for ‘quarter past’ and ‘quarter to’ the hour, yíqè and sānqè. One kè represented 14.4 minutes, or approximately 1/8th of a ‘double hour’ (or 1/100 of a day).

In 1912, the new Republic of China officially adopted the Gregorian calendar, and 1912 was named year one of the new era (so 2004 is year 93). In the modern era, Chinese have sometimes dated from the birthdate of Huángdì ‘the Yellow Emperor’ (one of the five mythical founding emperors). At the beginning of the Republic, this date was fixed as 4609 years before year one of the Republic, ie 2698 BCE.

4.6.3 Age

While in English, age and duration are both given in years (‘3 years old’, ‘for 3 years’), in Chinese there is a distinction. Years of duration are counted with nián (originally ‘a harvest’ or ‘harvest year’): sān nián ‘3 years’; sānshí nián ‘30 years’. But years of age are counted with sui (originally used for the planet ‘Jupiter’, with its revolutionary period of 12 years, then for the yearly cycle of seasons). Thus: shíbā suì ‘18 years old’, èrshíyī suì ‘21 years old’, jiǔ suì ‘9 years old’.

Asking about the age of adults, one can safely use the following expression:

Tā duō dà le?	(S/he how big by+now?)
Tā èrshíbā <sui> le.	S/he’s 28.

The addition of the noun niánjì ‘age’ makes the expressions a little more formal, and therefore more appropriate for a direct inquiry:

Nǐ duō dà niánjì?	(You how big age?)
Tā niánjì duō dà le?	(S/he age how big by+now?)

As the examples show, age can be expressed without a verb, much like dates in, where shì can be omitted in cases where there is no adverbial modification. Shì may also appear when rejecting an age:

Tā bú shì sìshí suì, tā shì shísì suì.	She's not 40, she's 14.
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But otherwise, when a verb has to be supplied for an adverbial modifier, it is usually yǒu (rather than shì):

Tā duō dà? Tā zhǐ yǒu bā suì.	How old is he? He's only 8.
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With children, it is possible to ask about age directly using the basic expression: Nǐ jǐ suì? 'How many years old are you?' There are also deferential ways of asking about the age of older people. Sometimes, using the respectful form of address for old people, lǎorénjiā, will convey sufficient deference:

<Lǎorénjiā> jīnnián duō dà niánjì?	<Kind sir> may I ask how old [you] are this year?
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Other expressions are also available that convey the tone of English 'May I ask your age, sir?'

<Lǎorénjiā> guì gèng?	(<venerable+sir> worthy-age?)
<Lǎorénjiā> gāoshòu?	(<venerable+sir> long-life?)

One additional point: age is frequently given as an approximation, in which case lái (cognate with lái 'come') can be inserted between the number (typically a multiple of ten) and the M, suì:

Tā duō dà? Tā <yǒu> wǔshí lái suì	How old is he? She's about 50 [50 ~ 55]; she's 50 something.
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Notes

- a) Notice that duō in duō dà functions as a question word meaning 'to what degree'.
- b) Le often appears with expressions of age in the sense of 'so far; by now'; however, the restrictive adverb zhǐ, is not compatible with final le.
- d) Suì can be omitted where the number is above a single digit: èrshíbā <suì>.

4.6.4 The animal signs

At times, it may be inappropriate to ask someone directly about his/her age, but it is nevertheless important to know roughly how old a person is so as to be able to use proper levels of deference. So Chinese often ask what one's zodiac sign is instead, and infer age from that. Birth signs, called shēngxiào ('born-resemble') or shǔxiàng ('belong-appearance') are the 12 animals associated with the Chinese zodiac, beginning with the rat and ending with the pig. For reference, two recent cycles of years are noted here:

shǔ > niú > hǔ > tù > lóng > shé > mǎ > yáng > hóu > jī > gǒu > zhū.
 rat > ox > tiger > hare > dragon > snake > horse > goat > monkey > chicken > dog > pig

1984 > 85 > 86 > 87 > 88 > 89 > 90 > 91 > 92 > 93 > 94 > 95
 1972 > 73 > 74 > 75 > 76 > 77 > 78 > 79 > 80 > 81 > 82 > 83

Comments about birth signs generally make use of the verb shǔ 'belong to': Wǒ shǔ mǎ, tā shǔ tù! 'I'm the horse [year], she's the hare.' So to discover a person's age, you can ask:

Qǐngwèn, nǐ <shì> shǔ shénme de? What's your animal sign, please?
 Wǒ <shì> shǔ lóng de. I'm the year of the dragon.

Notes

- The pattern here with *shì* and *de* translates literally 'you be belong [to] what one', which suggests a permanent status rather than a fleeting one; however, people do ask the question in its leaner form as well: Nǐ shǔ shénme?
- In 2005, a person born in the year of the dragon is either 17, 29, 41, etc. In most cases, the correct choice will be obvious.

Though traditionally, they have played a relatively small role in the casting of horoscopes and predicting the future, in recent years, particularly in more cosmopolitan places such as Hong Kong, the zodiac signs have come to play a more important role in the matching of couples for marriage, as well as in other social activities.

4.6.5 Year in school or college

'Year' or 'grade' in school or college is niánjí (unfortunately close to niánjì 'age', introduced in the previous section). Niánjí is a compound consisting of nián 'year' and jí 'level'. Different levels are expressed as yīniánjí 'first year (freshman)'; èrniánjí 'second year (sophomore)', etc. The question, 'which level', is formed with the low toned jǐ 'how many; how much'; hence, jǐniánjí 'what year':

- Q. Qǐngwèn, nǐ shì jǐniánjí de < xuésheng >? Excuse me [may I ask], what grade you're in?
- A. Wǒ shì sìniánjí de < xuésheng >. I'm a fourth year student.
Wǒ shì Qīng Huá sānniánjí de xuésheng. I'm a 3rd year student at Tsinghua.
- Wǒ bú shì xuésheng. I'm not a student.
Wǒ shì yánjiūshēng. I'm a graduate (or Brit. 'post-graduate') student. (research-student)

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