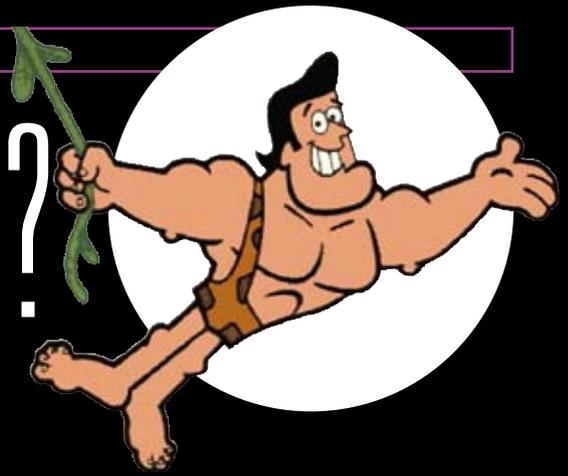


WHAT'S IN A NAME?

HOW THE PEKING MAN GOT HIS NAME

by George Ding



I was born, I'm told, on a windy evening in Gongan Hospital in central Beijing.

After I popped out, there was the question of what to call this overgrown fetus. My grandmother, an imposing doyenne, suggested the arcane character *xiao* (肖) and, I guess, no one had a better idea.

If you'll notice, that character is composed of three of these: 白 (*bai*). *Xiao* means "bright" or "brilliant," without the attendant suggestion of intelligence that the words carry in English.

Later, I was told that my grandmother picked the name out of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, which raises several questions: Why did she bring the *Kangxi Dictionary* to the hospital? And couldn't she have decided on a name earlier?

Also, did Grams pick the name randomly by flipping to a page and sticking her finger down on a word? If that's the case, I could have just as well been named "river valley" or "colon."

However it went down, I had a name. It was only years later that I realized what a troublesome one it was.

When I went to America at age four, I had the chance to choose my own name.

I was legally registered in the United States as Xiao Ding, but I soon found out, like countless immigrants before me, if your name contains a phoneme not present within the English language, you can bet it'll be butchered by every Anglophone you encounter for the rest of your life.

At home, my parents called me Xiao'r, appending the Beijing curl to the character, but when I entered kindergarten, what should have been pronounced "Hsiao" became "Zee-ow" or, more puzzlingly, "Eggs-aye-oh," a name worthy of a comic book supervillain.

I would try to correct my teachers and classmates, but to my puzzlement, they were unable to produce that particular sibilant. "Shee-ow" was as close as they got.

So, to spare me and those around me a lifetime of awkwardness, a new name was in order. But which one?

To pluck a name out of thin air, without the help of *Babynames.com* or a grandmother with a dictionary, seemed like a tall order for a 4-year-old, but it was either that or keep telling people, "No, it's not Eggs-aye-oh."

I first considered my friends' names – the Michaels, Johns and Kevins of the world – but decided that I wanted something fresh and unique. Even now, I am surprised at my equanimity as a child, for not picking something gimmicky like "Superman" or "Ice Cream."

Days went by. I couldn't think of anything that really fit who I was and who I wanted to be.

Then, inspiration struck.

One night, my dad told me a bedtime story about a hard-boiled policeman named George, who rode around on a motorcycle busting bad guys.

The next day, in my kindergarten class, I recounted my father's thrilling tale of the grizzled detective breaking up a gambling ring. My classmates were on the edge of their seats. Perhaps carried by this momentum, I impulsively announced: "And that's why I've chosen my new name to be George."

Needless to say, I've regretted it every day since.

How was I to know that all the fictional characters named George I'd encounter later in life would taint my perception of the name?

First, I heard that there was a character in the *Nancy Drew* series with my name. Turns out George was a girl.

Then there was Curious George, who wasn't even a human.

After that came George of the Jungle. Correct species and gender – but the guy was a dendrophilic buffoon. I would be taunted endlessly with his theme song.

Later, in high school, I'd encounter the demented King George III, the cuckold George Wilson from *The Great Gatsby*, and the neurotic from *Seinfeld*, George Costanza.

Far from being unique, my name was well-worn – and, by the time I had chosen it, reserved for pitiful louts and comic relief. Even my father, who had named that fateful policeman, later admitted that he borrowed the name from then-president George H.W. Bush. I won't even get into how embarrassing the name George became after his son was done with it.

Why *hadn't* I chosen to call myself Ice Cream? Everybody likes ice cream.

George wasn't even the most problematic part of my name. When it came to ridicule, Ding had infinitely more possibilities: George Ding-dong. George Ding-a-ling. George Noding-a-ling.

And my old name didn't just go away.

My Chinese passport still said Ding Xiao. But in 1989, the year I was issued that passport, the archaic character *xiao* didn't exist in any computer databases. Someone had used a pen to write in the character 肖.

When I returned to China at the age of 13, the customs officer found this suspicious. He called his supervisor.

I was taken into a small room. "Is this your real name?" the supervisor asked.

When I told him it was, he asked if I had written in the character myself. After checking my bags and seeing only clothes and stuffed animals, he let me go.

Before handing back my passport, he asked, "How do you read this character?"

"Take a guess," I said.

He frowned, scrutinizing the three 白 "whites" stacked on top of each other.

"Ding Sanbai?"

Close enough.

