

Obviously, if I wanted to give myself a revolutionary name, I'd have to change my family name as well. I had read a report in a newspaper about a boy who, in order to express his boundless respect for the great leader Chairman Mao, had changed his own family name Mu to Mao. I was going to use him as my example. But this time I first consulted Wang Zaofan.

"You want to name yourself *Mao* too? Hah! Pee on the ground and look at your image to see if you're worthy of the name *Mao*. What kind of person was your father?" he snarled with curled lips. Zaofan was seven inches shorter than I, so for greater emphasis he jumped up on a chair and continued, "What kind of person was your grandfather?"

I knew what he was getting at. Before their deaths, my father had been a rightist and my grandfather a landlord. I was not worthy of so great and honorable a family name as *Mao*; absolutely not.

Finally, I adopted my mother's family name, *Qin*, as my own. Before the decision was made, I carried out as thorough a research as possible. I consulted three different dictionaries. They all defined the character *Qin* as follows: the *Qin* Dynasty (221-207 B.C.); another name for Shaanxi Province; a surname.

None of the definitions looked like a potential trouble-maker. I also investigated my maternal history. My mother's parents were poor peasants, her father's father was a poor peasant, and so was her father's father's father. Therefore, I concluded with relief, *Qin* should be a safe surname for me.

To be honest, I was glad to change my old family name. My father had divorced my mother after he became a rightist in 1957. Then he'd died somewhere. I'd been raised by my mother, who earned her living as a primary school teacher. I could hardly remember what my father looked like. It was shameful and painful to be a rightist's son! So it was not simply that I had no affection for my father, I positively hated him. By discarding his name, I intended to make a clean break from him, and wash his reactionary taint off myself.

With this thoroughly new name, *Qin Weiqing*, I lived another ten years. Before long I found the name was far from being as good as I had thought. People began to hate *Jiang Qing*. Scandalous rumours about her spread from mouth to mouth throughout the country. Even the threat of imprisonment did not stop people from whispering. Could you expect them to be nice to a fellow who'd named himself *Jiang Qing's* defender? And in fact, I myself had also come to hate this woman. So after the downfall of the Gang of Four, headed by *Jiang Qing*, the first thing I did was to apply to resume my old given name, *Dexiao*. I continued to use the surname *Qin*, for it showed my love for my mother.

17 The year I turned thirty-two, the government removed the
label "rightist" from just about everyone. My father was among the
rehabilitated. So I was finally free of his reactionary mark.

18 I was now a skilled turner in a factory. Some people said
I was quite handsome. However, with a wage of only 36 yuan
per month and without powerful and rich parents, I found it very
hard to find a wife. My mother was so anxious about me that her
hair turned white. An old Chinese woman suffers untold anxiety
until she sees her son married. She asked all her acquaintances to
look for a girl for me. Thanks to an introduction by an aunt of one
of my mother's former pupils, I was finally brought together with
a potential marriage partner. Her name was Yue Meihua. Though
Meihua meant "beautiful flower," she wasn't beautiful at all. The
girl, an unskilled laborer in a cotton mill, was twenty-eight. Her
parents were peasants who lived in a village far from our city. All
of which meant that she was not a girl with a high "selling price."

19 All the same, I liked her very much. Perhaps it was because
she was so gentle, even shy. She would always blush before she
started to speak to a strange man, and one never heard her speak
or laugh loudly. I didn't agree with the aesthetic standard of
ancient China which required a woman not to show her teeth while
smiling; still I preferred a gentle, timid girl, for I'd been frightened
by a few neighbors' wives. They enjoyed quarrelling too much,
and for them the greatest pleasure in life was to bad-mouth their
husbands. I could often hear them, in the small hours of the morn-
ing, cursing their husbands instead of making love to them. But
my *Meihua* was quieter than a sleeping flower.

20 Besides, for my sake, my mother had suffered too much
already and I didn't want to hurt her by marrying a shrewish girl.
As some of my married friends had told me, the most unbear-
able business, for a man, was to be a buffer in clashes between his
mother and his wife.

21 Evidently, Yue *Meihua* liked me too. So I wrote a letter and
proposed to her. A few days later, the go-between—the aunt of my
mother's former pupil—told me that the girl liked me but could
not accept until she got her parents' approval, and it was very
likely that her mother would come and have a look at me.

22 Of course, the news gave my mother hope. But it added to
her worries because it was said of people in the country that they
didn't marry off their daughters, but sold them at high prices. It
happened that a couple of days earlier, my mother had read a tragic
story reported in the newspaper. A bride refused to go into the bridal
chamber because the bridegroom was unable to satisfy her parents'
additional economic demands. The poor bridegroom, who was up to
his ears in debt already, killed the bride and then himself. If *Meihua's*
parents asked for extravagant betrothal gifts, what would we do?

When her mother arrived, Meihua took me to see her. All I remember about the meeting was that the top button of my new shirt seemed determined to strangle me. The day was sweltering and I was terribly thirsty. But I do recall what happened at the end of the interview. Her mother filled the pockets of my new jacket with peanuts which she had grown herself. I was half-paralyzed and murmured some words no one could understand. Meihua blushed and said softly, "Say thank you to Mama, you foolish man." I came to my senses at once. Wonderful! The old lady was fond of me!

Then her mother and my mother met. Exceeding our hopes, the negotiations went off without a hitch. Although Meihua's mother was unable to read or write, she had an enlightened mind. She did not ask for betrothal gifts.

Now what we needed was her father's approval. That would be no problem, Meihua assured me. Her father had never questioned any decision made by her mother. Therefore, no sooner had her mother departed than we began to prepare for the wedding. My close friends and relatives went into action. Three friends asked for a few days sick leave to make a bed and a wardrobe for us. A cousin who was a truck-driver made plans to go to some out-of-the-way town to fetch food for the wedding feast. My mother withdrew all her savings from the bank and went on a shopping spree. How happy and excited she was!

Then came the blow. Meihua's parents suddenly refused to let me marry her. The wedding was off. It was not her mother nor her father but some elders of the clan who had exercised their veto. They made a declaration: if Meihua marries the man named Qin, we will expel her from the clan. And after the marriage, if she appears in our village, we will break her legs.

Why? All they knew about me was my name. But it was nothing else than my name that killed the wedding!

To understand, one must go back more than 800 years, to the year 1142. That year, an evil Prime Minister, Qin Hui, concocted a charge against a great national hero, Marshal Yue Fei, and had him put to death. But people loved Yue Fei very much. Soon he was rehabilitated, and from then on, Yue Fei's tomb has become a scenic spot in Huangzhou City. Out of indignation, people cast two iron effigies in a kneeling position, to represent Qin Hui and his conspiratorial wife. Since then the two have been humbling themselves in front of the tomb for hundreds of years. And since Yue Fei's execution, people named Yue have adopted an unwritten prohibition against marrying people named Qin.

So, I remain a bachelor. What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name may smell of stinkweed.