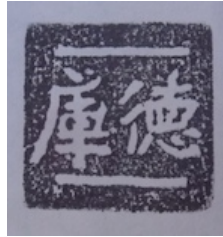


The Chinese *zì*, *biǎozì* (表字), or "courtesy name" Khu De



A *zì* (字), *biǎozì* (表字), or "courtesy name", was traditionally given to Chinese men at the age of 20, marking their coming of age; it was sometimes given to women upon marriage. The practice is no longer common in modern Chinese society. According to the Book of Rites, after a man reached adulthood, it was disrespectful for others of the same generation to address him by his given name, or *míng*. Thus, the given name was reserved for oneself and one's elders, whereas the *zì* would be used by adults of the same generation to refer to one another on formal occasions or in writing; hence the term "courtesy name."

Up to the 20th century, most educated Chinese men used a courtesy name bestowed upon one in adulthood in addition to one's given name, from one's parents, a teacher, or by self-selection, by which they were known among those outside their family and closest friends. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 was one point when this practice began to decline.

Yan Zhitui of the Northern Qi dynasty asserted that whereas the purpose of the *míng*, the given name, was to distinguish one person from another, the *zì* should express the bearer's moral integrity.

The *zì* is usually is disyllabic, consisting of two Chinese characters, like the personal or given name. It stands alone, not with a family name. My "courtesy name" is khu de (庫德), khu meaning storehouse or treasury, and de suggesting "virtue" or "inner moral power." While khu, a storehouse, a physical object, is easy to translate, de has no simple synonym in English. Among English readers it is perhaps most often encountered as the second character in the book title *Dao De Jing* (道德经), *The Book of the Way and of Virtue*. For pronunciation, start with rising tone or accent for khu, and falling tone on de; << KOO duh >>. I found the name in a novel by E. C. Bentley. I do not speak or read Chinese.

Stuart Wier

Boulder, Colorado

2023

Copyright © 2023 Stuart K Wier

Reproduction, retransmission, reuse, or redistribution prohibited without prior written consent of the author.