About Lensey Namioka

My name is Lensey Namioka. I was born in China and moved to the United States when I was nine. I am the only person in the world with the name Lensey. My father made it up, and why he did it is a funny story. My husband is Japanese, and that's why I have a Japanese last name. I am interested in both Japan and China, so I have written books about both places.

I remember being a little girl in China. I also remember what it was like when our family moved to the United States. So I have written stories about what it's like to move to a new country and learn a new language.

Once, when I was in Japan with my husband, we visited the town where his family was from. There was an old castle on a hill there. The castle was named "Namioka," which is where the name "Namioka" comes from. This trip got me interested in Japanese history and the samurai. So that's how I started writing about Japan and the samurai.

Here is some more stuff about me that grownups might be interested in:

I attended Radcliffe College and the University of California, Berkeley, where I majored in mathematics. I decided I liked being a writer better than being a mathematician. I've been writing for 30 years, and my books have received several recognitions.

Like the Yang Family, I live in Seattle, Washington.
The "funny story" of how I got my name

This is how my father gave me the name of 'Lensey,' which nobody else in the world has. For thousands of years, the Chinese used a system of writing based on pictographs, symbols that look like the objects they represent. Gradually, the symbols became simplified, so they no longer looked very much like the thing they represent. It became hard for people to understand the symbols.

Nor was the writing phonetic, that is, you can't tell how those symbols are pronounced by looking at them. (English writing and others using an alphabet are phonetic.) That was why there were so few people who could read in China.

In the 20th century, the Chinese government decided to make up a system of writing that would make it easier for people to learn. My father was on the committee working on this project. The first thing was to make the system phonetic, so that you could tell how something sounded by looking at the symbols. One way to do it is by Romanization, that is, using the letters of the Roman alphabet (the one used in English) to spell Chinese sounds. My father and his co-workers found problems with this. For instance, Chinese is tonal, unlike English and most European languages (a language is tonal if the meaning is changed when you change the tones, or melody). My father decided to change the spelling slightly to convey tones. For example, the first syllable of my name is pronounced like "len," but there are 4 possible tones, and to differentiate the four tones, they are spelled "lhen," "len," "leen," and "lenn."

My father discovered to his delight that he could spell not only all Chinese words with this system, but he could even spell words that didn't exist in Chinese. To celebrate this, he decided to give his newborn baby a name that could be spelled in the system and sounded sort of Chinese, but didn't really exist.

That was how I wound up with a name that looks plausible, but which makes every Chinese say, "Huh? It also guarantees that nobody else in the world has (or would want) a name like mine.