

Male Names of Women and Female Names of Men in the Chinese Society

Irena Kałużyńska

DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.81

Abstract

The paper discusses some Chinese given names that apparently indicate the sex of their bearers. In China there have never been any strict linguistic rules concerning the gender-specific differentiation of given names, as the Chinese language does not have a grammatical gender, and the gender usually is a covert category. However, there is a group of given names strictly complying with the most common naming convention, i.e. that a name overtly indicates the sex of the person named. These are Chinese female given names with “female” terms written in characters with the graphical marker of “femininity”, and male names with typical “male” terms, especially general terms for men, terms of address, kinship and rank. In most cases the occurrence of such a term in a name indicates that the bearer of the name is a woman or a man. The cases of the inverse use of the terms reveal the additional significance of such formed names, as commendatory or counter-commendatory names.

Introduction

The meaningfulness of names plays an important social and cultural role in the Chinese naming system. Given names are formed individually, and they are mostly semantically transparent. The approach to names, as being not only labels helpful in the identification of people but almost real or desired facts, has caused that through personal names the Chinese express their culture-oriented opinions and expectations. Gender stereotypes have had an enormous impact on various aspects of the family and social life, and they have also influenced personal naming. In China there have never been any strict linguistic rules concerning the gender-specific differentiation of given names. The marking of the gender is less obvious than in many other languages, as the Chinese language does not have a grammatical gender, and the gender is in most cases a covert category. The typical traditional Chinese given names are considered masculine or feminine mainly on the basis of treating some objects, concepts or qualities as being characteristic for or associated with men or women. As a result, a great proportion of traditional male names have references to such qualities as being strong, healthy, brave, active, auspicious, loyal, intelligent; males are expected to prolong the family, to bring honour to ancestors, the nation and the country; to create, to construct, to defend, and they are usually associated with the sea, big waves, mountains, trees and powerful animals. Chinese traditional female names mainly refer to such qualities as being moral, chaste, beautiful, sweet, quiet, laborious, and women are usually associated with the moon, rainbow, rosy clouds, precious things, birds and flowers. Therefore, the distinction between male and female names is recognizable to some extent, and in many cases one can identify the sex of a person just by the name. There is also a group of Chinese given names strictly complying with the most common naming convention around the world, i.e. that a given name overtly indicates the sex of the person named. These are female given names constructed (at least partially) out of the “female” terms, mainly those written in characters with the graphical marker of “femininity”, and male names containing or composed of the typical “male” terms, especially general terms for men, terms of address, kinship and rank. In most cases the occurrence of such a term in a name indicates that the bearer of the name is a woman or a man. The comparatively rare cases of the inverse use of these terms reveal the additional significance of such formed names, as commendatory or

counter-commendatory names selected by namers for the purpose of covering up what really exists, preventing troubles or influencing the future for the better.

Documentation

The investigation is mainly based upon the research material consisting of names of Chinese persons of the Han nationality, chosen from *Zhongguo renmin da cidian* 中國人名大辭典 [The Great Dictionary of Chinese Persons], hereafter abbreviated to ZRD, published in 1921, *Huaxia funü mingren cidian* 華夏婦女名人詞典 [Dictionary of Famous Chinese Women], published in 1988, hereafter abbreviated to “Dictionary”, and of given names of students performing their studies in Beijing in 2003/2004. The statistical information is based upon data presented in the book *Xingshi renming yongzi fenxi tongji* 姓氏人名用字分析統計 [Statistics in Characters Used in Surnames and Given Names], hereafter abbreviated to “Xingshi”, published in 1991. The work also make use of data collected in other works listed in the Bibliography, especially in the book by Irena Kałużyńska, *Chinese Female Namings. Past and Present*, published in 2008.

Given names with “female” terms, written in Chinese characters with the graphical marker of “femininity”

The most numerous group of Chinese characters (Karlgren, 1929, 43-60) are so-called ideographic-phonetic compounds, i.e. characters which consist of a significative part (a radical), indicating, or at least suggesting, the sense of the semanteme or giving the category to which it belongs, and a phonetic part (a phonetic) indicating, or at least suggesting, the pronunciation of the semanteme, e.g. *gū* 姑 ‘father’s sister; aunt’ (女 ‘woman’, the radical; 古 *gū*, the phonetic). Another group of characters are so-called logical compounds, i.e. characters composed of two or more graphical elements or graphemes (one of them being the radical) combined so as to bring their meanings into logical relations and the resulting compound forms serve as the symbols of a new idea, e.g. *hǎo* 好 ‘to love; good’ (女 ‘woman’, the radical, 子 ‘son; child’, the grapheme). Most of the characters having the 女 ‘woman’ radical or grapheme serve for the notation of terms in a way associated with women. It may be assumed that when these terms were standardized, the characteristics to which they referred to were conceived of as typical for women in the Chinese society. Therefore, the unmarked usage of these terms usually conveys a meaning with the semantic feature <+feminine>. The method of creating given names that consist of these lexical items has been simply called *yòng nǚxìng zì* 用女性字 ‘using of female terms/characters’ (Xu & Xin, 1999, 141).

336 given female names of the research material contain 56 terms that are written in characters with the ‘woman’ radical. Thus, these terms stand for 15.5% of all 363 such terms/characters as recorded in various sources, and for about 5.5% of all 1050 terms the standard given names of the research material are composed of. These terms can be divided into several groups:

1. terms denoting female kinship relations, terms of self-reference or address, general terms for ‘female’ (17 terms; 80 names);
2. terms denoting functions or status of women (6 terms; 21 names);
3. terms denoting female appearances or manners and female aesthetic values (21 terms; 186 names);
4. terms denoting mental and moral qualities of women (8 terms; 28 names);
5. other terms (4 terms; 21 names).

In the Chinese society it was considered proper that personal names need to reflect the reality and/or improve the reality by promoting the qualities wished for the society members, therefore many female given names are constructed out of these terms as related to their status in family and society or reflecting feminine aesthetic and moral values. Almost all terms dealing with the appearance and character of women can be considered as commendatory and wishful ones. They have been selected in order to make a good impression, or simply as being pleasant and attractive. However, nowadays most of these terms seem to be considered mainly as good symbols of the femininity and good terms for female names, but without any precise meaning. Two terms, i.e. *nī* 妮 ‘girl; lass; maid’ and *nà* 娜 ‘lithe and graceful carriage; feminine beauty’, are in contemporary China often used for transcription of foreign female names or names imitating foreign names, like Janet or Jenny (Zhangni 張妮 or Qianni 蒨妮), or Anna (Anna 安娜), Lina (Linna 林娜), Nina (Nina 妮娜).

According to statistical information on characters used in Chinese surnames and given names (“*Xingshi*”, 1991), some of the primary terms for gender-specific female names occur also among given names of men. Most of such terms used in male names seem to have no more any evident associations with females, and cannot be considered as being gender-specific, e.g.: *hǎo* 好 ‘to love; good’ (0.085% of female names – hereafter abbreviated to F; 0.021% of male names – hereafter abbreviated to M); *shǐ* 始 ‘to initiate; to start’ (0.004% F; 0.043% M). However, the use of some “female” terms while forming male names can be inspired by various important motivations.

Male given names with “female” terms

The girlish names for boys are mainly those containing general terms for women and terms of female kinship and rank. Chinese scholars call them *nánrén nǚmíng* 男人女名 ‘female names of males’ (Ji, 1993, 39, 221; Wanyan, 1994, 78). The most frequent and typical terms (“*Xingshi*”, 1991) are:

- wá* 娃 ‘baby; newborn animal; beautiful girl’ (0.052% F; 0.118% M);
- mèi* 妹 ‘younger sister; girl’ (0.802% F; 0.011% M);
- mā* 媽 ‘mother; aunt; maidservant’ (F –; 0.003% M);
- é* 娥 ‘beautiful; beautiful woman; eyebrows; *Cháng’é* (Chinese moon goddess)’ (0.401% F; 0.002% M);
- nǚ* 女 ‘woman; daughter; girl’ (0.204% F; 0.002% M);
- gū* 姑 ‘father’s sister; aunt’ (0.022% F; 0.001% M);
- mǔ* 姆 ‘governess; mother; aunt’ (F –; 0.001% M);
- niáng* 娘 ‘mother; young woman; girl; mistress; wife; a form of address to an elderly married woman’ (0.026% F; 0.001% M);
- pó* 婆 ‘wife; old woman; mother-in-law’ (F –; 0.001% M);
- piào* 嫖 ‘to visit prostitutes; lustful; prostitute’ (F –; 0.001% M).

The idea of using some “female” terms in male names can be considered as being motivated by the same reason as that of creating goal-oriented apotropaic or depreciating names (also called counter-commendatory names). Such names supposedly have had the power to avert evil influences or bad luck, and in China they have been connected mainly with the ancient belief in evil spirits and the magic force of names. In the result, some people might be named after unpleasant notions to make them undesirable to evil spirits (Kałużyńska, 2002, 182; 2004, 129-142). For many Chinese people it was wise to use as names such terms which in the ears of bad spirits denoted not the persons involved, but

different things or people, preferably unvalued or despicable ones, which were not worth attending to. Chinese depreciating names, mainly childhood ones, are usually based on the parents' desire to have or keep a male heir, as females were not valuable children in the Chinese society. In the old days, and even nowadays, especially in rural China, Chinese people felt raising daughters as being a losing proposition, because they had to be provided with food and a dowry when they get married, but in return they did not have to fulfill responsibilities in continuing the family line in the patrilineal Chinese society. Therefore, girls in general have been regarded as *péiqiánhuò* 賠錢貨, literally 'compensate money commodities', i.e. 'losing propositions', 'loss money goods' (Graffin, 1988, 279; Sung, 1981, 82). Any "loss money goods" are unappealing, and since evil spirits feel distaste for bad things, they could disregard the boys with girlish names. Therefore, boys, first of all weak, unhealthy and only sons, received such debasing girlish names.

However, another very important reason for using some "female" terms (mainly *mā* 媽 and *niáng* 娘) while forming male names can be naming after the Taoist goddess, Mazu 媽祖 'Mother-Ancestor' (also called Tian Fei 天妃 'Celestial Consort' or Tian Hou 天后 'Heavenly Empress'), one of the most popular deities in South China. The main idea is that the goddess will then bestow favours on the bearers and rescue them from all kinds of difficulty (Chen, 1985,:37; Kohn, 2004, 180-181).

Female given names with "male" terms

Some depreciating male names can be formed with "female" terms, and some female counter-commendatory names can be formed by the use of general terms denoting 'man' or other terms of male kinship and rank (or words homophonous with these terms). Female names with such terms are simply called by Chinese scholars as *nǚrén nánmíng* 女人男名 'male names of females' (Ji, 1993, 221; Wanyan, 1994, 78).

The most typical names of this type are those revealing that not a girl but a male heir is desired. When a couple after having one or more daughters still does not have a son, the couple in hope that their next child would be a son may give the latest daughter a name with a term *dì* 弟 'younger brother; brother', e.g.:

- Guandi 觀弟 'Watch a Younger Brother' (*guān* 'to look at; to watch');
- Laidi 來弟 'Make a Younger Brother Come' (*lái* 'to come; to arrive');
- Zhaodi 招弟 'Attract a Younger Brother' (*zhāo* 'to attract; to beckon').

Examples of such or similar female names are to be found in some works on Chinese personal names (Alleton, 1993, 174; Ji, 1993, 221-223; Wanyan, 1994, 78-79; Watson, 1986, 621), but no example with the term has been found among the names collected as the research material. However, the name of a daughter can also be formed of terms that are only homophonous with the above-mentioned names or their parts. In some female names instead of the term *dì* 弟 'younger brother; brother', the typical "female" term *dì* 娣 'sister-in-law; girl' can occur, e.g.:

- Zhaodi 招娣, literally 'Attract a Sister-in-law/ a Girl', suspected 'Attract a Younger Brother' (*zhāo* 'to attract; to beckon');
- Zhaodi 昭娣, literally 'Bright Sister-in-law'/Girl', suspected 'Attract a Younger Brother' (*zhāo* 'bright; clear');
- Liudi 留娣, literally 'Keeping Sister-in-law/ a Girl In', suspected 'Keeping Younger Brother In' (*liú* 'to keep in; to remain').

Another similar term that can be used in depreciating female names is *dì 棣* ‘*Kerria japonica*; Japanese kerria; younger brother’, eg.:

Houdi 厚棣, literally ‘Strong Kerria’, suspected ‘Strong Younger Brother’ (*hòu* ‘great; strong’).

Among female names of the research material one can find also some other names considered as those evidently expressing the wish of parents of having a male heir. As one of the most evident examples can be regarded, e.g.:

ao’er 要兒, ‘Son Wanted’ (*yào* ‘to want; to desire’; *ér* ‘son; child’), name of Zhang Empress of the Chen Dynasty (Ji, 1993, 222; ZRD, 1921, 1016).

Two other examples of female names given with the hope that sons may be born to the family are quoted by L. C. Arlington (1923, 324):

Huanzi 換子 ‘Exchanged for a Son’ (*huàn* ‘to change; to exchange’; *zǐ* ‘child; son’);
Daige 代哥 ‘Instead of an Elder Brother’ [*dài* ‘to take the place of; to replace’; *gē* ‘elder brother’).

Some names given to girls reveal that they are considered somewhat worse than boys or almost as good as boys, and, sporadically, better than boys. The typical names of this type are those formed with the use of the term *nán 男* ‘man; male’ (0.022% F; 0.007% M). Several examples of such female names are to be found in some works on Chinese personal names (Feng & Ding & Yin, 1998, 6; Ji, 1993, 221-223; Wanyan, 1994, 78-79; “*Xingshi*”, 1991), e.g.:

Cinan 次男 ‘Secondary/Inferior Man’ (*cì* ‘second; secondary; vice’);
Guannan 冠男 ‘The Best Man’ (*guàn* ‘the best; champion; first place’);
Henan 赫男 ‘Conspicuous/Bright Man’ (*hè* ‘conspicuous; grand; bright’);
Shengnan 勝男 ‘Defeating/Superior to Man’ (*shèng* ‘to win; to defeat; to be superior’);
Yanan 亞男 ‘Second/ Inferior Man’ (*yà* 亞 ‘second; inferior’);
Yinan 宜男 ‘Should Be a Man’ (*yí* ‘should, ought to; suitable’; *yínán* ‘another name for a flower day-lily’).

Among the female names in the research material there are two names with the term, e.g.:

[Sun] Nanyu [孫] 男玉 ‘Male Jade’, ‘As Virtuous as Man’ (*yù* ‘jade; virtuous’; surname *sūn* ‘grandson’, the whole personal name might mean ‘Grandsons will be Male Jades’);
Kenan 克男 ‘Can Be as Good/Able as Man’ (*kè* ‘can; to be able to; to be competent’).

The name of a daughter can also contain the term *nán 楠* ‘nanmu tree; cedar wood’, homophonous with the term *nán 男* ‘man; male’, and presumably used with the same intention. Among the names of the research material there are 9 names with the term, e.g.:

[Xu] Nanying [許] 楠英, literally ‘Cedar Flower’, suspected ‘Male Flower/ Hero’ (*yīng* ‘flower; hero’; surname *xǔ* ‘to allow; to hope for’, the whole personal name may mean ‘Hope for Male Hero’);
Yanan 雅楠, literally ‘Refined Cedar’, suspected ‘Refined Man’ (*yǎ* ‘refined; elegant’).

The term *nán* 南 ‘south’, being homophonous with the term *nán* 男 ‘man; male’ can also perform the similar semantic function of denoting ‘man’, e.g.:

Yaonan 耀南, literally ‘Shining South’, suspected ‘Shining Man’ (*yào* ‘to shine; to illuminate’), or even ‘Man Wanted’ (*yào* 耀 is homophonous with *yào* 要 ‘to want; to desire’).

Conclusions

Chinese female given names with typical “female” terms, mainly those written in characters with the graphical marker of “femininity”, and male names with typical “male” terms, especially general terms for men, terms of male address, kinship and rank, comply with the most common naming convention around the world that a given name indicates the sex of the person named, i.e. it is gender-specific. In most cases the occurrence of such a term in a name indicates that the bearer of the name is a woman or a man. The occurring cases of the inverse use of the terms reveal the additional significance of such formed names, as commendatory or counter-commendatory names selected by namers for the purpose of covering up what really exists, being goal-oriented, and thus making the improvement of the reality, preventing troubles or influencing the future for the better. They are based on the belief that names can create the reality, and bring fortune or misfortune. In the result, such motivated male or female names to some extent reflect the inferior status of women in the Chinese society.

Selected Bibliography

- Alleton, Viviane. 1993. *Les Chinois et la passion des noms*. Paris: Aubier.
- Arlington, L.C. 1923. The Chinese Female Names. *Chinese Journal of Science & Arts* I, 316-325.
- Chen, Zhanqiang 陳章太. 1985. Hanyu de renming he renming yongzi 漢語的人名和人名用字 [Chinese Personal Names and Characters Used in Personal Names]. *Yuwen Daobao* 語文導報 [Language Guide] 7, 36-37.
- “Dictionary”. 1988. *Huaxia funü mingren cidian* 華夏婦女名人詞典 [Dictionary of Famous Chinese Women]. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Feng, Shu 馮舒; Ding, Fei 丁菲; Yin, Li 殷麗. 1997. *Mingzheng yanshun – Zhongguo mingzide wenhua aomiao yu jiedu* 名正言順 – 中國名字的文化奧妙與解讀 [Secrets and Abilities of Chinese Naming Culture]. Urumqi: Xinjiang Qingshaonian Chubanshe 新疆青少年出版社.
- Grafflin, Denis. 1983. The Onomastics of Medieval South-China: Patterned Naming in the Lang-Yeh and Tai-Yüan Wang. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, 383-398.
- Ji, Xiuqin 籍秀琴. 1993. *Zhongguo renming tanxi* 中國人名探析 [Research on Chinese Personal Names]. Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe 中國廣播電視出版社.
- Kałużyńska, Irena. 2002. *Contemporary Chinese Place Names. Names of Administrative Divisions at County and City Level*. Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang.
- Kałużyńska, Irena. 2008. *Chinese Female Namings. Past and Present*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo AGADE.
- Kałużyńska, Irena. 2004. Traditional Chinese Rules Concerning Personal Naming and ‘Depreciating Names’. *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 57.2, 129-142.
- Karlgren, Bernhard. 1929. *Sound and Symbol in Chinese*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Kohn, Livia. 2004 (first published 2001). *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. United States: Three Pines Press.

- Sung, Margaret M. Y. 1981. Chinese Personal Naming. *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers' Association* 16.2, 67-90.
- Wanyan, Shaoyuan 完顏紹元. 1994. *Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhongguo xingming wenhua* 趙錢孫李,中國姓名文化 [Zhao, Qian, Sun, Li, Culture of Chinese Personal Names]. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社.
- Watson, Rubie S. 1986. The Named and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society. *American Ethnologist* 13.4, 619-631.
- “Xingshi”. 1991. *Xingshi renming yongzi fenxi tongji* 姓氏人名用字分析 統計 [Statistics on Characters Used in Surnames and Given Names]. Beijing: Yuwen Chubanshe 語文出版社.
- Xu, Jianshun 徐健順; Xin, Xian 辛宪. 1999. *Mingming. Zhongguo xingming wenhua de aomiao* 命名.中國姓名文化的奧妙 [Naming. Secrets of Chinese Culture of Personal Names]. Beijing: Zhongguo Shudian 中國書店.
- ZRD. 1921. Zang, Lihe 臧勵和, ed. *Zhongguo renming da cidian* 中國人名大辭典 [The Great Dictionary of Chinese Persons]. Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan 商務印書館.

Irena Kałużyńska
Faculty of Oriental Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland
i.kaluzynska@uw.edu.pl