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**Patterns of Chinese Female Names
and Names with the ‘Woman’ Radical**

Abstract

The physiological differences of men and women and philosophical differences in the attitude to the both sexes have brought about great differences in their productive activities, social roles, and other aspects. Chinese women have held an inferior status in society for more than 3000 years of the history of China, and their social position has had great influence on female personal names. As the Chinese naming practice does not restrict the list of possible given names (a name is **formed individually**), and they are considered lexical items rather than onomastic ones, female names seem to be well suited for a study of some stereotyped opinions and cultural expectations concerning women.

The paper presents patterns of female names in the historical and contemporary China, and describes in some more detail the given names constructed of morphemes/ words written in characters with a “woman” radical or a graphical element, as an evident indicator of female names in their written form. The investigation is based upon the research material consisting of 1552 female given names of 1595 women, chosen from *Huaxia funü mingren cidian* (Dictionary of Famous Chinese Women), published in 1988 in Beijing, China (hereafter referred to as “Dictionary”), and of given names of 896 female students performing their studies in Beijing Language and Culture University and Beijing Foreign Languages University in 2003/2004 (hereafter referred to as “Students”).

1. Introduction

According to some legends, women had a high status in the matriarchal clan in the beginning of Chinese civilization. At some point in history their high social status disappeared, and in the patriarchal society women had to submit themselves to men. The reason (K i a n g 1935: 223) for sex inequality in Chinese philosophy might be found in

the oldest classic, *Yijing* (Book of Changes). There were drawn from the single origin two opposite forces: *yang* or the positive/active/light, and *yin* or the negative/passive/dark. All the universal phenomena were then divided into two classes, represented by these two forces. The heaven, the sun, a man and almost all good objects and terms belonged to the *yang* force, while the earth, the moon, a woman and, unfortunately, all bad terms belonged to the *yin* force. This led females into undesirable associations not only in terminology, but also in sociology. Most Chinese philosophers were not free from the influence of this conception and considered women as an inferior sex. It is stated: *Yin and yang differ fundamentally, so behaviour of man and woman are different. Force is a virtue of yang, and submission is a virtue of yin. A man is respected for his strength, and woman is praised for her weakness* (Fan 1996: 815), and *Only when males and females are treated differently, can proper relations between husband and wife be established in conformity with the principles of morality and justice* (The Book 2000: 401).

The Chinese women were heavily oppressed, philosophically and legally, for thousands of years before the introduction of modern Western ideas of equality. The moral standards for women crystallized into "three submissions and four virtues", *sancong side*, coined on the basis of some statements found in old Chinese books on rites, comprising the Chinese standard of decorum in every department of life. "Three submissions" were: obedience to father and elder brothers before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after husband's death (Liji 1957: 1209). The required "four virtues" were: morality, proper speech, modest manners, and diligent work (Zhouli 1957: 269). The most important moral virtues for a Chinese woman were her chastity, then the filial piety to her parents-in-law. Proper speech meant a refined and well-restrained conversation, together with some literary attainments. Manners meant graceful and polite acts in accordance with ceremonial regulations. The chief job of women was housekeeping, cooking, weaving, and needlework, although in noble families some pictorial and musical skills were also required (in the poorer classes women, like men, worked on farms and later also in factories). One can read: *After the age of ten, a girl is not to go out any more. Then, her tutoress should teach her how to be gentle in speech, decorous in appearance and meek and agreeable in manner. Besides, she should be taught to perform the household duties of the womenfolk, such as processing hemp and silk and weaving* (The Book 2000: 131). The ideal woman in China, as woman's obligations are concerned, was symbolized as a grateful daughter, faithful wife, kind mother, and was respected as an unselfish being, living to serve her parents, her husband, and her children (Kiang 1935: 224).

In the Chinese society man and woman had their roles divided and kept separated: *Man occupies his [rightful] place outside and woman occupies her [rightful] place inside* (Liji 1957: 1272). *Man speaks not of inside affairs and woman speaks not of outside affairs* (Liji 1957: 1240). There was almost no opportunity for social intercourse between sexes except by marriage or concubinage. Sexual relations outside marriage were considered taboo but, of course, they took place; moreover, it was quite fashionable for men, especially of the higher classes of the society, to visit singsong girls and prostitutes.

Women's position in China was, however, quite important, not so much with regard to legal rights, as to actual influence. Besides the models of good daughters, wives and mothers, recorded together with the famous beauties in the biographies of women (*Lienü zhuan*), started in I century B.C., and continued as parts of 14 of 24 standard histories of China, many other outstanding figures in various fields (in scholarship, literature, art, music, and even military skills) represented the fair sex. After the introduction of the Western style of public education in XIX century, many modern schools for girls were established. The old marriage custom was radically modified and a more free social intercourse between sexes approved. During XX century, and especially in the last decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC), many well-educated women achieved noteworthy successes in political, social, literary, and other professional activities.

2. Chinese personal names

A typical Chinese (Han nationality) personal name consists of a surname and a given name. The standard form of a surname is a monosyllabic word, written in one character, although there are some surnames constructed of two syllables/morphemes/words. In ancient China there were two kinds of surnames. According to the etymology, a *xing*-surname denoted "production by a woman", while a *shi*-surname denoted "a root" (King 1935: 131). Almost all characters for ancient *xing*-surnames bear the radical "woman", which seems to indicate the existence of a matriarchal society at the dawn of Chinese civilization. The females mainly used *xing*-surnames as indicators of their attribution to the definite clan, while the majority of males used *xing* or *shi*-surnames as the indicators of their rank of nobility or of a place of origin. In the early historical period of China surnames were the privilege of the aristocracy. This changed with time and in later times almost all Chinese had their surnames. In III century B.C. the differentiation between *xing* and *shi* surnames disappeared. The two notions became synonymous, and in the Modern Standard Chinese they both mean 'a family name, a surname'. The great clan structure of the Chinese society has resulted in a rather limited list of surnames. In contemporary China about 3000 surnames are used, while less than 10% of them are commonly used (Yuan 1994: 14–20).

Typical Chinese given names are constructed of one or two lexical items (morphemes or words), and, in writing, characters. Since every Chinese lexical item retains in a name its own lexical meaning, a combination of any two items usually represents the sum of the lexical meanings, or signifies a new derived meaning. The given name was believed to be particularly important for a person's life, and Chinese people felt and manifested a kind of aversion from using it; this especially referred to their own names and names of those whom they esteemed and loved. Therefore, in the past a Chinese could have a number of names to be used in different situations. The most important of them was his original 'great name', *ming* or *daming*, given in the infancy and considered a private and sacred one and not to be freely used by others. Sometimes small children had their pet

names, called 'small names', *xiaoming*, or 'milk names', *ruming*, used by their relatives to express familiarity. On reaching maturity (males in the age of 20, females in the age of 15), a Chinese was given a social name or style, *zi*, meant for the public use. A Chinese could also adopt other names, nicknames and pseudonyms, *hao*. Apart from this, rulers and notables were granted certain names posthumously, as their posthumous memorial or temple titles. The more important the position of a person, the more given names the person had in traditional Chinese society. In the present day China, a Chinese usually has one official name, called *mingzi*; sometimes small children have their pet names coined on the basis of their official names.

In theory, a Chinese woman could be given all of the above-mentioned given names, i.e. 'milk name', 'great name', 'style'. Famous women could also have their nicknames, pseudonyms or 'studio appellations'. However, most girls and women had to be content with their surnames, and sometimes also pet names or nicknames. Pet names were highly important, since many women, especially among the common people, had no other given names. Among aristocratic families, a girl was usually known by her pet name by her own relatives until she was teenager, when it was abandoned, and a 'great name' or 'style' was occasionally used.

Since girls and women in China usually had no access to the outside world, they did not feel their names had particular importance for them. It was even considered improper for a woman to reveal or use her given name. A Chinese woman was normally referred to by her maiden surname, even after she was married: for example, if a woman's maiden surname was *Wang*, then in documents she would be referred to as *Wang shi*, the term *shi* denoting that she belonged to the *Wang* family by birth. Her given name would not even be mentioned. Women were accepted into patrilineal families as a means of prolonging the men's identity, so children were called after the surnames of their fathers. A married woman could gain membership in her husband's lineage after her death (Sun 1977: 7), therefore she was granted her husband's family name posthumously. Inscriptions on tombstones, ancestor tablets and official documents show that a married woman with the maiden surname *Wang* married to a man surnamed *Li*, could be referred to as *Li Wang shi*, i.e. her two surnames (married surname and maiden surname) were given one after the other, and the combination served as her naming. Later on, this form of naming became quite common for all married women. In contemporary China women normally retain their maiden surnames, and the children of the couple are usually called after the surname of their father.

Sometimes, in addition to the surname, a girl or a woman were referred to by the term of relationship ('daughter', 'wife', 'mother'), or term of rank or address ('empress', 'princess', 'concubine'). For unmarried girls a term denoting the order of birth in a family ('the eldest', 'the second', etc) was usually added. Occasionally, some other terms were used as additions, such as, above all, names of women's place of origin, the *shi*-surname, or the title or the name of the place of origin of their husband. (Yuan 1994: 6).

Due to the fact that women were not referred to by their given names (even if they had any), female given names were scarcely recorded in official documents. In fact, it

seems that one of the otherwise very few cases of women who in long history of China were more somehow known and recorded by their given names were some famous concubines, prostitutes and singsong girls. Even in the earlier mentioned special biographies of women, *Lienü zhuan*, female given names occurred rarely, and stood for about 10% of their personal namings. The situation looks better in records concerning Chinese literature and art, where given names of many famous women were properly recorded. In spite of all the limitations, the numbers of female given names recorded during the long history of China are enough to allow the analysis of their structure and meaning.

In "Dictionary" there are recorded:

- 39 women (mainly empresses, princesses, imperial concubines, scholars, poetesses, warriors) born before the end of V century, of whom 23 (59%) have their given names registered, and 6 (15%) have their public name or style;
- 54 women (mainly empresses, poetesses, painters, singsong girls, prostitutes) born between VI century and second half of XIV century, of whom 37 (68.5%) have their original name registered, 11 (20%) have their styles, and 17 (31.5%) have other names;
- 123 women (mainly poetesses, writers, painters) born between 1368 and 1880, of whom 113 (92%) have their original name registered, 71 (58%) have their styles, and 36 (29%) have other names;
- 873 women (politicians, doctors, scientists, writers, painters) born between 1881 and 1920, all of whom have their given names registered while 195 (22%) have also other names: styles (only 2 women), artistic names, pen names or pseudonyms;
- 506 women (mainly politicians, artists, sportswomen) born between 1940 and 1970, all of whom have their given names registered; 27 (5.5%) of them also have other names.

In "Dictionary" there are also recorded names of about 1300 women born between 1921 and 1939 as well as of about 500 women of non-Han nationality or women who did not have citizenship of the Peoples' Republic of China. The latter group of names has not been taken into consideration in the present study.

From the end of XIX century, Chinese female professionals became more numerous and more differentiated as far as the field of their activity is concerned. With the development of public education and important changes taking place in the social life, the problem of the use or disuse of female names ceased to exist. The "Students" born in the years 1982–1986 have, of course, their given names registered.

3. Semantic features of female names

The distinction between male and female names in the old and contemporary China is recognizable – due to the difference in meaning of the lexical items of which the names are constructed, in many cases the sex of a person can be identified merely by the name itself. Exceptions to the general pattern of course occur: some boys are given girls' names, and some girls have boys' names, while some other names can be considered

neutral in this aspect. A huge proportion of male names have references to such qualities like being handsome, intelligent, strong, healthy, brave, auspicious, and loyal. Males are expected to prolong the family, to create, to construct, to defend, and they are usually associated with the sea, big waves, mountain peaks and pine trees.

A more detailed analysis of Chinese female names shows that three broad groups cover the majority of semantic fields represented by Chinese female given names. The groups are following:

- I. Names reflecting the status and material attributes of domesticated women:
 - terms denoting ladies' chambers or boudoirs;
 - lexical items denoting housekeeping, needlework or other articles for daily use, musical instruments;
 - terms for dresses, fabrics and personal adornments;
 - lexical items denoting female cosmetics;
 - terms of relationship and self-reference.
- II. Names reflecting feminine softness and female aesthetic values:
 - lexical items denoting female colours: orange, red, scarlet, green, blue, white, yellow;
 - lexical items describing female appearance and manners: beautiful, graceful, pretty, fresh, docile, delicate, tender, admirable, charming, elegant, ladylike, attractive, fascinating, gorgeous, courteous;
 - lexical items describing feelings of women: to love, to be fond of, to dote on, to favour, to think of, to pity, to worry; to miss, to cherish, kind, happy, delighted;
 - lexical items denoting some natural *yin* phenomena: the four seasons of the year, the moon, cloud tints, rosy clouds, morning or evening glow, snow, rainbow, frost, small wave;
 - lexical items denoting plants, flowers and fruit trees;
 - lexical items denoting birds: phoenix; goose, cuckoo, swallow, oriole, duck;
 - double names, reduplications, as names having maximum of softness.
- III. Names reflecting female moral values:
 - names consisting of lexical items describing noble nature and moral character of women: upright; proper, capable, clever, skilful, bright; intelligent, pure, having moral integrity; faithful, virtuous, noble, honest, calm, serene, poised, kind-hearted, refined, gentle, mild and indirect; tactful, pleasant, self-possessed.

4. Female names having in their written form characters with *nü* 女 'woman' radical (or graphical element)

The most numerous group of Chinese characters are so-called ideographic-phonetic compounds, i.e. characters which consist of a signfic part (a radical), indicating, or at least suggesting, the sense of the morpheme/word or giving the category to which it belongs, and a phonetic part (a phonetic) indicating, or at least suggesting, the pronunciation of the

morpheme/word. According to the author's investigation, there are 161 Chinese characters with the 'woman' radical, *nǚ* 女, recorded in *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary* (MD), and 318 characters with the 'woman' radical recorded in *Hanyu Dacidian* (HYDC). Because some of the characters recorded in HYDC are only graphical variants of other forms, and because there are also some characters in which the grapheme 'woman' is not a radical but only a graphical element (being a part of the phonetic), it can be considered that there are altogether about 300 Chinese characters written with the grapheme 'woman'. Most of them serve for the notation of morphemes/words/lexical items associated with women by way or another. The research material contains 49 lexical items of women's names that are written in characters with the radical or at least the graphical element 'woman'—the evident indicator of female names in their written form (thus they stand for 16.3% of all such terms/characters, as recorded in MD and HYDC dictionaries). Such terms/characters seem to be best suited for a study of some stereotyped opinions and expectations embedded in names and connected with women in the Chinese society. The investigation of these lexical items/terms/characters which occur in the names included in the research material makes it possible to divide them into several classes. Quoted below are the terms in transcription Pinyin and in Chinese characters, their meaning, and, in brackets, the number of names with the term in "Dictionary" (w), and of "Students" (s).

I. Terms of relationship, rank and self-reference, some of them are also self-depreciatory terms or "humble words" (14 terms; 29w +7s):

ài 媛 'beloved daughter; complementary term for a daughter' (3w, 1s);

dī 娣 'wife of one's husband's younger brother; sister-in-law; woman's younger sister' (6w);

gū 姑 'father's sister; aunt; husband's sister, sister-in-law' (1w);

jī 姬 'complimentary term used for women in ancient China; imperial concubine; professional female singer or dancer, woman court official in Han times; handsome girl' (2w);

jié 婕 'favoured beauty (a title conferred upon an accomplished imperial concubine)' (1w, 2s);

má 嫫 'woman' (1w);

mèi 妹 'younger sister; sister' (4w, 1s);

nī 妮 'slave girl, maidservant, girl', also used in transliteration of English names Janet, Jenny (1w, 3s);

niáng 娘 'ma, mum; mother; form of address to an elderly married woman; young woman' (5w);

niū 妞 'girl' (1w);

qiáng 嫻 'woman court official in ancient China—palace lady' (1w);

wá 娃 'baby, child' (1w);

xū 嫗 'elder sister, sister' (1w);

yīng 嬰 'baby, infant' (1w).

II. Words describing female appearances or manners and female aesthetic values (17 terms; 41w + 72s):

cháng 嫦 [beautiful lady], 'Lady of the Moon'; name of a lady (Chang'e) who stole the elixir of the immortality and fled with it to the Moon (2s);

é 娥 'pretty young woman' (5w);

héng 姮 [beautiful lady], 'Lady of the Moon'; another name for Chang'e, a lady who stole the elixir of the immortality and fled with it to the Moon (1w);

jiāo 娇 'beautiful, graceful, lovely; charming; delicate' (2w, 7s);

juān 娟 'beautiful, delicate; graceful, elegant' (20w, 15s);

mèi 媚 'enchanting, lovely; fascinating; seductive' (1w);

miào 妙 'tasteful; elegant, subtle' (2w);

mó 嫫 'ugly' (1w);

nà 娜 'elegant, courteous, fascinating'; also used in transliterations of foreign female names (7s);

pīng 婷 'graceful, slim and supple' (1s);

róu 姝 'enchanting, lovely, charming' (2w);

shān 姗 'walk slowly like woman' (2s);

shū 姝 'beautiful, pretty woman' (3s);

tíng 婷 'graceful and ladylike' (1w, 25s);

yán 妍 'beautiful; delicate; freshly pretty' (1w, 4s);

yàn 晏 'ease and comfort' (2w);

yuàn 媛 'beautiful woman' (3w, 6s).

III. Terms denoting female moral values (13 terms; 51w + 26s) :

ān 安 'sedate; peaceful, calm; content, satisfied' (11w, 1s);

hǎo 好 'good, fine, nice; friendly, kind' (1w);

huà 姪 'gentle, self-possessed, refined' (1s);

jìng 婧 'modest, supple, talented girl' (1w, 14s);

liáo 嫖 'happy, glorious' (1w);

nà 纳 'married' (1w);

rú 如 'acting in compliance with, like' (16w, 1s);

suí 绥 'peaceful, pacify' (1w);

wǎn 婉 'docile, agreeable; kindly disposed; complaisant, mild and undirect; tactful' (10w, 2s);

wēi 威 'impressive strength, might, power' (1w, 1s);

wēi 葳 'luxuriant' (1s);

wēi 巍 'towering, lofty' (2s);

xián 娴 'sedate; gentle; self-possessed, adept; skilled' (8w, 3s).

IV. Other terms, referring mainly to some *yin* force or female attributes: plants, water and gems (5 terms; 11w + 2s):

ān 鞍 'saddle' (1w);

gū 菇 ‘plant, mushroom’ (1w);

rǔ 汝 ‘name of a river, place name, form of address ‘you’ (4w);

rú 茹 ‘madder, vegetable’ (4w, 2s);

yīng 璵 ‘jade-like gem’ (1w).

It can be noticed that the above-presented terms, written in characters with the ‘woman’ radical or at least the graphical element, cover the major part of semantic fields represented by all Chinese female given names, and they can be considered the primary terms for the female naming. They stand for 5.3% of all 922 terms the names of the research material are constructed of. 41 terms occurred in given names of women from “Dictionary” (5.4% of all terms) and 24 terms in names of “Students” (5.7%), 16 terms are shared by both groups. These terms occurred in altogether 239 names (9.8% of all female names analysed), in 132 names of “Dictionary” (8.5%) and in 107 names of “Students” (12%).

Some of the primary terms, especially those with a “positive” meaning, are quite frequent in names of the women mentioned in the “Dictionary”, as well as in names of “Students”, e.g. *juān* 娟 ‘beautiful, delicate, graceful, elegant’ (20w, 15s). The most typical terms for women from “Dictionary” are: *rú* 如 ‘acting in compliance with, like’ (16w, 1s) and *ān* 安 ‘sedate; peaceful, calm; content, satisfied’ (11w, 1s), which seem to be in accordance with the basic expectations connected with women in traditional China. As for “Students”, these are: *tíng* 婷 ‘graceful and ladylike’ (1w, 25s) and *jīng* 婧 ‘modest, supple, talented girl’ (1w, 14s) that seem to be considered mainly as symbols of femininity.

5. Conclusions

The study of Chinese female names gives an excellent insight into traditions and roles of women in a patrilineal society. Chinese women have held an inferior status in the society, they were domesticated with a narrow access to the outside world, and so individual given names were not considered important to them. Much more important were their surnames, because no marriage could be permitted between those with the same surname, and women were accepted as, above all, means of prolonging the men’s great families and their surnames.

From the investigation of Chinese female given names (names of famous women of the historical China and names of students), especially those consisting of the lexical items written in characters with the ‘woman’ radical or at least the graphical element – the primary terms for female namings – one can learn about thoughts and affections connected with women in both historical and contemporary China. According to the Chinese ancient theory of the universe, women are endowed with feminine and soft qualities. Therefore their names are usually made up of morphemes/words/lexical items related to their status in family and society, and reflecting feminine softness and female

aesthetic and moral values. Women are primarily supposed to be filial and sedate, gentle and chaste, but also intelligent, graceful and pretty. On the basis of the analysis of the lexical items of female given names from “Dictionary”, treated as traditional ones, and those of “Students”, considered as reflecting any new trends in Chinese naming system, it is fairly evident that sex stereotyping continues to be practiced in China.

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