

A Chinese Name is an Act of Creation

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*Fù MàoJī “hardworking master, who deserves to accomplish great things in life“,
a very formal, learned name

* Shang Ke “just so-so”, a very modest name

* Zhào Mì “honey”, a sweet name

1 Introduction

Chinese names have always fascinated me, because they seem so rich in meaning and aesthetical values; they look like paintings, have a musical tone and they seem to carry a great deal of symbolic content. Such names are comprehensive symbols, which can be perceived with all the senses: they are visual and auditory and they can be smelled and even tasted. Think of a man, who calls himself 傅懋勳 *Fù MàoJī* “hardworking master, who deserves to accomplish great things in life”. Think of a little girl, who calls herself 香花 *Xiāng Huā* “fragrant flower”. A powerful name makes the man powerful; a lovely name makes the lady lovely. When naming a baby the parents often express their wishes for the future life of the child. They also may express their own wishes like the one of having a son, when they call their daughter 帶弟 *Dài Dì* “bring little brother”.

I believe that people in western cultures often tend to interpret Chinese names just in this sense: we see, hear, smell and taste them. Above all we measure a great importance to the symbolic meaning of the name. The symbolism of a name is interesting to us because it is often missing in our own names. We seldom know where our names come from or what they mean. The historical origin and the etymology of western names seem not to bear great significance in modern times.

Another important, but not so obvious, aspect of a Chinese name is the information the name may contain about the social background of its carrier. This is indicated in various different ways, some of which will be discussed in this paper.

Chinese men often have many different names used in different situations at different times of life.¹ Traditionally women only have one name, which is the “milk” name given at the time of birth. Women didn’t use to have an official name indicating their origin, because through marriage they became members of their husband’s family. This was changed in 1955 with the introduction of the new

¹ These are: the milk name, the scholar name or the official name, the pen name, the respect name, the monk or nun name as well as different kinds of style and nick names. Chang, Eileen 1996: “What is essential is that the names be right”. *Renditions Vol. 45*: 29-30.

population registration system. Now the official name of each Chinese citizen is the one given at the time of birth registered in his or her residence and working permit.

Because Chinese men, and sometimes women as well, may have many different names, it seems to me that the name does not play a decisive role in self-perception. In earlier times a new name was given for example, when a boy started school and got his scholar name, which then became his official name. His scholar name would be used at school, his milk name at other times. Later on he might take a pen name or two and as a venerable old man he might get a “respect name”. Important is the fact that all these names can be and often are used simultaneously. Taking on a new name can be interpreted as a symbolic transition from one social status to another. However, such a change does not mean breaking up with the past. Eileen Chang claims that a Chinese name represents a state of mind. When the state of mind changes, why shouldn't the name change accordingly? She believes that taking on different names is a kind of ego inflation.² I think that the practise of using many names can be interpreted as a reflection of the Chinese way of differentiating between the various aspects of a person. The same person acting the part of a son at one time and that of a teacher at another time indicates the different roles by using a different name. In other cultures this may be done by adding e.g. a title in front of a name.

A typical example of a Chinese person with many names is Z. 福山 *Fú Shān*, born around 1900 in the village of 东北阳 *Dōng Běi Yáng*. His milk name is 壮宝 *Zhuàng Bǎo* “magnificent treasure”. His official name is 福山 *Fú Shān* “blessed mountain”, his pen name 玉石 *Yù Shí* “jade”, his respect name 翡翠 *Fěi Cùi* “jadeite” and his nickname 老翠 *Lǎo Cùi* “venerable jade“. All these names were known in the village and they were used in accordance with the given situation.³

Who chooses the name for a new born baby plays an important role. Traditionally it would be the paternal grandfather. Sometimes an astrologer, the village teacher, or some other person with some formal education would be consulted. How

² Chang, Eileen 1996: 30.

³ Author's interview in the village of Dōng Běi Yáng in 2006.

important the issue of finding the “right” name for a baby is depends on the social background of the parents as well as the gender of the baby. Naming a baby boy still seems generally more important than naming a baby girl.

Sources of proper names

Traditional name giving practises draw their sources from the endemic doctrines of Confucianism and Daoism. The formal construction of the official name is often based on the Confucian world view, in which social order plays a very important role. A person’s place and status in the family (or any other group) can be expressed through the use of the so-called 排行 *páiháng*-element⁴ or any other word expressing a seniority or subordinate status within a given group. Thus the traditional Chinese name does not only identify or differentiate a person as an individual, but can also define his place in the society. Furthermore Confucian ethic and moral views are expressed in names. The often used character 德 *dé* “virtue” serves as an example thereof. Magic aspects from the Daoist doctrine and various folk religious beliefs provide a counterbalance to the formal Confucian elements. They include aspects from the theory of “the five elements”, geomancy and numerology.

The parts of a traditional Chinese name

A traditional Chinese name is made up of three parts: the family name, a *páiháng*-element and the proper name or names. The corpus of surnames used by the Han (over 90% of the population of the PRC today) in modern China numbers between 3000 and 4000, the current population being about 1,3 billion. A total of 11 000 historical surnames of various ethnic groups has been collected from literary sources. According to documents on the early history of China, surnames of noble families were often adopted by the common people and they thus became more and more popular while other surnames disappeared. Many representatives of minority nationalities took on a Han-name as the Han were generally considered to be the most civilized ethnic group.⁵ As so many people share the same surname

⁴ The 排行 *páiháng* element is a component, which can mark the age order of siblings or simply the fact that they are siblings, and a seniority position in a family. It can also be used to mark the generation within a family in which case it is part of the name of each person belonging to the same generation. It can mark the membership of any given group like a school of artists.

⁵ Du, Ruofu et al. 1992: „Chinese Surnames and the Genetic Differences between North and South China“. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics monograph series* 5: 10-11.

it can not serve the purpose of identification and differentiation the way it does in many other cultures. Therefore in a Chinese context personal names are more significant than surnames.

How do the Chinese themselves feel about their names? Do they see them “in colours”? Does the symbolic meaning of a name play a role for them? What kinds of information can they deduce from a name? These are some of the questions I am seeking to answer in this paper.

2 The purpose of this paper and the data

This paper attempts to discover the extent and role that some of the old traditions have played in the name giving practices during the past century. I am focussing on the following two aspects:

1. The role of the 排行 *páiháng* in modern Chinese names expressing the importance of clear family and other social structures.
2. The symbolic and aesthetical aspects of proper names.

Surnames are not included in my research.

I presume that when in China a new baby is born, it is very important that it gets the “right” name. The name should express the parents’ hopes and expectations as well as their good wishes for a long and successful life for their child. It may (but does not have to) include certain magic elements from the Daoist doctrine. The name should also imply the social status of its carrier. I further suggest that modern Chinese parents want their children’s names to be aesthetically pleasing; look nice when written and sound good when said aloud.

The data

When collecting empirical data for this paper I asked the following questions:

- Does the name include a 排行 *páiháng* component?
- What is the meaning of the name? Does it express specific wishes or expectations for the future life of the child?
- Should the name have a pleasing sound? Should the name be pleasant to look at?

- Who and what was consulted when selecting a name (an astrologer, a village elder, etc)? Where books like the 易经 *Yìjīng* (an ancient oracle book) or other such sources consulted?

The data consists of a corpus of 51 Chinese names collected in the PRC in 2006. Information on 24 names was collected in the village of *Dōng Běi Yáng* in *Héběi* province in central China. *Dōng Běi Yáng* is a traditional farming village with about 4000 inhabitants built around a Daoist temple. It is a rapidly developing village due to its proximity to the big city of 邢台 *Xíngtái* where many villagers find employment. Four village elders aged between 83 and 66 gave information on name giving practices in general as well as on the names of their own children and some of their grandchildren. Two of the elders are teachers, one is a carpenter and one is a soldier.

The second group of informants consists of people from all over the country who live and work in Beijing. This group answered questions on what they knew about their own names and what aspects they had considered when giving names to their children. As for their education and professional occupation they form a very heterogeneous group, some of them being teachers, others being engineers, clerks, waitresses, bellboys and cleaners. All informants, except for one sinitized Manchu, belong to the Han-nationality.

My assistant and helper for collecting and interpreting the data is my good friend 赵小燕 *Zhào Xiǎo Yàn*, who introduced me to her family in her home village of *Dōng Běi Yáng*. She was invaluable at helping me conduct the interviews, distribute and translate the questionnaires, provide answers to further questions by email and finally by trying to explain to me “what the people really meant” when they talked to us.

Before saying more about Chinese names, I will first discuss some relevant points of the theory of proper names in general.

3 On the theory of proper names

According to Vincent Blánar personal names form one of the main categories of every language. Proper names have developed from *appellativa* forming a group of words *sui generis* and are thus creations of a secondary level, having gone through a functional reconstruction. Words like “Maria” or “Sam” in a western context are immediately recognizable as proper names, but the etymological development from an *appellativum* to a *nomen proprium* of such words is mostly no longer clear.⁶ The custom of using the same proper name for many people at the same time in the Anglo-American and European cultural contexts has served to consolidate proper names as a lexical category.

Chinese names are not lexical units. There is no category of proper names in the Chinese language.⁷ Chinese names are creations of a moment put together from characters and radicals⁸ with a concrete or symbolic meaning or a phonetic function. Many of them include components like “river”, “fire” or “mountain”, which originally functioned as *appellativa*. The etymological constituents of Chinese words can often be clearly recognized and they also play an important symbolic role in the name. Y. 川江 *Chuān Jiāng* “river, river” is a 40-year old man from the 四川 *Sì Chuān*, “four rivers”, province. His proper name may have been chosen to establish a link with his home province. Another reason for choosing this particular name could be the vigorous impression of constantly forward running water symbolising his parents’ wish for a highly active life for their son. Yet another possible explanation for the use of these constituents could be that the element “water” was badly wanting in his body at the time of his birth.

In the traditional Chinese context knowingly giving someone the name of another person would be unthinkable, because it would be considered disrespectful. According to Margaret Song the name taboo is especially strictly followed in the case of an emperor, an ancestor or of any person in an authority position. If in

⁶ Blánar, Vincent 2001: Theorie des Eigennamens. Status, Organisation und Funktion der Eigennamen in der Gesellschaftlichen Kommunikation. In *Germanistische Linguistik*: 164-165. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag: 167.

⁷ By “Chinese language” I mean the standardized Mandarin Chinese or 普通话 *pǔtōnghuà* „common language”, the official language of the People’s Republic of China.

⁸ Radicals are the individual components of characters.

China two people should have exactly the same official name, one of them may apply or even be forced to change his name. The official name can also be changed, if a person feels that his name is vulgar, bad or in some way considered unsuitable.⁹ A young Beijinger changed his name meaning “draw a picture”, because he used to work as a graphic designer and didn’t want people to guess his profession on the basis of his name. Now he calls himself “little picture”.

The name taboo is surely one reason for the practice of creating new names rather than copying already existing names. However, according to Wolfgang Bauer, expressing respect towards ancestors or other authorities cannot be the only explanation for the name taboo. It wouldn’t explain the avoidance of “bad names”. Bauer looks for further explanations for the taboo in the age-old belief in the inherent magic powers of words. The carrier of a name identifies himself with the idea the name represents.¹⁰

Willem Klaas defines *nomen proprium* as a “mono-referential and unambiguous etiquette” which identifies a person and differentiates him or her from any other person.¹¹ Gerhard Koss states that the function of a proper name is to transmit information about a person as well as to help him to identify himself. It is a human need to be recognised as someone unique, someone who cannot be mistaken for anyone else. The fewer the people that have the same name the higher the level of distinction. According to Koss the proper name can be understood as an inextricable part of a person’s identity. It is not only a means of legal identification but, as he puts it: “my name – it’s me!”¹² In the Chinese context this idea would have to be modified and expressed as follows: “my names – that’s me”.

Knowing that in China it is customary for a man to have more than one name, it would seem to me that the self-perception of a Chinese person is not very strongly connected with his name or names. Changing names would not be considered as

⁹ Song: 87-88.

¹⁰ Bauer: 263-264.

¹¹ Klaas, Willem 1996: *Eigennamen und Bedeutung: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie des nomen proprium*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter: 21-22.

¹² Koss, Gerhard 2002: *Namenforschung. Eine Einführung in die Onomastik*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag: 71.

loosing part of one's identity in the same way such a practice might be perceived in our western cultures. What exactly happens when "superficially westernized" Chinese wearing western style clothes take additional western names and start to call themselves Julia or Gary, would be an interesting question to follow. I believe that switching between two "Chinese identities" demonstrated by different Chinese names is not the same as switching between a Chinese and a "foreign" identity. When giving English names to Chinese people I have often made the experience that the symbolic meaning of the name is not considered very important. However, when I present a list of names with their meanings, men tend to select names like Nick "winner" or Curt "brave", even though Curt with an "r" is very difficult to pronounce for many Chinese. Women tend to select names of flowers. Without such a list at hand the sound and the easy pronunciation are the most important factors when selecting an English name. Copying names of western movie stars is not considered a taboo.

The next chapter is a discussion of some theoretical aspects of Chinese name giving practices in different social and political contexts as well as how a Chinese name is put together.

4 Chinese names

4.1 *A general introduction*

The Chinese culture is an extremely literary one. There are meticulously kept records on all aspects of life, the oldest of them dating back to the Shang Dynasty (about 1600 - 1046 B.C.). Such records supply a great amount of information on genealogies, including an extensive corpus of names.

The political organisation of the Chinese society has traditionally been based on clan structures. Viviane Alleton points out that with the founding of the PRC the privileged social position as well as the traditional rights of the great families were denied by the new government. Keeping family records was theoretically overthrown especially in urban areas. Nevertheless, the significance of close family ties seems not to have been greatly affected in the countryside. Working

units (in the form that they still exist) were and are still often formed from people sharing the same family name or the same lineage.¹³ Furthermore, a tendency of going “back to the roots” can be observed in China as in other parts of the world. This is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that people are beginning to add a generation *páiháng* to the names of their children in order to establish a connection with the paternal lineage and the place of origin. In modern China the political importance of reconstructing the lineages of the once powerful great families is winning a new meaning as the clan-based networks are taking on an increasingly important role in the developing economic life of the country.¹⁴

In 1955 the 户口 *hùkǒu* system was introduced in the PRC. The *hùkǒu* is an official residence permit issued at the time of birth. It allows a person to live and work within a limited area around his place of origin. The system was introduced to keep inland migration under control. Now the official name of a Chinese person is the one given at the time of birth registered in his or her *hùkǒu*. Other names, however, continue to be taken and used as before. A person may be given a new “formal” name, e.g. for religious reasons like putting it on a commemorative stele at a temple graveyard. Such a name would be registered only in the private family records, which are now being revised as the government policy regarding old traditions is no longer so strict. An example of this practise will be illustrated on page 13 in chapter 4.1.1 “The 排行 *páiháng* component”.

In addition to containing information about a person’s social background, traditional Chinese names also include symbolic meanings. I asked a few Chinese people about the information they can deduce from the following names and about the general impressions these names make on them. The answers mirror the social and cultural background of the answerers, some of them being well-educated in the traditional culture, others having been socialized within the world of the communist ideology in which many traditional aspects were negated.

These are some of the comments I received regarding the name 傅懋勳 *Fù MàoJī*, “hardworking master, who deserves to accomplish great things in life“:

¹³ Alleton: 77.

¹⁴ Alleton: 85-87.

- “It is a very formal, masculine name.”
- “The man must come from a highly cultured, literary family.”
- “This is a very scholarly name.”
- “His parents are well educated; they set high moral standards and expect achievements from their offspring.”

At the other end of the spectrum there were comments like:

- “The name does not say anything to me.”
- “It’s just a name.”
- “I think it is probably a man’s name.”
- “I can’t read the characters, because they are too complicated.”

The following are comments on the name 赵蜜 *Zhào Mì*, “Süsse”:

- “This is a typical girl’s name.”
- “This girl’s parents have no education and do not set high expectations on their offspring.”
- “The name ‘smells good’ (*mì* means “honey”). I can see that the girl has a gentle, smiling face.”
- “This name says nothing at all to me.”

From these answers we can conclude that the names do give information on the family background to given people, but not to others. Some people see and even smell the person behind the name, others not.

My Chinese name is 李香盈 *Lǐ Xiāng Yíng* “fully fragrant plum blossom”. The different parts of the name were taken from a well known poem from the Song Dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), a culturally flourishing period of Chinese history. The words were carefully selected so that they should compose a harmonious whole regarding the meaning, the sound and the visual effect. It is a very learned name, much appreciated by a Chinese scholar.

4.2 Composition of Chinese names

4.2.1 The 排行 *páiháng* component

An essential part of a traditional Chinese name is the so-called 排行 *páiháng* component, which can indicate the age order of siblings, a seniority position in a family, or membership in a group. It can also indicate the order of generations within the family. In the village of Dōng Běi Yáng each of the four sisters of a

family have the same *páiháng* 娥É “pretty woman” indicating that they are sisters. The name 三妹 *Sān Mèi* literally means “third younger sister”, the word “three” being the *páiháng*. Members of artists’ groups like famous Peking Opera Schools include as a *páiháng* a component of a famous teacher’s name in their own “artist” names to show that they belong to this specific school of the art.¹⁵

The social status of a family can, at least partially, be recognized from the use of the various *páiháng* components. The higher and the more stable the status, the more consequently the family has followed the complex traditional system and the more carefully the family records have been kept.¹⁶

Perhaps the most important type of *páiháng* is the generation name, which is shared by members of the same generation within a family. It is normally added to the name of boys only, because they are the ones who carry on the paternal lineage. The function of the generation *páiháng* is to give the patrilineal genealogy a clear structure so that the position of any male of a given family can be easily traced back.¹⁷ Some families, but not all, have a generation name poem or proverb. Knowing it makes it easy to follow the order of the generations. This is the “*páiháng*- poem” of one branch of the Zhào family in Dōng Běi Yáng. The highlighted characters are the ones in use now.

赵氏家谱用字 Zhào shì jiā pǔ yòng zì

成士文 修庆 chéng shì wén xiū qìng
 国克子智敬 guó kè zǐ zhì jìng
 吉祥冠长鸿 jí xiáng guān cháng hóng
 更新连万圣 gèng xīn lián wàn shèng.

This branch of the Zhào family updated their generation *páiháng* system in 2000, when a commemorative stele was erected at the village graveyard to honour a great ancestor. The names of all living male members of the family were chiselled onto the stele. As some of the younger men did not have a generation *páiháng* – the older men all did - they got one at this occasion. This had to be done so that the names could be inscribed in the correct column on the stele. Now all of the

¹⁵ Alleton 1993: 88.

¹⁶ Bauer 1959: 221.

¹⁷ Sung 1981: 78-79.

nine males of the investigated group have a name that we could perhaps call a “religious” name including a generation *páiháng*.¹⁸ Such a name is solely used for the family records and the name registered in the *hùkǒu* continues to be used as the only official name.

The act of raising a commemorative stele implies the wish to honour the old tradition of showing respect towards ancestors. This kind of practice can be interpreted as a wish to strengthen spiritual hold as well as social order. On the one hand the spiritual vacuum created by the diminishing influence of the communist ideology must be filled. This can be done, for instance, by re-establishing traditional belief systems with ancestor worship being a very important component. On the other hand, the new organisational structures created by the communist regime are breaking down as communes cease to exist and the 单位 *dānwèi*¹⁹ system is losing its importance. The traditional family structures are being restored.

Many of the Zhào family members are farmers who live in their ancestral home village. Even though the village is in many respects quite modern, traditions still seem to play an important part in village life. This is reflected in the name giving practices as well as in the importance my informants place on updating the formal family records in the traditional manner.

In the group of the Beijing interviewees three out of five men (aged between 22 and 37) have a generation name and four out of sixteen females (aged between 18 and 53) reported having one. Most of the parents of this group of informants would have been born around 1949. They may have relinquished the use of a generation *páiháng* on account of the communist ideology practiced in their homes. Another explanation for the missing generation name could be that these informants come from families that were relocated²⁰ during and shortly after 1949 and have thus lost the close connection to their place of origin. Having no

¹⁸ At this point it is interesting to notice that 10 females of the investigated group of 13 have a generation name as well, even though they are unofficial and will thus only appear in the family records, but not e.g. on a commemorative stele.

¹⁹ *dānwèi* is a word used to describe a working unit or certain other kinds of organisational units.

²⁰ Intellectuals from towns were sent to the countryside to be ideologically re-educated by the farmers. Farmers, who were loyal to the communist party, were sent to the cities to take up government posts.

knowledge of the familial background of this informant group I can only speculate about the reasons.

The above mentioned considerations and the empirical evidence from my research seem to solidify the postulate that clear family structures play an important sociological role in the traditional as well as in the modern Chinese society. The *páiháng* component in a name is the formal expression of it.

In the following chapters I will illustrate the composition of Chinese proper names; the different structural components as well as the sociological and magic aspects considered when creating a “perfect” name.

4.2.2. Parts of proper names

A Chinese proper name generally consists of one or two characters each having a lexical meaning of its own. Thus the name will represent either the sum of the lexical meanings or get a completely new meaning derived from the parts as a whole.²¹

A Chinese name can be put together in any desired way using the corpus of approximately 50 000 existing characters. If that’s not enough, the 214 so called radicals can be freely combined to create new characters with new meanings. Thus a Chinese name can be recognized as a personal name only in a context. Knowing whether the name belongs to a man or a woman requires additional information about the person. However, there are clues to help define the gender. For instance, someone called “hero of the fatherland” would probably be a man and someone called “sweet sugar” a woman.

When composing a name the following aspects may (but do not have to) be considered:

- The person’s place within the family
- The meaning of the individual components, which together make up the name

²¹ Sung: 67.

- The sound and the visual effect of the characters
- The time and the historical context of birth
- References to literary works

Examples illustrating some of these aspects:

美娥 *Měi É*, and 花娥 *Huā É* are sisters. This is indicated by the character 娥 *É*, which both have in their names. 爱国 *Ài Guó* is a combination of the characters 爱 *ài* „love“ and 国 *guó* “country”. This name was given at the time when the PRC was founded. It expresses the parents’ wish that their son should always support the “new” fatherland. The name 国华 *Guó Huá* is one of the names for China and was chosen, because the baby was born on October 1, the national day of the People’s Republic of China. *Ài Guó* and *Guó Huá* are examples of names, which can be used for both males and females.

In addition to simply formal aspects different symbolic and aesthetical considerations seem to play a significant role in Chinese names. Some such aspects will be discussed in the following chapters.

4.3 Symbolism and magic in Chinese names

Chinese names can be interpreted within the frame of the symbol theory.²² Clifford Geertz defines cultural patterns as bundles of “models of something” as well as “models for something”. Talking about “models of something” the focus of modelling lays on the manipulation of a symbol system. It is an attempt to make something understandable by giving it a concrete form, which can then be interpreted by all members of a given group in the given cultural context. Such symbol systems are manifestations of ideas, behavioural patterns and expressions of wishes, attitudes and beliefs. Symbols can be pictures, building instructions or, as in this special case, names. The “models of something” represent something real and concrete like a bridge or a pretty flower. When talking about “models for something” the focus lays on the manipulation of concrete things. Naming a boy “bridge between old and new” or a girl “pretty flower” causes characteristics associated with these images to be transferred to the person. When we think of the

²² Geertz, Clifford 1983: *Dichte Beschreibung*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp: 49-54.

boy we see the picture of a bridge and when we think of the girl we imagine a picture of something that's beautiful to look at, smells good, is fragile, etc. The objects of modelling are the boy, who should grow up to be like a bridge, and the girl, who should be pretty and submissive. However, one must always bear in mind that such symbol systems are culture specific. They do not form rigidly defined sets of symbols, but their contents are constantly modified and change with time. Chinese names can be interpreted as models of and models for the personal characteristics of a person.

Elegant and simple, lucky, unlucky and repulsive names

It seems that well-educated people tend to choose elegant words from great literary works, and common people tend to compile rather simple names for their children. An exception to this general rule would be the name 尚可 *Shàng Kě* discussed more closely on page 19.

Characters with a good meaning as e.g. 福 *fú* "good fortune, blessing, happiness" and 財 *cái* "wealth, riches" are very popular parts of personal names. On the other hand Chinese history books are full of stories about people with names that can – if one wishes to do so – be interpreted as unlucky. An example of such a person is the first Emperor of the 魏 *Wèi* Dynasty, 曹丕 *Cáo Pī* "big, great".²³ His name can be analysed as including the radicals 不十, which, among other things, can be interpreted as *bù shí* "not ten". He died after having reigned for only 7 years, which was proof enough for his adversaries that his untimely death was caused by his unlucky name. The symbolic power of a name is further illustrated by the fact that if a Chinese Emperor was not happy with the state of the nation, he would simply change the name of his reign-era thus hoping to change the country's fortunes as well.²⁴

If a person feels that the connotation of his name is bad, he can take on a new name. Here I think we must make a distinction between a milk name and an official one. As shown in the example of doctor 狗屎 *Gǒu Shǐ*, a disgusting milk

²³ Bauer: 42.

²⁴ Chang: 31.

name can be used by family members and friends without making the person look or feel bad. The following story is from the village of Dōng Běi Yáng.²⁵

“There is a man in our village. He is a very famous doctor working in a big hospital in the city. His milk name is 狗屎 *Gǒu Shǐ* “dog droppings”, because his elder brothers died as babies. His official name is 运福 *Yùn Fú* “fortune and happiness”.

The villagers like to use the milk name, usually, and that is OK for him when he is back home in the village. But there are many farmers who go to the hospital in the city to see doctors. The farmers want some help from him, so they ask the doctors and nurses: Do you know which is the room for the Gǒu Shǐ dean?

Also the farmers may call him GOU SHI, GOU SHI as they came across him in the hospital. I think farmers do not call him Gou Shi to make him embarrassed. Perhaps most of them only know the doctor's milk name. Another reason our Chinese like to use the milk name is to show close relationship.”

The fear of demons and evil spirits was great in old China and this still seems to be case. In order to protect their babies from bad spirits people would give them repulsive baby names like the above mentioned 狗屎 *Gǒu Shǐ*, or 尿泡 *Niào Pāo* “urine”. When hearing such a name, so they hoped, the spirits would turn away from the child in disgust. Sometimes a boy would be given a girly milk name in order to make him uninteresting for the spirits.²⁶

Symbolic contents of names: wishes for future

Most of the names in the corpus of this study have a clear symbolic meaning. Only five (3 female and 2 male) of the 51 names were reported not having any specific meaning at all. They are “just names” as the informants told me. In most cases there is a direct connection between the name and specific wishes for the future of the child. Only in 15 cases out of 51 was the name said to have no connection with any possible wishes or expectations. There are, however, two interesting contradictions: A man whose son’s name means “reading, engage in farming, part study and part farming, success in family” says that this name does not express a wish. Another man, whose name means “honest and frank”, said the same about his name. Unfortunately I was not able to study these contradictions more closely.

²⁵ The story was told in an email message from Zhao XiaoYan in October 2007.

²⁶ Bauer: 49-50.

Adjectives referring to the physical appearance like 美 *měi* and 玉 *yù* meaning “pure, beautiful” formed a part of 11 of the 34 female names. The parents’ wish that the girls should grow up to be beautiful women is expressed in all these cases. Two sisters had names with the meaning “be better than boys”, which clearly expresses the parents’ wish that the daughters should overcome the traditional way of considering boys more important than girls. Then there is the little girl called 宁宁 *Níng Níng* “peaceful, tranquil”. She is now 8 years old and as lively and full of energy as an 8-year-old would be. However, the parents wish for her is that she should grow up to be a woman with a tranquil heart. Other female names include symbols for things like freedom and cleverness, which in the traditional context would rather have been used for boys.

The range of symbolic meanings in men’s names is wider than that in women’s names. Men’s names mostly include expressions of patriotic feelings, intelligence and physical strength. Four brothers have names that express love for the fatherland and the People’s Liberation Army, e.g. 爱军 *Ài Jūn* “love the army”. The parents wish that these boys should always support and love their country and the army. Five of the men have names including words like 聪 *cōng* and 德 *sī* “clever, intelligent, bright, talented”. Their parents wish that they should study hard and have successful careers. *Níng Níng*’s brother, now 10 years old, is called 奕皓 *Yì Hào* “glowing with health, radiating vigour, far-reaching”. He is a healthy, strong young boy and very open minded and curious. Friends of mine called their now 6-year old son 尚可 *Shàng Kě* “just so-so” in the hope that he should have an easy and carefree life. The parents have both pursued academic careers. They know how big the competition in the academic world is and how much hard work is required on their chosen path of life. So they hope that their son will have it a little easier.

Commemorative names form a special group of symbolic names. A man born in 1949 was given the name 斗 *Dòu* “struggle” to commemorate the difficult birth of the PRC. His nephew was named 小波 *Xiǎo Bō* “little Boeing” to remember another important event in the history of the country, the day Henry Kissinger landed at the Capital airport of Beijing on a Boeing jet plane. *Xiǎo Bō*’s father worked as a guard at the airport at that time. A special kind of memory is

associated with the name 新房 *Xīn Fáng* “new house”; namely that of the family building a new home at the time the boy was born.

Magic elements in names

The main sources of magic components in names are to be found in the Daoist doctrine as well as various folk religious belief systems with their ideas of the five elements, the 阴 *yīn*-阳 *yáng* –symbolism, numerology and geomancy. Magic elements in names are based rather on oral than written tradition.²⁷

Based on the time of birth an astrologer would determine whether all the primary elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) are in a harmonious balance in the body of the new born baby. If there seems to be a shortage of a given element, it would be provided for by including the symbol of the corresponding element like e.g. 火 *huǒ* for “fire” or 水 *shuǐ* for “water” in the name.²⁸ A symbol of an element can also be added for other reasons. 爱萍 *Ài Píng* “love duckweed” was born in the year of the rabbit. *Píng* “duckweed” includes the radicals for water and grass, which are both good for a rabbit. Consequently they would be good for a person born in this year as well. This is the only name I found that included a symbol of one of the five elements. A woman called 玉 *Yù* “jade, fair, beautiful” told me that her skin was very dark when she was born. Her parents hoped that the colour of her skin would eventually change to a light shade of jade as they called her name *Yù* out loud many times a day.

As far as literary works are concerned, the ancient oracle book 易经 *Yìjīng* or some other similar book had been consulted in five cases. The children, whose names were chosen with the help of this traditional method, were aged between 2 and 19. This suggests that some young Chinese parents are now looking for ideas for names in such traditional sources. Computer programs based on the above-mentioned magic elements are now available. A young professional Beijinger selected the “best possible name” for his daughter using such a computer program. He entered the exact time of her birth and got a list of names to choose from. The little girl’s name is 子萱 *Zǐ Xuān* “child, water lily”. The number of the strokes (an

²⁷ Bauer: 223-224.

²⁸ Sung: 72.

example of numerology) in the characters symbolises wealth and happiness and the name sounds beautiful. According to her father it is a perfect name in all aspects.

4.3 The *aesthetical* aspects

A name should have a pleasing sound

What makes the sound of a Chinese name so special? It is the different tones, which together form different sound patterns. The following in the West well known official names of Chinese politicians illustrate some positively perceived tone patterns. 孫中山 *Sūn Zhōngshān* is the Mandarin Chinese form of *Sun Jatsen*. All parts of the name are pronounced in the high, level first tone giving the name a smooth, “elevated” sound. 毛澤東 *Máo Zédōng* has two rising second tones with the high, level first tone in the end. This pattern gives the name a vigorous, rising tone. 鄧小平 *Dèng Xiǎopíng* has first a falling fourth tone, then a low third and then a rising second tone. This is a well balanced, harmonious tone pattern. A name consisting of falling fourth tones only would generally be perceived as too aggressive and therefore negative. An exception would be the name 奕皓 *Yì Hào* “glowing with health, radiating vigour, far-reaching” in which the “aggressive” fourth tone underlines the vigorous image the meaning of the name creates.

Most of the names of my informants have a positively perceived tone pattern. This is surely an important reason for why they like the sound of their names. When I asked them whether they thought that their name sounded nice, most of them replied with a rather surprised “yes” or “yes, of course”. My interpretation of their reaction is that they were astonished anyone should ask such a question. Why should their parents have given them a name that didn’t sound nice? In fact only two informants said that they didn’t like the sound of their name and one made the remark her name sounded just ok. The only exceptions were the following cases: One name is considered too long and complicates and another one is a Manchu-name, which people tend to hear as consisting of Mandarin Chinese words, which the name closely resembles.

There are only a few examples of names consisting of two or more fourth tones in my corpus. The positive symbolic meaning seems to compensate for the falling tones as the sound of these names was also perceived as pleasant. How conscious people are of the tone patterns in their names would be an interesting question to study further.

A name should look nice

In the written form a Chinese name does not consist of lineally ordered letters like western names. It is a visual symbol perceived as a picture. Simple characters are easier, very complicated ones more difficult or even impossible to interpret. Reading and understanding characters requires a certain level of education. The written form of the name is like a business card, which can tell different things about the person's social background just by looking at it. To put it in a much generalized way: the more complicated the characters, the higher the social status. My informants are generally happy with the visual effect of their names. The only complaint in this respect came from J. 勇为 *Yǒng Wéi* who said that his name does not look especially nice and is too complicated to write.

In two of the names I have been using as examples throughout this paper, 傅懋勳 *Fù MàoJūn* “the hardworking master, who deserves to accomplish great things in life” and 尚可 *Shàng Kě* “just so-so”, the written form complies with the symbolic meaning of the name, the first one being rather high-flying and the second one very simple. In the third example, 赵蜜 *Zhào Mì* this is not the case. This fairly complicated looking name belongs to a girl and it simply means “honey”.

My question about whether the people thought their names “look nice” were answered with the same surprised “yes, of course” as my questions about the sound of the name. What exactly makes them perceive names as looking nice would be another interesting question to study further.

5 Conclusions

The results of my research support the thesis that also in modern China it is important that a new born baby gets the “right” name. A good name is a

harmonious picture with a pleasing sound. But it is more than just a picture; a Chinese name can be understood as a kind of “calling card”, giving information on a person’s social background as well. How much information someone can read from another person’s name tells something about the interpreter himself. The more complicated Chinese characters are difficult to read so just to be able to read a name requires a certain level of education. References to historical events and literary works included in a name require an even higher level of education. Knowledge of the Confucian and Daoist doctrines helps by the interpretation of names further.

Most of my informants know who gave them their name. Most of them know what the name means. And most of them are happy with their name or names. If two people should happen to have exactly the same name, one of them may wish or even be forced to change it. This can also be done if the name is considered bad or unsuitable. One of my informants had changed his name (see page 9).

Modern Chinese parents still sometimes rely on their own parents as sources for suitable names. Instead of letting the paternal grandfather make the final decision, as he would have in earlier times, young parents tend to make it now themselves. Old literary works like the 易经 *Yijing* are still consulted, but now also in the modern form of computer programs. The name taboo is still effective as far as Chinese names are considered, but does not apply to English names which are taken to make communication with foreigners easier. Names of popular western movie stars and other celebrities are very much liked by the young Chinese.

The criteria for a good name have not changed. When composing a name the symbolic meaning of the components still play an important role. Words with positive meanings like “lucky, intelligent, courageous, hero and virtue” are still popular constituents of names and words with negative meanings are avoided. Girls’ names often include adjectives referring to the physical appearance or feminine qualities like “beautiful, gracious and sweet”. Men’s’ names often include expressions of patriotic feelings, physical strength or virtue and intelligence. Very often the name still expresses the parents’ wishes for the future of the child. It is interesting to see that the traditional *páiháng*-element indicating

a person's place within the family is now being added to names again and not only to boys' names, as in earlier times, but to girls' names as well. This clearly indicates the wish to re-establish family ties and recreate clear familial structures that were intentionally severed by the Communist government in the early years of the PCR.

The old habit of having many names simultaneously was confirmed by the senior informants from *Dōng Běi Yáng*. It was not specifically confirmed by the Beijing group of informants who represent a younger generation. This would be an interesting question to pursue. I would expect that nick-names, pen-names and other artist-names are still widely being used in all age groups. The question whether the Chinese identify themselves mainly through one personal name can, in my opinion, be answered with a "no". The examples provided above demonstrate this. The fact that younger people like to take on an English name, but do not seem to identify themselves with that name (the criteria for selecting an English name are only partially the same as those for selecting a Chinese one) may indicate a change of thinking. Those young people, who deal with Westerners, often find themselves living in "two worlds"; their Chinese name(s) symbolizes their ethnic or national identity and the English name connects them with the rest of the world. In this context the Chinese name may get a new, significant role as an indicator of ethnic and national relatedness and thus acquire new relevance in self-perception.

Two political events in the 20th century have had an impact on the name giving practices. Firstly the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and secondly the introduction of the *hùkǒu*, the official residence permit in 1955. Starting in 1949 the new government propagated the communist ideology on a nationwide scale and forbade many old traditions including certain traditional name giving practices. Indicating family background or a high social status by e.g. Confucian elements in names and the use of a *páiháng*-element was discouraged. Every kind of superstition was condemned and consequently the use of magic elements in names. As a sign of a change in women's social status parents would give their daughters names like "be better than boys" (see page 18). In boys' names new ideas like "love of the People's Army" or "the east is red" appeared.

With the introduction of the new residence and working permit system in 1955 all citizens of the PRC are now officially registered with the name given at the time of birth. To what extent these regulations have affected traditional naming customs in remote countryside regions and the western mountain areas, where the influence of the central government is not as great as in the cities and in the industrialized eastern parts of the PRC, would be another interesting point to study.

Since the 1980's big social changes are taking place in the PCR. With the Communist Party losing on influence the once powerful great families are becoming important again as the clan-based networks have begun to play an increasingly important role in the developing economic life of the country. This can be reflected in the names e.g. by the use of the above-mentioned *páiháng*-element.

Social conditions and lifestyles change. With each change new types of names appear. An example of a late type of name is *Shàng Kě* "just so-so". It is a very simple and modest name selected by young academic parents to symbolise the wish that their son should have a "more relaxed" life as they put it. Both of them have had to work very hard to get where they are now and they do not wish to put their son under equally great pressure – thus the very simple, unassuming name.

The big cities are being rapidly westernized and many people have a TV-set now to show them a parallel world of western cultures which had been unknown thus far. I therefore think it is possible that the practice of having one Chinese name and an additional English name will become more and more common at least in larger centres of population. What could this Chinese name look like? I believe that the traditional structures of the name will prevail and perhaps even become more pregnant in order to mark the cultural boarder. In the countryside where people have no contact with foreigners and there is no need for an English name (as of yet), I think this kind development will probably not take place very soon if at all.

This is a picture of two Chinese children in 2006. Their names (see page 19) reflect many of the aspects discussed in this paper.



奕皓 *Yì Hào* “glowing with health, radiating vigour, far-reaching” and his sister
宁宁 *Níng Níng* “peaceful, tranquil”.

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