



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

A good son is sad if he hears the name of his father : the tabooing of names in China as a way of implementing social values

Adamek, P.

Citation

Adamek, P. (2012, September 11). *A good son is sad if he hears the name of his father : the tabooing of names in China as a way of implementing social values*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19770>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19770>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/19770> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Adamek, Piotr

Title: A good son is sad if he hears the name of his father : the tabooing of names in China as a way of implementing social values

Date: 2012-09-11

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The custom of name tabooing was an important element of Chinese culture through the ages. It was present in every period of Chinese history. The reader could see the continuous development of the practice of *bihui* from its beginning until now, which was described in successive chapters (3-6). In various periods of China's long history, name tabooing developed into different forms and methods of avoidance, and an elaborate system of taboo principles came into being.

However, the tabooing of names in China was more than one of many customs. It was applied unconsciously or intentionally in order to enforce social values. From the beginning, the tabooing of names was never merely a private custom, but a social one. It always involved relationships with other people, or sometimes with ghosts (the supernatural world). A person's own taboo name was violated if other people used it, especially if they used it without reverence. The violation of other people's taboo was considered not only a breach of ritual, but also an assault on the whole society.

The taboo custom in China was observed very solemnly. We read about the impact of name tabooing on social life, for example in the *Caomuzi* 草木子. It describes the preparation of a banquet in the Song time. The invited guests were deliberately asked beforehand about their family taboos (*hui*) over three generations. Actors and musicians performing during the banquet then had to check all their texts and delete all taboo characters. Only after that could the performance be staged. Moreover, guests entering the banquet asked about taboo names of the inviting family in order not to violate them by accident.²⁰⁹

The tabooing of names was more than just a kind of *savoir-vivre* or courtesy in Chinese society. It was used intentionally in the political culture and likewise had a great impact on it. The tabooing of names designated a person's position in society and his rank, and distinguished a superior from his subject. Especially the names of emperors, officials and teachers were tabooed. The emperor used the custom in order to legitimate his power. Name tabooing was, in many periods, the litmus test to determine whether the ruler was accepted or not. People were killed when they used the emperor's name openly. On the other hand, the deliberate violation of a name taboo was a way to express one's irritation or disapproval of a ruler. Similarly, the name of one's parents and ancestors were avoided to emphasize their status.

²⁰⁹ *Caomuzi*, j. 3, p. 22a.

The practice of tabooing names changed together with Chinese culture, and it itself also changed Chinese culture. With its roots in the very distant past the customs of “taboo of the dead” (*sihui* 死諱) and reverence for names of the living (*buming* 不名 or *shenghui* 生諱) (see 4.1.1) gradually merged and were unified between the end of Zhou and the beginning of Han period under the overall label of “name tabooing” (*hui* 諱 or *bihui* 避諱) (see 4.3.2.1). This custom evolved then subsequently from a “religious” practice of tabooing into a more or less “secular” practice, but in both cases the use of taboos created relationships of respect between the people involved, often of a very hierarchical nature.

Very influential in this process was the authority of emperor and state. The Emperors – from the First Emperor of the Qin (see 4.4.3) to Emperor Qianlong of the Qing (see 7.3.2) – often used the tabooing of names in order to demonstrate their political power and to legitimize their authority. Generally it seems that the weakening of political power often caused a temporary dwindling of tabooing practices, at least regarding the emperor. There are, however, also relatively weak rulers using or even increasing the custom of name tabooing (for example, the tabooing of posthumous names in the Jin period) in order to stress their political status (see 5.3.7).

In different periods of the history of tabooing of names in China various specific customs can be pointed out, related to the political and social situation. The Three Kingdoms period tabooed courtesy names (*zi* 字) (see 5.2.4) and sometimes taboo names were mutually avoided (see 5.2.8). In the Eastern Jin time the tabooing of names of empresses reached its peak (see 5.3.4) and also posthumous and era names were tabooed (see 5.3.7). This proved rather extreme and was not continued. Since the period of Southern and Northern Dynasties lists of taboos (*huibang* 諱榜) (see 5.4.2) and genealogical records (see 5.4.5) appeared, showing the ongoing institutionalization of the custom and the increasing importance of written records. The Tang time elaborated the *Tang Code* with concrete rules of punishment for violation of taboo, which were adopted in the legal codes of subsequent dynasties (see 6.2.5). The particularity of the Song period was an excessive tabooing of distant and legendary ancestors (see 6.4.4 and 6.4.5), perhaps because of the increasing concern of literati of that time with the distant past of Chinese culture as apparent in the rise of epigraphy. The Yuan and Ming dynasties stressed the avoiding of inauspicious characters and words (see 7.1.3 and 7.2.1) in addition to names, although little else is known of tabooing under the Yuan. The Qing time saw the return of the persecution of

people violating the taboo name of emperor, related to the “literary inquisition” (see 7.3.2).

Roughly approximately since the Eastern Jin we also see the spread of the custom outside of an imperial context, spreading among literati and later also common people. Here the difficulties of finding enough sources do make it difficult to gauge the precise impact of the custom statistically. Moreover neighbor countries of China perceived the “Chinese tabooing of names” as a significant part of Chinese culture (i.e. the culture) and transferred it to their own countries, as is for instance the case in Korea or Japan (see 10.5).

Significant changes can be observed over time in the methods used for tabooing. In the Han the most popular was “the method of equivalent characters” (*tongxun daihuan* 同訓代換), replacing the taboo character with another one with a similar meaning and a different pronunciation (see 5.1.2.1). In the Jin period this method was extended to that of “situational equivalents” (*linshi xunbi* 臨時訓避), enabling the use of numerous equivalent characters in different situations (5.3.3). Tang period established the method of a missing stroke, which permitted (in most cases) the recognition of the original character (see 6.2.3).

There is also a visible change in the avoidance of homonyms of taboo characters. Individual examples are known since the Three Kingdom period (see 5.2.5), but only in the Tang time did they became more numerous, with a culmination in the Song time, when sometimes more than 50 homonyms of a taboo character had to be avoided for the emperor alone. By the end of the period of Southern Song the avoidance of homonyms abruptly weakened, perhaps because of the change in reading practices from loud to silent in that time (see 3.3). Still, homonyms of inauspicious taboo characters continued to be avoided in the Yuan and Ming time (7.1.3 and 7.2.1).

The impact of name tabooing was pervasive throughout society, within the family, in public life and in the life of the emperor. It had both positive (e.g., expression of respect and courtesy) and negative (e.g., resignation from office or severe punishments) consequences for life in China. Both these aspects of *bihui*’s impact were always apparent and have affected Chinese culture. Name tabooing impacted public life, but also the production of texts, since name taboos had to be followed through in writing as well. Many texts were changed and proper names, words or single characters in them were replaced. By determining taboo characters, we can distinguish different editions, to determine the age of a given text, etc. It is very important for Chinese historiography and a necessary tool in historical research.

This dissertation has been an attempt to determine the place of name tabooing in Chinese culture and to depict its various aspects. In the beginning, many questions related to the topic of name tabooing were posed: about the origin of the custom and its evolution, about its social and religious aspects, about its meaning and motivation, about its impact on Chinese culture. Many other problems related to the tabooing of names were addressed in the research. An attempt was made to find answers in a detailed, systematic and historical description of name taboo practices. Especially the textual dimension of taboo practice was pointed out. The additional historical-anthropological analysis helped to understand the social, political and ideological contexts of taboo practice.

Surely not every question could be answered. The tabooing of names in China remains as a very complex phenomenon with many topics. The study of this phenomenon is still in its early stages. The sources used for this research – basically Chinese historical works – allowed only a partial elaboration of some themes. Many aspects of the tabooing of names (as, for example, its significance in religious and popular culture, its impact on other countries, etc.) could be mentioned only in a limited way. It is the nature of this dissertation that its contribution is more on the level of detail than in presenting a radically new interpretation of China's cultural past. Nonetheless, the custom of name tabooing was deeply influential and pervaded all realms of society.

Although the topic of name tabooing appears as a very important aspect of Chinese culture, it has only recently been “rediscovered” in China, and until now has been rather neglected in Western research. This contribution endeavours to stimulate more systematic research in Western sinology dealing with this subject. It is hoped that it could provide for the reader a systematic overall view, by means of a first survey of name tabooing through time and its numerous aspects.

The tabooing of name in China is not a marginal or unimportant problem, but touches upon a central aspect of Chinese culture. The taboo principle of the *Records of Ritual*, quoted in the title of this dissertation, prescribing for a good son to be sad (literally: frightened) if he hears the name of his father²¹⁰ is reflected in its many aspects in the whole history of China. Actually, Chinese culture cannot be thoroughly understood without understanding the phenomenon of name tabooing. In Chinese society, the tabooing of names was the way to implement social values and to legitimize the political hierarchy.

²¹⁰ *Liji*, j. 7, p. 83b.