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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

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STELLINGEN

PROPOSITIONS

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

PIOTR ADAMEK

1. The names of sovereigns, ancestors and officials, as well as characters identical or similar in writing or pronunciation, were generally prohibited and avoided in the Chinese culture. This custom of tabooing names in imperial China was called *bihui* 避諱 or “avoidance of taboo names”.
2. Various methods were used in different periods to avoid taboo names or characters. Among these were changes of pronunciation, changes in the way of writing a character, leaving an empty space, etc. There were strict rules to determine by whom, when and where a taboo had to be observed or not. The tabooing of names was also an expression of courtesy and respect, fear and anger, and, of course, an aspect of the legitimization of power.
3. The tabooing of names resulted in the changing of many personal names, official titles, geographical names, but also the names of plants and things, common expressions, and even expressions from the Chinese calendar. People refused to accept offices because of taboos. They were punished and sometimes even killed because they transgressed the rules concerning the tabooing of names.
4. The tabooing of names was used to indicate social and political hierarchies. It designated someone’s position in society and his rank, distinguished a superior from his subject and legitimated his power.
5. Neighboring countries of China saw the “tabooing of names” as a significant part of proper culture and transferred it to their own countries, such as Korea or Japan.
6. Observance of taboo was related to the political authority of emperor. The weakening of political power often caused a temporary dwindling of taboo practices, at least regarding the names of the emperor. There are, however, also relatively weak rulers using or even increasing the custom of name tabooing in order to stress their political status.
7. Even though social customs have changed immensely in the last century, the tabooing of names remains important for many Chinese in their intersubjective relationships. To this day, for example, it is not possible for many Chinese to take the names of the older generation as names of their children, names of parents, grandparents and their brothers and sisters are to be avoided. Newly-married people have to change their names if they are too similar to the names of relatives of their spouse.
8. There is no substantial difference between common taboos (*jinji* 禁忌) and name taboos (*bihui*), since the latter is simply a manifestation of the first.
9. Language, both spoken and written, is the most important medium of communication among human beings. People perceive a connection between a word and the object it describes, as well as a causal relation between a verbal order and its execution. Thus a word can have “performative” power.
10. Chinese people believed that a personal name possessed and emanated a special power, in both speech and script, making it tantamount to a respective person. For this reason it had to be protected and its use had to be avoided in normal life.

11. *Bihui* can be comical: a man from the Song period, whose father's name was Shi 石 (stone) never used stone tools in his life. He had to pay extraordinary attention when walking in order not to step on stones. Once, as he happened upon a stone bridge on his way, he had to ask other people to carry him across the bridge on their back.
12. The custom of tabooing of names is a useful device if you want to anger somebody in a "cultural way". You just have to ask "kindly" if the character of this person's name should be written with a dog-component or without a heart-component at its side (as done by an official in the period of Southern and Northern Dynasties). Your antagonist will be angry for sure.
13. To violate *bihui* is also good for physical training and reducing aggressions. If you do not like somebody and his name, it is enough to attack something with a similar sound as that person's name. If somebody's name is Alian 阿練, you can cut a few "silk trees" (*lian* 練).