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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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CHAPTER THREE: BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF NAME TABOOING

Human names were perceived as the “essence” of a human being in China and were tabooed. The problem of tabooing names is quite complex. Therefore it seems appropriate to provide a survey of basic features of this topic. Different groups of persons whose names were tabooed will be designated and described. Various kinds of names and titles of people, which were objects of tabooing, will be analyzed. Tabooing of words and characters, as well as their homonyms and parts of characters will be distinguished. Miscellaneous methods of taboo avoidance will be defined, and principles of taboo practice will be discussed. We will also ask when and where taboo names were avoided, and what motives people had for avoidance or, on the contrary, for open use of taboo names, as well what functions the tabooing of names had in Chinese society. Throughout the presentation of this topic we will follow the evolution of taboo and evaluate its importance in the history of China.

3.1. Tabooed Persons

Anybody's name could potentially be considered as taboo. Usually, however, the tabooing required an adequate conviction and respect of other people or otherwise the custom could never have lasted. That is why names were often tabooed because of the name-bearer's function and depending on someone's relationship to that person. One person could be at the same time an object of taboo practice, i.e., a tabooed person, and its subject, i.e., a tabooing person. The name of a hypothetical Mr. Wang could be taboo for his children and grandchildren, as he was their father and grandfather, and for his pupils, as he was their teacher. On the other hand, Mr. Wang would observe a taboo of the names of his ancestors as their son, his teachers, officials, and of course the name of the emperor. As we can see, tabooing was a relational activity, i.e., the tabooing of name expressed a hierarchical relationship to the tabooed person.

In traditional Chinese society we can distinguish a few groups of tabooed persons. The first group consisted of emperors and their relatives: ancestors, wives, crown princes and other members of the royal family (see 3.1.1). The taboo customs of this group are best known, because most records of taboo practice refer to them. Less known is the second group of tabooed persons connected with religious belief and legends, such as real and legendary heroes, sages, and famous persons (e.g., Confucius), but also names of gods,

ghosts and priests (see 3.1.2). The tabooing of their names is sometimes affiliated with official taboo practice, but usually considered as informal taboo. The last group consists of persons tabooed in a limited way within the family or society: relatives of one's own family (see 3.1.3) and respected persons (officials, teachers and friends, see 3.1.4). The so called "family taboo" (*jiahui* 家諱) – taboo of relatives (especially from the father's side), and "internal taboo" (*neihui* 內諱) or women's taboo (*fuhui* 婦諱) – taboo of maternal relatives – are part of this third group.

Taboo of a person's own relatives, teachers, friends and local officials was restricted to a concrete group of people and was therefore called "private taboo" (*sihui* 私諱) – contrary to the taboo of emperors, which should be observed by everybody and was thus called "public taboo" (*gonghui* 公諱) or "state taboo" (*guohui* 國諱). Taboos of ghosts and legendary heroes, if mentioned, are usually counted among the common taboos, similarly as sometimes taboos of the highest officials of the state.

3.1.1. Emperors and Related Persons

The most important for rulers and therefore the mostly recorded and studied taboos in China were those of kings and emperors. The personal names (*ming*) and often other types of names or titles of deceased monarchs, and since the Han dynasty also of living ones, were taboo. Name taboos related to emperors were usually strongly maintained by custom and law, and affected the life of most people, although the practice still evolved and had various characteristics in different periods. Usually it had to be observed in the whole country for seven generations. Taboos for the founder of a dynasty – the Great Ancestor or Taizu – were observed for the entire duration of a dynasty. The selection of taboo names of rulers and their ancestors was renewed with each new dynasty and finished with its fall. The strongest punishment – sometimes even decapitation – was applied for violation of the emperor's name and could sometimes carry consequences for nine generations of relatives. Most instances of name tabooing mentioned in the literature were connected to the emperor.

As this is the largest group of tabooed persons, examples of avoiding their names can be found in almost all different periods of Chinese history.¹ It is no wonder, for example, that the name the founder of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang 劉邦, is practically not quoted in the *Book of the Han (Hanshu)*, and the character *bang* 邦 is replaced in numerous

¹ Probably the biggest collection of instances of emperors' taboo can be found in *Jinshi biming huikao*, pp. 69-377.

places in the text by the character *guo* 國. The reason for that is already explained in the commentary of Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209) to the *Book of the Han*, just at the beginning: “(Emperor Gaozu’s) taboo was Bang, his courtesy name was Ji. All instances of the character *bang* were replaced by *guo*.” The same statement can again be found at the same location in the text in the later commentary of Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645): “The fact that the characters *bang* were replaced by *guo* is because tributaries tabooed the dynastic name.”²

Two thousand years later, in the Qing dynasty we still find very similar cases. The personal name of Qianlong was Hongli 弘曆, and both of its characters had to be tabooed. If the reader consults for example the *General Catalogue to the Imperial Collection of Four* (*Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要, printed 1793), he will discover six “unfamiliar” works listed there – all containing the character *hong* 宏, as *Hongzhi Bamin tongzhi* 宏治八閩通志 or *Hongzhi Huzhou fuzhi* 宏治湖州府志.³ In fact these works are not unknown: the first was written by Huang Zhongzhao 黃仲昭 (1435–1508), the second was compiled by Wang Xun 王珣 – both published in the ruling period (1487–1505) of the Hongzhi emperor 弘治 (which is the year title, not a proper name) of the Ming. From this time on their titles were conveyed in this way. However, the first characters of these titles were changed in the *General Catalogue to the Imperial Collection of Four* from the original *hong* 弘 to *hong* 宏, because of the taboo name of the Emperor Qianlong.⁴ Other examples of tabooing of imperial names will be mentioned chronologically in the next chapters.

Beside names of emperors, names of family members of sovereigns, too, were often taboo. These names were a taboo for the emperor himself, but because of his status they sometimes had to be observed by everybody in the empire. Especially the name of the father of the emperor was tabooed, even if he had not been an emperor himself. An example of a taboo name of an emperor’s father can be found in the Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin dynasty in the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*): “In the 23rd year (223 BC), the King of Qin again summoned Wang Jian 王翦 (...) to lead an attack on ‘Jing’ 荆.”⁵ An unaware reader would probably wonder where this curious country of Jing could be. The explanation

² Cf. *Hanshu*, j. 1 shang, p. 1a.

³ *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao*, Vol. II, p. 1560. On the advantages and shortcomings of *Siku quanshu zongmu* see: Xu Zhenxing 2006, pp. 38-39.

⁴ See also other books titles with the *hong* 弘 character changed because of taboo in: Wang Yankun 1997, p. 161.

⁵ *Shiji*, j. 6, p. 7a. Cf. English translation in Burton 1993, p. 41; Nienhauser 1994, Vol. I., p. 134.

is very simple and was included in the commentary *Correct Interpretations/Meanings of the Shiji* (*Shiji zhengyi* 史記正義) by the Tang historian Zhang Shoujie 張守節. As he explains, the quote refers to the conquest of the well-known state of Chu by Qin. However the character *chu* 楚 was taboo and could not be used, because the personal name of the father of the First Emperor of Qin was Zichu 子楚. Therefore it was replaced by the character *jing*.⁶ This taboo version survived into the following dynasties.

Similarly, names of other ancestors of the emperor, the crown prince (*taizi* 太子), the queen consort (*huanghou* 皇后) and the empress dowager (*huang taihou* 皇太后) were sometimes avoided. There are even examples for taboos on the names of the parents of the queen consort, family on the mother's side, the emperor's son-in-law, or the whole distant royal family. We will describe concrete cases of them in subsequent chapters. Numerous discussions are known in various periods of Chinese history on the question whether the avoidance of such taboos was correct or not.

For example, tabooing the name of the crown prince (*taizi*) was practiced already from the Western Han period, as presumed by some scholars.⁷ We find such an instruction in the practice of naming already in the important Han-work entitled the *Records of Ritual* (*Liji*), which prohibited choosing names identical to the name of the crown prince.⁸ Interestingly, the word *taizi* itself is also an effect of tabooing. The former title for a crown prince was *shizi* 世子 and it was changed to *taizi* because of the taboo of the Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty, Li Shimin 李世民 (r. 627–649).⁹ We can find numerous cases of taboos for the name of a crown prince also in subsequent dynasties. One of them about an official of the Jin dynasty Zhang Xingxin 張行信 (1163–1231) was recorded in the *Standard History of Jin* (*Jinshi*): “Zhang Xingxin's courtesy name was Xinfu 信甫 and his former name Xingzhong 行忠. He changed it because of the taboo of the Crown Prince Zhuang Xian 莊獻.”¹⁰ The crown prince mentioned in the story was Wanyan Shouzhong 完顏守忠 (d. 1215), the son of the Emperor Xuanzong of Jin (r. 1213–1223).

The tabooing of the queen consort's and the empress dowager's names was different in various dynasties. Although this kind of taboo belongs to the internal taboos (*neihui*),

⁶ *Shiji*, j. 6, p. 7ab.

⁷ Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 40.

⁸ *Liji*, j. 1, p. 46b: *bugan yu shizi tongming* 不敢与世子同名.

⁹ Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Jinshi*, j. 107, p. 8a.

sometimes it was observed in the whole state, especially if the empress had political power. An instance of that taboo is that concerning the name Fengniang 鳳娘, which belonged to the queen consort Ciyi 慈懿 (1144–1200) of Emperor Guangzong (r. 1189–1194) from the Southern Song dynasty, as noted in the late Ming work the *Sichao wenjianlu* 四朝聞見錄. Because of the empress' name, the word for jewelweed *impatiens cyathiflora* (*jinfenghua* 金鳳花) was changed to “flower of a good daughter,” *hao nü'er hua* 好女兒花.¹¹ Ciyi was *de facto* ruler of China in 1189–1195 when Emperor Guangzong became ill. She was considered temperamental – according to a story from the *Standard History of Song* (*Songshi*), after Ciyi heard that the emperor had admired the hands of a concubine, she sent him the latter's truncated hands on a dish at lunch time.¹² No wonder that nobody risked speaking out her name openly.

3.1.2. Sages, Legendary Persons, Gods and Ghosts

The next group of tabooed persons includes sages (holy men) and legendary emperors. Also names of ghosts and gods can be included among this kind of tabooed persons. Although different cases of such tabooing can be found in various periods, there was no one unified taboo custom. This kind of taboo was probably regarded as a “popular taboo” (*jinji*), but sometimes entered the practice of state taboo. It depended on the decision of the emperor.

The most famous taboo of this kind is the taboo of Confucius' name (Qiu 丘) which was observed in China especially during the Tang and Song dynasty, but also in other periods. The Qing compilation of name taboos *Jingshi biming huikao* says in this regard: “If (copyists) during the Song dynasty saw the taboo character of Holy Man (Confucius), they changed it to *mou* 某 (certain).”¹³ A special edict of the Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735) was issued in 1724, mandating that the character *qiu* 邱 should be written in place of the taboo name of Confucius.¹⁴

Also taboos of other illustrious and legendary people, such as Laozi 老子, Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 219), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (5 cent. BC), Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (a poet of Tang, 690–740 AD), were observed, as were the taboos of legendary rulers' names, such as the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 (named Xuanyuan 軒轅), Yao 堯, Shun 舜 and

¹¹ *Sichao wenjianlu*, j. 5, p. 44a; Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 69.

¹² Cf. *Songshi*, j. 243, p. 13b.

¹³ *Jingshi biming huikao*, j. 40, p. 585.

¹⁴ *Qiaoxi zaji*, p. 33b-34a.

Yu 禹.¹⁵ A special case is the taboo of God Jahwe (Jehovah) 爺火華 during the period of the Taiping Rebellion (see 10.3.1).

If taboos of persons were ordered to be followed by the emperor, they became “public taboos” (*gonghui*) or “state taboos” (*guohui*) and were generally observed by everybody.

3.1.3. Family

Besides the public taboos (*gonghui* 公諱) or state taboos (*guohui* 國諱), there were family taboos (*jiahui* 家諱) and private taboos (*sihui* 私諱), affecting one family or one group of people. They were especially observed by literati. The most important person in this group was the father of the family, his ancestors and close relatives from the paternal side. Examples of that kind of name taboo can be found in the literature, if the author of the respective work observed his family taboo. For example, the compiler of the *Book of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu*) Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445 AD) writing his work did not use the character *tai* 泰, and if he came across names having this character (such as Zheng Tai 鄭泰, Guo Tai 郭泰 etc.), he changed them to *tai* 太.¹⁶

There are also examples of taboo for the name of one’s mother, names of collateral relatives (eldest brother or uncle), and distant ancestors of one’s father. Chinese historians assume that the poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) tabooed his mother’s name Haitang 海棠 because he never mentioned flowers of the crab apple, *haitanghua* 海棠花 in his poems.¹⁷ Sometimes a father observes the taboo for his son.¹⁸ Family taboos were generally limited to one family, but might also be observed by friends and neighbors. There are also examples for observing private taboos of officials by the emperor himself.¹⁹

3.1.4. Persons of Respect

The last group includes respected persons: officials, whose names were taboo for a group of subordinates, teachers and friends.²⁰ Names of superiors were tabooed for their subordinates. For example, local people had to avoid names of local officials. Also private taboos

¹⁵ Cf. Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 65-67 ; Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 39-45.

¹⁶ *Xuelin*, j. 3, p. 68.

¹⁷ *Xianjulu*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 62.

¹⁹ Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 63. See also Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 69-80.

²⁰ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 46-56; Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 80-93.

observed by officials were avoided by colleagues in office. Respect for officials in this aspect was considered as similar to the respect shown to the emperor and therefore had his support. The custom started perhaps from the mourning rituals of the Han period.²¹ We know, for example, that as Chen Yi 陳逸 became the Senior Official of Lu (*Lu xiang* 魯相),²² the name of his father Chen Fan 陳蕃 (d. 168 AD), formerly the Imperial Guardian of the Emperor Ling of Han, was taboo for the local people. They apparently pronounced the characters *fan* 蕃 as *pi* (皮).²³

There are also examples of names of teachers that were tabooed. One should respect one's teacher just as one would one's brothers. In particular, it was impermissible to use the name of a teacher directly. Other titles were used instead of that, as *shi* 師, *gong* 公, *sheng* 生, *jun* 君 or *xian* 先 and *xianjun* 先君. In Song times, the titles *fuzi* 夫子 (master)²⁴ and later *xiansheng* 先生 (literally "first born") were popular.²⁵ The modern meaning of the term *xiansheng* (sir, gentleman, and in the south also teacher) clearly derives from this usage. Friends were usually called directly by their names. But there were also cases in which the use of a friend's given name was considered disrespectful. The courtesy name of a friend had to be used instead or the word "brother," *xiong* 兄.

3.2. Taboo Names

After knowing which kinds or groups of people were "tabooed persons" in China, we should determine which of their names were tabooed. As well-known, the Chinese used many types of names with different connotations and not all of them were relevant for tabooing. The meanings of and relationships between names are described in the previous chapter (cf. 2.2.1). The most important in tabooing was of course the given name (*ming* 名), which was considered as someone's real or true name, and even as the person in question him- or herself. It could be called a standard taboo name, because most examples of taboo are related to this type of name.

For example, the given name Xian 賢 of the Emperor Jingzong (r. 969–982) of the Liao dynasty was taboo for everybody in the Liao state. When in 1043 AD the Song official

²¹ Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 80-81.

²² Cf. Hucker 1985, pp. 230-231.

²³ Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 82.

²⁴ Cf. the name Confucius Latinized by the Jesuits from Kong *fuzi* 孔夫子 (Master Kong).

²⁵ Cf. Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 85-87.

Li Weixian 李惟賢 was sent as an envoy to Liao, he had to avoid the taboo name of the former emperor and change his name (temporarily) to Baochen 寶臣.²⁶

Beside tabooing of the given name, there are also examples, especially in case of the emperor, for tabooing other names and titles, including their family name (*xing* 姓), milk name (*xiaoming* 小名, *ruming* 乳名, or *xiaozi* 小字), courtesy name (*zi* 字) – given in adulthood, posthumous name (*shihao* 謚號) – the honorary title granted to a dead former emperor, an era name (*nianhao* 年號), the title of a dynasty (*guohao* 國號), other imperial honorific titles (*zunhao* 尊號), and the name of the imperial tomb (*lingming* 陵名). Sometimes the name of an office (*guanming* 官名) was a taboo, too.²⁷

The purpose of most of these alternatives names was to protect the given name *ming* and replace it. Therefore they were not usually tabooed. Sometimes they were avoided in special situations and conditions, and not tabooed when the situation changed. There are three possible circumstances of such cases: if somebody wanted to show an excessive respect, if the pronunciation of an inauspicious word resembled a taboo name, and if the name belonged to a detested man.²⁸ The name of the short-lived Xin 新 dynasty founded by Wang Mang 王莽 (9–23 AD) between the two Han dynasties is such an example. As is known from the *Book of the Han (Hanshu)*, after his defeat, the name of the dynasty was tabooed and the characters *xin* 新 were changed: “In this year he (Wang Mang) changed eleven public names replacing *xin* 新 with *xin* 心; later he repeatedly changed *xin* 心 to *xin* 信.”²⁹

Chen Yuan and other Chinese authors include taboo words that were not names or titles of people in the custom of name taboos (*bihui*) as well. Many different characters were taboo in China, such as numbers, animals of Chinese zodiac, the five phases (elements), inauspicious words (maladies, barbarians), swear words, or characters implying usurpation of power.³⁰ These characters were often tabooed in names. Although they are not taboo names, they are sometimes discussed by Chinese scholars in this context. They will be mentioned in this study only in some instances related to the tabooing of names.

²⁶ *Xuzizhi tongjian changbian*, j. 142, p. 33.

²⁷ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 76-93; Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 54-65.

²⁸ Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 79.

²⁹ Cf. *Hanshu*, j. 99 zhong, p. 20.

³⁰ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2006, pp. 93-97.

3.3. Taboo Characters and Sounds

The most important and most frequently tabooed characters were of course those directly denoting the real name of a taboo person, which was called *zhengming* 正名 (also *zhenghu* 正呼, *zhengzi* 正字, *benzi* 本字, *zhenghui* 正諱). For example, Zhang Kui 張奎 of the Song refused to accept an office in Qingzhou 慶州 (today Qingyang 慶陽 in Gansu province), because the same character *qing* 慶 was the given name of his father Yuqing 余慶, as we read in the *History of Song (Songshi)*.³¹

However, the tabooing of a concrete name was not only limited to the character or words that constituted the name. The reason for this is that the characters of the Chinese language have numerous homonyms and many different characters are similar in writing. As a consequence these homonyms and similar characters might also be often involved in the tabooing custom. Which characters and sounds were related to the tabooed one and became taboo as well?

There are many examples for the tabooing of characters that are homonyms of a taboo character, i.e., having an identical or similar pronunciation, but a different way of writing. They are called *xianming* 嫌名. The avoidance of *xianming* affected a large group of characters. For example, in the Southern Han Kingdom (917–971) of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, the names of the prefectural governor of Mengzhou 蒙州 (today in Mengshan county 蒙山 in Guanxi province) – Long Xiao 龍驍, of his father – Que 碯, and of his son – Qiong 蛩 were all taboo for the people of this prefecture. They tabooed not only these three names, but also their homonyms and referred to the “owl” (*xiao* 梟) as “to spit thirteen” (*tuoshisan* 唾十三), the “magpie” (*que* 鵲) as “why are you happy” (*xinaihe* 喜奈何) and the “cricket” (*qiong* 蛩) as “autumnal wind” (*qiufeng* 秋風).³²

Characters having a taboo character as a constituent part and characters graphically similar to it could be tabooed, too, even if such instances are not as numerous as those of the groups mentioned before.³³ For example, because the name of Emperor Wuzong (r. 840–846) of the Tang dynasty was Yan 炎, the characters *tan* 談 and *dan* 淡 were also tabooed and changed to *tan* 譚 and *dan* 澹.³⁴

³¹ *Songshi*, j. 324, p. 12a.

³² *Qingyilu*, j. 2, p. 30b.

³³ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 97-108; Fan Zhixin 2006, pp. 27-36.

³⁴ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 107.

The avoidance of homonyms is known since the period of the Three Kingdoms. Before that time we have only examples of tabooing the character of a given name. During the Jin period (265–420) instances of this kind of tabooing became very numerous. The avoidance of homonyms (*xianming*) reached its culmination in the Song time. At that time, together with the real characters of a name, up to 55 homonymous characters had to be avoided, for example during the reign period of Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–1162).

The avoidance of homonyms can be seen also in the family taboos. Only in the time from the Five Dynasties Period to the Song dynasty (907–1279) could the tabooing of parts of characters also be seen. Later tabooing was normally limited to the actual character of a name. This disappearance of homonym taboos in the later period was caused perhaps by the fact that the usual practice of reading aloud, which was dominant before, started to change in the Southern Song time (1127–1279) into silent reading, so the avoidance of homonyms became less important.³⁵ The avoidance of homonyms of inauspicious words can be seen continuing further. Similarly homonyms of auspicious words could be used: for example also nowadays we can see depictions of bats (*bianfu* 蝙蝠), because they are homonymous with happiness (*fu* 福).

3.4. Ways of Tabooing

The avoidance of taboo names was practiced in various manners. Below we describe different inventive ways in which successive generations of Chinese people dealt with this problem. The repertoire varied from replacing a character or leaving a blank space to all kinds of changes to the character, such as leaving out strokes or simply covering it up with yellow paper.

3.4.1. Replacement of Characters

This method was the most commonly used one. It replaces the taboo character with another character. The new character could be chosen according to its meaning, pronunciation or structure. There were seven possible methods of how to choose the substitute character or word.

³⁵ Cf. Cherniack 1994, p. 53-54. There is also a note about the tabooing of names in the Song dynasty (pp. 106-108).

a. Characters with the same or similar meaning

The new character could be chosen because of its similar meaning. This kind of taboo can be found in various periods. The first known example comes from the Qin dynasty, from the stone inscriptions which were left by the First Emperor during his successive journeys to the central mountains that marked the eastern boundaries of his empire. In the inscription on the stele of Mount Langye (Langyetai 琅邪臺) in Shandong the character *zheng* 正 has been replaced by *duan* 端 with the same meaning “proper.”³⁶ The tabooing of the character *zheng* because of the name of the First Emperor – Zheng – and its replacement by character *duan* is also described in the *Index to the Records of the Historian* (*Shiji suoyin* 史記索隱) by Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (8th century).³⁷ This method was also used in the case of tabooing the father of the First Emperor (Zichu 子楚) recorded in the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*). The character 楚 *chu* is replaced there by *jing* 荆 with the same meaning “thorny tree” (see 3.1.1).³⁸

During the Han dynasty every taboo character had an adequate replacement (based on meaning rather than on sound). As mentioned above, the character *guo* 國 was used in order to taboo the character *bang* 邦, which was the name of the Emperor Gao of Han – Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 206–195 BC). Later this method was still used, but often a few equivalent characters were applied for a single name taboo. During the Tang period, the character Yuan 淵 meaning “whirling water” from the name of Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626) was replaced by various characters with a similar meaning, such as *shui* 水 “water”, *chuan* 川 “river” or *quan* 泉 “spring”. For example the sentence “the first (sword) was called Longyuan, the second one – Tai’a” (*yiyue longyuan eryue tai’a* 一曰龍淵二曰泰阿) from the *Lost Records of the State of Yue* (*Yuejueshu* 越絕書) by Yuan Kang 袁康 (Eastern Han period)³⁹ is recorded as *yiyue longquan yiyue tai’a* (一曰龍泉一曰泰阿) in the *Book of the Jin* (*Jinshu*, compiled 644⁴⁰ by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡).⁴¹ The method was used not only for the tabooing of the emperor’s name but also for taboos of other persons.⁴²

³⁶ See the description of this case and the discussion of it in 4.4.2. For the inscription, see Kern 2000, pp. 25-34.

³⁷ *Shiji*, j. 16, p. 3b.

³⁸ *Shiji*, j. 6, p. 7a.

³⁹ *Yuejueshu*, j. 11, p. 3a. This book has been studied by Olivia Milburn. See Milburn 2010.

⁴⁰ Wilkinson 2000, p. 503.

⁴¹ *Jinshu*, j. 36, p. 12b.

⁴² Cf. also Teng Ssu-Yü 1968, p. 24 with English translation of *Family instructions of Master Yan* (*Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓) of Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591): “In all cases of prohibited names a character of the

b. Characters with related meaning

It was also possible that the new character did not have the same meaning, but had another kind of connection with the tabooed character. There are, for example, a few examples of the character *yin* 殷 being replaced by *shang* 商 because of the taboo name of the Emperor Taizu of the Song – Kuangyin 匡胤 (r. 960–976). Here two steps are involved, for the character 殷 is evidently only a homonym of 胤 and therefore not strictly speaking taboo. Nonetheless, in the *Thousand Character Classic* (*Qianziwen* 千字文, written in the 6 c.⁴³) the word *yintang* 殷湯 is replaced by *shangtang* 商湯.⁴⁴ In *History of Yuan* (*Yuanshi*) we read that the poet Shang Ting’s 商挺 (1209–1288) former family name was Yin 殷, but he changed it because of the Song imperial taboo.⁴⁵ The characters *shang* 商 (Shang dynasty) and *yin* 殷 (late period of the Shang dynasty) have a related meaning (though they can also be understood as synonyms).

Two other instances can be found in the period of Southern Dynasties. As the general Hou Jing 侯景 (d. 552) usurped the throne of Liang and established the short-lived Han dynasty (551–552) he also ordered new state taboos. Because the name of his grandfather was Zhou 周, all characters *zhou* had to be changed to *ji* 姬, as we can see in *History of the Southern Dynasties* (*Nanshi* 南史). Both of these characters were connected, since Ji was the family name of the Zhou dynasty’s kings.⁴⁶

A similar example can be found in *The Primary Anthology* (*Chuxueji* 初學記), though here inauspicious words and not names are tabooed in such a way: The superstitious Emperor Ming of Song of Southern Dynasties (r. 465–472) avoided the character *bai* 白 (white) – probably because the color white signified mourning and therefore reminded him of death – and ordered “to replace all these characters by *xuan* 玄 (black), *huang* 黃 (yellow), *zhu* 朱 (vermilion) or *zi* 紫 (purple).”⁴⁷ Thus the character *bai* was replaced by him with characters for other colors.

same meaning may be substituted.” In the same work other examples of such tabooing can be found (pp. 23–26).

⁴³ Wilkinson 2000, p. 49.

⁴⁴ *Qianziwen*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *Yuanshi*, j. 159, p. 2b.

⁴⁶ *Nanshi*, j. 80, p. 12a.

⁴⁷ *Chuxueji*, j. 25, p. 7a.

c. Characters with opposite meaning

An inauspicious character could be replaced by a lucky one. This kind of tabooing can be found especially in the period of the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864, see 10.3.1), when for example the *xinhai* 辛亥 year (1851) was changed to *xinkai* 辛開, *guichou* 癸丑 year (1853) to *guihao* 癸好, and *yimao* 乙卯 year (1855) to *yirong* 乙榮, because the characters *hai* 亥 (homonym of *hai* 害 – harm), *chou* 丑 (homonym of *chou* 醜 – ugly), and *mao* (pronunciation the same as *mao* 冇 – not to have) was regarded as unlucky. The same method was used for recording days.⁴⁸

d. Characters with the same or similar pronunciation

It seems that before the Three Kingdoms period, characters with the same pronunciation were used to replace taboo characters. Even in the *Book of the Han (Hanshu)* there is recorded a case that the Emperor Wang Mang (r. 9 – 23 AD), mentioned above (see 3.2), ordered a change of characters from *xin* 新 to *xin* 心 and later to *xin* 信 because of his dynastic name Xin 新. In the next centuries this way of tabooing was less often used because homonyms were tabooed, too. But there are, in any case, isolated examples of such a method, as for example in *Forest of Learning (Xuelin 學林)*, where we read that the character *wu* 戊 was changed to *wu* 武 because it was a part of the character *mao* 茂 in the taboo name of the grandfather (Maolin 茂琳) of the Emperor Taizu (r. 907–912) from the Later Liang dynasty.⁴⁹

More popular are instances where characters with a pronunciation similar (but not identical) to that of the taboo character were used to replace it. Such a method was used even during the Tang and Song dynasties, when the avoidance of homonyms reached its peak. Among the substitute characters for the taboo name of the Emperor Taizu of Song (r. 960–976) – Kuang 匡 – there are, for example, the characters *guang* 光 and *kang* 康, which have a similar pronunciation to *kuang*.⁵⁰ Also during the period of the Taiping rebellion characters with similar sounds were used for tabooing. We know, for example, that in order to taboo the name of Yahweh/Jehowah (Yehehua/Yehuohua 耶和華/爺火華) the Taipings changed the character *hua* 華 to *hua* 花 (these two characters have a different tone), e.g., *huaren* 華人 to *huaren* 花人 (see 10.3.1).

⁴⁸ Cf. *Banxing lishu*, pp. 195–200. Wang Jian 2002, p. 268.

⁴⁹ *Xuelin*, j. 3, p. 70.

⁵⁰ Notice that there is impossible to reconstruct the exact pronunciation of that time.

e. Courtesy name as a substitute

Taboo characters of a name could be replaced by one of the alternative names that elite males would have. Often the given name (*ming*) was changed to the courtesy name (*zi*). When we read the *Book of the Jin (Jinshu)*, compiled in the Tang period in 644, we can observe that persons who originally had characters such as *yuan* 淵 or *hu* 虎 in their names were called by their courtesy names. This was, for example, the case of Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349, Emperor Wu of the Later Zhao state) whose name was changed to Shi Jilong 石季龍,⁵¹ or Liu Yuan 劉淵 (251–310, Emperor Guangwen – the founding emperor of the Xiongnu state Han Zhao) whose name was changed to Liu Yuanhai 劉元海.⁵² Both of these changes to a courtesy name were made because of Tang taboos for the names of Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626) – Yuan 淵, and his grandfather Hu 虎. The method of tabooing by using a courtesy name instead was often applied in various periods, if the given name of a person included a taboo character and had to be changed.

f. New characters

The name offending a taboo could sometimes be changed to a completely new one, with no connection to the original one. This method was used, for example, when the name of Yizheng county 儀徵縣 was changed for a short time (1908–1912) to Yangzi 揚子 – its old name from the Tang era – because of the taboo of the Last Emperor Qing Puyi 溥儀.⁵³

g. Special expressions

Sometimes special expressions were used to avoid taboo words. An example of that can be seen in the story from *Records From the Centre of Heaven (Tianzhongji 天中記)* presented in the introduction of this study: because of the name of the teacher Feng Dao 馮道 (882–954) students reading the character *dao* 道 in the first sentence of the *Classic of the Way and Virtue (Daodejing 道德經)*, pronouncing it as “not dare to say” (*buganshuo* 不敢說), in order not to offend the taboo of their teacher’s name.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See for example *Jinshu*, j. 7, p. 7b.

⁵² See for example *Jinshu*, j. 5, p. 2b.

⁵³ Huizipu 諱字譜 according to Wang Yankun 1997, p. 536.

⁵⁴ *Tianzhongji*, j. 24, p. 29.

3.4.2. Alteration of the Character

The second group of tabooing methods is changing a part of a character, or its position. One part of the character (*pianpang* 偏旁) could be added (e.g. tabooing of *xiu* 秀 by *you* 莠), removed (e.g., tabooing of *yong* 顛 by *yu* 禺), changed to another one (e.g., tabooing of *yu* 渝 by *yu* 喻), or sometimes to a similar one (e.g. tabooing of *fang* 方 by *wan* 万). We know that scholar-general Zhao Kui 趙葵 (1186–1266) of Southern Song changed the name of Fangcheng town 方城 to Wancheng 万城, because of the taboo name of his father Zhao Fang 趙城. Later the name was erroneously written as Wancheng 萬城.⁵⁵

a. Addition of new elements to a character

A character could be adapted to a taboo requirement by changing its structure through adding a new element. For example, the character *lan* 覽 was written with a different radical as *lan* 攬 in the work of Wang Xizhi's 王羲之 (307–365) *Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion* (*Lantingxu* 蘭亭序), in order to avoid his family taboo (Wang Lan 王覽 206–278 was his great grandfather).⁵⁶ In the period of the Taiping rebellion, for example, the word “scholar” (*xiucai* 秀才, sometimes also called *xiushi* 秀士 in the Qing period), was changed to *youshi* 莠士 to avoid the taboo name of the Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan.⁵⁷

b. Omission of parts of a character

One or several components of a character could be dropped because of taboo. An instance of this can be found, for example, in the *History of the Yuan* (*Yuanshi*): Jin Lüxiang's 金履祥 (1232–1303) former family name was Liu 劉. He changed it by omitting parts of the character to Jin 金 in order to avoid a homonym of the taboo name of King Qian Liu 錢鏐 (r. 907–932) - the founder of the Kingdom of Wuyue (907–978) in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period.⁵⁸ One other instance can be seen in the *Book of Taboo Characters* (*Huizipu* 諱字譜), where an imperial edict is mentioned that all characters *yong* 顛 had to be

⁵⁵ *Jingshi biming huikao*, j. 35, p. 579.

⁵⁶ *Bijing*, j. 6, p. 17a.

⁵⁷ *Nanzhongji*, p. 641.

⁵⁸ *Yuanshi*, j. 189, p. 2b.

changed to *yu* 禺 because of the taboo of the Emperor Jiaqing of Qing – Yongyan 顓頊 (r. 1796–1820).⁵⁹

c. Exchanging part of a character for another one

Such a case of taboo from the Han period is claimed, for example, in the Song source *Verification of Family Names in Old and New Books* (*Gujin xingshi shu bianzheng* 古今姓氏書辯證) by Deng Mingshi 鄧名世 (12 c.): the official Yu Mi 渝彌 of the Emperor Jing of Han (r. 156–141 BC) had to change his name in 148 BC to Yu 喻 in order to avoid the taboo name of Ayu 阿渝 – Empress Bo 薄 (the first wife of the Emperor, d. 147 BC).⁶⁰

d. Change of place or separation of a character's parts

A part of the character can also change its place (i.e., *xing* 星 to 日生 – written as one character), or two parts can be written separately, preserving the former pronunciation as one character (i.e., *ye* 曄 to 日華).

3.4.3. Omission of Strokes

Another way of tabooing is the elimination of a few strokes – usually the last stroke – in a taboo character. This method of tabooing probably started in the Tang period. Possible previous examples cannot be confirmed, because many different writing styles were used before that time. But in the Tang era the omission of strokes as a method of tabooing was apparently common already. This is a visual method that fits changes in the way of reading.

The first known instance is probably the record of a stone inscription of general Li Ji 李勣 (594–669), dated 677 AD, where the character *shi* 世 in the name of the general Wang Shichong 王世充 (d. 621) of the Sui dynasty is written without the middle stroke in order to observe the taboo for the name of Emperor Taizong from the Tang – Li Shimin 李世民 (r. 627–649).⁶¹ Later this method was practiced until the Qing dynasty, where characters such as *xian* 弦, *xuan* 炫, *xuan* 眩, *xian* 絃, *xian* 舷, *xuan* 洊, *xuan* 痲, *xuan* 銜, and *xuan* 鉉

⁵⁹ *Lidai huizipu*, j. 1, p. 1a.

⁶⁰ *Gujin xingshi shu bianzheng*, j. 30, p. 413. The author of this dissertation supposes that the example comes originally from a Han source, not from this compendium, but was unable to find a concrete source from that time.

⁶¹ The name of Li Ji himself was also a result of tabooing custom. His original name was Xu Shiji 徐世勣. The new family name was bestowed upon him by the Emperor. He later dropped the character *shi* because of the taboo of the Emperor Taizong. See also 3.5.8 and 6.2.4.

were written without the last stroke (with the component 彡), due to the name of the Emperor Kangxi – Xuan 玄 (r. 1661–1722). Thus the taboo on Xuan 玄 was taken one step further, since all characters containing this element were changed. This method of tabooing was maintained solely by visual means, without any change in pronunciation. But it can also be supposed that leaving out strokes reminded the reader of the taboo status of a character that should not be pronounced.

3.4.4. Omission of Character

Yet another way of tabooing was to not write the taboo character at all. Instead of it, an empty place could be left, but it was also possible to record the location of the taboo character by the characters *wei* 口 (surround), *mou* 某 (certain), or *hui* 諱 (taboo).

a. Omission

This method is perhaps the oldest one and has its roots in the practice of “not to call” (*buming* 不名) and concealment in the Zhou time that will be explained more precisely later (see 4.3.1.2). The taboo character could be omitted, as for example in the inscription on the tower of Dengci temple 等慈寺, where the name of the already mentioned general Wang Shichong 王世充 (d. 621) is written as Wang Chong 王充.⁶²

b. Empty place

A popular method of tabooing was to leave an empty place instead of the name. It is probably connected with the practice of leaving a blank place in front of royal names of emperors or dynasties, and in front of words of political power, which was a well-known practice in traditional China. The title of the emperor could be written higher than other lines of the text: either by writing it in a position raised above the text, or by bringing the surrounding text down to a lower position.⁶³ This typographically enacted the fact that one should normally kowtow or bow for an emperor. Other characters indicating the power of

⁶² *Jinshi cuibian*, j. 42, p. 3b.

⁶³ The author of this dissertation found, for example, such a practice in the preface of the *Luzhou chuji* 鹿洲初集 of Lan Dingyuan 藍鼎元 (1680–1733). The sentences with the character *shang* 上 are cut and start with a new line two fields above the main text. The sentence including characters of the dynasty *Da Qing* 大清 starts in the same way one field above the main text (*Luzhou chuji*, p. 5). Later in the same work empty places are left before characters *da* 大 (great), *kang* 康 (part of the Era name of the Emperor Kangxi) and *chao* 朝 (dynasty). Cf. *Luzhou chuji*, j. 1, p. 9. Similarly, an empty place is left before the word *taizi* (crown prince) in *Yizhai shiwenji*, j. 5, p. 7.

the emperor were preceded by an empty field. It was a way to show reverence to the institution of emperor.⁶⁴

c. Character *wei* 匚

The place of a taboo character could be marked by the character *wei* 匚. The example can be seen in the *Jigu* Edition (汲古本) of the *Book of the Southern Qi* (*Nan Qishu*), where it replaced the character *shun* 順 in the name of the general Xiao Shunzhi 蕭順之 (5th c., the brother of the founding emperor of the Southern Qi dynasty). A commentary “Song taboo” is made above this spot.⁶⁵ Sometimes the label was even placed around the taboo character.⁶⁶

d. Character *mou* 某

This method, too, is very old. The example from the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu*), considered sometimes the oldest known example of taboo, used this way of tabooing.⁶⁷ Of course, the true age of this fragment of *Book of Documents* is very disputable, and by implication also of this instance of taboo. It is certain that many later works also used this method to avoid a prohibited name. For example, in the *Book of the Southern Qi* (*Nan Qishu*) the name of the founding emperor of the Southern Qi (Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成) is not written directly, but is replaced by the characters *moujia* 某甲.⁶⁸

e. Character *hui* 諱

This method was especially used from the Three Kingdoms period onwards to the Tang dynasty. Often, names of emperors were tabooed with the character *hui*, but it can also be seen in some geographical names.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ More about the Chinese practice of „raising the head“ (*taitou* 抬頭) as an expression of reverence see 7.4.1. We are not sure whether the custom was present only in printing or also in manuscripts.

⁶⁵ According to *Jingshi biming huikao*, j. 12, p. 182.

⁶⁶ Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 128.

⁶⁷ For more precise description of the case see 4.3.1.1.

⁶⁸ *Nan Qishu*, j. 18, p. 2b.

⁶⁹ Cf. for example *Sanguozhi*, j. 5, p. 5a: the character *hui* is used in place of the Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty Cao Pi; *Nan Qishu*, j. 3, p. 10b. Cf. also Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 197.

3.4.5. Other Methods

a. Alteration of pronunciation

One possibility for tabooing a spoken name was to change the pronunciation, but not the character. For a long time, historians disputed whether this method was really used. Some of them presumed that this method was used for tabooing as early as the Qin dynasty, because the name of the First Emperor Zhèng 政/正 was read as zhēng.⁷⁰ But later, Chen Yuan showed that many characters such as zheng 正 had different pronunciations in earlier times, and cannot be regarded as an example of taboo.⁷¹

Yet, instances of this kind of taboo – especially from the Song times – are so numerous that they cannot be ignored. We read, e.g., in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢), that Lin Daiyu 林黛玉, the mother of whom was called Min 敏, if she met the character *min* while reading (aloud) a book, read it every time as *mi* 密, and if she met this character in writing, she omitted one or two strokes.⁷² The alteration of pronunciation affected words only at the time they were actually spoken. There are three possible variations of this method. If the character originally had two or more pronunciations, one of them could be tabooed and the other used in place of the former. Further, the character could take the pronunciation of its substitute, as, e.g., the character *bang* 邦 for the taboo of Liu Bang could also be read as *guo* 國, even if it was not changed in writing. As one more possibility, any other pronunciation could be taken, more or less arbitrarily chosen by the tabooing person. This could work best in a more or less oral culture,⁷³ otherwise people would still be aware of the written form. But if writing was only used for reading and speaking aloud, changing the sound would be enough.

b. Dividing a character

There are a few ways of tabooing names not mentioned directly by Chen Yuan, but noticed by other scholars. One of them is to divide a character into two characters with a different pronunciation (i.e., *jing* 敬 to *gouwen* 苟文). In such a way, for example, the family name Jing 敬 was changed twice, as far as we know: during the period of the Five Dynasties and

⁷⁰ Cf. *Qidong yeyu*, j. 4, p. 39.

⁷¹ Chen Yuan 1958, p. 8. See also discussion about the taboo name of the First Emperor of Qin in 4.4.2.

⁷² *Hongloumeng*, *hui* 2, p. 10. For translation see Hawkes 1973, Vol. I, p. 82.

⁷³ Pronunciations of dialect could play an additional role here.

Ten Kingdoms, in order to taboo the name of the Emperor Gaozu of the Later Jin (Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭, r. 936–942), and during the Song dynasty, in order to taboo the name of the grandfather (Jing 敬) of Emperor Taizu (r. 960–976).⁷⁴ This method also seems to be related to the Chinese practice of literomancy – fortune-telling by dividing and analyzing characters (*cezi* 測字 or *chaizi* 拆字).

c. Attachment of a character

One can also attach a new character to the tabooed one, forming a new name. This was done, for example, by one of editors of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, Chen Jing 陳敬 (1638–1712), who changed his name to Chen Tingjing 陳廷敬. The story was described in the *Draft to the History of Qing (Qingshigao 清史稿)*.⁷⁵ In this way, the new name differs from the tabooed one. There are only a few examples of this kind.

d. Alteration of character order

One could write the characters in reverse order. We know, for example, from the *Collection of Gossip From Mountains Surrounded by Iron (Tieweishan congtan 鐵圍山叢談)* of Cai Tao 蔡條, that the name of *caigeng* 菜羹⁷⁶ (dish with thick juice) was called *gengcai* 羹菜, because its pronunciation was too similar to the name taboo of a high official of the Song dynasty Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047–1126).⁷⁷ However, cases with such a way of tabooing were not very common.

e. Indirect description

Yet another way of tabooing was an indirect description. For example, the taboo character *yan* 炎 was described as “two *huo* 火”,⁷⁸ and the taboo character *xu* 旭 as *ri* 日 following *jiu* 九.⁷⁹ This method seems to be close to riddles and word games (*miyu* 謎語).

⁷⁴ According to *Qidong yeyu*, j. 4, p. 40.

⁷⁵ *Qingshigao*, Liezhuan, j. 54, p. 5b. There is probably an earlier source of that story but the author could not find it.

⁷⁶ Pronounced apparently as *jing*.

⁷⁷ *Tieweishan congtan*, j. 2, pp. 19b–20a.

⁷⁸ *Yinhualu*, j. 5, p. 38.

⁷⁹ *Mengxi bitan*, j. 3, p. 17.

f. Covering with a yellow paper

Especially in the Song and Jin period, covering a taboo character with a piece of yellow paper was used for tabooing. For example, we can read in the Interpretation on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Hushizhuan* 春秋胡氏傳) of Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138), that when compilers saw an emperor's taboo, they did not change it, but covered it with yellow paper.⁸⁰ The same method was also used to cover family taboo characters.⁸¹ Yellow paper was probably used for the reason that this color is considered the color of emperor, the color of heavenly status, and is commonly used in Daoist rituals for the same reason.

g. Leaving a gap to be filled by other people

One more way for tabooing in writing was to leave an empty space instead of a (family) taboo character and later ask other people to fill the places left. This method was called “completion of taboo” (*tianhui* 填諱). In that case, often a special note was included at the beginning or at the end of a text that so-and-so completed the writing of taboo characters. The author of this dissertation found such a note in *Records of Famous Feats* (*Mingjilu* 名蹟錄) of Zhu Gui 朱珪 (1731-1807).⁸² It is also known, for example, that as Shao Jingbang 邵經邦 (d. 1558) wrote his *Records in the Pavilion of One Mirror* (*Yijian ting ji* 一鑿亭記), all *jian* 鑿 characters were not written by his hand, because Jian 鑿 was the name of his father. We can find an additional note (in smaller script)⁸³ below it, explaining what happened: “Li Tong has filled in the taboo characters” (李炯填諱).⁸⁴

h. Omitting the last part of a common expression

The last part of a common expression (so called *xiehouyu* 歇後語) is sometimes omitted, if it contains a taboo name. This concealment of the second part of an expression is very popular in China, not only in relation to taboo. We know, e.g., that the expression from *Analects* (*Lunyu*): *bang jun shu sai men* 邦君樹塞門 was omitted because of the taboo name Shu of Gaozu's father of Northern Qi.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ *Chunqiu Hushizhuan*, “Lun minghui zhazi 論名諱劄子”, p. 2a; Cf. also *Baiguanzhen*, j. 2, p. 19b.

⁸¹ Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 128.

⁸² Cf., for example, *Mingjilu*, j. 3, pp. 11b and 13a.

⁸³ Notice that comments on taboo are also made in small script on the side of a taboo character (see Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 128).

⁸⁴ Quoted in *Hongyilu* 弘藝錄 of the same author Shao Jingbang 邵經邦, see *Hongyilu* j. 25, p. 5b.

⁸⁵ *Zixiaji*, j. xia, p. 4b.

3.5. Principles of Tabooing

The implementation of name taboo varied and different taboo principles can be found in various periods in China. There are, however, rules that might be called traditional or classical.

The most important “canonical” text on tabooing that explains the basic principles came from the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*:

When the ceremony of wailing is over, a son should no longer speak of his deceased father by his name. The rules do not require the avoiding of names merely similar in sound to those not to be spoken. When (a parent had) a double name, the avoiding of either term (used singly) is not required. While his parents (are alive), and a son is able to serve them, he should not utter the names of his grandparents; when he can no longer serve his parents (through their death), he need not avoid the names of his grandparents. Names that would not be spoken (in his own family) need not be avoided (by a great officer) before his ruler; in the great officer’s, however, the names proper to be suppressed by the ruler should not be spoken. In (reading) the books of poetry and history, there need be no avoiding of names, nor in writing compositions. In the ancestral temple there is no such avoiding. Even in his presence, a minister need not avoid the names improper to be spoken by the ruler’s wife. The names to be avoided by a wife need not be unspoken outside the door of the harem. The names of parties for whom mourning is worn (only) nine months or five months are not avoided. When one is crossing the boundaries (of a state), he should ask what are its prohibitory laws; when he has fairly entered it, he should ask about its customs; before entering the door (of a house), he should ask about the names to be avoided in it.⁸⁶

This text can also be understood as a legitimization of already existing norms and prescriptions. It was often quoted later as a standard by most emperors and officials over the centuries, even if its principles were not always observed.

From this canonical text, we can deduce the following principles of tabooing:

- tabooing starts after mourning (ceremony of wailing);
- there is no taboo in the ancestral temple;
- the interior taboo (*neihui* 內諱) is observed only inside of house/palace;

⁸⁶ *Liji*, j. 1, pp. 38b-40a. Translation according to Legge 1968, Part III, p. 93.

- there is no taboo for names of deceased distant relatives – needing five months (so-called *xiaogong* 小功) or nine months (*dagong* 大功) mourning time;
- homonyms are not tabooed;
- characters of composite names are tabooed only together and not separately;
- taboo does not affect the written texts, especially *Classic of Documents (Shangshu)* and *Classic of Poetry (Shijing)*, poetry and historical works.

All of these principles are explained in more detail further below. Additionally, I will analyze two more principles, which are not included in the *Records of Ritual*, but are nonetheless important for the practice of tabooing names:

- the names of earlier ancestors (whose tablets were moved to the temple of distant ancestors) are not taboo;
- and there is no taboo after someone's abdication or dismissal.

Rules of tabooing and differences in practice of different periods of history will also be discussed more precisely where relevant in the historical surveys below.

3.5.1. Tabooing Starts after Mourning

The first rule is rooted in the time when taboo concerned only dead people and is connected with the point of someone's definitive change from living to dead. This was the ceremony of wailing at the end of the mourning period in Chinese traditional funeral rites.⁸⁷ Traditionally in China after the death and placement of the body in a coffin (after three days), a wailing period started. Three months after the death of scholars (*shi* 士) was their burial. During this three-month period, three sacrifices for appeasing the gods (*yuji* 虞祭) occurred. After the funeral, a sacrifice to mark the end of weeping (*zuku* 卒哭) took place on a specially selected, appropriate day (*jia* 甲, *bing* 丙, *wu* 戊, *geng* 庚, *ren* 壬), about 100 days after someone's decease. Therefore it was sometimes called among the people the "one hundred-day sacrifice". The funeral of high-ranking nobles (*dafu* 大夫) was three months and the "end of crying" five months after his death, while the funeral of a feudal lord (*zhuhou* 諸侯) was five months and the "end of crying" seven months after the death.⁸⁸ It meant that the wailing period was over, the soul moved to the temple, and the deceased should no longer be called by his name.

⁸⁷ More about Chinese funeral rites see Gao Chongwen 2006, pp. 447-472.

⁸⁸ *Yili zhushu*, j. 43, p. 8a; Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 209-210.

The *Classic of Rites*, besides listing this principle together with other rules of tabooing, repeats it later in another context with a stress on the turning point between life and death: “When the ceremony of wailing is over, tabooing starts. Affairs of living are finished, and affairs of ghosts begin.”⁸⁹ The commentator of the Han time, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 dates, observes that one should venerate the names of ghosts and spirits/gods, and taboo (these names).⁹⁰ Thus it appears that the period before the wailing ceremony still belongs to the affairs of living and the names of living were not taboo (*hui*).

A big change was made in the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC): the names of the living also became taboo. Not only the given name (*ming* 名) of the emperor after his death (then called “temple taboo” *miaohui* 廟諱), but also during his life time (then called “imperial name” *yuming* 御名) had to be avoided.⁹¹ It can be said that, in this way, the affairs of the living and of the ghosts became mixed, the rules of “taboo of the dead” (*sihui* 死諱) and “not to name” (*buming* 不名) jumbled (see about them 4.1.1), and this principle of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)* gradually became useless.

But still much later in a note in the *Old History of the Five Dynasties (Jiu Wudai shi)* about Emperor Gaozu of the Later Jin dynasty (r. 936-942), the following statement can be found: In the sixth month of the seventh year Tianfu (942), “Emperor Gaozu died ... In the seventh month *wuzi* day an imperial edict was applied: the names of districts, counties, offices and personal names of people should be changed, if they include homonyms of former emperor(s).”⁹² The change was made only after the death of the Emperor, even if only after one month of the wailing period and not after one hundred days as it was said in the *Records of Ritual*. It means that the principle of tabooing after mourning was still used sometimes.

3.5.2. No Taboo in the Ancestral Temple

When offering sacrifices in the ancestral temple,⁹³ the taboo was not to be observed.⁹⁴ This is understandable, because the sacrifice and the contact with ancestors were possible only, according to belief, if they were called by their real name. Through this ritual use of their

⁸⁹ *Liji*, j. 2, p. 89a.

⁹⁰ *Liji*, j. 2, p. 89a.

⁹¹ In the Qin and Han dynasties a noticeable increase of various types of names took place.

⁹² *Jiu Wudaishi*, j. 81, p. 1b.

⁹³ About the form of ancestral temple see Tiberi 1963, pp. 338-340.

⁹⁴ Cf. Instructions of Sima Guang about ancestral rites in Buckley Ebrey 1981, pp. 79-83.

name, the ancestors became present. There are notes about the practice of this principle: the last Emperor of the Wei state of the Three Kingdoms period – Cao Huan 曹奂 (the Emperor Yuan, r. 260–265 AD) always tabooed the name of his father. Only when offering a sacrifice in the temple did he not do so.⁹⁵

3.5.3. The Taboo of the Interior (*neihui*) Observed Only Inside

The interior taboo (*neihui* 內諱) is sometimes called taboo of women (*nühui* 女諱), because it normally concerned the female part of society. According to Chinese tradition, men act outside the home and women within it (*nan zhuwai nü zhunei* 男主外女主內). The taboo of a woman is therefore effective only in her own family. This principle can be found in the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*. The rule “*neihui* does not leave the palace” includes two situations:

- there is no need for tabooing the names of women (both wives and concubines) of the emperor in front of him;
- there is no taboo for the names of his wives and concubines outside the palace.

The interior taboo could denote the name taboos of women in high positions, but also taboos of their fathers and ancestors. The names of wives and concubines of the emperor were taboo, but this was practiced normally only inside the palace. Usually there were not too many occasions to taboo their ancestors. We know, however, numerous situations in which the interior taboo “went out” of the palace or even became as important as the taboo of the emperor. This was the case if the position of wife or concubine became particularly elevated, when she found special favor of the emperor, or received political power.

The principle of the *Records of Ritual* concerning the interior taboo was broken for the first time around the time of the Western Jin dynasty (265–317). The first exception was probably made for the taboo of an empress dowager, as the respected mother of the emperor. In the *Book of the Jin (Jinshu)* there is a passage about tabooing the name of the empress dowager Achun 阿春 (ca. 290–326 AD, see more about this taboo in 5.3 and 10.1.3). Because of that, the name of Fuchun County 富春 was changed to Fuyang 富陽 county, and the title of the work the *Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu 春秋)* temporarily to *Yangqiu 陽秋*.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ *Sanguozhi*, j. 4, p. 24b.

⁹⁶ *Qidongyeyu*, j. 4, p. 41.

Later, the tabooing of the empress dowager was slowly extended to include tabooing of the imperial consort. In 266 AD we have a proposal made for Emperor Wu of Jin (r. 265–290 AD), to issue a taboo of the imperial consort and the emperor together. The argument was that it would bring more veneration to her name. Ultimately, the Emperor did not agree. He came back to the *Records of Ritual* and issued a decree saying: “The *Records of Ritual* said that the interior taboo does not leave the palace, and today it is tabooed. It is not correct. We do not accept it.”⁹⁷ But we know from the same chapter of the *Tongdian* that a bit later in the Eastern Jin, the taboo of “the small ruler” (*xiaojun* 小君), which means empress, appears continuously in lists of imperial taboos.⁹⁸

There are numerous instances of that kind of taboo during the Tang, Song and Jin dynasties, as the importance of interior taboo then reached its greatest extent. In the Jin dynasty there were also taboos of the imperial consort among the temple taboos (*miaohui* 廟諱). For example, in the *Collected Rites of the Great Jin Dynasty* (*Da Jin jili* 大金集禮) we find the names of the mother of Emperor Shizong of Jin (r. 1161–1189) and of another empress (the former wife of his father) listed among the temple taboos.⁹⁹ In the Jin dynasty there were also examples for observance of taboos of the imperial consort’s father. We read, e.g., in the *Tongdian* that a general resigned from his office because of taboo of the empress’ father.¹⁰⁰ Later, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, this kind of taboo repeatedly declined in practice.

The interior taboo had to be observed in the palace by personal attendants, but also by other people coming there, such as, e.g., actors, singers, etc. They always had to first ask about the taboo of the empress, in order not to make a mistake. But apparently the taboo of the empress was usually not known among common people.

A special case is Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690-705) of the Tang dynasty, who reached the power of an emperor. Her status was no longer that of the emperor’s wife, but rather of a female emperor. Therefore her taboo cannot be regarded as *neihui*.¹⁰¹ Sometimes the term interior taboo (*neihui*) is mixed with family taboo (*jiahui*), which is not correct. However, as the family taboos of the emperor became more important in the course of time, the meaning of interior taboo often increased as well.

⁹⁷ *Tongdian*, j. 104, p. 555.

⁹⁸ *Tongdian*, j. 104, p. 553.

⁹⁹ *Da Jin jili*, j. 23, p. 203.

¹⁰⁰ *Tongdian*, j. 104, p. 554.

¹⁰¹ See more about the Emperor Wu Zetian in 6.2.7. and 10.1.2.

3.5.4. No Taboo for Names of Deceased Distant Relatives

Taboo of the names of distant relatives did not need to be observed. Distant relatives are those for whom only the long (*dagong* 大功) or short (*xiaogong* 小功) mourning periods were prescribed. Chinese custom knows five kinds of mourning periods. The strongest was *zhanshuai* 斬衰 – which lasted for three years.¹⁰² It was prescribed after the death of parents, husband, husband's father and mother. *Qishuai* 齊衰 was the second one. It was obligatory for a stepmother and foster mother (three years), for grandparents and wife (one year), for great-grandparents (five months), for great-great-grandparents (three months). *Dagong* and *xiaogong* are prescribed for distant relatives. The long mourning period lasted for nine months. The prescribed cloth was thicker than that of *xiaogong*. It was obligatory for male cousin with the same surname, an unmarried female, aunts, sisters, grandsons and many others. The *xiaogong* period was five months. The shortest mourning period was called *sima* 緦麻, and was observed for three months.

According to the *Records of Ritual*, there was no need to taboo the names of distant relatives. The rule was apparently not very strong and was often broken. One exception is already marked in *Records of Ritual*: if in the family the taboo was observed by the father, the son also had to taboo it, even if it concerned relatives which were distant for him.¹⁰³

3.5.5. The Names of Earlier Ancestors Are Not Taboo

One other principle of tabooing, mentioned above, said there was no need to taboo the name of a distant ancestor whose tablet had already been moved (*tiao* 祧) to the “distant temple.” The word *tiao* also means the “temple” (shrine) where sacrifices for spirits of deceased distant ancestors were made.

In the emperor's ancestral temple there were concrete places (*miao* 廟, “temples”) designated for the veneration of ancestors: seven in the family of the emperor, five of high-ranking nobles (*dafu* 大夫), three of feudal lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯), one of scholars (*shi* 士). The shrines or tablets of the ancestors were arranged in two rows, north and south of the shrine for the founder of the house, *zu* 祖, which was immovable.¹⁰⁴ On one side, facing south, were the tablets of fathers. These places were called *zhao* 昭. On the other side,

¹⁰² Actually 26–36 months, since a “year” refers in China to the transition and not to the full year (i.e., only three celebrations of a New Year). The last month of the preceding year and the first of the following are always included.

¹⁰³ *Liji*, j. 1, p. 39a.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. hence the expression *bu tiao zhi zu* 不祧之祖.

facing north, were those of sons. They were called *mu* 穆. Accordingly, the system of shrines in the ancestor temple was called *zhaomu* 昭穆. After a death in the family, the tablet of one of the remote ancestors was removed in order to make room, and moved to the shrine of distant ancestors.¹⁰⁵

If the tablet of an ancestor was moved to the distant temple, his name, according to the *Records of Ritual*, should not be tabooed any longer. Later, as tabooing expanded, this rule, too, was broken. Especially in the Song dynasty the rule was often forgotten and tabooing was continued longer. The changing practice of this rule will be described in the successive survey chapters (for instance in sections 6.2.4 and 6.4.6).

3.5.6. No Taboo after Abdication or Dismissal

This principle means that there is no need to continue tabooing a name after the dismissal of an emperor, queen consort, or crown prince. We know, for example, about Sun He 孫和 (223–253), the son of the founder of the Wu state in the Three Kingdoms period – Emperor Da (Sun Quan 孫權, r. 222–252 AD). Sun He became crown prince in 242. Unfortunately, it strained relations with his brother Sun Ba 孫霸, who wanted taking over as crown prince. Finally in 250 AD the Emperor became angry. He forced Sun Ba to commit suicide, deposed Sun He to the status of a commoner and exiled him to present-day Zhejiang. There he was forced to commit suicide three years later. After this, his name, which was avoided before (see examples in 5.2.1 and 5.2.5), was also no longer taboo.¹⁰⁶

3.5.7. Homonyms Are Not Tabooed

This means that words with the same or similar pronunciation (especially with the same tone) as the taboo character should not be tabooed. There are no instances for tabooing of homonyms before the Qin dynasty, but the reason for that could be that before this period there were not many examples of tabooing anyhow.

Some scholars saw the tabooing of the name of the First Emperor Zheng 政 as the first instance of avoiding homonyms. They showed that the character *zheng* 正 was tabooed and changed to *duan* 端.¹⁰⁷ But later, Chen Yuan verified that it is not a case of a homonym.

¹⁰⁵ For more about ancestral temples in China see Lévi-Strauss 1969, p. 311-345.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Fan Zhixin 2006, p. 157.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Nianershi huilue* 廿二史諱略 according to Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 202.

During the Qin, the characters 政 and 正 were still used interchangeably due to the script reform that was not yet completed.¹⁰⁸

Therefore the earliest accepted example of tabooing a homonym is from the Jin dynasty: as we know from the *Book of the Jin (Jinshu)*, the people of Jingzhou 荊州 tabooed the name of the general Yanghu 羊祜 (221–278). They referred to all doors (*hu* 户) as gates (*men* 門), and changed the name of Revenue Section (*hucao* 户曹)¹⁰⁹ to *cicao* 辭曹.¹¹⁰

Later, especially in the Tang and Song dynasties, we find many examples of tabooing homonyms. It became a common custom also among the literati. But we know from the same time that there were parallel instances of not tabooing homonyms, and their avoidance was criticized as irregular, e.g., by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) in his essay “Against taboos” (*Huibian* 諱辯, see 5.2.8).¹¹¹

Most of the imperial taboos in the Song dynasty included many homonyms that had to be avoided, e.g., because of the given name (Gou 構) of the Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–1162) – as many as 55 other characters became taboo, because they had a similar pronunciation (see 6.4.3 and the chronological list of taboos in the appendix). In the Ming and Qing dynasties the custom of avoiding homonyms decreased. Concrete examples will be given when the relevant periods are discussed.

3.5.8. Two Characters of Composite Names Are Not Tabooed Separately

As we know already from the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*, characters of two-character given names (full personal names, called in Chinese *erming* 二名 or *fuming* 復名), did not have to be avoided individually. The name as a whole was, of course, taboo, but its characters were tabooed only if put together. The most quoted case is the taboo name of Confucius’ mother – “The name of the mother of Confucius was Zhengzai 徵在. Saying *zai* he did not use *zheng*, saying *zheng* he did not use *zai*” (*yan zai bu cheng zheng, yan zheng bu cheng zai* 言在不稱徵, 言徵不稱在).¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Chen Yuan 1958, pp. 73–74. See also the discussion about the tabooing of the character *zheng* 正 in 4.4.2.

¹⁰⁹ Hucker 1985, p. 259.

¹¹⁰ *Jinshu*, j. 34, p. 6b.

¹¹¹ *Quan Tangwen*, j. 558, pp. 1a–2a.

¹¹² *Liji*, j. 2, p. 89b. For translation see Legge 1968, Part III, p. 190.

Another example we can find in the *Tradition of Zuo (Zuozhuan)* is where the title *sikong* 司空 was changed to *sicheng* 司城 because the name of Prince Wu of Song was Sikong.¹¹³ It means that *si* alone was not tabooed that time. When Wang Mang 王莽 took over power in 9 AD, he forbade two-character given names. This practice of a single given name was continued for about 300 years. Later, double given names appeared again, but the principle of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)* was already forgotten, and therefore single characters of a composite name started to be avoided as well.

We find in the *Book of the Southern Qi (Nan Qishu)* what is probably the first example of tabooing one of the two characters in a name separately: the name Daoyuan 道渊 was changed to Xueyuan 薛渊 because of the name of the Emperor Gao of Southern Qi – Daocheng 道成 (r. 479–482).¹¹⁴ Many similar instances can be found until the Tang dynasty, and we can see that it became a custom. Yet it was not officially mandated by the emperor. Emperor Taizong of Tang (r. 627–649) still gave out an imperial edict reminding people of the principle of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*.¹¹⁵

According to the *Tongdian* 通典, only with the Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) was the rule of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)* definitively broken. At that time, the Ministry of Revenue (*minbu* 民部)¹¹⁶ was changed to *hubu* 戶部,¹¹⁷ because of the taboo name of Emperor Taizong – Shimin 世民. However, this opinion is also questionable, as we do not have an edict with the order of tabooing single characters – on the contrary, we have examples showing that emperors did not welcome this existing custom. For example, in the *Zhongzhouji* 中州集 we find the story of Li Shoujie 李守節, who deleted the character *shou* in his name after the enthronement of the Emperor Aizong of Jin (r. 1224–1234), whose name was Shouxu 守緒. The Emperor, knowing it, said: “I do not want people taboo one character. Why does Li Shoujie do it?” The answer of his minister was: “It is because of reverence to Your Majesty.”¹¹⁸

According to Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815) the change of the principle, especially in the popular understanding, came from a miscomprehension of the original meaning of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*, which used the character *pian* 偏 in the sentence

¹¹³ *Chunqiu zuozhuan*, j. 5, pp. 16b, 18a.

¹¹⁴ *Nan Qishu*, j. 30, p. 1a.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Jiu Tangshu*, j. 2, p. 6a.

¹¹⁶ Hucker 1985, p. 333.

¹¹⁷ *Tongdian*, j. 23, p. 136.

¹¹⁸ *Zhongzhouji*, j. 7, p. 11a.

“composite names are not ‘partially’ tabooed” (*erming bu pian hui* 二名不偏諱).¹¹⁹ According to Duan, its meaning as “incomplete” caused the popular translation “Double names cannot be tabooed incompletely,” i.e., every character should be avoided, neglecting the original principle.¹²⁰ However, it is reasonable to assume that the meaning of this rule was continuously present among officials of the Chinese state, as this principle was repeatedly mentioned in the historical literature.

3.5.9. No Taboo in Written Texts and when Reading the *Classics of Poetry and Documents*

This principle means that the texts of some classical works should not be tabooed in order to protect the truth of real facts. Later the principle sometimes also included reading aloud of classical texts. Besides, reading aloud of poetry or historical books sometimes required no observance of taboos, according to this principle. The original text was not to be changed, but had to be protected. In fact, as we will see, the principle was often forgotten or violated, and numerous classical texts were affected by the tabooing of names (cf., e.g., stone inscriptions of Han dynasty in 5.1.1). Still, it is not difficult to see why sometimes changing a text was impossible, for instance when using a book such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in which every character was thought to have been consciously chosen by Confucius himself in order to carry subtle meanings of praise and blame.

3.6. Period of Tabooing

In order to establish the appropriate period of tabooing, we need to determine the starting and end points of concrete cases of tabooing. The beginning of tabooing (*hui*) the name of a deceased person was, according to principles of the *Records of Ritual (Liji)*, the end of the mourning time after this person’s death. Tabooing during a person’s lifetime was perhaps partly practiced before the Qin dynasty as “not naming” (*buming*), and after it also concretely as “taboo” (*hui*). It was observed especially after the ceremony of capping. From that moment, the courtesy name *zi* of person had to be used. But it was also appropriate to taboo the name of a child even immediately after its birth. Therefore, children were called by a different name in order to protect them from ghosts.

¹¹⁹ *Liji*, j. 1, p. 39a. Cf. translation of Legge: “When (a parent had) a double name, the avoiding of either term (used singly) is not required” (Legge 1968, Part III, p. 93).

¹²⁰ *Jingyun louji*, j. 11, pp. 1a-2b. Cf. also Wang Zhenzhu 2009, pp. 95-97.

The length of time a taboo was to be observed depended on the person it applied to. The longest was the tabooing of the name of the emperor. The taboo of founders of a dynasty was usually avoided until the end of its rule. The taboo of other emperors was observed for the time of seven generations (a very common ritual practice). This is connected with the system of *zhaomu* 昭穆 and the principle of distant ancestors (see 3.5.5). This system, used until Qing dynasty, determined the end of taboo as the moment that the ancestral tablet was moved into the distant temple, which took place after seven generations.¹²¹ This principle can also be proven with an example given by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 in his *Record of Daily Knowledge* (*Rizhilu* 日知錄), where stone inscriptions made in the time of the Emperor Wenzong of Tang (r. 826–840) tabooed characters of the last seven emperors preceding his reign, but not those of remaining former rulers.¹²²

If we check instances of taboo in the *Book of the Han* (*Hanshu*) we can see that they are also limited only to the last seven emperors. Characters of emperors' names were no longer avoided in chapters dealing with emperors after that time. Certainly sometimes tabooing was observed after the prescribed time, or even in successive dynasties (for example because of respect or as an established custom), but this was not the rule.

Private taboos were observed probably only in the life time of the people concerned (e.g., the taboo for consorts of the emperor), or sometimes for two or three generations (e.g., taboo of officials or of family ancestors). At least according to the prescription of the *Records of Ritual*, the taboo of a grandfather was to be observed for as long as one's father lived. In the practice of naming, the names of ancestors were taboo insofar as the names were known.

Of course, taboos of legendary rulers and of sages such as Confucius had no time limits, but were practiced differently in various periods. Also the taboos of characters concerning the usurpation of power (like *tian* 天 – heaven or *di* 帝 – the emperor) or taboos of inauspicious characters were not limited to a particular period of time.

3.7. Place and Circumstances of Tabooing

Generally speaking, if the real given name was perceived as taboo, it could not be arbitrarily used anywhere, apart from special situations, for example if one wanted to

¹²¹ The rule was perhaps applied not only for emperors. In the rules of Daoism there is one (No. 245) stating that the monk should take care that seven generations of ancestors ascend in to heavenly hall (Hackmann 1931, p. 27).

¹²² *Rizhilu*, j. 23, p. 21b.

summon the presence of the tabooed person during a ritual occasion. This was the case in the temple. According to common belief, the deceased person, or god or ghost, could appear only if that individual heard her/his own real name. In other situations the name was taboo. It was sometimes used by parents for children and young people (often the milk name *xiaoming* was used instead of it), or sometimes among friends. But after the capping ceremony, people were normally addressed by their courtesy name *zi* in order to protect their real name.

Another matter was the tabooing of characters and sounds of somebody's name in real life or in books. It was of course impossible to taboo every character of every name. Therefore everybody was mindful not to speak and write characters of taboo names of relatives, respected persons, superiors, or persons having an emotional relation to him. Here we can see differences in the place and circumstances of taboo observance between different kinds of taboo.

If we consider the taboo custom of a hypothetical Mr. Wang, we will see that he avoided especially taboos of his own family. In particular, characters of the name of his father, and sometimes other ancestors, were emotionally prohibited for him. It can be supposed that this taboo was subjectively the strongest one and was kept in every place by the taboo person himself. On the other hand, observance of one's family taboo was limited to persons related to him, usually only family and friends.

A distinction was made if this person became a superior or a respected person. Mr. Wang had to be tactful toward his superiors, officials, teachers, friends, and could not use their taboo characters, especially in front of them. These taboos were related to a limited group of people and often to a concrete place, as, e.g., office. The tabooing depended here on people's power and influence. For example taboos of the imperial court (*neihui*) were usually avoided only by insiders. But there are also examples for their observance outside court, or even as a state taboo in concrete cases.

Mr. Wang had to avoid, of course, characters of the emperor's name and those of former emperors (state taboo), and sometimes the taboo of sages. These taboos had to be generally avoided by everybody in every place and every situation. Also inauspicious characters and words implying usurpation of power had to be avoided. They were normally tabooed in order to prevent calamity or a putsch.

Special attention was paid to names of subordinates and of one's own sons. They could not have names offending the taboo of their superior or their father. If the name of a

subordinate had characters similar to the name of superior, it had to be changed. If the name of office offended the taboo of an upper official, he could change it or had to refuse it. Special rules were to be followed at the site of imperial examination. Besides state taboo and their own taboos, students had to observe the taboos of examiners (see 8.2.2).

3.8. Motives of Tabooing

Let us now deal with the question why names were tabooed in China, and what role tabooing played in society. There were at least three possible motives of tabooing: fear, reverence and hate. Chinese authors suggest reverence or respect for the taboo person as the main and almost exclusive reason for tabooing.¹²³ Historically, however, fear of the supernatural world was probably the main original motive.¹²⁴ This fear of sacral power of superiors, gods and ghosts was present as a motive throughout Chinese history. Nowadays this motive can still be seen in China as a fear of inauspicious words and as a fear of the names of ghosts in popular belief. In “official” history, the motive of respect for superiors, relatives and friends etc. became more and more important, although here, too, the fact that real personal names represented power over someone would not have been forgotten.

One very different motive for tabooing was anger. The names of irritating persons could be tabooed and changed, or openly used in order to offend in this way the taboo person. Sometimes tabooing was also a way for legitimization or – on the contrary – for usurpation of political power (see 3.8.4). This last habit should be noted, perhaps not as a conscious motive, but surely as an important reason of avoidance for a long time. All of these social, political, religious and other motivations and functions of name taboo shall be analyzed here.

3.8.1. Taboo out of Fear (*jihui* 忌諱 or *jinji* 禁忌)

Tabooing of words because of fear was very popular in the whole history of China and its surrounding regions.¹²⁵ Especially common was the tabooing of inauspicious words and characters, which can be seen until now. The function of taboo here is to protect people and

¹²³ It is because they distinguish “primitive taboo” (*jinji*) connected with fear and the “Chinese taboo” (*bihui*) connected with “humanistic” Confucian culture (cf. 2.1.7).

¹²⁴ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 31-32.

¹²⁵ Although this present research focused on Han Chinese custom, it is interesting to know that this kind of (writing) taboo can be seen, aside from Han China, in the Nestorian-Turkish texts from Turfan. They have two different ways of tabooing for the names of gods and ghosts: sublime and depreciated. For example, the word for devil “šumnu” is written backwards, out of fear (Knüppel 2008, pp. 107-108).

not to provoke evil powers. It is normally regarded as a “popular tabooing custom,” and is therefore not always appreciated in the Chinese historiography which is done by educated elites. Nonetheless, these are fundamentally very similar customs.

Many examples of that tabooing will be given in the following chapters. Here we mention that especially in the south of China the expression *lisan* 離散 (disperse) is understood as inauspicious, and because of that people do not pronounce words with similar sounds. They call, for example, pear (*li* 梨) as “round fruit” (*yuanguo* 圓果), and umbrella (*san* 傘) as “vertical hat” (*shuli* 豎笠).¹²⁶

The same happened with people’s names if they included characters considered to be inauspicious. There is an example of an Advanced Scholar (*jinshi*) in the Ming period called Ai Zhenji 哀貞吉. Emperor Jiajing (r. 1521–1566) considered the character *ai* 哀 in his name as inauspicious and changed his name by adding a stroke to make it Zhong 衷.¹²⁷

Another thing that should be mentioned here is the fear of punishment in the case of offending the taboo of superiors. Such a motive is not really taboo from fear (*jihui*). As a matter of fact, it is not always possible to separate strictly taboo from fear and taboo out of reverence. In China, as in many other cultures, fear and reverence often went together, as we know it for example from the *Bible*: “Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”¹²⁸

3.8.2. Taboo out of Reverence and Courtesy (*jinghui* 敬諱)

Because of respect, courtesy, or etiquette the name of a person (emperor, superiors, relatives) became taboo, and its characters or characters with similar pronunciation and structure could not be spoken. It is the most “standard” motivation for taboo. This motive is mentioned, e.g., in the *Spring and Autumn Annals, Gongyang’s Tradition* (*Chunqiu Gongyangzhuan* 春秋公羊傳): “You have to taboo persons of respect, relatives and sages.”¹²⁹ The function of taboo here was to protect the name of the taboo person from

¹²⁶ *Shuyuan zaji*, j. 1, p. 7.

¹²⁷ *Jingshi biming huikao*, j. 46, p. 645. Wang Xinhua 2007, p. 32 gives this example as taboo from hate, but the emperor had nothing against the *jinshi* himself. He tabooed a character because of his fear of inauspicious words.

¹²⁸ *Die Bibel* 2006, p. 1357 (Hebr 12, 28).

¹²⁹ *Chunqiu Gongyangzhuan*, j. 9, p. 9a.

insult and disadvantage and to express reverence to it. Taboo out of reverence (*jinghui*) originated in the prehistorical fear and veneration of the chieftain and shaman.¹³⁰

3.8.3. Taboo out of Hate (*ehui* 惡諱, *zenghui* 憎諱)

It is interesting that avoiding a taboo name and offending a taboo name could both express somebody's anger. For example, Emperor Suzong of Tang (r. 756–762) tabooed the character *an* 安 and changed many geographical names (mostly of counties and districts) containing this character. In this way he expressed his hate of the rebellious general An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757).¹³¹ The motive of taboo here was to conceal someone's name as a kind of revenge, to offend him in that way, and also to protect oneself from offence by the presence of a hated name.

Sometimes motivations of hate and fear come together, as in the case of a general of the Tang dynasty, Li Baoyu 李抱玉 (703–777). “He was a great-grandson of An Xinggui 安興貴, but after the insurgence of An Lushan he changed his family name to Li.”¹³² It is probably fear of possible consequences (having the same name as a rebel), but also hatred for him. On the other hand, the new family name Li is in itself also a politically significant choice: it was the family name of the emperor. A very different kind of *ehui* is to use somebody's name in public, with the intention to offend him.

3.8.4. Taboo out of Legitimization and Usurpation

A name, especially that of the emperor, had an important connection to power and politics. The tabooing of a ruler's name was strictly preserved as a sign of loyalty, and the violation of this taboo was punished as *lèse majesté*, sometimes with the death sentence. In this way, any possible form of usurpation was eliminated. On the other hand, a deliberate offence of taboo could be interpreted as a sign of usurpation of power.

Many characters that expressed power during the Song, Yuan, and Qing dynasties were taboo, and could not be used, because they were understood as an usurpation of imperial power. Special edicts were issued in order to forbid their use and force people to

¹³⁰ Cf. Wang Xinhua 2007, pp. 31–32.

¹³¹ Chen Yuan 1958, p. 33–34. Of course, fear could also be another motive as An Lushan and his son were still alive when the emperor ordered the tabooing of his family name.

¹³² *Xin Tangshu*, j. 138, p. 3a.

change names with such characters.¹³³ Such words were for example: *di* 帝 (emperor), *huang* 皇 (imperial), *jun* 君 (ruler), *long* 龍 (dragon), *shang* 上 (the one on high), *sheng* 聖 (sage), *tian* 天 (heaven), and *yu* 玉 (jade) (cf. 10.3.1). On the other hand, the highest deity from the divine pantheon, the Jade Emperor, continued to have this name and many other deities also received high feudal titles such as Emperor or King. The point here is that such divinities could only carry these titles because they had been bestowed by the Emperor himself.¹³⁴ There are numerous examples from the *Tolerant Study Notebooks* (*Rongzhai xubi* 容齋續筆) collected by Hong Mai 洪邁 showing that given names and family names were changed because they contained these characters.¹³⁵

Another example comes from the *Sketches from the Study room of Possible Transformation* (*Nenggaizhai manlu* 能改齋漫錄) and describes “the illegitimate aspirations” in the names of two officials because of their names: Daming 大明 (great brightness) and Peixian 丕顯 (great and splendid). These words were used in the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*) in order to describe the virtue of King Wen of Shang and in the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu*) in order to depict his plans.¹³⁶ The use of these names by officials of the Song time was seen as a usurpation of the emperor’s power. We also know from the same source that once during the examination for the *gongshi* 貢士 degree, more than ten graduates were eliminated or degraded because their names “implied the usurpation of privileges.” They used forbidden characters such as *bi* 辟 (monarch) or *yuanxun* 元勳 (extraordinary merit in state affairs).¹³⁷

Still more visible is this function of taboo in one case from the time of the Five Dynasties. When Zhu Quanzhong 朱全忠 declared himself emperor of the new (Later) Liang dynasty (907–923), he changed his name from the time of the Tang dynasty – Quanzhong 全忠 (completely loyal) to Huang 晃 (bright). A special imperial decree then allowed the use of characters from the old name and forbid the use of the new one.¹³⁸ The new name legitimated the new emperor and was presented as a kind of mandate to his subjects. The emperor, especially if he started a new dynasty, needed to confirm his power

¹³³ More about edicts of the Song emperors against the use of names implying the usurpation see Chen Yuan 1958, pp. 31–32.

¹³⁴ For more about titles of gods in medieval China see Hansen 1990, pp. 79–104.

¹³⁵ *Rongzhai xubi*, j. 4, p. 12a; Chen Yuan 1958, p. 31.

¹³⁶ *Shijing*, j. 16, p. 3a; *Shangshu*, j. 6, p. 35a.

¹³⁷ *Nenggaizhai manlu*, j. 13, p. 335–336.

¹³⁸ Chen Yuan 1958, p. 149.

for himself and for his subjects. Taboo of legitimization and usurpation can perhaps be seen (on the part of subjects) as a special case of taboo of reverence (legitimization) or of hate (usurpation). It can be also seen as a method of attestation and keeping of power.

The basic characteristics of the custom of tabooing names were introduced in this chapter. There were various persons whose names were avoided for different reasons. Especially names of emperors, their ancestors and their families were tabooed – a practice well-documented in literature. But also numerous other persons in society and the family were tabooed persons, such as officials, revered persons, fathers, teachers etc. Even more names of sages and legendary persons, and names of gods were tabooed.

Normally the given name was considered taboo, but there are also cases of tabooing courtesy names and other names and titles. Usually the exact character of a name was tabooed, but there are also many cases of tabooing homonyms and characters similar to the taboo character.

Throughout Chinese history, numerous methods of tabooing were elaborated. The character could be replaced or partly changed. Because of tabooing, strokes could be omitted, special marks could be made in its place or it could be covered with a yellow paper, etc. There are also various normative rules for tabooing a name, which were observed by various means in history. Different motives for tabooing names have also been described in this chapter.

With this basic knowledge, the reader can now take a look at the taboo custom in sequential periods of Chinese history, which will be described in the following chapters.