



A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF CHINESE NAMING SYSTEM IN INDONESIA: FACTS, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

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Abstract

Chinese ethnics are spread across the world. Indonesia is one of many countries with a number of Chinese inhabitants throughout generations. Chinese-Indonesian are those who also apply the Chinese naming system following their ancestors. The naming system is not only unique in identifying the tribal identity but it may also tell many aspects in it. The Chinese naming system is also used to identify gender, a certain tribal group, generation and hope. Despite the stable system, external and internal influences have affected the consistency of the commitment to obey the standardized pattern. The influences to mention are Western culture, religion, politics and practicality which are triggered by modernity, government and education. This study is to see the current of Chinese naming system in general practice and the reasons why the naming system is slowly abandoned. This study shows that Chinese Indonesians still have the Chinese names even are not used in legal papers. They still hold the traditions and belief despite the influence of politic, education, religions and modernity. The using of Indonesian and Western names instead of Chinese names are gestures of modernity, obedience to Indonesian identity, religion, cultural assimilation and practicality.

Keywords: *Chinese, Naming System, Culture, Pragmatic, Influences*

Introduction

Every nation in the world has its own cultural significance starting from the way they live, believe and standard of interaction, to name some. Every person in a society has its own identity called names. Names in all societies represent the culture itself. Societies have their own system of naming which represent their communal identity.

The system of naming in every nation is unique as it holds the naming habit, procedure and order that should be obeyed by families. The naming system, for advanced countries, is a kind of legalized and stable system to be followed by its citizens though it may vary in tiny variation

but as a general system, it serves a guideline for people.

Western and Eastern countries may have their own system in naming a person. They follow the pattern generated by elders and government system. Arabians, for example, have what they call *ism*, *kunya*, *nasab*, *laqab* and *nisba* which do not conform the Western naming system of first name, middle and family name.¹ People of Arabic origins use the five elements constantly though it may be different in applying the components. In general, the five elements are used as the identity.

A different mindset showed in Western Europe. In contrast, a discussion of abolishing of the sole patriarchal surname

¹ Beth Notzon and Gayle Nesom, "The Arabic Naming System." 28.1 (Feb. 2005): 20

has been going starting from 2000s. The equality of men and women has been considered in the naming system that not only a father surname is used, but also both or either one. Hence, children can use either patriarchal or matriarchal system by discussion among parents.² The option of using either father or mother's surname and both has been seen as the effort to give equality and fairness to abolish the sexist system which is seen to take side on the patriarchal system.

In African tribal groups, they also have unique naming system. Some major tribes in Nigeria and Somali, for example, use compound names, abbreviation, or reflect the circumstance when the child born and some unique ways such as using the local communities.³ Somalian children, for example, may not have their family names but possessing three personal names instead.

Chinese naming system, the topic of this paper, may be among the oldest system applied. Chinese people spread across the continents elsewhere become the ones who use the stable naming system. Personal names are used by those with Chinese backgrounds from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora overseas. Due to China's historical dominance of East Asian culture, many names used in Korea and Vietnam are adaptations of Chinese names, or have historical roots in Chinese, with appropriate adaptation to accommodate linguistic differences. Further, this paper will touch based the discussion.

This part will be discussing the historical facts of the Chinese naming system including the evolution and changes. A small view will be shown in

how dynasties and Confucius' thoughts affect the system. As the system not only relates to identity matter but also touches political and etiquette of Chinese people in the world. To be more contextual, the discussion also relates the issue on Chinese Indonesian especially West Kalimantan Chinese as the writer experiences and lives with.

Discussion

Cultural system cannot be separated from the people living in the certain span of time. There are rulers who manage, administer and implicate policies for the ruled people to follow. Chinese naming system is influenced by authorities during the time. This section will show the historical facts of naming system from Chinese dynasties and the consequence now.

As Chinese communities spread across the world, the naming system is also adopted and practiced by many Chinese in different continents, including Indonesia as part of Asia. The journey of the consistency of the practice will be over looked despite the internal and external factors influencing the process of naming implementation.

Chinese Naming System: Dynasties and The Era

In Chinese society names classify and individuate, they have transformative powers, and they are an important form of self-expression. Some names are private, some are chosen for their public effect.⁴

Chinese people usually have three parts of name consisting of one surname and two given names. We are familiar with Sung Yat Sen, Mao Ze Dong and the typical three syllabic system. The very first syllabic

² Valerie Feschet, "The Surname in Western Europe: Liberty, Equality and Paternity in Legal Systems in the Twenty-First Century." *L'Homme. Z.F.G.*, 20.1 (2009): 64-5.

³ The General Secretariat of United Kingdom. *A Guide to Names and Naming Practices*. (Mar. 2016): 5-9.

⁴ Rubie S. Watson. "The Named and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society." *American Ethnologist*, 13.4 (Nov. 1986): 619.

name is the family name (Xiang) and the two latest will be called the given names i.e., middle and last. The very end is called nick name or the daily name people address the person.

Chinese people, especially the high ranked figures can have more than one or two names including the courtesy names. It was prior to 20th century. The courtesy or other names are used among families and relatives. In an academic field, Chinese people may also have their signature names used among scholars. It was no wonder that a person may possess more than 10 different as many as required.

Compiled from different resources and articles⁵ In the era of between 5,000-6,000 years ago, the naming system started with the matrilineal system. It is proper to say that the very first Chinese family names began with a matrilineal society in which many of these earliest clan names (known as Xing/Siang) contain the ideograph for “woman” such as Ji, Ying, Yao, Jiang and so on. During the time people knew more their mother identity than the father. The word Xing is made up of two ideographs that read “born of a woman”, and a person’s Xing name placed them within a kinship group that forbade marriage between its members. As life became more complex, the patrilineal system exists with another kinship marker called Shi as recorded in the Zhou Dynasty. The Shi name was essentially a subset of the Xing name, and individuals might have taken one because they desired greater differentiation among themselves.

During the war era, it was usual for warlord families to expand and then use the conquered land to name themselves. The numbers of families with the same Xing tried to differentiate themselves using the new family name. They usually use the state name, for example, Zheng, to state their Shi

to differentiate themselves with others Ji (their previous Xing). Hence, even a family member with the same given name, for example Loze, could have names of Ji Loze and Zheng Loze. This kind of practices was changeable of families dropping Ji by obtaining Zheng or vice versa. It was also normal that some descendants might also have changed their Shi names to reflect new circumstances, such as migration or acquisition of a prominent title by one of their own.

Confusion emerged then in the uncontrolled naming system. History showed that there were commoners without Xing names but who took on Shi names that identified where they lived, what they did for a living and so on. The system became unclear and was hard to identify the states of people.

In 221BC, in the era of Qin Dynasty, the naming system was seriously administered. The life aspects in China were administered better including the naming system. The administration was also centralized and standardized. The concept of Xing and Shi was stabilized and merged into a family name or surname system. Confusion was solved.

The effort to manage the system better was followed by Han dynasty (206-220BC) following the initial Qin era. The naming role got more and more stable. People followed the pattern of Family name plus the given name norm. Nevertheless, throughout the imperial period, many people, especially members of the elite, took on or were referred to by aliases in addition to their name, but this practice was dropped in the early 20th century.

Chinese people’s names, the Hans usually choose two words or one word as their given names except their surnames. Before the period of the Three Kingdoms (220 - 280 AD), the given name was usually

⁵ Wee Kek Koon, “The complex origins of Chinese names demystified”. South China Morning Post. (21 Nov. 2016).

one word, and it became two words from the Jin Dynasty (265 - 420 AD) to modern times.⁶ Though in the practice, we still encounter names only consisting of two syllables such as Lin Dan, Wang Lin and Li Na instead of Zhang Zie Yee, Lim Sioe Liong and so on.

Taboos in Chinese Naming

Neither are linguistic taboos arbitrary as these facts relate to culture, beliefs, religions and social control.⁷ The naming system is part of linguistic phenomena. Names are considered hopes and prayers from parents to their children. Chinese people in naming their children usually follow rules, including what they should avoid in respecting the system. Since ancient times, the Chinese people have attached great importance to the name. Under the influence of "Rectification of Names" of Confucius, people take it very sacred and even mystical to name their descendants. This was totally practiced in Chinese Zhou Dynas (1046 BC- 256 BC) that names had huge impacts on the person using it. Good names related to reputable figures might get a better treatment. Those who owned bad names would get worse receptions. It was common that people rooted one's reputation from his ancestors would result in either good or bad treatments. Naming was then included in the etiquette to shape a system, not only a mere identity of a person. This would much match the notion of Ries and Trout in seeing names as brands, refusing Shakespeare's perpetual "what is in a name".⁸

One of famous Confucius' teaching is respecting ancestors. That is why in Chinese naming system using the same given names similar to ancestors or elders

is considered disrespectful. Hence, using the given name connoted the speaker's authority and superior position to the addressee. Peers and younger relatives were striped from speaking it. Relating to this, many historical Chinese figures—particularly emperors—used a half-dozen or more different names in different contexts and for different speakers. Names similar to emperors were forced to dismantle them. in Chinese families, it is quite abnormal to find a grandson's name similar to his grandpa. Chinese families also avoid, for example, name their son Sun Yat Sen or Shi Huang Tie resembling the famous ancient figure.

Using names sound bad wishes are also avoided even the meaning is good. Chinese people are known to avoid any symbols and sounds related to bad wishes or bad luck. For example, the name Sung Xie Xie will be avoided as the sound resembles the meaning "deliver the dead". Lucks are identical to written and spoken meanings.

Gender is also related to the naming rule to differentiate the user's sex. Women are always related to softness, calmness and beauty. The selection of flowers and natural beauties becomes the favorite names such as Fa/Flowers, Jun/Cloud, Fung/Phoenix and so on. Men are identical to strength and bravery. Words such as mountain/san, dragon/liong, warrior/hiong and others symbolizing "strong" are commonly used. Names also identify gender and normativity. It is rare or even zero possibility to name girls liong "dragon" or san "mountain".

Chinese names also avoid in attaching two contradictory things. It is not usual to find a person by name Lie San Hoi meaning Mount and Ocean of Lie as the two

⁶ Chinese Name."Your Chinese Astrology". Retrieved from <https://www.yourchineseastrology.com/chinese-name/>

⁷ Muriel Saville-Troike, *The Ethnography of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2003): 210

⁸ Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. McGraw-Hill Education (2001)

components are far to each other. The same thing also refers to the name of natural elements such fire/*Fo* and water/*sui* in the same arrangement. Even, during Dynasty Qing, mentioning moon and sun in a sentence was considered dangerous.⁹ The faults in mentioning and naming will be resulting bad lucks, sickness and unhappy life.

In the practice Chinese families will look information in details of names and meaning and consult with elders of Chinese priests. They also use calendars to avoid bad lucks. Chinese people also relate their names to Chinese horoscope to find the best fitted names. Those can change their names if later on they find the names creating bad lucks and sickness without changing the legal documents. They only change nick names. Another practice is about never writing Chinese names in red ink.¹⁰

Names: Kindship and Family Tree

Names become not only the very identity of a person, this naming system is then used to track the generation and family-ship. From the surname, people can track the province of one's originality. From the last two personal name, people can track the number of generation sequence.

Chinese names traditionally obey the standardized system built for the past. Many modern Chinese families still follow the path. Elders, foundations and temples are usually the places people can consult with in finding the proper names based on the surnames. Chinese people try to avoid faults and wrong tracks in naming their new-borns.

Using of family name is the most important as it keeps the continuity of the generations. The patrilineal system is used. In this case, sons are considered those who

perpetuate the surname. Hence, the son's children are called the inside clan. They will use the surname. Daughters will follow their husband's surname and are considered the outer clan. This practice is still followed to date.

Surnames are important to anticipate the taboo in the same surname marriage. In Chinese tradition, a couple with the same surnames is not allowed to marry each other especially from the patrilineal side. This is considered incest as marrying the same line of kinship. It is common that the prospective wife or husband will be traced and then confirmed by his or her Xing/Siang or clan.

Surname is also important in tracking the family tree especially for men side. Chinese people with three component names will connect themselves with the clan and generation. For example, a clan should have the sequence of the middle name to state the generation level. Sons and male cousins born in the same generation will use the consistent middle name different from their father's level. So, if the father's name is Sung Sie Liong, the uncles should have the same Sung and Sie as the first and second component with the different last name. If the sons are names Sing Wan Chung, the cousins (nephews) may obtain the same pattern of Sung Wan ... This pattern will tell the generation. Later on, the next generation will use the fixed pattern, for example, Sung Kwet and the same new-borns follow. To avoid the false naming, parents should consult with elders or the surname temple or foundation.

Surname and sounding following certain dialect can also confirm from which part of region and tribes the family come from. The pronunciation of names and spoken pattern will identify the tribe of the people. For example, Sung surname usually

⁹ Vivian Rice. During China's history, has there ever been any Chinese character which use has been forbidden and/or considered taboo? Quora (15 Sep. 2015).

¹⁰ Ming, Yi. "A Chinese Taboo: Never Write Other People's Names Using Red Ink." Vision Time, (Ju. 2016).

Hakka and Tong related to Tiochiu. In this case, it is quite abnormal to find Tong in the Sung family names but Chung to state the same meaning of “middle”. It is clear that the name should be Sung Ban Chung rather than Sung Ban Tong.

Chinese Names in Practice in Indonesia: Internal and External Factors

There are three important eras in Indonesia affecting the use of Chinese naming system. In the Colonial era to 1965, the spelling convention of Hokkien way was applied as they became the majority of Chinese immigrants (Dutch East Indies), or often called Peranakan China.¹¹ The administrators used the closest Dutch pronunciation and spelling of Hokkien words to record the names. The surnames, for example, are written like Liem (Dutch), Oei or Oey, Go, Tjan (Dutch), Lie, Liong (Dutch) and to name some, to follow the Dutch system favoring Hokkien. The spelling convention continuedly used through the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) well into Indonesian independence (1945) and sovereignty acknowledgment by the Dutch government (1949). Since the independent Indonesian government inherited the Dutch legal system, it also survived until 1965 in the Sukarno era as history records.

Things adjusted following dynamics. Some minor changes happened. First was under the *Ejaan Suwandi* introduced in 1947, and again under the *Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan*, literally “Perfected Spelling”, adopted in 1972. Under the Suwandi system of spelling, “oe”, influenced by Dutch, became “u”, influenced by English; for example, Loe was spelled as Lu. Since 1972, Dutch-style “j” became “y”, meaning Njoo is now

spelled Nyoo. Spelling quite transformed itself.

Educational system was not only the scapegoat that triggered the spelling uncertainty, the political direction and power also affected people in the cultural expression including naming system. Histories, including modern history, show that people tend to follow the political tendency in the era.¹² The most dramatic influence was during Suharto’s time. President’s 127/U/Kep/12/1966 which mandated that ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia adopt Indonesian-sounding names instead of the standard three-word or two-word Chinese names. Adjustment was done to follow the mandate. Many Chinese names were camouflaged into Indonesian sounding names. Names such as Suwanto to accommodate the surname Sung, Halim to hide Lim and so on. Still some important figures use the Chinese names such as Kwik Kian Gie, Tan Djoe Hok and Lim Swie King.

The reluctance of tailoring names into Indonesian sound and flavor not only connects to the firmness to keep the Chinese identity and culture, but also to the procedure and financial ability of poor Chinese to follow the legal step of obtaining the new legal Indonesian names. They had to experience a long and corrupt procedure in adopting the new names. Thus, in short, Chinese-Indonesians’ participation in society is characterized by both liminality and ambivalence, as their economic potency is both admired and resented, and their presence is simultaneously praised and discriminated against. Significantly, for a heterogeneous population whose cultural practices and histories of settlement in Indonesia have varied greatly over time and in space, this structural liminality has

¹¹ Li Minghuan. “From ‘Sons of the Yellow Emperor’ to ‘Children of Indonesian Soil’: Studying Peranakan Chinese based on the Batavia Kong Koan Archives.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34.2 (Jun. 2000): 215.

¹² Elena Obukhova, Ezra W. Zuckerman and Jiayin Zhang. “When Politics Froze Fashion: The Effect of the Cultural Revolution on Naming in Beijing.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 120. 2(Sep. 2014): 559.

induced multiple experiences of “belonging-in-alienation,” which is perhaps the only commonality shared by all Chinese-Indonesians.¹³

The modern Indonesian after Suharto’s fall generates more conducive atmosphere. Chinese traditions and cultures are well accommodated. The effort to preserve the traditional and original names grows. Some regions such as Bangka, Medan and Singkawang are even popular with their preserved Chinese festivals.

Political factor influences a lot in the changing the Chinese naming system. Chinese families and the generation after Suharto’s regime use more Indonesian and Western names. Newborns after 1970s are unusual in using Chinese names in their legal documents, mostly using Indonesian or Western names but still keep their Chinese names for daily and limited community. Surname and middle names are still used to track the kinship and used in relations to Chinese familial and communal events.

Education, religion and modernity are also considered factors that change the trend. Students in schools are comfortable using the names showing their Indonesian identity. Doctors and important figures sometimes involve in giving the names. Names are also used to show religious identities such as Christian or Muslim names. Modernity also affects parents in choosing children’s names. It is normal to find Indonesians using Latin names such as Diego Maradona, Gaudio Sergio and Frans Peter.

Besides the three factors previously mentioned, prestige should also be considered as a trigger factor in adopting

other than Chinese names. Chinese prefer Western rather than Indonesian common names. In the 21th century, new born generation is given more sophisticated “brands” such as Michael, David, Evan and the likes. Seldom do we encounter Gunawan, Budiman and other Indonesian traditional names. This may firmly indicate that parents now hold the believe that names are related to prestige, outstanding, popularity and uniqueness as well.¹⁴¹⁵

Practicality could be the factor that distances Chinese families to use tribal names. Choosing Chinese name is not an easy matter like choosing Indonesian or Western ones. Parents have to follow the rule and pattern. They cannot name their children as they want to without considering the surname, middle name, meaning, sound and many important aspects. Many even do not know the exact middle name to use.

Assimilation should be seen as the result of dismantling the Chinese names. Many Chinese people in rural West Kalimantan use Dayaknese names rather than Chinese names even they still speak Chinese and fluent Dayaknese. Using the Dayaknese names could be seen as merging themselves into the local community. They learn to speak Dayakanese and vice versa. The marital relation also creates the speed in the assimilation.

The rise of nationality also drives Chinese communities into more inclusive. National patrons and icons are the driving factors to generate such feeling of belonging. Some patriotic jargons trigger the rising of national spirit among Chinese families. Education and assimilation support the spirit of nationality.

¹³ Tsai Yen-ling. “Spaces of Exclusion, Walls of Intimacy: Rethinking “Chinese Exclusivity” in Indonesia”. *Southeast Asia Program Publications at Cornell University*, 92 (Oct. 2011), pp. 128.

¹⁴ Sharon, Jayson. “Parents looking for ‘cool factor’ in baby names”. *USA Today*. (29 Nov. 2012). Retrieved from

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/29/baby-names-top-2012/1730637>.

¹⁵ Mitra Tarigan, “Mengapa Orang Tua Zaman Now Senang Memberi Nama Unik Untuk Anak”? *Tabloid Bintang* (5 Feb. 2019). Retrieved from <https://gaya.tempo.co/read/1172495/mengapa-orang-tua-zaman-now-senang-memberi-nama-unik-untuk-anak/full&view=ok>

Conclusion

Naming system in the world is considered part of cultural identity and pride of nations and people. The naming system evolves following the regimes and rulers of the time. People usually follow and obey the naming policy. Some follow the system fully and quite a few take the middle and adaptation. Chinese naming system is among the oldest system in the world.

Chinese people in the worlds still understand and follow the naming system, including Indonesia. They follow the standardized of the surname and given name(s) system. The fixed pattern is used to identify gender, tribe, generation and obey the wisdom behind it, including Confucius's teaching. Chinese follow the normativity in giving suitable names and avoid taboo.

Indonesian Chinese in practicing the naming system is influenced by internal and external factors that drive them to dismantle the system. Some holding the Chinese names understand that tribal and blood identity are important in tracking generation, obeying tradition and a way to avoid the same-surname marriage. The families dismantling the Chinese names are influenced by education, religion, modernity, assimilation, nationality and practicality.

Though political intervention once influenced the use of Chinese names, Chinese-Indonesian families (at least in West Kalimantan) still understand the pattern in using the naming system. They still have knowledge and reference in practicing the system. The open politic of Indonesian government nowadays also support Chinese communities to celebrate the identity as a part of Indonesian cultural richness.

People in the world, including Chinese-Indonesians, should keep their cultural identity. There is traditional wisdom behind the system. Naming system is part of linguistic evidence, pragmatic richness of every culture to express the

attached treasure unique to its tribes and nationalities. Seeing this significant pragmatic tradition, Chinese may consider Shakespeare's "what is in a name" a practical joke.

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