

Names of Chinese Singsong Girls (up to the End of the 19th Century)

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Abstract

China's long historical tradition of male dominance and patriarchal authority based on patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence is deeply embedded in its culture and institutions. For more than 3,000 years of the history of China women have held an inferior position within the family and society, and their social status has had a great influence on female personal naming. Chinese 'famous women', i.e. the women recorded in various historical documents and biographical dictionaries (999 females of the research material) can be divided on the basis of their 'professional' or 'daily life' activities into certain social-professional groups. One of these groups consists of singsong girls or special female entertainers (95 females; 9.5%). These professional society ladies were of literary, musical, political, and emotional importance in China. It so happens that in the long history of China singsong girls and prostitutes were almost the only women more freely known and recorded by their given names, occurring together with their surnames or as separate appellations. However, their given names in many cases should rather be considered as being their artistic or stage names, and not their standard given names, bestowed on them by their parents or relatives. Many of these names have their own specific features, and they are meaningful, usually descriptive and affectionate.

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Physiological differences between men and women and philosophical differences in the attitude to both sexes have brought about great dissimilarities in their work activities, social roles, and other aspects. China's long historical tradition of male dominance and patriarchal authority based on patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence is deeply embedded in its culture and institutions. For more than 3,000 years of the history of China, women have held an inferior position within the family and society, and their social status has had a great influence on female personal naming (Kałużyńska 2008).

Confucian social philosophy in China stood for a society with an emphasis on distinction between superiority and inferiority, for obedience, for recognition of authority in a family as well as in a state, for sexual differentiation, separation of men and women, and for the division of labour into men's duties outside and women's duties inside the household. In the best spirit of Confucianism, sexual differentiation was considered not as a subjection of women to men, but as the harmony of relationships. One can read: 'Only when males and females are treated differently, can proper relations between husband and wife be established in conformity with the principles of morality and justice' (*Liji* 1957: 2385). However, the basic notions of female inferiority were there.

Confucius and other people of the early period of China (5th BC-3rd AD) set down basic definitions of Chinese womanhood and moral standards for women, that were endowed by later generations with enormous authority and respect.

Social-Professional Groups of Chinese ‘Famous Women’

Chinese ‘famous women’ are the women recorded in various historical documents, and later collected in two biographical dictionaries: *Zhongguo renming da cidian* [The Great Dictionary of Chinese Persons], hereafter abbreviated to ZRD, published in 1921, and *Huaxia funü mingren cidian* [Dictionary of Famous Chinese Women], hereafter abbreviated to HFMC, published in 1988. They can be divided on the basis of their ‘professional’ or ‘daily life’ activities into certain social-professional groups.

According to the research material, the main groups of 999 women living from the beginning of recorded Chinese civilization to the end of the 19th century (approximately to 1880) are:

(1) exemplary mothers, wives (or private concubines) and daughters, generally called *liè nǚ* 列女 or *liè nǚ* 烈女 ‘outstanding women; paragons of chastity’ (143 females; 14.3%);

(2) imperial court ladies, i.e. empresses, princesses, imperial consorts, imperial concubines, imperial maids, etc., that can be labelled as *gōng nǚ* 宮女 ‘palace ladies’ (342; 34.25%);

(3) singsong girls and prostitutes, classified as *jì jū* 妓 ‘singsong girls; prostitutes’ (95; 9.5%);

(4) women as Buddhist or Taoist nuns, recorded generally as *nǚ sēng* 女僧 ‘nuns’ (21; 2.1%);

(5) other women, living mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries, recorded because of their outstanding achievements in various domains of intellectual or artistic activities, and generally called *cái nǚ* 才女 ‘talented women, gifted female scholars’, or considered as heroines of some historical or cultural events, and usually labelled as *nǚ yīng xióng* 女英雄 ‘heroines’ (398; 39.85%).

Concubines and Singsong Girls

The separation between men and decent women was a fact of Chinese society, and it became even more distinct with time. There was almost no opportunity for any social intercourse between sexes, except through marriage. Laws, traditions and customs severely guarded this separation, mainly the seclusion of women. A decent Chinese woman was loyal, obedient, and instinctively chaste. However, there was an acceptance of sexual freedom for men. As a result, concubinage and prostitution came in as a relief for them, and such arrangements were lawful and quite fashionable in China, especially among the higher classes of society. There is a Chinese proverb: ‘We select a wife for her virtue, a concubine for her beauty’.

Concubinage has been present in Chinese history since the beginning. If the marriage was somewhat unsatisfactory, the man could, with public consent, take a concubine. This solution was also greatly encouraged by the insistence on male progeny. The law of the Ming Dynasty officially sanctioned the taking of concubines in the case of a man who had reached forty years of age and was still without any male progeny (Lin 1936: 156). The Chinese regarded marriage as a family affair, and if the marriage failed in any aspect, they accepted concubinage, which kept the family intact as a social unit. Concubines usually lived with the wife and served as her assistants and maids, their rights were duly protected and their children were treated by law as those of a wife.

The insistence on the segregation of the sexes, and the seclusion of decent women of elite families, greatly limited the possibilities for elite men to associate with educated females outside their own families. However, there were special female entertainers, i.e. singsong girls, usually publicly presented as artists or actresses, who fulfilled the need for female companionship during various festive gatherings.

The Chinese term *ji* 妓, under which these females are categorized, has two somewhat different meanings. These are: 'singing girl; female performer' and 'prostitute' (HD 1994: 4.295, Mathews 1963: 439, 'Shuowen' 1981: 621). According to Arlington (1923: 317), the original meaning of the term was 'woman's trinkets', denoting something of small value, a mere trifle. The original meaning has been lost, and nowadays it simply refers to a prostitute. This term probably originated during the Han Dynasty, when the emperor Wu (140-86 BC), established a women's camp for unmarried troops. The term 'singsong girl' in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* is explained as: '(in China) a female entertainer, informal a prostitute' (TNODoE 1998: 1739). Thus the term 'singsong girl' is preferred here for such women to the term 'courtesan', defined as 'a prostitute, especially one with wealthy or upper-class clients' (TNODoE 1998: 422).

The great majority of these women were sold in early youth to brothel-keepers by poverty-stricken parents or relatives, or kidnappers. They were usually taught singing, dancing, playing musical instruments and sometimes reading. Some of them were quite well educated, trained in all the skills of witty conversation, painting, poetry, music and dance, so they could be the professional companions of elite men. The entertainment they provided might extend to sexual services, but not necessarily.

Singsong girls had to be courted before permitting a man to pass a night in their boudoirs. It was, in fact, the only kind of courtship legitimate and proper in China. Singsong girls waited upon banquets and acted as hostesses for the host, because in China wives never participated in men's feasts. The overwhelming majority of these female entertainers lived a miserable life, but for a few women this kind of activity provided an opportunity to pursue an independent life outside the strict confines of the family.

Alongside the development of Confucian ethics, society continued to establish its own frames, based on social conventions, and even more on economic pressure. It seems that more important than the influence of Confucianism was in many cases the fact that in China men controlled the finances of the family, with the property generally passed along the male line. The accumulation of wealth and the rise of great houses during the Wei and Jin dynasties (the 3rd-5th century AD), coupled with the general political disorder, encouraged

the development of concubinage and prostitution. In these times rulers and rich noblemen had many concubines and plenty singsong girls in their palaces and private households. In short, many women had become the playthings of rich men.

Quite a few singsong girls were closely connected with the political events of the Chinese nation, e.g. Chen Yuanyuan 陳圓圓, the beloved mistress of general Wu Sangui (1612-1678). Her capture by Li Zicheng (1606-1645) during the latter's conquest of Peking led Wu Sangui to enter Peking with the assistance of Manchu troops for her recovery, and thus directly contributed to the downfall of the Ming Dynasty and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. After this event, she decided to live out her life as a nun in a monastery (HFMC: 620, Lin 1936: 154, ZRD: 1092.4).

Singsong girls became a very visible presence in urban China throughout the ages. At the beginning they were primarily noted as performers, actresses and artists. The last decades of the 16th and the first half of the 17th century witnessed an extraordinary flowering of courtesan culture, and many of the best-known singsong girls established their reputations as poets.

The history of Chinese intellectual women could be sought partly in the lives of many accomplished singsong girls. Among the females of the research material there are 95 singsong girls recorded altogether and they stand for 9.5% of the women recorded in the period until the end of the Qing Dynasty. One record (at the same time the earliest) concerns the singsong girl of the Northern Qi Dynasty (479-502). There are 30 singsong girls recorded from the Tang Dynasty (618-906), 7 from the Song Dynasty (960-1279), 22 from the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368), 25 from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1662), and 10 from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

Names of Chinese Singsong Girls

A Chinese woman, in theory, could be given all of the categories of given names proper for Chinese civilization: a childhood name, a standard great name, a style, or other appellations. In practice, however, most girls and women were simply called 'daughters', 'wives' and 'mothers', and even if they had any names, they were usually not used and recorded. It was even considered improper for a woman to reveal or use her given name. Chinese women were generally treated as additions to males, and they were identified or referred to not by their own personal names, but by the personal names of their family members.

It happens that in the long history of China singsong girls and prostitutes were almost the only women more freely known and recorded by their given names, occurring together with their surnames or as separate appellations. However, their given names in many cases should rather be considered as their artistic or stage names, *yì míng* 藝名, and not their standard given names, bestowed on them by their parents or relatives (Kałużyńska 2008: 101-105, Yin 1998: 231, Liu 2000: 208).

Personal names consisting of a surname followed by a kind of given name are the most typical forms of Chinese personal names, in the past and at present. The form was introduced at the beginning of Chinese civilization and during the Han Dynasty it acquired the status of the standard form of Chinese personal names. However, as far as women are

concerned, such forms of recording were rather limited and used for certain groupings of women, especially unmarried girls of mainly noble families, famous talented women and famous singsong girls.

On the basis of the research material, one can establish that this form of recording was used in the case of 459 women born up to 1880 (46%), 70 singsong girls (73.7% of all of them) included. Since in the past a Chinese could have a number of given names, the forms are differentiated as to the category of the given name concerned. However, 47 singsong girls (67.14% of the group) have only one name recorded, without any information on its kind. The rest of them have their other names additionally recorded: 10 – style (*zì* 字), 2 – appellation (*hào* 號), 1 – style and appellation, 9 – standard name (*míng* 名). Only in the case of one singsong girls it is stated that the given name recorded is her adopted name, a kind of pseudonym.

In early times of China the method of recording people by their given name or appellation without surnames was mainly caused by the lack of more complicated naming systems or detailed information concerning the people recorded. Later, the method was used rather sporadically, and was considered as impolite, depreciating, or even as reflecting a kind of disapproval, typically on moral grounds. The women recorded in ZRD and ‘Dictionary’ without their surnames were mainly of a low social status, i.e. nuns, concubines of the lowest rank and singsong girls.

The given names of females, recorded as separate names without surnames, are standard given names bestowed by parents, relatives or teachers, or kinds of adopted appellations, artistic pseudonyms chosen by the persons themselves or given by their hosts or other persons. This pattern of identification in some roundabout way reflects the low position of their bearers. Sometimes it is impossible to distinguish standard given names from nicknames or artistic pseudonyms.

Altogether 25 singsong girls are recorded in dictionaries under their standard given name or appellation (32.86% of all). 16 singsong girls (64% of the group) have only one name recorded, without any information on its kind. The rest of them have their other names additionally recorded: 6 – surname, 1 – surname and standard name, 1 – surname and appellation, 1 – surname, style and appellation.

Semantic Content and Structural Features of Given Names of Singsong Girls

Names of Chinese singsong girls usually have their specific features, and they are meaningful, usually descriptive, affectionate and often hypocoristic and very feminine. The names of the singsong girls of the research material can be divided into 8 main groups.

(1) Hypocoristic Reduplicated Names

Among traditional Chinese methods of creating hypocoristic given names there is one that originated in the 5th century, and nowadays is quite fashionable and common. This method is based on the process of reduplication, i.e. an exact repetition of a linguistic element (a

syllable/a morpheme/a word). Names created using this method are usually called *diémíng* 疊名 ‘reduplicated names’. Reduplicated names are broadly used to convey an appealing diminutiveness, and to express an affectionate or condescending attitude. Chinese people consider them as having a maximum amount of softness and tenderness, and as being beautiful in sound and appearance.

Women in their lives had to conform to standards provided by men. Reduplicated names gave the impression of intimacy, and as such were well-suited to men’s emotional needs. They also reflected the inferior position of women, as those purposely currying favour with men, and were often considered as having the quality of a commercial label of women. As Yin (1998: 231) notes:

Chinese singsong girls and actresses made their living by exposing their feminine charms. For this reason their artistic names mainly sought for beautiful sounds and sensual pleasures. People hearing their names felt affected and delighted... Names of some famous singsong girls and actresses were: Zhen Shenshen, Li Shuaishuai, Mao Xixi, Chen Yuanyuan, Xue Susu... Although these names were full of poetic charm, they revealed their painful life. In those past times, singsong girls and actresses lived as slaves within the lowest levels of society. They had no personal liberty. Their artistic names were simply commercial labels attributed to them by their owners.

22 singsong girls (23.15%) of the research material have reduplicated names. The first reduplicated name recorded in historical documents is the name of [Su] Xiaoxiao [蘇] 小小, ‘Small; Little’, who was a famous singsong girl from Qiantang (present Hangzhou) during Southern Qi Dynasty (ZRD: 1775.4). Some examples of these names as below:

- [Zhang] Haohao [張] 好好, ‘[Small] Good’ (ZRD: d14.4);
- [Sun] Xiuxiu [孫] 秀秀, ‘[Small] Beautiful’ (ZRD: 754.2);
- [Luo] Aiai [羅] 愛愛, ‘[Small] Loving’ (ZRD: 1752.1).

(2) Given Names with Lexical Markers of ‘Diminutiveness’

Some Chinese hypocoristic names are formed by the use of lexical markers of ‘diminutiveness’. Such methods of denoting the nature of a pet name or a diminutive form of a name are morphological methods of compounding or of affixation. So-called diminutive terms, also named terms of endearment, have various statuses in the name as either root morphemes/words having the lexical meaning of ‘diminutiveness’ (‘small’, ‘young’, ‘child’, etc.) or affixes, serving to mark the semantic function of ‘diminutiveness’. Among the names of singsong girls figuring in the research material there are altogether 12 names with the terms (12.63%). The terms and names used are as below:

- *xiǎo* 小 ‘small’; ‘little’; ‘young’, 6 names, e.g.: [Huo] Xiaoyu [霍] 小玉 ‘Small Jade’ (*yù* ‘jade’; ‘pure’; ‘beautiful person’), Tang Dynasty (HFMC: 1108; ZRD: 1626.1);
- *ér* 兒 ‘child’; ‘suffix added to nouns to express smallness’, 3 names, e.g.: [Zhang] Ben’er [張] 奔兒 ‘Running Child’, ‘[Small] Runner’ (*bēn* ‘to run’; ‘to hasten’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 937.2);
- *nú* 奴 ‘slave’; ‘maid’; ‘term of endearment for girls’, 1 name, i.e.: [Wang] Baonu [王] 寶奴 ‘Treasured Darling’, ‘Treasured Slave’, ‘[Small] Treasure’ (*bǎo* ‘treasure’; ‘precious’), Ming Dynasty (ZRD: 159.4);
- *wá* 娃 ‘baby’; ‘child’; ‘small animal’; ‘girl’, 1 name, i.e.: [Li] Wa [李] 娃 ‘Baby’ (surname *lǐ* ‘plum’; surname and given name together mean ‘Plum Baby’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 404.2);
- *tóng* 童 ‘child’; ‘young’, 1 name, i.e.: [Li] Zhentong [李] 真童 ‘Sincere Child’, ‘[Small] Sincere’ (*zhēn* ‘true’; ‘sincere’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 414.3).

(3) Names with Terms of Relationship or Rank

Typical general terms for women, terms of female relationship, self-reference, address or rank are mostly those written in Chinese characters having the radical *nǚ* 女 ‘woman’ – the marker of femininity and female names. Among the names of songsong girls figuring in the research material there are altogether 12 names with the terms (12.63%):

- *niáng* 娘 [孃] ‘woman’; ‘mother’; ‘mistress’; ‘wife’; ‘lady’; ‘form of address to an elderly married woman’, 7 names, e.g.: [Wang] Daniang [王] 大娘 ‘Great Woman’ (*dà* ‘big’; ‘great’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: d3.2);
- *jiě* 姐 ‘elder sister’; ‘sister’; ‘young woman’, 1 name, i.e.: Chongjie 寵姐 ‘Favoured Sister’ (*chǒng* ‘to bestow favour on’; ‘to honour’, Tang Dynasty (ZRD: d24.3);
- *jī* 姬 ‘concubine’; ‘professional female singer or dancer’; ‘complimentary term for women’; ‘lady’, 1 name, i.e.: [Cao] Wenji [曹] 文姬 ‘Talented Lady’ (*wén* ‘literary talent’; ‘knowledge’; ‘gentleness’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 984.4).

There are also other terms of relationship or rank which sometimes occur in names of women, however, they are considered as typical for male names:

- *gē* 哥 ‘elder brother’; ‘brother’; ‘term of endearment’, 1 name, i.e.: [Li] Ge [李] 哥 ‘Brother’ (surname *lǐ* ‘plum’; surname and given name mean ‘Plum Brother’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 411.3);
- *qīng* 卿 ‘minister’; ‘term of endearment’, 1 name, i.e.: [Ma] Suqing [馬] 素卿, ‘Pure Minister’ (*sù* ‘white’; ‘pure’) Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 867.1).

(4) Names with Lexemes Denoting Personal Ornaments

Names consisting of terms for personal ornaments are generally considered as female-specific. However, the lexical items denoting jewels, especially various kinds of jade, are not solely found in the names of women. Jewels also function as symbols of moral or aesthetic qualities. Among the names there are altogether 14 names with the terms (14.73%). These are:

- yù 玉 ‘jade’; ‘pure’; ‘moral excellence’, 9 names, e.g.: [Qin] Yulian [秦] 玉蓮 ‘Jade Lotus’ (*lián* ‘lotus’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 827.1);
- yuàn 瑗 ‘large ring of fine jade’, 1 name, i.e.: [Wu] Yuan [吳] 瑗 ‘Jade’, Qing Dynasty (ZRD: a7.2);
- jué 珏 ‘two pieces of jade joined together’, 1 name, i.e.: [Fan] Jue [范] 珏 ‘Jade’, Ming Dynasty (ZRD: 709.4);
- qióng 瓊 ‘fine jade’; ‘good’, 1 name, i.e.: [Nie] Shengqiong [聶] 勝瓊, ‘Defeating Jade’, ‘Superior Jade’ (*shèng* ‘to win’, ‘to defeat’; ‘to be superior to’), Song Dynasty (ZRD: 1722.4);
- zhū 珠 ‘pearl’; ‘valuable’, 2 names, e.g.: Zhenzhu 真珠 ‘True Pearl’ (*zhēn* ‘true’; ‘sincere’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 821.3).

(5) Names with Lexemes Denoting Colours

Given names with lexemes denoting colours are generally considered as revealing certain female aesthetic values. Many of the terms can also be treated as symbols of certain moral qualities. Among the names there are altogether 12 names with these terms (12.63%). They are:

- cǎi 彩 ‘colorful’; ‘ornamented’; ‘brilliant’, 1 name, i.e.: Caiyun 彩雲 ‘Colorful Cloud’ (*yún* ‘cloud’), Qing Dynasty (HFMC: 1081);
- cuì 翠 ‘emerald green’; ‘beautiful’, 1 name, i.e.: [Su] Cui [蘇] 翠 ‘Emerald Green’, Song Dynasty (ZRD: 1782.3);
- hóng 紅 ‘red’; ‘successful’; ‘beautiful’, 4 names, e.g.: Honglan 紅蘭 ‘Red Orchid’ (*lán* ‘orchid’; ‘subtle beauty or fragrance’), Qing Dynasty (ZRD: 679.2);
- qīng 青 ‘colour of nature’; ‘blue’; ‘green’; ‘black’; ‘luxuriant’, 1 name, i.e.: Qiaoqing 樵青 ‘Firewood Colour’ (*qiáo* ‘firewood’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 1585.2);
- sù 素 ‘white’; ‘plain’; ‘pure’, 4 names, e.g.: [Xue] Susu [薛] 素素 ‘[Small] White’, ‘[Small] Pure’, Ming Dynasty (ZRD: 1667.3);
- zǐ 紫 ‘purple’; ‘loyalty’, 1 name, i. e.: [Cui] Ziyun [崔] 紫雲 ‘Purple Cloud’ (*yún* ‘cloud’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 909.3).

(6) Names with Lexemes Reflecting Female Aesthetic Values

It is assumed that women love beauty, thus their names need to express their longing for beauty. In China many aesthetic terms also have moral connotations. There are altogether 6 names of singsong girls figuring in the research material with these terms (6.3%). The terms and names are as below:

- *xiù* 秀 ‘beautiful’; ‘delicate’, 4 names, e.g.: Tianranxiu 天然秀 ‘Heavenly Beautiful’ (*tiān* ‘the sky’; ‘the heavens’; ‘*rán* ‘like’; ‘suffix’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 39.2);
- *juān* 娟 ‘beautiful’; ‘graceful’; ‘elegant’, 1 name, i.e.: [Wu] Juanjuan [吳] 娟娟 ‘[Small] Beauty’, Ming Dynasty (ZRD: a7.2);
- *yán* 妍 ‘beautiful’; ‘fine’, 1 name, i.e.: [Yang] Yan [楊] 妍 ‘Beauty’, Qing Dynasty (ZRD: 1268.3).

(7) Names with Lexemes Denoting Fragrances

Perfumes or simply fragrances are generally associated with women, and in China it is considered proper and gender-specific to coin female names with the use of such terms. Among the analysed names there are altogether 4 names (4.21%) with the term *xiāng* 香 ‘fragrant’; ‘aromatic’; ‘perfume’; ‘flower’; ‘women’s things’; ‘woman’. Hui (2002: 354) notes that ‘when it is used in personal names, its main meaning is to denote females as having a fragrance of flowers and things from female apartments’, e.g.:

- [Fan] Xiangge [樊] 香歌 ‘Fragrant Song’ (*gē* ‘song’), Yuan Dynasty (ZRD: 1506.1).

(8) Names with Lexemes Denoting Dresses and Fabrics

In Chinese personal naming the use of terms for dresses and fabrics is considered as typical for female names. Among the names of singsong girls figuring in the research material there are altogether 3 names with the terms (3.15%). The terms and names are as below:

- *qǐ* 綺 ‘figured woven silk material’; ‘thin silk’; ‘beautiful’; ‘gorgeous’, 1 name, i.e.: [Zhou] Qisheng [周] 綺生 ‘Silk Born’ (*shēng* ‘to give birth’; ‘to be born’), Ming Dynasty (ZRD: 542.3);
- *sī* 絲 ‘silk’; ‘silks’; ‘thread-like thing’; ‘string’, 1 name, i.e.: Liusi 柳絲 ‘Willow Silk Threads’ (*liǔ* ‘willow’), Qing Dynasty (ZRD: 661.4);
- *xiāo* 緞 ‘raw silk’; ‘plain silk’; ‘silks’, 1 name, i.e.: Hongxiao 紅緞 ‘Red Silk’ (*hóng* ‘red’; ‘successful’), Tang Dynasty (ZRD: 679.2).

Conclusions

Singsong girls, the professional society ladies, were of literary, musical, political, and emotional importance in past China. They are also very important for onomastic studies on Chinese female names, as their names were known, used, and sometimes recorded, and could serve for later generations as a model of typical female names.

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