

Tabooed names in ancient China
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Family names are picked from a fairly restricted list that has been transmitted from ancient times. Personal names, on the other hand, can be chosen among the general lexicon and here one is completely free of his to choice. There is no special way to differentiate a name from a word. It is always possible to invent the name one likes for one's children. All sorts of qualities (human, moral, physical, intellectual, artistic, etc.,) are usually picked up to form a name, but deprecatory and thus humble terms like, for example, «Vilain, Ugly» (chou 丑) black-egg/ rotten-egg 黑蛋 exist as well as a kind of protection against ill fate.

This great liberty for names was traditionally subject to a special kind of taboo. Nowadays no one would ever think of calling his child Zedong 泽东. Veneration for emperor's personal names (as well as other sages) comes from ancient times and was known as emperors' personal names taboo *bihui* 避讳. It was governed by more or less strict rules that could engender death punishment if contravened.

I will present the different devices that were used to avoid writing taboo characters such as

- replacing the character by another one with a different pronunciation and a close if not a synonymous meaning,
 - skipping a character or leaving a blank space in the text,
 - skipping one stroke or two in the graph (which would be limited to writing)
- and I will illustrate them with historical examples taken from Chen Yuan (2004).

This religious and social-political phenomenon is quite interesting for the anthropology of writing in China. It is well attested since late Zhou times, and seems to have had an impact on texts (at a more or less systematic degree) from the 3rd century BC on. As it says in the *Book of rites* «One should avoid the deceased father's name once the ceremony of wailing is over» (*Liji*, Quli A : 1951 a), it probably first concerned the enunciation of the name of the deceased father before it applied to written words, and lead to possible confusion and misunderstandings via the deformation of graphs.

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