

Discrimination in Chinese Women's Names: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract. This paper explores the issue of gender discrimination in Chinese female names, and conducts a comprehensive analysis from historical evolution and contemporary manifestation. The research background is based on the cultural importance of Chinese names, which reflect family history, social values, and gender roles. The research topic focuses on gender norms and discrimination in female names, and how these factors are perceived and accepted in modern society. Through the analysis of historical and cultural perspectives, this paper adopts the research methods of literature review and theoretical analysis to fill the current research gap. The results show that despite the increasing trend of gender neutrality, gender discrimination is still deeply rooted in some aspects. Also, although modern female names have begun to diversify and reflect richer social values, traditional concepts and cultural traditions still have a profound impact on female naming practices. The conclusions of the study emphasize how gender discrimination is reflected and transmitted in cultural inheritance, and how this phenomenon is challenged and changed in contemporary society. This paper not only provides a new perspective for understanding the status of Chinese women in society and culture, but also contributes new empirical data and theoretical analysis to the field of gender studies. By revealing gender bias in names, this paper highlights the importance of continued attention to gender equality and provides support for building a more equal and inclusive society.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, name culture, feminism.

1. Introduction

Chinese names carry deep cultural significance and often reflect family history, social values, and gender roles. Throughout Chinese history, women's naming practices have been particularly affected by gender norms and discrimination. These influences are reflected not only in traditional naming practices, but also in the perception and acceptance of women's names in modern society. Duan and Wang analyzed the language and culture of ancient Chinese Han female names and pointed out that female names in feudal society were often related to family background and status, while modern names are more diverse and personalized, reflecting changes in gender roles and social expectations [1]. Zhao studied the cultural meanings of pre-Qin female names and found that they were mostly related to virtue and family roles, lacking emphasis on personal achievements, indicating that ancient women were expected to bear mainly family and moral responsibilities [2]. Wang and Huang explored the impact of gendered names on occupation and social status and found that names with obvious gender characteristics may lead to discrimination in the workplace and social interactions [3]. Although their discussion reveals that sexism in women's names affects contemporary women's professional and social life, there is a lack of comprehensive research that traces the historical evolution and contemporary relevance of this issue in Chinese society. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by examining the historical evolution of gender discrimination in Chinese women's names and its contemporary manifestations, with the goal of understanding the cultural and social implications of such discrimination. This study will firstly explore the social implications of names, and then analyze historical evolution of women's names from the culture perspective. Finally, this paper will conclude with the gender discrimination in contemporary women's names, with its impact on women's social status, and propose corresponding reflections and challenges.

2. The Social Implications of Names

2.1. The Connection Between Name and Personal Identity

The connection between names and personal identity is a topic which be concern about various field. Therefore, there has also been study of names, called nameology. The name of a person is closely linked to their individual value, self-esteem and self-perception. That to say, name take part in shaping a person's identity.

From the perspective of Linguistic, language is an important carrier of culture and identity [4]. It is also an indispensable way through which individuals express themselves to the outside world. Everyone in society is made up of multiple identities, and the identities used are different in different scenarios. For example, at home, school, or work. However, there is no doubt that names will be the first choice for people to express their identity in any situation [4]. In addition, some of people's identities possibly imposed on themselves by the social environment, and they may not have a sense of these identity. However, it is rare that a person's name is not recognized. As an explicit personal symbol, a name has an important impact on an individual's identity and gender identity. Specifically, a name not only reflects an individual's cultural background, but may also affect others' perception of their gender, race, and social status. Therefore, understanding the role of names in identity formation can help us explore in more depth how individuals position themselves in society and the challenges they face. In addition, the name wound have a profound impact on the personality and behavior of self. For example, women with more feminine names are more likely to choose traditional female occupations, such as teaching and nursing. Men with more masculine names may be more in line with the expectations of men in social traditions, such as defending the country.

2.2. The Relationship Between Name and Social Status

In the context of Chinese culture, names are not merely labels, but they often carry significant social connotations and implications for social status.

First, for legal and political purposes, the full name helps a person to obtain social identity [5]. Having a name is having an identity. Only under legal circumstances can a person obtain the rights of a free person in society. On this basis, people can continue to pursue power and status. Therefore, a name is not only a personal identifier, it also contains the individual's social attributes, reflecting the individual's cultural background, gender identity and social relations. From the previous section on names and self-knowledge, this essay concludes that people's names will affect their future development, so it can be considered that names are not only parents' expectations for their children's future, but also the first step for people to shape their future status from birth, and the first step to promote the integration of individuals and society [5]. Under the system of Chinese culture, names have meanings that are consistent with social values, such as "Yao Zu" and "Xing Bang". Such a name reflects respect for traditional culture, shows personal compliance with social expectations, and can enhance one's social status in the community. Because a name is someone else's first impression of an individual, others will subconsciously assume that your personality is what your name means, although sometimes it's not.

Moreover, from the historical records, the naming habits of ancient China are closely related to family background and social class. When families with status name their children, they will use unique naming methods to emphasize their equal status. For example, the names of members come from royal family may contain auspicious characters, and it is forbidden for anyone to use the words in the emperor's name as a name. These ways seem to reflect their high status in society.

In conclusion, names in Chinese culture play a significant role in shaping social hierarchies and perceptions of social status.

2.3. The Interaction Between Name and Cultural Tradition

The interaction between name and cultural tradition in the context of women's names is a complex and multifaceted area of study. Names reflect cultural values and norms and culture affect named means.

One aspect of this interaction is the use of traditional naming conventions. In Chinese culture, names are generally rooted in traditional culture and customs and have profound symbolic significance. For example, under the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese people usually hope that their descendants can possess the virtues of "Ren(benevolence), Yi(righteousness), Li(propriety), Zhi(wisdom) and Xin(faith)", so they place this expectation in their descendant's name. For example, Xue Rengui, a general of the Tang Dynasty, Zhao Guangyi, an emperor of the Song Dynasty, and Wang Shouren, a thinker of the Ming Dynasty [6]. In addition, Chinese names have always adopted the structure of surname before name, which is influenced by patriarchal ideas. Moreover, influenced by the patriarchal concept, Chinese people attach great importance to blood ties and family culture, so in many large Chinese families, children will have the same character in their names, such as "Song Qingling, Song Ailing", which is benefit to close family relation. This method embodies the continuous blood relationship, which in turn maintains cultural traditions.

From the perspective of historical development, the prosperity of national culture and the liberation of people's ideas led to the change of naming habits. In Chinese names, the more the number of characters, the more the meaning it contains. Before the Pre-Qin Dynasty, influenced by the feudal ethical code of the Zhou Dynasty, the combination of surname and two characters was regarded as a "cheap name" [6]. Therefore, they usually take one character such as "Kong Qiu, Ji Fa, Shang Yang". But after the Tang Dynasty, with the development of the national economy and the improvement of people's living standards, the thoughts gradually become active. A person's name with a surname plus one character cannot fully express the expectations and blessings for his descendants, so the combination of a person's name with a surname plus two characters has become the first choice for naming [6].

It can be said that the names of people in different times can reflect the development of social culture in that era.

3. Historical Evolution of Women's Names Culture

3.1. Gender inequality in Family Upbringing as Shown in Women's Names

Chinese people's mentality is often influenced by the idea of "male superiority and female inferiority" advocated by Confucianism [2]. This leads to unequal treatment and opportunities for girls in family upbringing. This sex prejudice is evident in the process of naming children in the family. In Chinese cultural tradition, parents believe that only sons can support them, which is the Chinese idiom "bring up sons to support parents in their old age", which impacts their attitude towards raising daughters. As a result, they tend to shift the balance of educational investment towards sons in the process of raising children [2]. And daughters' names usually carry meanings that are not ambitious, requiring them only to conform to women's moral standards, such as "De(virtue), Yan(speech), Rong(appearance) and Gong(needlework)" on [7]. Gender bias within traditional Chinese families is often expressed through their mothers. According to a survey conducted in 1994 in rural China, nearly one in five mothers agreed with the statement: "It is no use sending girls to school because they will get married and leave home and will no longer be part of the family. Girls will belong to other families" [8]. Because the main purpose of raising girls in traditional families was to marry them off. Therefore, women's names often use symbols of beauty, gentleness or fragility, emphasizing that family and society expect women to be obedient. This naming practice perpetuates the idea that women are subordinate to men [2].

The preference for sons and the devaluation of daughters' potential in both family and societal contexts contributed to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination.

3.2. Characteristics of female names in ancient and modern China

The characteristics of female names in ancient and modern China reflect the cultural and societal norms prevalent during different time periods.

In feudal China, A woman's name is made up of parts such as where her original family is located, or her birth order at her original family [9]. This method of naming is to make it easier to see their native place, family and marital status, which is more like a label on women [9]. This naming convention, resembling that of inanimate objects, emphasizes the subordinate position of women in society. And women's names are constantly changing, because the men they are attached to are sometimes not the same. After a woman gets married, her name also becomes a fixed format of "husband's surname and father's surnames" [1]. They are not given independent personality and opportunities for self-expression, but are directly defined.

In modern times, with the development of the era and the progress of society, women's names, like men's, adopt the format of "themselves surnames", in the late 19th to early 20th century [10]. Women's names began to diversify, reflecting richer social values. Also because of the rise of women's power, more and more people use characters that can express independence, self-reliance and ambition as names. For example, "Lin Huiyin", "Huiyin" mean virtue and reputation. The characteristics of female names in ancient and modern China reflect the cultural and societal norms prevalent during different time periods.

3.3. Trends in the Development of Contemporary Women's Names

In the contemporary era, the development of women's names has witnessed several significant trends that directly reflect the changing societal attitudes and cultural values towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

The first significant trend is that modern names have broken through the characters of "Ji, Jiang, Zhen and Rao", which are used to describe the characteristics of women's pretty, dazzling, elegance and beauty. Most of these characters are deliberately expressing women's appreciation [7]. Furthermore, there are characters with the "female" radical, which, while containing some meaning, primarily serve to denote the physiological differences between females and males [7], ultimately highlighting gender distinctions. Nowadays, parents often use neutral or masculine names. This is to place parents' expectations on their daughters, and it is also a rejection of the traditional concept of gender. Chinese women's names have also been influenced by national politics in a specific historical period. For example, in the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, in the 1950s, China declared itself to the world with a new and unprecedented appearance. During this period, "Hua", "Ying" and other characters that can represent the revitalization of the country have a high frequency of appearance [9]. Contemporary females are being liberalized in their naming practices, and their parents may also use Western transliterations of their names in pursuit of unique names. For example, the Chinese name "Zhang Kaiwen" comes from the transliteration of the English name "Kevin".

In conclusion, the trends observed in the development of contemporary women's names reflect society's evolving attitudes towards gender, individuality, cultural heritage, popular culture, and the recognition of name bias and discrimination.

4. Gender Discrimination in Contemporary Women's Names

4.1. Female name stereotypes

Female name stereotypes refer to preconceived notions and expectations associated with specific names assigned to women. These stereotypes often reflect societal beliefs and norms surrounding gender roles and expectations.

Individuals tend to form judgments and expectations about individuals based on their names. These judgments can have significant effects on women's opportunities, career prospects, and social

interactions. Many employers tend to form an impression of quiet gentleness when they come across female names containing characters such as "Rou(gentle), Tian(sweet), Wen(warm)," etc. However, this impression does not fit for their requirement for job applicants to be efficient and decisive. Coupled with the possible preconception that women's work capabilities and efficiency are lower than men's, they may subconsciously underestimate the abilities of female job seekers. It is quite evident that gender pay disparity is prevalent in many societies when it comes to salary, highlighting the discrimination against female workers [11].

The perpetuation of female name stereotypes can be attributed to a complex interplay of cultural and societal factors. Traditional Chinese thinking generally holds that "men take care of the outside and women take care of the inside". Women are expected to be more responsible for the family affairs, while men are expected to work and earn money [2]. Societal attitudes towards femininity, which often emphasize nurturing and domestic roles for women, contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes associated with certain names.

In conclusion, female name stereotypes are a manifestation of societal expectations surrounding gender roles. These stereotypes have significant implications for women's opportunities. Addressing and challenging these stereotypes is crucial for promoting gender equality and creating a more inclusive and equal society.

4.2. Impact of Names on Gender Discrimination

Despite significant progress and development in naming girls in contemporary society, there are still many females' names that directly reflect gender discrimination, such as Zhaodi. When these two characters are combined, the meaning is to bring a younger brother. Parents often give their daughters such names because they really want a son. Therefore, they express their desire for a son through their daughter's name. This way of expressing expectations, although it also expresses expectations for the daughter, is not an expectation for her to have a good development. It simply treats her as a tool, a tool to bring a boy to the family. Of course, there are not only names with obvious meanings that discriminate against women. Some females' names may sound very nice, but upon careful review of historical or traditional literature, it can be found that their meanings still pertain to the prosperity of male members of the family. They completely ignore the feelings of self-worth of women.

4.3. Contemporary feminism's reflection on name culture and the challenges they encountered

One of the main challenges that contemporary feminism encounters in challenging discriminatory name practices is the deep-rooted nature of cultural traditions. According to contemporary Chinese surname customs, married women are allowed to retain their own surnames. Therefore, from a legal standpoint, children can inherit their surnames from both parents, but typically, the father's surname is the one that is inherited [3]. This is due to deeply rooted cultural traditions. Of course, the one-child policy has disrupted the common practice of children inheriting their father's surname. There are increasingly more children inheriting their mother's surname as only children, which, on the surface, appears to challenge patriarchal society. However, this approach perpetuates a form of covert patriarchy [12]. Due to the impact of the one-child policy, if a child's maternal grandfather has only one daughter, he may still believe that his lineage and surname need to be passed down, thus requiring his grandson to inherit the daughter's surname, which is essentially the grandfather's surname. This example illustrates the challenges that feminism faces in the realm of surnames.

To address these challenges, contemporary feminism advocates for greater awareness and education surrounding the implications of discriminatory naming practices. They emphasize the importance of giving individuals the freedom to choose and redefine their names, thereby empowering women to break free from traditional norms and fostering a more egalitarian society. Many women have changed their names, such as "Zhao Di", which are full of patriarchal ideas, to names they have carefully chosen to help them have a better future, so that their names can serve them instead of promoting gender discrimination in their families. This behavior is not only a protection of personal dignity, but also a challenge to traditional gender roles and patriarchal social

structures. Moreover, the process of changing names itself is an opportunity for dialogue and reflection. When choosing a new name, women often think deeply about the values and beliefs they want to convey. This self-reflection allows them to more clearly recognize their rights and values. In this way, women not only achieve self-empowerment at the personal level, but also promote discussions and recognition of gender equality on a larger scale.

5. Conclusion

This paper reveals how gender discrimination is reflected and transmitted in cultural heritage by deeply analyzing the historical evolution and contemporary manifestations of Chinese female names. From the stereotyped expectations of female roles in ancient society to the gradual recognition of gender equality in modern society, the changes in female names reflect a major shift in social values. The study shows that despite the increasing trend of gender neutrality, gender discrimination is still deeply rooted in some aspects, such as gender role expectations conveyed through names and gender stereotypes in market performance. This study not only provides a new perspective for understanding the status of Chinese women in society and culture, but also contributes new empirical data and theoretical analysis to the field of gender studies. By revealing gender bias in names, this paper emphasizes the importance of continued attention to gender equality and challenging traditional gender norms. In addition, the results provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and social activists in promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination. Due to time constraints, this paper only explores the situation within the Chinese model article, and the sample size is not sufficient. Therefore, future research can further explore the impact of globalization and digitalization on China's traditional name culture and how these changes affect the gender identity and social roles of the younger generation. In addition, more in-depth comparative studies of Chinese female names in different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds could be conducted to reveal broader social and cultural dynamics. As Chinese society continues to change, research on female names will need to be continuously updated to reflect new social phenomena and trends. Through these efforts, we can better understand how sexism is manifested in culture and provide support for building a more equal and inclusive society.

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