

Generation Names in China: Past, Present, and Future

Li Zhonghua

Ocean University of Qingdao

and

Edwin D. Lawson

State University of New York College at Fredonia

Traditional Chinese names are composed of three parts: the family name, a generation name, and a given name. The male generation name marks the position of the bearer in the sequence of generations within a clan. Until the middle of the 20th century, most Chinese men used their generation names regularly. Since then the use of generation names has been greatly reduced by social and cultural change in China, especially by urbanization, the breaking of traditional ties to the land, the perceived feudal aspect of generation names, and the influence of the policies of Mao Zedong. We report on the incidence of generation names in four time periods from 1940-1983. The major finding is that generation names decreased significantly until the 1960s; since 1976 their use has increased, but not to pre-1950 levels.

Introduction

Generation names appear to be unique to China. A generation name is that part of a personal name which indicates the generation position of its bearer in the family hierarchy. In a typical Chinese name the generation name usually follows the family name and precedes the given name, although it may occasionally appear after the given name. All of a male's male first cousins (from his father's side) would bear the same generation name.

For females the generation name (if there was one) was applied less formally. Females might not have a generation name at all; they might have the same generation name as their brothers; or they might have a generation name different than that of their brothers but shared with their sisters.

Names 50.3 (September 2002):163-172

ISSN:0027-7738

© 2002 by The American Name Society

164 Names 50.3 (September 2002)

Traditionally, when a male child was born, his father would take the appropriate generation name from the chain of generation names already determined by the ancestors and then choose another name as the baby's given name. For instance, in the name *Mao Zedong*, *Mao* is the family name, *Ze* is the generation name and *Dong* is the personal or given name. The name of Mao Zedong's grandfather was Mao Enpu and his father's name was Mao Yichang. The generation names are *En*, *Yi*, and *Ze*, respectively, belonging to and indicating the 12th, 13th, and 14th generations of the Mao clan in Shaoshan, Hunan Province, Mao Zedong's birthplace.

The generation names of the Maos of Shaoshan are represented in a poem. The generation name *Ze* stands as the fourteenth character of the poem; thus it was given automatically to male members of the fourteenth generation since the chain of generation names was created in 1737. Even though Mao Zedong also called himself Runzhi, Yongzhi, Ziren, Mao Shishan, and Li Desheng, names he used for different reasons or for different periods of time, *Zedong*, with the generation name, never changed and he used it all his life (Quangen Wang 2000, 119).

The custom of using generation names is known as *Pai-hang*, literally 'ranking in rows', the purpose of which, according to Louie (1998), is

to identify men according to generation in their family and clan so as to determine their relationship to one another. As such, it reveals horizontal and vertical dimensions of a family and clan The generation name in the names of siblings represents the horizontal *Pai-hang* and when all the generation names for a clan are listed together, this depicts the vertical *Pai-hang*. Each generation therefore must be distinguished by a different generation name. (52-53)

Louie is correct in her use of the word *men* since generation names were intended primarily for males, as noted earlier.

Background

Generation names have a long history in China. Typical generation names began toward the end of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Liu Biao, who lived toward the end of the Han Dynasty, had two sons, Liu Qi (刘琦) and Liu Cong (刘琮). The given name of each son contains the same Chinese character component (王), which means 'king'. During the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-265), generation names

became more common and more stylized. The famous marshal Sima Zhongda had seven brothers and the eight boys were named Sima Boda, Sima Zhongda, Sima Shuda, Sima Jida, Sima Xianda, Sima Huida, Sima Yada, and Sima Youda. The eight names all share the Chinese morpheme *dá*, meaning 'eminence, understanding'.

Over time, especially during the period known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), generation names began to enter the general naming system and became quite popular, especially in royal and upper class families. Emperor Song Wudi had seven sons, named Yifu, Yilong, Yizhen, Yikang, Yigong, Yixuan, and Yiji, whose generation name, Yi (义), means 'justice, righteousness'. It was also given to the sons of Song Wudi's brothers, who belonged to the same generation.

Generation names increased in popularity, and it was also at this time that the father or the elders of the family or clan determined the generation name when a son was born, marking the generation name as a formal part of the naming system.

The use and practices regarding generation names developed further and became more formalized during the rule of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Generation names were no longer determined by the father and family elders when a child was born. Instead, a sequence or chain of names and the Chinese characters used to represent them had already been chosen and fixed by the ancestors, perhaps generations before. When a son was born, his father would now go directly to the predetermined chain of generation names and choose the one following his own for the boy's generation name. The sequence of generation names was set for many generations to come. When the last name on the list was reached the elders of the clan would meet and decide whether to create a new list or to recycle through the existing list. In either of these cases, if a member of a family or a clan of the same family name knows the name of another member of the family or clan that has the same family name, he will know his relation to that person in terms of generation.

An important aesthetic aspect of generation names was introduced in the 10th century, between the end of the the Tang Dynasty in 907 and the beginning of the Song Dynasty in 960, when poems were composed as ways of codifying generation names and as aids in remembering the string of generation names. The Chinese characters representing the chain of generation names formed a poem which usually contained praise for the ancestors and hope for the continuation of the family and

166 Names 50.3 (September 2002)

for its prosperity in the future. This aspect of generation names takes separate and otherwise unrelated characters and creates a structure both aesthetic and functional. The generation poem is an important mark of maturity for generation names.

The generation names of Mao Zedong's family again provide an example. The chain of generation names of Mao's family was determined in 1737 and when the generation names are combined in their proper order a poem appears, stylized with five characters to a line. In Pinyin, the romanization system for written Chinese, Mao's generation poem reads

Li xian rong chao shi,
Wen fang yun ji xiang.
Zu en yi ze yuan,
Shi dai yong cheng chang.

In 1881, four lines were added:

Xiao you chuan jia ben,
Zhong liang zhen guo guang.
Qi yuan dun sheng xue,
Feng ya lie ming zhang.

A rough translation is:

Celebrity and eminence glorify government officials,
And knowledge and education extend the good luck of the state.
There is no end to the bounties of ancestral kindness,
On which prosperity keeps for following generations.
Filial piety and benevolence preserve the family,
And faithfulness and loyalty invigorate the nation.
Encouragement be given in the beginning for imperial honor,
And noble elegance and refinement exalt every generation.

The 40 characters in the poem would provide the generation name for each of the following 40 generations.

Generation Names Today

Some people, including Caiyan Liu, feel that generation names will "lose [their] dominance in naming practice as time goes on" (1999, 59) and that they will shortly die out. Many modern Chinese, especially younger people, have names which consist of only two parts, the family

name and a given name, rather than the traditional three parts. Anecdotally at least the use of generation names seems to be decreasing, a trend which will perhaps lead to the loss of generation names entirely. We chose to test this notion by investigating recent and current use of generation names. We collected and analyzed generation names in four time periods: the pre-Mao period (from 1940 to 1949, when Mao came to power with the founding of the People's Republic of China), the early Mao period (1950 to 1959), the later Mao period (1960-1976), and the Post-Mao period (1977-1983).

We wanted to know if the use of generation names had indeed declined from the pre-Mao to the Mao periods, and if, with the passing of Mao in 1976 and the waning of his influence on Chinese society, generation names had seen a resurgence. We also wanted to know the status of what we chose to call "latent" generation names; that is, generation names whose bearers had chosen, for whatever reasons, not to use publicly.

Method

Data for this study were collected in September and October of 2001 from students at the Ocean University of Qingdao, China and from citizens of Qingdao who filled out questionnaires asking about their names and the names of their fathers. Specifically, they were asked their full name, their generation name, and their year of birth. The students were also asked their father's full name, their father's generation name, and their father's year of birth. Questionnaires were returned by 493 men and 151 women. Of the males, there were 173 regular, part-time, and graduate students, 95 fathers of students, and 58 community members. (The responses of the fathers and the community members were pooled.) Of the women, there were 123 regular, part-time, and graduate students, and 28 community members.

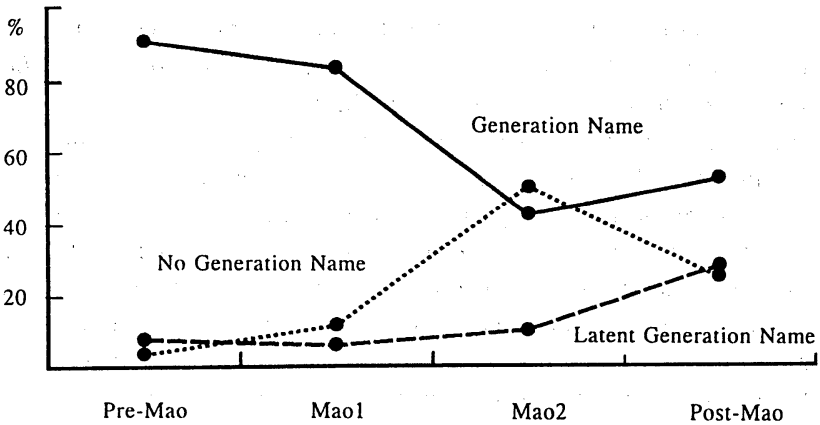
Results

Table 1 and figure 1 show the generation names given to males in each of the four time periods. The second Mao period (1960-1976), when Mao's power and influence was at its height, marks a watershed in the use of generation names. By about 1960 there had been a significant dropoff in the number of males with generation names (χ^2 at least $< .01$), while in the post-Mao years there has been a resurgence of generation names (χ^2 at least $< .05$). Latent generation names, which were rarely found before 1960, more than doubled after 1976 ($\chi^2 < .01$).

Table 1: Generation Names - Males.

Generation Name	Pre-Mao (1940-1949)		Mao 1 (1950-1959)		Mao 2 (1960-1976)		Post-Mao (1977-1983)		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Generation Name	66	90.4	139	82.3	42	41.2	79	53.0	326
No Generation Name	2	2.7	20	11.8	50	49.0	33	22.1	105
Latent Generation Name	5	6.8	10	5.9	10	9.8	33	24.8	62
Total	73		169		102		149		493

Figure 1. Generation Names in Four Time Periods



Female Generation Names

Generation names for women during the crucial time periods are shown in table 2. Because the use of generation names for women has been sporadic over the years and was never as fully integrated into the system of naming females as it was for males, we are reluctant to analyze these results in detail. We would point out, however, that the only relationship which rises to statistical significance ($\chi^2 < .05$) is the decrease in the number of women *without* generation names from the second Mao period to post-Mao. Curiously, there was a significant corresponding increase in the number of women *with* generation names. While there was a tendency for generation names to increase at this time, it was not statistically significant. This is a statistical anomaly that we are unable to explain at the present time.

Table 2. Generation Names - Females

	Mao 2 (1960-1976)		Post-Mao (1977-1983)		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Generation Name	6	13.9	26	24.1	32
No Generation Name	22	51.2	34	31.5	56
Latent Generation Name	15	34.9	48	44.4	63
Total	43		108		151

Discussion

Our original interest was whether or not traditional generation names in China had been affected by the regime established by Mao Zedong in 1949. It is quite clear from the evidence presented in table 1 and figure 1 that a significant decline in the use of generation names had begun before Mao but accelerated greatly during the Mao years. We attribute this decline in large part to Mao's social and economic policies which transformed traditional Chinese life in several fundamental ways. We also note that the trend toward the loss of generation names has apparently reversed since the end of the Mao era and generation names seem to be more acceptable than they once were; they may again become a regular part of the naming process. It must be pointed out, however, that generation names, while they have been increasing, have not yet recovered to their pre-Mao levels.

We believe there were four major factors which contributed to the decline in generation names up to and perhaps including the 1960s: urbanization, the breaking of traditional ties to the land and the local community, the feudal aspect of generation names, and the policies of Mao Zedong.

The big cities attracted migrants from many different parts of China, who, now far from their homes and far from their ancestors, were no longer part of the extended family and the hierarchies of clan relationships which encouraged generation names.

Related to urbanization is the breakup of the traditional rural economy and the ties of the people to the land. Family farming tends to concentrate members of a family or clan in one village or area, with a resulting strengthening of family relationships and an acute awareness of genealogical generations since respect for ancestors was such an important aspect of rural Chinese life. Urbanization and change in the rural way of life contribute to the loss of generation names because, in the words of Lu and Millward, they "blunt" the sense of clans (1989, 275), and it was just this sense of clans which gave rise to generation names originally.

Generation names may also be seen as unwelcome reminders of an earlier feudal and patriarchal society, where people "knew their place," literally and figuratively. As a reaction, many intellectuals and those

especially in the larger towns and cities began to give their children two names rather than three, a family name and a personal name.

The final, and perhaps the most important reason for the decline of generation names was the effect of Mao Zedong, and especially the Cultural Revolution of 1967 to 1976, which affected all parts of Chinese society. During the Cultural Revolution many (especially younger) people dropped their generation names and took for themselves such politically motivated names as *Weidong* 'protect Mao Zedong', *Hongwei* 'Red Guard', and *Xiangdang* 'be loyal to the (Communist) Party'.

Conclusion

In 1989 Lu and Millward remarked on the fact that many families in China no longer used generation names (275). However, the increase in generation names which we noted since the end of the direct influence of Mao makes it premature to conclude that generation names are on their way to extinction. The dramatic decrease in the use of generation names was brought about in part by political events in China, especially the Cultural Revolution. The subsequent rise in their use after that event and following the death of Mao may be related to a return of interest in, and celebration of, traditional Chinese culture.

Generation names also serve a practical purpose in China since they reduce the duplication of names. The two name pattern, consisting of family name and personal name, produces a great many identical names which could be avoided if a third name (even if it were not a classic generation name) were to become common.

It is of course impossible to predict the future of generation names in China, but it is quite clear, as Daliang Wang (2001, 74) puts it, that the generation name "is exhibiting new vigor."

Note

We wish to express our appreciation to colleagues Li Ling, Mao Yanyang, Xin Haiyan, and Xu Zhongchuan of the Department of English, Ocean University of Qingdao, for their assistance with the data collection; to Richard F. Sheil, Professor Emeritus of Music, State University of New York College at Fredonia, for assistance in the statistical analysis; and to Professor Xu Xuanliang of the Children's Palace of Qingdao, and Professor Yang Zijian of the Department of English, Ocean University of Qingdao, for assistance in the interpretation of the generation poem of the Mao family.

References

- Liu, Caiyan. 1999. *Qimingxue* [On naming]. Beijing: Chengshi.
- Louie, Emma Woo. 1998. *Chinese American Names*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Lu, Zhongti, and Celia Millward. 1989 "Chinese Given Names Since the Cultural Revolution." *Names* 37: 265-280.
- Wang, Daliang. 2001. *Xingming Tanyuan yu Quming Yishu* [Origins of Surnames and the Art of Naming]. Beijing: Qixiang.
- Wang, Quangen. 2000. *Zhongguo Renming Wenhua* [The Culture of Chinese Names]. Beijing: Tuanjie.