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Young Chinese Women's Reasons for Changing their Given Names: An Online Investigation

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Abstract

The implementation of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China in 2021 greatly facilitated the legal procedure for changing one's name. The current study collected 334 cases of young Chinese women's given name changes from January to June 2022 on the Xiaohongshu app, a lifestyle platform that inspires people to discover and connect with a range of diverse lifestyles. After collecting the 334 former and 334 present names of the Chinese women included in this research, the reasons the respondents gave for changing their given names were examined. These reasons included following superstition, correcting registration mistakes, and clarifying gender confusion. The decisions to adopt new names were found to have been motivated by several different reasons. These motivations are explained in detail. As will be shown, the self-renaming practices discovered in this study demonstrate how modern Chinese women can use their personal names to reflect their personal identity. The findings of this study increase our collective understanding of women's efforts to express their self-awareness through name change.

Keywords: given names, name changing, self-renaming, women, personal names, Chinese, autonymy

Introduction

Past Studies on Name Changing

Chinese people traditionally believe that they should never alter their names under any circumstance. However, not everyone is satisfied with their name. Some Chinese people therefore decide to change their names because "name changes may assist a person in shedding an old, unwanted identity" and "may express the person's new sense of identity" (Alford 1988, 158). There are many identity features that may impact a woman's sense of self and the names she prefers to identify herself. These include her marital status, her sexuality, her cultural heritage, and her nationality.

Numerous studies have focused on marital name changes among women in particular countries and regions. These studies mainly discuss women's decisions over whether to change their surnames to that of their spouses, to retain their birth names, or combine their birth and marital names. These investigations have identified the importance of cultural, regional, and age factors in this decision-making (Scheuble & Johnson 2016; Kopelman et al. 2009; Hoffnung 2006; Stafford & Kline 1996; Foss & Edson 1989). Acording to this research, women's attitudes and surname practices often reflect their changing identities and sense of autonomy. Research on name changes involving people within the LGBTQ community has shown that many non-heterosexual couples are also confronted with decisions regarding their name choices and evolving identities (Leino 2014; Clarke et al. 2008; Suter & Oswald 2003).

These are not the only groups where questions over names and identity are pertinent. When immigrants enter a new country or settle in a foreign community, some change their names in response to environmental pressures (Drury & McCarthy 1980). For instance, in Sweden, it has been found that some immigrants with Middle Eastern backgrounds elect to alter their foreign-sounding surnames as a destigmatization strategy (Bursell 2012). Their surname change became a form of pragmatic assimilation.

Name choice can also be used to signify political positions. In post-apartheid South Africa, the rise of African nationalism has been shown to affect the names people prefer (de Klerk 2002). In a study published in 2004, de Klerk & Lagonikos found a decreasing number of speakers of African languages who elected to change their first names to English names. Sometimes, the motivation for a name-change has less to do with a national trend and more to do with personal prefence.

In their analysis of personal name changes amongst French respondents, Jacob and Horn (1998) found that the people were motivated to change name that they perceived as obscene, ridiculous, or foreign-sounding. Coulmont (2014), who also focused solely on French people's given-name changes, found that respondents altered their names for gendered, social mobility, and/or generational mobility.

Although this body of research has given us many important insights, in general, it has focused on surname changes, presumably because these changes "are much more common" than "voluntary changes of first names" (Aldrin 2016, 9). Therefore, more research is needed on women's voluntary changes to their first or given names. The same can be said of name-changing in Asia; and more specifically in China.

In comparison to other countries, the practices surrounding Chinese name changes has not yet been well addressed. There are many possible reasons for this fact. One reason may be related to the fact that changes women's surnames are not related to institutionalized marital policies. Another reason may be that Chinese given names are not strictly gendered. Yet another major reason may be the historical procedural difficulties in legally changing one's name.

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Chinese names and naming practices have transformed over the course of history. Since the Zhou Dynasty (1045–221 B.C.), newborns are traditionally given informal nicknames or childhood names at birth. Following this Chinese tradition, only once a person reached the age of fifteen, they would take a public or legal name (He 2012). When entering marriage, Chinese women adopt a new name with the following structure: husband's surname + her maiden surname + *shi* (氏, 'clan'). This name-change signified the married woman's affiliation to their husband (Duan & Wang 2002).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a new tradition was adopted. Newborns were to be officially named by their parents or relatives and these names were to be legally registered around birth. This practice eliminated the difference between childhood names and public names. Furthermore, the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China of 1950 granted both parties the right to retain their names upon marriage. As a result of this legislation, in China, both men and women have tended to carry their original names for their entire lifetime.

In recent years, this practice has begun to change. Chinese are now able to change their names more easily. This is directly associated with the passage of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China in 2020, which ensured an easier and faster official name-changing procedure.With this legal facilitation, changing one's name become more desirable.

In this study, "name changing" refers to a voluntary, autonomous legal name change initiated by a name bearer at any point of their life. This investigation excludes name changes which came as a result of change in marital status. With this focus, the present paper explores young Chinese women's reasons for changing their given names. It also examines how issues of identity may relate to the respondents' self-renaming decisions.

Chinese Women's Names

Before embarking on a discussion of young Chinese women's self-renaming, it is important to explain the basics of Chinese names. A Chinese name consists of two parts: a surname and a given name, in that order. Considering the Chinese language's monosyllabic nature, most surnames are monosyllabic morphemes written with one character (e.g., 李 *Li*, 赵 *Zhao*). In some rare cases, Chinese surnames are disyllabic morphemes written with two characters (e.g., 欧阳 *Ouyang*). Given names can be either monosyllabic or disyllabic, with one or two characters, respectively. Three-character given names are extremely rare. Thus, the following names of famous Chinese personalities are typical: 姚明 *Yao Ming* (a basketball player), 章子怡 *Zhang Ziyi* (an actress), 欧阳娜娜 *Ouyang Nana* (an actress). For historical and political reasons, Chinese names may be variously transcribed (Louie 2006). The present study adopted the Pinyin spelling system and views the given name as a single unit, with the initial letter capitalized. In the case of the given names *Ming* and *Ziyi*, the first is monosyllabic (明) and the second is disyllabic with two characters (子怡).

When naming a newborn, the surname is always derived from the father's side. However, given names are not a random combination. Take 花 *hua* 'flower' as an example. This character can be used as a one-character given name, or it could be represented by two-character given names like 小花 *Xiaohua* 'little flower', 春花 *Chunhua* 'spring flower', or 红花 *Honghua* 'red flower'. Sometimes, a two-character given name is not a word or a phrase. Like many Anglo-Saxon names, Chinese given names may be "dithemic" with two elements in a name.[1]

In terms of the semantic meaning, He (2012) divides Chinese women's given names into eight common categories: 1.) words suggesting femininity, usually with the female radical 女 (e.g., 娘 *niang* 'girl' and 姑 *gu* 'maiden'); 2.) flowers and birds (e.g., 春兰 *Chunlan* 'spring orchid' and 紫鸽 *Zige* 'purple dove'); 3.) items commonly found in a maiden's chamber (e.g., 霓裳 *Nishang* 'rainbow-colored clothes'); 4.) treasure and pearls (e.g., 玉簪 *Yuzan* 'jade hairpin'); 5.) rich colors (e.g., 筱红 *Xiaohong* 'bamboo + red'); 6.) tender feelings (e.g., 爱玲 *Ailing* 'love tinkling of jade'); 7.) beautiful sceneries (e.g., 彩云 *Caiyun* 'colorful cloud') ; and 8). virtues and morals (e.g., 丽洁 *Lijie* 'beautiful + pure' and 静娴 *Jingxian* 'quiet + elegant'). These traditional types of women's names are still widely used today, but the characters are increasingly considered outdated. In their place, other names that reflect changes in the nation have risen in popularity. Since 1949, for example, names like 建国 *Jianguo* 'construct the country', 建军 *Jianjun* 'construct the army', 爱华 *Aihua* 'love the nation' became quite common.[2] Table 1 shows the most frequent women names in China over six decades.

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Table 1: Most Frequently Used Women's Names from 1960 to 2019

Ranking	1960–1969	1970–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2019
1	秀英 *Xiuying* 'flourishing petal'	丽 *Li* 'beautiful'	静 *Jing* 'quiet'	静 *Jing* 'quiet'	婷 *Ting* 'pretty'	欣怡 *Xinyi* 'happy + pleasure'
2	桂英 *Guiying* 'osmanthus petal'	艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous'	丽 *Li* 'beautiful'	婷 *Ting* 'pretty'	欣怡 *Xinyi* 'happy + pleasure'	梓涵 *Zihan* 'catalpa ovata + cultivated'
3	英 *Ying* 'petal'	敏 *Min* 'smart'	娟 *Juan* 'graceful'	敏 *Min* 'smart'	婷婷 *Tingting* 'pretty pretty'	诗涵 *Shihan* 'poem + cultivated'
4	玉兰 *Yulan* 'jade + orchid'	芳 *Fang* 'fragrant'	艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous'	婷婷 *Tingting* 'pretty pretty'	静 *Jing* 'quiet'	梓萱 *Zixuan* 'catalpa ovata + day-lily'
5	萍 *Ping* 'duckweed'	静 *Jing* 'quiet'	燕 *Yan* 'swallow'	丹 *Dan* 'red'	悦 *Yue* 'pleasant'	子涵 *Zihan* 'son + cultivated'
6	秀兰 *Xiulan* 'flourishing orchid'	霞 *Xia* 'cloud'	敏 *Min* 'smart'	雪 *Xue* 'snow'	敏 *Min* 'smart'	紫涵 *Zihan* 'purple + well bred'
7	玉梅 *Yumei* 'jade + plum blossom'	红梅 *Hongmei* 'red plum blossom'	娜 *Na* 'elegant'	丽 *Li* 'beautiful'	佳怡 *Jiayi* 'fine + pleasure'	佳怡 *Jiayi* 'fine + pleasure'
8	红 *Hong* 'red'	燕 *Yan* 'swallow'	芳 *Fang* 'fragrant'	倩 *Qian* 'beautiful'	雪 *Xue* 'snow'	雨涵 *Yuhan* 'rain + cultivated'
9	丽 *Li* 'beautiful'	红 *Hong* 'red'	丹 *Dan* 'red'	艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous'	颖 *Ying* 'outstanding'	雨欣 *Yuxin* 'rain + happy'
10	敏 *Min* 'smart'	英 *Ying* 'petal'	玲 *Ling* 'tinkling of jade'	娟 *Juan* 'graceful'	雨欣 *Yuxin* 'rain + happy'	一诺 *Yinuo* 'a promise'

Source: The 2020 National Names Report

As shown in the table above, characters denoting women's appearance and pleasant qualities have been rather popular. The same is true of names taken from nature. Where the name structure is concerned, from 1970 to 1989, a general preference for one-character given names is apparent. For example, 丽 *Li* 'beautiful', 艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous', and 敏 *Min* 'smart' were the most popular names for this period. Thus, shorter names with straightforward meanings were fashionable at that time. Between 2010 and 2019, however, Chinese parents' choices shifted to two-character given names (e.g., 涵 *han* 'cultivated', 欣 *xin* 'happy',怡 *yi* 'pleasure', and 梓 *zi* 'catalpa ovata'). Although Chinese names are not gender-specific, characters and their associated semantic meaning can suggest a bearer's gender. Names chosen for females also tend to be longer than those chosen for males.

Table 2 presents data taken from the *2021 National Names Report* (Ministry of Public Security of the PRC 2022). It presents the most frequent single-character given names and their users' populations nationwide.

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Table 2: The Most Frequent One-Character Given Names and Their Population Numbers in China in 2021

Ranking	One-Character Given Name	The Population of the Name Holders (Millions)	The Population of Male Holders	The Population of Female Holders
1	伟 *Wei* 'great'	3.236	2.801	0.435
2	敏 *Min* 'smart'	2.770	0.481	2.289
3	静 *Jing* 'quiet'	2.732	0.175	2.557
4	杰 *Jie* 'hero'	2.574	2.033	0.541
5	丽 *Li* 'beautiful'	2.464	0.0007	2.457
6	勇 *Yong* 'brave'	2.398	2.344	0.054
7	涛 *Tao* 'large wave'	2.369	2.213	0.156
8	艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous'	2.227	0.0024	2.203
9	军 *Jun* 'army'	2.166	2.010	0.156
10	强 *Qiang* 'strong'	2.000	1.971	0.029

Source: The 2021 National Names Report

As demonstrated above, although the ten most frequent given names are held by both men and women, their respective ratios of male and female bearers differ. For instance,伟 *Wei* 'great', 杰 *Jie* 'hero', 勇 *Yong* 'brave', 涛 *Tao* 'large wave', 军 *Jun* 'army', and 强 *Qiang* 'strong' are far more commonly given to male children, whereas 敏 *Min* 'smart', 静 *Jing* 'quiet', 丽 *Li* 'beautiful', and 艳 *Yan* 'gorgeous' are far more frequently given to female children. Still, as Table 2 also shows, men with traditionally female names and women with male names are not unheard of. For example, 杰 *Jie* 'hero' was the name of 0.541 million women in 2021, and 7,000 men were named 丽 *Li* 'beautiful'. In addition, more recently, Chinese parents have gravitated towards names that without strong gender association. For instance, the unisex name 一诺 *Yinuo* 'a promise' was one of the most frequently given names in China between 2010 and 2019 (see Table 1). The name is derived from the first two characters of the idiom 一诺千金, "a promise will be kept".

Finally, the selection of characters and words used for female given names in China may not only reflect desired traits of the name-bearer, but also characteristics of the name-giver. As early as the Song Dynasty (960–1279), women's names tended to suggest their belonging to one of three social strata: 1.) the upper stratum made up of the wealthy and those who held office; 2.) the middle stratum composed of common people and everyday civilians; and 3.) the lower stratum which was made up of concubines and servants (Diao & Zhang 2012). For the two lowest strata, women were commonly named either 娘 *niang* 'girl' or 姐 *jie* 'sister', followed usually with the serial number suggesting their birth order (e.g., 十娘 *Shiniang* 'ten + girl' for a female child who is tenth in the birth order). According to Diao and Zhang (2012), girls in the upper stratum were more commonly named with characters denoting wisdom, grace, and demureness (e.g.,福延 *Fu Yan* 'surname, extend', 李秀萼 *Li Xiue* 'surname, flourishing stem', 胡淑修 *Hu Shuxiu* 'surname, virtuous + cultivated' and 徐文柔 *Xu Wenrou* 'surname, culture + gentle').

Similar results have been found in research about contemporary Chinese naming. According to Lee (1998) "common practice among lower-middle- and upper-class families is to give their daughters 'traditional' female names. These names conform to the feminine embodiment of beauty and virtue" (292). Moreover, the author conducted a detailed analysis of the women's names 招弟 *Zhaodi* 'hail a younger brother', 金花 *Jinhua* 'golden flower', 婷婷 *Tingting* 'pretty pretty', 含烟 *Hanyan* 'contain mist' and 化元 *Huayuan* 'reform + origin', and she categorized them into lower, lower-middle, upper-middle, gentry-learned, and learned upper-middle classes. Here is Lee's elaboration on the "un-feminine" name 化元 *Huayuan* 'reform + origin' (Lee 1998, 293): "*Huayuan* effaces a clear-cut gender line. It commends transformation and the elemental. When named this way, a Chinese female is commanded to value intellectual pursuits—a ticket to the learned world, and a movement away from material dependence on male figures in her life". Therefore, the author believed 化元 *Huayuan*, 含烟 *Hanyan* and 金花 *Jinhua* "indicate varying degrees of respect or privilege, whether gendered or genderless" (Lee 1998, 293).

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The unspoken message is that casual and traditional names may suggest one's humble origin, while names stressing knowledge and cultivation sound more artistic, refined, and well-educated, conveying a higher degree of privilege. In this sense, one's name could reveal their family's socioeconomic status. It is not surprising that the three aforementioned aspects result in the attractiveness or unattractiveness of a name and ultimately influence how the bearer is perceived. We should note that these sociocultural factors play their part in the naming practice; and, in turn, they may contribute to the name-changing motivation.

Methodology

The Xiaohongshu—literally, 'a small red book'— is known as the Chinese version of Instagram. It is an online community where users share their lives and discuss different topics. The users or creators post short videos, pictures, and captions. Below these, other users can comment and give a like, and some of their comments may receive replies from the creator. The diversified branches of conversation include makeup, reading, workout, cooking, interior designing, and so on. It is estimated that the number of users reached 300 million in July 2019, over 70 percent of which had been born after the 1990s. Every day, 7 billion new posts are published on the Xiaohongshu (Xiaohongshu 2021).

With the implementation of the Civil Code, the number of posts concerning "name changing" or "name changes" has sharply increased. People who have changed their names share their experience and tips. Ususally, they post a carousel with pictures of their permanent residence booklets, identication cards, and other relevant materials, such as petitions for changing names. People's "present name" and "former name" are also displayed.

From January to June 2022, the author regularly used the keyword "改名" 'changing names' to search for and read relevant posts. This search also fed the application's algorithm and relevant posts were further obtained from the "My Explore" page. In the end, a total of 334 cases of name changes—with both former and present names—were extracted from these posts. Using the provided information, the ages of the 117 name changers were determined. They ranged from 18 to 39 with the average age being 26.3 years. The reasons for the name changes were extracted from two sources: 1.) the user captions and replies; and 2.) the author's own analysis.

Regarding potential ethical issues, the information collected was posted by the name changers themselves on an online app that is accessible to everyone with or without an account. Thus, the data was extracted from a public domain. Also, the current study mainly restricts itself to given names, covering a limited number of full names. Still, to protect the users' privacy, Pinyin spelling is employed in this paper to ensure that the identity of the name changers is not recognizable. For example, *Zhang Jie* can be the Pinyin spelling of the following names 张洁, 张杰, 章婕, or 章捷.

Results: Reasons for Name Changes

The users gave many different reasons for changing their names. Sometimes, there were overlapping reasons for their name change. After all of the user reasons were collected, the following six motivations appeared: 1.) the user preferred a name that was less "ordinary"; 2.) the user wanted a name without the pejorative associations of their former name; 3.) they considered their former name to be too masculine; 4.) they changed their name to correct a registration error; 5.) their name change was motivated by superstition; and 6.) the reason was unindentified by the user. In some cases, users confessed that they had given false reasons on their official applications for a name change because their real reason (e.g., "having the namesake of other people," or because of personal superstition) would not have been accepted in some police stations. Such false reasons were not considered for this research. Table 3 presents the overall results of this part of the analysis.

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Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of User Reasons for Given Name Changes

No.	Reason:	Freq	%
1	former name considered too ordinary	209	62.57
2	former name considered too pejorative	56	16.77
3	former name considered too masculine	42	12.57
4	former name contained registration mistakes	12	3.59
5	former name was considered unfortuitous	10	2.99
6	unidentified	5	1.50

As shown in Table 3, most often, the reasons for why young Chinese women changed their given names were clear. With the exception of only a very few cases (1.50%) where the reason was left unidentified, the users felt their past names were either too common, pejorative, masculine, or ominous; or were simply wrong (i.e. incorrectly registered). In the following sub-sections, more information is given about each of these five motivations.

Reason one: former names were considered too ordinary

In all 334 cases, the primary reason (62.57%) for their name change was that they felt their former names were either ordinary or common. This group fell into several sub-categories. The largest was made up of 141 users or 42.21% who indicated that their former name was too "old-fashioned" or "outdated". As one user stated, she did not want a name that sounded "like a granny". One former user name that fell into this category was 娜 *Na* 'elegant'. This name was a common name during the 1950s, as China enjoyed a positive relationship with the former Soviet Union. It was inspired by Russian names like *Anna Karenina* (Zhu & Millward 1987). However, according to the users, presently, 娜 *Na* 'elegant' sounds untrendy and old-fashioned. Other user names that were once popular for people born in the 1960s but are now no longer fashionable are 秀英 *Xiuying* 'flourishing petal' and 玉兰 *Yulan* 'jade + orchid', *Hua* 'flower', *Ju* 'autumn chrysanthemums', *Xuelian* 'snow lotus', and *Lan* 'orchid'. As shown in Table 1, names that connotate beautiful physiques or lovely dispositions through their association with delicate flowers and animals became outdated in the 2020s. Again, the old-fashioned names of the name changers coincide with some the most frequent women's names in table 1. Among the former user names that fell into this sub-category, one of the most representative is *Hongmei* 'red plum blossom'. In fact, four women user had been named *Hongmei* previously. There were also many combinations with the character *Mei* 'plum blossom'. Examples include *Xiaomei* 'dawn + plum blossom', *Chunmei* 'spring plum blossom', *Dongmei* 'winter plum blossom'. Also a part of this grouping is *Ying* 'petal' and its combinations, like *Ziying* 'son + petal', *Meiying* 'plum blossom petal', *Xianying* 'clear + petal', *Tianying* 'field + petal', *Shiying* 'ten + petal'.

Another outdated set of names that fell into this category were those that stressed a woman's beautiful appearance. For instance, the once popular name *Yan* 'gorgeous' is now unfavored: a trend reflected in the fact that six women users in this study were formerly named *Yan*. In addition, two-character given names that included this character were also in this grouping: *Dianyan* 'hall + gorgeous'; *Haiyan* 'sea + gorgeous'; and *Jinyan* 'gold + gorgeous'. In Chinese culture, being beautiful is good; but being called "beauty" is embarrassing as it is considered to be too blunt or vain. Such names may therefore be perceived as being less cultivated and unattractive (Diao & Zhang 2012; Lee 1998).

Importantly, as Table 1 shows, 燕 *Yan* 'swallow' was a frequent name from 1970 to 1979. In Chinese culture, swallows symbolize the coming of spring, and are associated with a sense of hope and vitality. These positive associations help explain why *Yan* 'swallow' was once commonly used for one-character given names as well as two-character given names (e.g., *Chunyan* 'spring swallow', *Xiaoyan* 'little swallow', and *Haiyan* 'seabird'). The same is true of 凤 *Feng* 'phoenix' which was once also a common parental name choice due to the positive associations with nirvana and rebirth carried by this mythical bird. Once extremely popular, these names were considered by the users in this investigation as unacceptably too old-fashioned and were therefore changed.

Other user names that had a similar fate included the "*Xiao-x*" form (*xiao*, 'little'). Long a common nickname for young women (Kałużyńska 2016; Jiao 2001), in ancient China some women legally adopted these names when they turned fifteen years old. Amongst the users in this investigation, "*Xiao-x*" names such as *Xiaomei* 'little + beautiful' and *Xiaoyan* 'little swallow' sounded too much like informal nicknames and were traded in for more formal monikers. For this reason, names like *Hongxia* 'red cloud' and *Hongxia* 'wild swan + rosy cloud' were discarded by the users.

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Although many of the Chinese "fad" names still had positive meanings and connotations, as far as the modern users in this study were concerned, they were not simply "out of date", but also quite negative or even "disgusting". One user reported that she "hated the character *yan* ('gorgeous')" and another revealed that she had "felt inferior with the character *mei* ('plum blossom')". One user, *Honghua* 'red flower', revealed she had been frequently teased by her peers because of her name and *Linhua* 'forest flower' even showed the police proof of her depression to explain why her name change was necessary. These experiences were not uncommon. In general, women with old-fashioned names in this study were looked down upon and felt a sense of inferiority; and, as a result, they decided to alter their previous names.

While many of the names in this group were rejected because they were too old-fashioned, there was another reason why rejected names were considered too ordinary. Forty-five users (13.47%) indicated that the reason for their name-change was that their previous name was shared by too many others. The potential of this happening was highest with people who had common surnames and given name. For instance, in the data collected for this study, there were three women were formerly named *Yan* 'swallow'; and coincidentally, two of them had the same surname *Zhang* and therefore had the identical full name *Zhang Yan*. Another example comes from the women formerly named *Ting* 'pretty' and *Mengdi* 'dream + enlighten'. These users reported that before their name change, they had had the same names as neighbors in their villages. Others in this grouping had the same names as Chinese celebrities like 刘欢 *Liu Huan* (a singer) and 林丹 *Lin Dan* (a badminton champion). By changing their names, the users in this grouping differentiated themselves from others. Importantly, the users in this group were not resentful towards their former given names as was the case of the previously mentioned with users who had outdated names.

A similar motivation for users to change their names was that its structure was considered to be too everyday. This was the case with names that featured reduplication. Twenty-three women (6.89%) rejected their old names for this reason. Among these former names, there were three *Tingtings* 'pretty pretty'; two *Niunius* 'girl girl'; one *Lele* 'happy happy'; and one *Yuanyuan* 'round round'. Like the "*Xiao-x*" form, this structure is pervasive in Chinese women's nicknames. Reduplication in Chinese names may also involve the surname. Examples of famous persons with such names include the actress, 范冰冰 *Fan Bingbing* whose given name means "ice ice"; the actor 杨洋 *Yang Yang* whose given name means "ocean", and the musician *Yo-yo Ma*. In Chinese culture, the repeated syllables/morphemes can have a pleasing effect. However, it can also be interpreted as child-like, which might help to explain why this pattern is also widely employed in pets' names (Chen 2017). Given that fact, it is understandable why users in this group changed their former names as they did not want to be named like a puppy.

Reason two: former names were considered pejorative

Fifty-eight (16.77%) of the users in this study indicated that they had changed their previous given names which were potentially offensive. Clearly, carrying a pejorative name can cause psychological damage and social embarrassment to name-bearers. In Chinese, there are three ways a name can obtain a stigmatized meaning.

The first is phonologically. As a tonal language, Chinese language has many homophones and near homophones. Chinese also have a large number of dialects. For these reasons, it can easily happen that a name sounds similar to another word; and that similarity may cause humiliation to the namebearer. In this study, thirty-two women (9.58%) discarded their given names for this reason. According to one user, her former name, *Xiaohua* 'little flower', sounded like the word *xiaohua* 'joke', which was a source of personal embarassment. Similarly, *Danfei* 'red + fragrant' is homophonous with *danfei* 'solo': the woman who previously had this name mentioned that people would make fun of her by saying *danfei* and *shuangfei*. In Chinese, the term *shuangfei* is a vulgar way to suggest a sexual threesome. The woman who was originally called *Danfei* reported that, much to her annoyance, people frequently teased her with this word play. The user with the former given name *Famei* 'dispatch + plum blossom' also reported being distressed by the fact that her previous name sounded the same as *famei* which means 'moldy' in Chinese. The user *Yiyuan* 'pleasant pasture' explained that her motivation for changing her name was its phonological resemblance to *yiyuan* which means 'hospital' in Chinese. Sometimes the negative association was only clear when the surname was considered. An example from this study involves a user whose past given name was *Lijing* 'beautiful + quiet' and her surname *Hu*. Put together, her full name sounded similar to *hulijing* which detonates "a sexy evil woman". Other similar examples from this study are *Wei Tengteng* 'surname, fly fly'; *Wu Ming* 'surname, inscribe'; and *Xiang Xinxin* 'surname, happy happy'. When pronounced together these full names sounded like *weitengteng* 'stomach ache', *wuming* 'obscure', and *xiangxingxing* 'be like chimpanzee', respectively. Sometimes, stigmatization was based on the similarity between the women's former names and an unfavorable term in a Chinese dialect. A woman previously named *Xiaoyi* 'little pleasure' mentioned that her given name was similar to 'waiter' in Cantonese. In the Wuhan dialect, a woman reported that her former name sounded like the word for 'cockroach'.

The second way a name can become pejorative is changes in the way its morpho-semantic structure is perceived. In this investigation, sixteen women (4.79%) changed their name because it contained a

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morphological element which they found belittling to women. Examples include 妹 *mei* 'sister', 娣 *di* 'sister-in-law' or 'younger sister', and 弟 *di* 'younger brother'. These forms have been commonly used in Chinese culture. Throughout Chinese history, the names of baby girls have featured 娘 *niang* 'girl', 姐 *jie* 'sister', and 姑 *gu* 'maiden' to refer to their gender. In the past several decades, these traditional characters have become rare in women's names. They have been replaced by *mei* (妹). However, this term has also become a common way to address a young girl, especially one considered to be socially inferior to the speaker. Gradually, as a result, *mei* has come to convey a sense of disrespect and is even used as a swear word. By the same token, 你妹 *Nimei* 'your sister' or 你妹的 *nimeide* 'your sister's' became online insults.[3] These terms have yielded forms such as "verb + *nimei*" and "noun + *nimei*" (Li 2015) which function as "hell" and "bloody" and are used as intensifiers to communicate anger and aggression in phrases such as"What the hell are you doing?" and "I don't have time to finish my bloody work". These pejorative processes have had a negative effect on names that feature these elements.

In this study, *Xianmei* 'appear + sister' reported that she had been named by her grandmother. Likewise, *Dongmei* 'east + sister', revealed that her parents had named her. Since their original naming, the pejoration these names have undergone has meant that the name-bearers had a sense of inferiority due to their former names, which was why those elected to change them. For the same reason, *Guomei* 'country + sister' and *Xiamei* 'scare + sister' also changed their names. More users who did the same for the same motivation had the former names *Ningmei* 'peaceful + sister', *Jiangmei* 'river + sister', and *Hongmei* 'red + sister'.Included within this group are names featuring the element *di* (娣). Originally, it was used to refer to a sister-in-law and gradually it became the referent for a younger sister. Importantly, it is pronounced the same as 弟 *di* 'younger brother'. Chinese society has long been immersed in the Confucian and feudal ideology of patriarchy. As a result, preference for baby boys over baby girls is widespread. Before the one-child policy was established in 1980, baby girls were not welcomed in some rural areas. When girls were born, they were often given a name with *di*. For the name changers studied, the names *Zhaodi* 'hail a young brother' and *Pandi* 'look for a young brother' implies a parental wish for a male child. For the name-holders, these former names reflect their parents' expectation that the name holder's function was to bring a son to the family. These names were therefore considered to debasing labels by the users and were changed as soon as the women became adults.

The third way a name can be perceived as pejorative is the way it is written. In China, uncommon and/or taboo characters are usually avoided when naming babies. This avoidance was found in this study. However, there are some Chinese characters that are common in daily life but are perceived as eccentric when used for given names. Eight name changers (2.4%) in this investigation were motivated to change their names for this reason. Some of these users reported that they had been named by their grandparents. For example, one user had been previously named *Dian* 'electricity'. According to her, her grandfather had named her electricity because he thought it was of such great importance in daily life. This reason was evidently not sufficient enough for the user to continue to carry her highly unusual given name. A similar story was related by *Guanling* 'fill + tinkling of jade'. She had been given this name as an act of toponymic commemoration: she was born in *Guangyang*, a county in the Guangxi Province. However, the user considered her to be so unusual that it was pejorative and she decided to change it. Another example was the person whose former name was *Anting* 'I + pretty'. In northern Chinese dialects, *an* is a first-person pronoun referring to "I/we". According to the former name bearer every time people saw her name, they became startled and cautiously asked if the character was right. This social embarrassment became the user's motivation for changing her name.

Reason three: former names were considered too masculine

Forty-two (12.57%) women in this study had names that were perceived as being too masculine. Although Chinese names are not strictly gendered, there are eight categories of names that are commonly given to men (van de Weijer et al. 2019). These types of masculine names were present in the list of the users' former names. Examples include the following: *Likun* 'strength + earth', *Jian* 'strong', *Weiqiang* 'great strong', *Xueming* 'knowledgeable + bright', *Zhe* 'wise', *Di* 'enlighten', and *Jianfeng* 'sword + sharp'. Also included in this group were women whose former names indicated patriotism (e.g., *Jianhua* 'construct China', *Guoxian* 'country first', and *Zhiwei* 'aspiration + great').

Other traditionally masculine names that were rejected by the users were those which name-givers had chosen to commemorate ancestors, such as *Shiyan* 'generation + flame', *Jiacun* 'family + exist', and *Zhaole* 'omen + happy'. Alternatively, some parents in this group had given their daughters names that symbolized wealth and good health (e.g., *Cheng* 'success', *Jinsheng* 'golden victory', *and Xin* 'prosper'). These names were also rejected by their name-bearers as being too masculine. Finally, some women who decided to change their names had been named after elements of nature associated in China with masculinity. Examples include names related to high mountains and great rivers (e.g., *Tao* 'large wave', *Kaitao* 'open + large wave' and *Bo* 'wave') as

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well as mythical beasts (e.g., *Wenlong* 'culture + dragon'). The women with such names indicated that they felt awkward being called by names ususally in China with masculinity.

Reason four: former names were considered unfortuitous

In this study, ten women (2.99%) had altered their names due to superstition or their belief in feng shui. Some claimed, for example, that they lacked a certain element in *wuxi*, or the Five Elements—*jin* (gold), *mu* (wood), *shui* (water), *huo* (fire), and *tu* (soil). Still others believed their original names were unlucky and inauspicious. By changing their names, they hoped to change their fate and luck. One woman formerly called *Qian* 'beautiful' said, for example, that although she loved this name, her family had consulted a fortune teller who divined a new name for her. The same happened to the women formerly known as *Jingyun* 'quiet cloud' and *Wenjing* 'gentle + quiet'. Although neither woman had disliked their former names, they preferred to take on new names that were "good for their life".

Reason five: former names contained registration mistakes

Alongside the many personal reasons listed above, some users in this study elected to change their names simply correct registration mistakes. Twelve women (3.59%) revealed that, due to the errors in their permanent residence registration, they had been forced to carry incorrect and unwanted given names. Their motivation for changing their names was then to take back their original names. In this group, it was observed that many of these birth registrations had been done by grandparents. For example, one woman in this group changed her name from *Yan* 'gorgeous' to the homophonous *Yan* 'charming'. As she revealed, *Yan* 'charming' had actually been the original name given to her by her father. The wrong name *Yan* 'gorgeous' had been mistakenly registered by her grandfather. Through the name change process, she was able to regain her true name. Like the *Yan* example many of these registration mistakes were due to confusion over phonologically or orthographically similar structures. Examples of other confusions that resulted in name change corrections include *Ling* 'tinkling of jade' when *Lin* 'beautiful jade' was intended. Other cases deal with a missing character; for example, *Hui* 'clever' regained her genuine name *Qianhui* 'thousand + clever'.

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Discussion and Conclusion

In the cases analyzed for this study, young Chinese women's self-renamings are related to their choosing a new identity for themselves. These acts of self-definition reflect not only personal changes, but also larger societal developments. By rejecting onomastic former names with reduplication and "*Xiao-x*" forms which are both widely used to create informal nicknames, the female name changers in this study may reject stereotypical ideals that infantilize Chinese women and depict them as fragile, delicate girls in need of tending (Lee 1998). By the same token, in this investigation, the modern emanicipated Chinese women who were aware of the gendered power imbalances may have chosen to renounce their "manly" names they had been given and rejoice in the new feminine or androgynous names they gave themselves. This finding may relate to the modern Chinese trend of deviating away from traditional names that stress the female name-bearer's beautiful appearance within a patriarchical society — thereby eliminating the male gaze from women's names (Jiao 2006). This long-existing naming practice uncovers that, women are perceived as objects by the male gaze.

Although far more research is needed on gender and personal names in China, there is some literature which is potentially illuminating here. Through experimentation, Bao et al. (2016, 596) determined not only that personal names can activate gender stereotypes; they also discovered that women with genderless names had the highest interpersonal attraction, followed by women with feminine names. However, women with masculine names had the lowest attraction for respondents. Genderless names may have been preferred because they symbolize androgynous gender role that combines both masculine and feminine traits. It would be interesting to see if this perception holds for self-chosen names in China. Clearly, more research is needed. This is not the only area where more study is required. The present study has sought to broaden our understanding of the self-renaming practices of young Chinese women and to provide new insights into the relationship between a person's name and their personal identity. However, comparative research between female and male name changers was not the focus of this study. Therefore, further investigations, especially those utilizing mixed methods and adopting longitudinal approaches are also encouraged. Such investigations would increase our knowledge about self-renaming practices in China and beyond.

Notes

1. An example provided by Louie (2006, 214) is the name of the famous writer 林语堂 *Lin Yutang*. According to Louie, the author's name means 'language + hall' instead of 'hall of language'. Louie used a comma between the two elements to make this point.
2. According to the *2020 National Names Report* (Ministry of Public Security of the PRC 2021), the most frequently used men's given names before 1959 were 建国 *Jianguo* 'construct the country', followed by 建华 *Jianhua* 'construct China', 国华 *Guohua* 'country + China', 和平 *Heping* 'peace', 明 *Ming* 'bright', 建平 *Jianping* 'build peace', 军 *Jun* 'army', 平 *Ping* 'peaceful', 志明 *Zhiming* 'aspiration + bring', and 德明 *Deming* 'mind + bring'.
3. It is thought to have derived from 他妈的 *tamade* ('his mother's') which is akin to the English phrase "damn it" (Zhang 2014).

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