

FLOWERS, PLANTS, AND TREES IN FEMALE NAMING IN CHINA

SUMMARY

The paper deals with various linguistic and cultural aspects of Chinese given names constructed out of the linguistic items/lexemes/terms denoting flowers, plants, and trees. Special attention is paid to female naming, as the comparison of women to flowers is a common tendency in many cultures all over the world, including in Chinese culture. The paper discusses 17 Chinese terms denoting plants, flowers, and trees that were of the highest frequency of occurrences among the top 150 terms/lexical items/characters used in female names in the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) at the beginning of the 1980s. The current frequency of these terms is compared with the Internet list of the 150 most common terms/characters presently used in female and male naming in the PRC (approximately the years 2020–2024). It seems evident that the popularity of terms and names after flowers, plants, and trees has decreased, and it may be attributed, among others, to the tendency of Chinese people to opt to create more unisex personal names, and to avoid overt sex stereotyping, particularly in the context of women and female names.

Keywords: Chinese personal naming, Chinese female names, Chinese names after flowers and plants, frequency of terms in Chinese onyms

1. INTRODUCTION

Social divisions existing in societies can manifest themselves in anthroponyms, i.e. the proper names of human beings and this particularly concerns divisions along gender lines. Gender, i.e. the sexual identity as male or female, is one of the important social factors most frequently evoking any naming differentiation. It is generally considered that names for men and women need to be different, depending on their different physiological features and gender roles, or because of the need for appropriate identification of the person named.

The naming convention covering that a given name indicates the sex of the person named so it is gender-specific seems the most common. However, there are cultures where names are often gender ambiguous, and the same names are given to males and females, as so-called unisex names or epicene names, i.e. gender-neutral

names having characteristics that fit both sexes or have no gender-specific characteristics.

In China there have never been any strict linguistic rules concerning the gender-specific differentiation of onyms. The marking of the gender is less obvious in Chinese than in many other languages because Chinese does not have a grammatical gender, and gender is a covert category in most cases. However, the distinction between male and female given names in past and present China is recognizable to some extent, and in many cases it is possible to identify the sex of a person simply by the name. One of the main reasons is the difference in the meaning of the morphemes/words/lexical items that the names are constructed of. Names are considered masculine or feminine on the basis of treating some objects, concepts or qualities reflected in names as being characteristic or even typical for men or women (Kałużyńska, 2008, pp. 156–157; 2016, pp. 181–182).

Gender stereotypes as ideas based upon the physiological features and social roles of men and women have varied significantly from one society or culture to another and in China they have had an important influence on personal naming. In Chinese culture, maleness and femaleness are related to the aspects of two primal opposing but complementary forces or principles found in all things, i.e. *yáng* 阳 and *yīn* 阴, with males being linked with the attributes of the *yáng*, and females with the attributes of the *yīn*. The *yáng* force is bright, active, strong and firm, and it corresponds to the sun, heaven, day, south, summer and creation, while the *yīn* force is dark, passive, weak and tender, and it corresponds to the moon, earth, night, north, winter, material forms, etc. (Lin, 2003, pp. 81–85, 120). Therefore, Chinese given names are considered masculine or feminine mainly on the basis of treating some objects, actions, concepts or qualities (reflected in names) as being characteristic for men or women, either as *yīn-yáng* qualities or simply gender-specific attributes.

In China it was considered proper that male personal names reflected the characteristics of the *yáng* force, and female personal names reflected the attributes of the *yīn* force (Lu & Millward, 1989, pp. 271–273; Kałużyńska, 2008, p. 25). As a result, a great proportion of male names make references to qualities such as being strong, healthy, brave, auspicious, loyal, and intelligent; males are expected to prolong the family, to create, to construct, to defend, and they are usually associated with the sea, big waves, mountain peaks, pine trees and powerful animals. Chinese female names mainly refer to qualities such as being moral, pure, chaste, beautiful, sweet, quiet, and laborious, and they are usually associated with the moon and some natural phenomena, precious things, birds and flowers. The morphemes/words/lexical items denoting qualities or objects considered characteristic for women are usually called *nǚxìng zìcí* 女性字词 ‘female terms/characters’, and those denoting qualities and objects typical for men are labelled as *nánxìng zìcí* 男性字词 ‘male terms/characters’ (Liu, 1999, pp. 76, 79; Kałużyńska, 2008, p. 158).

Of course, exceptions to the general pattern of the Chinese personal naming occur. Some boys are given names considered female-specific, and some girls have names typical for boys, and some names can be considered neutral in this aspect. Many girls today are given names that are either unisex or predominantly masculine ones, and an increase in the use of such names for females is noted. Importantly, some lexical items that were predominantly used in masculine given names in China in the past now primarily occur in feminine given names (Du, Liu & Tian, 2020).

2. CHINESE FEMALE GIVEN NAMES WITH LEXEMES DENOTING PLANTS, FLOWERS, AND TREES

Women all over the world are often compared with flowers. In Chinese culture one can also find many statements like “flowers symbolizing females 象征女性的花草” (Hui, 2002, p. 346), “girls are like flowers 姑娘好像花儿一样” (Jin, 2002, p. 175), “people often compare females to flowers and birds, because flowers and birds symbolize beauty of females’ natural vivacity and tenderness 人们常把女性比作鲜花小鸟, 因为鲜花小鸟能象征女性的天真活泼和温柔之美” (Jin, 2002, p. 169), “naming girls after flowers demonstrates girls’ tenderness and beauty 以花给女孩子起名, 更显得女孩的娇美艳丽” (Jin, 2002, p. 175), etc.

Therefore, female names consisting of terms denoting flowers, as well as some other plants and fruit trees, were and remain quite common in the PRC. According to many Chinese scholars, such lexical items belong to the broader category called *huāniǎo zì* 花鸟字 ‘terms/characters for flowers and birds’ (He, 2001, p. 245; Jin, 2002, p. 169; Li, 2004, p. 39; Liu, 1999, p. 77), as the subcategory named *huācǎo zì* 花草字 ‘terms/characters for flowers and grasses’ (Jin, 2002, p. 169) or *huāhuì zì* 花卉字 ‘terms/characters for flowers and plants’ (Liu, 2003, p. 152). The method of naming based on such terms is sometimes called *yǐ huācǎo shù mù qǐ míng fǎ* 以花草树木起名法 ‘method of naming after flowers, plants, and trees’ (Jin, 2002, p. 174).

Various classifications of Chinese given names, mainly based upon the so-called methods of naming or sources of naming, put “names after flowers, plants, and trees” under the broader category labelled *wù míng fǎ* 物名法 ‘method by [taking] the name of any object’ (Wanyan, 1994, pp. 61–65), or *jiè wù qǐ míng* 借物起名 ‘naming by borrowing [the name of] an object’ (Liu, 1999, pp. 160–162; Yuan, 2001, p. 117). Liu (1999, p. 161) stated: “People always use [the name of] some visible objects that symbolize beauty, happiness, strength, activity to create proper names, e.g. flowers...人们总是用一些象征美好, 幸福, 强健有力积极向上的物象来起名, 比如说花...”.

It is evident that objects like flowers, plants, and trees are often used metaphorically to symbolize the various attributes of people.

Liu (1996, p. 46) stated: “Flowers, plants and trees are also frequently used to symbolize human bearing and character. Man has assigned symbolic meanings to all kinds of things in nature, such as flower, grass and tree. Parents can use these symbols to embody their expectations for their children’s future.”

One can read (Feng, Ding & Yin, 1998, p. 119): “In the Chinese traditional culture natural attributes of such objects like flowers and trees are often borrowed to symbolize peoples’ character and feelings. Therefore, among names of people there are many names reflecting character and feelings that are evidently connected with such objects like flowers and trees 中国传统文化中常借花木等物的自然属性来比喻人的情操。因此中国人名字中表情操的名字也必然与花木等事物相关联。”

As Slaměňíková (2018, p. 264) noticed: “It can also be observed that the used characters often mirror expectations generally associated with masculinity and femininity. The meanings evoking firmness and strength, such as land masses, bodies of water or large animals are typical for male names. In contrast, female names make use of a wide range of plant names and meteorological phenomena that evoke the idea of beauty, softness, tenderness, etc.”

According to Kałużyńska (2008, pp. 160, 222), such names may be classified as “standard given names with lexemes reflecting feminine softness and female aesthetic values,” and belong to the subcategory “given names with lexemes denoting plants and trees.”

3. THE MOST COMMON LEXEMES DENOTING PLANTS, FLOWERS, AND TREES OCCURRING IN FEMALE NAMES

There are many terms denoting various species of plants and trees in China. According to Kałużyńska (2008, pp. 223, 232), there were altogether 88 terms denoting plants, flowers and trees (general terms, species or the parts of flowers or trees) among the names of women figuring in the research material of the work, and the frequency of their occurring varied.

The selection of the most common terms denoting plants, flowers, and trees used in female naming, i.e. the terms of the highest frequency, makes use of some statistical information on Chinese personal names based upon the data collected during the national census performed in the PRC in 1982. The statistical data were presented in the work: “Xingshi renming yongzi fenxi tongji” 姓氏人名用字分析统计 [Statistics on Characters Used in Surnames and Given Names], published by Yuwen Chubanshe 语文出版社 in 1991 in Beijing (hereafter referred to as “Xingshi”). This work recorded the frequency of occurrence of Chinese characters in female and male names, and this statistical information pertained to people born approximately between 1900–1980. “Xingshi” provided the following

data: 2,500 characters occurred in the names of 85,567 females and 2,745 characters occurred in the names of 89,333 males. “Xingshi” is still considered the most crucial for any analysis of contemporary Chinese anthroponyms, as there are no other works dealing with the frequency of occurrence of lexical items/terms/characters used in Chinese personal names on such a large scale.

The paper also makes use of some data on Chinese female names presented on the Internet, especially “Zheng Qingsong qimingwang” 郑青松起名网 [Naming website by Zheng Qingsong], <http://m.nnn666.com/qiming> (hereafter referred to as “ZQS website”). This website lacks some important data needed by name researchers, as the main purpose of this website is to help people choose or create an appropriate name for their children. However, the website, among others, presents a list of the 150 most frequent terms/characters currently used in male and female names in the PRC (approximately 2020–2024).

The most common lexemes presented in this paper, denoting plants, flowers and trees occurring in female names are the 17 terms/characters listed in “Xingshi” as those of the highest occurrences among the top 150 terms/lexical items/characters used in female names. Some lexemes of female given names can also occur in male names, even those considered typical for female naming. Therefore, while listing the lexical items/characters, there are noted their occurrences in female names (F), and male names (M) as recorded in “Xingshi.” In brackets, there are registered as it follows: the number of the character at the frequency list/number of examples/percentage. The paper also makes use of the list of 150 terms/characters of the highest occurrences in female and male names published on the “ZQS website,” therefore the number of the character on the frequency list is noted in brackets (according to its position in the list).

The terms are solely presented in their written form as recorded in Chinese characters. In Chinese dictionaries the lexical entries (lemmas) are mainly grouped according to the Chinese character as the graphical form of the lexical item, the pronunciation of the lexical item (usually treated as the pronunciation of the character) written in *pīnyīn* or other kinds of the transcriptional system, its grammatical status (noun, verb, etc.), its meaning and its meaning relations with other lexical items. Therefore, one lexical entry may contain several lexemes (semantic morphemes/words or senses), as it groups forms that share graphical, phonological and sometimes grammatical properties, but may have some different elements of meaning as being related polysemous senses or unrelated homonymous senses. What is more, one Chinese character can serve as the graphical form for several lexical items having different pronunciation, grammatical status and meaning. Therefore, the semantic analysis of these terms on the basis of their written form is strongly limited, as they occur without any additional context that can have some restricting influence on the word meaning, and the pronunciation of characters is sometimes ambiguous.

The lexical items/characters quoted in the paper are presented together with somewhat abbreviated semantic explications found in dictionaries or other works. As the same Chinese character is often used for the notation of many lexemes, the lexemes considered as fitting for the particular category are listed as the first ones. Even so, the other semantic senses can also be important while exploring the probable meaning of names.

The explanations of terms and names presented in this paper have been chosen on the basis of the research material collected for the work “Chinese female namings. Past and Present” (Kałużyńska, 2008). The information on the meaning of the terms is based upon the dictionaries and publications listed in the References.

4. LIST OF THE 17 MOST COMMON LEXEMES/CHARACTERS DENOTING PLANTS, FLOWERS AND TREES OCCURRING IN FEMALE NAMES

The top lexemes/characters denoting flowers, plants and trees (general terms, species, parts), occurring in female names as seen in statistical materials (“Xingshi”), are the following:

- (1) **Yīng** 英 ‘flower; petal; hero; outstanding person; person excelling in talents or wisdom; handsome; fine; wise’ (HYC; XXH); “While it denotes a person’s wisdom, it usually occurs in male names. While used in female names, it mainly has the meaning of ‘beautiful’ 当指人的智慧时, 一般作男名用. 作女名时主要取漂亮美丽之义” (Hui, 2002, p. 340). (“Xingshi”: F 1/6446/4.023%; M 94/419/0.249%; “ZQS website”: F 99; M -).
Examples of female names:
Guiying 桂英 ‘Cassia Flower’, ‘Outstanding and Beautiful’ (*gui* ‘cassia; outstanding; valuable’);
Yingqin 英琴 ‘Flowery Zither’, ‘Beautiful Zither’ (*qin* ‘musical instrument; zither’).
- (2) **Huā** 华[華] ‘flower’ (HYC; XXH); *huá* ‘magnificent, splendid, prosperous, outstanding; China; Han nationality’ (HYC; XXH); “As in personal names, it is used in male and female names 在人名中, 男名女名皆有” (Hui, 2002, p. 341); “According to explanations in the Modern Chinese Dictionary (2016), its meanings are mainly ‘China, prosperous, elite, beautiful’, which represent the most common meanings of it when used in personal names 其在现代汉语词典(2016)中的解释主要有“中国、繁华、精英、美丽”等、这些代表了中国人最常包含的意义” (Du et al., 2020). (“Xingshi”: F 4/4067/2.539%; M 4/2626/1.561%; “ZQS website”: F 100; M -).

Examples of female names:

Chunhua 春华 ‘Spring Flower’, ‘Spring Prosperity’, ‘Spring China’ (*chūn* ‘spring; vitality’);

Lihua 丽华 ‘Beautiful Flower’, ‘Beautiful and Prosperous’, ‘Beautiful China’ (*lì* ‘beautiful; delicate’).

- (3) **Lán** 兰[蘭] ‘*bot. Cymbidium goeringii*; cymbidium; orchid; fragrant thoroughwort; lily magnolia’ (HYC; XXH); “orchid — a delicate, subtle beauty or fragrance” (Liu, 1996, p. 98); “epidendrum, used figuratively in the sense of fragrant, elegant, refined” (MECD); “In history these flowers were symbols of people’s refined moral standards or beauty. The character 兰 is frequently used in female names... it can also be used in male names 历史上一直把它们与人的高雅品德相比, 或者它比作美人. 兰字作女性名字时使用率较... 也可以用作男性取名” (Hui, 2002, p. 349); “The symbolical significance of the orchid has to do mainly with its scent. An ‘orchid-room’ is the dwelling place of a young girl or the bedroom of the married couple. A beautiful woman’s breath is like the perfume of an orchid. The word lan = orchid occurs in women’s names only” (Eberhard, 1986, p. 219).

(“Xingshi”: F 6/3542/2.211%; M 335/83/0.049%; “ZQS website”: F 6; M -).

Examples of female names:

Lanfang 兰芳 ‘Orchid Fragrance’, ‘Beautiful and Fragrant’, ‘Beautiful and Fine’ (*fāng* ‘fragrant; fine; good’);

Jinlan 金兰 ‘Golden Orchid’, ‘Precious and Beautiful’ (*jīn* ‘gold; precious’).

- (4) **Guì** 桂 ‘*bot. Laurus nobilis*; cassia, laurel, bay tree; sweet scented osmanthus; short for Guangxi Province’ (HYC; XXH); “Considered auspicious... What is more, since it is a homophone of 贵 [*guì* ‘valuable; honoured’], it is willingly used. In ancient times it was sometimes used in male names, nowadays it is often used in female names 人间祥瑞... 此外还由於桂字与‘贵’同音, 更加使人爱戴. 古代有时用作男性取名, 近代以後常用于女性取名” (Hui, 2002, p. 357); “outstanding achievements” (Liu, 1996, p. 48); “cinnamon tree (cassia tree) grows in the courtyard of the Palace of the Moon, it symbolises luxuriant grow and limitless duration of honour” (Eberhard, 1986, p. 67).

(“Xingshi”: F 10/2785/1.739%; M 106/400/0.238%; “ZQS website”: F 3; M -).

Examples of female names:

Guiying 桂英 ‘Cassia Flower’, ‘Outstanding and Beautiful’ (*yīng* 英 ‘flower; petal; beautiful; outstanding; hero’);

Guizhen 桂珍 ‘Cassia Treasure’, ‘Outstanding and Precious’ (*zhēn* ‘treasure; precious’).

- (5) **Méi** 梅 ‘bot. *Prunus mume*; plum; plum blossom; the rainy season’ (HYC; XXH); “Besides being very rarely used in male names, it is often used for female names 除极少一些作男名外, 常用来作女性名字” (Hui, 2002, p. 350); “symbol of firmness and loyalty” (Liu, 1996, p. 47); “The plum is described as ‘ice-skinned and jade-boned’ and compared to a burgeoning but as yet innocent girl. It represents winter and virginity; bamboo and plum represent husband and wife” (Eberhard, 1986, pp. 30, 239). (“Xingshi”: F 13/1978/1.235%; M 381/69/0.041%; “ZQS website”: F 130; M -).
Examples of female names:
Meimei 梅梅 ‘[Small] Plum’, ‘[Small] Firm/Loyal’;
Meijing 梅菁 ‘Plum and Chives’, ‘Firm and Luxuriant’ (*jīng* ‘chives flower; essence; lush, luxuriant’).
- (6) **Píng** 萍 ‘duckweed’ (HYC; XXH); “As used in personal names, it mainly has the meaning of his homophone 平 [*píng* ‘peaceful; safe’], and means ‘safe and sound’, ‘smooth’. The term is often used for female names 人名用萍字, 主要用其同音‘平’的字义, 表示平安, 平坦. 女性取名常用字” (Hui, 2002, p. 345). (“Xingshi”: F 23/1376/0.859%; M 445/50/0.030%; “ZQS website”: F 113; M -).
Examples of female names:
Fuping 富萍 ‘Abundant Duckweed’, ‘Rich and Peaceful’ (*fù* ‘rich; abundant’);
Pingping 萍萍 ‘[Small] Duckweed’, ‘[Small] Peaceful’.
- (7) **Huā** 花 ‘flower; blossom, bloom; colored; sweet; magnificent’ (HYC; XXH); “*Huā* has an extremely strong feminine flavour, it is always one of the most frequently used terms in female names 花字的女性含义特别浓烈, 一向被作为女性取名的最常用字之一” (Hui, 2002, p. 341); “The physical appearance of a beautiful woman is described as ‘flower-like’” (Eberhard, 1986, p. 111); (“Xingshi”: F 31/1303/0.813%; M 987/9/0.005%; “ZQS website”: F -; M -).
Examples of female names:
Renhua 仁花 ‘Benevolent Flower’, ‘Benevolent and Magnificent’ (*rén* ‘good; sensitive; benevolent’);
Jinhua 金花 ‘Golden Flower’, ‘Precious and Magnificent’ (*jīn* ‘gold; precious’).
- (8) **Zhī** 芝 ‘glossy ganoderma; sweet grass; magnificent’; *zhīlán* 芝蘭 ‘irises and orchids (symbolic of noble character, true friendship, or beautiful surroundings)’ (HYC; XXH); ‘iris’ (Liu, 1996, p. 17), ‘fungus with purplish stalk; long life and prosperity’ (MECD); “*Zhī*, as used in personal names, in ancient times was not at all especially used in female names; only nowadays it is often used in female names 芝字作人名, 在古代并非为女性所特有, 近代以後才较常用于女性” (Hui, 2002, p. 344).

(“Xingshi”: F 39/1026/0.641%; M 285/112/0.067%; “ZQS website”: F 111; M -).

Examples of female names:

Zhifang 芝芳 ‘Iris Fragrance’, ‘Prosperous and Fine’ (*fāng* ‘fragrant; fine; good’);

Zhiying 芝英 ‘Iris Flower’, ‘Prosperous and Outstanding’, ‘Prosperous and Beautiful’ (*yīng* ‘flower; petal; beautiful; outstanding; hero’).

- (9) **Lían** 莲 [蓮] ‘lotus; lotus seed; Buddha’s world’ (HYC; XXH); “Often used metaphorically to describe human beauty 常被用来比作人的美貌” (Hui, 2002, p. 351); “symbol of purity, cleanliness, modesty, harmony, love, marriage, and immortal” (Eberhard, 1986, pp. 168–170).

(“Xingshi”: F 43/956/0.597%; M 656/22/0.013%; “ZQS website”: F 134; M -).

Examples of female names:

Lianying 莲英 ‘Lotus Flower’, ‘Beautiful and Outstanding’ (*yīng* ‘flower; petal; beautiful; outstanding; hero’);

Qiulian 秋莲 ‘Autumn Lotus’, ‘Autumn Harmony’ (*qiū* ‘autumn; fall’).

- (10) **Jú** 菊 ‘China aster; chrysanthemum’ (HYC; MECD; XXH); “as exquisite as chrysanthemum” (Liu, 1996, p. 17); “elegance and nobility” (Liu, 1996, p. 47); “symbol of autumn, 9th month of the old Chinese calendar, long life and duration” (Eberhard, 1986, p. 63); “Female actresses or singers were called ‘Chrysanthemum Brigade’... Therefore, many females have 菊 character for their names. Some men also use 菊 character for their names 又把戏曲界的女性成为菊部... 因此, 女性也多以菊字取名. 有些男性也用菊字取名” (Hui, 2002, p. 348).

(“Xingshi”: F 44/898/0.561%; M 653/22/0.013%; “ZQS website”: F 122; M -).

Examples of female names:

Junjie 菊杰 ‘Chrysanthemum hero’, ‘Noble Hero’, ‘Noble and Outstanding’ (*jié* ‘hero, outstanding person, outstanding’);

Junju 君菊 ‘Master Chrysanthemum’, ‘Master of Elegance’, ‘Master of Nobility’ (*jūn* ‘mister; master; gentleman’).

- (11) **Róng** 蓉, *fúróng* 芙蓉 ‘*bot. Hibiscus mutabilis*; cottonrose hibiscus; lotus; another name for Hunan Province, it is a homophone of 荣 [*róng* ‘to glorify; prosperous; honoured’]’ (HYC; XXH); symbol of purity, modesty, harmony, love, marriage, and immortal (Eberhard, 1986, pp. 168–170); “Used in personal names, it has the meaning ‘beautiful’, as connected with lotus 作人名取与荷花有关的美丽之义” (Hui, 2002, p. 365).

(“Xingshi”: F 51/729/0.455%; M 903/11/0.007%; “ZQS website”: F 36; M -).

Examples of female names:

Rongfang 蓉芳 ‘Hibiscus Fragrance’, ‘Prosperous and Fine’, ‘Beautiful and Good’ (*fāng* ‘fragrant; fine; good’);

Changrong 常蓉 ‘Constant Hibiscus’, ‘Permanently Prosperous’ (*cháng* ‘constant; permanent’).

- (12) *Lì* 莉 ‘jasmine; name’s word’ (HYC; XXH); *mòlì* 茉莉 ‘*bot. Jasminum sambac*; Arabian jasmine; jasmine; jasmine flower’ (HYC; XXH); “It belongs to the classical category of terms for flowers and birds, so it is often used in female names 属于典型的花鸟字, 因此常为女性取名” (Hui, 2002, p. 357). (“Xingshi”: F 59/636/0.397%; M 1043/8/0.005%; “ZQS website”: F 126; M -).

Examples of female names:

Lili 莉莉 [Small] Jasmine’, ‘Lily’ (Lili, transcription of a foreign name);

Lina 莉娜 ‘Jasmine Grace’, ‘Lina’ (*nà* ‘lithe and graceful carriage’; Lina, transcription of a foreign name).

- (13) *Lín* 林 ‘forest, woods, grove; a group of persons or things; surname’ (HYC; XXH).

(“Xingshi”: F 63/608/0.380%; M 9/1961/1.166%; “ZQS website”: F -; M 4).

Examples of female names:

Linxia 林侠 ‘Forest Chivalrous Person’, ‘Forest Hero’ (*xiá* ‘chivalrous person; hero’);

Linlin 林霖 ‘Forest Rain’ (*lín* ‘continuous heavy rain’).

- (14) *Qín* 芹 ‘celery; meagre; humble’ (HYC; XXH); “vegetable name, also *shuǐqín* ‘watercress’; metaphorically ‘meagre, scanty, slender’ 蔬菜名, 即水芹; 喻微薄” (HDC; HYC).

(“Xingshi”: F 73/518/0.323%; M 999/9/0.005%; “ZQS website”: F -; M -).

Examples of female names:

Yuqin 玉芹 ‘Jade Celery/Watercress’, ‘Pure and Slender’ (*yù* ‘jade; pure’);

Xueqin 雪芹 ‘Snowy Celery/Watercress’, ‘Clean and Slender’ (*xuě* ‘snow; clean; white’).

- (15) *Rú* 茹 ‘madder; vegetable food; connected roots; soft; eat; surname’ (HYC; MCEd; XXH);

(“Xingshi”: F 121/205/0.128%; M: 861/12/0.007%; “ZQS website”: F -; M -).

Examples of female names:

Yanru 晏茹 ‘Sunny Madder’, ‘Peaceful and Soft’ (*yàn* ‘sunny; peaceful’);

Ruzhi 茹芝 ‘Madder and Iris’, ‘Soft and Prosperous’ (*zhī* ‘iris; magnificent; prosperous’).

- (16) *Xìng* 杏 ‘apricot; apricot flower; apricot colour; almond’ (HYC; MCED; XXH); “civility and good manners” (Liu, 1996, p. 48); “The apricot stands symbolically for the second month of the old Chinese calendar (corresponding roughly to our March. It is also a symbol for a beautiful woman” (Eberhard, 1986, p. 21). (“Xingshi”: F 122/202/0.126%; M 591/28/0.017%; “ZQS website”: F -, M -).
Examples of female names:
Xingge 杏阁 ‘Apricot Boudoir’, ‘Cabinet of Beauty’ (*gé* ‘boudoir; cabinet’);
Xingxing 杏杏 ‘[Small] Apricot’, ‘[Small] Beauty’.
- (17) *Shù* 树 [樹] ‘tree; plant, cultivate; set up; establish; uphold’ (HYC; MCED; XXH, p. 1520). (“Xingshi”: F 127/196/0.122%; M 56/714/0.424.% ; “ZQS website”: F -, M 69).
Examples of female names:
Shuying 树英 ‘Tree Flower’, ‘Tree Hero’, ‘Established Hero’ (*yīng* ‘flower; petal; beautiful; outstanding; hero’);
Shuwen 树文 ‘Culture of Trees’, ‘Cultivate Culture’ (*wén* ‘writing; literature; culture; gentle’).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper has discussed various linguistic and cultural aspects of Chinese given names constructed out of the linguistic items/lexemes/terms denoting flowers, plants, and trees. Special attention has been paid to the terms occurring in female names, as the comparison of women to flowers or plants seemed to be a common tendency in the Chinese naming culture. The paper has dealt with 17 terms denoting plants, flowers, and trees considered as those of the highest frequency of occurrence among the top 150 terms/lexical items/characters used in female names in the PRC at the beginning of the 1980s (“Xingshi”). The frequency of these terms has also been checked against the Internet list of the 150 most common terms/characters currently (approximately the years 2020–2024) used in female and male naming in the PRC (“ZQS website”).

The comparison of the frequency of occurrence of the presented terms has demonstrated:

- (a) Six of these seventeen terms are absent on the current Internet list of the most frequent characters/terms in female names (“ZQS website”), i.e.: (7) *huā* 花 ‘flower’; (13) *lín* 林 ‘forest’; (14) *qín* 芹 ‘celery’; (15) *rú* 茹 ‘madder’; (16) *xìng* 杏 ‘apricot’; and (17) *shù* 树 ‘tree’.
- (b) The frequency position of two terms is higher (“ZQS website”), namely (4) *guì* 桂 ‘cassia, osmanthus’ and (11) *róng* 蓉 ‘hibiscus, lotus’. However, it needs to

be said that these terms are rather willingly used since they are homophones of other words. *Gui* 桂 ‘cassia, osmanthus’ is a homophone of *gui* 贵 ‘valuable; honoured’, and *róng* 蓉 ‘hibiscus, lotus’ is a homophone of *róng* 荣 ‘to glorify; prosperous; honoured’.

(c) The frequency position of the other 9 terms is now lower than in the past.

It is evident that the popularity of the terms denoting plants and flowers used in Chinese female naming has decreased. There are probably many reasons for this situation, and it is possible that it can largely be attributed to the desire, and the readiness, for avoiding the overt sex stereotyping in the domain of personal naming in the PRC, as the “unisex” seems nowadays to be a worldwide trend.

As it has been said, gender stereotypes had an important influence on traditional personal naming in China in the past. The terms denoting plants and flowers were considered typical for female given names because plants and flowers mainly symbolized those qualities that were readily attributed to women, such as beauty, softness, tenderness, benevolence, purity, modesty, etc. Therefore, in the contemporary Chinese naming culture, the choice for a name of a term denoting a plant or a flower primarily leads to the creation of a gender-specific female name.

According to Li (2000, p. 30): “Although China has been tremendously successful in achieving gender equality, women still suffer a lower status compared with men.” Creating a gender-equal world is essential for the well-being and development of all people. Gender roles evolve but still trend toward the traditional and stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. Breaking down gender stereotypes can be difficult, but it is essential for creating a more fair society. Various policies and practices that promote gender equality may result in the observed tendency to refrain from overt sex stereotyping, particularly in the context of women and female naming.

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