Hilal al-Sabi’ (d. 1056) was a bureaucrat in Buyid service who wrote an interesting work on the manners and customs of the Abbasid court. The book is naturally well known to Oleg Grabar, who aptly laments the lack of any comparable source for the Umayyads, on whose palaces and court ceremonials he has written so much. At one point Hilal mentions the following curious rule: “It is not the custom for anyone to be mentioned in the presence of the caliph...by the name of the caliph, if his name happens to be his” (wa-laysa mina l-‘ādati an yudhara ahadun bi-hadrati l-khalifati...bi-smi l-khalifati in wāfaqa ‘smuhu ‘smahu). I shall refer to this rule (or rules very similar to it) as the namesake taboo. What the rule means can best be shown by giving an example. Let us suppose that the caliph’s name is Ahmad, as in the case of the caliph al-Mu’tadid (r. 892–902). It would then be improper to mention Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) by name in his presence. (You could, of course, solve the problem by using the patronymic “Ibn Hanbal” on its own; the problem is the name, not the person.) Hilal follows up his statement of the rule with an anecdote about a tribesman called Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, who almost missed getting his pay from the Umayyad caliph of the same name (r. 715–17) when the latter asked him his name and the unwary tribesman responded, “Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Malik.”

Hilal goes on to add a further rule. If it is necessary to mention anything that is also the name of one of the ruler’s womenfolk, then one must substitute another word for it. Here too he backs up his point with an anecdote. A kinsman of Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Salih (d. 811 or 812), sent a note to the caliph in which he had occasion to mention bamboo; he carefully avoided the word khayzurān and used a less elegant synonym, because Khayzuran (d. 789) was the caliph’s mother. But we can leave this refinement aside and return to the namesake taboo proper.

The namesake taboo was not restricted to the names of caliphs, as we learn from an anecdote about the litterateur Abu Zayd al-Balkhi (d. 934). We usually know him respectfully by his teknonym Abu Zayd, but his name and patronymic were Ahmad ibn Sahl. One day he went to call on the governor of Khurasan, a certain Ahmad ibn Sahl ibn Hashim (d. 920). The governor asked him his name, whereupon Abu Zayd replied, with apparent disrespect to the governor, “Abu Zayd.” The governor put this down to social ineptitude, and this diagnosis soon appeared to be confirmed: when Abu Zayd departed, he left his signet ring behind him in the place where he had been sitting. But when the governor examined the signet ring, he saw the name Ahmad ibn Sahl on it. He then realized that the apparent ineptitude of his visitor had actually been the height of good breeding: by leaving his signet ring behind, Abu Zayd had quietly provided the explanation for his apparent disrespect. For Abu Zayd to have spoken the name of the governor in his presence would have been a far worse lapse than calling himself by his teknonym.

We also hear of the namesake taboo in the context of behavior towards kings (mulāk). Siraj al-Din Mahmud Urmawi (d. 1283 or 1284), a scholar who studied in Mosul and died in Konya, was the author of a “mirror for princes.” He devotes a section of this work to the way one should behave towards kings; for example, he advises that one should brush one’s teeth before going to see them. At one point in this discussion he states that when the king asks someone his name, and he happens to have the same name as the king (ham-nām-i pādshāh bāshad), he should not speak his name (nām-i khwud nagūyad), but rather reply, “Your slave is the son of so-and-so.”

In short, the namesake taboo protects the dignity of those who wield political power by forbidding the mention by name in their presence of anyone who shares their names. Those who wield political power...
may be caliphs, governors, or kings, and those who may not be named may be present or absent.

There are doubtless other attestations of the namesake taboo to be found in the sources. But they are hard to locate, even with electronic search facilities, and the attestations given above are at least enough to establish the existence of this exotic phenomenon. To my knowledge it has not found more than an occasional mention in the secondary literature, though here too I may be guilty of oversight. Be this as it may, what are we to make of it?

We can start by resolving our phenomenon into two components. First, there is the rather trivial fact that for different people to have the same name is a problem. The primary function of your name is to identify you, so if someone else has the same name, the identification process collapses in confusion. Here we have a glitch that can affect any society in which names are not unique; where people and cultures differ is in the ways in which they attempt to work around the problem.

Second, there is the fact that in societies that set a value on steep hierarchy, it makes sense that the confusion should be obviated at the expense of the inferior party. If it is taken for granted that somebody has to stand down, then it is naturally the inferior party who is temporarily denied the use of his name. This is by no means trivial, and here some cross-cultural comparison may be interesting.

One way to go is to compare the namesake taboo with the way things are in the West. I take it that if during his presidency Bill Clinton had met the Harvard Islamicist Bill Graham or my late colleague Jerry Clinton, and had asked them who they were, each of them would have had a First-Amendment right to respond with his own name; and my guess is that both of them would have exercised that right. What is more, I doubt if either of them would have hesitated, if chatting to the President about his experiences in England, to refer by name to the “Hilary term” at Oxford or the London suburb of “Chelsea.” So if we see it from the perspective of the heirs of the American Revolution, our namesake taboo looks like a characteristic excess of Oriental despotism.

But the more interesting comparison is not with revolutionary America, but rather with traditional China, where we encounter a whole system of onomastic taboos. Indeed, seen from the perspective of imperial China, the namesake taboo as we have encountered it in the Muslim world seems so rudimentary that one could hardly call it a system; it looks more like Occidental anarchy.

Apart from the fact that such practices are much older in China—where they would seem to date from at least the first half of the first millennium BC—there are three major differences between the Chinese system and our namesake taboo.

First, in China the taboo applies just as firmly to writing as to speech. Abu Zayd could affect to forget a signet ring with his name inscribed on it without thereby giving cause for yet further offense; in a Chinese context, by contrast, the written name would have been no less of a violation of the taboo than the spoken name. This meant, for example, that candidates taking official examinations in China towards the end of the Ch’ing dynasty (1644–1911) had to avoid using a set of eighteen characters in their written answers; mostly these were characters that appeared in the personal names of the emperors of the dynasty, though the same protection was extended to Confucius (d. 479 BC) and Mencius (fourth century BC).

Second, the domain of the taboo was not limited to the immediate presence of the emperor. Since the second century BC it had extended to the whole realm. Thus in 1782 a provincial governor could stir up doubts about the loyalty of Muslims by pointing out that a Chinese biography of the Prophet seized in his province “does not respect the prohibitions regarding using the name of the emperor.” The exact rules varied from dynasty to dynasty. But the general idea was that the word or words making up the personal names of the emperors could not be spoken, and the characters used to write them could not be written—even in contexts that had nothing to do with an emperor’s personal name. It is as if it had been taboo to say or write “dollar bill” anywhere in the United States for the duration of the Clinton presidency.

The third major difference between the Chinese system and our namesake taboo lies in the relationship of each to the wider culture—or the lack of it. The Chinese system was entirely at home in Chinese culture; like so much else in traditional China, it was firmly grounded in Chinese family values. Every family had its taboo names, just as the imperial family did, although the taboo of a private family was supposed to stop at the door. Thus for the historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien (d. ca. 86 BC) the personal name of his father was taboo, and this led him to alter two names he mentions in his history. A common mark of European speakers of Chinese in modern times was their
insensitivity to the taboos of those they addressed and the embarrassment they thereby gave rise to; by contrast, a sign of the superb micropolitical skills of one Chinese emperor was that he never forgot the taboos of any family he had visited. Until recently, to ask a Chinese schoolboy to name his parents was to ask him to violate a taboo—just as Confucius would never pronounce the two characters of his mother’s name together. In the Islamic world, by contrast, the system is distinctly out of place in the wider culture. It seems to have no roots in the Arab heritage, and it has no properly Islamic underpinnings.

The first two differences, taken together, help to explain the fact that the main reason one hears about the Chinese system in Western scholarly literature is that it affects the work of modern philologists. Substitutions and mutilations of taboo characters are in effect a form of textual corruption, an added contribution to the ravages of time—though they can also leave behind clues to the history of a text. The name of the founder of the Han dynasty, for example, was taboo in its day, and this led to the substitution of another character in the text of the “Han Stone Classics.” It is as if we could infer that a copy of the Qur’an was written in the reign of al-Mu’tadid by observing that the scribe had been obliged to alter the name Ahmad in Qur’an 61:6—a thought as outrageous in Islamic terms as the idea that Bill Graham cannot be Bill in the presence of Bill Clinton is in American terms. So far as I know, there is still no major study of the taboo system as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. This is a pity; it would amply merit one.

The third difference is related to a striking onomastic disparity between China and most cultures to the west of it. In traditional China it was improper to name someone after someone else—say, a monarch, a governor, or an ancestor; such an action counted as a violation of a taboo, rather than a sign of respect. In China one checked the family registers precisely to avoid giving a child the name of an ancestor. In the West, by contrast, we frequently name one person after another. George Washington (d. 1799) may not in the end have proved a very loyal subject of the British crown, but his father surely meant no disrespect to King George II (r. 1727–60) when in 1732 he named his son George. As for ancestors, in America we are used to whole dynasties where the personal name of the father is conferred on the son. The Islamic world has a similarly positive attitude to “naming after.” The long-lived Companion Anas ibn Malik (d. 709 or 710) was named after (bihi summiya) his uncle Anas ibn al-Nadr, who was killed at the battle of Uhud in 625. Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (d. 658) was born in 632, in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). Muhammad ibn Talha (d. 656) was given his name by the Prophet himself; and there were further Muhammads of this vintage. Moreover, it is not hard to find people in biographical dictionaries called “Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad”—which in Chinese terms amounts to a whole string of taboo violations.

Nevertheless, the Muslim namesake taboo is not completely isolated in the wider Near Eastern context. Admittedly, I have not encountered any Near Eastern parallel in the case of the name of the ruler, the core case with which we are concerned. There are, however, scattered Muslim parallels in religious and social contexts. There is a story about Talha ibn ’Ubayd Allah (d. 656), who had made a point of naming his sons after prophets—including Muhammad. The caliph ’Umar (r. 634–44) took exception to this, decreeing that all who bore the names of prophets should change them; Talha won the ensuing argument, and the practice of giving such names has continued to this day—except that in some Muslim societies we find variant pronunciations of “Muhammad” that tend to be preferred when the name belongs to someone other than the Prophet. There is a possible Jewish parallel to such sensitivity: we scarcely hear of Jews being named “Moses” before Islamic times, when Jewish customs may have come under the influence of Muslim practice. On the Jewish side, in addition, Rabbinic norms placed a taboo on the name of one’s father (and also of one’s teacher). Whether any such practices existed in Sasanian Iran does not seem to be known; a passage in a work ascribed to Jahiz (d. 868 or 869) suggests the possibility that ideas of this kind might have a Sasanian background. But with regard to the origin of the Muslim namesake taboo, I have no hypothesis to offer.

The most interesting point in all this is not, however, about origins, but rather about the relationship between an imperial state and the society it rules. To us, and to the Western tradition in general, nothing is more intrinsically the property of a society than its language. From time to time governments will be found seeking to make linguistic changes for the sake of what they see or present as the public good. But for the state to appropriate words and names current in the community’s language—to claim exclusive own-
ship of them, denying their use to the society even in reproducing the texts of its classics—is by our standards breathtaking. Yet this practice was widely implemented, and very much at home, in imperial China. This need not altogether surprise us: in no other part of the premodern world did an imperial state come as close to claiming ownership of the culture of its society, a point that can be richly documented in such fields as historiography, law, and the workings of the calendar. Against this background, the surprise is that the namesake taboo, in however modest a form, should appear in the Islamic world at all. There the role of the state was in comparative terms severely restricted in all the three fields just mentioned. The very presence of the namesake taboo in a Muslim context thus goes against the grain. This at least makes it intriguing, which perhaps does something to mitigate the shame of presenting an aniconic tabhfa to Oleg Grabar.

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NOTES

Authors’s note: I am indebted to Patricia Crone and Ben Elman for reading and commenting on a draft of this article.


3. Hilâl, Rusûm, 57, 1. 13; idem, Rules and Regulations, 49.

4. Hilâl, Rusûm, 58, 1. 2; idem, Rules and Regulations, 49.

5. Hilâl, Rusûm, 59, 1. 3; idem, Rules and Regulations, 50.


7. The editor of the Rusûm notes two parallels with regard to the names of women (Hilâl, Rusûm, 59 n. 1). One is an anecdote about the poet Hammad al-Rawia (d. 771 or 772), who unwisely recited a poem that included the name Sumayya in the presence of Ziyad ibn Abih (d. 673)—whose mother was named Sumayya—and thereby so angered him that the chamberlain asked everyone to leave; after that he always made sure that no poem he recited in the presence of a caliph or amir mentioned the name of one of his womenfolk (Abû ’l-Fârâj al-Isbahânî, al-Aghâni, 24 vols. [Cairo, 1927–74], 6:93.4). The other is a reminiscence about a letter written to Abu Taghlib (r. 967–79), the last independent Hamdanid ruler in the Jazira, in which the author had occasion to use the feminine adjective jumil (beautiful); the letter was seen by Abû Taghlib’s powerful sister Jamila, who took great offense: al-Muhassin ibn ’Alî al-Tantûkî, Nishâwar al-muhâdâra, 2 vols, ed. and trans. D. S. Margoliouth (London, 1921–22), 1:97.15; trans. 2:106.


14. Urmawî, Latâ’îf, 283.3.


17. See the anecdote from the Kuo yû about the taboo names of two early rulers of the state of Lu quoted in Emmrich, Tabu und Meidung, 24; trans. C. de Harlez as Kâu-yû: Discours des royaumes, partie II (Louvain, 1895), 118.

18. See the list in A. Vissière, “Traité des caractères chinois que l’on évite par respect,” Journal Asiatique, 9th ser., 18 (1901): 325–26. The ramifications of the avoidance of these characters were considerable, and are set out at length in the rest of the article.

19. Haenisch, “Heiligung,” 7. Vissière observes that the Ch’ing taboos were not observed in Korea, Japan, or Vietnam and adds in a note that Vietnam had analogous taboo characters of its own (“Traité,” 322).
20. Z. Ben-Dor Benite, The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2005), 217; for the date see 215.
22. Emmrich, Tabu und Meidung, 36 n. 183.
28. The practice of "naming after" nevertheless existed (Bauer, Der chinesische Personename, 342–50); there are even examples of sons bearing the same name as their fathers (350). For attitudes in contemporary Taiwan, which are close to non-Chinese norms, see Chao-chih Liao, A Sociolinguistic Study of Taiwan-Chinese Personal Names, Nicknames, and English Names (Taipei, 2005), 217; for the date see 215.
29. Haenrich, "Heiligung," 5–6. The taboo was, however, limited to five generations; Haenrich, "Heiligung," 7.
30. Whether his intention was in fact to name his son after George II is not known: see H. Clark, All Cloudless Glory: The Life of George Washington, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1995–96), 1:12.
33. Ibn Hibbān, Mashāhīr, 25 no. 100; A. Fischer, "Vergöttlichung und Tabuisierung der Namen Muḥammad’s bei den Muslimen," in Beiträge zur Arabistik, Semitistik und Islamwissenschaft, ed. R. Hartmann and H. Scheel (Leipzig, 1944), 323. This study was drawn to my attention by Bernard Lewis.
34. Ibn Hibbān, Mashāhīr, 47 no. 301; 54 no. 369; 56 no. 391; cf. also Fischer, "Vergöttlichung," 322.
35. There are about a dozen to be found in the index of Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Dhahabi, Siyār a‘lām al-nabīlāt, ed. S. al-Arnā‘ūt et al., 25 vols. (Beirut 1981–88), 25:424–25. They do not appear in the first three centuries of Islam, and peak in the twelfth century AD. If we can trust the copyists, Dhahabi has one Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad, a Basaran ‘Ali who died in 1165: Dhahabi, Siyār, 20:423,8 but cf. 424,3 where the string is reduced from five to four. Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad. For another case of five successive Muḥammads see Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, al-Dawr al-khāmīna, ed. M. S. Jāḥ al-Haqq, 5 vols. (Cairo, ca. 1966), 4:348–49 no. 4469 (an ascetic who died in 1381 or 1382). See also Caetani and Gabrieli, Onomasticon Arabicum, vol. 1, 67, 137, and Fischer, "Vergöttlichung," 327. Far more common, of course, is the pattern in which the grandson bears the same name as the grandfather.
36. For this story see Fischer, "Vergöttlichung," 313, and M. J. Kister, "Call Yourselves by Graceful Names..." in his Society and Religion from Jāhilyya to Islam (Aldershot and Brookfield, 1990), article XII, 22–24.
37. Fischer speculates that this might express a reaction of Arab and Muslim pride against excessive Jewish and Christian influence ("Vergöttlichung," 314), and Kister suggests seeing it as a nativist reaction to foreign names, adding another anec- dote about ‘Umar that supports this interpretation: Kister, “Call Yourselves by Graceful Names,” 24. In our story, how- ever, ‘Umar also objects to the use of the name Muḥammad.
38. Fischer, "Vergöttlichung," 332–37; see esp. 334 on the Moroccan Mūḥammad, and 335–36 on the Turkish Mehmed.
39. I am indebted to Joseph Witztum for assistance on this point, which I believe I owe to a conversation with Haggai Ben-Shammas many years ago. Cf. Encyclopaedia Judaica, 16 vols. (Jerusalem, 1971–72, 12: col. 809 (in the article "Names"): “Not a single rabbi is known by the name of Moses.” As Patri- cia Crone points out to me, Christian attitudes to the name “Jesus” may have been, and may still be, in some measure analogous.
40. Maimonides (d. 1204) states that a son should not call his father by his name (bi-shōmo) whether he is alive or dead; if others bear the same name as his father or his teacher, he alters (mshanneh) their names: see Mshanneh Torah (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1965–67), 1834; Shoftīm, Ḥilkhot mamrim, chap. 6, section 3; A. M. Herschman, trans., The Code of Maimonides, Book Fourteen: The Book of Judges (New Haven, 1949), 154. Maimonides adds as his own view that this does not apply to common names such as Abraham or Moses when the son is not in the presence of his father. This taboo is pre-Islamic, being found already in the Babylonian Talmud, where we read: “A scholar (ḥabbak) alters (mshanneh) the name of his father and the name of his teacher” (Babylonian Talmud, Vilnius 1880–86, Qiddushin 31b:42; in the Soncino translation, ed. I. Epstein (London 1935–52), Kiddushin, 154. I owe these references to Joseph Braude.
41. We can at least point out that the names of Sasanian kings could be written—they appear, for example, on their coins—and that Bahram I (r. 271–74) was succeeded by his son Bahram II (r. 274–93): R. N. Frye, “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians,” in The Cambridge History of Iran, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 1968–91), 3:127–28, 178; R. Göbl, “Sasanian Coins,” in The Cambridge History of Iran, 3:330–31; R. Göbl, Sasanian Numismatics (New York, 1990), 22 and table XV.
42. Jāhiz (attrib.), al-Taṭ fi ʿalḥāl al-mulūk, ed. Ahmad Zaki Bāshā (Cairo, 1914), 83–89; trans. C. Pellat as Le livre de la couronne (Paris, 1954), 111–13. I owe my knowledge of this passage to Andras Hamori. The author says that no king should be called by his name or teknonym, regrets that the ancient poets had done so, and affirms that none of their subjects ever acted like this to the Sasanid kings: Jāhiz, Taṭ, 83.7. the passage is cited in F. Gabrieli, “Etichetta di corte e costumi Sasanidi nel Kitāb ʿAlḥāl al-Mulūk di al-Gāhīz,” Rivista degli Studi Orientali 11 (1926–28): 295. But he does not mention the namesake taboo. He does deal with the situation in which the visitor’s name is one of the royal epithets (ṣījāt), like al-saʿīd or al-sayyid; if asked his name, such a visitor should avoid calling himself by it: Jāhiz, Taṭ, 87.1. For the authorship and date of this ninth-century work in the Persian tradition see G. Schoe- ler, “Verfasser und Titel des dem Gāhīz zugeschriebenen sog. Kitāb al-Taṭ,” Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesell- schaft 130 (1980): esp. 221, 224–25. Analogous practices appear in societies where the scale of political organization is smaller. Long ago the Sanskritist F.
Max Müller discussed the well-attested case of Tahiti in his *The Science of Language*, 2 vols. (New York, 1891), 2:38–41, and added a couple of parallels, one from Cambodia and the other from southern Africa (2:42, 46–47). No doubt there are further examples to be found, but a recent book on linguistic taboos mentions only the southern African case: K. Allan and K. Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge, 2006), 128. This work was drawn to my attention by Joshua Katz.