

# CHANGE IN THE SELECTION OF AUSPICIOUS PERSONAL NAMES IN THAI SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article aims to study the change in the selection of auspicious personal names in Thai society by comparing the first names of people of two age groups, over 81 years old and under 20 years old, at different periods of time: before 1921 and 1981-2000. The result of the study shows that the first names of the young generation reflect a stronger belief in auspicious letters as practised in the traditional naming textbook "Tamrataksa" than those of the older generations. There are a few differences in the selection of names with favorable meanings of the old and young generations due to changing values.

## Introduction

Most studies on names of people in Asian societies show that the selection of personal names normally deals with

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auspiciousness. Blum (1997) finds that Chinese parents and elder relatives are the ones who select auspicious first names for a baby because it is traditionally believed that such names can make the baby have a good life.

In Thai society, first names are considered very important because they are not only used to call or to identify the owners, but are also closely related to the owners and help them have good lives. Thus, first names are usually carefully selected in terms of auspiciousness. If a name is auspicious, its auspiciousness increases every time it is called. On the contrary, inauspicious names may cause sorrow or even death. Belief in auspicious and inauspicious first names has been in Thai society for a long time. A line in *Khunchang-Khunphan* (Fine Arts Department 1990: 5), one of the best literary works of the Ratanakosin period, refers to the giving of auspicious names and can be translated as "Grandparents are pleased to name their granddaughter with a auspiciousness." Thep Sunthornsarathoon (1998: 27) also states that "Auspicious names will be the owners' source of luck all their lives".

At present such belief seems to be gaining more ground. Modern Thai people seem more eager to find methods to come up with auspicious first names. Auspicious letters are carefully selected to coin new names. Favorable meanings in accordance with contemporary social values are chosen. Most name coiners give names according to the traditional naming textbook *Tamrataksa* which emphasizes the selection of auspicious letters and the avoidance of inauspicious letters. Suphaphan Na Bangchang (1994: 107) concludes that the favorite way of naming is to use the principles



of traditional naming given in *Tamratak-sa*. According to Thep Sunthornsara-thoon (1998: 57), coining first names in royal families followed the principles given in *Tamratak-sa* a long time ago. Today, when commoners are better educated, they also follow the royal practice and tend to choose names based on their auspiciousness more and more. A lot of naming books are available in bookstores, and Thai people pay a lot of attention to them. Most naming books explain principles of naming based on *Tamratak-sa*, and give a lot of examples of auspicious first names for readers to select conveniently. Furthermore, modern Thai people seem to change their names more often than in the past. P. Suwan (1995: 9-10) refers to the belief that "People who have an unpleasant, unsuccessful, or unhappy life, tend to blame it on an inauspicious first name. However, if inauspicious first names are replaced by auspicious ones, the owners' lives will be better". In informal interviews, I found that most people who changed their names believed that they would have a better life thereafter since auspicious names can bring happiness, success, and goodness in life.

Auspicious names comprise two elements. The first is the appropriate choice of letters in line with the principles in *Tamratak-sa*. The second element is the meaning of the selected words which usually convey the social values at a particular time.

In this paper, I aim to show the change in the selection of auspicious first names in Thai society. I will compare the first names of Thai people of two age groups in different periods: namely, Thais over 81 who were named before 1921, and Thais under 20 who were named

between 1981 and 2000. Since names always reflect beliefs and values of the contemporary society, it is hypothesized that the names of the two periods differ and thus point to a change in the selection of auspicious personal names.

The data of 1,314 first names were taken from Census Department of records from four districts in Thailand: Muang district of Chiangmai Province, Muang district of Nakhonratchasima Province, Thonburi district of Bangkok, and Muang district of Nakhonsrithammarat Province. Five hundred and fourteen names<sup>2</sup> belong to the group of over 81 (hereafter this group will be referred to as "the old generation"), and eight hundred names belong to the subjects under 20 (as referred to as "the young generation").

The result of the study will be given in 2 parts: the first part deals with the selection of auspicious letters based on the traditional "Tamratak-sa", and the second part is about the selection of favorable meanings.

## **Some Knowledge about *Tamratak-sa***

Some astrological specialists refer to *Tamratak-sa* by different terms such as "Khamphiitaksaphayakorn" (Sutabut 1970: Preface), "Khamphiitaksapakorn" (Phlooluang 1997: 33), "Khamphiimahataksaphayakorn" (Pitsanuphetang 1984: 349), and "Khamphiinamtaksapakorn" (Na Bangchang 1984: 107). Despite the differences in names,

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<sup>2</sup>There are relatively few samples due to the small population of this age group.



the content and principles in these naming books are alike: they are astrological textbooks which are used to forecast everything concerning the lives of human beings. The basis of such books is the belief that the movement of “Atthakhroh”, or the eight heavenly bodies, affects everything, including the lives of human beings in good and bad ways. One part of the book is about the giving of auspicious name and explains the principles of selecting auspicious letters.

Praphit Sutabut (1970: Preface) states that *Tamrataksa* was first written in Pali

or Sanskrit; the identity of the writer and the exact time when the book was written are unknown. Phooluang (1977: 33) however, assumes that *Tamrataksa* originated from Mon and was rewritten in the Bangkok period. The book is very helpful for astrological studies and explains more thoroughly “Cakaradipani”, a textbook about the origin of the universe. In addition, it is very important for studying *Khamphii-phichaisongkhrum*, a textbook of the science of war, and *Khamphii-sorotpuram*, a textbook which suggests how to choose where to build a home.

Chart 1 “Atthakhroh” and groups of letters for each day

Sun Northeast Sunday อ and all vowels	Moon East Monday ก ข ค ง	Mars Southeast Tuesday จ ฉ ช ซ ฌ ญ
Venus North Friday ศ ษ ส ห ฟ ฮ		Mercury South Wednesday ฎ ฏ ฐ ฑ ฒ ณ
Pluto Northwest Wednesday night ย ร ล ว	Jupiter Southeast Thursday บ ป ผ ฝ พ ฟ ภ	Uranus Southwest Saturday ด ต ถ ท ธ น



A part of *Tamrataksa* refers to naming, which is well-known and widely believed by Thai people. It gives details about the principles of astrology. “Atthakhroh” or the eight heavenly bodies consisting of the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Uranus, Jupiter, Pluto, and Venus are mentioned in the book. Each of these heavenly bodies is assigned its position and day: sun, northeast and Sunday, moon, east and Monday, Mars, southeast and Tuesday, Mercury, south and Wednesday, Uranus, southwest and Saturday, Jupiter, west and Thursday, Pluto with northwest as its location does not have its day but night: Wednesday, and Venus, north and Friday, respectively. The position of these heavenly bodies is believed to influence one’s luck. Groups of letters are put in the slot for each star or each day to facilitate forecasting and naming as shown in the Chart 1.

The chart above shows that the seven days and Wednesday night have their own letters; for example, อ and all the vowels are for Sunday, ก ข ฃ ค ฅ and ง are for Monday, and จ ฉ ช ซ ฌ and ญ are for Tuesday, etc.

To decide which letter is auspicious or inauspicious, Chart 2 must be applied systematically with “Taksa”, counting clockwise according to eight groups of meanings: Parivara (surrounding people), Ayu (health and long life), Teja (power, dignity, and fame), Sri (goodness, attraction, and wealth), Mula (important base, social status, and treasure), Utsaha (diligence and tolerance), Montri (great authority and supporters), and finally, Kalakini (evil, misfortune, obstacles, decline, worries, and sorrow). One counts clockwise beginning with the day of one’s birth. For example, if one is born

Chart 2 Taksa and the groups of letters for people born on Monday

Kalakini อ and all vowel	Monday Parivara ก ข ฃ ค ฅ ง	Ayu จ ฉ ช ซ ฌ ญ
Montri ค ฅ ฌ ห พ ฝ		Teja ฎ ฏ ฐ ฑ ฒ ณ
Utsaha ย ร ล ว	Mula บ ป ผ ฝ พ ฟ ภ	Sri ด ต ถ ท ธ น



on Monday, one begins with the Monday slot (see Chart 2), which automatically becomes Parivara for those born on Monday. Counting clockwise, Sunday becomes Kalakini. The letters in all the slots except Sunday are auspicious letters and can be used to confer auspiciousness: ก ข ซ ฌ and ง are Parivara, จ ฉ ช ฌ and ญ are Ayu, ฎ ฏ ฐ ฑ ฒ and ณ are Teja, ด ต ถ ท ธ and น are Sri, บ ป ผ ฝ พ ฟ ภ and ม are Mula,

ย ร ล and ว are Utsaha, ศ ช ส ห ฬ and ฮ are Montri. The letters in the Sunday slot, อ and all vowels, are Kalakini, inauspicious letters, which should not be used. Chart 2 sums up the naming principles explained above.

For another example, auspicious and inauspicious naming letters for people who born on Friday are shown in the following chart.

Chart 3 Taksa and the group of letter for people born on Friday

<p>Ayu</p> <p>จ and all vowel</p>	<p>Teja</p> <p>ฎ ฏ ฐ ฑ ฒ ฌ ญ</p>	<p>Sri</p> <p>ด ต ถ ท ธ น</p>
<p>Friday</p> <p>Parivara</p> <p>ก ข ซ ฬ ห ฬ ฮ</p>	<p>Mula</p> <p>บ ป ฝ ฝ พ ฟ ภ ฌ ญ</p>	
<p>Kalakini</p> <p>อ ร ล ว</p>	<p>Montri</p> <p>ย ร ล ฬ พ ฟ ภ</p>	<p>Utsaha</p> <p>ด ต ถ ท ธ น</p>

Auspicious names must be coined with all auspicious letters and without even one inauspicious letter; names with any inauspicious letter are inauspicious. For example, for a person born on Monday, the name ศรราม /sǎ:nra:m/, is inauspicious because it contains the vowel “า”, which is inauspicious because “า” is in the Kalakini slot (see Chart 2). For a person born on Friday, the name สุวันนัท /sù?wǎnan/, is inauspicious because it contains the letter “ว” which is in the Kalakini slot (see Chart 3).

### Change in the selection of letters for auspicious names

Since names reflect the beliefs and values of the contemporary society, a study of names in two different periods should reveal a change of beliefs in the society. I hypothesize that the young generation has stronger belief in auspicious names. I compare the data of 170 names of the old generation with 800 names of the young generation. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 1.



**Table 1 Avoidance of Inauspicious Letters  
in Names of the old and young generations.**

Items	Names of the old generation	Names of the young generation
Total Names	170	800
Names with Avoidance of Inauspicious Letters	91	516
Average Per Cent of First Names with Avoidance of Inauspicious Letters	<b>53.53</b>	<b>64.50</b>

The table above shows that the average percent of names with no inauspicious letters is lower in the old generation than in the young generation. This reflects a stronger belief in the process of giving auspicious names between 1981 and 2000 than before 1921.

To confirm the younger generations stronger belief in the auspiciousness of names, I collected more data of new names chosen by people who changed their names between 1981 and 2000. I found that 81.22 percent (333 out of 410) of those who changed their names avoided inauspicious letters. This reflects the new generation's belief in auspiciousness following *Tamrataksa*. The following are examples of old names and new names of the young generation.

For those born on Sunday, of which the inauspicious letters are ศ, ช, ส, ห, พ, and ฮ

previous name สุโรจน์ /sùʔrô:t/ (great progress)  
renamed จิโรจน์ /cìrâ:rô:t/ (long-lasting progress)

previous name เครื่องศักดิ์ /kriangsàk/ (famous power)  
renamed ปฏิภาณ /paʔtìpha:n/ (wit)

previous name สุพรรณิ /sùʔphanni:/ (beautiful skin)  
renamed อธิมาพร /thìʔtìʔma:pho:n/ (Blessing of stability)

It can be concluded that the occurrence of auspicious letters in the new names increased. The names of the young generation reflect a stronger belief in auspicious letters, as prescribed in *Tamrataksa*, than those of the old generation.

### Change in the selection of names with favorable meanings

Studying the change in the selection of names with favorable meanings, I analyzed 514 names of the old generation and 800 names of the young generation. I analyzed each lexical item in each name and categorized them on the basis of significant meanings. For example, the name ดี /di:/ (to be good),



one lexical item, is grouped in the category of “goodness and prosperity”, the name สมบัติ /sǒmbàt/ (treasure), one lexical item, is grouped in the “wealth” category, the name ไฉฉะฉะฉะ /wajrô:trít/ two lexical items, is separated into ไฉฉะฉะ /wajrô:t/ (to make great progress) which is included in the meaning group of “goodness and prosperity” and ฉะฉะ /rít/ (magical power) which is grouped in the “dignity, fame, and power” category.

Favorable meanings are grouped into 12 categories. It can be noted that the lexical items can be standard Thai, Thai dialect, Pali and Sanskrit. Examples of lexical items are shown below :

- 1. Goodness and Prosperity : ดี /di:/ (to be good) ศรี /sǐ:/ (attraction) ส่วฉะฉะ /sà?wàt/ (virtue) มงคค /monkhon/ (to be auspicious) ฉะฉะ /cà?rə:n/ (to progress)
- 2. Wealth : ทอง /tho:ŋ/ (gold) กั้ว /kê:w/ (jewelery) เพ็ชระ /phét/ (diamond) ลิน /sǐn/ (treasure)
- 3. Nature : บัว /bua/ (lotus) ฝ้าย /fâ:j/ (cotton) ฉันทร์ /can/ (the moon) กุหลาบ /kù?là:p/ (rose) ฉะฉะ /rá?phi:/ (the sun) ดาว /da:w/ (star) ฉะฉะ /khi:ri:/ (mountain) นกฉะฉะ /nóppha?sǐn/ (river)
- 4. Humans and Family : ยะพา /jú?pha:/ (woman) ฉะฉะ /?à?noŋ/ (girl) ฉะฉะ /thí?da:/ (daughter) ปฉะฉะ /pà?nátda:/ (granddaughter) กุฉะ /kun/ (family)
- 5. Dignity, Fame and Power : ฉะฉะ /de:cha:/ (power) ฉะฉะ /chaj/ (victory) กิตติ /kítthí?/ (dignity) ฉะฉะ /sàk/ (Fame) ฉะฉะ /rít/ (magical power)
- 6. Actions and Qualities : ทา /tha:/ (to paint) ฉะฉะ /?à:p/ (to wetten) ฉะฉะ /dàt/ (to bend) ฉะฉะ /khùt/ (to dig) ฉะ /tú?/ (to be fat) เล็ก /lék/ (to be small) ฉะ /tía/ (to be short) ฉะฉะ /de:ŋ/ (red)

7. Knowledge and Ability : วุฉะ /wú?/ (degree) ฉะฉะ /wít/ (knowledge) ฉะฉะ /nát/ (learned person) ฉะฉะ /wítcha:/ (enlightenment) ฉะฉะ /me:thi:/ (academic) ปฉะฉะ /pri:cha:/ (to be sagacious) ปฉะฉะ /panja:/ (wisdom) ฉะฉะ /phu:ri?/ (intelligent person) ฉะฉะ /thirá?/ (educated person)

8. Happiness and Love : ปฉะ /pre:m/ (to be fine) ฉะฉะ /sámra:n/ (to be pleased) ฉะ /sùk/ (to be happy) ฉะ /ru:ŋ/ (to be cheerful) ฉะฉะ /sà?wà:t/ (passion) ฉะฉะ /?a:mon/ (pleasure) ฉะฉะ /ka:n/ (beloved person)

9. Religion and Beliefs : บุน /bun/ (merit) ฉะฉะ /tham/ (Buddhist teaching) ฉะฉะ /tha:da:/ (god of creating) ฉะฉะ /sǐ?wá?/ (the highest god)

10. Suitability : ฉะ /sǒm/ (to deserve)

11. Eternity : ฉะฉะ /ci:ra:/ (to be long-lasting) ฉะฉะ /?ammara:/ (to be immortal) ฉะฉะ /thá:won/ (forever)

12. Order and Numbers : ฉะ /?à:j/ (the first) ฉะ /lu:n/ (the last) ฉะ /lâ:/ (the latest) ปฉะ /pà?thǒm/ (the first) ฉะ /cà?tù?/ (four) ปฉะ /pancà?/ (five) นฉะ /nóp/ (nine) ฉะ /sà?hàt/ (a thousand)

Thai names must contain lexical items with good meaning and no names contain lexical items with bad meaning. However, there are still some lexical items with unknown meaning : ฉะ /ru:ŋ/ ฉะ /mǐ?/ ฉะ /cêm/ ฉะ /nuāŋ/ ฉะ /rě:m/ ฉะ /na:ta:li:/ ฉะ /rí?sá:/ and ฉะ /chinchaw/. These lexical items may perhaps be personal names or have obsolete meanings.

The frequency of each category is calculated, and the change in the selection of names with favorable meanings is then found. The old and the young generations select words of favorable meaning with different degree of frequency.



Analyzing data of 514 names of the old generation or the names given before 1921, I found 573 lexical items. These

items are grouped into meaning categories, and the frequency of words in each category is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency of Meaning Categories in Thai Names of the Old Generation

Meaning Categories	Frequency	Average Per Cent
1. Action and Quality	165	28.80
2. Goodness and Prosperity	79	13.79
3. Nature	69	12.04
4. Wealth	64	11.17
5. Happiness and Love	53	9.25
6. Religion and Beliefs	31	5.41
7. Human and Family	31	5.41
8. Eternity	22	3.84
9. Knowledge and Ability	18	3.14
10. Suitability	17	2.97
11. Order and Numbers	8	1.39
12. Dignity , Fame , and Power	6	1.05
Unknown Meanings	10	1.74
Total	573	100

The table above shows that the names of the old generation carry meanings which belong most often to the category of “**Actions and Qualities**”. The next three categories, each with more than 10 per cent, are “Goodness and Prosperity”, “Nature”, and “Wealth”. The order of the categories indicates the social values of the past, in which the actions and qualities of the name owners were most auspicious. The characteristics of the babies and the situation at the time of birth may have had an influence on the selection of names. For example, เล็ก /lék/ (to be small) was probably selected because the baby was small, ขุด /khùt/ (to dig) perhaps was selected because the father or mother herself was digging the soil at the time of the child’s birth

The categories of “Goodness and Prosperity” and “Wealth” indicate leading desirable goals in life such as ดี /diː/ (to be good) มงคล /mɔŋkhon/ (to be auspicious) เจริญ /càʔræon/ (to progress) and ทอง /thɔːŋ/ (gold) แก้ว /kêːw/ (jewelry) เพชร /phét/ (diamond) สิน/ Sín/ (treasure) แหวน /wǎːn/ (ring) บัวคำ /buakham/ (golden lotus). The category “nature”, for example บัว /bua/ (lotus) ฝ้าย /fâːj/ (cotton) จันทร์ /can/ (the moon) shows the close relation to nature and a belief in the auspiciousness of natural things.

Analyzing data of 800 names of the young generation or the names given between 1981 and 2000, I found 1,299 lexical items, which I grouped into 12 categories. The following table shows the frequency of occurrence and the average per cent of each meaning group.



Table 3 Frequency of meaning categories in Thai Names of the Young Generation

Meaning Categories	Frequency	Average Per Cent
1. Knowledge and Ability	219	16.86
2. Goodness and Prosperity	218	16.78
3. Human and Family	189	14.55
4. Wealth	180	13.85
5. Dignity, Fame, and Power	153	11.78
6. Nature	106	8.16
7. Happiness and Love	80	6.16
8. Religion and Beliefs	52	4.00
9. Eternity	31	2.39
10. Actions and Qualities	31	2.39
11. Order and Numbers	22	1.69
12. Suitability	14	1.08
Unknown Meanings	4	0.31
Total	1,299	100

The table above shows that names of the young generation fall most often in the category “**Knowledge and Ability**”. The next four categories, each with more than 10 per cent, are “Goodness and Prosperity”, “Human and Family”, “Wealth”, and “Dignity, Fame and Power”, respectively. Order of the categories indicates that in the modern period knowledge and ability are the most auspicious values. It is possible that in modern time it is believed that knowledge and ability enable one to live happily, because knowledgeable people are given social acceptance. Examples of names in this category are วุฒิชัย /wútthi?chaj/ (to graduate and to win), เรืองวิทย์ /ruaŋwít/ (progressive knowledge), ปรีชาพล /pri:cha:phon/ (power of sagacity), ปันญาพร /panja:pho:n/ (blessing of wisdom), ภูริวิทย์ /phu:rí?wít/ (intelligent person with a lot of knowledge), and ธีระพงศ์ /thi:rá?phoŋ/ (family of educated people).

The categories “Goodness and Prosperity”, “Humans and Family”, “Wealth”, and “Dignity, Fame and Power”, each with over 10 per cent, show the belief that such meanings are also very auspicious, and indicate leading desirable goals in Thais’ lives. Examples of names in these categories are วิชาวิทย์ /wɔ:rá?wít/ (the best knowledge), วรรดิมน /wɔ:rá?wát/ (superb progress) กมลชนก /kà?monchá?nók/ (heart of father), สุดารัตน์ /sù?da:rát/ (beloved daughter), ณัฐพงษ์ /náttthaphoŋ/ (family of learned people), ธนวิวัฒน์ /thá?ná?wát/ (financial progress), วัชร /wátchá?rá?/ (diamond) กิตติพร /kítthi?pho:m/ (blessing of dignity), ขจรศักดิ์ /khà?cɔ:nsàk/ (widespread power), ธีระเดช /thi:rá?de:t/ (power of educated person), and ฤทธิไกร /ríttthí?kraj/ (great magical power).

Compared to the names of the old generation in the same categories, we can see a modern preference for Pali and Sanskrit lexical items rather than Thai native words.



It can be seen from the study that favorable categories of the two generations differ. This reflects changes in social values, away from “Actions and Qualities” which are related to visualized and concrete characteristics in the names of the old generation, to abstract meanings such as “Knowledge and Ability”, “Goodness and Prosperity”, in the names of the young generation. Moreover, the names of the old generation reflect the real status of the name owners rather than the expectations or wishes for the name owners. For example, แดง /dɛ:ŋ/ (red), ด้ /tú:/ (to be fat), เก๋เลี้ยง /kɛ́iəŋ/ (to be smooth), น้อย /nɔ́:j/ (little), and จ้อย /cɔ́:j/ (to be tiny) can be related to the appearance of the name owners, but วิชาภัย /wɔ:rá?wít/ (the best knowledge), ธนวิวัฒน์ /thá?ná?wát/ (financial progress), วัชร /wátchá?rá?/ (diamond), ธีรเดช /thi:rá?de:t/ (power of educated person), and ฤทธิไกร /rítthí?kraj/ (great magical power) are the wishes for the name owners to be or to have.

To conclude, although the number of meaning categories in the names of the two generations is not different, there are differences in the priority given to the categories and also a shift in the choice of lexical items from Thai native words to Pali and Sanskrit words.

## **Conclusion**

Thai people have had a belief in auspiciousness and inauspiciousness for a very long time. The selection of letters and meanings in their names is evidence of such beliefs. However, the selection of auspicious letters and favorable meanings are practised more frequently among the young generation than the old generation. Younger Thais tend to

avoid unlucky letters more than their predecessors; moreover, the analysis of new names chosen by the young generation also shows that these names avoid unlucky letters by 81.22 per cent. As for the selection of favorable meanings for names, Thai people select meanings with contemporary social values. The names of the old generation carry meanings that imply contentment such as actions and qualities which reflect simplicity, acceptance of one’s own self, and suitability with one’s status, whereas the names of the young generation convey worldly desires, for example, knowledge and ability, and Goodness and prosperity.

The change in auspicious names reflects that the belief in supernatural power is increasing in Thai society in spite of today’s seemingly modern way of life. Perhaps this is the result of rapid technological and economic change in modern Thai society. There is so much competition that people feel their lives are unstable, so they try to find some psychological bulwarks to help them succeed in life. Names with auspicious letters and auspicious meanings are one interesting factor that gives them emotional stability. This is perhaps a continuous phenomenon from ancient times: that because human beings cannot understand and overcome natural disasters, they worship holy things and supernatural power.



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