

# A Study on the Language Characteristics and Cultural Connotation of the Village Names in Henan Province

Jinhai Wang<sup>1</sup>, Xiangyuan Xu<sup>2,\*</sup>, Yilin Xu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, Zhengzhou, China

<sup>2</sup>Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, Zhengzhou, China

<sup>3</sup>Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, Zhengzhou, China

\*Corresponding author: 863246314@qq.com

**Abstract:** Place names are proprietary names given by people to geographical entities, and are products of history and society. They are a highly practical form of historical and cultural form. Rural place names are an important carrier of rural culture, and the excavation and protection of place names are of great significance for the revitalization of rural culture. This article explores the language characteristics and cultural connotations behind the names of traditional villages in Henan, in order to discover the characteristics of naming traditional villages in Henan and provide empirical data for the protection and inheritance of rural language resources in Henan.

**Keywords:** Henan Province; Traditional villages; Language features; Cultural Connotation

## 1. Introduction

Place names are carriers of regional culture, gradually formed with the development of regional history and evolved with regional changes, becoming symbols of regional culture. Although there is no unified concept of “place name culture”, its two aspects of meaning are widely recognized by people, namely the culture accumulated in the long river of history by the place name text itself and the geographical entity referred to by the place name. In 2007, the Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage explicitly stated that place names belong to intangible cultural heritage. In 2016, Article 5 and Article 6 of the Notice of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Further Strengthening the Protection of Geographical Names and Cultural Heritage respectively pointed out the need to strengthen the inheritance and management of geographical names and cultural heritage, as well as deepen the research, utilization, and promotion of geographical names and cultural heritage.

The 2018 Opinions of the State Council on Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy pointed out that excellent traditional culture in rural areas should be inherited, developed, and enhanced. The degree of protection of traditional villages is a comprehensive assessment of the degree of preservation of the material cultural heritage of traditional villages and the level of cultural inheritance of intangible heritage.

Rural place names involve elements such as topography, relative geographical location, beliefs and customs, regional legends, history, language and taboos, and grassroots social organizational structure. They are carriers of historical inheritance and valuable rural cultural heritage. However, with the development of society and the continuous reduction of rural population, coupled with the construction of new communities, a large number of rural place names have disappeared or are disappearing. Currently, exploring and protecting rural place names is not only promoting and inheriting excellent culture, but also an important part of implementing rural cultural revitalization.

According to the national statistical zoning codes and urban-rural division codes released by the National Bureau of Statistics for the year 2022, Henan Province has a total of 17 prefecture level cities and 1 demonstration zone for industry city integration (Jiyuan City), 182 county-level divisions (including various economic and technological development zones), 2584 township level divisions, and 52379 village level divisions.

There are two main types of village level divisions: resident committees and village committees. The village committee, abbreviated as the village committee, is under the jurisdiction of an administrative

village. Currently, there are a total of 45887 administrative villages in Henan Province. Administrative villages are generally composed of several natural villages, and larger natural villages can independently form administrative villages or be decomposed into several administrative villages. The name of an administrative village is the place name or village name of the administrative village. Among them, there are approximately 3438 administrative villages under the jurisdiction of urban streets, which are not traditional villages in this study but modern new rural areas, and therefore are not within the scope of this study.

Henan Province, formerly known as “Zhongzhou” or “Central Plains”, has a very advantageous geographical location and a long cultural history. It is not only one of the main birthplaces of the Chinese nation, but also one of the provinces with the most preserved millennium old villages. It has always been a focus of research on place names throughout history. However, the census of place names only involves the township level, without conducting further searches. The author entered “Henan place names” and “Henan village names” in the theme search of CNKI, and found that there are only three studies on “Henan village names”, and more than 50 studies on “Henan place names”. Most of them are studies on geographical factors related to Henan place names, yin and yang, mountains and rivers, and taboo surnames. A small number of scholars have explored the naming rules and causes of administrative planning names at the county and township levels in Henan Province by studying their linguistic and cultural characteristics. The naming rules mainly involve geographical environment, historical events, cultural factors, etc., and there is little or no investigation of traditional village place names, lacking systematic analysis and data support. Therefore, this study is imperative in order to provide support for future research on traditional village place names in Henan, and to provide empirical references for the protection and inheritance of rural language resources in Henan.

## 2. The Origin of Place Names and Related Research

Laozi said, “The beginning of all things is unknown, and the mother of all things is famous.” The fame of the earth is the gradual emergence of knowledge, the gradual intensification of social communication, and the gradual recognition of the characteristics of landforms and forms. This silent symbol that remains in the heart can be said to be the embryo of name<sup>[1]</sup>.

In ancient times, people only knew each other's bodies and sounds were sufficient for communication. However, if people met at night and could not see each other clearly, they needed to “use their mouth to self name” to say a symbol as their own mark, hence the name, meaning is understood from “mouth” and “night”.

The term “place name” first appeared in the Book of *Rites of Zhou*, which states: “A teacher is in charge of place names in all directions.” It is indeed very ancient to trace the origin of place names, and from the place names recorded in oracle bone inscriptions, the expression form of place names in the Yin and Shang dynasties is quite complete<sup>[2]</sup>. There is no systematic research on place names in traditional China, but historical dynasties have emphasized cultural inheritance and emphasized the importance of living up to the name. Therefore, the origin and interpretation of place names are extremely rich, and research on place name usage is scattered in these discussions, involving changes in character usage, interpretation of rare characters, pronunciation and meaning of place names<sup>[3]</sup>. Traditionally, people have been very concerned about the meaning of place names, and even believe that the quality of geographical names can affect the people and customs of the region. Guo Zizhang of the Ming Dynasty once said, “The meaning of the spirit of the earth and the excellence of the people are not entirely related to their names? The spirit of the earth and the excellence of the people are born from the people of Qufu, Zou Ren gave birth to Kong and Meng, the thin and fierce land gives birth to the people of Yuancheng and Longxi gives birth to Mang and Zhuo.” Qufu is a place where talented people such as Confucius and Mencius were born. The folk customs of Yuancheng are fierce, so there are villains like Wang Mang and Dong Zhuo appearing. Place names have emerged and formed in the long history of human social development, and they are products of human social activities<sup>[4]</sup>. Shi Kaizhong believes that the origin of place names is influenced by the surrounding environment at the beginning of settlement, which endows various parts of the human body with natural geographical entities, resulting in vivid descriptions. Xiong Shumei explained in *A Brief Discussion on the Origin and Evolution of Chinese Place Names* that place name changes and succession are closely related to economic development, ethnic migration, and frequent wars. Dong Xiaoxiao divided the characteristics of place names into two aspects: essential characteristics and cultural characteristics, emphasizing the naming of place names based on human factors in his *research on the human geographical characteristics and spatial distribution of Chinese place names*.

### **3. The Language Characteristics of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province**

#### **3.1 The Phonetic Characteristics of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province**

Speech is the material shell of language. As a customary geographical indication, place names have extremely strong phonetic limitations. By studying the phonetic characteristics and forms of place names, it is possible to clearly interpret the language habits, living atmosphere, and perspectives of understanding the world contained in the local language. In ancient times, due to deficiencies in people's production level, knowledge level, cognitive level, etc., syllables were mostly monosyllabic. Later, with the increasing development of society, various human activities became increasingly complex, and vocabulary gradually increased due to various factors. Disyllabic and even polysyllabic place names emerged and developed, gradually replacing monosyllabic place names.

Taking the 9352 monosyllabic characters included in *Shuowen Jiezi* as an example, there are nearly 400 monosyllabic place names, commonly used ones such as “Qi”, “Chu”, “Jiang”, “Guan”, etc. During the pre Qin period, Chinese words were mostly monosyllabic, while in modern Chinese, there were only over two thousand monosyllabic words, accounting for only a small part of the total vocabulary of modern Chinese. The same goes for Chinese place names. According to the statistics of 131 place names in the “Central Region Map of the Shang Dynasty” of the first volume of the *Atlas of Chinese History*, there are 100 monosyllabic words, 24 disyllabic words, and only 6 trisyllabic words. The Central Region Map of the Western Zhou Dynasty includes 200 place names, with 51 disyllabic words, and 10 trisyllabic words. In the Han Dynasty, disyllabic place names had an absolute advantage. For example, in the *Sili Butu*, there were a total of 296 place names, with zero monosyllabic word, 230 disyllabic words, 56 trisyllabic words, 2 four syllables, and 8 five syllables. There are a total of 697 Henan place names in the *Atlas of the People's Republic of China by Province* published by Map Publishing House in 1974, including 501 disyllabic words, 188 trisyllabic words, 8 Four-syllable words and above. From the above paragraphs, it can be seen that there is a trend of disyllabic and trisyllabic language in modern Chinese place names.

This article analyzes the corpus of place names collected from 45887 administrative and natural villages in Henan Province up to now, and finds that there are hardly any monosyllabic place names, accounting for 1%, while there are 9636 disyllabic place names, accounting for 21%; There are 20190 three-syllable place names, occupying 44%; There are 11013 four-syllable place names, occupying 24%; There are 4589 multiple syllable place names, occupying 10%. From this, it can be seen that the place names in Henan Province are mostly three syllable or even four syllable polysyllabic. With the complexity of social relationships and changes in the richness of language, monosyllabic place names have gradually disappeared. This change is also due to the fact that most trisyllabic words have a “2+1” structure of “modifier + center”, which is not only clearer and more specific than the “1+1” structure of disyllabic words, but also more economically applicable than polysyllabic words, and the differences are relatively more obvious. Meanwhile, the changes in the syllables of place names are closely related to the local terrain, customs, economic and social development. As Guo Xi said, “The maintenance or disappearance of language is often constrained by many social, natural, and political factors.” Double syllable place names are simple and catchy, in line with people's common expression habits. The names of traditional villages in Henan highlight concise and concise features, which are also well-known; Compared to others, three syllable place names have stronger regional and directional characteristics.

#### **3.2 The central language and modifiers**

Traditional village names in Henan are generally named in a structural way of “modifier+central language”. The central language has obvious regularity. In the study of place names in traditional villages in Henan Province, it was found that among the top 20 main central languages, the highest proportion of central languages was “village”, with a total of 10732 cases; “village” followed closely behind, with a total of 9945 examples; The third character is “Street”, for 5600 examples. The central language can be roughly divided into 3 categories: Generic categories, Architectural markers, Functional markers. These central slogans fully demonstrate the humanistic style of Henan Province, which has a distinct regional color.

According to statistics, modifiers in traditional village names in Henan can be roughly divided into 9 categories: surname markers, surnames and topographical markers, direction markers, scale markers, time markers, location markers, religious markers, architectural markers and functional markers.

#### **4. The Cultural Connotation in the Names of Traditional Villages in Henan Province**

##### ***4.1 The Names of Traditional Villages in Henan and Their Concepts of Time and Space, as well as Intuitive Thinking Methods***

###### ***4.1.1 Intuitive way of thinking***

Intuitiveness is an important characteristic of the thinking style of the Han ethnic group, and people often name natural geographical entities based on their intuitive perception of the external characteristics of the place<sup>[5]</sup>. As Xu Hongzu of the Ming Dynasty described Mangshan, “Mangshan: (Duyun) County faces to the west. It is called Mangshan, with a stone back at the peak and winding like a giant snake. Today, the *Annals* have changed it to Longshan.” As the ancient saying goes, “Take all the bodies near and all the things far away.” This means naming a place name based on the characteristics of humans and all things, striving to make people intuitively feel their lifelike state. People associate the external image of mountains and rivers with animals to achieve the function of visualizing place names. This type of place name is also quite common in traditional villages in Henan Province. In addition, through the expression of colored words, place names sometimes give people a visual impact, like “Honglianzhang village”. Some place names are named after their sounds, such as “Luming village” (deer chirping is often heard in the mountains), “Xiangshui village” (sound is accompanied when the reservoir flows deep and bottomless), etc. These names can give people a more direct and specific auditory experience. In addition, “Ganquan village” highlight the taste characteristics of water, while “Lengquan village” and “Wentang village” give people a tactile feeling by depicting the water temperature.

###### ***4.1.2 The concept of time and space***

Time and space are fundamental issues in philosophy, the starting point of all concepts, and the root of any concept or thoughts. Time and space are the most fundamental cognitive methods of human beings and the methodological basis for their existence. In Wenzi · Nature, it is said, “From ancient times to the present, it is called the “zhou”, and the four directions up and down are called the “yu”. “zhou” refers to time, and “yu” refers to space. The Mohist school proposed the concepts of “long” and “yu” as time and space, and recognized the connection between time and space, as well as time and space and the movement of things.

The concept of time and space in language reflects human cognition and understanding of time and space, and expresses and communicates these concepts through vocabulary, grammar, and language structure. In the construction of Chinese place names, spatiotemporal features are also significantly reflected, as they express and describe the relationship between time and space through vocabulary, grammar, and language structure, reflecting the cognition and understanding of Chinese users towards time and space. This study found that the naming of traditional villages in Henan province has significant spatiotemporal characteristics, with spatial characteristics being particularly prominent, accounting for about 38%. The spatial vocabulary mainly involves “front”, “back”, “south”, “north”, “east”, “west”, “large”, “small”, etc; The temporal characteristics are mainly reflected through time vocabulary such as “old” and “new”, accounting for about 21%. This is closely related to both the spatiotemporal thinking characteristics in Chinese language construction and the inherent spatial and geographical attributes of the geographical region represented by place names.

##### ***4.2 The Clan Attribute of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province***

Mr. Gao Geyuan once said, “The place names of Chinese surnames account for different proportions in different regions, with the highest being 80% and the lowest being 15%, generally between 30% and 50%.”

Chinese people have always attached great importance to kinship relationships and regarded them as important pillars of society. The vast rural areas have long been in the small-scale agricultural economy, and people have a strong sense of kinship. Ethnic groups with the same surname often live together, forming a village, which is named after the big surname of the settlement family. The characteristics of clan surnames are also very common in traditional village names in Henan. For example, in traditional village names in Henan, surnames and place names that use “Zhang”, “Wang”, and “Li” as modifiers, like “Zhangjia village”. At the same time, there are various ways in which surnames appear in place names, including adding common names, like “Chenlou village”; Village names formed by the fusion of surnames and topographical features, like “Xiachen wa”; Village names with surnames and directional words, like “Lizhong shang”; There are also modifiers like “Wangxiao village” that add size to the

surname; There are also two surnames that combine to form place names, like “Yangbeiguo village”. In addition, there are various forms of expression such as adding surnames to animal and plant names, and adding surnames to numbers to form village names. These demonstrate the high importance placed on surnames in traditional villages in Henan, and the incorporation of surnames into township names is a clear manifestation of Henan’s clan culture.

The relationship between place names and surnames is very close. Many place names come from surnames, while some surnames come from place names. The Zheng surname originated from Xingyang in Zhengzhou, Henan. The son of an emperor of the Zhou Dynasty was knighted here and established the state of Zheng. Later, when the state was destroyed, and its people changed their surname to Zheng for memory. As a result, this surname originated and passed down to the world. Historical figures with the surname such as Zheng Chenggong, Zheng He, etc. The Jiao surname originated in Shaanxi County, Henan Province and was first used as a surname during the Zhou Dynasty. It was a surname bestowed upon the legitimate descendants of Shen Nong by King Wu of Zhou. The descendants of Shen Nong established the Jiao State, and later the descendants changed it to the surname in memory of the State. Famous figures include Jiao Yulu. In fact, with the changes of the times, not all people living in the place name “house Li village” may have the surname Li. However, whether using the surname as the place name or the place name as the surname, it largely reflects people’s psychology of using the surname as the symbol of the entire family and wanting to prosper and thrive.

#### **4.3 The geographical attributes of traditional village names in Henan**

“A place name is a symbol representing the terrain and region, and its decisions and changes are often controlled or influenced by the geographical environment. Therefore, in special climates, special place names are produced, and in special terrains, special place names are produced.” Mr. Jin Zumeng said. Gu Jiegang comprehensively and thoroughly pointed out in his article *Shuoqiu* the profound influence of terrain factors on place names, taking “qiu” as an example. According to the statistics of the place names named after hills in *the Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Zuo Zhuan*, the Song State, the Qi State, the Wei State, the Lu State and the Jun State were distributed, while the Qin State located in the Wei River basin and the Wu and Yue State in the Taihu Lake area were not. This distribution pattern is closely related to the geographical environment: all feudal states with the name “qiu” have rivers entering their territory; The Song Dynasty, which has the most place names with the character “qiu”, is located between two rivers. It is situated on a plain and is often ravaged by floods. Only by climbing “qiu” can one be saved. From this perspective, the place name “Qiu” is directly related to the number of floods.

There are various types of landforms in Henan Province, with the Yellow Huai Plain being the main area in northern, central, and eastern Henan, while mountainous and hilly areas are the main areas in northwestern, western, and southern Henan<sup>[6]</sup>. Henan is located in an area that transitions from a second level staircase to a third level staircase, spanning the four major river basins of the Yellow River, Huai River, Hai River, and Yangtze River, with well-developed rivers. The Huai River and its tributaries constitute the main river network in Henan Province, which is also the reason why natural place names are mainly composed of landscape and geological and geomorphological place names<sup>[7]</sup>. Although natural factor place names gradually increase over time, their overall changes are relatively small, and the changes in the natural environment are slow and relatively stable on a century to millennium scale. Therefore, the time changes of natural factor place names affected by them are also relatively small<sup>[8]</sup>.

Henan’s unique geographical location has created many unique natural and cultural names. There are many places in the eastern Henan Plain, which are greatly influenced by the Yellow River and Huai River. Therefore, there are many place names with topographical features. There are Dabie Mountains in southern Henan, with undulating terrain and numerous rivers, so there are many place names. There are many mountain and river landforms in western and northern Henan, and there are many place names with terrain features. Due to the differences between natural geography and human geography, the place names of traditional villages in Henan not only present geographical characteristics, but also highlight certain human characteristics.

#### **4.4 The Historical Attribute of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province**

The culture of China, spanning five thousand years, has gone through countless dynasties. As the most prosperous and legendary province in the Central Plains, Henan has also experienced the era of warlords fighting and separatism. After millions of years of historical accumulation, some ancient countries have become famous in the form of place names for centuries. The names of these traditional

villages serve as a mirror of history, reflecting the rise and fall of kings and bandits, as well as the rise and fall of honor and disgrace. The place name is silent, but it constantly reminds the world that there have been glory and decline on this land. Without heroes, there is only a memory of history.

For example, when it comes to Wagang zhai in Anyang, Henan, one cannot help but mention the peasant uprising. In the late Sui Dynasty, multiple peasant uprisings broke out across the country. The peasant army in this area is one of the three most rapidly developing and powerful rebel armies. Under the interpretation of historical novels and movies such as *The Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties*, the story of Wagang zhai has spread throughout the streets and alleys. Nowadays, it is still a must visit tourist attraction for many people to Huaxian County; For another example, the naming of Guandu Bridge Village originated from the “Guandu warfare”, one of the “Three Great Campaigns” in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. It was a crucial battle in northern China’s transition from division to unity at that time, which had a profound impact on the historical direction of the Three Kingdoms.

#### ***4.5 The Religious Factors of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province***

From the pre Qin period to the Song and Ming dynasties, the Central Plains region with present Henan as its hinterland was the birthplace and main activity center of traditional Chinese thought and culture. Legend has it that Fuxi painted the “Eight Trigrams” in Henan Province. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism coexisted in the Central Plains region, and a hundred schools of thought competed, laying a valuable foundation for traditional Chinese culture and having a profound impact on the development of Chinese culture. The Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius originated in Qilu and flourished in the Central Plains, representing traditional Chinese thought. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, was born in Luyi, Henan. The classic Taoist work *Tao Te Ching* was written in Lingbao, Henan; The representative figures who made a fortune in the pre Qin period were also mostly from central regions. They advocated for a monarchical dictatorship system, providing ideological support for feudal rule.

It is not difficult to find in the analysis of traditional village place names in Henan that place names are closely related to religion. There are many names in traditional village names in Henan Province that are named after religious places, among which most are religious place names that are mainly based on Buddhism, Guan Yu, Taoism, and some primitive local deities. In terms of place names, there are places related to Buddhism and places related to the three schools of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. It not only reflects the comprehensive nature of traditional village names in Henan, but also embodies the profound cultural connotations contained within them.

#### ***4.6 The Economic Factors of Traditional Village Names in Henan Province***

Since ancient times, places named after words have all been places in rural markets and commercial centers. Many traditional villages in Henan still use these expressions, reflecting the development of agriculture, handicrafts, commerce, and other aspects of history or modern society. At the same time, they are also related to other economic activities such as the social market, handicrafts, and animal husbandry of a certain era in the past. According to analysis, it has been found that the place names of traditional villages in Henan, all reflecting the small-scale agricultural economic characteristics and historical or current economic development status of traditional villages in Henan.

#### ***4.7 The Military Factors in the Names of Traditional Villages in Henan Province***

Many village names in China have characters where the army settles their fields, “Ying” is the military camp, which is the place where the army is stationed, and “Bao, Zhai, Wei, Guan” are all names related to the defense works of the army. Henan is located in the Central Plains, with a superior geographical location, and has always been a battleground for military strategists. The western, northern, and southern parts of Henan province are mountainous, and the terrain is easy to defend but difficult to attack, so the defense are often set up with passes. Plain areas are suitable for setting up camps and stationed troops. According to analysis, among the traditional village names in Henan, the most commonly used are “zhai” in military related village names, such as “Zhaozhai village”, followed by “ying”, such as “Fengyingxi village”, etc. “tun” is used like “Nantun village”, The use of “guan” includes “Jiaguan village”.

Yuguanying village, Zhou village Town, Baofeng County, Zhumadian, Henan Province, as a traditional ancient village, has a long history. Yuguanying village had already formed a village before

the Han Dynasty, and gradually formed a market after the Tang Dynasty. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was an important town on the official road leading to Luoyang, known as the “Three Miles Long Street and thoroughfare Important Town”. It is a well-known commercial gathering place both far and near. At the same time, it is also the command center of the Central Plains Bureau of the Communist Party of China and an important carrier of Henan’s red culture. Caogou village, Anliang Town, Jiaxian County, Henan Province is the former site of the Eighth Route Army’s resistance against Japan in the Central Plains region. As early as the Three Kingdoms period, Cao Cao had already stationed troops and herded horses there, hence the name Caogou. Revolutionary martyrs such as Zhang Caiqian, Wang Shusheng once led the anti- Japanese army and civilians to fight with blood there, composing a magnificent history of the Eighth Route Army’s resistance against Japan in western Henan, and truly showcasing the heroic deeds of the anti-Japanese army and civilians in northern China in their tenacious struggle against Japan.

## 5. Conclusion

Place names are carriers of historical and cultural significance, and the cultural factors they contain are an important part of traditional Chinese culture. Studying the place name culture of traditional villages in Henan can help to further understand the history and culture of Henan, in order to better inherit and promote the Central Plains and even China. This article explores the naming rules and causes of over 40000 village level names in traditional villages in Henan Province through data analysis. The naming rules mainly involve spatial and temporal concepts, clan surnames, geographical environment, historical events, military affairs, etc., aiming to provide empirical data for the protection and inheritance of language resources in rural areas of Henan Province, and to gather strength for rural revitalization.

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