

A Study on the Address of “Mr.Zhang Guimei” from the Perspective of Constructivism

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Abstract: In the context of traditional gender binary opposition, the choice of titles often reflects societal assumptions and expectations about individual gender identity. As modern society’s understanding of gender becomes more diverse and inclusive, individuals’ expressions of their own identity have also become more varied and complex. To explore the social context and individual cognition behind the use of addresses, the study uses “Zhang Guimei xian sheng” as a case study. Based on constructivist theory, it is found that both Mr.(xian sheng) and Ms.(nv shi) underwent a process of schema shift in modern times. However, the further shift of Mr. to a more modern form has led to gender bias, with a more complex schema change, which has set the stage for current controversies.

Keywords: Address; Constructivism; Schema Downshift

1. Foreword

“Zhang Guimei xiansheng”(Ms.Zhang Guimei), a teacher at Huaping Girls’ High School in Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, has dedicated decades to women’s education. She has worked tirelessly in the impoverished areas of western Yunnan, to address the issues of early marriage and low educational attainment among mountain women, giving them a chance to break the cycle. Since the national TV program featured her, discussions about Ms.Zhang Guimei have been ongoing on social media, with many people referring to her as “Mr.Zhang Guimei”. Some netizens explain that calling her “Mr.Zhang Guimei” is a respectful term, referring to someone of great virtue, regardless of gender.

Ma Hongji and Chang Qingfeng mentioned that addresses are used to denote social relationships between individuals, reflecting a person’s social status and the roles they play. Addresses are not only essential in daily

communication but also carry rich social and cultural meanings, conveying information about interpersonal relationships, and gender roles. Different terms of address reveal the speaker’s underlying psychological understanding, and by recognizing the type of term used, the listener can understand the speaker’s true intentions to some extent.

The term “address” is divided into face terms and back terms. ^[1] In this article, “xian sheng”(Mr.) and “nv shi”(Ms.) are both used as face terms and back terms. Other similar terms include familial and occupational titles such as “shu shu”(uncle) “lao ban”(boss) “lao shi”(teacher) and “yi sheng”(doctor), which all can be used for addressing someone to their face or behind their back.

The study of addressing terms spans multiple disciplines. It not only aids in understanding the structure and function of language but also reveals the social and cultural phenomena underlying it. This study primarily involves the parsing and organizing of traditional works and terms, as well as the study of the implicit and explicit relationships between terms and society, and case studies of specific interpersonal terms ^[2]. Regarding the study of address terms, MAUYAN noted that “address terms are imbued with different cultural characteristics” ^[3]. Liu Yonghou, after summarizing previous research on address terms, proposed that the study should expand in three directions: theoretical foundation, research perspective, and empirical research ^[4]. Chen Yunru’s research, using the construction of the meaning of sensory adjectives as an example, explores the underlying metaphorical mechanisms ^[5], describing the process of cognitive semantic expansion. Hu Wenhua and Du Fenggang argue that there is an inseparable connection between language gender differences and social culture ^[6]. This article, based on China’s unique cultural background, uses the case study of the term “xian sheng”(Mr.) “nv shi”(Ms.) and to explore its

pragmatic choices and special dynamic changes with social development, as well as the gender differences involved.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Changes in the “Xian Sheng” Schema

The term “xian sheng”(Mr.) can be traced back to ancient times, with its core connotations centered on virtue, intelligence, and seniority and gender is implicit and marginalized. The earliest use of “xian sheng” appears in “the Book of Songs”. However, here, “xian sheng” is used as a verb complex rather than a title. In the “Analects”, it states: “When there is work, the disciples take on the labor; when there is wine and food, the Mr. prepares the meal. Is this not filial piety?” Here, “xian sheng” refers to the elders or paternal figures in the family, contrasting with disciples or youngers.

In the pre-Qin period, “The Analects of Confucius” records that Confucius’s disciples called him “xian sheng” to show respect for their teacher. “The Book of Rites: The Record of Learning” also states: “When Mr. teaches tirelessly, students will exert all their efforts.” Here, “xian sheng”. refers to teachers or elders. By the Han Dynasty and later, “xian sheng” gradually evolved into a respectful title, used to refer to people with knowledge and virtue.

During the Republican era, the concept of the term evolved in two main directions. Firstly, people continued to assimilate the traditionally gender-marginalized schema to refer to respected teachers and literati. Secondly, Many young female and male intellectuals emerged during this period, but society lacked a specific term for them. To balance this, the public adopted the established “xian sheng” term, incorporating these intellectuals into it. These young scholars, who were not highly venerable, were also accommodated to as “xian sheng”. This led to a gradual erosion of the traditional requirement for “xian sheng” to be older. For example, in Zhang Henshui’s “The Golden Powder Family”, there is a scene where the tea house attendant asks, ‘Mr., what’s your surname? Is it Jin?’ Jin Fengju nods and replies, ‘I’m surnamed Jin, how do you know?’ In this instance, Jin Fengju is not a respected intellectual but rather a playboy. The tea house attendant addresses him as “xian sheng” without recognizing his identity, reflecting another layer of evolving, which involves

addressing ordinary men as “xian sheng” out of respect.

In modern Chinese, “xian sheng” is usually used as a respectful title for ordinary men to express respect for men. For example, in the identity information filling of takeout orders, you can choose “xian sheng” or “nv shi”, usually “xian sheng” represents men and “nv shi” represents women.

2.2 Changes in the “Nv Shi” Schema

The term “nv shi”(Ms.) can also be traced back to ancient times. As a respectful title for women, “nv shi”(Ms.) is associated with the another term “shi” which means ancient scholars. The concept of “nv shi”(Ms.) differs from “lady” or “madam”, as it encompasses both features of women gender and scholarly virtues. It does not imply seniority, and the emphasis on scholars gradually diminished during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

The Tang Dynasty scholar Kong Yingda explained that “nv shi” refers to a woman who possesses the virtues of a scholar. This indicates that only women with the virtues, breadth of mind, and talent of scholars can be respectfully called “nv shi”. In Zhang Shuo’s “Epitaph for Lady Zheng of Xingyang”, he writes that “nv shi” refers to women from scholarly families or those who possess the qualities of scholars. They not only exhibit the gentleness, delicacy, and sensitivity characteristic of women but also embody the knowledge, cultivation, and moral integrity of scholars.

In the Qing Dynasty, Gong Zizhen used “nv shi” refers to ordinary women in his poem talking about that “Life’s talents and fate often interfere; extraordinary men and women, each can be counted”. In Yuan Mei’s “Supplement to Su Yuan Poetic Discourse”, he mentions, “After a long tea conversation with “nv shi”(several ladies) I realized they were all well-bred.” Here, “nv shi” also refers to ordinary women. As multiple ethnic regimes coexisted and integrated, and cultural exchanges between the Han people and ethnic minorities became increasingly frequent, the concept of “nv shi” evolved. It expanded from a respectful term for specific women to a broader social context, gradually diminishing the central role of “scholars” in its connotation. During the Republican era, influenced by Western culture and in response to societal

expectations of women's empowerment, the emphasis on women as the schema was strengthened, further diminishing the central role of scholars in these models. The term "nv shi" began to be widely used, especially in formal settings or written language. Not only were outstanding women, but ordinary women, regardless of age or intelligence.

Then, in modern Chinese, "nv shi"(Ms.) is commonly used and has expanded to include all women, making it a respectful term on par with "xian sheng"(Mr.)

2.3 Comparison of Schema Between "Xian Sheng." and "Nv Shi."

First, the initial schema of "xian sheng" primarily focuses on virtue, intelligence, and seniority, without emphasizing gender. In contrast, the initial schema of "nv shi" emphasizes femininity and scholarly conduct, and age characteristics that are marginalized. Both schemas place absolute emphasis on virtue but differ in their schema characteristics regarding age and gender.

Secondly, both schemas have evolved in the Republican era and have undergone accommodation and assimilation at the same time. However, the use of "xian sheng" is still controversial at present.

In evolving times, the "nv shi" schema has been accommodated by society, gradually reducing the emphasis on scholarly class or character. The "xian sheng" schema has been assimilated by the virtue, intelligence, characteristics, and allowing both male and female intellectuals to be referred to. The element of seniority has gradually expanded to include all ages by adapting to social realities. Both schemas show a trend of downshift in titles. However, the "xian sheng" schema has continuously accommodated to the male gender, because "xian sheng" is used not only to honor intellectual males and older men but also to refer to someone's husband or one's own husband. The term emphasizes genderlessness in the intellectual class while emphasizes masculinity in the common man class gradually.

Thirdly, in contemporary colloquial usage, the terms "xiansheng" and "nvshi" have undergone a process of semantic convergence with the pronouns "Mr." and "Ms.."

3. Conclusion

First, the terms "xian sheng" and "nv shi" underwent a process of schema downward adaptation, where the schemas of "Mr." and "Ms." gradually aligned with those of men and women, respectively. However, the terms "xian sheng" emphasizes genderlessness in the intellectual class simultaneously.

Second, "nan shi"(Mr.) as gender term that corresponds most closely to "nv shi"(Ms.) in the Chinese word formation method emerged later, but its usage was far less frequent than that of "xian sheng". This is because the schema of "xian sheng" had better aligned with the typical and recognized use of male honorifics by the Chinese people at the time, "nan shi" did not gain widespread popularity. The preponderance of "xian sheng" over "nan shi" further underscores an indisputable fortification of gender identity within the "xian sheng" schema.

Finally, the heated debate over the use of "xian sheng" and "nv shi" was not originally about gender discrimination, but it did prompt people to reflect on the issue. In today's society, many titles are evolving. Peng Qingling discussed the shift from "goddess" to "woman"^[7], which illustrates the moving process from imbalance to balance. Therefore, adapting to today's social realities, it is a good idea to remove the use of "xian sheng" in reference to intellectual women.

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