

## Article

# A Study of Gender-Based Terms of Address in Chinese

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**Abstract:** Language is a symbolic system and one of the most important tools for human communication. It is an integral part of society and culture and exerts a significant influence on both. Language not only reflects various social phenomena but also mirrors cultural development. Gender discrimination has a long history in cultural traditions, with the patriarchal social ideology deeply ingrained. Whether in developed Western countries or in China, with its five-thousand-year cultural heritage, the prevalence and continuity of gender discrimination are reflected to varying degrees in language. A title is a term used in a specific linguistic context to address another person's name or status, and it has widespread application in social life. Once a common term of address is used in specific communicative activities, it carries rich social connotations. The terms "male" and "female" are a pair of contradictory yet equal concepts, and they are also equal in terms of gender distinction. However, the use of Chinese honorifics has given rise to some interesting phenomena of gender discrimination. The gender discrimination referred to in this study primarily refers to discrimination against women. By exploring honorifics throughout history, this study analyzes the causes of gender discrimination in Chinese honorifics from both social and psychological perspectives.

**Keywords:** address terms; social factors; psychological factors; sex discrimination

## 1. Introduction: Sexism in Pronouns

Appellation is an important aspect of language, accurately reflecting a nation's social changes, historical evolution, cultural development, beliefs, and biases. While sex discrimination can theoretically occur in both directions — men against women and vice versa — in the context of the Chinese language, it predominantly manifests as men's discrimination against women. The discrimination phenomenon in language is mainly reflected in predicates, and we can study it from both ancient and modern predicates.

## 2. Name Pronouns

Under the influence of patriarchal values in feudal and authoritarian societies, language is a distinctive symbol of social class and status. Pronouns are roughly categorized into seven types: kinship titles, generic titles, occupational titles, name-based titles, humble titles, intimate titles, and euphemistic titles [1]. We can analyse the name appellation from two perspectives: ancient and modern.

### 2.1. Ancient Appellations

Beginning in the era of matrilineal clans and continuing through centuries of historical evolution, China developed a complex system of personal appellations. A typical Chinese name often consists of a surname followed by a given name. In ancient Chinese society, men's names typically included a surname and a given name, and some individuals also had a "courtesy name" and a "pseudonym" [2]. For example, the famous Song Dynasty lyricist Su Shi, surnamed Su, name Shi, word Zizhan, the number of Dongpo Jushi. In ancient times, when friends met to recite poems and lyrics, they called each other's small words to express their affectionate love. For example, in Su Shi's "Song of the Water

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and the Moon", the phrase "wistful Ziyu" refers to his younger brother Su Zhe, conveying Su Shi's deep affection and the close bond between the two brothers. The two brothers were close [3]. In the feudal monarchy, the low social status of women, most women do not have a name, in everyday society, people tend to call them according to their age, generation sequence to address, such as: the eldest daughter of the family is known as the eldest girl. Some women had surnames but no names, and they were called by their surnames, such as Yang's women, Lin's women, and so on. Under the influence of the patriarchal idea that "a woman is identified through her husband", married women were often referred to using a combination of their husband's surname and their own, such as "Zhang Yang's", where the husband's surname is Zhang and the woman's original surname is Yang. Some or her husband's surname plus the identity of the woman to address, such as: "Dream of the Red Chamber" in Mrs. Wang, Aunt Zhou [4].

### 2.2. Modern Terms of Endearment

Since the founding of New China, both men and women have been recognized by their own names in social interactions. Men, regardless of marital status, are commonly addressed as "Mr." In contrast, married women are often referred to using their husband's surname followed by "Mrs." For example, if the husband's surname is Zhang, his wife may be called Mrs. Zhang. For example, if the husband's surname is Zhang, he will call his wife Mrs. Zhang or Mrs. Zhang. Unmarried women are referred to as "Miss" or "Ms.", such as Miss Yang or Ms. Li. In some exceptional cases, "Mr." has also been used as a respectful title for women, provided they are highly educated and morally esteemed. Sometimes "Mr." can also refer to a woman, but there is a prerequisite that she must be a woman of high learning and moral character, such as Mr. Yang Jiang, Mr. Bing Xin, Mr. Lin Huiyin, etc. These naming conventions reflect the predominance of men and the dependent status of women in naming practices [5].

### 2.3. Summary

To sum up, historical naming conventions reveal that most women in ancient society did not possess independent naming rights and were often referred to by their husband's name after marriage [6]. In the feudal and authoritarian society, women were in a subordinate position and did not have their own independent personality.

## 3. Sexism in Title Appellations

Appellations are an important component of language. As language evolves rapidly, forms of address change accordingly, reflecting the cultural characteristics and prejudices of each era. With the establishment of New China, we have entered the modern society, but there are still some residual ideological prejudices reflected in the Chinese vocabulary.

### 3.1. Ancient Appellations

There are also discriminatory terms for women in professional titles, as follows:

#### 1) Mister

In ancient times, the idea that a woman's lack of talent was a virtue was deeply rooted, and most men taught, so in ancient times, teachers were called "sir". For example, "Qu Li": "from the gentleman, not to cross the road and speak with others" Zheng Xuan note: "Mr, the old man teaching." With the development of society and the emergence of feng shui, storytelling, divination, fortune-telling and other professions, the emergence of feng shui gentleman. However, professional titles specifically used for women were rare.

### 3.2. The Modern Appellation

In ancient times, "Mr." was commonly used to refer to teachers. As society developed, the title "Mr." was also extended to practitioners of professions such as feng shui, story-

telling, and divination [7]. But very few women's titles are used for professional communication titles. In modern society, some occupations, if a woman as the occupation will be in the occupation before adding "female" as follows:

- 2) Secretary
- 3) Doctor

These professions are usually preceded by the word "female", which is discriminatory not only in terms of word formation, but also in terms of meaning. In modern society, the term "female doctor" often evokes the image of a highly educated, authoritative woman, which may feel distant or formal to some people. The term "female secretary" originally referred to the boss's assistant, but with the social development of individual vulgar social phenomena, due to certain social stereotypes, the term "female secretary" in modern society may carry negative connotations, with some people making inappropriate assumptions about the relationship between a female secretary and her male employer [8]. Similar gendered labeling can be found in professions like architecture and engineering, where female practitioners are sometimes referred to as "female architects" or "female engineers."

### 3.3. Summary

Job title is one of the important parts of title, in ancient society, under the influence of feudal ethical and moral concepts, men were allowed to go out to work, so most of the titles allude to men. In modern times, although women are accepted to work in the society, the prefix "female" in front of certain professions has a certain derogatory colour. On the other hand, there is no such phenomenon in male job titles [9].

## 4. Honorific and Modest Appellatives

### 4.1. Ancient Terms of Endearment

Salutations are linguistic devices used to show respect to the listener, and they constitute an important form of polite language in both ancient and modern Chinese. People use honorifics on different occasions to indicate the etiquette of the speaker. The honorifics used for women in ancient times are as follows:

- 4) Jade Lady
- 5) Jade Woman
- 6) Jade person
- 7) Qianjin

Most of these terms praise women's physical beauty and were coined by men, reflecting male aesthetic standards. Although they appear complimentary, they often ignore women's intrinsic value and individuality. For example, "Jade Lady" is from "Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals-Gui Zhi Theory": "The Duke of Hui was on the throne for two years, and his lust was violent and slow, and his body was good for the Jade Lady" Gao Lui Note: "Jade Lady, beautiful women". Jade's crystal clarity is used as a metaphor for a woman's purity and flawlessness. Another example is "Jade" from Chen Hong's Song of Eternal Hatred: "But I want to mourn Jade for what happened, and also for what will happen in the future." The story of Tang Xuanzong and Yang Guifei is written here, and the word "especially" is used to refer to the beauty of Yang Guifei. Although the term is used to praise women, the word "thing" originally refers to an object, suggesting that women are seen merely as objects to fulfill men's desires, thus reinforcing their subordinate and dependent status [10]. When "Jade Man" refers to a fairy, it comes from Tang Jia Dao's poem "Climbing to Tian Zhong Chancellor's High Pavilion": "The Jade Rabbit and the Jade Man come out of the song, and the white clouds are like no other." When referring to beautiful people, from the Book of Jin-Wei Jie biography: "[Jie], at the age of five, had an extraordinary appearance... When he entered the city riding a goat-drawn cart, people mistook him for a jade figure, and the crowd was mesmerized." Southern Song Dynasty-Liu Yiqing, "New Words on the World-Rong Zhi": "(Pei Kai) GMPs were so good that people thought

he was a jade man." Over time, the term "Jade Man" came to be used primarily to describe beautiful women. From this, we can see that in ancient times, women were often described metaphorically using objects, emphasizing their physical traits and societal roles. In contrast, men were typically portrayed using their personal characteristics, reflecting a higher social status and more independent identity for men than for women [11]. Lastly, the term "thousand gold" appears in Chapter 57 of *Dream of Red Mansions*: "No wonder she truly is a thousand-gold lady from a marquis's family — how could someone so young understand all this?" Here Qianjin refers to the daughter of other people's families. The original meaning of "a thousand jin" is a thousand pounds of gold, which is used to describe a large amount of money, and is later extended to be an honourable title for a woman. Equating women with wealth reduces their worth to a monetary value, treating them as commodities rather than individuals, and reveals a fundamental lack of respect. In contrast, no such objectifying terms exist for men, which clearly illustrates the gender bias embedded in the Chinese language.

In addition, there are also some honorifics that imply that men have a higher status than women, as follows:

- 8) Nobleman
- 9) Noble Guest

These terms are formed by combining "Gui" with Chinese morphemes. The term "Guiren" has three primary meanings: a distinguished person; a person of high status; and the title of the consort of an ancient emperor. The meaning "distinguished person" comes from "Rites of Passage-Funeral Clothes": "The son of a gentleman is also the son of a distinguished person. The son of a nobleman." The phrase "the son of a nobleman is the son of his father" reflects the patrilineal succession and highlights the importance of the father figure in society. This is an image of the importance of the father, the male. The phrase "a person of high status" comes from "Han Shu-Guanfu Zhuan": "The general is a man of high status, Bi Zhi". In ancient times, generals were predominantly male, and the term "nobleman" was used as a respectful address for such men. In ancient times, "nobleman" was also a title used for the emperor's consorts. However, the ranking of consorts depended on the emperor's favor, reflecting women's social status as dependent on men and lacking independent value. "Nobleman" also referred to an honourable guest during the Han Dynasty [12]. According to the "Records of the Grand Historian-Sima Xiangru Liezhuan", respected guests were highly valued and accorded special titles. In ancient times, women were not allowed to go out to socialise and participate in social activities due to the idea of "not going out of the gate, not taking a step forward", so "honourable guest" was mostly a term of respect for men in ancient times.

Modest appellatives also contain many terms that explicitly or implicitly reveal sexism in Chinese vocabulary. The details are as follows:

- 10) Bastard
- 11) Poor woman
- 12) Thorny wife
- 13) Cheap concubine

These terms are modest expressions men use to refer to their wives externally. However, they carry derogatory connotations. The word "lowly" indicates low status, while "clumsy" suggests stupidity and slowness. Both terms reflect the low social status of women and the underestimation of their abilities. The term "lowly wife" refers to a wife of low status and is a modest term for one's own wife. It comes from Sun Yuzu's "Qin Xin Ji-Vow Zhi Qiao Qiao" in the Ming Dynasty: "The lowly wife is ill, and I dare to trouble her with a divination." The term "clumsy woman" was used modestly to refer to one's wife. For example, in the sixty-fifth chapter of *Water Margin*, it states: "Just a clumsy woman died, with no relatives nearby." The word "Jing" here means "my". Historically, women who could not afford silver hairpins were referred to with terms associated with "thorns" or poverty, reflecting their low status. The term "lowly concubine" refers to an ancient woman's modest title for herself [13,14]. It first appeared in *Zuo Zhuan-The Third Year of*

Duke Xuan: "Duke Wen of Zheng had an untouchable concubine named Yan." Later, this term was widely used in poetry, where poets sometimes assumed the voice of women to express lowly status and limited knowledge. For example, in Cao Cao's "Yan Ge Xing" during the Wei and Jin dynasties: "The lowly concubine stays all alone in the empty room, and doesn't dare to forget her husband when thinking of him in sorrow."

#### 4.2. Modern Appellatives

China, a country rich in culture and etiquette, places great importance on modest and honorific terms within its vocabulary. The traditional prejudices of Chinese culture can be shown in honorifics as follows:

- 14) Lady
- 15) Miss

These words are used to show respect to women. The term "lady" is an honorific title for women originating from the Han Dynasty, first appearing in the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry). Kong Yingda interpreted the term "nǚ shì" (meaning "lady") as a woman possessing virtues traditionally admired in men. The term "lady" is used to describe a woman with man-like virtues, talents and wisdom, and is an honourable term for a cultivated woman. The term "lady" did not become common until modern times, when it was frequently used in social contexts. "Miss" is a traditional honorific for unmarried women. However, in contemporary times, especially within the entertainment industry, the term has sometimes acquired negative connotations, referring to women involved in improper or erotic services [15]. For example:

- 16) The bar owner said, "Without the lady, the bar business is bad."
- 17) She works as a lady in an opera house.

Obviously, the word "Miss" in these two sentences is no longer an honourable term for unmarried women, but a uniform term for women who provide improper or disreputable services [16]. This also shows that some of the terms used in modern society to show respect for women are still discriminatory.

The inequality between men and women in titles can also be shown in modesty as follows:

- 18) Despicable person
- 19) Humble person
- 20) Old man

These three words are all modest titles for oneself. The term "despicable person" refers to a person with shallow knowledge. The term "humble man" refers to a person of low status. The term "old man" is used modestly to refer to oneself as an elderly male. We can see that in modern society, there are few words that directly express women's self-effacement, while the number of words used for men's self-effacement is larger and clearer.

#### 4.3. Summary

To sum up, the concept of male and female superiority and inferiority in gender can also be seen in the words of respect and humility. As we can see from the ancient titles, most of the words of honour and modesty about women are from men's point of view, either to please men or to show that women are lowly and inferior. In the modern language, the number of women's modesty words is less than men's, and women's honorifics are either pejorative or use men's cultivation to praise women [17,18]. This shows that there is also the concept of "male superiority and female inferiority" in the honorifics and modesty.

## 5. Analysis of the Reasons for the Formation of Chinese Sexist Words

### 5.1. Social Factors

Language is an important communication tool in the society and has the important function of transmitting information. It plays an important role in social life and production, and at the same time, it also reflects the development of social life and the change of social system. It is very reasonable for us to examine the vocabulary system in language from the social perspective. The social relationship between male language and female language is reflected in the vocabulary system, which is the root cause of sexism in Chinese language vocabulary.

#### 5.1.1. Social System

Social system is a general term for all kinds of systems that reflect and maintain a certain social form or social structure. Social system is bound to exist in a country or nation. Social system can be divided into three levels: the first level is the overall social system or the old social form, such as the capitalist system, the socialist system; the second level is the system in different areas of a society, such as the economic system, the legal system, etc.; and the third level is the specific behavioural patterns or procedures, such as the attendance system, the auditing system and so on [19].

In early human society, it can be roughly divided into two stages matrilineal clan society, patrilineal social system. In matrilineal clan society, the mother was honoured, and women played a dominant role in the social family, while men were in a subordinate position. In primitive societies women were respected as they had the important task of reproducing their offspring. Later, due to the increase of productivity level, men found their important role in reproducing offspring, and children changed from the mother to the father, and the distribution of family property inheritance also changed. The status of men is higher than that of women in the social family, and the patrilineal clan gradually replaces the matrilineal clan. From the perspective of the marriage system, matrilineal clan society in the early days of "group marriage" as the main mode of spouse relationship is unstable, the development of the prosperous period of the marriage system changed to "dyadic marriage", the man usually through the woman's home to help the work, to send hunting and labour tools to win women's The man usually won the woman's favour by helping her with work in her home and giving her hunting and labour tools. In the late period, productivity levels increased and men were concerned about whether their offspring were their own, so they wanted stable marriages and for this reason, forceful robberies and "exchange marriages" arose [20]. The "exchange marriage" was the result of men's increased labour status and their choice to exchange their own women for wives in order to obtain wives without reducing the labour force of their wives' families. Later on, it slowly developed into "monogamy", which represented the triumph of patriarchy over feminism, with the wife living from her husband, and the wife, with her low level of productivity and lack of support from her own clan, gradually being relegated to a subordinate position in the family [21]. The wife is mainly responsible for running the household, away from social affairs, "the door does not come out, two doors do not step forward", and with the significant increase in the role of men in the development of production, the woman's main task is to reproduce offspring and "birth of a woman, not a man" said. In the Longshan culture sites in Shaanxi and Shanxi, Taozu, a symbol associated with fertility, was found, and married women worshipped it to ensure an endless succession. From the marriage system, we find that women were gradually reduced to a subordinate and dominated position in the family and society, reflecting gender inequality [22].

#### 5.1.2. Social Division of Labour

In the process of labour, language plays a vital role. Without language, people cannot distribute work, and the efficiency of labour is also greatly affected. The social division of labour between the sexes influences the production, learning and use of language, and

this influence is then fixed as a concept of thinking. The division of labour between men and women already existed in matrilineal clan societies. In primitive societies, women were responsible for simple farming, weaving, gathering and, above all, reproducing. Men were responsible for hunting and defence. Because of the simple hunting tools and natural disasters, hunting often involved many accidents, which could not guarantee the stability of family life and production. Therefore, in matrilineal societies, women had more say in the family, while men were less dominant. Later on, with the continuous updating of production tools, productivity increased greatly, and men had a great physical strength advantage over women, so men gradually took the dominant position in the family. In patriarchal societies, men own more of the means of production and account for most of the economic output of the family, and women are economically subordinate to men [23].

As a result of the social division of labour, a great prejudice has developed between the sexes: women's task is to raise children and run the household, and they need to focus on the family and are excluded from social activities. Men, on the other hand, are mainly engaged in social activities, maintaining their livelihoods and shouldering the burden of honouring their ancestors. Over time, there has been a saying that "the man is in charge of the outside world and the woman is in charge of the inside world". This concept has permeated male-related sayings, such as "a man's mouth is big and he eats in all directions" and "a man's son has his own ambition", which show that men do not need to worry about household chores, while women can only focus on activities around the family. The division of labour in society as a result of gender differences between men and women reinforces discriminatory attitudes towards women.

### *5.2. Psychological Factors*

From the perspective of social psychology, sexism in language is influenced by the subjective and implicit stereotyping of individuals and groups through social interaction. Language can reflect the human mind and mental construction, transforming objective information into subjective information through linguistic symbols. In patriarchal society, women have long been in a subordinate position in labour and family, and influenced by traditional ethical concepts, the social value of women has been underestimated, and over time women themselves have formed the idea that they have to live in dependence on men.

Physiological psychology seeks to understand the psychological basis of human actions and behaviours through the mechanisms of the brain. There are nerve centres in the brain that control people's behaviour and speech. The left and right hemispheres of the brain are differently developed in men and women, which in turn causes different emotional attitudes to events in men and women. Some earlier psychological theories suggest that the right hemisphere of the brain is more developed in men, leading to stronger spatial reasoning and logical thinking, while the left hemisphere in women is more developed, leading to better language skills and figurative understanding. However, current research emphasizes that brain functions are complex and not strictly divided by gender. In the later patriarchal societies, men had to go out and hunt to support their families due to the constraints of the social conditions at that time, and in line with their brain structure, the right side of the male brain was more developed. The psychological differences between males and females as a result of their physiological structure also show that females are more susceptible to external influences, have strong emotions and are more attentive, so females are very sensitive to emotionally related matters such as anniversaries. Compared to women's sensitivity and emotionality, men are more rational and nervous. Women are concerned with trivial matters, while men are concerned with the big picture.

In the development of society, women's economic productivity has historically been regarded as lower than that of men due to social and structural factors. The fact that men hold economic power in the family also means they hold authority and decision-making

power. As a result, women often have to rely on men — whether their husbands or sons — to survive, which has given rise to expressions such as "the mother is dependent on the son" and "the husband is honoured by the wife".

In ancient societies, women were long subjected to feudal ethical and moral doctrines such as the Three Principles and Five Virtues and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. As a result, women subconsciously believed that the value of their lives was to serve their families, and the term "wise wife" gradually became a term of art. The term "virtuous wife" has gradually become the highest evaluation of women. The saying "Behind a successful man there is always a woman who supports him silently" or "Behind a successful man there is always a good woman" also shows that women can only hide behind men. Women do not choose to fight against such unfair treatment, but rather suffer in silence. When evaluated in these terms, women also rejoice in the fact that they are willing to take on all the menial tasks in the family. According to Freud, women are considered to be defective human beings who are jealous of men's physiological structure and become dependent on them, and a sense of inferiority arises, i.e. women are born inferior to men.

To sum up, apart from the discrimination against women by the society at large, women themselves psychologically mould themselves into an image of inferiority, self-denial and weakness.

## 6. Conclusion

Language is a tool for human communication and plays a vital role in the development of human civilisation. Sexism in language is not only a manifestation of inequality between men and women in terms of politics, culture, power, and personality, but it also profoundly impacts education, human character, ideology, social values, and the harmonious development of humanity. In the vocabulary of ancient and modern Chinese, traditional ethical and moral thoughts have always existed at the level of predicates, which are expressed in name predicates, title predicates and respectful and modest predicates. By analysing these three types of ancient and modern predicates, we can distinctly conclude that both in ancient and modern times, men have always held dominant positions in society, while women have had little social power and were largely confined to family roles. Finally, the phenomenon of sexism in Chinese vocabulary is analysed at two levels: social and psychological. Social structures such as gender-based division of labor, combined with psychological factors like inferiority complexes among women, further reinforce discriminatory attitudes toward women.

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