

LANGUAGE AS A SPEECH ACT IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO SELECTED APPELLATIONS IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study examines the use of two respectful forms of appellation on women in the linguistic practice of the Chinese language. One is the male-gendered prefix Sir. and one is the kinship term Big Sister. Drawing on the theory of Speech Act and the theory of Doing Gender, the study analyzes the sociolinguistic meanings of these titles, the typology of women who were addressed to by these titles, and the gendered meanings that both are underlying and underpinning such appellational practice in the daily Chinese language usage. The study shows how these prefixes of appellation, when being used, convey the speakers' coded meaning of gender and underlying intention to frame the addressed women in a particularly gendered role and gendered pattern of social relations. This form of language use thus acts actively in the social construction of gender and gender norms.

Key words: Language, Gender, Speech Act, Social construction, China

Introduction

This study examines the usage of two respectful forms of appellation on women in the linguistic practice of the Chinese language. One is 先生 (Sir.) and one is 大姐 (Big Sister). Whether 先生 (Sir.) or 大姐 (Big Sister), the women who have won a such title will always be addressed as so in text/oral presentations about them in the Chinese official media, popular media, printed media and social media as well. A title like these would appear before the name to form a prefix in English language, but in the Chinese language it is placed after the name to form a suffix. While the 大姐 (Big Sister) title appears to be gender-fitting for a woman, the 先生 (Sir.) title is obviously not. In fact, it counts for a deliberate misplacement of gender in the linguistic act of addressing.

This paper scrutinizes such linguistic practice by asking the following questions: Why would some Chinese women be addressed as 先生 (Sir.) and on what ground? What typology of women deserve such a male-gendered appellation and under what circumstances? Likewise, why would some women be addressed as 大姐 (big sister) and on what ground? What typology of women are given this female form of appellation and for what reasons? And last, but not least, what does this linguistic practice tell us about gender, gender norms and gender relations in the Chinese society? What discursive impact would such appellation and the active use of it bear on gender and gender relations? How does the daily use of these forms of appellation work to enact and maintain gender orders and hence get involved in the configuration of power relations between genders? In other words, is this linguistic practice of appellation in the Chinese language just a neutral, habitual and conventional linguistic phenomenon or has it been instrumental in the construction and constitution of a gendered social reality and mindset? All these can be boiled down to one overarching question, and that is the question of gender and language. As Pratt (1986, p.71) rightfully points out, speech and language are 'engaged in both fitting words to world and fitting world to words' [1].

Until the publication of *Language and Women's Place* by Robin Lakoff in 1975, gender and language had remained largely an uncharted territory. Since then, sociolinguistics began to grow into a discipline on its own right, and the focus on linguistic variations has propelled linguists all over the world to study women's talk first and then the entangled relations between gender and language [2]. In the meantime, feminist linguistics has ventured into the field of critical linguistics, aiming at 'uncovering injustice, inequality, taking sides with the powerless and suppressed' [3]. It has been widely acknowledged that

language has a gender and, vice-versa, the gendered makeup of human society also comes to manifest through the languages people speak/use. Numerous studies have, for instance, demonstrated how pervasively sexism permeates our language and language usage and how abundant linguistic evidences can be found in our language that denigrate women [4]. Other studies joined the bandwagon of gender differences, postulating that men and women ‘belong to different subcultures’ [5] and hence speak different languages and deploy different communication strategies [6].

This paper views the two above-mentioned forms of appellation on women in the Chinese language as a linguistic ‘transaction’ imbued with gendered meanings and will examine these gendered meanings in the light of two theoretic streams. One is the social constructionist approach to gender and gender difference which views gender identity ‘as a social construct rather than as a “given” social category’ [7]. Seen from this view, gender ‘is not an attribute of individuals but a way of making sense of transactions’. Gender, therefore, ‘exists not in person but in transactions’ [8]. Hence, when a speaker speaks, he/she ‘should be seen as “doing gender” rather than statically “being” a particular gender’ [9].

In this sense, language, spoken as well as written, plays a primary role in the social construction of gender as it acts as ‘a set of strategies for negotiating the social landscape – an action-oriented medium in its own right’ [10]. Speech/text is thus ‘a powerful resource that is brought to bear in influencing other people’ and, more importantly, ‘the reality constructed through language forms the basis of social organization’ [11].

The other theoretic stream this study draws on is the theory of Speech Act initiated by J. L. Austin in his pathbreaking book “How to do things with words” in 1962. The central tenet of this theory is the claim that ‘language does more than simply say things; rather, we *do* things with words’ [12]. It postulates that ‘the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc.’ [13]. Speech thus acts, and words ‘do more than convey information’ as the earlier sender-receiver model of language studies has suggested [14]. As to how exactly speeches/words act, the theory conceptualizes three elements involved in language usage – locutions (the uttered/written words), illocutions (the action a speaker intends to do with his/her words) and perlocutions (what has in fact resulted from the speech/words). It is by means of these three elements that language acts and ‘accomplishes various actions’ [15]. In a way, the Speech Act theory and the social constructionist theory of gender complement each other, providing a perceptive analytic tool for examining not only language and gender but also how language is doing gender instrumentally.

In line with the Speech Act theory and the social constructionist theory of gender, this study investigates how the use of 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (big sister) in Chinese speeches/texts insinuate subtle gendered meanings and hence act to construct socially defined gender in a way that is often delicate and even unmarked. In other words, this study aims to reveal how the use of these honorific appellations in linguistic transactions through text and utterance acts to mark gender and to negotiate/renege the social landscape of gender and gender boundaries. To serve this goal, the study will devote one section to examine the linguistic practice of addressing certain women as 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (big sister) respectively and one section for theoretic discussion and conclusion in the end. For each of the analytic sections, I will start with a bouquet of sample texts where the appellation in question is used. Then I will proceed to dwell upon who/what kind of women are addressed so, followed by an analysis of the sociolinguistic meaning of these appellations and the underlying gendered messages they denote. The sample texts as well as other supporting materials are collected from assorted online and printed Chinese sources, including news items, books, official documents, blog posts, and relevant academic works.

To address a woman as Sir.

In September 1936, at the dawn of the Sino-Japanese War, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Mao Zedong wrote a letter to Madam Song Qingling, widow of Sun Yat-sen (the Founder of the Republic China), inviting her to a meeting with CCP representatives to discuss the possibility of forming

a cross-party United Front. ‘Sir. Qingling’, the letter starts. Then in June 1949, a few months before the CCP announces the birth of the People’s Republic of China, Mao wrote to Song Qingling again, inviting her to join the new CCP government in Beijing. In the letter, Song Qingling was once again addressed as Sir. Qingling [16]. On 25th of May 2016, a woman writer/translator named Yang Jiang passed away in Beijing at an age of 105. The news soon gets circulated quickly in the mainstream and social media, invoking wide public condolences to the decease of Sir. Yang Jiang and the great loss in China’s cultural life [17]. In an article commemorated to another deceased woman writer Zhang Ailing, the author writes about how sentimental he/she feels when visiting the old residence of the writer, Sir. Zhang, and wandering around for a while in the building [18]. These are, however, not the only examples on the use of Sir. title on women. There are lot more. It seems that the tradition of addressing a woman as Sir. stems from the Republic period of the 1920s, 1930s and has since been a recurrence in the Chinese language usage up to today.

Why? Why using a male-gender appellation on a woman? As a Chinese reader wonders in the case of Yang Jiang, ‘she is a woman. Why is she addressed as Sir?’ [19]. To answer the question and unpack the gendered meanings of the Sir. title on women, I will in the following paragraphs examine: 1). What does Sir. 先生 mean in the Chinese language and how is it normally used, 2). What typology of women are given to the title and on what ground.

Sir. 先生, in the Chinese language has several layers of meaning. According to Modern Chinese Dictionary 现代汉语词典, Sir. 先生 has at least 6 different connotations. It refers to ‘husband’, ‘medic doctor’, ‘bookkeeper’, ‘fortune teller’, ‘teacher’ and ‘male intellectual and literati’ in general. Since the profession of ‘bookkeeper’ and ‘fortune teller’ has disappeared and fewer and fewer women still use the term to refer to their husband, Sir. 先生 becomes a proper noun mostly for teachers and literati and remains so throughout the modern Chinese history [20]. Normally, the title is preserved for highly established male literati with prominent social status. The modern Chinese literature tycoons like 鲁迅 (Lu Xun), 老舍 (Lao She), 周作人 (Zhou zuoren), 沈从文 (Shen Congwen), 林语堂 (Lin Yutang), 曹禺 (Cao Yu), 巴金 (Ba Jin) and 钱钟书 (Qian Zhongshu) are, for example, the ones that entitled to a such Sir. title and often addressed so when their names are mentioned [21]. As a male-gendered form of appellation, the Sir. title is not only used on men but also echoes the Chinese historical past when education and literature were a field of privilege reserved only for men. Besides gender, Sir. 先生 title also carries an age dimension and mainly refers to literati of elder age, given that social establishment takes life time and most people don’t get there in young age. As a courteous appellation, Sir. 先生 expresses a dual respect to the addressed: respect for their achievement and their age.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Sir. 先生 began to apply to women as well. Though no systematic figures have been found available on the quantity of women being addressed as Sir., an average Chinese reader would easily run into a cluster of women’s names with a Sir. suffix in the Chinese media, printed media, social media. Apart from Song Qingling 宋庆龄, Yang Jiang 杨绛 and Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 mentioned above, the names that can be added on are He Xiangning 何香凝, Xu Guangping 许广平, Bingxin 冰心, Shen Ziji 沈兹九, Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, Shen Zufen 沈祖棻, Zhang Chonghe 张充和, Xie Xide 谢希德 and Zhou Yuliang 周与良. In an article on Bingxin’s life in Yunnan, China’s South-West province bordered to Thailand, the author, for instance, narrates how Sir. Bingxin moved down there with her family in 1936 and lived there for two eventful years [22]. In an article on Lieqibar.com commemorated to Xu Guangping, Lu Xun’s *de facto* wife and widow, the author laments with a sigh that Sir. Xu Guangping has after all left us for more than forty years [23].

A brief review of who these women are provides a footnote for why and under what circumstances the Sir. title was applied to them. As Xu narrates in his online article, He Xiangning 何香凝 and Song Qingling 宋庆龄 were renowned national figures of politics and social activists. Non-communist but communist-friendly, both had cooperated with the CCP and served the CCP government. Xu Guangping 许广平 was a known writer and social activist on her own right, but she also owes her fame to her being the widow of Lu Xun, the icon of China's modern literature endorsed by the CCP. Bingxin 冰心 was a prominent writer specialized in children literature, while both Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君 and Shen Zufen 沈祖棻 were well-known writers and literary historians. Zhang Chonghe 张充和 was counted to be one of the female talents during the Republic period in China who was recognized for her high attainments in poem, Kunqu opera and calligraphy. Xie Xide 谢希德 was an eminent physicist and once rector of Fudan University, whereas Zhou Yuliang 周与良 was a distinguished microbiologist who founded the Department of Microbiology at Nankai University [24]. Besides, Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 was a famous writer in the 1940s, and Shen Ziji 沈兹九 was a reputed journalist and women's movement activist. She had been the chief editor of several influential women's journals and magazines in China [25]. More names could be mentioned, but the profile would be approximately the same.

According to the online article by Xu, what common for the women Sirs are three characteristics. One, they were all talented and remarkable individuals. Two, they all had a rich life experience and enjoyed high social prestige. In terms of age, most of them were born in the early twentieth century, with one in the late nineteenth. Three, they all attained outstanding achievements in their respective fields, be that politics, literature, education and science, and were deemed highly for their accomplishments. The Sir. title is thus a compliment and a token recognition of these women's life-long achievements. Xu argues that when being used on a woman and due to the 'switch' of gender, the Sir. title conveys a sense of respect and admiration that is far stronger than any other titles could possibly do. In Xu's view, conventional appellations for women like Ms. and other professional titles such as Professor or President are too usual, lacking the dramatic effect that can accentuate the extraordinariness of these extraordinary women. Further, it is argued that whether the extension of the Sir. title to women could be a testimony of the historical progress in gender equality that modern China has achieved so far, given China's long patriarchal history where women were confined to the domestic domain without rights to education and the changes taking place since the beginning of the twentieth century that have made education and labor market accessible for women [26].

While recognizing the complimentary nature of the Sir. title on women, this study takes one step further to scrutinize whether the use of Sir. title on women in the Chinese language constitutes what can be termed as 'social doing of gender' [27]. According to the theory of doing gender, 'gender itself is constituted through interaction', and social doing of gender is 'the continuous creation of the meaning of gender through human actions' (ibid.). At this point, addressing a distinguished woman as Sir. does not only show respect to the addressed but also create and reiterate gendered meanings. This is because, when people engage in 'descriptive accountings of states of affairs to one another' [28], they make sense of the world and construct social reality 'rather than merely depicting it' [29]. Here, the Sir. title on women encodes a subtle message, and that is only when a woman finally arrived at the social top that she can become as brilliant and admirable as a man, and the Sir. title represents the highest honor a woman could ever achieve. What underlies the use of Sir. title on women is also a subtle cue that only when a woman becomes as outstanding as men, she deserves the Sir. title normally reserved for men and can be finally accepted as an equal member of the male 'excellency' club. In this way, the use of Sir. title on women functions as a kind of 'descriptive accountings of states of affairs' that is 'both serious and consequential' [30].

The doing of gender by using the Sir. title on women can be further elucidated from the perspective of the Speech Act theory (SAT). The 'central premise of' the theory, according to Ludwig and Ruyter, 'is

that language construction (in speech or writing), through words, sentences and interactional exchanges, conveys a speaker's underlying meaning and intention' [31]. To cast a light on how 'word categories and sentence constructions, apparent in people's everyday language use, gives insights into their intentions, perceptions and identities' [32], the SAT makes a distinction between locutionary acts (locutions), illocutionary force (illocutions) and perlocutionary force (perlocutions) [33]. A locution could be a word/sentence from a text and a locutionary act can take place when someone 'says or states something' (ibid.). Each locution 'also comes with an illocutionary force (s), which is the action the speaker hopes to do with this piece of language' [34], meaning that people have an intention to do or achieve the thing they are saying or stating. Perlocutionary force (s) is 'the actual result of this illocutionary force' (ibid.) which can also be framed as the 'impact of the communication on an audience' [35].

Following the line of the Speech Act theory, the use of Sir. title on a woman in Chinese language, either written or oral, can be viewed as a locutionary act. Underneath lies the illocutionary force of this locution, i.e. what the user of Sir. title intends to do or to achieve, and that is to show respect to a woman and/or some women who is/are deemed high in society due to their long-established social prestige and remarkable deeds of career. The respect and the act of paying respect is, however, mediated by a male-gendered appellation which deliberately 'switch' the gender of these women, and it is through this gender 'switch' that the women were acknowledged, accredited and admired. Thus, what the Sir. title expresses, in a colloquial manner, is an implicit illocutionary message that 'you have levelled yourself to the height of men; you are like a Sir. to me (us) and you will be regarded and treated like a Sir.; I (we) therefore confer this title upon you to confirm our recognition of you as an equal of male excellency and our respect to you as a Sir'. Then the perlocutionary force of the Sir. locution could be the social effect that Sir. becomes an ultimate marker of woman's social achievement and the social evaluation of women against men as the bar of standard.

Thus, the Sir. title, when being used on women, invokes gendered meanings and mediates gender power relations. This can be further illuminated by drawing a parallel to two other similar male-gendered suffixes that have been found in regular use in the Chinese language to address a woman. One is the use of 老佛爷 (the Old Buddha) on Cixi, the Empress Dowager of late Qing, who ruled China for as long as nearly a half century [36]. According to an internet source, Manchu people were Buddhist believers, and it has been customary for the Manchu tribe leaders and later the Qing rulers to address themselves as 老佛爷 (the Old Buddha), the highest Buddhist guru, to legitimize themselves as the incontestable authority of both the religious and secular world. When the Empress Dowager began to attend to state affairs from behind curtain, the discontent among the conservative Qing court officials towards her being a woman meddling the state affairs posed an actual threat to the legitimacy of her rule. It was said that Li Lianying, the chief eunuch of the Dowager, a scheming and sweet-talking figure eager to please Cixi, had a new Buddha statue installed behind the Buddha statue in the Wanshou imperial temple and exclaimed Cixi as the new 老佛爷 (Old Buddha) when she walked in the temple to inspect the statue. Since then, the title got spread in the Qing court and Cixi began to be referred to as 老佛爷 (the Old Buddha) on regular basis. Here it shows again how the Speech Act of 老佛爷 (the Old Buddha) elevates Cixi to the divine zenith of the Qing ruling power by switching her gender, conferring a male-gendered appellation title on her, making her an equal of all the great male Qing leaders and hence legitimizing her as the rightful ruler of Qing China [37].

A more recent example concerns actress Fan Bingbing(范冰冰), China's movie diva and fashion icon in one. Her fame dimmed a bit since 2018 as she got implicated in a tax evasion case and was fined an astronomical sum of money. But before that, she had won an impressive number of film awards and appears regularly on international film festivals, wearing astonishing couture outfits that showcase her figure and her oriental beauty. Since her debut, she gained a nickname 范爷 (Master Fan) and has been widely referred to as such in the Chinese media and social media. Meaning grandpa, old gentleman and master, 爷 in Chinese is mostly associated to men of age and fame/power. Fan Bingbing is a female

actress, and being born in 1981, she is far too young to be a 爷 in any sense. To address her as 范爷 (Master Fan) thus might constitute a Speech Act that is saturated with deep-underlying gendered meanings. In a search for these hidden gendered meanings, I choose to examine the question/answer posts under the question “Why is Fan Bingbing called Master Fan?” appeared on Baidu Knows, a self-developed, search-based interactive knowledge sharing platform developed by Baidu, the world’s largest Chinese search engine.

According to the posted posts, several factors can be attributed to why Fan is addressed as 范爷 (Master Fan), and all seems to have to do with her way of being. Some posts point out that Fan is bold and forthright, never holds herself back and never afraid of showing off herself. She knows the value of her beauty and capitalizes on it without hesitation and diffidence. With the aid of extravagant use of cosmetic and fashion, she has forcefully boosted up her image as the unquestionable queen of oriental beauty [38]. Besides, she is outspoken about her success and wealth, never trying to be modest. When being asked whether she plans to marry into a wealthy and powerful family as many female film stars have chosen to do at some point of their acting career, she boldly declares that ‘I am rich’, ‘I am powerful’, ‘I don’t need to rely on men’ [39]. The post also mentions her tenacious pursuit of career amid media storm and news scandals that targeted at her, firmly determined not to let the media spotlight overrule her [40]. Moreover, she is also described as being domineering, but generous and loyal to friends. These qualities, as the posts conclude, make her one of her own kind, an unusual woman, one with manful strength and traits, and that is how she won the title of 范爷 (Master Fan). Here it is again by using a male-gendered suffix ‘Master’ on a woman that she is recognized, praised, extolled and celebrated. This male-gendered suffix functions not only as a script of her extraordinary personality and achievement but also as the highest recognition she could ever get.

To address a woman as ‘Big Sister’

In contrast to the use of male-gendered suffixes on women, such as Sir. and Master, there is a sociolinguistic practice of calling a woman 大姐 (big sister). In the normal Chinese language usage, 大姐 (big sister) is a kinship term reserved for the elder ones of female siblings in a family. One could, for instance, introduce his/her elder sister, saying that ‘this is my big sister’. Under certain circumstance, however, 大姐 (big sister) does become a suffix and is used after one’s name to form a title-like appellation on women who are not kinship-wise related. In an article commemorated to Kang Keqing 康克清, for example, the author recalled how he/she in several occasions had face-to-face contact with Big Sister Kang and felt immensely enlightened when talking and listening to Big Sister Kang [41]. Apart from Kang Keqing, other women that are generally referred to as Big Sister include Cai Chang 蔡畅 (Big Sister Cai), Deng Yingchao 邓颖超 (Big Sister Deng), Chen Muhua 陈慕华 (Big Sister Chen), Peng Peiyun 彭佩云 (Big Sister Peng), Gu Xiulian 顾秀莲 (Big Sister Gu) and so on. A more recent example is a female mayor who was praised as 大姐市长 (Big Sister Mayor) in a book about China’s female mayors [42] and a female party secretary of a business company named Chen who died at age of 53 in a traffic incident in 2011. In an online article that is dedicated to her, she was extolled and remembered as a 大姐书记 (Big Sister-like party secretary) dear to all the people she knows and has worked with [43].

In this case, it is the use of a female-gendered suffix on (certain) women. To unpack the underlying gendered meaning of the ‘Big Sister’ appellation and the role of this Speech Act in doing gender, I will again ponder upon the two questions that were raised and shed light upon in the above section, but in a reversed order. I will begin to ask, ‘What kind of women are given to this title and on what ground’ as the first question and then proceed to the second question ‘What is the role of Big Sister in Chinese

family/society and what gendered meanings that are encapsulated in the use of this appellation on women’?

To set the background for the first question, we need to look back into the history of the Chinese Communist movement and the history of women’s movement within the Chinese Communist movement. Conceived in the womb of the May 4th Movement, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consists of radical young men and women who were determined to transform the Chinese society and build a strong modern nation so that China can shake off its’ backwardness and the humiliating position it has suffered in the international world order. These ‘20th-century Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries consistently took the status of women as a signifier of the strength of the state’ [44]. In the same vein as the great late Qing reformer Liang Qichao, they ‘blamed China’s weakness, at least in part, on the fact that its footbound, enclosed women were “parasites” rather than productive citizens’ [45]. In doing so, they ‘linked the movement for women’s rights to the national struggle and thus put gender equality on the agenda’ of the party’s overall political program [46]. Throughout the CCP history, whether it was in the CCP controlled base-areas in the 1920s, 30s and 40s or in the waves of socialist transformation after the CCP took power, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the CCP has both advocated and promoted women’s liberation in terms of marriage freedom, land right, labor participation and political participation. The institutional mechanism that leads and supervises the women’s movement within the CCP was the CCP’s women-work committee (during the early CCP period) and then the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) that was established in 1949, the year of the CCP takeover.

Most of the women ‘big sisters’ mentioned above are top CCP figures in charge of the party’s women-work, and leaders of the ACWF under the wing of the CCP. Kang Keqing, Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao were, for example, the first-generation of women leaders within the party. Joining the CCP revolution in the 1920s and early 1930s, these individuals had built a revolutionary career that is equally long as that of their male counterparts within the party and enjoyed a venerate status that is equally senior as many of the top CCP male leaders. The Chinese revolution in the first half of the twentieth century carried an intrinsic feminist agenda with it. Theoretically, the CCP revolutionaries and leaders believed that ‘women’s liberation would only be achieved under socialism and therefore engaged in revolutionary activity’ [47]. In practice, as ‘the revolution mobilized ...both men and women’ and the ‘Party work always included woman-work’ to organize and incorporate women in the revolution process [48]. Whether or not women like Kang Keqing, Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao had an ambition for party politics when they joined the party, they were soon entrusted with the party’s woman-work and remained in that work portfolio throughout their entire career. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Kang Keqing served as the first to fifth standing committee members of the All-China Women’s Federation, the third vice-chairman, the fourth and fifth presidents, and the sixth honorary chairman [49]. Cai Chang was elected as the vice chairman of the International Federation of Democratic Women in 1948. In 1949, she was elected as the chairman of the All-China Women’s Federation and, later, served as the vice chairman of the Fourth and Fifth National People’s Congress Standing Committee [50]. Deng Yingchao served as the vice chairman of the first, second and third National Women’s Federation and the honorary chairman of the Fourth All-China Women’s Federation [51]. It is owing to their life-long commitment to the party’s woman-work that these women won the title of 大姐 (Big Sister) and were mostly addressed so in the official media.

Like Sir., the Big Sister title is also used on women as a token of recognition and respect. Since it is a kinship term in origin, an effective approach to unpack the gendered meanings underlying this appellation would be to simply look at the role of big sisters, i.e. the elder female siblings, in Chinese kinship families. In an article on the change of girls’ social status in rural China, for instance, the author dwells upon how economic, policy-derived and attitudinal factors have contributed to the lift of rural girls’ position in families. Prior to the one-child policy era, as the author states, it was usual for families in China to have several children and they were raised in a ‘sheep herding’ fashion, with younger siblings being looked after by their older brothers and sisters while the parents were busy with making a living for the family. And because the role of care-takers is traditionally associate with women, the elder sisters in multi-sibling families have become the main provider of care, a mother-like figure so to speak.

Moreover, girls in the traditional multi-sibling families are always the one to sacrifice, or the last one to consider, in family decisions about economy and succession, due to the patriarchal tradition of viewing boys as the 'breadwinner' of family and the maintainer of family lineage. Investment on girls, on the contrary, was often regarded as 'watering other's garden' as the girls will sooner or later leave their natal family for a married life somewhere else. When families having difficulties to afford a marriage for their son (s), it happens often that the daughter (s) will be married out, regardless (very often against) her will, for an exchange of a wife for the son (s) [52]. The role of big sisters in multi-sibling families is thus not only to take care of the younger siblings but also to sacrifice herself to the benefits of the brothers whenever necessary.

A parallel, then, can be drawn between the role of elder girls in multi-sibling families and the role of the CCP's Big Sisters in women-work, and the resemblance is apparent. On the one hand, these women-work Big Sisters have been taking care of their 'siblings' (the entire female population of the nation) by virtue of their capacity as the heads of the All-China Women's Federation, tending their wellbeing and welfare, organizing activities among them, educating them in line with the Party's doctrines and leading them towards the direction of socioeconomic/political participation that the Party has envisaged. In the eyes of women masses, figures like Kang Keqing, Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao can be indeed pictured as loving and caring big sisters who lead the way and make sure that they are on the right track. On the other hand, however, these Big Sisters were often rendered a secondary position within the Party (family) in relation to their male party fellows (brothers) and must restrain themselves from vying for power and influence against the 'big brothers'. What often being sacrificed is either their feminist instinct or personal political ambitions. Studies of women and socialism in China have shown with abundant empirics how ardent communist feminists like Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao had to steer the ACWF towards a conservative turn to champion women's domestic role in times when the emphasis on women's socioeconomic participation wilted and slipped away from the Party's central political agenda [53]. While serving the interests of women, Big Sisters like Kang Keqing, Cai Chang and Deng Yingchao must see to serve the Party's will first and never be at odds with it.

A salient part of these women's revolutionary fame has been the fact that they all married to a fellow comrade within the inner power circle of the Party who eventually rose to the top of the Party's leadership. In terms of career path, these life-long revolutionary women were all channeled into the field of women-work and found themselves being trapped in a pattern of 'gender labor division' that deters them from gaining more power within the Party. At the same time, they also suffered subtle and overt career constraints due to their marriage to top CCP leaders, for it has been an unwritten rule within the Party that a wife must not outdo the husband when it comes to rank, title and political influence. Deng Yingchao, for instance, recalled how her husband Zhou Enlai (then China's Premier) vetoed the proposal for installing Deng as the vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress (The Chinese Parliament). Zhou also personally assigned an order to confer Deng a lower rank status than she was qualified for. 'It has been quite difficult to be the wife of the Premier. He always suppresses me', said Deng [54]. Top male leaders like Zhou often did so to showcase their moral integrity in the sense that they abhor nepotism and never seek political benefits for the sake of their family members. Underneath this seemingly righteous gesture, however, lies the deep-rooted patriarchal mindset of the Party which monopolies power and power-associated privileges in the hands of men and rebuffs women's equal share of it. A Big Sister within the Party therefore must be ready to sacrifice their personal career ambitions, remain supportive to their 'brothers' and restrain from competing for power and influence against the big brothers.

'Big Sister' is thus a moralized caption of women's virtue within the CCP (family) which accentuates women's subordination at both the institutional and individual levels. A footnote to this kind of womanly virtue can be found in various official and media representations of these Big Sisters. In an article dedicated to Deng Yingchao on the ACWF webpage titled "Deng Yingchao: (our) Dear and respectable Big Sister", for instance, Deng was described as a person who has through her lengthy political career fully demonstrated a unique set of moral quality which ranges from being hard-working, altruistic, ignoring personal gains and losses, always having the overall interest of the Party in primary concern, being loyal to her duty, exemplary compliance with the Party's revolutionary disciplines; to being keen to helping others, loving and caring for comrades, maintaining a close tie with the masses, and serving

the people wholeheartedly [55]. In an article commemorated to Kang Keqing on the party's newspaper the People's Daily, Big Sister Kang was portrayed as a one who 'has worked diligently to pursue a revolutionary career through more than 60 years.' She is, according to the article, unconditionally loyal to the Party and unwavering for the great communist causes. She always sets an example for others (to follow), self-disciplined, bright and upright, be clear about right and wrong, caring about comrades, is approachable, frugal and prudent, honest and clean. Moreover, she has a deep concern about the development of women's and children's in China [56]. In the same vein, Cai Chang was described as an extraordinary revolutionary woman who always put (s) the interests of the Party and the people first, adhere (s) to principles and insists that the aim of the Party is to serve the interests of the people, not anything else. Furthermore, Cai Chang is said to be indifferent to fame and fortune, cares about political integrity, is honest and clean in work, and leading a frugal and humble life style. The article highlights the fact that how the Women's Federation under the leadership of Cai earned a reputation of being a 'poor' institution, for Cai would rather bear this reputation than to ask for more money from the state [57].

This self-sacrificing image has become such a classic repertoire in the virtue script of Big Sisters that it can also be spotted easily in texts about Big Sisters of the younger generation. In 2011, a female party secretary of a construction company named Chen died unexpectedly in a traffic incident at age 53. In an online article that is dedicated to her, she was extolled and remembered as a 'Big Sister Party Secretary' (大姐书记) dear to all the people she has worked with [58]. Normally, in China, people in such positions (whatever level) would be addressed as 'Party secretary X', an appellation combining one's official work title with the surname in question. In Chinese society where power distance is bigger [59], such way of addressing clearly marks the hierarchical relationship between people and conveys a sense of respect to party officials. 'Party secretary X' is thus an institution-derived title of appellation for people holding authoritative positions within the Party. Chen's being called 'Big Sister party secretary' is thus quite unusual, as the appellation combines a formal official working title with a kinship title which normally will not be associated together. Here, 'big sister' functions as an attribute to modify 'party secretary', signposting that she is not a party secretary of any kind but a 'big sister-like' party secretary. In calling her 'Big Sister Party Secretary', what the appellation emphasizes is the special quality that she has added on to her role as a party secretary and extolls her for these special qualities. Browsing the text of the memorial talk that is dedicated to her brings these special 'Big Sister' qualities to the light. The text reads,

'She was affectionately called 'Big Sister Secretary' not only because she has been in the leading groups of the company for three terms, but also because she is sincere and kind, always like a big sister. Whenever you need her, she will always be there for you, timely and warmheartedly'. To recap 'the spirit' of Chen, the article describes her with words like 'loyalty/dedication, public interests first, strict discipline, and caring for the masses'. Furthermore, Chen is said to have been a person who is always putting public interests in front of her personal concerns and who is always delighted to work hard and endure hardship. When facing the balance between the public and the private, she always upholds the principle of 'sacrificing the "small family (private)" for the benefit of the "big family"' (public). Her deeds that exemplify this principle, according to the article, are many. It is, for instance, said that she often works all night long till the early morning, takes a quick nap in her office and goes to work again; she leads a thrifty life herself but has donated 5000 yuan from her own pocket to have a gas line installed in the kitchen of some poor families; she has also used her own money to help drop-off kids coming back to school again; she donated 4000 yuan to a housing project for a migrant worker; and she always sends birthday greetings to the employees whenever they have birthday and whoever they are. In short, she acted like a big sister in multi-sibling families, and it is for this reason, that she distinguished herself from any other party secretary figures and won the title of 'Big Sister Party Secretary' she deserves [60].

In the light of the Speech Act theory, to call a woman 'big sister', either written or oral, institutes a locutionary act. Underneath this locutionary act, however, lies the illocutionary force of this locution, and that is the speakers' intention to see a woman as a caring and self-sacrificing sister, to want her to behave like one, to locate her in that role, and, of course, to show her respect because she has fulfilled the role that she is anticipated to fulfill. The perlocutionary force (s) of the 'big sister' appellation could

be that once being conferred upon such title, a woman must see to uphold her 'big sister' virtues and continue to behave like a 'big sister' to deserve the honor and the respect that is directed at her. Interesting enough, 'big sister' title is indeed a title that can be both given to and taken away from a woman, all depends on whether and how she behaves.

Taking Chen Zhili 陈至立 as an example. She starts her political career in Shanghai. Getting acquainted with the son of Jiang Zemin (China's leader from 1989 to 2003), Chen soon moved into the inner circle of the CCP Shanghai Municipal Committee and became director the party's propaganda department in Shanghai. Later, recommended by Jiang Zemin, Chen was appointed as Minister of Education and then as a member of the State Council. In 2007, Chen became president of the All-China Women's Federation. During her presidency, Chen, like all her predecessors, was addressed as 'Big Sister Zhili'. A news reportage in 2010 reported, for instance, Chen's visit to Chongqing city as the president of the All-China Women's Federation and the vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress. The then party secretary of Chongqing Bo Xilai received the delegation and delivered a formal welcome speech in which he praised 'Big Sister Zhili' for being not only very dedicated to education and women/children's welfare but also highly experienced in these matters [61]. Since 2007, however, Chen gradually lost her political favor due to her association with Jiang Zemin's faction. In 2013, Chen was removed from the position as the president of the All-China Women's Federation. At an official meeting where Chen was also present, the new president of the All-China Women's Federation delivered a speech in which she reviewed the work of the previous presidents and used the 'big sister' title to refer to former presidents like Peng Peiyun and Gu Xiulian. When mentioning Chen Zhili, however, the title was not 'Big Sister' but just 'comrade', signaling that Chen is no longer considered as a 'big sister' [62]. What more intriguing is that when the official Chinese news channels reported the meeting afterwards, Chen's name was not mentioned at all. Chen's case illustrates clearly the moral connotation of the 'Big Sister' title. When a woman was found to have been involved in factional politics and power games, she is not regarded as a 'big sister' any longer and will be consequently deprived of such title of honor and respect.

The 'big sister' titling is thus a doing-gender act through which the speakers negotiate 'the social landscape' of gender, convey gendered meanings, define gender appropriate behavior and boundaries. And since the title is only used on women within the Chinese Communist Party, it exhibits clearly how gender relations are configured within the party and on what premises. The respected women within the Party are all, and must be, 'big sister'-like figures, caring and self-sacrificing, remain supportive to their powerful male party fellows (the brothers) and never challenge the authority of 'the brothers' or compete for power and influence with them. They should be contented to deal with women's issues, a marginalized job portfolio that 'the big brothers' delegated to them, take care of the women masses (their sibling herd) and make sure that the women masses (the sibling herd) would follow their leads and be in good term with 'the brothers'. Of course, not all women within the Party are willing to accept this submissive role and some did have seized their chance to grab on power in the same vein as the male party leaders would do. Madame Mao Jiang Qing 江青, for instance, transformed herself from a picky and capricious wife of Mao Shun to the public to the most powerful woman in top national politics during the Cultural Revolution. Holding the position as the chairman of the Small Cultural Revolution Leading group and a member of the CCP Politburo, she was the *de facto* leader of the Cultural Revolution and played a crucial role in shaping both the contour and the course of the Cultural Revolution. But Jiang Qing was not a 'big sister'. She was neither regarded as nor called 'big sister' in any texts/speeches about her, officially or popularly, and never will. It seems that her craving for power and lavish use of power has disqualified her from being included into the well-behaved 'big sister' club. The 'big sister' title thus performs the function of role-assigning/confirming to those women who live up to the 'big sister' ideal and role-depriving/refuting to the women who deviate from that ideal.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined a specific linguistic practice in the Chinese language usage, i.e. the use of 先生 (Sir.) on women of outstanding social standings/professional achievement and 大姐 (big sister) on virtuous women within the Chinese Communist Party. These titles of appellation are widely used in the Chinese media, whether official or popular, printed or online. While further sociolinguistic and chronological studies are needed to trace the history of such appellation usage as well as how and under what circumstances a woman begins to be addressed/mentioned by either of these two titles, it seems to be a convention that those women who have won the title of either 先生 (Sir.) or 大姐 (big sister) will mostly addressed as xxx 先生 (Sir. xxx) and xxx 大姐 (big sister xxx) in descriptions about them, either it is historical accounts, official or popular writings. In the English sentence order, these titles are prefixes to be followed by the name, whereas in the Chinese sentence order, they are suffixes to follow the name of the addressed.

Drawing on the theory of doing gender and the theory of Speech Act, this study shows how these words of appellation, with their frequent appearance in speeches and/or texts, insinuate subtle gender norms and hence act to construct gender socially in a way which is often delicate and sometimes even unmarked. The study revealed how the use of these appellations in linguistic transactions conveys gendered meanings and works to mark gendered boundaries and gendered social relations. This is done by analyzing: 1). What does 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (Big Sister) connote in the Chinese language, what role 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (Big Sister) play in the social fabric of Chinese society and how it is normally used; 2). What typology of women are given to the two titles respectively and on what ground.

The study has shown how the use of Sir. title on women in the Chinese language institutes an act of 'social doing of gender' [63]. An honorable title as it is, the Sir. title on women encodes a subtle message about gender, signaling that only when a woman arrived at the social top, she can be regarded as brilliant as a man and hence deserves the title of Sir. which is normally reserved for men. Moreover, what underlies the use of Sir. title on women is also the cue that when a woman achieved high social stand, she finally becomes an equal of men and will be accepted and honored as an equal member of the 'Sir.' club. In this way, the use of Sir. title on women functions as a kind of 'descriptive accountings of states of affairs' that is 'both serious and consequential' [64]. Furthermore, the use of Sir. title on a woman is also a locutionary act which carries an underlying illocutionary force, i.e. the intention of the speakers. While the title is used to express respect and honor to women of high social stand, the respect is mediated by a male-gendered appellation which deliberately 'switch' the gender of these women, and it is through this 'switch' that women were acknowledged, accredited and admired. What the Sir. title says, in a colloquial manner, is actually 'you are like a Sir. to me (us). I (we) therefore confer this title upon you to confirm that I (we) recognize you as a Sir., an equal of male excellence, and, because of that, I (we) extend my (our) respect to you, Sir'.

Likewise, this study has shown how the use of 'big sister' title is doing gender and constructing gender relations. And since the title is mostly used on women within the Chinese Communist Party, it mainly exhibits how gender relations are configured within the party and on what premises. The respected women within the Party are all, and must be, 'big sister'-like figures, caring and self-sacrificing, remain supportive to their powerful male party fellows (the brothers) and never challenge the authority of 'the brothers' or compete for power and influence with them. They should be contented to deal with women's issues, a marginalized job portfolio that 'the big brothers' delegated to them, take care of the women masses (their sibling herd) and make sure that the women masses (the sibling herd) would follow their leads and be in good term with 'the brothers'. As a Speech Act, to call a woman 'big sister', either written or oral, discloses the speakers' intention to see a woman as a caring and self-sacrificing sister, to want her to behave like one, to frame her in that role, and, of course, to show respect to her for having fulfilled the role that she is anticipated to fulfill. The perlocutionary force (s) of the 'big sister' appellation could be that once being conferred upon such title, a woman must see to uphold her 'big sister' virtues and continue to behave like a 'big sister' to deserve the honor and the respect that is

directed at her, for ‘big sister’ is indeed a title that can be both given to and taken away from a woman, all depends on how she behaves.

Concerning the relationship between gender and language, sociolinguistic scholarship has hitherto argued about: 1). How ‘sexism exists in languages’ [65] and how sexist bias permeate daily communicative practices and hence work to sustain, reiterate and reinforce gender inequalities; and 2). whether men and women speak different languages, have different language style and communicative strategies due to their socialized differences. Within the Chinese-language scholarship on gender and language, voluminous studies have pointed to the relationship between sexism and language, especially on how language (the Chinese language as well as the English and other languages) denigrates women. However, the gendered nature of language does not have to denigrate women. On the contrary, as this study has shown, respectful appellations and honorable titles are often used in the Chinese language to extol women, only that these titles are not necessarily gender-neutral because of their respectful nature. This study shows how appellation prefixes like 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (Big Sister) are imbued with deep-lying gender assumptions and how they, when being used, are ‘engaged in both fitting words to world and fitting world to words’ (Pratt, 1986:71) and hence act actively in the social construction of gender and gender norms.

When applying the Speech Act theory to analyze the use of honorific title appellation on women in the Chinese language, however, there is a methodological question to consider and that is the role of the speaker. In the theory of Speech Act, the speaker is an individual with a clear utterance. This study moves a step away from the isolated individual utterance. Instead, it has examined the broader discursive social discourse context where the speaker is no longer an individual but rather a congregation of diverse voices. To the extent that appellations like 先生 (Sir.) and 大姐 (Big Sister) are both used by the official and the popular media/texts, it just shows how multiple forces, individual as well as institutional, are involved in doing gender and in reinforcing gender norms. Likewise, to the extent that appellations like Sir. 先生 and Big Sister 大姐 are used by both men and women, it indicates the complexity involved in doing gender in the sense that not only men participate in the social construction of gender, but women as well. Thus, gender is not a ‘given social category’ (Coates, 2016:6) but a ‘social construct’ which involves ‘dynamic aspects of interaction’ in both social life and linguistic practices.

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