

A Note on Women’s Courtesy Titles in Chinese

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This study examines the use of women’s courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society. In particular, 245 native Mandarin speakers were asked to complete a survey that was modeled on the one used by Donna Lillian. The results show that age is an influential factor in the selection of courtesy titles for women of different marital status. They also confirm Lillian’s observation that a woman’s occupational status may outweigh her marital status. The study lends insight into the uses of courtesy titles across cultures and briefly suggests areas worth exploring in future research.

KEYWORDS women’s courtesy titles, form of address, Chinese surnames, transcultural gender-related onomastics

Introduction

As a form of address, titles refer to the given initials of individuals in order to show their gender or social ranks in different situations. The “Title + First Name” form of address throughout history has been the subject of Thomas Murray’s research (2002). With respect to courtesy titles, the use of *Ms* and the choice of surname have been the focus of numerous studies (cf. Dion and Cota, 1991; Feather et al., 1979; Fuller, 2005; Murray, 1997). The courtesy title *Ms* was greatly debated in the US during the 1970s, when feminists proposed to do away with *Miss* or *Mrs* and adopt the neutral title *Ms* instead, in the same manner parallel to the use of *Mr* for men. Lillian (2008), in particular, has considered ethnicity and race (White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian) as variables in people’s likelihood of using *Ms*. For example, she reported that Blacks and Latinos appear to be more likely than Whites and Asians to continue to use *Mrs* for a woman who is separated from her husband but not divorced. Lillian (2008) also concluded that, in general, marital status seems to be the most important factor in the decision made by Blacks in their choice of courtesy title.

In this study, I examine the use of three courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society — *xiaojie* (小姐, XJ), *nushi* (女士, NS), and *taitai* (太太, TT) — by partially replicating Lillian’s (2008) studies on the choice of women’s courtesy titles. Fifteen

hypothetical scenarios with descriptions of women from different marital statuses were presented to 245 native Mandarin speakers. The informants were asked to select the appropriate combination of courtesy title and surname provided on the survey. The results show that age is an influential factor in the selection of courtesy titles for singles and newly-singles. They also confirm previous observations made by Lillian (2008), such as that a woman's occupational status may outweigh her marital status. The results of this study contribute to studies on courtesy titles across cultures.

On forms of address and courtesy titles in Chinese

Family terms, occupational titles, courtesy titles, and pronouns are commonly used as forms of address in everyday life. These address forms are linguistic forms that mark social relations and are often influenced by social variables such as kinship, age, and gender. Address forms also can be agents of influence, as in the case of how academic titles can influence course ratings (Wright, 2013). Furthermore, the appropriate or correct forms of address vary across cultures. For example, according to Brown and Gilman (1960), the use of the familiar pronoun *Tu* and the deferential pronoun *Vu* in European languages is governed by the forces of power and solidarity. In Japanese society, forms of address by way of honorific markers can represent linguistic politeness (Mogi, 2002). Furthermore, as shown in Yokotami (2015), Japanese young adults' disrespectful form of address for their fathers can be linked to negative feelings of rejection and depression. Finally, in the case of the polygynous Dagomba family in Northern Ghana, there are different modes of addressing the head of the household and his wife or wives and their extended families (Alhassan, 2010).

Just as in English, the Chinese language contains more than one courtesy title for women. For men, single as well as married, the courtesy title is *xienshen* "Mr." For married women, the courtesy title is *taitai* "Mrs." For unmarried women, there are two common courtesy titles available in the language — *xiaojie* and *nushi*. According to the *Dictionary of the Chinese Lexicon* (DCL), the definitive lexicographical publication from the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE, 2015) website, the term *xiaojie* (XJ) is defined as "young lady" and *nushi* (NJ) as "a polite term for women." The traditional sense of XJ is equivalent to "Miss" in English. However, the semantics of XJ have broadened in scope. In various contemporary discourse settings, such as when a bank teller greets a new female customer whose marital status and age are unknown, the latter may be addressed by the courtesy title XJ. The more formal term NJ also can be used to address both single and married women. On the surface level, NJ is also likened to the English courtesy title "Ms." The definitions are made even more ambiguous by the lifestyle choices of modern couples, who live in a period when relationship status can be confusing, when the prototypical "single" and "married" are no longer sufficient. As in the US, there are various terms to label a couple's relationship status: *tongju* "cohabiting," *gongtong fuyang* "co-parenting," *weihun luiban* "unmarried partners," *jiehun dan feng kai* "married but separated," and the latest borrowing from Hollywood, *chingxing fenshou* "conscious uncoupling." Moreover, the average marrying age for both Taiwanese men and women is consistently rising. The figure is highest in the major city of Taipei. The Taipei City Government Department of Civil Affairs reports that, for 2015, 59 % of men and 50 % of women between the ages of 30 and 34 have never been married (Gerber, 2015). It is,

in fact, common for a single, 30-something “child” to still be living with their parents. In light of the different types of marital status and lifestyle choices, it would be interesting to examine the actual usage of women’s courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society. This is the objective of this study.

To obtain a clearer insight into the use of women’s courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society, 245 students — 150 female students and 95 male students — from a public university in Taipei were surveyed. The ages of these millennials ranged from 18 to 22. Students were asked to pretend that they were working for a company and writing a business letter to the company’s female clientele. They were then asked to read the various descriptions and select the choice or choices which they thought were appropriate to use when addressing female patrons. The women described in the scenarios were of varying ages and different marital statuses.

The 15 hypothetical scenarios presented to the students were inspired by Lillian’s (2008) own examples. All 15 scenarios are provided in the Appendix. To be precise, two-thirds are direct translations of Lillian’s (2008) examples, while one-third are her examples qualified by minor additional information which I have included. For all of the hypothetical scenarios, the English names have been changed to Chinese names, following the surname-given name form. To avoid confusion, I use the terms *surname* and *given name* instead of *first name*, *middle name*, and *last name*. For example, in the following statement (equivalent to Lillian’s #11), *Ke* and *Kuo* are the surnames and *Ya Xin* and *Wei Zhong* are the given names of the couple.

Ke Ya Xin is 43 years old with three children in high school. Her partner, Kuo Wei Zhong, is the father of her children. Ya Xin and Wei Zhong have lived together for over 20 years, but they have never formally married.

Ke Xiaojie Kuo Xiaojie Ke Nushi Kuo Nushi Kuo Taitai

Participation was optional and those who volunteered to participate in the study filled out the survey after class. Students were asked to complete the survey individually and were assured of confidentiality. The completed surveys were collected and all of the responses were tabulated.

Results

Table 1 presents the frequency count for all combinations of surnames and courtesy titles. Below I summarize and discuss the key findings from the survey results. It should be noted, however, that some of the figures discussed may add up to more than 100 %. This is because respondents could select more than one choice, as mentioned earlier.

For scenarios in which there was no mention of a male partner, age seems to be the influential factor when determining courtesy titles; the general assumption is that the women described are unmarried. For the 17-year-old student living at home (#1) and the 27-year-old cab driver (#5), XJ was preferred over NS (97 % versus 3 % for the former and 84 % versus 15 % for the latter). In these two cases, DCL’s definition of XJ (“young lady”) applies here, even for the woman with a non-traditional occupation. On the other hand, for the 83-year-old woman who lived by herself (#2), NS was preferred over XJ (94 % versus 6 %). Perhaps a qualifier should be added to DCL’s definition of NS: “a polite term for (older) women.”

TABLE 1
COMBINATIONS OF SURNAMES AND COURTESY TITLES

1	Liu XJ 238	Liu NS 7					
2	Chang XJ 15	Chang NS 230					
3	Yeh XJ 113	Yeh NS 158					
4	Huang XJ 22	Huang NS 108	Huang LS 160	(*LS: <i>laoshi</i> = “teacher”)			
5	Wang XJ 205	Wang NS 36	Wang JS 24	(*JS: <i>jishi</i> = “driver”)			
6	Chen XJ 29	Gao XJ 4	Chen NS 182	Gao NS 11	Gao TT 85		
7	Lin XJ 55	Wu XJ 0	Lin NS 98	Wu NS 5	Wu TT 105	Lin Dr 158	Wu Dr 10
8	Chou XJ 183	Chou NS 97					
9	Hsieh XJ 142	Liang XJ 6	Hsieh NS 96	Liang NS 5	Liang TT 104		
10	Chiang XJ 94	He XJ 3	Chiang NS 98	He NS 4	He TT 158		
11	Peng XJ 204	Yang XJ 1	Peng NS 57	Yang NS 1	Yang TT 4		
12	Cheng XJ 68	Jiang XJ 4	Cheng NS 203	Jiang NS 2	Jiang TT 3		
13	Ma XJ 157	Lu XJ 3	Ma NS 124	Lu NS 2	Lu TT 4		
14	Ke XJ 105	Kuo XJ 0	Ke NS 153	Kuo NS 1	Kuo TT 26		
15	Chu XJ 90	Li XJ 2	Chu NS 147	Li NS 6	Li TT 79		

Note: XJ: *xiaojie*; NS: *nushi*; TT: *taimai*.

The scenario which elicited the most TT responses (the Chinese equivalent of *Mrs*) was that of the married 33-year-old stay-at-home mother (#10). In this case, TT was preferred (64 %) over NS (42 %) and XJ (40 %). However, for the scenario of the woman who co-owned a store with her husband (#9), comparatively fewer respondents selected TT — specifically 42 %, compared to 60 % for XJ and 41 % for NS. The difference between the stay-at-home mother and the female co-owner of a store seems to confirm Lillian’s (2008) observation that a woman’s working status is an influential factor.

The data paint a different picture for divorced women and women of separated status. In the relevant cases, the courtesy title TT was rarely considered (less than 2 %). For the 52-year-old woman who finalized her divorce two months ago (#12), the courtesy title NS was the overwhelming choice (84 %), while XJ was chosen by 29 % of the respondents. The case of the 34-year-old woman who was separated from her husband, returned to school, and worked a part-time job (#13), seemed to be the least clear-cut example for the respondents, with 65 % opting for XJ and 51 % for NS. However, these two results show salient differences in the choice of courtesy title for women. Again, age seems to be an influential factor in deciding between XJ and NS; the latter seems to be reserved for relatively older women.

The observation that some kind of “age gradient” is at work in the selection of XJ and NS can be further supported by the responses to other scenarios. For the teenage

single mother who had no contact with the father of her child (#11), 84 % of the respondents chose XJ while only 24 % considered NS appropriate. On the other hand, for the 43-year-old with three children who had been with her partner for 20 years but had never married (#14), NS was preferred over XJ (63 % versus 43 %). Age, therefore, trumped even maternal status and long-term cohabitating status. Moreover, although there was no definite or clear age cutoff at which one can be addressed as XJ or NS, it appears that, as the single or newly-single woman's age (if known) gets closer to mid-life, XJ is preferred less often.

Besides that of married women, the only other scenario where TT was considered by a substantial number of respondents was that of widows. In the scenario of the 57-year-old (#6) and 39-year-old (#15) widows, NS was preferred over XJ (79 % versus 13 % for the former and 62 % versus 38 % for the latter). In both cases, one-third also found TT to be appropriate. Perhaps a continuation in using the married courtesy title was preferred out of respect for the deceased husband and his extended family, with which the woman may still have close contact. The higher figure for the choice of XJ for the 39-year-old widow can be, again, attributed to the woman's (comparatively) younger age.

When neither a woman's age nor marital status was available, XJ appeared to be the default choice. This was the case for the scenario of the secretary working at the National Palace Museum (#8), in which the courtesy title XJ was almost doubly preferred over NS (75 % and 40 %).

The only instance where the courtesy title was bypassed was when the woman was associated with certain professions. In such cases, the occupational title was preferred over the courtesy title, regardless of the woman's age or marital status. For example, in the scenario of the unmarried 63-year-old retired teacher (*Huang Laoshi* "Teacher Huang"), the occupation title *Laoshi* "teacher" was preferred over NS and XJ (65 % versus 44 % and 9 %). For the 45-year-old married surgeon, while the choices TT and NS were considerable (43 % and 42 %, respectively), the courtesy title *Yishi* "Dr" was preferred by 69 % of the respondents. The results confirm Lillian's (2008) observation that a woman's occupational status can outweigh her marital status. To be more exact, the claim should be qualified with the modifier "prestigious" in front of the word "occupation," since one will also observe that only 10 % chose *Jishi* "driver" (*Wang Jishi* "Driver Wang") to address the cab driver in scenario #5. This is rational as there is generally a high degree of respect accorded to the teaching and medical professions in Asian societies.

Finally, a further comparison of the percentages of XJ and NS shows that courtesy title is almost always collocated with a woman's maiden name, rather than their husband's surname. For example, NS was the predominant choice for the 57-year-old Chen Mei Zhi (married to Gao Zhong Rong) in scenario #6, but specifically *Chen NS* was preferred by 74 % of the respondents while *Gao NS* was used by only 4 %. Where XJ was selected by a minority (14 %, 33 respondents), the maiden name was still the preferred collocation (29 respondents). A comparison of the results for scenario #7 presents an even more drastic case: while some 22 % of respondents would consider the courtesy title XJ to be acceptable for the 45-year-old surgeon, no one (0 %) found the (husband's surname + XJ) combination appropriate. Similar findings for maiden name preference can be reported for cases #9–15. Suffice to say, the results conform to the current bureaucratic custom. With respect to names on official documents and government identification cards, the surname printed is almost always that of the woman's maiden name. This is different

from the formal custom in the US where, unless otherwise indicated, the surname is usually that of the husband.

Conclusion

This study has provided a snapshot of the use of women's courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society. In particular, it has examined native Chinese-speaking millennials' responses to various scenarios described in a survey. The findings show that the courtesy title for single or newly-single women seems to be sensitive to the women's age. While the courtesy title NS can be applied to both single and married women, it seems to be reserved for relatively older women. The qualifier "relatively" is noted because there is no clear cutoff point that distinguishes between XJ and NS. Besides, people's perceptions of age have changed. Just as the 30s are said to be the new 20s and the 40s the new 30s, a *xiaojie* "young lady" may not be considered to be so "young" and a *nushi* "mature, older woman" may not be so "old."

The study also confirms previous observations made by Lillian (2008). As shown in the study, a woman's (prestigious) working status outweighed her marital status. Also, the courtesy title for married women continued to be used for widows. To be fair, the data set is small, as it was based on a convenience sample. The limitations of the ages and the mixed gender group of the sample are acknowledged here. The study thus opens up further questions, such as whether the results might be different if only males or middle-aged people were surveyed. Whether the results presented here apply to the general population remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the results of this study lend some insight into the uses of women's courtesy titles in Chinese and, in turn, contribute to the body of literature on forms of address across cultures.

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Appendix

1. Liu Si Han is a 17-year-old high-school student living with her parents.
2. Chang Qiu Mei is 83 years old and is living on her own.
3. Yeh Xin Yi is 37 years old and works at a bank.
4. Huang Yu Xiang is a 63-year-old retired teacher. She has never been married.
5. Wang Yan Hua is 27 years old and works as a cab driver for the City of Taipei.
6. Chen Mei Zhi is a 57-year-old widow, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for homeless children. Her husband, Gao Zhong Rong, passed away two years ago.
7. Lin Chao Ying is a 45-year-old surgeon, married to Wu Lu Gang.
8. Chou Ke Xin works as a secretary at the National Palace Museum.
9. Hsieh Hui Ting and her husband Liang Guan Wei are co-owners of a small clothing store.
10. Chiang Mei Lan is 33 years old. She is a full-time homemaker with three children. Her husband, He Kai Yan, works full-time and supports the family.
11. Peng Xiao Chi is a 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The child's father, Yang Jia Xiang, has no contact with Xiao Chi or the child.
12. Cheng Xiu Zhu is 52 years old and finalized her divorce from her husband, Jiang Guo Qin, just two months ago.
13. Ma Pei Rong is 34 and is separated from her husband, Lu Guan Hong. He has custody of their children. She attends university and works part-time.
14. Ke Ya Xin is 43 years old with three children in high school. Her partner, Kuo Wei Zhong, is the father of her children. Ya Xin and Wei Zhong have lived together for over 20 years, but they have never formally married.
15. Chu Xiang Yun is a 39-year-old widow. Her husband, Li Xing Quan, passed away six months ago.