

Masculine Hegemony and Resistance in Chinese Language

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Free from gender agreement and linguistic gender markers, the Chinese language system does not have any inflexion, derivation, infix, or prefix. Thus, it may give a false impression that the Chinese language is morphologically and syntactically genderless, if not gender-neutral. However, linguistic sexism does not necessarily have to be reflected in inflection and derivation. It can permeate a language through various forms. In this paper I will examine the following topics: the morphology of Han characters; Chinese vocabulary (occupational terms and forms of address); the Chinese pronoun system; Chinese word order; Chinese four-character idioms; and Chinese proverbs. The masculine hegemony that is deeply rooted in Chinese language and culture will be examined and discussed. I will also investigate whether there is a possibility for the Chinese language to resist patriarchal bias in its usage.

Sexism in the Morphology of Han Characters

Unlike English, and many other languages, there are no letters or spellings in the Chinese language. Han words – or more specifically, Han characters – are made of one or several radicals. The radicals are section headers and semantic roots that give meaning to the Han characters. For instance, characters with the female radical nu 女 are almost always related to females. The Han characters

below are good examples: ma 媽 (mother), jie 姐 (elder sister), mei 妹 (younger sister), yi 姨 (aunt), qi 妻 (wife), qie 妾 (concubine), xi 媳 (daughter-in-law), fu 婦 (married woman) and po 婆 (old woman). Moreover, Han characters that are perceived to evoke female imagery also consist of the female radical. Jiao 嬌 (pampered), nen 嫩 (delicate), yuan 婉 (congenial, restrained) and zhuang 妝 (to adorn oneself, or dress up) are all words that describe and/or are associated with feminine traits, even though they can also be used to describe males, children and the elderly. Among the many Han characters with the female radical, those that are found most problematic are the ones with vulgar and negative connotations. Here are a number of the most frequently used Han characters with negative meanings: ji 嫉 (jealous), du 妒 (envy), lan 婪 (greedy), wang 妄 (presumptuous), luan 變 (homosexual and paedophilic), xian 嫌 (dislike, scornful), jian 奸 (wicked, evil, treacherous), jian 姦 (rape, illicit sexual relations), yao 妖 (demon) and nu 奴 (slave). It is important to note that all of the negative Han characters that possess the female radical nu 女 have no fundamental connections with the female gender. As shown in the following sentence:

Chinese version: 這 男人 貪婪 又 奸險。
(Zhe nanren tanlan you jianxian)

Word-to-word translation: This man greedy and wicked.

English translation: This man is greedy and wicked.

The expression “This man is greedy and wicked” has nothing to do with the female gender. However, the female radical embedded in the derogatory Han characters lan “婪” (greedy) and jian “奸” (wicked) creates false impressions, unwittingly implying disrespect towards women.

Sexism in Chinese Vocabulary

Besides the discriminatory Han character structure, Chinese vocabulary is also found to be gender-biased and misleading. First of all, most powerful professions are considered to be male occupations in the Chinese tradition. Women who enter these masculine professions are therefore often marked

with the prefix nu 女, which means “female” or “woman.” For example, fa guan 法官 (judge) becomes nu fa guan 女法官 (female judge); yi sheng 醫生 (doctor) becomes nu yi sheng 女醫生 (female doctor); jiao shou 教授 (professor) becomes nu jiao shou 女教授 (female professor) (Lu 2009, 26 – 30). Also, in Chinese, the equivalent term for “career woman” is nu qian ren 女強人, which means “female strong person.” The implication is that all qian ren 強人 (strong people) are supposed to be male, and women should only stay in the home. As Moser points out, “The case of a female ‘strong person’ is an exceptional case, a curious footnote in the male-dominated discourse” (1997, 15). Thus, there is a need to specify the gender in the term.

On the other hand, occupations that are low-paid and generally seen as less prestigious are considered to be feminine; in the sense that when a man is engaged in such occupations, the use of the prefix nan 男 (male or man) is required, such as nan hu shi 男護士 (male nurse), nan bao mu 男保姆 (male nanny) and nan mi shu 男秘書 (male secretary). Both the prefix nu 女 (female) added to the masculine professions and the prefix nan 男 (male) added to the feminine occupations perpetuate the notion that women are inferior and second class.

In addition to the sexist occupational terms, the forms of address in Chinese are also unfair to women. As with the English language, males, married and unmarried, are called xian sheng 先生 (Sir or Mr). However, the marital status of females is indicated in the standard terms xiao jie 小姐 (Miss) and tai tai 太太 (Mrs). Also, in ancient Chinese texts and traditional history books, women’s names are seldom mentioned because they are considered insignificant. Often, a Chinese woman is only addressed using her father’s surname (if she is single) or her husband’s surname (if she is married), such as Zhang shi 張氏 (a person whose surname is Zhang 張) and Lin shi 林氏 (a person whose surname is Lin 林). As a result, many women remain nameless in Chinese history.

Moreover, historically a married woman would refer to herself as nu jia 奴家 (a slave at home), and a humble married man would refer to his wife as jian nei 賤

內 (inferior inside) or zhuo qi 拙荆 (silly wife) (Ettner 2002, 29 - 56). All these forms of address reflect the gender bias in traditional Chinese society. Despite contemporary linguistic improvements, the wife's name is still omitted when she is addressed alongside her husband. That is, if the husband's name is Lin Dai Ming 林大明, the couple will be addressed as Lin Dai Ming fu fu 林大明夫婦 (Mrs and Mr Lin Dai Ming) or the more formal Lin Dai Ming kang li 林大明伉儷 (Mr Lin Dai Ming and wife). Intriguingly, a woman who has great academic achievement is also called xian sheng 先生 (Sir or Mr). As Moser explains:

The term xiansheng 先生, in addition to functioning as a standard term of address for males ("Sir, Mr."), has also traditionally been used in academia as a polite form of address for a teacher who has achieved a great degree of respect and achievement (and such teachers were usually male, of course!)...women professors to this day are often respectfully addressed in this way in book inscriptions or letters. Xiansheng as a term of address...has...shown herself to be able to compete on equal footing with men. (1997, 14)

To sum up, the Chinese forms of address convey the sexist message that women are of little significance so their names need not be mentioned. Also, the Chinese language bears the covert bias that women do not deserve "a fully independent and normative semantic status in the linguistic domain"(Moser 1997, 14), because most powerful professions belong to males. The "small" number of exceptional cases, or so the Chinese believe, can be referred to by adding the prefix nu 女 (female) to the normative male occupational terms.

Sexism in the Chinese Pronoun System

Before the May 4th Movement of 1919, the third-person pronoun in the Chinese language was, surprisingly, non-gender specific in terms of its morphology and syntax. The third-person pronoun is ta 他, which is composed of the radical ren 人, meaning "human" and "humanity." The plural form of the third-person pronoun, ta men 他們 (they), was also non-gender specific at the syntactic level. Although both ta 他 and ta men 他們 (they) seem all-inclusive, they are

not truly gender neutral. Farris notices that the Chinese radical ren 人 (human, humanity) often has strong male defaults, not to mention ta 他 and ta men 他們 (they) (1998, 291). Nonetheless, for thousands of years Chinese users have used the all-inclusive pronoun system to refer to all males and females, children and adults. However, in the early twentieth century, young Chinese intellectuals were very influenced by Western literature. Chinese language reformers, such as Hu Shi, devised four more written forms for the third-person singular pronoun ta 他 from 4th May 1919 (Jung-Palandri 1991, 167-170). Now, there are altogether five third-person singular pronouns in Chinese:

1. 他 : Equivalent to "he," refers to males only
2. 她 : Equivalent to "she," refers to females only
3. 牠 : Similar to "it," gender-neutral, refers to an animal or a plant only
4. 祂 : Similar to "it," gender-neutral, refers to a celestial/divine being only
5. 它 : Similar to "it," gender-neutral, refers to an inanimate object only

As mentioned, the originally all-inclusive, third-person singular pronoun ta 他, with the radical ren 人 (human, humanity), is now reserved exclusively for "he" or "him." For the pronoun "she" and "her," a new Chinese character ta 她 was invented. The radical ren 人 (human, humanity) was replaced by the radical nu 女 (female, woman). Besides the masculine and feminine third-person singular pronouns, there are also singular pronouns specifically designed for animals and plants, gods and divine beings, and inanimate objects. For non-human creatures such as animals and plants, the radical ren 人 (human, humanity) was replaced by the radical niu 牛 (cow) to form the new pronoun ta 牠 (similar to the gender-neutral pronoun "it" in English but referring to an animal or a plant only); for gods and divine beings, the radical shi 示 (the spiritual) is used to form the new pronoun ta 祂, which is similar to the gender-neutral pronoun "it" in English, but refers to a god or a divine being only. For non-living objects, the non-gender specific Chinese character ta 它 – similar to the gender-neutral pronoun "it" in English, but refers to a lifeless object only – is now used.

Although the Chinese pronoun system has been reformed, the problem of

grammatical gender has now been introduced to the Chinese writing system. As in most European languages, the masculine third-person singular pronoun ta 他 (“he” or “him”) is used in generic contexts. The default image is of a male unless the context demands a female. Consequently, women become subordinate and invisible.

Sexism in Chinese Word Order

In the Chinese language, masculine terms almost always have the “natural” order of coming before feminine terms. Here are numerous examples that show the conventional male-female word order in Chinese: nan nu 男女 (male-female; man-woman), fu mu 父母 (father-mother), ba ma 爸媽 (dad-mom), fu fu 夫婦 (husband-wife), fu qi 夫妻 (husband-wife), zi nu 子女 (son-daughter), er nu 兒女 (son-daughter), xiong di jie mei 兄弟姊妹 (elder brother, younger brother-elder sister, younger sister), qian kun 乾坤 (heaven-earth, which symbolise male and female respectively) and long feng 龍鳳 (dragon-phoenix, which symbolise male and female respectively).

The problem of this male/female word ordering pattern is that in most oppositional and collocational dyads, the first component of the dyad is usually perceived as generic, normative, positive and primary. The second component of the dyad is characterised as adjunct, negated, less typical and of less importance (Link 2013, 177). In Chinese, almost all oppositional pairs follow this ordering logic, e.g. shi fei 是非 (right-wrong), dui cuo 對錯 (correct-incorrect), rong ru 榮辱 (glory-shame), ai hen 愛恨 (love-hate), shang xia 上下 (up-down) and gao di 高低 (high-low). Thus, the “male” first, “female” second, word order pattern in the Chinese language inevitably reflects the deep-seated gender bias in Chinese culture.

Sexism in Chinese Four-character Idioms

Many Chinese four-character idioms originate from traditional folktales and the preaching in Chinese classics such as The Analects of Confucius (ca. 500

B.C.). Chinese intellectuals and teachers – in formal contexts, both oral and written – often use them. School students are also required to learn these four-character idioms in their Chinese lessons and use them in their compositions. Unfortunately, many of these four-character idioms carry negative connotations and demeaning ideas about women. The use of these derogatory terms reiterates and passes on sexist notions and social conventions from generation to generation in Chinese society. The following examples reflect the gender prejudice embedded in the Chinese language. In hong yan huo shui 紅顏禍水, it warns men that beauties (hong yan 紅顏) are all as dangerous as floods (huo shui 禍水), because they are the cause of trouble and will bring disasters. In fu ren zhi ren 婦人之仁, it refers to the silliness of women showing sympathy to enemies, which later brings harm to oneself. What is interesting about this idiom is that it can refer to the silliness of both men and women. Fu you chang she 婦有長舌 remarks that all women have a long tongue, meaning that all women like to argue, gossip, and they do not know when to shut up. In po fu e zhi 潑婦惡治, po fu 潑婦 refers to the nasty woman. Together, the four characters mean that it is not an easy task to tame the shrew. Similarly, the idiom po fu ma jie 潑婦罵街 evokes an image of the shrew, yelling at or scolding others so loudly that everyone in the street can hear. It is a derogatory expression used to describe women who speak up in public.

Sexism in Chinese Proverbs and Expressions

Besides the four-character Chinese idioms, there are also numerous Chinese proverbs and expressions that show a strong bias against women. One good example is zui du fu ren xin 最毒婦人心 (a woman’s heart is the most poisonous.). Ironically, as Chinese history reveals, most massacres, genocides and unjustifiable wars in China were caused by tyrants and warlords, who were all males. Rather than being “poisonous,” women and children were most often defenceless victims of male brutality and violence. Another proverb that discriminates against women is san ge nu ren yi ge xu 三個女人一個墟 (three women make a market); this proverb gives the negative impression that all women like to gather together and gossip. Women are portrayed to be noisy, nosy and obnoxious.

There are also proverbs that teach women how to play the role of a “good” daughter, wife and mother. Nu zi wu cai bian shi de 女子無才便是德 (it’s a virtue if a woman hasn’t talent), a proverb from The Analects of Confucius (ca. 500 B.C.), is one that reveals gender inequality in the Chinese tradition. Such a proverb is based on the myth that it is bad luck for a woman to have talents, because her talents will bring trouble and create threats to her man and family. Because of this proverb, many girls and women are deprived of their right to receive education. Contradictorily, women are expected to be talented enough to bring up good sons. In ci mu duo bai er 慈母多敗兒 (a gentle, lenient mother brings up useless sons), the gentle mother is relegated and blamed for effeminising her son and making him useless.

As Chinese expressions that describe men and women are compared and contrasted, sexist attitudes become apparent. Whilst a Chinese woman who has many lovers is negatively described as fang dang yin jian 放蕩淫賤 (loose, promiscuous, cheap, easily seduced and bedded), shui xing yang hua 水性楊花 (a woman of easy virtue), and ren jin ke fu 人盡可夫 (any person can be the husband of and sleep with a disgraceful, adulterous woman), a Chinese man who has many lovers is praised as feng liu ti tong 風流倜儻 (handsome, amorous, unrestrained and unconventional in spirit and behaviour). Simply put, sexist attitudes and social inequalities are directly reflected in the proverbs and common expressions of the Chinese language. Sexist features encapsulated in Chinese morphology and lexical expressions, make it very difficult for Chinese users to remain gender neutral.

Rationality of the Sexism in Chinese Language

While the Chinese Language system honestly reflects the traditional gender ideology and patriarchal structure of Chinese society, Chinese history leaves traces of the ways in which sexist notions gradually laid down roots in Chinese culture – thus influencing its language. The matrix of gender bigotry can be traced back to the cosmological conception of the Supreme Ultimate (tai ji 太極) in Chinese philosophy. As recorded in Zhuangzi, the Daoist classic written in

the 3rd century B.C., the Supreme Ultimate (tai ji 太極) emits the two exemplars (liang yi 兩儀), and the two exemplars emit two opposing natural forces into the world. On the one hand, the yang force (陽) represents energetic qualities. It is associated with heat, brightness, activity, excitement, stimulation, movement, upward and outward directions, etc. The yin force (陰), on the other hand, represents the opposite; it is associated with cold, darkness, rest, condensation, inhibition, nourishment, downward and inward directions. Parallels are also drawn between the ideological thinking of yin-yang and human orders, with male being yang and female being yin. We can see this ideology operating in the work of Chunqiu fanlu in his Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn 134BC – which is a philosophical work believed to be “the orthodox doctrine of state” (Loewe 1993, 77):

The yin and yang of heaven and earth correspond to male and female. In the human realm, male and female correspond to yin and yang. Indeed, it is by being yin and yang that male and female are called [such]; and it is by being male or female that [things are] called yin and yang (Translated and cited in Raphals 1998, 163).

At the beginning, the yin force was perceived to be equal and complementary to the yang force. As Raphals notes, “yin-yang polarities are mostly cyclic and relatively nonhierarchical” (1998, 142). They alter and transform. However, the yin force was gradually stigmatised as inferior (Wu 1995) when Confucianism became popular. It was stressed then that male, the embodiment of yang, was superior to the female, yin. As recorded in the “Domestic Rules” of The Record of the Rites, the male should take the action while the female should follow him; the male should take care of the outer affairs and the female should manage the household well. It was believed that “female submissiveness was the main factor needed for domestic harmony” (ibid). The concept of male supremacy and female subordination was further consolidated in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) as Confucian scholars “associated the yang force with good, and regarded the yin as prone to evil and in need of yang’s control” (ibid). As Guisso notes:

[A]ll women possess a nature which is predominantly yin and unless they are regulated by the yang qualities of the male[,] the all-important harmony of family and cosmos will be upset (1981, 53).

To prevent the harmony of the family and the cosmos from being “upset,” rules of conduct and regulations of sexual segregation were written in detail in The Five Classics. For instance, as a creature in need of discipline, women should conform to the rituals of three obediences. This means that before marriage, a woman should obey her father; after marriage, she is to obey her husband; finally, after the death of her husband, she should obey her son, should she have one. An unrestrained woman is considered destructive and dangerous. This prejudice against women is reflected in the chapter of Chan-han in The Five Classics of the Confucian tradition:

A clever man builds a city wall;
 A clever woman overthrows it;
 Beautiful is the clever woman,
 But she is an owl, a hooting owl;
 A woman with a long tongue,
 She is a promoter of evil;
 Disorder is not sent down from Heaven,
 It is produced by women;
 Those who cannot be instructed or taught
 Are women and eunuchs

(Cited in Guisso 1981, 55).

Hilarious as it may seem, to this day, the Confucian teaching about gender is still popular and influential in China. For example, in the Chinese language, “Hell” is called 陰間 (The Land of Yin); 陽間 (The Land of Yang), on the other hand, is the land of all living things. Similarly, according to Chinese Feng Shui, places that are dark, quiet, cold and wet are called “yin places.” Ghosts and demons love to reside there, and humans who live there will have bad luck. Furthermore, people who were born in the yin hour, yin month and yin

year are unlucky. Not only will they bring bad luck to people around them, they may also have unpleasant, ghostly encounters many times in their lives. Even more disappointingly, despite the advancements in economy, life quality and education, the common Confucian saying, “A woman who lacks talent is virtuous” (女子無才便是德) still has a powerful effect in China. This can be reflected in the degrading Chinese slang, “Female PhD” (女博士), which is used by both men and women in China. The Chinese term “Female PhD” refers to a woman who has been educated to a high standard, and may be single, old, unkempt, desperate, and without a male partner. To Chinese men, a “Female PhD” is undesirable for three reasons. Firstly, her qualifications are a threat to men. Secondly, it is assumed that she is sexually unattractive and boring because she only spends time on her studies and research. In addition, it is believed that a woman who has a PhD is not considered to be young anymore. Female PhDs are said to belong to the derogatory “third sex.”

Against All Odds: Resistance against Sexism in Chinese Language

Attempts have been made to reduce sexism in Chinese morphology. According to Hodge and Kam (1998, 57), at the historical moment when the character simplification project was being undertaken in the People’s Republic of China, feminists made suggestions to the language reform committee, urging them to identify negative Han characters with the female radical 女 and have it replaced with the evil radical 歹 – which is non-gender specific. Unfortunately, the plea for the non-sexist morphological reform was put aside. To this day, some Chinese linguists still find the proposal for non-sexist morphological reform in the Chinese language “controversial,” “heavily feministic” and “emotional” (Shi 2008, 1-2). As a result, countless Han characters with the most negative connotations are still composed of the female radical 女, even though these Han characters may be used in contexts that do not necessarily mean to discriminate women.

As hard as it is, some gradual advancement of non-sexist Chinese reform can still be observed in modern Chinese usage. For instance, with the rise

of Chinese women's social position in the previous decades, it has become common for a Chinese woman to choose freely whether she wants to change her surname to that of her husband if she marries. It is now up to the married woman if she would like to keep her maiden name at her workplace and on her passport. This is particularly popular with women in the workforce. Also, as with the English language, the standard term nu shi 女士 (Ms) is now widely used to replace xiao jie 小姐 (Miss) and tai tai 太太 (Mrs). In fact, the term nu shi 女士 (Ms) has become a convenient and polite form of address for women on most occasions, especially when the age and marital status are not given.

In addition, gender-neutral occupational terms such as can ting fu wu yuan 餐廳服務員 (restaurant attendants), kong zhong fu wu yuan 空中服務員 (flight attendants), and shou huo yuan 售貨員 (salespeople) have also been invented to replace old, gender-specific terms like xiao jie 小姐 (waitress, occasionally also used as a derogatory term for young women who offer sexual services), kong zhong xiao jie 空中小姐 (air hostess), and shang dian xiao jie 商店小姐 (saleswoman). The introduction of these gender-neutral terms makes sense and is welcomed by many because more and more males have joined the once mostly female-only professions. As discussed, traditionally sex-marked terms such as nan hu shi 男護士 (male nurse) and nu yi sheng 女醫生 (female doctor), reveal "a great deal about cultural expectations and designated roles" (DeFrancisco et al 2007, 117), leaving men and women who hold the marked occupational terms to be perceived and assessed as less professional and competent. Now, the invention and use of unmarked terms such as can ting fu wu yuan 餐廳服務員 (restaurant attendants) and kong zhong fu wu yuan 空中服務員 (flight attendants) can be viewed as a challenge towards hegemonic definitions and conventional social constructs. The use of these new occupational terms also reflects that there is a need to redefine conventional designated roles so as to better describe the gender configuration in the labour market of modern Chinese society.

Besides adopting generic occupational terms and emphasising gender equality in the forms of address, feminists also encourage feminisation (Sullivan 2006,

34) so as to obtain greater linguistic visibility of women in modern economic and social contexts (Bazzanella et al 2006, 8). Although, for a long period of time, the patriarchal view heavily influenced Chinese culture (Li 2014, 109) and language system, feminists still attempt to view Chinese morphology in a positive light. For example, Lee remarks that quite a number of Han characters with positive connotations are associated with women (2008, 140). Like xing 姓, the Han character for "surname," carries the female radical nu 女. Also, the second component of the character is sheng 生, which means "giving birth." As Lee explains, this suggests that once upon a time Chinese society was matriarchal (2008, 140). People used to be named after their mother's surname rather than their father's. Another Han character that reflects female supremacy is shi 始, meaning "the beginning." Since shi 始 also carries the female radical nu 女, it can be argued that women were once honoured as the beginning of life.

In fact, it is likely that the Han character shi 始 is associated with 女媧 Nuwa, a significant legendary female figure in Chinese tradition (Norden 2011, 2). Like Eve in the Holy Bible, Nuwa is considered the mother of all humans. Yet, Nuwa is not created by God or from a rib of Adam. Instead, she is the deity who repaired the collapsing Heaven and created human beings from the yellow earth of China in the likeness of her own image. Also, Nuwa is not the mother of sin; rather, she is like Eve and the serpent in one, for it is said that the upper part of her body is human-like, and the lower part of her body is like a snake or the tail of a dragon. Nuwa's serpentine qualities also came to be associated with the Yellow River during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618 – 907). It is said that from a distance the Yellow River that gives life and nurtures the people in China looks like a yellow serpent that stretches her body into the mainland. Hence, the Yellow River, a symbol of Nuwa the goddess, is also known as "China's Mother River." By and large, the rediscovery of ancient feminine power in Chinese words empowers women. It provides an alternative viewpoint to the masculine hegemony present in the Chinese language.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the sexist phenomenon manifested in the morphology, as well as lexical and syntactic expressions of the Chinese language. With examples, I have shown that male superiority and female inferiority are encapsulated in Chinese language. Seeing the harm of linguistic sexism, feminists such as Rowbotham raise the need to bring about non-sexist linguistic reform.

The language of theory – removed language – only expresses a reality experienced by the oppressors. It speaks only for their world, from their point of view. Ultimately a revolutionary movement has to break the hold of the dominant group over theory, it has to structure its own connections. Language is part of the political and ideological power of rulers (1973, 32 - 33).

Resistance against sexism in Chinese language is far from easy. Nonetheless, the reproach of gender biases in the Chinese language can be considered as an initial step to combat gender inequality, drawing public attention to the unequal linguistic representation of women and men.

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