

A Comparative Study on Women's Courtesy Titles in Mainland China and Taiwan

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Abstract: Based on Lillian's (2008) and Chen's (2016) studies on women's courtesy titles, this study makes a comparison and contrast of women's courtesy titles in mainland China and Taiwan, with reference to those in the Whites and Blacks. It is based on a survey of a questionnaire, which is almost the same as the one used in Chen (2016) that was modelled on the one used in Lillian (2008). The results confirmed that age is an influential factor in the selection of courtesy titles for women of different marital status. It also confirmed Lillian's observation that a woman's occupational status may outweigh her marital status. However, even mainland China and Taiwan belong to the same Chinese community, they have statistically significant difference in women's courtesy titles, especially in the use of XJ (Miss). Its fill-in-the-blank method of collecting women's courtesy titles, rather than fixed-choices method, also seems to be effective.

Keywords: women's courtesy titles, Chinese, gender-related onomastics.

INTRODUCTION

Women's courtesy titles are influenced by many factors including race, gender, age, working status, marital status, etc. Studies on the use of *Ms.* have been conducted from the 1970s on and the following findings are comparatively more enlightening to our study of women's courtesy titles. Feather, O'Driscoll and Nagel [1] investigated the effects of three variables on people's preference for using the *Ms.*

Title: 1) attitude toward the Women's Liberation Movement, 2) general conservatism and 3) psychological androgyny. Atkinson [2] found from university undergraduates that maiden name retention and the use of *Ms.* are interrelated. Dion and Cota [3] proved two hypotheses on women's courtesy titles: 1) a woman who prefers *Ms.* as her title of address would be seen differently, and 2) explicit preference for the woman's title of address would elicit stronger trait attributions for women. Twenge [4] found that women who wish to keep or hyphenate their names have more feminist attitudes, score higher on instrumentality/agency, and are more likely to be immigrants and/or women of color. Fuller [5] found multiple meanings and patterns of female title use in the United States, with little evidence pointing toward a decrease in this variation. Lillian [6] found that a greater tendency on the part of Whites to use the non-traditional title *Ms.* for the women in the scenarios she set up and that marital status seems to be the most important factor in the decision made by Blacks in their choice of courtesy title. Chivero [7] asserted that *Ms.* in Harare is associated with a certain group of people, mainly divorcees and single women and viewed negatively. Dion [8] showed that a woman

who prefers the title *Ms.* gives the impression of being more achievement oriented, socially assertive and dynamic, but less interpersonally warm. Enlightened by former studies, Chen [9] examined the use of women's courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society and had new findings to supplement Lillian's [6] study. Furthermore, to better supplement Lillian's [6] study, more Asian respondents for the comprehensive research is needed to better understand women's courtesy titles across cultures. We hope that our data and analysis of mainland Chinese respondents will encourage more comprehensive studies in this field in the future.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we partially replicated Lillian's [6] and Chen's [9] studies on the choice of women's courtesy titles, in which Lillian used online and offline methods to collect data for a questionnaire to study women's surname choices and courtesy titles, while Chen [9] asked 245 native Mandarin speakers to complete a survey that was modeled on the one used by Donna Lillian to examine the use of women's courtesy titles in contemporary Taiwanese society. We made changes in that we simplified all the surnames of the fifteen

hypothetical women into the same surname Wang because our study only focused on women’s courtesy titles without surnames.

To ensure that this modification is good, we asked 16 respondents whether it was better to vary the hypothetical women’s surnames prior to undertaking the full study, and their general response was that without various surnames, they could pay more attention to the hypothetical women’s marital status, occupational status, age, etc. Fifteen hypothetical scenarios with descriptions of women of different ages in different marital statuses and occupations were presented both online and offline to a convenience sample of 196 university undergraduates speaking Mandarin Chinese and English. The respondents were asked to act as company staff to do a mailing to the female clients of the company they work for. They were told to write down the most appropriate courtesy titles for each woman in the fifteen scenarios (cf. Appendix-A). In this way, the respondents provided more varied and more

authentic answers than those in the study of Lillian [6] and Chen [9]. However, a disadvantage is that only 183 (93.4%) respondents – 36 male and 147 female-- provided meaningful responses to all the scenarios. Eleven respondents missed at least one scenario, and two respondents had only one answer for all the scenarios. Their responses were not counted. In addition, personal interviews were used when the subjects had answers unexpected by the authors, even though interviews were not scheduled at first. In this research, 15 subjects were interviewed about why they used *mama* to address a 19-year-old single mother, who is of their age, and the results were factored into the analysis of scenario 11.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Table-1, there are 23 women’s courtesy titles collected from the respondents in mainland China. But in Taiwan, only 6 women’s courtesy titles were reported [9].

Table-1: Women’s Courtesy Titles In Mainland China

1	TX	XJ	XMM	GN			
	139	39	3	2			
2	NN	NS	PP	FR			
	103	73	5	2			
3	NS	XJ	AY	J	GX		
	117	38	22	4	2		
4	NS	LS	XJ	NN	FR		
	91	84	3	3	2		
5	SF	NS	XJ	J	DJ	SJ	GX
	58	56	52	9	3	3	2
6	NS	AY	DJ	Y	NN	FR	
	129	36	11	3	2	2	
7	YS	TT	FR	AY	NS		
	97	38	22	16	10		
8	MS	NS	XJ	GX			
	87	54	40	2			
9	LB	NS	LBN	TT	AY	J	XJ
	89	49	21	15	4	3	2
10	NS	TT	AY	MM	J		
	92	69	16	4	2		
11	XJ	NS	MM	NCT	J		
	80	78	15	7	3		
12	NS	AY	Y	DJ			
	162	16	3	2			
13	NS	XJ	J				
	163	17	3				
14	NS	XJ	J	AY	MM	Y	
	156	18	3	3	2	1	
15	NS	DJ	AY	Y	XJ		
	160	12	5	4	2		

Note: see Appendix B for the meanings of abbreviations

In order to make a comparison and contrast of women’s courtesy titles in mainland China and Taiwan, we simplified Chen’s [9] frequency count of women’s courtesy titles in Taiwan, as shown in Table-2.

Surnames were deleted, because our study is concentrated on women’s courtesy titles without surnames.

Table-2: Women's Courtesy Titles In Taiwan

1	XJ	NS		
	238	7		
2	XJ	NS		
	15	230		
3	XJ	NS		
	113	158		
4	XJ	NS	LS	
	22	108	160	
5	XJ	NS	JS	
	205	36	24	
6	XJ	NS	TT	
	33	193	85	
7	XJ	NS	TT	Dr
	55	103	105	168
8	XJ	NS		
	183	97		
9	XJ	NS	TT	
	148	101	104	
10	XJ	NS	TT	
	97	102	158	
11	XJ	NS	TT	
	205	58	4	
12	XJ	NS	TT	
	72	205	3	
13	XJ	NS	TT	
	160	126	4	
14	XJ	NS	TT	
	105	154	26	
15	XJ	NS	TT	
	92	153	79	

Note: adapted from Chen 2016, see Appendix B for the meanings of abbreviations

In Table-3, $P=0.001<0.05$, showing that the use of XJ (Miss) in mainland China and Taiwan have statistically significant difference. To make the

comparison and contrast clearer, we listed the percentage of XJ in mainland China and Taiwan in Table-4

Table-3: Anova of XJ In Mainland China And Taiwan

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.682	1	.682	13.830	.001
Within Groups	1.380	28	.049		
Total	2.061	29			

First, let's begin from the five scenarios (2, 6, 7, 10, 12) in which none of the mainland Chinese addressed the woman XJ, but 6.1%, 10.6%, 12.8%, 27.2%, and 25.7% of the Taiwanese respectively addressed the woman XJ. Take scenario 2 for example, the mainland Chinese usually address her with NN (56.3%), NS (39.9%) or PP (2.7%), here the age of the woman is a determining factor. It confirmed Chen's [9] observation that age is an influential factor in the selection of courtesy titles for women of different marital status. In scenario 6, the mainland Chinese usually address the woman with NS (70.5%) or AY (19.7%) because her age is 57. In scenario 10, 27.2% of

Taiwanese used XJ to address the 33-year-old full-time homemaker with three children, but none of the mainland Chinese used XJ. They preferred NS (Ms. / Mrs., 50.3%) and TT (Ms. / Mrs., 37.7%), greatly influenced by her marital status.

Second, it's necessary to select a few more scenarios to find out the reasons why XJ is used differently. In scenario 1, 97.1% Taiwanese addressed the 17-year-old high-school student XJ. But only 21.3% of the mainland Chinese addressed her with XJ, and the majority of them (76.0%) addressed her with TX (Classmate), influenced by her status as a student.

Table-4: Percentage of XJ In Mainland China And Taiwan

SCEN.	XJ IN MAINLAND	XJ IN TAIWAN
1	21.3	97.1
2	0.0	6.1
3	20.8	41.7
4	1.6	7.6
5	28.4	77.4
6	0.0	10.6
7	0.0	12.8
8	21.9	65.4
9	1.1	41.9
10	0.0	27.2
11	43.7	76.8
12	0.0	25.7
13	9.3	55.2
14	9.8	36.8
15	0.5	28.4

In scenario 3, 41.7% Taiwanese addressed the lady working at a bank XJ, while only 20.8% mainland Chinese addressed her XJ, mainly because she is 37 years old, an age old enough to be addressed with NS (63.9%).

In scenario 4, LS (Teacher) or NS (Ms. / Mrs.) are preferred by both mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, because the woman's age is 63, even though she is single all her life, she is considered too old to be addressed as XJ for the majority of respondents. Her occupation as a teacher also has influence upon the courtesy title.

In scenario 5, 77.4% Taiwanese addressed the 27-year-old cab driver XJ, while only 28.4% mainland Chinese addressed her XJ, because most of them think it is more appropriate to address her with SF (Master, 31.7%), a euphemism for her occupation or NS (Ms. / Mrs., 30.6%), a more appreciative form of address than SJ (Driver, 1.6%) to show certain respect.

In scenario 8, 47.5% of mainland Chinese used MS (Secretary) to address the woman secretary, influenced by her profession as a secretary. Because neither her age nor her marital status was identified, XJ (Miss, 29.5%) and NS (Ms. / Mrs., 21.9%) were almost equally used by the respondents.

In scenario 9, 41.9% Taiwanese addressed the co-owner of a small clothing store XJ (Miss), while only 1.1% mainland Chinese addressed her XJ. Most of the mainland Chinese address her as the boss or the woman boss, emphasizing her occupation.

In scenario 11, the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese were also divided regarding the 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The majority of Taiwanese used XJ (Miss, 76.8%), much more than NS (Ms. / Mrs., 21.7%), whereas the

mainland Chinese almost equally used XJ (43.7%) and NS (42.6%). It's also noteworthy that 8.2% respondents aging between 18 to 22 used *mama* (mother) to address her, while only 2.2% respondents used *mama* to address the 33-year-old full-time homemaker with three children, who should be considered a more typical mother. According to personal interviews with the respondents who used *mama*, we come to know that they were addressing the single mother from her child's perspective to make her feel closer. On the other hand, they thought that for the full-time homemaker in scenario 10, it would be more appropriate to address her using NS (Ms. / Mrs., 50.3%) or TT (Ms. / Mrs., 37.7%). Also, in scenario 11, we found 3.8% respondents addressed the young mother by her "given-name". This special strategy of courtesy was not mentioned in Lillian [6] or Chen [9]. However, Horgan *et al.*, [10] had a similar finding about the given name phenomenon in stating that the vast majority (82.1%) of women patients preferred to be addressed by their first name. Therefore, it is probable that the use of "given-name" can be considered a special way of courtesy and might be expected by the addressee under certain circumstances.

In scenario 13, the woman with children is 34 years old, an age that can be either addressed with XJ or NS (Ms. / Mrs.). The mainland Chinese preferred NS (89.1%), much higher than the Taiwanese's use of NS (43.4%).

In scenario 14 and 15, the mainland Chinese preferred NS (85.2%, 87.4% respectively), probably because the two women seem quite similar to them in that they are about 40, either unmarried or widowed. For the mainland Chinese, the age is a more important factor than the marital status. However, to the Taiwanese, the two women seem still quite different in terms of their marital status. TT (Ms. / Mrs.) was used to address the widow (24.4%) and the unmarried mother

(9.1%). According to Chen (2016), perhaps it was out of respect for the deceased husband and his extended family, with which the woman may still have close contact.

It is also interesting to find that in scenario 7, 12.0% mainland Chinese used FR (Ms. / Mrs.) to address the 45-year-old surgeon, comparatively higher than that in scenario 2 (1.1%) and scenario 4 (1.1%). In light of the fact in China a medical doctor is similar in social status to a teacher, the major difference in the three scenarios is that in scenario 7 the woman is married, while the two women in the other two scenarios are single. One of the reasons is that FR (Ms. / Mrs.) is often related to higher status, as shown in its definitions:

- Wife of a diplomat/feudal lord/high official
- Madame, Lady, First FR is the Chinese equivalent to First Lady
- Wife, usu. general manager and his wife [11].

It can be concluded that a stable marriage for Chinese is a symbol of higher status than being single. Similar findings are also stated in Chivero [7] in that marriage as an institution is highly valued and respected among Shona-English bilinguals in Harare. Therefore, we can conclude like Lillian [6] that marital status is one of the most important factors in choosing women’s courtesy titles. This prediction should be proven with more data collected from more scenarios.

Why does the current study differ so greatly from Chen [9] in the use of XJ as a woman’s courtesy title? Firstly, it’s important to know that XJ has six meanings:

- (Archaic) young lady [used by a servant in addressing his master’s daughter]
- miss [honorific term of address for unmarried woman or girl]

- Miss [title of an unmarried woman or girl, usu. used before the surname or sometimes alone in direct address]
- Miss [a woman who has won a beauty contest]
- Miss [usu. used before a profession]
- (Derogatory) call girl; prostitute [11].

Secondly, in Chinese culture, XJ has gone through many changes and painted with different appreciative or derogatory colors in history. Beginning from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 AD), XJ was used to address a woman from the lower class. However, in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), XJ was gradually used to address a young woman in a rich feudal family or an official’s daughter. In the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912 AD) and the Republic of China (1912-1949 AD), XJ was used for an unmarried woman in a well-off family. Even when she is married, her former servants still call her XJ to show intimacy and respect. After the Kuomintang government withdrew to Taiwan in 1949, the use of XJ as an honorific title was kept in Taiwan, regardless of the age of women. Women in Taiwan usually like to be addressed as XJ rather than NS or DJ. However, in mainland China, XJ gathered more meanings, sometime derogatory. In the 1990s, it was used to address a young prostitute, which led to the disdain of XJ. At the same time, it is also used as an honorific title for young women, for example, a woman who won a world-level beauty contest is called XJ (Miss) Universe, or XJ World, the same as Miss Universe in English.

Moreover, based on the observation of scenarios 2, for the mainland Chinese, XJ is often used for woman unmarried if the occupational status is unknown, but generally speaking the woman should not be over 60. If she is unmarried and over 60, she would most likely be called NN (Granny), even though she might have no grandson or granddaughter at all. Here, age trumps the marital status.

Table-5: Anova of Ns In Mainland China And Taiwan

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.062	1	.062	.856	.363
Within Groups	2.026	28	.072		
Total	2.088	29			

In Table-5, $P=0.363>0.05$, showing that the use of NS in mainland China and Taiwan have no statistically significant difference.

In Table-6, $P=0.186>0.05$, showing that the use of TT in mainland China and Taiwan have no statistically significant difference either.

Table-6: Anova of Tt In Mainland China And Taiwan

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.031	1	.031	1.836	.186
Within Groups	.471	28	.017		
Total	.501	29			

As for the differences between mainland China and Taiwan’s use of courtesy titles, there are a much wider range of courtesy titles as women’s courtesy titles in mainland China, compared with the 6 courtesy titles discussed in Chen [9]. There are three major reasons. Firstly, it’s no exaggeration that Chinese courtesy titles are one of the most complex in the world, because in traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese people are most concerned with the relationship of blood, family, relatives, and friends. Even people in mainland China and Taiwan have the same ancestral root and the same Chinese language with the same basic vocabulary, their use of women’s courtesy titles are different from each other to a certain extent. Secondly, in ancient times, the traffic in China was inconvenient, and a title has developed different variants in different places. Thirdly, even though people from Taiwan and mainland China speak the same Chinese language, share quite similar cultural customs, values and beliefs, and belong to the Chinese community, they have been completely cut off

from each other for about 40 years from 1949 to the 1980s. Thus, in that period, Chinese people at the two sides of the Taiwan Straits began to have almost no interaction with each other. Because Taiwan is only an island, people in Taiwan begin to use more limited titles to address people [12].

Furthermore, the 23 women's courtesy titles found in mainland China can be classified into four types: 1) Social terms such as Miss, Your Excellency, Girl, NS (Ms. / Mrs.), FR (Ms. / Mrs.), TT (Ms. / Mrs.); 2) Occupations such as Classmate, Teacher, Master, Doctor, Secretary, Boss and Woman Boss; 3) Kinship terms such as Younger Sister, Grandma, Granny, Aunt, Sister, Older Sister, Aunty, and Mom; 4) Given names.

Based on the above classification and the data in Table-1, Table-7 is presented to show the percentage of each type as women’s courtesy titles in mainland China.

Table-7: Percentage of Each Type In Mainland China

Type as women’s courtesy titles	Percentage
Social terms	66.9
Occupations	21.1
Kinship terms	11.7
Given names	0.3

As shown in Table-7, social terms as women’s courtesy titles account for 66.9%; Occupations as women’s courtesy titles, 21.1%; Kinship terms as women’s courtesy titles, 11.7%; Given names as women’s courtesy titles, only 0.3%. Thus, social terms are still mostly used as women’s courtesy titles, followed by occupations and kinship terms in mainland China. Even though given names have been used by a few subjects in the research, its percentage of 0.3% obviously suggest that the mainland Chinese, in most cases, would not use the given name as a courtesy title to address a woman.

CONCLUSION

Lillian [6] stated that Asians were one of the under-represented ethnic categories examined in her study and she needed more data to continue her study. Chen [9] conducted a similar study in Taiwan to supplement Lillian’s study and had new findings in the women’s courtesy titles. However, a comparison between her study of Taiwanese and our study of mainland Chinese showed that there are great differences in the use of XJ as a woman’s courtesy title. Different from the great popularity of XJ as a courtesy title for Taiwan women of different ages, the study showed that the mainland Chinese will seldom use XJ to address a woman older than 40, married or not, probably because XJ is only reserved for young unmarried woman. As for the use of NS and TT, the two studies showed no statistically significant

difference. The study confirmed Chen’s [9] study that the courtesy title NS can be applied to both single and married women, and that it seems to be reserved for relatively older women. The study also confirmed observations made by Lillian [6] that a woman’s (prestigious) working status outweighed her marital status.

Furthermore, our study used a fill-in-the-blank method to encourage the respondents to write down whatever women’s courtesy titles. This method proved to be more effective because we collected 23 women’s courtesy titles without considering their own surnames or their husband’s surnames, much more than the 6 courtesy titles discussed in Chen [9] and the 9 courtesy titles used as choices for the questionnaire in Lillian [6].

The study not only contributes to studies on women’s courtesy titles across cultures, but studies in different areas of one culture. Considering the great population, vast territory and diversified customs of mainland China, and the relatively small size of subjects in the study, the results should be taken cautiously. Another limitation of the study is that the questionnaire in Appendix A is better equipped with open-ended questions asking for the reasons why the subjects would have chosen a certain courtesy title. Thus, research with a more complicated and efficient questionnaire responded by more subjects should be encouraged to

collect more data for more in-depth analyses in the future.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. Wang Sisi is a 17-year-old high-school student living with her parents.
2. Wang Qiumei is 83 years old and is living on her own.
3. Wang Xinyi is 37 years old and works at a bank.
4. Wang Yuxiang is a 63-year-old retired teacher. She has never been married.
5. Wang Yanhua is 27 years old and works as a cab driver in the municipality she lives in.
6. Wang Meizhi is a 57-year-old widow, who works as a volunteer at a shelter for homeless children. Her husband, Gao Zhongrong, passed away two years ago.
7. Wang Chaoying is a 45-year-old surgeon, married to Wu Lugang.
8. Wang Kexin works as a secretary at the National Palace Museum.
9. Wang Huiting and her husband Liang Wei are co-owners of a small clothing store.
10. Wang Meilan is 33 years old. She is a full-time homemaker with three children. Her husband, He Kai, works full-time and supports the family.
11. Wang Xiaochi is a 19-year-old single mother living on her own with her child. The child's father, Yang Jia, has no contact with Xiao Chi or the child.
12. Wang Xiuzhu is 52 years old and finalized her divorce from her husband, Jiang Qin, just two months ago.
13. Wang Peirong is 34 and is separated from her husband, Lu Hong. He has custody of their children. She attends university and works part-time.
14. Wang Yaxin is 43 years old with three children in high school. Her partner, Kuo Wei, is the father of her children. Yaxin and Kuo Wei have lived together for over 20 years, but they have never formally married.
15. Wang Xiangyun is a 39-year-old widow. Her husband, Li Xing, passed away six months ago.

Appendix B: Women's Courtesy Titles in Mainland China

No.	Abbreviation	Chinese Pinyin	Meaning
1	TX	tóng xué	Classmate
2	XJ	xiǎo jiě	Miss
3	XMM	xiǎo mèi mèi	Younger Sister
4	GN	gū niáng	Girl
5	NN	nǎi nǎi	Grandma
6	PP	pó pó	Granny
7	NS	nǚ shì	Ms. / Mrs.
8	AY	ā yí	Aunt
9	J	jiě	Sister
10	GX	gé xià	Your Excellency
11	LS	lǎo shī	Teacher
12	FR	fū rén	Ms. / Mrs.
13	SF	shī fù	Master
14	DJ	dà jiě	Older Sister
15	SJ	sī jī	Driver
16	Y	yí	Aunty
17	YS	yī shēng	Doctor
18	TT	tài tài	Ms. / Mrs.
19	MS	mì shū	Secretary
20	LB	lǎo bǎn	Boss
21	LBN	lǎo bǎn niáng	Woman Boss
22	MM	mā mā	Mom
23	MZ	míng zì	Given Name