

# Language, Gender, and Ideology: Media-induced Linguistic Innovation in Female Address Terms in China

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## Abstract

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find ourselves living in intensified globalization, characterized by global cultural flows of people, technologies, money, images, and ideas (Appadurai 2020). Language is evolving in response to socio-cultural changes. As such, linguistic innovations via mass media offer a particularly interesting locus to track such global flows.

This paper aims to study how popular lexicons in female address terms have emerged out of digital communication and have been widely used and interpreted by different communities interacting with mass media in contemporary China. As China is increasingly integrated into the global economy, the widespread of media networks, such as WeChat, QQ and Microblogs, has increasingly provided Chinese citizens with access to new words and new ways of using old forms. The study thus enquires as to the origin of these linguistic innovations, the linguistic resources required to bring about such changes, the motives for developing such online resources, and the responses by Chinese citizens to these media-induced language changes. By addressing these issues, this paper is oriented toward exploring the role of mass media in language change as well as the relationship between language, identity and ideology, in China, in the context of globalization.

Our findings suggest that Chinese female address terms have emerged via mass media, by coining, borrowing, reappropriating older forms for new meanings, and by employing multimodality. These media-induced language innovations are not simple responses to the broader socio-cultural changes occurring inside and outside of China. Instead, Chinese citizens, through creating, using, or promulgating new popular lexicons, are able to construct, negotiate, and make sense of multiple selves across those digital spaces. Therefore, Chinese mass media has generated a network of “figured worlds”, within which individuals' identities and agencies form dialectically and dialogically in global cultural processes (Holland et al. 1998). In particular, the circulation of certain female address terms across digital spaces involves the enregisterment of words as part of a sexist register, which has perpetuated the ideologies of male dominance in contemporary China. Both individual and institutional efforts have been made to respond to such sexism and reconstruct gender images and identities.

**Keywords:** *Linguistic Anthropology, gender, ideology, China, online*

## Introduction

Facets of globalization have become highly intensified since the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The cultural dynamics of such intensified globalization could be better interpreted in terms of free flow of people, technologies, money, images, and ideas (Appadurai 2020). The evolution of language, globally, has in part responded to the social and cultural changes that accompany these global flows. China's pursuit of national and cultural development, together with its centrality in current global flows, has required the country to excel in its engagement with these facets. As such, China has gained prominence as a globalized country and has thus increasingly integrated into global economy. To spur its integration, China has combined technology with communication through widespread media networks and online systems such as WeChat, QQ and Microblogs, facilitating the reappropriation of old language forms so as to mediate the attempts by Chinese users of these technologies to differently address men and women. Thus, linguistic innovations of address terms in China via mass media offer a particularly interesting locus through which to track such global cultural flows. For instance, a recent television reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves* (乘风破浪的姐姐) (Wu 2020) has brought one female address term, 姐姐 *elder sister*, to public attention, both inside and outside of China. The emergence of this address term has motivated heated discussion and debate on what constitutes an ideal modern woman. Originally a kinship term referring to one's elder sister, 姐姐 has become immensely popular on social mass media, signifying any easy-going, lovable, and adorable girl. The term has spread widely into everyday communication, a spread which offers

a snapshot of how media-induced linguistic innovations are reflecting and perpetuating Chinese people's daily understanding and interpretation of gender roles and identities.

This paper aims to present how popular female address terms have emerged out of digital communication and how different groups of individuals within and outside China have widely used and interpreted these address terms. We first situate the study within a macro context, by providing a literature review of research on digital communication and Chinese online female address terms. Then, two concepts, *figured world* and *enregisterment*, will be discussed as our theoretical framework, to address digital communication as ideology and practice. This is followed by an introduction of the research context and the methodologies. We then analyze the major changes in Chinese female address terms employed and circulated in the popular digital spaces and various factors mediating such changes. Finally, we discuss the social and cultural implications of these linguistic innovations in relation to language, gender, and ideology by addressing ways in which multiple selves are negotiated and reconstructed through Chinese online communities in the context of globalization.

## Language and Gender via Digital Communication

The Internet and information technology have facilitated the increase in intersections between language and media. While globalization has intensified the worldwide mobility of people, money, data, goods, and services, it has transformed the flow of images and sounds through new media technologies. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2020) calls this new formation a global mediascape: Global cultural flows of media and visual images enable linkages and communication across boundaries of culture, language, geography, economics and politics in ways unimaginable one hundred years ago. Just as newspapers dominated mediascapes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, radio, audio recordings, film, television, and the Internet have shaped communication in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In contemporary culture, visual language, whether in written texts, photographs, film, or video, has gradually gained an equal place to verbal messages as the primary means of communication. Recent forms of online media, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Google, have transformed global communication communities, where Internet-based technologies serve as sources of pleasure and social engagement, and not merely as tools for work.

Then, what are the channels through which sociolinguistic changes that distinguish digital communication from face-to-face communication have emerged? Linguists and other scholars have identified a series of major characteristics of digital communication. These are several. 1) Digital discourses not rigidly bound by time and space but rather, technology-dependent, involving multiple platforms such as bulletin boards, social media, blogging, texting, TV, etc. To maintain convenience and high efficiency in viral communications, users simplify standardized

language expressions to acronyms, abbreviations, numbers, icons, etc. through digital discourses (Baron 2008; Bonvillain 2014). 2) Multimodality as a juxtaposition of a wide range of semiotic resources, including texts, signs, emojis, emoticons, pictures, audios, videos, etc. (Cohn 2015; Danesi 2016). 3) User-generated content as a do-it-yourself practice, lowering boundaries between experts and novices. Here, contents are co-constructed by users. With reference to participation frameworks, the distinction between core vs. periphery members becomes murky (Cristal 2001, 2004; Eisenstein et al. 2014). 4) Shared public space consisting of multiple communities of practice within which, people share common endeavors (Stanlaw 2005; Stanlaw et al. 2018). However, co-construction does not necessarily entail affiliate or supportive interactions (Jacoby and Gonzales 1991; Jacoby and Ochs 1995). 5) Heteroglossia/polycentricity embodying a highly interactive discourse that involves multiple voices and plural positionalities, and as such, participants are free to express their opinions, ideas and ideologies (Islam 2006; Li 2011).

Address terms can index gender through deixis, where the study of address terms constitutes an important component of language and gender research, within the fields of anthropology, linguistics, and gender studies. Prior to the social media revolution, classic studies of Chinese language and culture emerged, such as Gu's (1990) discussion of the insider-effect and positive politeness strategies in relation to kinship terms and self-negation in traditional China, and Blum's (1997) analysis of the significant role of naming practices in sustaining social structures in China. However, with the flourishing of social media throughout the past decade, a large number of researchers have directed their attention towards online Chinese buzzwords to address differentials between men and women, covering themes such as the origin of buzzwords, reasons for their popularity, semantic changes, pragmatic analysis, cultural implications and social influence. For instance, Liu (2014) explored the Japanese ACG (Animation Comic Gaming) origin of buzzwords indexing younger age; Yang et al. (2016) discussed factors motivating the popularity of the buzzword 小公举(*little princess*) as well as its semantic change over time; Meng (2018) focused on the semantic development of address terms initialed with 小(*little*); Both Jiang (2018) and Yang (2018) attempted a pragmatic analysis of address terms; Zhang (2015) explained the cultural implications of the two words 女神(*goddess*) and 女汉子(*tough lady*); Hong (2011) examined psychological motives for employing Internet language to denote younger age; Ren (2019) developed a cultural and psychological analysis of females' appellation in communication.

Despite this work, previous studies have either largely conflated male and female address terms or have focused on a select few female address terms, such as 美女(*beauty*) (Wu 2014; Jiang 2018; Ren 2019), 女神 (*goddess*) or 女汉子 (*tough lady*) (Zhang 2015), 大妈 (*Dama*) (Bai 2016), and 小公举(*little princess*) (Yang et al., 2016). More so, little work has focused on online

female address terms as a specific cluster, or current work has largely systematically analyzed the socio-cultural implications of media-induced language changes. Additionally, scholarship lacks theoretical grounding that addresses the dynamics of digital communication and gender ideologies in a global context.

## Theoretical Framework

To address these lacunae, this paper aims to explore concerns such as when these linguistic innovations in female address terms first began to appear online, which linguistic resources are used to bring about such phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic changes, the factors that motivate the emergence of new language and its meaning in the online realm, and how Chinese citizens respond to media-induced language changes. By addressing these concerns, this paper explores the role of mass media in language change as well as the relationships among language, identity, and ideology in an era of globalization.

We draw on the concept of 'figured worlds' to discuss digital communication as both ideology and practice. This concept of figured worlds refers neither to imagined communities as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 1983), nor to imagined places as "displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality" (Gupta and Ferguson 2002: 69), nor to imagined worlds, that is, "the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe (Appadurai 2020: 93). Instead, figured worlds are situated contexts that are peopled by figures and characters who form collective ideas, images, and aspirations, and accordingly take various actions towards those collectively realized 'as if' realms. It is within these culturally figured worlds that people's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically. As Holland et al. point out,

By "figured world", then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others.

(Holland et al. 1998: 52)

The concept of 'figured world' highlights the situated nature of identity and human agency to interpret polysemous address terms in online Chinese communities. As such, it can address the interactions of the global and the local, i.e., how globalizing processes exist in specific online Chinese communities, offering a useful framework for the study of the dynamics of media-induced linguistic innovations, as it provides an account of domains, practices, activities, and identities in circuits of interconnections.

The second theoretical concept we adopt is enregisterment. In sociolinguistic scholarship, register refers to the language of groups of people with common interests or jobs, or the language used in situations associated with such groups, such as baby talk and courtroom speech. Asif Agha coined the term enregisterment as “processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users” (2007: 38). Unlike the term ‘register,’ as a static concept conventionally associated with particular groups of people or specific situations of use, enregisterment is a dynamic process reflecting human agency (Chun 2019; Lei and Rao 2020) to reappropriate a register for situated context in their own figured worlds. In the context of digital spaces, it is of great significance to capture the ongoing dynamics of how particular sorts of forms, linguistic or other, can become indexically linked with online communication, what are the agents of enregisterment, and what ideological and interactional conditions can make enregisterment occur in a particular way.

Although the concepts of figured world and enregisterment are presented as separate concepts, we link these altogether when discussing media-induced language changes and identity construction. Figured worlds transfer between the etic and emic perspectives across various contexts, for enregisterment is the emic placement of etic frameworks through the presentation and interpretation of particular language usage. However, enregisterment mediates between individual and group efforts to construct figured worlds, as it is within the figured worlds that individual language users come up with various ideologies, ideas, and aspirations about language (s), which leads to the collective processes of enregisterment of certain common language forms. In addition, both concepts emphasize human agency and view language users as having a complex history and multiple desires. Therefore, we argue that the concepts of figured worlds and enregisterment provide a useful framework for the analysis of the dynamic interactions between language, identity, and social environment.

## Setting, Data, and Methods

This article has emerged from an 18-month online ethnography of Chinese female address terms. Following on from the specific characteristics of digital communication discussed above and the lack of previous corpus work on those terms, no firm evidence has as yet exposed the origin of these terms or their emergent connotations, nor the extent and frequency of their use. In addition, research has not produced reliable, uniform criteria justifying the status of Chinese online buzzwords. As such, the current study pursues a qualitative analysis of the dynamics of this online glossary. Participant observation in asynchronous interactions online constitutes an initial access to data. The collection of this data required an extended engagement with Chinese news online platforms such as xinhua.net and sina.com (two of the most popular news websites

in China), as well as participation in chat groups via QQ and WeChat (two of the most popular apps among Chinese communities globally), documenting weblogs and blogs such as *Sinaweibo*, and the viewing of film media via *Youku* or *Iqiyi* (two of the largest Chinese streaming website) for approximately one decade. As such, the ethnography has documented a large majority of popular online female address terms. The researchers selected *Baidu*, the Chinese equivalent of Google, as a search engine to determine the occurrence of specific female address terms across various media platforms so as to landscape the semantic changes and functions of these terms. The data collection also includes an ethnographic search of the original use of these terms in online news, articles, blogs, and bulletin boards and comments, so as to further investigate how netizens make sense of multiple selves through these linguistic innovations and the responses made by various groups of individuals. In particular, the authors have extensively browsed digital platforms, such as *wenxuecity.com* (the largest Chinese news website external to China) and *ifvod.tv* (a global Chinese streaming website), to track ways in which these linguistic innovations have spread among Chinese diasporic populations and to monitor how overseas Chinese communities interpret these changes in comparison with their counterparts in the Chinese mainland.

## Findings and Analysis

### *Changing Dynamics of Online Female Address Terms*

Largely influenced by the popularity of various social media platforms, a cluster of new popular words has emerged out of digital communication in China within the past two decades. These lexical innovations are characterized by coining, borrowing, drawing on older forms to develop new meanings, and through deployment of multimodality. These rules also apply to changes in online female address terms.

We begin with a range of online female address terms which have been coined by connecting two or more pre-existent words to identify women who exhibit certain characteristics. For instance, 女汉子 (*tough lady*) is formed by coupling the character 女 *female* as a prefix to the word 汉子 (*man*), suggesting a manly or masculine female. The term 绿茶婊 (*green tea bitch*) is also formed by combining the word 绿茶 *green tea* (representing purity and freshness) with 婊 (*bitch*), denoting scheming and sly females who present themselves with an innocent, pure yet fine appearance (Baidubaike, n. d.).

As another example, the address 白富美, a rich beautiful woman with fair complexion, exhibits a morphology characterized by arraying the three adjectives, 白 (white), 富 (rich) and 美 (beautiful), signifying a woman of fair complexion and genuine beauty with a wealthy-family

background. Online communities have gradually generalized this term to denote any rich (inherited or self-made), well behaved or educated woman with or without attractive facial features. Below, I present two examples of use of the address term.

a	中国“白富美”不差钱，差感情？(Gao 2013)
	Zhongguo Baifumei bu cha qian, cha ganqing?
	Chinese Baifumei Lacks no Money but Romance Love?
b	中国最杰出商界女性排行：三位 80 后白富美上榜 (Zhao 2017)
	<i>Zhongguo zui jiechu shangjie nvxing paihang: san wei baling hou Baifumei shangbang</i>
	China's Most Outstanding Businesswomen Ranking: Three Post-80s Baifumei on the List.

Cultural diffusion has mediated the emergence of online female address terms from foreign sources. Contemporary accelerated globalization is witnessing an intensified flow of pictures, images, and other information, which has increasingly subjected Chinese citizens to the influence of foreign cultures (Gao 2006). In particular, Japanese ACG culture, as a popular subculture in East and Southeast Asia, attracts the attention of large communities in China, resulting in increased amounts of semantic and lexical change, in both online and offline communication. Chinese female address terms, thus, have borrowed significantly from Japanese ACG, producing such items as homophones and homonyms (Liu 2014).

萝莉 (Japanese, *luó lì* in Mandarin, *Lolita/Loli* in English) represents a typical homophone of the word 萝莉, popular in Japanese ACG. This term is generally believed to be borrowed phonetically from two sources, ‘tres joli’ from French or the name of a 1955 novel *Lolita* by Russian-American novelist, Vladimirovichi Nabokov (Shi 2013), neither of which is relevant to Japan. Chinese youth see this term as having become popular through the influence of ACG phonetic usage and it therefore refers to girls who are under 15 or who dress in Lolita style. This appears in the following two news titles:

a	疫情下西班牙萝莉姐妹花的“隔离”日常(Zhai 2020)
	<i>Yiqing xia Xibanya luoli jiemeihua de geli richang</i>
	The ‘Quarantine’ Routines of the Spanish Loli Sisters amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.
b	倪妮穿背带裤戴渔夫帽变萝莉小可爱 (Xinhua 2018)
	<i>Ni Ni chuan beidaiku dai yufu mao bian luoli xiao ke'ai</i>



Ni Ni' s Loli Look with overalls and a fisherman hat.

As for the homonym example, 御姐 (yù jiě in Mandarin; domineering lady in English), similar in typography with the Japanese 御姉, emerges from the Japanese 御姉 and is an address term borrowed from Japan popular with female speakers. The address term signifies a type of determined, confident and domineering female, usually older age than the 萝莉 Lolita. For example.

秦岚短发造型拍摄写真, 仙女御姐随意切换 (Huanqiu 2019)

a

*Qin Lan duan fa zaoxing paishe xiezhen, xiannv yujie suiyi qiehuan*

Qin Lan's Photo Shooting in Short Hair, Switching between a fairy and a domineering lady.

In addition to coining and borrowing, online female address terms emerge through the use of pre-existing forms. One semantic stylistic development involves the reappropriation of old words indexing elegance in a more generalized form. From the late 1990s, the intended use of the address term 小姐 (*Miss*) towards women has transitioned from its official and respectful form to connoting a scornful, despicable prostitute (Ren 2019). This process of reappropriation also appears in 美女 (*beauty*) as an address term toward a woman of beautiful appearance, a term which most Chinese women welcome. The term has been in circulation among Chinese online communities globally. This appears, for example, in the phrase 四大美女 *the Four Beauties of Ancient China*. These online communities generally employ this term to refer to any female, regardless of appearance, age, status and so forth (Ren 2019). Such generalization appeared in the online survey by Tencent Company (China's largest social media company) in 2008, which determined that 96.83% of all 48,465 online female netizens surveyed have often or occasionally been addressed as 美女 *beauty*, where only 3.17% of this sample set have never experienced being labeled as such (Wu 2014).

In addition, aligning with the practice of fictional kinship (Gu 1990), some traditional kin terms are extended to denote new meanings. For instance, alternative communication methods, such as the Danmaku and online comic forums, have fashioned the use of terms such as 小姐姐 (*little elder sister*). Originally a kinship term to refer to the elder sister in the Chinese nuclear family, the address has evolved into a two-dimensional term in Japanese ACG, referring to lovable and adorable girls in ACG fan circles, and has been generalized to indicate an easy-going, lovable and adorable girl (Tie 2019), as in the below examples. Influenced by Japanese ACG, the viral acceptance and application of expressions such as 小姐姐 (*little elder sister*), 小仙女 (*little*

*fairy lady*), 小公举 (*little princess*), and 萝莉 (*Lolita*), may also suggest that the indexicality of online female address terms is transitioning toward younger age groups.

a	老人雨中迷路 警察小哥哥小姐姐的举动好暖心 (Fu 2020)
	<i>Lao ren yu zhong milu, jingcha xiao gege xiao jiejie de judong hao nuan xin</i>
	A senior citizen lost in the rain: little brother and sister police officers helped with a warm heart
b	张雨绮: 姐姐这个词不是有什么年龄感, 就是自我或者独立那种状态 (Zhang 2020)
	<i>Zhang, Yuqi: Jiejie zhe ge ci bu shi you shenme nianling gan, jiu shi ziwo huozhe duli na zhong zhuangtai.</i>
	I don't think the term JIEJIE (elder sister) is about age, it's about self-centeredness or independence

As a final instance, we present that new online female address terms traverse online multimodality in their journey towards public spaces. This multimodal online communication requires juxtaposition of a range of semiotic resources, such as texts, emojis, emoticons, pictures, audio, videos, and so forth. Online communities in China create, circulate, revive, or assign new semantic connotations to female address terms through new image forms, such as emojis and memes, and through new platforms, such as Weibo, comic forums, and Danmaku (弹幕 *dàn mù* in Mandarin, bullet comment in English). For example, 小仙女 (*little fairy lady*) has undergone a semantic transformation from its original connoting of fairy ladies living in heaven in ancient Chinese fairy tales to a current description of young girls considered to be beautiful, elegant, pure, or cute. The popularity of this term has been facilitated by a meme in a popular mobile application which instructs girls to control their diets through the phrase

a	你要记得你是仙女, 你是喝露水的 (May 2016)
	Remember you are a fairy lady who only drinks dew, so you can't eat any more food.)

Viewing this meme as a convincing euphemism of persuading girls to keep fit, a large number of Chinese girls, both slim and overweight, have welcomed and have spread the term by inserting the meme into new more complex new memes. The intentions of the meme include that women should become 'as beautiful as a fairy lady' by addressing themselves with this term, as in the following three Emoji examples:



Figure 1: From image.baidu.com

## Analyzing Online Female Address Terms

Online female address terms emerge from coining, external borrowing, and applying previous forms, and frequently draw on multimodality by juxtaposing various semiotic resources, so as to produce new meanings. We then ask why new lexicons and new meanings are created, and how these lexicons reflect larger socio-cultural changes both within and outside China.

The appearance of numerous online female address terms can be attributed to a reinterpretation of multiple gender roles and categories assigned to women in contemporary China. Following the political, legal and economic policies that have been implemented in China since 1949, and more so to the global Feminist Movement since the 1960s, women's status has significantly improved. No longer confined to the domestic sphere as wives or mothers, Chinese women have increasingly played active roles in social, economic, political and educational domains, an enactment which has in turn required the creation of new address terms that specifically describe and define various characteristics and clusters of characteristics in women (Li 2014). Popular address terms such as 女博士 (*female PhD*), 女汉子 (*tough lady*) and 御姐 (*domineering lady*) suggest that Chinese women have gained more independence in finance, family, education, and social and professional sectors.

The tendency of online communities to position female address terms as signifiers of a generalized gender identity, and the indexical meanings associated with younger age, reflects the desire by Chinese women to evade hierarchical constraints in the material world replete with hierarchy. In spite of much work that has aimed to improve gender equality, the judgmental positioning of Chinese women in society is predicated on a variety of factors, such as age, physical appearance, education, profession, family background, and marital status. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communication, however, usually invites pseudonyms or

falsely constructed IDs, thus enabling netizens to conceal their real identities. Therefore, online communities have provided Chinese women with ideal platforms so as to feel more comfortable and confident when communicating with others, regardless of individual factors. Accordingly, the use of more generalized female address terms becomes a communicative routine in digital culture.

Approaching the online phenomenon in China through a pragmatics lens, the emergence of new female address terms and meanings is closely related to positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987). Compliments and in-group solidarity markers are among the most commonly used politeness strategies attending to the positive face/images of the hearer. The generalization of the term 美女 (*beauty*) reinforces the acceptedness of such a term with Chinese women as opposed to middle-aged plain-looking 大妈 (*Dama/aunties*). The extended use of kin terms such as 小姐姐 (*little elder sister*) and X 姐 (*Sister X*) would quickly create intimate interpersonal relationships. Such in-group solidarity markers, as a result of the insider-effect (Gu 1990), function to form a close bond among members of online communities.

Finally, the use of self-address to contrast between virtual and real identity can mediate comical discourse and communication. For instance, by addressing oneself as 女汉子 (*tough lady*), the female with goddess-like intentions seeks to downgrade herself while eliciting comical reactions from audiences and interlocutors, and hence narrowing social distance between speaker and hearer, thus serving as a positive politeness strategy. A middle-aged or elderly female labeling herself as 小公举 (*little princess*) with a proud tone appears as though she is mocking herself, thus also taking a comical stance and reducing social distance to reduce discomfort during social communication.

## Discussion

### *Digital Communication as Figured Worlds*

Chinese online communities engage with and circulate these polysemous address terms for women. These online users consider the visual, discursive, and ideological aspects of these address terms. The dynamics underlying these online mediated language innovations supersede the simple reciprocating of the broader global Chinese socio-cultural changes. As such, Chinese citizens, through creating, using, or promulgating new popular lexicons, are able to construct, negotiate, and make sense of multiple selves across digital spaces. These linguistic changes have migrated from online to offline spaces, perpetuating respective gender ideologies and identities, while shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors in material realms. Therefore, we argue that these digital spaces have generated a network of 'figured worlds' that assist individuals of respective social backgrounds to develop practical images, expectations,

and self-actualizations that extend beyond temporal and spatial limits (Holland et al. 1998; Boyd 2014).

The word *figured* has at least four implications. Firstly, it implies illusion or the reconstruction of online communities, creating a distinction between the real physical world and the virtual world. Secondly, it denotes the disjuncture between the public self (how you are viewed by others) and private self (how you view yourself), or between the etic and the emic perspectives. Thirdly, it conveys the difference between people's anticipations for the address terms and the actual realization of them. Finally, it denotes the historical dimension of gender ideologies within and outside China, while exposing the patent transition of China from a strictly patriarchal society to a more gender-friendly one. The term *world* in this case has at least a three-fold meaning. Firstly, it represents the physical existence of virtual space as opposed to the material world. Secondly, the term suggests that digital communication is not rigidly bound by specific temporal spatial limits, since it also occurs in multiple online spaces in multiple periods of time. Finally, each digital community can be perceived as a community of practice where netizens share common goals, expectations, and endeavors (Wenger 1999). As such, *figured worlds* capture the fluid, multi-sited, multimodal, and interactive nature of online communication.

Various online female address terms have been created, borrowed, or assigned new meaning with which to identify Chinese females' changing personalities and characteristics in current society. This process serves as a psychological coping strategy with which to escape from material hierarchies, as a tool for communication that achieves positive politeness, as an in-group solidarity marker to establish a more gentle, easy-going, and approachable relationship, or as a mode of humorous communication. Evidently, such linguistic innovations in those virtual spaces have created multiple figured worlds along time and across space. Employing with various images, ideas, and expectations configured within these multiple figured worlds, Chinese netizens are able to explore multiple identities and ideologies related to gender dynamics, which in turn are enacted through such linguistic practices.

We argue that these media-induced linguistic changes have enregistered a unique online female discourse to index multiple gender roles, images, and ideologies through the use and circulation of these polysemous address terms in digital spaces. Despite frequently recognizing women's diverse gender roles, mass media has also perpetuated gender ideologies that disenfranchise females, which we will now discuss.

### *Enregisterment of a Sexist Discourse*

We suggest that the circulation of certain female address terms across digital space involves the

enregisterment of words as part of a sexist discourse (Lei and Rao 2020). By overtly stigmatizing women based on age, marital status, personality, and physical appearance, and by covertly positioning women as secondary to men, online linguistic innovations in female address terms have reinforced Chinese as a sexist language, a form of symbolic violence against women (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Overt sexism is realized by creating new female address terms or new meanings with which to stigmatize certain types of females whose new gender roles and identities conflict with traditional ones. For example, 剩女 (*leftover lady*) is a derogatory term signifying women who remain unmarried in their late twenties and beyond, a discursive practice which foregrounds and signifies the high pressure on women who must delay marriage and childbearing in favor of educational and professional advancement.

While being well-educated and socio-economically independent, 女博士 (*female PhDs*) are frequently stigmatized by mass media mainly in terms of their physical appearance, marriage and family, academic achievements, personalities, and social lives (Fu 2018; Wu 2014). In regard to appearance, these women are labeled as UFO, an acronym for ‘ugly, fat, and old’ (Liu 2016). Generally speaking, these women are perceived by larger society as super-nerdy women who are idiots outside of their ivory tower. The following remarks from 《爱情公寓》 *iPartment*, a well-known Chinese comic TV show (a Chinese version of the popular American sitcom *Friends*), expose the unique characteristics of female PhDs:

世上有三种人，男人，女人和女博士。女博士是人类中的战斗机，身上笼罩着多层光环。知识光环，学习新知识的时间减半。冷漠光环，无视所有精神类攻击；理智光环，对所有男性的伤害都加倍。...男人要打赢女博士，只有靠圣斗士。

There are three types of people in the world, female, male, and female PhD. Female PhD.s are super-fighters among human beings, with multiple layers of halo. With the halo of knowledge, they can spend half of the time to learn new things; With the halo of indifference, they can ignore all mental attacks; with the halo of sanity, they can double the damages to all men. ...A man can only be a saint to defeat a female PhD.

(Wang and Wei 2011)

As a 女汉子 (*tough lady*) exhibits a tough personality with a strong determination to succeed, which contradicts women’s traditional roles, this type of female may find romance and family challenging. This address term sharply contrasts with 女神 (*goddess*), a term that signifies extraordinary beauty. A comic show in the 2015 Spring Festival Gala, organized by Chinese Central Television (CCTV), the largest state-run TV station in China, brought these two terms into public attention, inducing heated discussion and debate on the constituents of a socially favorable woman. The two Chinese comedians Qu Ying and Jia Ling acted to

impersonate 女神 (*goddess*) and 女汉子 (*tough lady*) respectively in the show:

a	瞿颖：我长得漂亮，一群男生前呼后拥我特别有面子。
	<i>Qu, Ying: Wo zhang de piaoliang, yi qun nansheng qian hu hou yong wo tebie you mianzi.</i>
	Qu, Ying: I'm gorgeously beautiful, so I have earned my face by having boys crowd around me.
b	贾玲：我没心没肺，一群男生前呼后拥找我掰腕子。我就从来没输过。
	<i>Jia, Ling: Wo mei xin mei fei, yi qun nansheng qian hu hou yong zhao wo bai wanzi. Wo jiu conglai mei shu guo.</i>
	Jia, Ling: I'm guiltlessly insensible, so I have enjoyed having boys crowd around me for a wrist battle. And I've never lost.

As these two terms denote two different types of females, with 女汉子 referring to manly females who attach appreciatively more importance to the masculine bravery, determination, and self-independent aspects of the woman, this comic show and the subsequent responses from Chinese on- and offline communities further perpetuated stereotypes against women who possess masculine characteristics (Zhang 2015).

大妈 (*Dama/auntie*) presents another derogatory term to discriminate against middle-aged or elderly women. As a popular address term that addresses post-middle age women, *Dama*, or Chinese *Dama*, was coined by the *Wall Street Journal* when a group of Chinese women, middle aged and above, rushed into gold markets and jewelry stores to purchase large quantities of gold, following adverts presenting a 20% plummet in the price of gold, on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. These women managed to collectively purchase 300 tons, sending shock waves throughout Wall Street. Being finally included into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013, the term *Dama* now symbolizes those middle-aged to elderly woman, of all socioeconomic levels, who are usually targeted for enjoying leisurely lifestyles, rather than fulfilling traditional duties such as performing house chores or caring for the family (Baidubaike, n.d.), as shown in the following examples:

a	当广场舞大妈遇到网红健身博主 (Yang and Wang 2020)
	<i>Dang guangchang wu Dama yudao wanghong jianshen bozhu</i>
	When Square Dancing Dama Encounter with Online Fitness Blogger.

	现货金跌穿 400 元关口 “中国大妈”边看走势图边入手 (Stock Daily 2020)
b	<i>Xianhuo jin die chuan sibai yuan guankou Zhongguo Dama bian kan zoushi tu bian rushou</i>
	Gold below 400 RMB, Chinese Dama Start to Buy Gold by Reading Price Charts

Both examples appeared in news titles, catching audiences's attention by suggesting that Dama are either engaged in square dance as a popular fitness activity for their age group (Part a) or actively investing in financial markets (Part b), thus connoting sarcasm towards women who do not perform traditional gender roles.

The negative associations and images of these female address terms mirror the predicament of Chinese women in current society. By contrast, equivalent terms for men have either neutral or positive connotation. For instance, single males reaching a certain age will often be labeled as either 黄金单身汉 (*golden bachelors*) or 钻石王老五 (*diamond single men*), both of which display positive connotations.

In addition to overt sexism, covert sexism is subtly enregistered through positioning male/masculine as default and female/feminine as deviant, that is, they mark the woman. Following on from Markedness Theory, dominance is seen as being sustained by privileging perspectives on language and naturalizing language as 'neutral' or 'unmarked' (c.f. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 483). The morphology of the terms is such that new female address labels, for example, 女博士 (*female PhD*) and 女汉子 (*tough lady*), are derived from the male/masculine form by adding 女 *female/feminine*, positioning the male/masculine attribute as the unmarked item and thereby a privileged one. To analyze this inexplicit gender hierarchy, we also observe whether the neutral or positive female address terms have equivalents for males. Although some address terms such as X姐 (*sister X*)/X哥 (*brother X*) and 小公举 (*little princess*)/小王子 (*little prince*) usually appear in pairs across various contexts, the equivalent terms of other popular address terms such as 女神 (*goddess*) and 美女 (*beauty*), 男神 (*god*) and 美男 (*beautiful man*) are not as commonly employed in Chinese society. Male/Masculine is, thus, the unmarked gender term; female/feminine, the marked. Both morphology and asymmetrical use of address terms suggest a weak form of male dominance.

Gender ideologies are usually enacted in linguistic practices, including in naming practice. Language does not constitute a passive tool to report or reflect pre-given realities; instead, it can influence human perception by reinforcing certain ideas and ideologies. It is through language that the individual cultural understandings of gender categories and gender roles are learned and perpetuated (Foley 1997; Ochs 1990). Therefore, the circulation of certain female



address terms across digital space has overtly and covertly enregistered a sexist discourse, which in turn has perpetuated the ideologies of male dominance in contemporary China.

Enregisterment, as an emic framing of etic representations of speaking/writing, attends to the concern of how Chinese women, as victims of symbolic violence, respond to such enregistered sexism and reconstruct their images and identities. Generally speaking, both individual and institutional efforts have been identified in this paper. Considering as an example the reconstruction of the image of female PhDs, some female PhD micro bloggers use texts and photographs in their blogs to share facets of their lives, describing that they are not outcasts and have the same normal appearances, personalities, and lifestyles as other women. Nanxun Qin, a female biology PhD student at Peking University, presented a talk show in which she humorously listed the advantages of marriage with a female PhD, to refute the social prejudice of marriage with a female Ph.D. as disastrous (China Live 2018). In addition, groups and institutions, such as PETD and Voice of Feminism (two online feminist organizations), also work together to eradicate stereotyping against female PhDs both online and offline (Liu 2014). These emic responses have constructed alternative figured worlds in which women can engage in negotiating and reconstructing their images and identities. This in turn reshapes the dynamic process of enregisterment of digital discourse in relation to language and gender.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that Chinese female address terms have emerged via social mass media, by coining, borrowing, reappropriating older forms for new meanings, and by employing multimodality. These media-induced language innovations are not simple responses to the broader socio-cultural changes occurring inside and outside of China. Instead, Chinese citizens, through creating, using, or promulgating new popular lexicons, are able to construct, negotiate, and make sense of multiple selves across those digital spaces. Therefore, Chinese social mass media has generated a network of 'figured worlds' that assist individuals to develop practical images, expectations and self-actualizations that extend beyond temporal and spatial limits. As such, linguistic innovations in those virtual spaces have created multiple figured worlds, within which individuals' identities and agencies form dialectically and dialogically in global cultural processes. In particular, the circulation of certain female address terms across digital spaces involves the enregisterment of words as part of a sexist register, which has perpetuated the ideologies of male dominance in contemporary China. Both individual and institutional efforts have been made to respond to such sexism and reconstruct gender images and identities.

This study sheds light on language and gender research in relation to the anthropological framework of agency and community (of) practice. However, concerns remain, such as how Chinese people negotiate and reconstruct alternative gender/sexuality 'online,' whether

concepts such as 'online,' 'digital,' and 'social media' adequately capture the discursive practices of technology-mediated interactions, the extent to which online communication influences 'offline' negotiations of norms, identities, and language ideologies. Furthermore, the factors that contribute to those social media research practices that capture the complexities of language and gender without compromising ethical issues such as participant privacy and confidentiality remain to be found.

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