

# Why the history and context of words are important - the example of 'xiansheng'

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Teaching and learning the Chinese language in Australia is usually promoted as useful for economic reasons, that is, students who can speak Chinese would be able to use it for future employment in trade or business.

This utilitarian approach to language learning can constrain students' understanding of important concepts such as transcultural communication and identity, as well as critical thinking about language and culture. Transcultural understanding can get lost through translation, and misunderstanding can occur when words are uncritically considered to have 'equivalents' in other languages.

To illustrate, I will use the Chinese term *xiansheng*, which is commonly used as the modern Chinese translation of the English terms 'Mister/Mr.' and 'gentlemen' in the phrase 'ladies and gentlemen', but which is sometimes, controversially, used to refer to women.

## The current use of *xiansheng* in Mainland China

In contemporary Chinese dictionaries, *xiansheng* is listed as being the equivalent of the English term Mister (Mr.) so it's usually understood as referring to a man, but it is sometimes used as a title for women.

In 2020, Professor Ye Jiaying (Yeh Chia-ying), a renowned female scholar in Chinese classical poetry from Nankai University, China, received a prize from a China Central Television (CCTV) program along with the title of 'Ye Jiaying *xiansheng*'. The use of the title *xiansheng* to honour a woman sparked heated discussions on Weibo, the Chinese counterpart to Twitter and it was the first time that the use of *xiansheng* was widely questioned in public.

There was much discussion on Weibo that it's discriminatory for a woman to be honoured with a male title. Some expressed their discomfort by noting that women were placed as if intrinsically inferior to men when a woman could only be honoured by a title commonly addressing any man. It should be noted that the use of *xiansheng* in this context was defended by some who argued that in traditional Chinese, *xiansheng* was an honorific for respected personnel, with no indication of gender. Others argued that since language is always evolving *xiansheng* should be decoupled from its modern translation as 'mister/Mr'. For instance, 'ladies and gentlemen' (女士们和先生们) is better translated as "*nüshimen he nanshimen*" (女士们和男士们); or that it's not discriminatory to use a male term for a woman.

The incident shows the problems that can arise for language learners or translators who are encouraged to rely heavily on modern Standard Chinese dictionaries and textbooks to understand and use translated concepts and terms, without a wider knowledge of the history and context of words.

Modern Chinese textbooks in Mainland China contain only a small proportion of classic Chinese, such as essays and poems. In addition, some of the traditional meanings and use of terms and concepts are lost when the traditional style of written Chinese is replaced by simplified characters. Although the written form of *xiansheng* remains the same in both traditional Chinese and Standard Chinese, its meanings and usage are discrepant. Therefore, knowledge about how the term and concept has evolved over time is helpful, to have a better understanding of background ideas attached to the term and whether they have been discarded, and to empower language users to be aware of their translingual practice and potential

contributions to social change.

## *Xiansheng* and its wide-ranging use

Before *xiansheng* became a fixed translation of Mister and Mr., it had a very wide range of meanings in the pre-modern Chinese language. According to the *Comprehensive Chinese Word Dictionary*, *xiansheng* has been used in a very diverse range of circumstances, including:

- a person born before another,
- one's older brother from the same father,
- a knowledgeable person who is older than another,
- one's teacher,
- one's ancestry,
- a person who retires from their official position,
- a general title for literati and scholar,
- a Taoist priest,
- a fortune teller ,
- a singer in the street, bars or restaurants,
- a doctor,
- a Fengshui practitioner,
- a folk artist of storytelling,
- one's husband,
- a female sex worker, the usage of which was prevalent in the Shanghai area during the early years of the 1900s.

In the period when *xiansheng* carried both old and new meanings, it is not easy to distinguish it as purely a courtesy title for men (as gendered) because it was also used as an honorific for a respected person (as gender-neutral) falling into the categories mentioned above. For instance, if Mr. White were a doctor, the Chinese translation would be White *xiansheng*. In this case, *xiansheng* plays double roles in referring to White both as a male in gender and a doctor in the profession. The

double roles of *xiansheng* make it more difficult to distinguish the term as gendered or not. In the traditional society where professionals such as doctors were male-dominated, the use of *xiansheng* could reinforce its connection with the male gender.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s it was not unusual for *xiansheng* to be used primarily as a title for men—at time when women were largely kept within the household and away from social and political activities.

Research shows the translation of Mister/Mr. was introduced around the time of the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement in 1919. During and after the May Fourth period, Chinese terms for Mister/Mr. include *xiansheng* as well as phonemic translations - *misituo* (密司脫 or 密斯脫, both terms share the same pronunciation but in different characters). If the transliterated terms of Mister/Mr. were widely accepted as a title for men nowadays, it would be possible for *xiansheng* to retain its gender-neutrality, similar to the usage in Japanese and Korean.

Although it is not clear who first established the linguistic equivalence between Mister/Mr. and *xiansheng*, and how *xiansheng* became widely accepted as a title for men, it became a reflective of male-dominant traditional Chinese society. Since ‘mister’ derives from ‘master’, a term initially referring to a man of higher social class, *xiansheng*, even with no gender distinction per se, it became generally used as a title for men only.

## Social change: the driving force for language change

*Xiansheng* has continued to sometimes be used as a title for women. Since the May Fourth Movement and under the influence of feminist movements at the time, *nüxiansheng* (女先生) referring to female teachers, became a term used in influential newspapers such as *Shun Pao*. The use of *nüxiansheng* was applauded at the time as

it represented the improved social status of women: obtaining the right to education and to work in professional fields. Thus, female teachers, knowledgeable women, and women who have made substantial contributions to society could receive the honorific title of *xiansheng*.

Despite this, after the use of *tongzhi* (同志) as a generic reference for both men and women faded away after the 1980s, *xiansheng* became most commonly used as a title for a man. The *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005), one of the most used dictionaries for schooling in mainland China, defines *xiansheng* as referring to (1) a teacher; (2) a male intellect, or a male adult with a certain social position; and (3) one's husband—largely gendered terms.

The prevalence of feminist movements in recent years has stimulated, to some extent, the self-recognition and self-identity of individuals, especially women. The change of language, e.g., pre-modern and modern definitions and the current use of *xiansheng*, has featured in feminist discussion.

The use of *xiansheng* to refer to women reveals the unconsciousness of gender inequality embedded in the language. If addressing a large audience '*nüshimen he xianshengmen* (ladies and gentlemen, *men* at the end of both terms implies the plural form of *nüshi* and *xiansheng*)' at a ceremony for instance, and at the same time honouring a woman as *xiansheng*, this would easily indicate the unequal relations between a *nüshi* (lady) and a *xiansheng* (Mister/gentleman). In this scenario, *xianshengmen* addresses all the men at the ceremony. As a courtesy title to a particular man, '*xx xiansheng*' is equivalent to 'Mr. *xx*'. So, by honouring an honoured woman with the title of '*xx xiansheng*' is similar to addressing the woman as 'Mister woman' or offering a lady the social status of a gentleman. Awareness of this issue is somewhat lacking from the in-depth and systematic research in the Chinese mainland. Despite the situation, decoupling *xiansheng* from its outdated gender-neutral usage is supported by those who are aware of the issue. Avoiding using *xiansheng* to address a woman, addressing women by their professions, or simply using *nüshi* (lady or Ms.) are considered more appropriate in contemporary

Chinese settings.

## A comparison across borders

The Japanese term *sensei* (先生) and Korean term *seonsaeng* (先生), both originated from traditional Chinese and share the same characters as *xiansheng*. In Japanese, *sensei* is a generic title for teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals with a certain level of power or authority, which is similar to the usage of *xiansheng* in traditional Chinese. It is also an honorific for someone who has achieved a certain level of mastery of a certain skill or in the arts, for example, a master chef or a musician. Similarly, the Korean term *seonsaeng* is a degendered title addressing teachers or an elder. Both *sensei* and *seonsaeng* are closer in meaning to the traditional Chinese *xiansheng* than the modern Standard Chinese term.

## Conclusion

The changing use of the term *xiansheng* illustrates the importance of an inclusive approach to language education and empowering students to critically engage with language and culture. A utilitarian and synchronic approach to language learning can sometimes cause misunderstandings in translingual and transcultural practice. Moreover, language change reflects and creates social change. Learning language through the lens of social change and vice versa helps us better understand the contested ideas underlying the definitions.

*Image: Young people in Beijing. Credit: watchsmart/Flickr.*