

STUDY ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF *XIANSHENG* IN MODERN TIMES

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Abstract

The concept of *Xiansheng* underwent profound semantic evolution in China's modern period (1840–1949). Prior to this period, the term had already developed a relatively stable meaning. Knowledge and moral reputation constituted the core elements of the concept of *Xiansheng*. The introduction of *Mister* took time. And the contents of the dictionaries reflected the gradual formation of the corresponding relationship between *Mister* and *Xiansheng*. The reform of appellation and the rise of egalitarian ideas contributed to changes in the meaning of *Xiansheng*. Around the May Fourth period, the term further generalized with no restrictions on age, occupation, status, knowledge. After 1949, *Xiansheng* experienced a brief decline and revival, becoming more closely associated with men. Entering the 21st century, the term *Xiansheng* once again sparked heated discussions. From a female perspective, *Xiansheng* reflects the transformation from limited gender inclusiveness in traditional China to gender segregation since modern times. The concept of *Xiansheng* was reshaped, embodying both the collision and negotiation of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: *Xiansheng*, conceptual evolution, appellation.

Introduction

The term *Xiansheng* (先生, “teacher” or “gentleman”) as a social appellation has rich connotations throughout Chinese history. The concept of *Xiansheng* underwent long-term semantic evolution, changing while retaining its basic meanings. Renewals in linguistic signs reflected corresponding changes in social ideology. This article, from the perspectives of conceptual history and appellation examination, reveals the changes in the meanings and usages of the *Xiansheng* within specific historical periods.

1. *Xiansheng* in historical tradition

Xiansheng has existed in Chinese since ancient times and has been widely used as an appellation for a long time. Erya, “*Shiqin*” states:

Among a father’s brothers, Xiansheng refers to the elder brother, and Housheng (后生, the later born) to the younger brother. Among males, Xiansheng denotes an elder brother, while Housheng denotes a younger brother. When a man addresses a female relative, Xiansheng indicates an elder sister, and Housheng a younger sister. [Guan 2014]

Xiansheng here refers to elder uncles, elder brothers, or elder sisters. It is not used as one word, but a combination of the two characters *Xian* (先, earlier) and *Sheng* (生, born), meaning “born before me”. As time passed, *Xian* and *Sheng*, the two characters combined to form the word *Xiansheng*, which developed multiple meanings from its original sense. By the pre-modern period, the meanings of the word had largely stabilized. The traditional senses of *Xiansheng* can be categorized into the two types further explored below – *Xiansheng* as a kinship term and *Xiansheng* as a social appellation.

1.1. *Xiansheng* as a kinship term

The concept of *Xiansheng* was initially used as a kinship term, referring to one’s father, elder siblings, firstborn child, or husband. This usage is significantly different from contemporary practice. The applications referring to fathers, elder siblings, or the first-born child gradually faded over time. Using it to address a husband was rare in ancient times but becomes more common in later periods. Some scholars have provided detailed summaries of *Xiansheng* as a kinship term, which are valuable for reference. For example, Wang Gonglong (1985) analysed classical texts:

Analects, Wei Zheng (论语·为政), states: “When there is wine and food, *Xiansheng* is served first.” Here, *Xiansheng* refers to fathers or elder brothers.

Yi Li, You Si Che (仪礼·有司彻) records “the *Zheng*¹ for *Xiansheng*”. In this context, *Xiansheng* refers to the eldest brother.

Analects: Translation and Annotation (论语译注), Yang Bojun notes that *Xiansheng* can also refer to the firstborn child [Wang 1985].

Zhang Xiaoqian (2007) further observed that although the usage of *Xiansheng* for husband was rare, examples exist. For instance, in *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (列女传·楚于陵妻), the concubine says, “I fear that *Xiansheng* may be in danger.” Here, *Xiansheng* refers to a husband [Zhang 2007].

It is worth mentioning that *Xiansheng* could refer to both males and females. Unlike modern appellations which have clear gender distinctions, some ancient appellations could be considered gender-neutral. For example, terms such as *Xiong* (兄, elder brother), *Jun* (君, gentleman), *Zi* (子, son), and *Gongzi* (公子, noble son) could also be applied to females.

The term *Xiongdi* (兄弟, brothers) could refer to sisters. In some cases, elder sisters were called female elder brothers, younger sisters female younger brothers, or even simply brothers. For example, *Mencius, Wan Zhang I* (孟子·万章上) notes, “*Mizi*’s wife and *Zilu*’s wife were considered *Xiongdi*”.

The title *Jun* was used as an honorific for adults. In households with multiple wives or concubines, a concubine might refer to the legal wife as *female Jun*, and to her husband as *Jun* or *male Jun* [Yuan 2007].

Zi though mainly means son nowadays refers to son and daughter in the past. In Tao Yuanming’s *Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源记), “led their wife, *Zi*, and fellow villagers to this place isolated from the outside world.” Here, *Zi* refers collectively to both sons and daughters. Accordingly, *Gongzi* could refer to both male and female children of nobles.

In contrast to the instances above, the terms *father* and *husband* carried clear gender distinctions. Hierarchy and ethics were long emphasized in ancient Chinese society. Ethical principles like “the ruler guides the subject, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife” were regarded as fundamental truths. Therefore, although some appellations could be used for both genders, men and women also had distinct forms of address. *Xiansheng* could either specifically denote males or more broadly serve as a common appellation applicable to both genders.

¹ *Zheng* (饗): a wooden ritual table or platform used to hold offerings, especially sacrificial animals.

1.2. *Xiansheng* as a social appellation

The core connotation of *Xiansheng* was knowledge. Centred on knowledge, its semantic scope continuously expanded, coming to address the educated group in a broad sense. As a kinship term, *Xiansheng* meant “one born before me”, while in social contexts it focuses on mastering a skill or knowledge precedingly. The elements *Xian* and *Sheng* could extend from chronological priority to superiority in knowledge, prestige, experience, status, and skill, generally carrying a respectful meaning. During its long evolution, because it encompassed a wide range of ages, professions, and statuses, *Xiansheng* could be regarded as a quasi-general term of social address.

The social usage of *Xiansheng* included several denotations:

- a. **Elderly and learned person.** For example, *Mencius* notes: “An older scholar, hence called *Xiansheng*.” [Liang 1996]) In *Strategies of the Warring States*, *Wei Ce* (战国策·卫策), it is written: “Then he met the *Wuxia Xiansheng*.” Gao You notes: “*Xiansheng* is a title for elders of virtue.” [Wang 1985] Age was an important factor in this conception. In Chinese ancient society under a natural economy, knowledge and learning were often associated with accumulated experience. In premodern agrarian society, agricultural knowledge couldn’t be fully recorded in written form but transmitted orally. Elders thus embodied rich long-term practical experience, representing the living storage of production techniques.
- b. **Teacher.** Teachers are naturally linked to imparting knowledge, and using *Xiansheng* to refer to teachers became one of the most common usages. In *Li, Qu Li I* (礼·曲礼上), it is stated, “Follow the *Xiansheng*” with the annotation “*Xiansheng* means an elder who teaches learners.” *Bian Shi Ming* (辨释名) states, “In antiquity, teachers were called *Xiansheng*.” *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* (韩诗外传) notes, “In ancient times, those who understood the Way were called *Xian* – for they awakened earlier than others.”
- c. **Retired official.** Knowledge served as cultural capital for entering officialdom, and authority was underpinned by learning. Retired officials, inseparable from their accumulated knowledge, were accordingly addressed as *Xiansheng*. *Yi Li, Shi Xiang Jian Li* (仪礼·士相见礼), it is stated, “*Xiansheng* with a rank superior to the host” with the annotation “*Xiansheng*, a retired official.” *Yi Li, Shi Guan Li* (仪礼·士冠礼) states: “*Xiansheng* refers to local elders in the village, specifically retired ministers and officials.”
- d. **Self-reference by literati and scholars.** For instance, Tao Yuanming styled himself Five Willows *Xiansheng* (五柳先生).

- e. **Specialized professionals.** The term was also applied to Taoist priests, courtesans, fortune-tellers, diviners, singers, physicians, geomancers, clerks, and managers. Examples include expressions such as *feng shui Xiansheng* (风水先生, geomancer), *fortune-telling Xiansheng*, and *storytelling Xiansheng*.

The common basis for the above usages was the mastery of specialized knowledge and the respect it commanded. Elderly and learned figures were esteemed for their experience and seniority. Teachers were respected for their knowledge. The ancient Chinese official selection system emphasized appointing virtuous and capable individuals. In the Qin State, military ranks were granted based on military merits. During the early Han dynasty, the recommendation system selected prominent individuals with both good moral character and academic excellence. The imperial examination system selected talents. Even under the hereditary aristocracy system, where social status was determined by birth, nobles who held official positions, regardless of their rank, had to receive education at the national academy and learn relevant etiquette knowledge before taking up their posts. Literati and scholars possessed certain literary cultivation and knowledge. Taoist priests, courtesans, fortune-tellers, diviners, singers, doctors, geomancers, clerks, and managers were all relied on specialized skills or expertise. Courtesans, in particular, often demonstrated cultural sophistication and were skilled in music and singing [Jiang and Dorji 2004].

2. Early 19th to early 20th century: Introduction of *Mister*

Xiansheng became a more widely used general social appellation. However, this change involved significant semantic tensions. While *Xiansheng* referred to multiple groups, its various meanings emphasized intellectual ability rather than biological gender. Beginning in the late Qing dynasty, the Western term *Mister* gradually became associated with *Xiansheng*. *Xiansheng* gradually acquired the sense of *Mister*, a term that inherently refers to adult males in the West.

2.1. How *Mister* grafted onto the *Xiansheng*

Dictionaries are useful resources for studying the translational relationship between *Mister* and *Xiansheng*. By searching the keywords “*Mister*” and “*Xiansheng*” in *Database of English-Chinese Dictionaries* [Academia Sinica], a comparison table can be constructed. The Chinese translations of *Mister* and the English words whose Chinese renderings include “*Xiansheng*” were collected. Similar entries were then merged and categorized under the column “Entries Translated with ‘*Xiansheng*’”, as shown in Table below.

Table. Translation of *Mister* and *Xiansheng* in Chinese-English dictionaries from the early 19th to early 20th century

Dictionary	Writer	Chinese Translation of <i>Mister</i>	Entries Translated with <i>Xiansheng</i>
<i>A Dictionary of the Chinese Language in Three Parts. Part The Third, English and Chinese</i>	Morrison Robert		a. teacher: teacher; schoolmaster; tutor; preceptor; writing master; venerable teacher; mistress b. non-teaching personnel with professional technical knowledge: mineralogist; prophet; fortune-teller; astrologer; geomancer; enchanter; chooser of days; physiognomist; interpreter of dreams; physician; surgeon; herbalist; apothecary; oculist; charlatan; portrait-painter; commentator; clerk of accounts; receiver of money; pawn broker; minister of religion; chaplain c. honorifics and general terms: Mr.; sir; master; gentleman; senior; you d. other: the first born
<i>An English and Chinese Vocabulary, in the Court Dialect</i>	Williams Samuel Wells		
<i>English and Chinese Dictionary</i>	Medhurst Walter Henry	Xiansheng; Xianggong (相公, minister); Gong (公, lord); Gua n (官, official)	
<i>A Dictionary of the Chinese Language</i>	Morrison Robert		
<i>English and Chinese Dictionary with the Punti and Mandarin Pronunciation</i>	Lobscheid Wilhelm	Xiansheng; Xianggong; Gong; Laoshi (老师, teacher); Shiye (师爷, learned official)	
<i>Vocabulary and Handbook of the Chinese Language</i>	Doolittle Justus	Xiansheng; Xianggong	
<i>An English and Chinese Dictionary</i>	Original work by Lobscheid Wilhelm, revised and augmented by Inoue Tetsujiro		
<i>An English and Chinese Dictionary</i>	Kwang Ki-Chaou	Xiansheng; Xiongtai (兄台, peer-aged honorific)	
<i>An English and Chinese Standard Dictionary</i>	Yen Wei-Ching Williams	the general term Xiansheng; Xianggong; Gong; Weng (翁, old man); Laoshi; Shiye	
<i>A Chinese-English Dictionary</i>	Giles Herbert Allen		
<i>English and Chinese Pronouncing Condensed Dictionary</i>	Translation and Compilation Institute of the Commercial Press	Xiansheng; Laoshi	
<i>English-Chinese Dictionary of the Standard Chinese Spoken Language and Handbook for Translators</i>	Hemeling Karl Ernst Georg	Xiansheng; Gong; Jun	

Missionaries played a crucial role in early modern English education in China. The books they compiled and the newspapers they founded provided essential materials for the insightful individuals beginning to learn English and translation. Their legal residence in China allowed missionaries to conduct relatively accurate translations, despite the substantial differences between Chinese and Western concepts. The scientific works they translated were studied by the Chinese intellectuals and became an important part of the Self-Strengthening Movement [Zhao 2012]. The notion of mutually translating *Xiansheng* and *Mister* entered the dictionaries compiled by the Chinese people and began to circulate widely in daily usage in an unabashedly open manner [Pan 2024]. In these dictionaries, *Xiansheng* was listed as one of the translations for *Mister* (see Table above for detailed overview).

Various Chinese translations of *Mister* existed. For instance, *Xiongtai* was an honorific for a man of similar age; *Gong* was a common ancient honorific whose usage broadened over time; *Xianggong* was a widely used honorific for men; *Guan*, originally meaning “official”, extended to honorific usage; *Jun* was one of the most common honorifics; and *Weng* referred to an elderly man or father. In Lobscheid’s *English and Chinese Dictionary with the Punti and Mandarin Pronunciation*, the translations for *Mister* include *Laoshi* and *Shiye*. He emphasized that these two terms are the most respectful terms for *Mister*. From the English words excluding “*Mister*” that were translated with the characters “*Xiansheng*”, the usage of *Xiansheng* was summarized comprehensively, encompassing teachers, various professionals, honorifics or general terms. This indicates that the understanding of *Xiansheng* was relatively accurate and broad.

Dictionary compilers glimpsed the inherent compatibility between *Mister* and *Xiansheng* but also recognized their differences in specific usages. Some missionaries, influenced by the social background where women were secluded in inner chambers and not widely noticed and by the predominantly male usage of *Xiansheng*, may have overlooked certain translational mismatches.

Notably, Lobscheid was among the first to explicitly connect mistress with *Nü Xiansheng* (女先生, female teacher) [Lobscheid 1866–1869], a usage also documented by Inoue Tetsujirō and Yan Huiqing. Here, *Xiansheng* means “teacher”, while *Nü Xiansheng* specifies a female teacher. In English, male teachers are commonly addressed as “Mr. + Last Name” and female teachers as “Mrs./Miss + Last Name,” but these forms are general honorifics unrelated to the teaching profession. Meaning “teacher” is one of *Xiansheng*’s most common usages, which *Mister* cannot fully convey. Moreover, *Xiansheng* could be applied to both men and women, which is completely different from *Mister*, a general English term for males. The former carries a stronger connotation of respect than the latter. Since the authors noticed

that the two words are not in a one-to-one correspondence, why did they still use it as the translation for *Mister*?

2.2. Why *Xiansheng* was chosen to translate *Mister*

The translation of *Mister* was not limited to *Xiansheng*. *Xiansheng* outcompeted other archaic or traditional Chinese honorifics mentioned in Table above, such as *Gong*, *Jun* and *Xianggong*, and had also prevailed over many transliterated versions of *Mister*.

The concept of *Xiansheng* gradually showed characteristics of cross-class universality in the late Qing period. [Pan 2024] After the Tang dynasty, its original meaning as “elderly person” gradually receded, and the social status of its referents declined [Yu 2003]. Consequently, it shifted from an honorific title to a more general form of address. Although other appellations also showed a tendency towards generalization in their development, their referents were not as universal as *Xiansheng*. Titles such as *Gong*, *Jun* and *Xianggong* were more closely linked to official position, status, and class. In contrast, *Xiansheng* penetrated into various ordinary occupations in society, such as *fengshui Xiansheng* and *Kanxiang Xiansheng* (看相先生, fortune-teller). It was almost universally applicable to scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants – a rarity in a feudal society that emphasized hierarchical order. In this respect, the concept of *Xiansheng* overlapped to a large extent with that of *Mister*.

Free translation took root more easily than transliteration. On the one hand, free translation conformed to Chinese linguistic conventions. Federico Masini pointed out that there is a semantic connection between the sound and form of Chinese characters, and Chinese tends to create new words through free translation. Pure transliteration, by contrast, lacks the ideographic function that allow meaning to be inferred from the characters themselves, and it could even lead to misinterpretations due to the form of the characters used. Moreover, the unification of Mandarin in the late Qing dynasty was an arduous and long process, and the pronunciation of a single word, corresponding to numerous dialects, gave rise to an overwhelming number of equivalent Chinese characters. Against this backdrop, *Xiansheng* replaced transliterations like *Weishida* or *Misite* (both old transliterations of *Mister*). Subjectively, missionaries found that adopting familiar Chinese terms made it easier for people in Han Chinese society to understand and accept new concepts, thereby facilitating the smooth progress of their missionary work.

On the other hand, long adhering to the concept of the Celestial Empire, the Qing dynasty rulers resisted transliterated words. As one scholar observed, “Chinese people, considering themselves orthodox, always preferred to name everything according to their own habits.” Even the establishment of the *Tongwen Guan* (the first modern foreign-language institute in Qing China) implicitly carried

the intention of assimilating foreign languages into the framework of Chinese characters [Kong 2020]. The signing of a series of unequal treaties made the ruling class acutely aware of the urgency of translation. The guiding principle of the Self-Strengthening Movement, “Chinese learning as the foundation, Western learning for practical use”, was reflected in the translation practice that adopted free translation wherever possible.

3. Around the May Fourth Period: Generalization and contraction

Since the advent of modern times, Chinese society has witnessed an intensifying process of cultural interaction and conflict between China and the West. Ideas such as democracy and equality were increasingly promoted. Addressing others as *Xiansheng* in daily interactions became a widespread social habit. Yet beneath this seemingly inclusive usage lay an unresolved gender dilemma, which made the contradictions between *Xiansheng* and *Mister* increasingly prominent.

3.1. The generalization and contraction of the concept of *Xiansheng*

The traditional term *Xiansheng* gradually evolved and generalized, with relatively loose restrictions on gender and age. However, the ethical and moral system of feudal society was, in essence, a set of unequal hierarchical concepts. Forms of address in daily communication were also regulated by this structure, profoundly reflecting the principle of hierarchy [Li 2004]. Around the May Fourth Movement, the strong social demand for equality erupted and began to reshape forms of address.

3.2. The popularity of *Xiansheng*

The reform of address terms provided policy support for the expansion and popularization of the concept of *Xiansheng*. Before this reform, in practical use, *Xiansheng* still mostly used to address elderly people. Constrained by its core association with knowledge, it could not be applied equally to those lacking knowledge or skills. Although it could occasionally refer to women, such usage was limited and rare. In 1912, the Nanjing Provisional Government issued the *Provisional President's Decree to the Ministry of the Interior: Instructing All Government Agencies to Abolish the Addresses Used in the Official Offices of the Former Qing Dynasty*. In this decree, Sun Yat-sen demanded the abolition of derogatory titles such as *Daren* (大人, Lord) and *Laoye* (老爷, Master) and their replacement with two address terms: *Xiansheng* and *Jun* [Pan 2024]. In 1934, the Ministry of Interior of Nanjing National Government issued a general order. Building on the previous document, it further stipulated that *Xiansheng* should be used as a universal address for all people without official positions. Additionally, it abolished additional traditional titles, including *Taitai* (太太, Madame), *Shaoye* (少爷, Young Master), and

Xiaojie (小姐, Young Lady), and clarified that *Xiansheng* could be used regardless of age, gender, or status. Thus, the semantic extension of *Xiansheng* was explicitly reinforced through official documents.

3.3. The masculinization of *Xiansheng*

The semantic narrowing of *Xiansheng*, which came to refer exclusively to males, gradually eclipsed its original traditional meanings. Even though the circular issued by the Ministry of the Interior of the Nanjing National Government in 1934 sought to preserve its traditional connotations, Western discourse had already assumed dominance in the contest for linguistic and cultural authority between China and the West. Consequently, *Mister* inevitably gained ascendancy. The more widely *Xiansheng* was used, the more prominently the profound contradictions inherent in its concept became.

The practice of free translation contributed to the association between *Xiansheng* and *Mister*. In translation theory, free translation represents a process of domestication, while transliteration reflects foreignization. Yet, over long periods of linguistic evolution, these two processes may yield paradoxical results: transliterated terms become assimilated into the host language, while freely translated terms can induce semantic displacement within native words. [Kong 2020] The reciprocal translation of *Xiansheng* and *Mister* was initially intended to facilitate comprehension and acceptance among Chinese speakers; however, this accommodation ultimately resulted in the homogenization of two culturally distinct concepts. Consequently, *Mister* gradually became one of the fixed meanings of *Xiansheng*.

The proposal of *Sai Xiansheng* (赛先生, Mr. Science) and *De Xiansheng* (德先生, Mr. Democracy) during the May Fourth period brought the term *Xiansheng* into broader public view in China. In these expressions, *Xiansheng* represents a hybridization of the traditional *Xiansheng* and the *Mister*. On one level, *Xiansheng* embodies the meanings of “teacher” and “respect”, personifying science and democracy as ideological mentors from the West. This kind of title directly echoed the victory of the Allied Powers at the end of World War I at that time, indicating that the two *Xiansheng* would lead China out of darkness. On another level, both *Sai Xiansheng* and *De Xiansheng* carried an obvious gender inclination. It cannot be inferred from their literal form that they were exclusive to males – even though *Mister* became prevalent around the May Fourth Movement, the use of *Xiansheng* as a gender-neutral honorific did not decline completely. However, even if there was no explicit gender attribution when these two *Xiansheng* were proposed, the subsequent introduction of *Mu Guniang* (穆姑娘, Miss Morality) invalidated this assumption. The New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement liberated the minds of young people from constraints of feudal ideology, yet they broke down the old

ethical order without establishing a new and coherent moral framework. As Lu Ping (2006) noted,

Most young people admired traditional morality and nationalism: they advocated that women should remain loyal to one husband for life, uphold chastity, and even die for it [...]. At the same time, however, they also paid respect for ideas such as women's liberation, gender equality, cosmopolitanism, and socialism, not daring to offend these ideals. [Lu 2006]

Their thoughts either stagnated or became more radical than that of the West. Against this backdrop, the figure of *Mu Guniang* emerged as symbolic response, representing moral virtue. Since *Guniang* referred to young women, *Xiansheng* naturally became corresponding to men by the contrast.

3.4. Manifestations of contradictions in the concept of *Xiansheng*

The simultaneous expansion and contraction of the meaning of *Xiansheng* generated internal contradictions, and often clashing with its previous connotations. The entrenched stability of its traditional usages, rooted in hierarchical social structures, could not be dismantled overnight. By examining literary instances of the phrase retrieved from the *Cultural Database of the Total Database of Modern Chinese Literature* [Jingdian Guji Database], one can trace the linguistic shifts in the usage of *Xiansheng* in everyday discourse, and thereby gain insights into the evolution of social history.

The work *Wasting Effort* illustrates the tension between the original sense of *Xiansheng* as “teacher” and its broader usage as a general term of respect. In Wang Chenglian’s *Moonlit Night on the Spring River* describes, the concept of *Xiansheng* breaks through traditional identity boundaries – using *Xiansheng* to address the so-called vulgar soldiers, which to a certain extent creates a subtle sense of distortion and incongruity. At the policy level, attempts were made to reshape it into a universal honorific that transcends class and occupation through institutionalized discipline. However, this effort was always constrained by the deep-rooted resistance of cultural inertia, and *Xiansheng* continued to carry its association with intellectual authority. Excerpts from the texts are provided below.

“Remember, from now on, you must focus on proper pursuits and stop performing in operas. In your spare time, discuss and exchange ideas about knowledge with Gao Xiansheng (Mr. Gao).”

“Dad, look at you – you keep calling him Xiansheng all the time. What kind of Xiansheng is he? He’s not my Xiansheng, nor yours! How could he be a Xiansheng to us? He’s just a clerk in an office.”

"This is absurd – you even refuse to acknowledge him as Xiansheng. If teachers are not respected, how can knowledge itself be valued? No wonder each generation grows worse than the last."

"But he doesn't actually teach us anything."

"Even so, we still have to address him as Xiansheng, it's a matter of etiquette."

"I'll keep calling him Gao Jingxiang."

"And I'll keep insisting you call him Gao Xiansheng." [Shi 1941]

– Shi Ling, *Wasting Effort*

"My name is Shouzhong, and I currently serve as a battalion commander."

"So, you are Battalion Commander Ding!"

"I merely told you my role, not that you should use my title," said Ding Shouzhong bluntly and displeased, "A battalion commander is a minor officer, not deserving of formal titles."

"According to common practice, we either use official titles or else call someone Xiansheng. Shall I call you Ding Xiansheng?"

"That won't do. I am a simple soldier—how could I possibly be a Xiansheng? Just call me by my name."

"I wouldn't dare." [Wang 1947]

– Wang Chenglian, *Spring River Flower Moon Night*

Overall, the meanings of *Xiansheng* showed a dual tendency: while it became increasingly generalized in social scope, it simultaneously narrowed in terms of gender. In the novel *After the Rain, Withered Buds*, Mrs. Wang equates *Xiansheng* with *Mister*, using it as a general term for men. Traditionally, the term *Xiansheng* signified hierarchical order rather than gender distinction. In modern usage, however, this hierarchy–gender relationship underwent a reversal: *Xiansheng* came to highlight gender while simultaneously serving as a marker of social equality. This incomplete transformation was closely tied to the inconsistent implementation of address-term reforms during the Republican period, as well as to the dominance of Western discursive power, which eventually undermined the state-sanctioned linguistic order.

"Mrs. Wang! Was that new sick Xiansheng able to sleep soundly?"

"Last night I didn't hear a thing. It's likely that sleep was uninterrupted. But that one isn't a Xiansheng."

"If not a Xiansheng, then what is he?"

[...]

"Oh, I get it! That's right – they're all university students. But we should definitely call them Xiansheng – that's the proper way!" Old Fourth slaps his knee with his right hand, thinking Mrs. Wang is deliberately playing a riddle with him.

"I knew you wouldn't guess correctly."

“What? Still wrong? Then tell me! Haha! Mrs. Wang, are you also playing a trick on me now?”

“Who’s playing a trick on you? You need to understand—that one isn’t a man!”

“Not a man, then a woman. Men and women are both human beings. The only difference between you and me is just that you, Mrs. Wang, have one more twisted bun on your head. Now female students don’t even twist their hair into buns anymore—they all cut their hair short. So, where’s the difference between men and women? If men are called *Xiansheng*, then women can certainly be called *Xiansheng* too.” [Li 1935]

– Li Zhengfu, *After the Rain, Withered Buds* (Yu Hou Can Lei)

Language itself possesses a self-purifying capacity: when accommodating new forms that facilitate effective communication, it also eliminates excessive or ambiguous variants that impede clarity to correct itself [Masini 1997]. Through this ongoing process of conflict and assimilation, *Xiansheng* was not completely displaced by the imported *Mister*, yet its original meaning gradually diminished in this contest for usage.

4. Post-1949 developments

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, under the guidance of political ideology, *Tongzhi* (同志, comrade) emerged as the mainstream social honorific, emphasizing class equality and eliminating gender distinctions. The use of *Xiansheng* was restricted to specific groups and primarily appeared in the context of united front work. Following the Reform and Opening-up period, the concept of *Xiansheng* was revitalized once again. Stimulated by both globalization and the market economy, it re-entered social circulation. Influenced by the linguistic cultures of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as well as international exchanges, *Xiansheng* rapidly developed into a general honorific for ordinary men, thereby deeply solidifying its status as an honorific exclusive to men. The traditional usage of “Nü *Xiansheng*” was squeezed to the margins.

5. From a female perspective

The forceful imposition of the Western honorific *Mister* and the current decline of the traditional *Xiansheng* are also the process of *Xiansheng* becoming gendered: shifting from the limited gender inclusivity in traditional China to gender differentiation in the modern era.

5.1. Implicit exclusion in the traditional context

In traditional Chinese context, women could only be addressed as *Xiansheng* to a limited extent, and such usage never gained widespread social recognition.

In ancient China, men and women occupied distinct spheres – men in the public domain and women in the domestic one [Pan 2024]. In the concept of traditional *Xiansheng*, when women in ancient times were addressed as *Xiansheng*, it mostly referred to female teachers. Owing to the rarity of this application, the character *Nü* (女, female) was often added before *Xiansheng* for emphasis. According to Markedness Theory, *Nü Xiansheng* specifically denotes women, whereas *Xiansheng* alone cannot confirm whether the reference is female. Conversely, *Nan Xiansheng* (男先生, male *Xiansheng*) is so commonly used that the gender marker becomes redundant. Based on the principle of linguistic economy, in most cases, it is sufficient to address *Nan Xiansheng* simply as *Xiansheng*. Consequently, a title that was originally intended to be gender-neutral became implicitly biased toward men. Linguistic markedness has played an indelible role in shaping gender stereotypes, while the accumulation of gender stereotypes over time has in turn reinforced markedness itself [Li 2016]. The more the gendered prefix “female” is emphasized in *Nü Xiansheng*, the more the association of *Xiansheng* with women is erased.

Around the time of the May Fourth Movement, with official endorsement from the government, the practice of addressing women as *Xiansheng* became more widespread than in pre-modern society. The 1934 official regulations on forms of address stipulated that both *Taitai* and *Xiaojie* could be addressed as *Xiansheng*. Gender specification was deemed unnecessary. The shift from marked to unmarked reflected the pursuit of equality and the awakening of women’s consciousness. Even though this government-granted permission failed to entirely counteract the influence of Western discourse, the awakening of women’s consciousness still advanced, accompanied by the reform of honorifics and the broader trend of social equality. During this period, women’s organizations, newspapers and educational institutions flourished, and the practice of addressing women as *Xiansheng* increasingly common.

5.2. The implantation of Western gender logic

An inherent gender controversy exists between the Chinese term *Xiansheng* and the English *Mister*. The obvious gender indication of *Mister* consequently narrowed the gender space available to women within the semantic domain of *Xiansheng*. Compared with *Mister*, the gender reference of *Xiansheng* was considerably weaker. However, it should still be noted that in China’s feudal society, where the husband was considered the head of the wife and women were largely confined to domestic roles, women were unlikely to have been included in the initial scope of those addressed as *Xiansheng* as an honorific. Even though *Xiansheng* could be applied to both men and women in theory, in the subsequent use, since the number of women

addressed as *Xiansheng* was extremely small and the marked term *Nü Xiansheng* was frequently used, the male subjectivity of *Xiansheng* strengthened. This perhaps functioned as a buffer that allowed *Mister* and *Xiansheng* to maintain superficial compatibility despite their intrinsic semantic contradictions.

The emergence of universally accepted honorifics in society is an inevitable manifestation of the further development of the awareness of equality. In modern Chinese society, where social mobility and social complexity increased dramatically, the existence of such universal honorifics was indispensable. However, modern China not only failed to prevent the semantic equivalence between *Xiansheng* and *Mister*, but also failed to develop new universal honorifics that cross class boundaries, resulting in women being further excluded from the system of respectful titles. In traditional China, mainstream respectful titles for women were often associated with marital status, age, or chastity. Titles such as *Xiaojie*, *Furen* (夫人, Lady), *Taitai*, *Lao Furen* (老夫人, elder Madam), and *Lienü* (烈女, Chaste Woman) underscored women's dependent social status as appendages to men. *Xiansheng* was one of the rare respectful titles occasionally applied to women in professional or intellectual fields. The Chinese term *Xiansheng*, once encompassing multiple social identities and naturally associated with intellectual prestige, has gradually been reduced to a single reference meaning: "adult male". Under such explicit marginalization, the already limited repertoire of respectful titles for women gradually disappeared from public discourse.

The coexistence of *Xiansheng* and *Mister* has produced a dilemma of gender erasure, particularly when addressing distinguished women with the title *Xiansheng*. The 21st century witnessed the full eruption of semantic tension within the concept of *Xiansheng* amidst the rising tide of gender equality discourse. On one hand, exceptional women such as Chi Zijian and Ye Jiaying are honoured with the title *Xiansheng*, continuing the traditional respect for knowledge and learning. On the other hand, this practice reveals implicit gender inequality: while men receive this honorific by default, women must demonstrate exceptional achievements to merit the same recognition. The use of *Xiansheng* to honour outstanding individuals was originally a manifestation of cultural self-strengthening in response to Western influence. However, under the premise that *Xiansheng* is widely used as a generic honorific for men, the respectful connotation conveyed by this title was gradually diluted. When used to address outstanding women, it further neutralizes their female identity, implying that feminine identity is incompatible with intellectual authority. *Xiansheng* has already largely become an honorific exclusive to men, making the restoration of its gender neutrality increasingly difficult in contemporary Chinese society. Given the current situation, addressing distinguished women as *Xiansheng* occupies an ambiguous and problematic position.

Conclusion

Within the framework of traditional Chinese society, the concept of *Xiansheng* carried the Confucian ethical order's reverence for intellectual authority and the hierarchical relations between elders and juniors. With the powerful influx of modern Western cultural forces, the establishment of an equivalence between *Mister* and *Xiansheng* unfolded gradually. However, the integration of *Mister* as a new semantic item actually signified the penetration and expansion of Western discursive power in the social and cultural fields of modern China. From a gendered perspective, the honorific use of *Xiansheng* for women in traditional China reflected the limited degree of gender inclusivity. The introduction of the Western honorific system gradually dissipated the originally latent gender-neutral traits of *Xiansheng*. This transformation demonstrates the complex interaction between gender ideology and the contestation of Sino-Western discursive power throughout China's modern transformation.

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