

## The Semantic Changes of *Tongzhi* and *Shifu*

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### Abstract

*Address terms, regarded as an irreplaceable group of lexis in social communication and the barometer of interpersonal relationship, are an important area in language study. The change of the times and the update of the values can all bring about changes to them. The present paper intends to reveal the most updated changes of the two general address terms in Chinese—*tongzhi* ‘comrade’ and *shifu* ‘master, hoping to get a detailed and systematic understanding of their semantic “ups and downs”, and further to unearth the enlightenment they might provide in both semantic change and language system. Semantic change is usually the unintended result or a byproduct of an intentional conduct aimed at realizing certain social and expressive goals (Wong, 2003); it is also an objective requirement of language and cognitive economy. Moreover, chain shifts prone to occur in the semantic inventory of existing linguistic forms to keep language system in balance.*

**Key words:** *tongzhi*; *shifu*; semantic change; language system

### 1. Introduction

Language, being the most essential factor for the existence of society, absolutely attaches itself to society, and responds to the changes in society. It is subject to changes in all aspects, from sound to grammar to meaning, with the changes in meaning identified as semantic change.

“Address forms are the words speakers use to designate the persons they are talking to while they are talking to them” (Fasold, 2000:1-2); general address terms are those which can be used widely without regard to the addressees’ age, occupation, etc. The most preferred general address terms in Chinese include: *tongzhi* ‘comrade’, *shifu* ‘master’, *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *nvshi* ‘Ms.’, *laoshi* ‘teacher’, *laoban* ‘proprietor’, *pengyou* ‘friend’, etc. *Tongzhi* and *shifu* are what we will mainly probe into in the present study. They were used alternately in different historical periods and were once involved in a “push chain” (Scotton & Zhu, 1984:334) during the Cultural Revolution. The discussion on one of them can by no means be detached from referring to the other.

The division of the development phases of *tongzhi* and *shifu* will be primarily based on the social events serving as milestones in the long history of China.

### 2. The semantic changes of *tongzhi*

#### 2.1 The generation of *tongzhi*

Dating back to some 2,200 years ago in the early Qin Dynasty (BC.221-BC.207), *tongzhi* made its first appearance in 《国语》 *Discourses of the States* in the expression 同姓则同德，同德则同心，同心则同志 ‘People with the same last name worship the same totem and have the same nature; hence, they have the same disposition and aspiration’. Then it emerged in 《后汉书》 *History of the Later Han* in 所与交友，必也同志 ‘The reason why I make friends with someone is that we have the same aspiration’. At that time, however, *tongzhi* was even not a single word, let alone being an address term. It could only be regarded as a collocation or combination of two monosyllabic characters *tong* and *zhi*, referring to “the sharing of” or “the people with the same ethics and ideals”, as a term of reference.

## 2.2 The use of *tongzhi* since the bourgeois democratic revolution

*Tongzhi*, as an address term, first appeared in the late Qing Dynasty (1616-1911). It was used among revolutionaries during the bourgeois democratic revolution, as in the will of Sun Yat-sen (leader of the 1911 Chinese Democratic Revolution): 革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力 ‘As the revolution is not yet completed, all my followers must endeavor to carry it out’.

*Tongzhi* here means “followers”. After the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1921, it was popularized among the Party members rapidly, as all of them shared the common ideal of the realization of communism, and it was gradually endowed with a sense of sacred political belonging, which, then, drew a clear boundary between revolutionists and those who were not. The mutual use of the term indicated equality, solidarity, intimacy, supreme respect and trust among revolutionists, which can be identified in the literary works of that period. In those days, “being addressed as *tongzhi* required the addressee’s admission into the Party or demonstration of one’s commitment to the Communist Revolution. For those who aspired to join the revolutionist ranks, being addressed as *tongzhi* by a Party member symbolized recruitment into the Revolutionary Army” (Wong, 2003: 23-24). Accordingly, its original meaning—“people with the same interest(s)” was gradually overshadowed by its newer meaning—“comrade.”

## 2.3 The use of *tongzhi* since the founding of PRC

The founding of People’s Republic of China (hereafter shortened as PRC) in 1949 witnessed tremendous changes in the connotations of *tongzhi*. The Party vigorously promoted the use of it as a new address term among the public, in order to replace those that signaled differences in the addressees’ social status and class, like *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, etc., to put everyone on an “equal footing” (Scotton & Zhu, 1983:479), and ultimately to unite all politically. The extension of the use of *tongzhi* from revolutionists to the masses reflected the Party’s desire to establish an ideology of egalitarianism (Wong, 2003). *Tongzhi*, then, emphasized the solidarity among all the Chinese people, and their mutual engagement in the course of building a socialist China. Eventually, almost everyone, regardless of their gender, age, occupation, rank and so on, could be addressed as *tongzhi*, as long as they were not classified as class enemies of the state. Meanwhile, its original connotations of revolutionist intimacy and honor lost in the wake of its generalization to the masses.

## 2.4 The use of *tongzhi* during the Cultural Revolution

The breakout of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) converted the destiny of *tongzhi* again. The whole society was anti-intellectual and divisive in that particular era; the inherent political overtones of *tongzhi* further evolved into a kind of “political honor”. Some people, like capitalist roaders, were deprived of the qualification of being addressed as *tongzhi* or addressing others with *tongzhi*. Interlocutors would not dare to use *tongzhi* unless they were clear of each other’s political background; otherwise, that might cause unnecessary trouble. Those who had been unjustly treated as counter-revolutionists would immediately burst into tears once occasionally heard people address themselves with *tongzhi*. The function of *tongzhi* had gone far beyond that of an address term. Furthermore, with the political atmosphere so breath-taking and people’s political nerves stretched so tightly, their major reaction was disenchantment with political rhetoric. The primary component of *tongzhi*’s meaning inventory—political peers having the same ideals and interests, made it disfavored. Consequently, *tongzhi* lost favor with much of the population, and the connotations of respect and intimacy disappeared accordingly; as a replacement, *shifu* became very popular.

## 2.5 The use of *tongzhi* since the Reform and Opening-up

With the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, great changes took place in every regarding of Chinese people’s life; the whole address system changed accordingly. For one thing, the address terms like *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, and *nvshi* ‘Ms.’, which were once replaced by *tongzhi*, were resurrected and became increasingly popular. For another, occupational terms, such as *laoshi* ‘teacher’, and *laoban* ‘proprietor’, were generalized to those who were not suitable to them previously. Moreover, owing to its original political and revolutionist connotations, *tongzhi* was gradually disliked. It began to be regularly used for “strangers, those whose occupations are unknown, and those whose occupations carry no title and with whom the speaker is not very familiar” (Scotton & Zhu, 1983:481). In other words, it was used as a “distant and polite form of address between interlocutors who did not intend to invoke power relations, solidarity, or intimacy in their interaction”

(Wong, 2003:24). Li (1996) surveyed the use of general address terms among 1026 adults in Shanghai from October, 1995 to May, 1996, and verified that only 9.65% people were often addressed with *tongzhi*, while the percentage of *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *pengyou* ‘friend’ and *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’ was 65.89%, 24.95%, and 18.02% respectively. *Tongzhi*, once being the most widely used address term, lost its allure following the Reform and Opening up in Mainland China.

Although it was going out of date in Mainland, *tongzhi* seemed to have gained currency in Chinese gay community in Hong Kong in the late 1980s. It was appropriated by gay rights activists engaged in sexuality-based social movements to refer to sexual minorities—lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered persons (Wong, 2005), with the positive connotations of respect, equality and intimacy among them. Chou (2000) claimed that two gay rights activists, Maiké and Lin Yihua, who were also the organizers of the “First Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival”, decided to use *tongzhi* as the Chinese equivalent of “gay and lesbian” in the Chinese name of the film festival in 1989. In their opinion, “gay” and “lesbian” were western constructs with their specific histories; they failed to capture the essence of Chinese sexual minorities. *Tongzhi*, however, could create a sense of “Chineseness” and provide an indigenous identity for Chinese sexual minorities. Both the revolutionists and sexual minorities are marginalized groups living under oppression. They each are united by shared beliefs and striving for a shared cause—for the former, it is the founding of an egalitarian socialist state, and for the latter, it is the promotion of equal rights for sexual minorities. *Tongzhi* called up the image of communist revolutionaries fighting for their ideals, and by exploiting its revolutionist connotations, it called on the sexual minorities to respect themselves and to join the common endeavor of fighting for equality in a heterosexist society.

Since then, *tongzhi* has been widely adopted by gay rights activists in Hong Kong, and later, it was exported to Taiwan and Mainland China. However, many of the lesbians and gay men who were not involved in the *tongzhi* movement avoided using *tongzhi* as a term of reference or a label for self-identification. They preferred to use “ellipsis (i.e., not specifying same-sex desire explicitly)”, “the in-group euphemism *mem-ba* ‘member’”, “circumlocutions (e.g. *dou-hai tung ji-gei yat-yeung ge yan* ‘people like me’)” and “deictic expressions (e.g. *go-di yan* ‘those people’)” (Wong, 2003:45) and so on. But perhaps interestingly, this new usage of *tongzhi* appeared to be very popular in mainstream newspapers in Hong Kong, especially in *Oriental Daily News*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Hong Kong. Instead of referring to sexual minorities in general, it was appropriated to denote those who were supposed to engage in illegal, indecent, or immoral behavior, and was often found in “highly sensationalized news stories about murder, fist fights, gay sex clubs, and domestic disputes of gay and lesbian couples” (Wong, 2005: 766). *Tongzhi*, therefore, might have undergone pejoration in this domain. When used in these malicious contexts, its positive connotations—respect, equality and intimacy—were lost, while negative connotations were added to it.

## 2.6 The use of *tongzhi* at the present stage

Nowadays, the new usage of *tongzhi* can be occasionally heard in Mainland China; it is not widely recognized, however; *tongzhi* is still used in its traditional sense “comrade” to a great extent. For instance, in writing to and addressing strangers, making jokes among acquaintances, temporarily establishing certain social distance between interlocutors, or occasionally being used after the names of historical figures, entertainment stars and others to achieve some humor or ridicule, such as in 关于给予杜甫同志处罚的重要决定 ‘Important decisions regarding the granting of punishment on Du Fu comrade’, one of the most famous poets in ancient China (Fang, 2007). Fang investigated the use of *tongzhi* through retrieving the articles from January 1, 1997 to December 31, 2004 in *Guangmingwang*, one of the earliest founded news websites in China. The results indicated that *tongzhi* was used in “comrade” sense with a percentage of 99.9%.

Although the use of “comrade” sense was in absolute dominance, its frequency declines further. Zhou’s (2006) research on general address term use among university students showed that among all the 8 investigated terms (*a’yi* ‘aunt’, *nvshi* ‘Ms.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *shifu*, *laoshi* ‘teacher’, *laoban* ‘proprietor’, *tongzhi*), *a’yi* and *tongzhi* were respectively the most and least frequently used, accounting for 20% and 6%. It might imply the frequency of *tongzhi* has been on the decrease while that of pseudo-kinship terms on the increase.

Officials in government organizations and institutions, among whom *tongzhi* is supposed to be used commonly, are now more inclined to employ other address modes, like titles, *juzhang* ‘bureau head’, or LN (last name) + titles, *Li juzhang* ‘bureau head Li’ etc.. Yan (2002) researched the address term use among the public servants at the ministries of the central government and announced that, overall, five modes were mainly employed:

*lao* ‘old’/*xiao* ‘young’ + LN, accounting for 31%, followed by FN (full name), 30%; LN + titles, 25%; given name, 13%; and other address terms, 1%, including *tou’er* ‘chief’, *jie* ‘elder sister’, *xiong* ‘elder brother’, LN + academic titles, and nicknames, in descending order. In formal situations, FN and LN + titles were the most frequently used; while in informal ones, *lao* ‘old’/*xiao* ‘young’ + LN was the most frequently employed. Moreover, various newspapers have constantly mentioned the vulgarization, commercialization and factionization of the addressing deeds in officialdom: addressing leaders as *laoban* ‘proprietor’, *laoda* ‘boss’, and addressing subordinates as *gemen’er* ‘buddy’, *xiongdi* ‘brother’, etc. have been commonplaces; while *tongzhi* may only appear in some extraordinarily formal settings, i.e., in the handover meeting or the notice of the appointment and removal of the leading cadres.

### 3. The semantic changes of *shifu*

#### 3.1 The use of *shifu* before the Cultural Revolution

The historical evolution of *shifu* before the Cultural Revolution can be roughly divided into two phases, with the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) as the temporal “boundary”.

Different from *tongzhi*, *shifu* was born as an address term, reserved honorifically for teachers, as in 《春秋》 *Spring and Autumn Annals* in 羈贯成童，不就师傅，父之罪也 ‘If children older than eight do not have teachers to learn from, that would be the fathers’ fault’. Since the Han Dynasty (BC. 202-8, 25-200), nevertheless, it began to be specifically applied to addressing teachers of the Emperor or the princes, and worked as a general term of 太师 and 太傅 (terms used to denote teachers), as in 《史记》 *Shih Chi* in 吴太子师傅皆楚人 ‘The teachers of Prince Wu are all from Chu’. This usage remained to be the most common one until the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), and it was still retained in the following dynasties. But since the Southern Song Dynasty, *shifu* could be used to denote teachers of the ordinary people as well (Xu, 2007).

Then, *shifu* became a term employed by apprentices to address masters who imparted skills in industrial, commercial, drama and other walks of life in the late Qing Dynasty. It referred to “master in the sense of elder and skilled craftsman” (Scotton & Zhu, 1984: 327), which was exhibited in the Chinese proverb 师徒如父子 ‘Master and apprentice are similar to father and son’. People like experienced jade carvers, tailors, or chefs can all be called *shifu*. *Shifu*, therefore, contained the semantic feature [+respect], for its use acknowledged a master/apprentice relationship, entailing respect for what the addressee knew and had accomplished, and [+filial-paternal solidarity], “since the master/apprentice relationship is metaphorically a father/son tie” (ibid.).

#### 3.2 The use of *shifu* during the Cultural Revolution

During the ten-year Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, significant changes occurred to the semantic inventory of *shifu*. As Scotton and Zhu (1984:327) stated that, firstly, “worker propaganda teams took over the administration of academic organizations and schools”, making the working class the leading class, all team members began to be addressed as *shifu*, be craftsmen or not. Secondly, “[t]hat the working class is the leading class is a general principle of Marxism, already giving workers prestige” (ibid.); the shift of power endowed them with additional prestige, other people who were not workers, therefore, also preferred to be called as *shifu*. Thirdly, some people, like capitalist roaders, were bereft of the qualification of addressing others *tongzhi* or being addressed with *tongzhi* at that time. Also, as the political leanings and affiliations of one another were suspected, it was politically expedient to use *shifu*, which, consequently, became the most favored term, filling the vacuum of interpersonal solidarity left by *tongzhi*, and having connotations of deference, intimacy, revolutionary leadership, and solidarity.

Just like *tongzhi*, which had been generalized to the masses, the honorific title *shifu* had experienced a similar process during the Cultural Revolution. It had been so popularized that it was used to address people from almost all walks of life; a sweet potato baker even chose to address a young African as *shifu*, “a person by no stretch of imagination could be a *shifu* to the peddler in the original sense of the term” (Ju, 1991:389).

#### 3.3 The use of *shifu* since the Reform and Opening-up

Since the Reform and Opening-up, with the rapid social and economic changes and the moving out of the working class from its leading position, *shifu* fell into disfavor; while address terms like *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *nvshi* ‘Ms.’, *taitai* ‘Mrs.’, which were once obsolete owing to their feudalistic overtones, were revived. Scotton and Zhu (1984) investigated the use of *shifu* in 1982-1983, shortly after the Reform and Opening-up, in Beijing.

The results revealed that out of a total of 398 counts of address terms, *shifu* occurred 81 times; instead of referring to the skilled craftsmen, nevertheless, it was more often used as “an innovation/partial replacement” or modified *shifu*, i.e. to refer to workers in general sense, or as a total replacement, a replacement of *tongzhi* in all its unmarked contexts. Of the 71 interviewees, 53 were modified *shifu* users, 6 replacement users, and 12 traditional users. *Shifu* in “skilled craftsman” sense was mainly used by middle-aged or older speakers, especially persons who themselves were *shifu* in this sense; while speakers who were young, male, and workers predominated among the users of modified or replacement *shifu*. And in 68 instances of *shifu* usage to service personnel, 81% were under 30, and 66% were workers or shop assistants.

Li's (1996) large-scale investigation in Shanghai announced that in the social address system, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *tongzhi* and *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’ were the most preferred, while the use of *shifu*, contrary to its undisputed position during the Cultural Revolution, descended obviously. Even so, it was the most preferred among the manual workers with lower income. The results of the two empirical researches above demonstrate that since the Reform and Opening-up, as the applicability sphere and use frequency of *shifu* having narrowed down, it was still applied to addressing skilled craftsmen or workers in general sense, and especially to and among those engaged in manual labor of lower social classes.

### 3.4 The use of *shifu* at the present stage

Qi and Zhu's (2001) survey on students' use of social address terms disclosed that *shifu* was most frequently used to address those repairing shoes and selling vegetables, and sometimes to shop assistants and strangers; also, along with the decrease of the students' age, the occurrence number of *shifu* fell. Zhou's (2006) field work on general address term use displayed that the use frequency of *shifu* ranks in the fifth place, accounting for 11%, lower than that of *a'yi* ‘aunt’ 20%, *laoshi* ‘teacher’ 18%, *laoban* ‘proprietor’ 15%, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’ 11%, while that of *tongzhi* comes in last, accounting for 6%, suggesting that the “glorious days” of *tongzhi* and *shifu* have gone by. Most recently, Zhao (2013) researched the age distribution of general address terms with Chengyang District, Qingdao, China as an example. The rough use frequency of *shifu* of different age groups can be listed as follows: 18-25, 5%; 26-35, 12%; 36-45, 10%; 46-55, 16%; 56-65, 11%, which manifest that the overall frequency of *shifu* decreases as the age of the participants' decreases. In addition, the research results reveal that *shifu* still performs an important role in addressing strangers and workers in general sense among the participants of 36-45, 46-55 and 56-65.

To put it in a nutshell, the semantic inventory of *shifu* basically remains unchanged by comparison to that since the Reform and Opening-up. Its use frequency, however, is in a continuous decline.

## 4. Discussion on the semantic changes of *tongzhi* and *shifu*

Human language is always in constant changes either spatially or temporally (Zhu, 2013). The former one is the change along the lines of social strata or geography on a synchronic level, like social dialect and regional dialect; the latter one is the change in the light of the times on a diachronic level, such as the semantic changes of *tongzhi* and *shifu*, which offer us the following implications:

First of all, semantic change is often the unintended result or a byproduct of an intentional action aimed at achieving certain social and expressive goals (Wong, 2003). [S]emantic change (or language change, in general) has sometimes been described as the result of an invisible hand process (see, e.g., Anttila 1989: 408; Keller 1985, 1989). As Györi (2002:129) explains, ‘Such a process occurs when individuals perform certain actions intentionally but not with the consequences that will nonetheless eventually be caused in mind’. In other words, semantic change is often an epiphenomenon (Wong, 2003:4).

After the founding of PRC, the Party made huge efforts to propel the use of *tongzhi*, not because they intended to change the meaning of *tongzhi*, but because they wanted to put everyone on an equal footing, and ultimately to unite all politically. In a similar vein, the semantic change of *tongzhi* from “comrade” to “sexual minorities” occurred, not because *tongzhi* activists intended to change the meaning of it, but because they felt the need for a label that would give same sex desire a public persona and provide Chinese sexual minorities with an indigenous identity. Given its inherent meaning constituent of people with a shared ideal and close association with Chinese revolutionists, *tongzhi* became the ideal choice.

Besides, during the Cultural Revolution, people wanted a term of address to express interpersonal solidarity in daily communication. Prior to this period, *tongzhi* would necessarily be the optimal choice. It was also equipped with political overtones, however, which made it unfavorable.

At the same time, the working class became the politically leading class, everyone enjoyed to be addressed as *shifu*, leading to the generalization of *shifu*, and its substitution for *tongzhi* to encode intimacy and solidarity.

Secondly, semantic change is an objective requirement of language economy and cognitive economy; it performs an important role in language development. When there is a lexical hole in a language that the new needs of communication can't be met, two solutions can be usually provided. One is to borrow a form from another language, or just to create a new word. However, the sheer number of new words that would have to be borrowed or coined "would soon exceed the capacity of our memory and render communication impossible" (Radden & Dirven, 2007:12). A more appropriate and efficient solution would then be extending the meanings of the existing linguistic categories, especially those associated with the to-be-established ones, which will, in turn, precipitate the semantic changes of the related linguistic signs.

In the 1980s, the gay rights activists wanted a term to bring Chinese same sex desire into public. The existing linguistic category, *tongzhi*, originally denoted peers sharing the common ideal of the ultimate realization of communism all over China. It was closely associated with the to-be-established category, which referred to those with the same-sex desire, and hoped to strive for equality and a public face in a heterosexist society. Since both of the categories encode those with certain common ideal, the reappropriation of *tongzhi* to refer to sexual minorities appears to be well-reasoned and it is cognitively economic. During the Cultural Revolution, no address term appeared to be appropriate in recognizing apolitical solidarity. *Shifu*, with the traditional meaning—skilled craftsmen, already meant a specific type of worker; it is "related to worker comrade by having the same functional basis (metaphor) and also by being a part of the whole (metonymy)" (Scotton & Zhu, 1984: 341). Consequently, *shifu* was generalized and promoted to be the most popular address term of that special period.

Thirdly, language is a system characteristic of dynamic balance; chain shifts in the semantic inventory of existing linguistic forms may, therefore, occur. But as to how the chain shifts will eventually occur, it depends on the influence of external factors, with the social structure being the most decisive one. During the Cultural Revolution, the disfavor of *tongzhi* precipitated the emergence of another general address term that could fill the gap left by it; in the meanwhile, the working class became the leading class, promoting the expanding of *shifu*, which in turn, limited the domain of *tongzhi* and pushed it out of its original position as the most extensively used address term. In the same vein, since the Reform and Opening-up, with the social life increasingly diversified, and the integration with western countries pyramidally growing, address terms *xiansheng* 'Mr.', and *xiaojie* 'Miss', etc., were revived, and occupational titles *laoshi* 'teacher', and *laoban* 'proprietor', etc., were generalized. All these led to the narrowing down of the reference sphere and use frequency of *tongzhi* and *shifu*, and the thorough shaking of their core status in the social address system.

## 5. Conclusion

*Tongzhi*, from its early generation as an address term, has a close relationship with political discourse, which makes it distinct from other address terms and be the one and only one that has been advocated by the Communist Party particularly. Besides, due to its great functional value—the use is not constrained by age (appropriate to both the old and the young: *lao/xiao tongzhi* 'old/ young comrade') nor by sex (applicable to both males and females), nor by context (appropriate in both formal and informal contexts) (Lee-Wong, 1994), it would be extremely difficult to find another term that can fulfill such a diversity of roles as *tongzhi* does, though China's future political and social environment will continue to shape the address system constantly. *Tongzhi* will not disappear in the short term at least; it will proceed to perform its irreplaceable function, especially in those serious political situations. Likewise, *shifu* will not fade away, either, as it plays an indispensable role in addressing workers in general sense and those engaged in physical work. Terms of address are universally among the linguistic structures which most distinctly encode the social structure of a community. Their uses embed and flow with social and political changes. Reviewing the semantic changes of *tongzhi* and *shifu* from their first emergence to the present stage, what is presented before us are the stupendous changes the Chinese society has experienced through the ages.

Language is the reflection of ideology in social reality; it is where meaning and ideology intersect. Semantic change, especially the semantic change of words related to people, is often ideologically motivated. The early adopters of a certain term inscribe their ideologies to it, with little attention paid to others' understanding of it; whether the new usage can spread or not depends on whether the inscribed ideologies are compatible with those of others. Since the spread of a term involves not only the spread of the referential meaning endowed on it, but the ideologies attached to it.

The social address terms used now, in addition to the general address terms *tongzhi*, *shifu*, *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, *xiaojie* ‘Miss’, *nvshi* ‘Ms.’, *laoshi* ‘teacher’, *laoban* ‘proprietor’ etc., pseudo-kinship terms, like *shushu* ‘uncle’, *a’yi* ‘aunt’ and *X ge/jie* ‘X elder brother/sister’, also play a significant role. However, there still exists a gap in the choosing of address terms, i.e., people find themselves all a loss about what address forms to employ on certain occasions. The reason lying behind is that every address term carries with itself a value; when a certain value is commonly accepted, the address form it corresponds to will become popular. However, due to the complexity of social structures and the diversity of people’s values in contemporary China, there is no such a value that can be commonly recognized. Then in order to bridge the gap, what the State Language Work Committee can and should do is to provide some necessary specification and functional guidance. In the studies of address patterns, it seems advisable to associate the linguistic dimension with both social and political dimension. Only by being aware of the constantly changing social and political scenes can we know the subsequent subtle changes that have crept into the use of address terms and obtain from the prismatic changes a deeper insight into the underlying constraints, actuation and working mechanisms of semantic change.

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