

# Masculinity or Femininity: Questioning Social Gender of Personal Nouns

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## Abstract

Since essentialism and binarism of gender is challenged in gender studies, poststructuralists argue for a more deconstructive perspective of gender. Through a survey on social gender of thirty lexically female and male Chinese personal nouns, this research tends to examine: 1) how lexically female and male personal nouns are socially gendered in language use, 2) how such social gendering affects sex stereotyping. Combining a langue-oriented and structuralist framework with a parole-oriented and poststructuralist perspective, the author shows that diversified language use encourages coining of new lexical forms. Along with this process transitions and shifts happen to traditional sex stereotypes. This research encourages more similar research with combined structuralist and poststructuralist approaches on the interrelationship between gender and language. (Personal nouns, social gender, sex stereotypes, gender representation)

**Keywords:** Chinese personal nouns, social gender, femininity, masculinity

## 1. Introduction

Recently, local, context-sensitive studies of gender in concrete interaction attract more attention in language and gender academia (Holmes, 2003; Mullany, 2007; Weber, 2011). Compared to langue-oriented, structuralist linguistic approaches, such parole-oriented perspective is claimed to focus more on linguistic performance of gender rather than on fixed categorization. However, language system should not be conceptualized as an abstract prerequisite on which language is used, nor should linguistic structural properties be treated as cold precondition by which many social categories are established. Instead, from a poststructuralist linguistic perspective, language system is actually the materialization of certain structural categories led by linguistic performances that repeat over time. A co-existence of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches works well in sociolinguistics and its contemporary theorization of the relationship between language and gender, language and identity (Baxter, 2003; McElhinny, 2003). It may seem that a combined methodology consisting of a structuralist approach based on stable linguistic categories and a poststructuralist perspective is incompatible at the first glance. This article questions this notion by arguing that a poststructuralist approach can significantly benefit from structuralist, langue-oriented analysis.

Drawing on this joined method, a major binarism to be deconstructed in this article is that between female and male. Although female and male are socially salient categories, people's everyday reality confronts them not just with binary gender differences but also with a high degree of gender overlap that people are usually aware of. This requires researchers not to base their data from the beginning on a categorization that assumes women and men to form two mutually exclusive categories. So when using categories like woman and man or female and -male, researchers should demonstrate critical awareness of the discursive materialization and normativity that are attached to them. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that the boundaries between these categories are fuzzy, flexible and negotiable. Problematizing gender allows us to recognize incoherence or marginal category members that are frequently glossed over in a quantitative approach. Given these considerations, this article examines how social gender is represented and used with examples of 30 Chinese personal nouns. Research on social gender in and across language has been done based on English, German, Turkish (Braun, 2001; Hellinger, 1990, as cited in Motschenbacher 2010; Holmes, 2003; Motschenbacher, 2010) and other languages, but similar studies in Chinese context is few. The research helps us to recognize how binarism of gender is entrenched through sex stereotyping during ongoing materialization processes.

### *1.1 Sex Stereotype*

From a psychological perspective, sex is used to refer to a person's biological maleness or femaleness and gender to the non-physiological aspects of being female or male --- the cultural expectations for femininity and masculinity. This distinction helps us to focus on the fact that many female-male differences in behavior or experience do not spring naturally or automatically from biological differences between the sexes (Lips, 2005). In a word, sex is to be reserved for biological/bodily classification of living beings as female or male while gender for sociocultural practices, conventions and ideologies clustering around the biological classification. More specifically, sex is biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender exaggerates biological difference and carries biological difference into domain in which it is completely irrelevant. The very definition of the biological categories male and female, and people's understanding and beliefs of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social. Such socially shared understanding and beliefs that certain qualities can be assigned to individuals based on their membership in the female or male half of the human race are sex stereotypes. Stereotyping can proceed on the basis of race, age, religion, height, social class, or any other distinction that can be used to divide people into groups. Sex stereotyping, though, has the relatively unique aspect of being based on a distinction that divides human beings into two groups: male and female. As a result, many of our sex stereotypes are based on the notion of opposites.

Another pair of terms representing such a dichotomous categorization is masculinity and femininity, which is not same dimorphic as male and female exactly. In his book *Masculinities*, Robert Connell (1995) proposed two kind of masculinities: the physical masculinity of the working class, and the upper-middle-class technical masculinity. He points out that working-class masculinity is associated with physical power, while upper-middle-class masculinity is associated with technical (scientific and political) power. That is not to say that physical power is unimportant for upper-middle-class men. Actually, the masculine ideal throughout society involves physical power. On the other hand, women are expected to be small and delicate, with a carefully maintained body down to the smallest detail. Just as physical strength is expected to some extent of all men, this delicacy is expected to some extent of all women.

Researchers using key attributes to define masculinity and femininity may end up with findings that overestimate the strength of stereotypes and underestimate the overlap in the popular perceptions of females and males. The question comes with a built-in assumption that each adjective may be classified as more typical of either women or men. People answering such a question are thus subtly encouraged to provide stereotypic answers, and the results may yield an exaggerated view of the stereotypes. Moreover, respondents in these studies have usually been asked to indicate whether certain traits are typically associated with women or men, not whether they personally believe a particular set of adjectives actually reflects what women and men are like. Finally, a fact often overlooked in discussions of stereotypes is that the average ratings obtained for males and females in these studies, although significantly different from each other, do not usually represent opposite extremes. For instance, on a 10-point scale ranging from passive (1) to active (10), males might be rated at 7.2 and females at 6.1. Indeed, the mean ratings of males and females on such scales rarely fall on opposite sides of the midpoint (Lips, 2005). These research results confirm the danger inherent in proposing generalizations: they may be used to perpetuate stereotypes rather than to challenge them.

Besides, ever-developing socioeconomic environment change these expectations and beliefs of typical men and typical women in many ways. Those who have made big fortune with high tech in the digit era, either male or female, have proved that they are doing well in living by their brains. Men need to look clean, behave graceful and use less swear words while women have to hone their ability to defend themselves both in the workplace and out. Those age-old connections between masculinity and physical power or femininity and physical delicacy seem to be decreasing by these transformations brought by dramatic socioeconomic developments. How do such changes on sex expectations, if they do exist, manifest themselves in language use? Through an investigation on social gender represented in Chinese pronouns, this question will be discussed with details later.

### *1.2 Social Gender*

Insights from the biosciences suggest that a continuum would be a must more adequate characterization of gender diversity. Yet, everyday discourses of gender sketch it as a strictly binary category (female/male), neglecting inter-gender overlap and intra-gender diversity. Obviously, the binary relation between natural gender is far too more simplistic to explain the interrelationship between gender and language structure in any language. Linguistically speaking, talking about (whole) human bodies is mostly done by means of personal nouns and pronouns, which in turn often have acquired a gendered materiality (boy - girl, she - he; Butler, 2004). Identifying people with gendered personal reference forms does not only construct them as gendered. It also functions as a normative imperative urging people to perform their identities in established ways - ways that Butler calls-intelligible.

More sophisticated linguistic treatments of gender representation are necessary to describe gender construction through

universal linguistic categories to be found across language throughout the world, as indicated in Hellinger and Bußmann (2003). According to them, categories of gender include grammatical gender, lexical gender, referential gender and social gender as mechanisms of linguistic gender construction. They propose that these mechanisms provide linguists with descriptive tools to avoid essentializing statements on gender and its linguistic construction. A critical scrutiny of the 'binariness' of these descriptive categories will make them better equipped for the purpose of gender deconstruction. For example, Hellinger held the fact that lexically gender-neutral personal nouns like *nurse* and *farmer* (Hellinger, 1990, as cited in Motschenbacher 2010) are anything but completely gender-neutral is a matter of social gender. Whereas nurse is more likely to be perceived as female, farmer is biased towards the male (even though male nurses and female farmers exist). Phenomena like these are sometimes also called 'covert gender' (Hellinger, 2004, as cited in Motschenbacher 2010) because gendering in these cases cannot be deduced from the forms themselves, but surfaces only occasionally, for instance, when anaphoric pronouns refer to the personal nouns concerned in non-specific contexts (e.g. a nurse - she; a farmer - he) or when social gender has to be overcome through explicit opposite-gender marking (e.g. male model, woman doctor).

Specifically, social gender is a matter of entrenched social stereotypes that tie certain role scripts to women and men. These stereotypes can be very well established (as is the case of nurse and farmer), but they may also come in much weaker degrees of stereotypical association (teacher and doctor, for example, are less clearly socially gendered (Motschenbacher, 2010). Social gender, therefore, is not about directly indexing female or male, but about making a gendered interpretation more likely (indirect gender indexing; Ochs, 1992). Even languages with no grammatical gender and no gender distinctions in pronouns, such as Turkish (Braun, 2001), can therefore be a site of gender bias that, due to its covertness, is even more difficult to challenge than that in gender languages.

The conceptualization of gender as a strictly binary identity --- i.e. female and male seen as biologically based, mutually exclusive and monolithic categories --- is subjected to deconstruction. Deconstruction in this case aims at going beyond binary thinking (Bergvall, Bing, & Freed, 1996), exposing gender as a continuum of overlapping femininities and masculinities that are a result of social construction rather than biological predetermination. This goes hand in hand with an emphasis on intra-gender rather than inter-gender variation, an acknowledgement of identities as hybrid, locally negotiable, unstable and even contradictory, and an increasing skepticism towards essentializing statements of gender differences. Poststructuralist approaches such as Queer Linguistics take pains not to further entrench essentialist discourses of gender and sexual identity. In this respect, they contrast with approaches in the field of language and gender that take gender binarism as a starting point for their research. Queer Linguistics does not conceptualize language in a structuralist sense, i.e. as a system of signs which are conventionally regulated, but in principle arbitrary connections of a signifier and a signified. Instead what is widely known as the language system is viewed here as the result of processes of discursive materialization. How are gender categories represented and reified during such processes? How do masculinity and men, femininity and women connect in language use by language users? Based on a combined langue- and parole-oriented survey, this article examines the male-female binarism represented in language structural properties against the backdrop of strong social stereotypes and ascriptions about gender in complex association with biology.

## 2 Method

As stated above, social gender is a discursive materialization of the most traditional gender stereotypes. It is defined as a covert gender bias stereotypically attached to personal nouns. From a poststructuralist perspective, it would also make sense to apply it to lexically female or male personal nouns, allowing for the linguistic construction of diverse (more masculine or more feminine) femininities and masculinities. Earlier studies using semantic differentials to study connotative meanings in personal nouns clearly point to the fact that female and male occupational terms, for instance, may vary in the degree to which they are perceived as similar to woman and man, respectively - i.e. some professions may lead to the assignment of stereotypical masculine qualities to a female occupational term and vice versa (Hellinger 1990, as cited in Motschenbacher 2010).

## 3. The Data

In order to test this more specifically, an explorative survey is conducted at Northwest University for Nationalities in November 2014, in which students were asked to rate Chinese personal nouns with respect to whether they represent more feminine or more masculine femininities and masculinities. In total, 70 subjects took part in the survey, including 37 women and 33 men. All of them are juniors in their early twenties and from English major. The students were assigned a piece of paper with 30 Chinese personal nouns on it, including 15 lexically female nouns and 15 lexically male nouns. These personal nouns, either lexically female or male, are from two groups of common daily words. One includes kinship terms, such as 妈妈 (mom), 哥哥 (brother), etc., the other consists of personal nouns referring to different kinds of people, say, 女神 (goddess), 女汉子 (wo-man), 小鲜肉 (twink) and 大叔 (Dashu), which enjoy

great popularity with the help of internet, either in online forums like *Tianya*, *Renren* or on Friends' Blog of synchronous online communication tools such as *QQ*, *Wechat*. The subject were asked to rate these personal nouns on a scale from 1 (-strongly masculine.) to 7 (-strongly feminine.). More specifically, they were supposed to make judgments on the connection between what gender representation the words denote and what they expect in terms of sex stereotypes. In order to guarantee the efficiency of the data, the subjects are required to finish the questionnaire in 10 minutes without discussing with others. The aim is to find out how social gender is felt and rated by language users. Do women and men have same sex stereotypes for each gender? If they don't, how do they differ in rating being 'strongly masculine'? Or 'strongly feminine'? Does 爸爸 (dad) represents more masculinity than 花美男 (metrosexual)? Or does 妈妈 (mom) connect more closely with the sex stereotype of femininity than 萝莉(loli)? The results are shown respectively in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Social gender ratings for lexically female personal nouns

Personal nouns	Average rating (overall)*	Average rating (fe-/male subjects)
妈妈 (mom)	6.83	6.86/6.79
全职太太 (full time wife)	6.64	6.81/6.46
美眉 (pretty girl)	6.52	6.70/6.33
软妹 (soft sister)	6.39	6.57/6.21
女神 (goddess)	6.10	6.35/5.84
萝莉 (loli)	6.17	6.30/5.97
老婆 (wife)	6.35	6.22/6.48
白富美 (Baifumei)	5.93	5.73/6.12
美女 (beauty)	5.59	5.84/5.33
家庭妇女 (housewife)	5.58	5.27/5.88
御姐 (royal sister)	4.93	5.59/4.27
富婆 (rich lady)	4.16	4.08/4.24
剩女 (left-over lady)	4.13	3.76/4.50
大妈 (Dama)	2.89	2.86/2.91
女汉子 (wo-man)	2.59	2.45/2.72

\*N.B.: Index score 1 = 'strongly masculine'; Index score 7 = 'strongly feminine'.

Table 2. Social gender ratings for lexically male personal nouns

Personal nouns	Average rating (overall)*	Average rating (fe-/male subjects)
娘炮 (new half)	4.83	4.30 /5.33
小鲜肉 (twink)	4.56	4.51/4.61
花美男 (metrosexual)	4.03	3.82/4.24
暖男 (sunshine boy)	3.54	3.16/3.92
宅男 (homebody)	3.53	3.35/3.70
屌丝 (Diaosi)	3.25	3.38/3.12
高富帅 (Gaofushuai)	2.65	2.43 /2.87
男神 (god)	2.45	2.36/2.58
帅哥 (lady-killer)	2.41	1.30/3.51
哥哥 (brother)	2.26	1.16/3.36
先生 (mister)	2.25	1.38/3.12
大叔 (Dashu)	1.58	1.68/1.45
钻石男 (diamond man)	1.57	1.49/1.85
老公 (husband)	1.47	1.22/1.76
爸爸 (dad)	1.12	1.00 /1.24

\* N.B.: Index score 1 = 'strongly masculine'; Index score 7 = 'strongly feminine'.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Social Gender: Being Multiple and Fluid

While the terms *man* and *woman* can refer to definitions based on biological differences, the terms *masculine* and *feminine* are always about expected gender characteristics - what men and women are supposed to be like. While *man* and *woman* are nouns and therefore suggest people, *masculine* and *feminine* are adjectives and suggest qualities or attributes. So we could talk about masculine women and feminine men and be thinking about people who depart from the norm of what we consider appropriate for each sex, just as how Chinese young people comment on women these days, i.e. there are only two kinds of women, one is of masculine quality with a feminine outlook, the other feminine heart with a masculine appearance.

What we obtain from the survey is an interesting illustration of how gender is represented in language and how it sediments in daily words. First, the variance of scores in each of the table shows that gender manifests itself as a continuum of overlapping femininities and masculinities rather than biological predetermination. For example, 娘炮 (new half) is rated as the most feminine in the male personal nouns with the score of 4.83, which is even higher than 女汉子 (wo-man), being scored 2059. This interestingly shows that for language users, 娘炮 (new half) conveys more femininity than 女汉子 (wo-man) and is closer to the pole of 'strongly femininity'. Additionally, different ratings of lexically same-sex personal nouns are good examples showing that gender is not fixed but in a state of flux. We can see that the variance within same gender groups is dramatic. The highest difference of overall score in Table 1 is 4.24, with 妈妈 (mom) being more -strongly Feminine than 女汉子 (wo-man); while in Table 2, 娘炮 (new half) is rated as less -strongly masculine than 爸爸 (Dad) with a difference of 3.70.

### 4.2 Social Gender and Stereotypes

Social gender is categorized based on biological predetermination according to linguistic representation, which is deeply rooted in gender binarism where sex stereotypes are rooted. Language speakers connect personal nouns with sex association in an either-this-or-that way, but this does not mean that they are not aware of the overlap or the non-exclusively mutual feature of gender. Although gendering in these cases cannot be deduced from the words themselves, language users make judgments of indexed gendered identity almost all the time. As indicated from the results, the subjects have made quite different judgments on connections between man and masculinity, woman and femininity, which not only indicates that gender representation in language system is the result of processes of discursive materialization, but also provides a clear clue for further research on the use of sex stereotype in the interrelation between gender and language.

A quick interview was followed after the calculation of the scores was done. Two thirds of the subjects which were randomly chosen were asked of two questions: 1) Why do you rate ... higher than ...? 2) How do you see the difference between... and ...? They gave brief replies to the question as required, mostly only with several adjectives or very short comments.

As for the standard of femininity, adjectives used most often by the female subjects are gentle, sweet, and weak; while male students gave a list of pretty, sexy, and sweet. It is obvious that physical appearance plays an important role for men to make a decision on the degree of femininity of a woman. At the same time, the interpretations of being masculine given by the subjects are almost the same, with modifiers as strong, brave, and generous with the highest frequency. Concerning to the disagreements on social gender of female personal nouns, i.e. 御姐 (royal sister) and 剩女 (left-over lady), male students said that 御姐 (royal sister) represented assertive, aggressive and harsh women, which was against a traditional sex stereotype of a feminine woman is weak, beautiful, sweet, gentle and calm, and could be described as-feminine at all. But for female students, this image was full of intelligence, energy and talent, who could handle a lot of hard problems in the society and was treated by some female subjects as their role model, being beautiful and bright at the same time. In the case of 剩女 (left-over lady), women rated it lower than men in terms of being -strongly feminine.. Some young women reported that being left over was a big failure for a woman and 剩女 (left-over lady) was lack of the most important feature of being a woman, that is, femininity. But young men said 剩女 (left-over lady) was "better" than 御姐 (royal sister) --- by saying "better" they mean more feminine --- because the former was less harsh, less controlling, and easier to get along with than the latter.

As to the disagreements on male personal nouns, young women claimed that 娘炮 (new half) was very effeminate, but 先生 (sir) and 帅哥 (lady-killer) were "ok" in terms of masculinity. However, male subjects felt that these nouns, especially 娘炮 (new half), represented sissy men who were weak, caring too much on their outlook and having interest in things that girls like, who did not correspond to a traditional and classical identity of the macho man with physical prowess and violence. Some of the male students even used comments like/I know they are impotent even without a second thought when they were asked to make it more clear by saying such men are "sissy". Another point shown from such heavy discrepancy in male personal nouns is a fact that our society is more tolerant towards females

whose behavior deviates from their norms than males from theirs, as discussed and confirmed in some other language and gender research (Cameron, 2009; Bucholtz, 2003). A special case is 哥哥 (brother). Men treat it as a very feminine one at the first sight because it is a popular homosexual term in gay men's circle. However, this sense of the noun does not hit upon most of the young women in the survey (which does not mean these women do not know this sense of the noun, as in a longer talk after the quick interview they admitted it was just that sense of the noun 哥哥 (brother) did not come to mind at the moment of rating).

Interestingly, while 爸爸 (dad) gets the rating score from female subjects of 1.00 as strongly masculine, 妈妈 (mom) doesn't get the opposite score of 7 as-strongly feminine from either group of subjects. Instead, it gets an overall rating of 6.83, which indicates that 妈妈 (mom) is perceived as having more elements of the other gender than 爸爸 (dad) does. When female subjects were asked about the different positions of 妈妈 (mom) and 爸爸 (dad) on the scale, with 爸爸 (dad) rated as strongly masculine while 妈妈 (mom) as not so strongly feminine. Some women reported that their moms sometimes were very controlling, strong-minded, mannish, which were definitely categorized as qualities suitable for a man rather than a woman. On the contrary, dads are described as always being very manly, rational and tolerant. Even when dads sometimes behave carefully and sensitively which are classified as typical qualities for a woman (Lips, 2005), they are regarded as a kind of a new good man by some female subjects rather than being feminine.

## 5. Conclusion

As is shown in the survey, social gender represented in personal nouns is entrenched by social stereotyping, i.e. tying certain role scripts to women and men. And an implication of stereotyping two groups as polar opposites is that any movement away from the stereotype of one group is, by definition, a movement toward that of the other group. The subjects gave ratings based on their perception of sex stereotypes in Chinese language and culture (Sun, 1997), which is supportive of binary gender categorization. A man who acts less violent than the male stereotype is seen not only as less masculine but as more feminine; a woman who acts less gentle than the female stereotype is viewed not only as less feminine but as more masculine. Although the interview data show that sex expectations of being masculine or feminine do not exactly correspond to what we described in section 2, there is still a strong inclination for language users to classify personal nouns into two categories based on biologically-determined sex expectations.

The ratings of personal nouns in the two tables help in making at least two points clear. First, there is an inconsistency between linguistic units and gender representation. Lexically female words do not refer to a same group of women with same degree of femininity, nor do lexically male words stand for same kind of men with same amount of masculinity. The inconsistency between gender representation in language and its conceptualization in speakers' mind is compromised through sex stereotypes. Second, variances within same-sex group as shown from the lists of rating scores indicate that Chinese lexically female and male personal nouns can be perceived more socially gendered than they appear to be. In order to find out how such a covert gender works in language use, more systematic research on intra-gender variance is needed, with an aim of providing a more holistic picture of our understanding of what gender is and does in our interactions.

The deconstruction of social gender indicates that language use does not help setting up the perspective of what constructivists and poststructuralists argue about gender, i.e. as a continuum instead of binary, stable opposition. Instead, language system has entrenched the binary perspective as the result of processes of discursive materialization. Polarized gender categories are constructed and materialized from every trace of our talking, behaving and negotiating, or more specifically, from our every choice of what kind of a gender to do, to show, to perform to others in a certain situation. Gender representation in language system, through times of materialization processes, results in gender conceptualization as a kind of a normativity, which forms a part of the culture and exerts its power on sex stereotyping. It is in such a process that language affects gender performance and construction. It is also from here that the interactions between gender and language have been discussed during the Third Feminism (Although the theory of three waves of Feminism have been challenged since the first decade of this century, this concept is used here to refer to periods and trends of development in language and gender research as a convenience). Such processes cannot be elicited or researched comprehensively by a pure structuralist or poststructuralist perspective.

This study certainly has its limitations. Only a small amount of personal nouns are examined in the survey. And it concentrates on a rather restricted, homogeneous group of subjects that cannot be considered representative of the Chinese speech community. Nevertheless, the study points to the fact that gender representation leads to the materialization of certain gender categorization as a result of repeated linguistic performances, which have entrenched the binary perspective of gender, with Chinese as a research language. Further studies are needed, especially ones that are based on Chinese language and Chinese context. More importantly, issues discussed above require analyses with combined langue- and parole-oriented research methods, for such a combined approach of a structuralist relying on stable linguistic categories and a poststructuralist skepticism will lead to more productive research results on the complexities of interrelationship between gender and language.

## Notes

1. *Baifumei* literally means white, rich and beautiful girls, which is sometimes translated into in English as Paris Hilton. *Gaofushuai* means high, rich and handsome guys, similar to golden spoon, blue blood in English. Both of the two words refer to those who were born as princess and prince. On the contrary, *Diaosi* represents one who is not so rich, not so handsome, not so lucky, having similar meaning as English words like loser or nobody, with a color of self-mockery.

2. *Dama* literally refers to a woman who is above fifty years old and very experienced in running a family. Going to farmers market in the morning, taking care of

grandchildren at daytime, attending Public Square Dance as exercises in the evening

are thought as regular activities for *Dama*.

3. *Dashu* is a newly popular personal noun referring a middle-aged, experienced, charming man who cares about his outlook, keeps in tune with fashion, and knows well how to make himself desirable and how to take good care of women. Since *uncle* definitely cannot convey such denotation, *Dashu* is used here in the same way as in the last two cases.

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