

Analysing Different Dimensions of the Lexical Meaning of "Xian Sheng" from the Textual Corpus of the Republic of China

Diya Mo *

College of Literature and Journalism, Shangrao Normal University, Shangrao City, Jiangxi Province, 334001, China

* Corresponding Author Email: mdy19808038367@163.com

Abstract. Vocabulary is a reflection of social thought. As an appellation, the Chinese word "Xian Sheng" expresses the social relationship between people in different social states. The Republic of China period was a special era from 1912 to 1949; the feudal imperial system had just disappeared, so the referential object of "Xian Sheng" was then generalised. This paper focuses on the meaning of "Xian Sheng" in the textual corpus of the Republic of China period. It discusses the inheritance of the old meaning, the similarities and differences between the Chinese and Japanese meanings, and the emergence of the new meaning by applying comprehensive analysis and inductive comparison. It is concluded that while feudalism remains and democratic and scientific thinking prevails, interpersonal relations in the Republic of China tend to be equalised, and the status of women has been improved to a certain extent. This study of interpersonal relationships in China during the Republic of China will be conducted by analysing this vocabulary. At the same time, it will consider whether the term "Xian Sheng" still applies to women today.

Keywords: Xian Sheng, Appellation, Semantic Evolution, Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

The Chinese word "Xian Sheng", which includes the meaning "Mr.", has undergone semantic enrichment throughout evolving societal contexts. Even during the Republican era from 1912, while influenced by the Japanese language, "Xian Sheng" retained its original significance, yet its usage context underwent a transformation. This shift reflected the changing interactions between Chinese and foreign cultures as antiquated viewpoints gradually modernised, becoming more inclusive of women. Consequently, the application of "Xian Sheng" expanded to encompass both male and female figures, transcending its previous role as a status indicator to evolve into a universally affectionate form of address.

Prior research has examined the semantic evolution of "Xian Sheng," focusing primarily on nominalistic aspects and patterns of usage. Some studies have delved into its gender-specific connotations. However, the Republican period, a crucial juncture in China's shift from tradition to modernity, remains relatively unexplored regarding the term's usage. This era saw a critical reevaluation of traditional values in light of increased exposure to foreign cultures and ideas, shaping the term "Xian Sheng" and its enduring contemporary significance.

This study centers on the lexical implications of "Xian Sheng" within the Republican period corpus. By analysing this textual archive, we seek to unravel the semantic transformations of "Xian Sheng" within diverse contextual frameworks from 1912 to 1949.

2. Remnants of the traditional meaning

The Peking University corpus is a corpus based on large-scale Chinese texts, which is of great significance to studying Chinese texts as one of the important tools in linguistic research. According to it, "Xian Sheng" first appeared in the pre-Qin period [1]. During this period, "Xian Sheng" meant "born before me", "teacher" and also meant to represent the title of honour. "Xian Sheng" had more connotations of "the name and alias" in the Two Han and Tang-Song periods than in the pre-Qin period, but the rest of the meanings remained. By the Yuan Dynasty, "Xian Sheng" was also given

more the meaning of a "professional title". However, in the Republic of China, the meaning of "Xian Sheng" as "born before me" has faded away since this period [2]. This chapter will explore what traditional meanings of "Xian Sheng" were retained in the Republican period and why they were retained.

2.1. The Meaning of geomantic omen and fortune-telling

In the past, the title "Xian Sheng" referred to the professions of fortune-telling, medicine, storytelling, practicing geomancy, and more. The two most frequently employed names were "fortune-teller" and "geomancer," which first emerged in the Yuan Dynasty and the period of Ming and Qing Dynasty. With closer examination, these traditional meanings were still preserved in the textual corpus of the Republic of China period.

For example, "Suan Ming Xian Sheng (the one who works as a fortune teller)" and "Feng Shui Xian Sheng (the one who works as a geomancer)" in the famous writer Lao She's work "Four Generations under One Roof" in 1944, and Lin Yutang's work "The Smoke and Clouds of Beijing" in 1938 are the names for those who take fortune-telling and practice geomancy as their profession. They know how to tell one's fortune by reading his face and divine using the trigrams so that people longing for a better life can have sustenance. Additionally, "Chai Zi Xian Sheng (someone who works as a typical kind of fortune teller)" also made an appearance in contemporary writers Xu Zheshen's "Three Great Heroes of the Qing Dynasty" novel, referring to people who demolish words as a profession, which is also sort of an extension of the meaning of practicing geomancy and fortune-telling. Character dismantling, also known as "character measurement", is a unique Chinese folkloric practice that involves adding or subtracting strokes or disassembling radicals from Chinese characters to make predictions about the fortune or misfortune of people and events. "Chai Zi Xian Sheng" often breaks a word into several words and interprets them differently. He will say different things to different people, so there is a certain degree of subjectivity and superstition.

In the corpus of the Republic of China texts, "Xian Sheng" still retains the meaning of geomantic omen and fortune-telling in the old days. Moreover, the reason why this meaning was preserved is that in ancient times, the readers practicing what they learned and caring about national affairs had high social status in the eyes of the people around them. Hence, the ancients collectively called these learned and cultured people "Xian Sheng". These people who can tell fortunes and practice geomancy also belong to the cultured people with knowledge. Hence, their prestige in society is also very high, so they are honored by the people as Suan Ming Xian Sheng or Feng Shui Xian Sheng. Moreover, although the feudal society in China ended during the Republic of China, such things with feudal superstitious colors were still retained due to the deep-rooted feudal superstition of the Republic of China, and people still put their hopes on divination, fortune-telling, and other illusory things, so such names still exist. Indeed, on the one hand, we can quickly and accurately judge their occupation through this kind of name. On the other hand, it shows the speaker's respect for those who make a living from these professions with a positive overtone [3]. Please note that the first paragraph of a section or subsection is not indented. The first paragraphs that follows a table, figure, equation etc. does not have an indent, either.

2.2. The meaning of the name and alias

The name and alias refer to names and nicknames. Through the combination of "the name and alias" and "Xian Sheng", users can show the characters' basic characteristics and respect for the referrer [4]. In the textual corpus of the Republic of China, the proportion of "Xian Sheng" in the meaning of "the name and alias" is not very large.

There are aliases based on the meaning of the characters in a person's name. For example, the famous writer Lu Xun called Shou Zhulin "Shou Zhulin Xian Sheng (Mr. Shou Zhuli)", whose name is Pengfei, and the style name is Zhulin in "The Morning and Evening Come and Go". Moreover, the author Xiao Hong uses the word "Lu Xun (Mr. Lu Xun)", the pen name Zhou Shuren used in 1918 when he published Diary of a Madman, which is also the most widely used pen name, together with

the word "Xian Sheng" in "Tales of Hulan River", reflecting her deep gratitude and nostalgia for "Lu Xun Xian Sheng". In addition to aliases and pen names, epithets are formed according to the character's traits. For example, Xiao Hong called the teacher "Ma Zilian Xian Sheng (Mr. Ma Zilian)" according to his facial features. The term "Ma Zilian" refers to people who were left with pits the size of sesame seeds on their faces after recovering from smallpox infection were therefore called pockmarked faces. In "Three Great Heroes of the Qing Dynasty", there is also the name "Gu Dong Xian Sheng (Mr. Gu Dong)", which refers to a person who is not in line with the trend of the times and who is stubborn in his thinking. The term "Gu Dong Xian Sheng" is used here to represent "He Ruilin Xian Sheng (Mr. He Ruilin)" to show his stubborn and old-fashioned character traits.

Since the meaning of the name is metonymy based on "His Holiness said" to "the name and alias", this meaning also survived in the textual corpus of the Republic of China period to express respect for people.

To sum up, the word "Xian Sheng" still retains the meaning of "geomantic omen and fortune-telling" and "the name and alias" in the textual works of the Republican period. Its residual situation also reflects the social status quo and people's ideology.

3. The intersection and departure of the meaning used in Japan

As seen in Chinese and Japanese documents from the Qing Dynasty, Toyo refers to Japan. Since ancient times, China has been exchanged frequently with Japan. However, there are still major cultural differences between the two countries. Not only is the usage of "Xian Sheng" different between Chinese and Japanese, but the frequency of use and the target audience are also diverse. With the development of Western learning and Japan's transformation in modern times, Chinese scholars thoroughly publicised modern Japanese cultural thought and translated many Japanese literary works.

3.1. Homogeneity in address

Since "Xian Sheng" in Japanese was imported from Chinese nouns, it also borrowed the character shapes and meanings of the Chinese characters. The usage of "Xian Sheng" in both languages is similar. Therefore, they referred to teachers and doctors as "Xian Sheng". Ba Jin wrote in his work *Home*, "If 'Zhu Xin Sheng' hadn't reminded you, I am afraid you would not have finished memorising." This "Zhu Xian Sheng" refers to the teacher Zhu. From this, there are similarities in using "Xian Sheng" in Chinese and Japanese. In addition, teachers address each other as "Xian Sheng" without considering seniority and inferiority [5].

3.2. Differences in usage

Japan emphasises the order of seniority and inferiority. In the meanwhile, the Japanese word "Xian Sheng" is an honorific term. Therefore, this word is a term of respect for a person who has a high status. A professor or associate professor is referred to as "Xian Sheng". However, a professor's assistant or someone not directly involved in teaching activities can only be called a "San" [6].

This notion of difference in terms of address was imported into China and gradually evolved into a symbol of high or low status. In this case, the Chinese believed that only high-status people were worthy of the "Xian Sheng" title. As a result, a new fashion emerged in the Republican period. One such scene was depicted in *Philosophy of Lao Zhang* written by Lao She: "Don't call me teacher, please call me Xian Sheng". Lao Zhang, in the corpus, was a teacher who asked his students to address him as "Xian Sheng" rather than "teacher". This shows that the people at that time were influenced by Japanese culture and incorporated the semantics of "Xian Sheng" with the meaning of Orientalism. In fact, the Republic of China already had the moniker of the teacher to refer to "Xian Sheng". Moreover, "Xian Sheng" was a very honorable title in Japanese. "Xian Sheng", as a title, serves a social and emotional function. It reflects the speaker's respect for the addressee [7]. The general public also considered those called "Xian Sheng" to be of higher status. Thus, the title "Xian Sheng", used for teachers in ancient times, became a status symbol in the Republican period. People began to

blindly pursue this new designation to demonstrate their new identities and ideas, which led to a sense of accomplishment.

Compared to Japan, the term "Xian Sheng" was used and applied to a wider range of people in Chinese society. In Republican China, one could call everybody at a society event "Xian Sheng". There was no need to consider the occupation, status, position, or even the specific age or marital status of the party being addressed. Diary of a Madman, written by Lu Xun, mentioned calling foreigners "Yang Xian Sheng". The reason for calling the Yankees "Yan Xian Sheng" here was that it felt inappropriate to address them directly as Yankees. That is why addressing each other as "Xian Sheng" was not rude.

The exchange and fusion of the term "Xian Sheng" with "the meaning used in Japan" reflects the critique and reflection on traditional culture by ordinary people and scholars during the Republican period. They tried their best to absorb the advanced parts of Japanese culture to change their country's backwards thinking. However, awakening the public's thinking has made them more rational regarding foreign cultures. They innovated on their own, thus extending the lexical connotations of the word precursors.

To sum up, the Chinese word "Xian Sheng" had a similar meaning to the Japanese word during the Republic of China period but evolved under the trend of the times.

4. "Xian Sheng" in modern language

4.1. The modern meaning of the term "Xian Sheng" in the Republic of China Period

4.1.1 The emergence of the meaning of female honorifics

After the establishment of the Republic of China, Western thought played a certain impact on traditional Chinese feudalism. The introduction of feminist ideas led to more and more women pursuing progress, while the demise of the feudal imperial system gave more and more women the opportunity to receive education and creativity. As a result, the term "Xian Sheng" was gradually expanded from a male-only title to include women with a certain political status, cultural background, or achievements in a certain field. The use of the word "Xian Sheng" twice in Mao Zedong's letter to Soong Ching-ling in June 1949, beginning with the words "Ching-ling Xian Sheng (Madam Ching-ling)", shows the solemnity of the invitation, and the subsequent phrase "Welcome Xian Sheng to the north" expresses the respect for Soong Ching-ling.

In addition to political figures such as Soong Ching-ling, other prominent women of the same era were referred to as "Xian Sheng", such as Xu Guangping, Bing Xin, and Yang Jiang. It can be seen that the use of the term "Xian Sheng" has broken through traditional constraints and gained wider recognition [8]. Its root comes from the improvement of women's status. It demonstrates the recognition of women's achievements in the Republican society, ignoring their female identity but emphasising their achievements and showing respect and commendation by giving women male honorifics. Although women's usage of "Xian Sheng" is far less common than men's, it is still a great breakthrough in language usage.

4.1.2 Generalisation of the meaning of male honorifics

The term "Xian Sheng" in the Republic of China period was generalised by the gradual evolution of the meaning of its honorific title. Its meaning gradually became more and more conventional and gradually evolved into a mainstream term of address. In 2022, according to the BBC corpus, the word "Xian Sheng" was used more frequently in the Republic of China than in other periods. At the same time, the emotional tendency of the collected corpus was measured by the CUCsas system. The results show that the affective tendency value is +0.41, and the corpus with "Xian Sheng" shows strong positive respect and is mostly used in more formal situations [9].

The polite address is an important part of human social interaction and a reflection of social culture. The Republican period was a transition period in Chinese society, and its social structure and cultural background were undergoing major changes. It was not completely separated from feudalism but was

subject to the collision and impact of different ideas. Therefore, the meaning of "Xian Sheng", which means to honour a noble person, did not waver. With the development of the New Culture Movement in 1919, the ideas of democracy and science spread rapidly. The ideas of "Democracy Xian Sheng (Mr. De-)" and "Science Xian Sheng (Mr. Sci-)" were widely reflected in the texts as core ideas. At the same time, the vernacular language movement promoted the flourishing of two-syllable vocabulary. The use of monosyllabic words such as "Lang" and "Jun" (both words traditionally used to honour men) gradually declined, while "Xian Sheng" was more widely used, becoming a general term of endearment for men.

For example, in Lu Xun's work, *Hair Story*, it is written that "N Xian Sheng" was originally ill-tempered and was often unnecessarily angry and said things that did not make sense in the world. The N here is the senior of the main character, with a certain status, and the use of "Xian Sheng" shows respect. However, it is only used once in the whole text, while "N" is used later, such as "N suddenly smiled" and "N looked at the beams of the roof and seemed to be thinking about something". From this, readers can see that "Xian Sheng" here does not belong to the strict personal name but is a polite name that can be added or subtracted, with a certain colour of power. In his "Sudden Thoughts - XI", character A directly addresses B as "Xian Sheng", where A and B are not superior, subordinate, or seniors, but only in the communication process. Here, A and B are not in a superior-subordinate or senior-subordinate position but are merely engaged in a process of communication. "Xian Sheng" here has a much lighter flavour of honorific title and is used only as a term of endearment in the men's daily conversations. In his "Evaluation of the heart carved dragon", "I am not in favour of Geng Xian Sheng, I have also criticised him" can also be seen in respect for the reverence of the diminished emotional colour.

In "The Ricksha Boy", Lao She wrote: "Only this Zhang Ma has been with them for five or six years, the only reason is that she dared to swear, regardless of Xian Sheng and Tai Tai." [10] Here the first "Xian Sheng" is a typical use of traditional honorifics alongside "Tai Tai (the Mastress)" and has the meaning of "master" and "proprietor". The latter, "Yang Xian Sheng", uses "surname + Xian Sheng", which refers to the object of reference. The usage of "Cao Xian Sheng" and "Wang Xian Sheng" are also polite terms of address for men. For example, "Cao Xian Sheng is a socialist." "Zuo Xian Sheng knows people; people are stronger than the law." All of them use "surname + Xian Sheng" to refer to a male figure, avoiding the complexity and rudeness of calling him by his first name, and do not have the meaning of "teacher, fortune-teller, senior".

4.2. Causes and connotations of the modern meaning of the term "Xian Sheng" in the Republic of China period

Behind the generalisation of the meaning of the term "Xian Sheng" is a change in the national psyche. From the initial "born before me" to its later usage in various ways, "Xian Sheng" as a term of address has been expanding in its scope of application, reflecting the equalisation of status between human beings. Vocabulary reflects the social environment, from the exclusive name in the feudal system to the general polite address in the Republican period, showing the progress of the times.

At the same time, the entry of women into the scope of application of the term "Xian Sheng" reflects the improvement of the status of women in the Republic of China. In other words, women were no longer treated uniformly but were chosen for their excellence and given a male-only title of honour. Being "awarded" the title of "Xian Sheng" was a recognition of a woman's personal achievements. This was a huge breakthrough in the social conditions of the time, as women broke through the stereotype and moved from the backyard to the study and laboratory, gaining social recognition and praise. However, it should be noted that this increase in meaning was also a sign of inequality between men and women. The overlap between the general term for men and the high praise for women undermines the equality and distinction of the words. Zhou Youguang once discussed this issue, stating clearly that it is inappropriate for a woman to be called "Xian Sheng", believing it would cause confusion between the genders [11]. The universalisation of the term "Xian Sheng" as an honorific title for men demonstrated the equalisation of men within men, while the

awarding of the title "Xian Sheng" to exceptional women demonstrated the subconsciousness of naturally placing women in a lower class. Vocabulary can be sensitive to the characteristics of the times, recording the social conditions and reflecting the general state of mind of the people. Therefore, the use of "Xian Sheng" to honour women is not wrong in the context of the pursuit of progress and emancipation during the Republic of China and shows the recognition and care of society for outstanding women, but whether it is appropriate to continue to use this term nowadays is a social topic that deserves to be explored in depth.

5. Conclusion

Through the research, this paper finds that the term "Xian Sheng" still retained the meanings of "geomantic omen and fortune-telling" and "the name and alias" in the past during the Republican period. During this period, it was innovated independently based on the Japanese language, thus extending the connotation of "Xian Sheng", eventually producing the modern meaning that continues today. Therefore, the researchers believe that this can be possibly explained by the fact that the meaning of the word "Xian Sheng" in the textual corpus of the Republican period embodies the nature of tradition, difference and modernity due to the remnants of the traditional thought, the spread of the Japanese modern cultural thought and the Western democratic and scientific thought. This paper specifically composes and analyses the meanings of "Xian Sheng" in the corpus of Republican texts from various angles and expounds and explains the causes of the residual old meanings and new meanings to provide a certain reference for the future study of the use of "Xian Sheng" in the Republican period. However, this paper lacks systematic statistics on using "Xian Sheng" in the corpus; in addition, the analysis of its causes is not very comprehensive and profound. In the future, conducting statistical data and a more detailed analysis of the causes of the corpus usage for in-depth research is worthwhile.

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