

Research on the use of address terms in the past four decades, beginning with the classic study of Brown and Gilman (1960), has focused on the social dimensions of address terms, primarily, on issues of solidarity, power, and formality. Many studies on address terms in contexts of social-political changes tend to examine change in address terms as caused by and reflecting societal changes. Except for a few studies (e.g., Scotton and Zhu 1983), research on address terms in Chinese has taken a similar approach (Fang and Heng 1983; Wu 1990; Ju 1991), and there has been no published study on this topic since 1994 (Lee-Wong 1994). In the past three decades, China has been undergoing the transition from a state-controlled economy to a market-oriented economy. The commodifying forces of the market economy has fragmented the formerly socialist egalitarian society, giving rise to a socioeconomically more stratified society marked by new social distinctions. The present study examines use and change in address terms from a new perspective. Rather than treating them as simply reflecting external social changes and indexing existing social relations, I examine change in address terms as integral to socioeconomic change and as a linguistic practice that effects (new) social distinctions.

The data are collected in Tianjin, China, using participant observation of spontaneous interactions between service/sales people and customers across a selected range of “sites of consumption” that cater to different (imagined) socioeconomic groups and lifestyles: restaurants (ranging from neighborhood diners to luxury gourmet restaurants), clothing and accessory stores (ranging from traditional state-run department stores to brand name boutiques), daily necessities/grocery stores (ranging from neighborhood open markets and convenient stores to upscale supermarkets).

Approximately 500 tokens of address terms are analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The number of each address term is correlated with the socioeconomic status of the site(s) where it is used and the social characteristics of the interlocutors. It is found that *tongzhi* ‘comrade,’ the most widely used term in the pre-reform era, has become obsolete and been replaced by terms that are status- and gender-specific, for instance, kinship terms, *fuwuyuan* ‘service person’, *xiansheng* ‘Mr.’, and *xiaojie* ‘Miss’. Detailed analysis of the imagined socioeconomic status of the site of consumption and the immediate discourse environment contextualize the quantitative analysis. It shows that service/sales people and customers choose various address terms to co-construct socioeconomically stratified spaces through interaction. Particularly, on the one hand, the use of a specific term that initiates an interaction effects the imagined socioeconomic status and lifestyle that the site caters to, and thus, constructs the consumer as a member of a certain socioeconomic group. On the other hand, cases of absence of address term from the service/sales people are found to be a strategy to exclude certain customers from the imagined group of legitimate consumers to whom the site caters. The study demonstrates that address terms play a crucial role in constructing these sites of consumption as productive spaces where new socioeconomic distinctions are produced.