

***Gender Differences in Spoken Chinese, or,  
How To Talk Like a Real Chinese Man***

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Everyone knows that the speech of women and men do not sound the same – a person generally can tell a male voice from a female's, and knows what constitutes "masculine" or "feminine" (or even "effeminate") speech. This relationship between language and gender is one that has been explored in increasing depth in the past thirty years, roughly starting with the women's movement. Since then, differences between male and female speech have been shown for many languages; Chinese is no exception. The influence of gender on spoken Chinese is complex and detailed, and serves as an interesting case study of a language, its culture, and those aspects of it relating to gender and speech.

This subject bears with it a personal interest of mine as a student of Mandarin Chinese. Since beginning studying Mandarin, it has happened to be the case that my teachers have all been women. Coupled with the fact that my main extracurricular Chinese influence (my mother, born in Taiwan) is also a woman, I have come to believe that this lack of a "masculine" influence has had an effect on my spoken Chinese accent. This idea, based on feedback received from Chinese native speakers, has led me to conduct this brief study of the linguistic differences between male and female speech so as to learn which parts of my accent are causing this perception, and mark them for possible future correction.

The role of women in Chinese culture is quite a broad subject and beyond the scope of this essay, but some generalizations and a brief summary can be made here for the purpose of establishing a cultural background. Imperial attitudes towards women come from the Confucian principles of women's inferiority to men. A woman had a sequence of men that it was her duty to obey: first, in childhood, her father; once married, her husband; and later, as a widower, her sons. Marriages were arranged, and upon marriage, a woman became her husband's property, moving into his ancestral home and becoming subsumed into his extended family. A woman's ways were indirect, quiet, and polite. A rather infamous illustration of this diminutive role was in the traditional binding of a woman's feet; the practice – reinforcing the place of the woman at home – continued until even the most recent Qing dynasty (for example, my great-grandmother had bound feet).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China instituted many reforms, legislating equal rights for women, eliminating arranged marriages, and encouraging women to become educated and take careers. Westernization has given way to similar reforms in areas outside the PRC (Hong Kong, Taiwan). Economic reform and prosperity has brought with it increased opportunity for female businesspeople and entrepreneurs.

However, thousands of years of cultural bias cannot be completely reversed in such short a time; the traditional roles of the woman as secondary to her husband, a

general preference for male leadership, and traditional responsibilities for women as child-bearers and homemakers still exist today. These societal gender roles are reflected in language, as we will see.

The differences between male and female speech span across all aspects of the Chinese language, including phonetics, phonology, lexicon, and syntax. We begin with phonetics, and the simple case of difference in pitch. Females of course have higher absolute pitch than males when speaking, due to shorter vocal tracts; however, phoneticians have studied a greater difference in pitch than can be explained by this anatomical gender difference, though these studies were not specifically in reference to Chinese speakers.

A feminine style of speaking characterized by high pitch (*sajiao*) will be discussed later, and further aspects of the “feminine accent” will be shown as having the effect of producing a higher pitch. Generally, a low, deep voice conveys masculine authority, while a high voice expresses feminine fragility. Cheng (1995) marks the male-female division of Chinese speakers at 150 Hz. With the aid of computerized speech analysis, I found my voice ranged from around 80 Hz to 140 Hz, centering around 100-110 Hz. Thus, so far I am safely within the “masculine” range.

One of the most important phonological aspects of the “feminine accent” is that of the production of palatal consonants as dental sibilants or more fronted palatals. This “fronting” of consonants is explored in depth by Hu (1991), who finds that young Beijing female students tend to pronounce palatal consonants when followed by the vowel /i/ as fronted palatals and dentals instead. Typical of this is pronouncing palatals [tX, tX', X] as dental sibilants [ts, ts', s]. Hu reports that such dentals are called “fragile” and “piercing” sounds in the traditional teachings of Chinese opera – and thus more womanly – while palatals are considered more “blunt” and manly.

Another possible reason for fronting these consonants is that of the idea that Chinese women should not talk with their mouths wide open. Hu attributes the shape of the mouth when pronouncing these dentals as owing to a societal requirement on women to have good manners and speak without opening their mouths too wide. Thus in an effort to do so, the tongue slips forward to help keep the mouth closed more. Chan (1998) points out that the fronted articulation also helps to produce a higher pitch, another feminine characteristic.

Hu’s exploration of this topic unearths other interesting social aspects of this accent, first being its correlation with age. Study subjects seemed to begin using dentalized consonants at puberty, continuing this use through early adult years, but then discontinuing its use in the mid 20’s. This evidence seems to show it as a gender-based sociolinguistic feature rather than a new dialectal feature for Beijingers in general. Second was the denial by study subjects of having any kind of feminine accent, or at some affected mode of speech in order to sound more “lovely” – all the subjects claimed to speak standard Chinese. Hu claims that this is due to the insidiousness of the social forces behind the accent.

As for my Mandarin accent, it woefully often produces dental or fronted palatal substitution where a palatal should be. This is partly due to a Taiwanese influence, which “fronts” many palatal consonants in a similar fashion – giving way to the perception by many speakers from the PRC to believe that Taiwanese men sound more effeminate

(Chan, 1998). This “lazy tongue,” as it is referred to, is quite an infectious habit and reining it in has been on the top of my list for reforming my speech for quite a while.

It is helpful to introduce a Chinese concept now – that of *niangniangqiang* (娘娘腔), or “womanish womanish speech.” It is used to scorn a speaker when he speaks with an accent that is unmanly – that is, high-pitched, thin, and generally characterized with feminine rather than masculine attributes. A man who uses the feminine attributes discussed in this essay could very likely be ridiculed as *niangniangqiang*.

Another important phonological difference is that of syllables beginning with the consonant /w/. One finds that women pronounce the /w/ not as labial [w] but often with the labiodental [ɸ]. This occurs both in Taiwan and Beijing, and through media influence and emulation is heard used in southern China and elsewhere. [ɸ] is found before syllables such as *wei*, *wan*, *weng*, but not syllables *wo*, and *wu*. This can be attributed to the fact that [ɸ] is produced with spread lips, as are the vowels succeeding it in *wei*, *wan*, *wen*, etc., but in words such as *wo* and *wu*, the vowels are produced with rounded lips, making using spread [ɸ] in place of rounded [w] less natural. [ɸ] in place of [w] is perceived as more feminine and is used by female news broadcasters – news broadcasters are more often female in China than in the US – in both Taiwan and the PRC, though it is also sometimes used by male broadcasters.

My accent does not contain the [ɸ] sound – the Chinese pinyin system contains no “v”, and I had never heard the consonant being used as an approximant for /w/ until recently, when watching a Taiwanese film. So luckily I have one less *niangniangqiang* strike against me.

Important to note is that using both of these allophones – the [ɸ] and the [ts, ts', s] group – have two effects. First is minimizing the mouth opening – the lips come closer together with [ɸ], rather than rounded and open with [w]; and in pronouncing [ts, ts', s], the tongue can come forward, allowing the mouth to close more. This closed mouth is preferred, as it is more ladylike to speak without opening one's mouth too much, or laughing too often. The second effect is raising the pitch of the voice – both allophones produce a higher acoustic pitch than their alternative allophones. And, once again, this is due to cultural reasons – females are to have higher-pitched voices than males.

The connection between female announcers and broadcasters, standardized pronunciation, and the PRC is an interesting one. Women have been noted to exhibit a clearer and more standardized pronunciation of Chinese than men in the PRC, and that female announcers with cleanly articulated speech are the norm. As mentioned earlier, this is also true in Taiwan, with a strict standard pronunciation (though different from Beijing standard Chinese) taught to broadcasters there. Chan postulates that this greater frequency of females using the standard pronunciation, the much smaller frequency of young men exhibiting standard pronunciation, may be because men with strong regional accents have never been barred from gaining authority because of their speech (taking as evidence the PRC's political leaders), and rather were proud of keeping their regional accent.

Next in our study of gender and Chinese phonology is the pronunciation style of *sajiao* (撒嬌), defined in my Concise Chinese-English Dictionary as “to act like a spoiled child,” and expounded upon by Farris as “the adorable petulance of a spoiled child or young woman who seeks material or immaterial benefit from an unwilling listener.” It is

a style that uses many of the aspects already discussed – dental sibilants in place of palatals; high, thin pitch – with others not yet discussed: nasal delivery; lengthening of vowels; less aspirated consonants in a baby-like fashion. The style is intrinsically gender-oriented, heard characteristically from children to their parents as well, but also from adult women to their boyfriends or spouses. In terms of my own Mandarin accent, I have never used the *sajiao* style.

We move on from phonology to study differences in the spoken lexicon of males and females in Chinese. First item of interest is that of sentence-final particles (SFP's), particles placed at the end of sentences that have no grammatical function, but instead serve to express the feelings of the speaker. Particles such as *ba*, *ma*, *ya*, *ne*, *la*, and *ye* are identified as more often used by women, and women have been observed as using SFP's more often than men. By adding an SFP, a softening affect is achieved, making a comment perhaps less harsh than it would have been without the SFP. This increased use of SFP's is explained as important because of the cultural expectation of the woman to be more indirect and polite. Along with SFP's, women also use interjections more than men, like the popular interjections *aiyo* and *aiya*.

My Mandarin accent features SFP's *a* and *ba* fairly often – as well as the interjection *aiya*, which I have taken to using extremely often. Though I have been informed by countless Chinese friends that “guys don't say *aiya*!” it has taken some time getting used to this. Unfortunately, my knowledge of Chinese obscenities – which are typically inappropriate for women to speak, though it is accepted that men often do – is sadly spotty, cutting making my plans to find an *aiya* replacement short.

A very prominent example of a phrase used exclusively by women is that of the phrase *renjia* (人家, literally, “person family”) as a first-person pronoun in place of the general term *wo* (我, or “I”). Males never use the term *renjia* – unless in mimicking a woman deliberately – thus it carries with it an air of femininity that would be laughed at if a man attempted to use it. The term itself again is explained as owing to feminine expectations of indirectness. In my Mandarin lexicon, *renjia* has never appeared.

Finally, we turn to syntactical differences between males and females in Chinese. Though not as dramatic as the phonological differences, gender-specific syntactic differences have been found in Chinese. The best example of such a difference is that of verb reduplication – that of repeating a verb several times, in order to describe a repeated or continuous action. Initial results show that women use reduplication significantly more than men – the analysis being similar to that for the rest of the gender differences, tying it to traditional traits sought in women of graciousness, using less direct or forceful sentences. Repeating the verb here is seen as having the effect of diluting a sentence's brashness or strength, desirable in a woman's speech.

So we have shown briefly the gender-based differences in spoken Chinese. Broad similarities can be drawn across all of them – chiefly that they reflect cultural attitudes and depictions of women as polite, indirect, and delicate. The phonetic, phonological, lexical, and syntactical differences all seem to center around making the female voice high-pitched, decidedly less forceful, thin, and indirect, while the masculine voice is deep, low, strong, blunt, and with authority. Upon discovery, such well-defined gender

differences seem easy enough to follow for someone wishing to change his accent; however, perhaps as cultural gender roles become more progressive, these differences will become less important, or less marked.

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