

The Usage of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in Contemporary Chinese: Synchronic Differences in Distribution and Possibilities for Diachronic Change

Hu Fanzhu * Fan Xiaoling **

Abstract: *xiǎojiě* (小姐, miss) is a popular form of address in contemporary Chinese; generally speaking, it is defined as a title for “unmarried girl”. This form has multiple connotations,. Given recent changes in society, some think that, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) will become a widely-used form of address, while others think that young females will come to consider the title repulsive. None can have the final say, this is because the synchronic language differences are not only the result of the synchronic change but also possibly its sign. Since synchronic differences could not only be a result of diachronic change but also could herald further change, it is not clear what direction *xiǎojiě* (小姐) will take. In the language conflicts, When two language varieties conflict, the more common variety usually influences the less common. A field investigation in large cities throughout China thus allows us not only to draw *A Distributional Map of Pragmatic Features of the Title xiǎojiě* (小姐), but also enables us to see its diachronic possibilities.

Key words: address, *xiǎojiě*, pragmatics, synchronic distribution, diachronic change

1. The focus of our discussion

In the contemporary use of Chinese language, especially since the opening and reform that began in the 1980's, *xiǎojiě* (小姐, miss) has been a very common title for girls. Chinese dictionaries usually define it as a “courtesy title of an unmarried girl.” Actually, the semantic meaning is not limited to this; because of the drastic changes in social life, there appear to be increasingly large differences between people in understanding the meaning of the word. Some believe that, given current social changes, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) as a general courtesy title for females will be increasingly used, while others believe that with life style changes, especially with the growth of sexual services, *xiǎojiě* (小姐), often used

* Hu Fanzhu: College of International Chinese Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200062, China. E-mail: hufanzhu@21cn.com.

** Fan Xiaoling: College of International Chinese Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai, 200062. E-mail: aimee.fan@126.com.

to refer to a female “sexual provider”, will lead to Chinese young females no longer accepting it as a common courtesy title, and believe that the title will disappear from the Chinese language. Some even suggest a substitute for a common courtesy title for young females (Zhao Li, et al., 2002). There is no final agreement.

Can *xiǎojiě* (小姐) at present be accepted as a common courtesy title? Will it be abandoned in social life because the appearance of bar girls? Although these views can be verified with language facts, these “facts” up till now have basically come from individual experience, without the support of wide-range investigations of the language in use.

Diachronic language development is closely related to the synchronic state, and terms of address are no exceptions. To have a clearer picture of the diachronic development of this title, we should know more accurately its synchronic state in use throughout China, on the basis of field investigations to draw “a map of the language in life”. If we want to draw a map of “Distribution of the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in Use”, we should first have a holistic understanding of the main semantic connotations and the pragmatic conditions of the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in contemporary Chinese.

2. Semantic connotations and pragmatic conditions of the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in contemporary Chinese

In contemporary Chinese, as a courtesy title, the semantic meanings of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is manifold:

xiǎojiě (小姐)₁, as a common “courtesy title to young females”, a match for “mister”, is a commonly accepted meaning. Because of contact with western languages and culture, English “miss” has been accepted into the Chinese language. At first it was transliterated as “misi” (密斯) and then as “xiǎo jiě” (young sister). As a match for “mister”, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in contemporary Chinese totally matches the denotation of “miss” in the west, for

(1) It can mean that an “unmarried female” with no limitation for age, even the addressee is already seventy or eighty years old, for instance, “Zhāng xiǎojiě yǐjīng qīshí duō suì le, érqǐ shēntǐ yě bù hǎo (张小姐已经七十多了,而且身体也不好。 / *Miss Zhang is already over seventy years old and not in good health*)”.

(2) It can refer to a young or looking young female without consideration of marriage,, even if the addressee is known as a married female, for instance, “Zhāng xiānsheng, nǐ de tàitai shì Liú xiǎojiě ba ? (张先生,你的太太是刘小姐吧? / *Mr. Zhang, is your wife is Miss Liu?*)”

Of course, a typical *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is not only “unmarried” but also “young”. As a common title, its pragmatic features are:

(1) It can be used as a form of address, for instance, “Xiǎojiě, dǎrǎo yíxià, qǐngwèn xiànzài jǐdiǎn le ? (小姐,打扰一下,请问现在几点了? / *Excuse me, miss, what is the time,*

please?)” This use occurs usually in meeting with a stranger to show courtesy or politeness.

(2) In another similar form address, a surname is added before the word, for instance, “surname + *xiǎojiě*”, for instance, “Zhāng xiǎojiě, diànhuà! (张女士, 电话! / Miss Zhang, a phone call!)” “Wáng xiǎojiě, zǎo’ān! (王小姐, 早安! / Miss Wang, Good morning!)”

On this occasion, the addressee is usually a familiar female, or in media for the sake of someone’s anonymity, people usually only speak out the surname without her name, that is, “surname + *xiǎojiě* (小姐)”.

(3) As a form of third person reference, a surname is followed by *xiǎojiě* (小姐), that is, “surname + *xiǎojiě* (小姐)”, for instance, “Hǎiwài jīngjù piàoyǒu zhī qípā——Jì jiānádà jīngjù míngpiào Wǔ Xiùzhōng xiǎojiě (海外京剧票友之奇葩——记加拿大京剧名票伍秀中小姐 / a unique overseas amateur performer of Peking opera—Miss Wu Xiuzhong, the famous Canadian Peking opera amateur performer)”. Usually, the address in this way indicates a more unfamiliar respectfulness.

(4) Profession + *xiǎojiě* (小姐), for instances, “Hùshì xiǎojiě (护士小姐, Miss Nurse)”, “Dǎoyóu xiǎojiě (导游小姐, Miss Tourist Guide)”, “Lǐyí xiǎojiě (礼仪小姐, ritual girl)” and so on, but, not all professions can be added with a *xiǎojiě* (小姐), for instance, teachers, as more serious professionals, can not be addressed as “Jiàoshī xiǎojiě (教师小姐, Miss Teacher)”.

***Xiǎojiě* (小姐)₂**: a form of address for kinship, it refers to “an old form of address for young girls in the old wealthy and official families”, a match for “shàoye (少爷, young master)”, this meaning comes down from early modern Chinese. Its pragmatic features are:

(1) A number can be added before the word to indicate seniority between sisters and position, for instance, Dà xiǎojiě (大小姐, the first miss), èr xiǎojiě (二小姐, the second miss), sān xiǎojiě (三小姐, the third miss), and so on.

(2) A clan surname as a marker can be added before the word to indicate “Nǎ jiā de xiǎojiě (哪家的小姐, a miss from which family)”, for instance: “Wáng jiā xiǎojiě (王家小姐, a miss from Wang Family)”.

(3) A surname and seniority can be added at the same time to the word, for instance: “Zhào sì xiǎojiě (赵四小姐, The fourth miss from Zhao Family)”.

This meaning is now rarely used as the result of social change, and it is usually only used in the literary works that describe the old times. It can also be used as an adjective to describe a behavior or personality (finickiness, willfulness and so on) of a female (or a kind of females), for instance, *xiǎojiě píqì* (小姐脾气, a girlish temper).

***Xiǎojiě* (小姐)₃**: “The best female winner, or the title for a winner in the beauty contest.” This meaning is more often used in the media. But the word in use must have a modifier, for instance, “Shìjiè xiǎojiě (世界小姐, Miss World)”, “Jījiàn xiǎojiě (击剑小姐, Miss

Fencing)” and so on. This meaning item has the tendency to become a proper noun.

xiǎojiě (小姐)₄: A title for a relative in a family, “the youngest elder sister” (Xu Baohua, Miyata Ichiro, 1999). This sense is mainly used in regional dialects. For instance, in the official language between the areas of the Changjiang (Yangzi) River and the Huai River, the youngest elder sister, e. g., the second sister, is so addressed in relation with the eldest sister.

xiǎojiě (小姐)₅: A social title, especially for “a female in professional sex service”. In recent years, because of the development of service industries, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in some places is used only to address prostitutes. Because of the spread of sex services, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) can also be used as a title for “a bar girl”. At the same time, in grammar, there appears a new form, for instance, “Tā shì zuò xiǎojiě de (她是做‘小姐’的, *She is in a profession of ‘miss’*)”. This meaning is closely related with euphemism. At the beginning, calling a female providing sexual service as *xiǎojiě* (小姐) was euphemistic, but the mass media’s description of such females in the special service pushed the development of the special meanings of the word *xiǎojiě* (小姐). Thus a sense of “sexual service provider” was established for *xiǎojiě* (小姐).

3. The geographic distributional investigation of “xiǎojiě (小姐)” in use in contemporary Chinese

The title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) covers many senses. Of these, *xiǎojiě* (小姐)₂ was mainly used in old times, *xiǎojiě* (小姐)₃ can not be used alone, *xiǎojiě* (小姐)₄ is dialectal; that leaves *xiǎojiě* (小姐)₁ and *xiǎojiě* (小姐)₅ as the titles currently used commonly in social activity. The addressees they refer to are widely different in social status. In terms of connotation, they can be divided into two kinds: the first four items (except item 2 sometimes used in derision) are used often in respect, while item 5 is not a title of respect but of euphemism. The two kinds form a strong contrast. Are these items of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) used in the same way in different areas throughout China? How many people still think that *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is “a title of respect”? Or are there differences between different areas in identifying the meanings? If there are differences, what are they in use? Might these differences influence the use of this title in the future?

With these questions in mind, we took the initiative to make a field investigation in large cities throughout China about the use of the title.

This investigation took half a year from April to September in 2003, covering the capitals of 24 provinces and some cities directly under the central government. The interviewees are people between 18-40 years old with educational background. The number of qualified samples is 240, 10 for each city. Three Questions are asked: (1) In your city, what does the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) firstly refer to? (2) Are Females in Your City Used to Being Addressed as a *xiǎojiě* (小姐)? Or do they Often Call Others *xiǎojiě* (小姐)? (3) On

What Occasions Can the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) Be Acceptable? The result is as follows:

Question One: In your city, what does the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) firstly refer to?

Table One: the First Meaning of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in Different Cities

Cities	1 st Denotation	Cities	1 st Denotation	Cities	1 st Denotation
Shenyang	40% [2] 40% [4]	Xi'an	40% [2] 20% [3][4][5]	Zhengzhou	50% [4] 40% [2]
Nanjing	90% [2] 10% [4]	Harbin	70% [2] 30% [4]	Taiyuan	40% [4] 30% [5]
Beijing	60% [4] 30% [2]	Lanzhou	40% [5] 30% [4]	Changsha	60% [3] 40% [4]
Shanghai	60% [3] 20% [2] 20% [4]	Chongqing	30% [2] 30% [5] 20% [4]	Tianjin	60% [2] 20% [3] 20% [4]
Nanchang	50% [2] 40% [4]	Fuzhou	50% [2] 50% [4]	Yinchuan	40% [5] 30% [4]
Urumqi	60% [2] 40% [4]	Nanning	60% [4] 40% [2]	Guiyang	40% [5] 30% [3]
Kunming	40% [5] 30% [3] 20% [4]	Changchun	40% [5] 30% [3]	Hefei	50% [5] 20% [2][3]
Hong Kong	100% [2]	Shijiazhuang	60% [2]	Huhhot	90% [4]

([1] means the youngest elder sister in the family; [2] a common female in social activity; [3] a female with some higher social status, [4] a female in a service enterprise; [5] a prostitute; [6] others)

Question Two: Are Females in Your City Used to Being Addressed as a *xiǎojiě* (小姐)? Or do they Often Call Others *xiǎojiě* (小姐)?

Table Two: The Habitual Use of the Title in Women of Different Cities

Locality	Lanzhou	Nanjing	Shenyang	Beijing	Chongqing	Nanchang	Yinchuan	Zhengzhou
Habitually being called	40% [3] 30% [2]	80% [1]	50% [2]	50% [4] 40% [2]	60% [4]	50% [2] 40% [4]	40% [5] 30% [4]	40% [1] 40% [2]
Habitually call	40% [3] 30% [2]	70% [1]	50% [2]	70% [4]	40% [4] 20% [3] 20% [2]	40% [1] 40% [2]	60% [3] 40% [2]	40% [2] 40% [3]
Locality	Huhhot	Changsha	Shanghai	Fuzhou	Guiyang	Nanning	Urumqi	Hefei
Habitually being called	50% [2] 40% [4]	60% [1]	80% [1]	60% [2]	20% [2] 20% [1]	50% [1] 30% [4]	60% [2] 40% [4]	70% [2]
Habitually call	60% [2] 40% [4]	90% [1]	100% [1]	40% [4] 30% [2]	40% [3] 20% [2] 20% [1]	60% [1]	60% [2] 30% [1]	40% [1] 30% [4]
Locality	Harbin	Taiyuan	Kunming	Tianjin	Changchun	Shijiazhuang	Xi'an	Hong Kong
Habitually being called	50% [4] 30% [1]	40% [2]	90% [4]	50% [2] 30% [4]	40% [4] 30% [2]	50% [4] 30% [3]	40% [3] 30% [4]	60% [1]
Habitually call	40% [4] 30% [1]	60% [2]	100% [4]	50% [2] 40% [4]	30% [4] 31% [3] 32% [2]	60% [4] 30% [3]	50% [3] 20% [1][2]	60% [1]

([1] habit, [2] locality, [3] not so habitually, [4] not habitually)

Question Three: On What Occasions Can the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) Be Acceptable?

Table Three: Degrees of Acceptability on Different Occasions for the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐)

“Entertainment Places” refer to “public entertainment places, such as restaurants, hotels, bars, dance halls and so on”; “places for public affairs” refer to “public affairs offices of governments, administrative bodies and companies”; “ordinary public and social places” refer to “roads, shops and supermarkets and so on, common social places and occasions”.

3.1. We can know from Table One that:

(1)*xiǎojiě* (小姐) primarily refers to “common females in society” in the cities, according to the percentages, Hong Kong 100%; Nanjing 90%; Harbin 70%; Tianjin, Shijiazhuang, Urumqi 60%; Nanchang 50%; Xi’an 40%. This means that when people in Hong Kong mention *xiǎojiě* (小姐), they firstly think she is a female in society. This proves that Hong Kong is a place which accepts the title most readily.

(2)Two cities primarily take *xiǎojiě* (小姐) as a female with some status in society: Shanghai and Changsha. In Shanghai, 60% of the interviewees think *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is a title for females with social status. In Changsha we got the same percentage, this has a close relation with the high social status of women in the two cities.

(3)In Huhhot, Beijing, Nanning, Zhengzhou, the title refers first to people for saleswomen in the shops and supermarkets, the order is as follows: Huhhot 90%, Beijing 60%, Nanning 60%, Zhengzhou and Hefei 50%.

(4)In some places, the primary meanings for the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) are more than one, for instance, in the cities like Fuzhou, Shenyang, Taiyuan, Changchun and Chongqing. There is no big difference between the primary and secondary meanings. In some cities, they are the same, for instance in Fuzhou, 50% of the interviewees firstly thought the title

was a “common female in society”, while the other 50% thought firstly of “saleswomen in different service enterprises”.

(5) All the senses are used in various proportions in Yinchuan, Guiyang, Changchun, Taiyuan and Shenyang. Taking these cities as a whole, the term refers most often to a female engaged in sexual service.

3.2. We can know from Table Two that the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) can be divided into four sections according to [1] habit, [2] locality, [3] not so habitually, [4] not habitually.

(1) The first section includes Nanjing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Changsha. The degree of habitual address respectively is 80% in Nanjing, 80% in Shanghai, 60% in Changsha, 60% in Hong Kong and 50% in Nanning.

(2) The second section of “locality” and degree includes 90% in Kunming, 60% in Chongqing, 50% in Beijing, 50% in Harbin and 50% in Shijiazhuang.

(3) The third section of “not so habitually” includes: 70% in Hefei, 60% in Fuzhou, 60% in Urumqi, 50% in Tianjin, 50% in Yinchuan, 50% in Huhhot and 40% in Taiyuan respectively.

(4) The fourth section of “not habitually” includes: 50% in Yinchuan, 40% in Xi’an and 40% in Guiyang.

(5) In some places, attitudes vary. People showed equal attitudes toward “habitual”, “locality”, “not so habitually” and “not habitual”. In these places, the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is not used so frequently, and therefore, these phenomena coexist. These cities are Shenyang, Nanchang, Chuangchun, Zhengzhou and Lanzhou.

3.3. From Table 3, we can see that:

(1) In Shanghai, Nanjing, Changsha, Fuzhou, Hong Kong, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is generally accepted as a title on all occasions. But in Yinchuan, Shijiazhuang and Huhhot, the title is not popularly accepted. Some cities even indicate a striking contrast.

(2) On general social occasions, in Shanghai, Nanjing, Changsha, Hong Kong, Fuzhou, Tianjin, Beijing, people usually use the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐); the other cities have their own titles for young females. For instance, in Xi’an the term is “*nǚ wázi* (女娃子, she baby),” in Yinchuan *yātou* (丫头, a head with pigtailed), in Lanzhou *gūniang* (姑娘, girl), in Hong Kong *liàngnǚ* (靚女, a beautiful girl), and in Hefei *xiǎomèi* (小妹, a young sister) besides the use of the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐).

(3) In entertainment places, people in most provincial capitals are used to the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐). In Beijing, Shanghai and Hefei, the percentage is 100%.

(4) In public affairs offices, the percentage reaches or passes 50% for people in use of the title in Changsha, Shanghai, Fuzhou, Kunming, Hong Kong, Tianjin, Nanjing, Nanning, Zhengzhou and Urumqi. But the title “*xiǎojiě* (小姐)” is not so popular for people in Nanchang, Shijiazhuang, Taiyuan, Shenyang, Yinchuan. For instance, 80% of the people

in Hefei are used to calling others “comrade”, while 60% of people in Shenyang use the term “Lady”.

(5) As for the statistics for Hong Kong in Table 2, none of the items takes first place, which seems contrary to the investigation. However, the firsthand investigation indicates that in entertainment places, 50% of Hong Kong people use the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐), 30% of them use *gōngguān xiǎojiě* (公关小姐, *Miss Public Relations*)(in fact this is a variation of *xiǎojiě* (小姐)), 20% of them still use English “Miss.” In public offices, 80% of people choose *xiǎojiě* (小姐), 20% choose English “Miss” instead of Chinese *xiǎojiě* (小姐). It is the same on ordinary social occasions. So the frequency of using the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in Hong Kong is the highest. This is due to historical reasons, as it is an international metropolitan city and subject to the influence of the West. Its international and economic advantages attract more foreigners, thus there is a coexisting phenomenon of Chinese *xiǎojiě* (小姐) and English “Miss”. This is not contradictory to the conclusion that it is most common for people in Hong Kong to use the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) to address “ordinary females in public places”.

4. The Map of the Use of the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in Contemporary China

It is an important work to draw a language map in linguistic study, but up to now, few in Chinese linguistic circles have paid much attention to “maps of living language”. Based on this investigation, we can draw a map to indicate clearly this living language phenomenon – *A Map of Primary Denotation for the Title ‘xiǎojiě’ (小姐)*.

From the map, we can see clearly that the cities with primary denotation of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) for a female in prostitution are only a small proportion, while the other senses – “common females in public” “females with certain social status” and “female workers in service enterprises” together comprise overwhelmingly the major proportion.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis based on the investigation shows:

(1) There are clear distributional differences in the use of the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) throughout China.

A. we can see from Table One that there are no identifiable denotations in the use of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in different cities for the addressees. *xiǎojiě* (小姐) can be used to refer to “a female with certain social status”, or “a common female in public”, or “a female worker in service enterprises” or “a prostitute”. The percentage for “common females in public” and “female workers in service enterprises” as primary denotation is 30% and about 20% respectively. There are coexisting primary denotations for the title, while the sense of “a

prostitute” comprises only a small percentage. We can say that in most provincial capitals, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is still a respectable term of address, and the reading of “a prostitute” will not have much influence on the normal use of the title in social life.

B. The degree of acceptability of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in different settings is different. We can see from the 24 provincial capitals that in all entertainment places, the title is accepted, but in other places and occasions, there exist differences. Thus, the highest degree of acceptability for the title is in entertainment settings.

C. The title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) for a prostitute is often used in the absence of the female, and when we face them and speak to them, or even address them as *xiǎojiě* (小姐) or *X xiǎojiě* (X 小姐, Miss X), the meaning is still a common title on social occasion. Only one exception exists, that the addresser is not willing to keep the face for both sides. When this occurs, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) becomes a direct call in face and means derogatory. This rarely takes place. Therefore, this sense is still unlikely to have a great influence on the normal use of the title.

D. The investigation indicates: in 20% of the provincial capitals people are used to addressing other females or being addressed as *xiǎojiě* (小姐); in 20% of them, people think that it depends on places and occasions; in nearly half the cities, people think they are not much used to or not at all used to addressing others or being addressed as *xiǎojiě* (小姐) (see Table Two). We have to admit that, although the majority of the people think that the title is acceptable, still they have misgivings, or believe there may be a special dialect to address young females. This shows that a positive and healthy use of *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in public still takes time.

(2) The Social Status of Women Has a Close Relation with the Use of the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐).

There are many factors that influence the use of the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) in any given location, and the most important one is the state of social development in that location. In a city, the higher in position females are in society, the more frequently the title *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is used to show respect; the higher the degree of social openness, the higher the degree of acceptability as a common respectful title. Of all the factors, the female social status is the primary parameter. That is, throughout China, most often *xiǎojiě* (小姐) is used as a common title of respect in the metropolitan cities with highly developed economy and culture, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

(3) *xiǎojiě* (小姐) as a Common Title for Respect Will Not Disappear, It Will Gradually Develop Positively

We think that in the living language of contemporary Chinese, *xiǎojiě* (小姐) as a

common title for respect will not be abandoned and will gradually develop positively simply because firstly, the synchronic differences of a language phenomenon are not only the result of diachronic differences but also signposts for diachronic change. Language development never takes place alone, but there is mutual influence between different regions, and such influences may have a strong influence on the language's development. Since influence generally flows from more prestigious language communities to less prestigious ones (though with some important exceptions), in China, the cities influence the towns and countryside, and big cities influence middle- and small-sized cities, seldom does the opposite happen.

A Map of Primary Denotation for the Title *xiǎojiě* (小姐)

Common females in public , Females in prostitution , Female workers in service
enterprises , Females with certain social status , Cities with multiple coexisting “primary

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denotations”

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