

Gender Malleability and the Discursive Construction of Wo-man and Ladyboy in Media

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1. Introduction

My research explores the representation of two emerging gender identities in China's social media, which are called *nv han zi*, “wo-man” and *she jing nan*, “ladyboy.” Although these two gender identities existed long before, the two gender labels went viral in recent years along with the increasing influence of social media on Chinese public life. Their broad circulation was seen after a female celebrity used the label of *nv han zi* in her weibo in the year of 2013 and was retweeted by millions of netizens. While wo-man generally refers to a tough girl persona, ladyboy captures the effeminate characters of male. Both of them confound conventional and established binary gender categories of male vs. female. They not only challenge but also lay bare the stereotyped gender ideologies which gave rise to the general conceptualizations of male and female genders in China. Through examining the discursive practices around wo-man and ladyboy, we are offered an opportunity to ask how people denaturalize and reconstruct their gender identities.

Specifically, my focus is on the linguistic practices of three debaters who are representative of and recognized as wo-man and ladyboy in an online Chinese debate talk show. In wo-men's case, I am looking at her use of rough talk, as well as the parodic

stylization of “girly-girl” talk in her own speech. As for ladyboys, I focus on two ladyboys’ frequent use of sentence-final modal particles and the full tone realization in places of neutral tone, both of which are features under the metapragmatic label of *gang tai qiang* “Hong Kong-Taiwan accent” (Zhang, 2005).

My aim is to investigate how the two hybrid gendered identities are linguistically indexed and socially negotiated on the one hand, and co-constructed and performed by all participants, on the other hand. I argue that the two hybrid gendered identities are constructed by wo-man's and ladyboy's multiple linguistic practices, mainly through stance-taking and role alignment (Jaffe, 2009; Mendoza-Denton, 1999; McIntosh, 2009).

2. Wo-man and Ladyboy Labels

Then what does it mean to be a wo-man “*nv han zi*” and a ladyboy “*she jing nan*”? The literal translation of *nv han zi* is a female manly man. I use wo-man as the equivalence of the Chinese term *nv han zi* in this paper. I didn't find any widely-used and recognized English translations for the two Chinese terms: *nv han zi* and *she jing nan*. Wo-man and ladyboy are just my own translations. While googling online, for example, how to say *nv han zi* in English, some English language learning websites and online forums will give several translation options as to how *nv han zi* can be translated into English.

Ladyboy is the translation I used here to refer to *she jing nan*. The exact meaning of *she jing nan*, however, needs to be understood in its Chinese term. Literarily translated, *she jing nan* is “snake-spirited man.” Particularly, the figure of snake spirit comes from a 1980s Chinese cartoon, where you can see the only antagonist character, snake spirit, is portrayed with a hyper-feminine tone and a V-shaped facial contour. In traditional Chinese literature such as ghost stories and fairy tales, the snake spirit can be embodied and take the form of a woman, a female character that is often seductive, calculative and dangerous.

3. Wo-man and Ladyboy Personae

Generally speaking, wo-man refers to a tough girl persona who is independent, self-supportive, not inferior to men either physically or mentally and not caring much about their appearance. Ladyboy captures the effeminate characteristics of a male person. They are often gentle, delicate, sensitive and good listeners and know women well.

A simple keyword search would find a lot of metadiscursive resources online about wo-man. It is considered as the third gender. It is a popular theme in comics, which show how wo-man dress, walk, talk and deal with people. There is also a set of core qualities for becoming a wo-man and it is used as a self-diagnosis list. In spite of some negative evaluation of some aspects of wo-man, many female celebrities claim to be a wo-man to expose their mental and physical strength to the public on one level and most importantly to present an authentic female persona against an artificial or fabricated public imagination of female stars. Lots of common girls claim to be wo-man as well, including myself. I would say it demonstrates more positive values than negative ones. However, there are also many opposing voices judging wo-man as unattractive and deserving being single. Unfortunately, ladyboy is not accepted by the public. There are lots of controversies involving ladyboys’ fashion style and ways of speaking, the two most manifesting features which make them look and sound girlish.

My aim is to investigate how the two gender identities are linguistically indexed and socially negotiated on the one hand, and co-constructed and performed by all participants of a Chinese online talk show on the other hand.

4. Theoretical Framework

In "Gender Trouble" (1990) Judith Butler introduced her famous notion of gender as performance and of the relation between gender identity and performativity. To explore how ladyboy and wo-man carry out their linguistic practice to fulfill social goals, it is necessary to bring in the notion of linguistic indexicality as well, a method people employ to perform their gender identities. According to Ochs (1992), we should not always expect a direct indexical relation between a linguistic form and social meaning of gender, as their relations were often mediated by social constructs such as "stances", "social acts", "social activities" (Ochs, 1992) and "social roles" (Kiesling, 1998). Eckert's (2008) notion of "indexical field" draws attention to the meaning potentials of linguistic variables and the underlying ideological moves in situated contexts where any one of the meanings of a variable can be enacted in constituting a style, a persona and a social identity. Stance (Jaffe, 2009) takes such an important role in mediating the relationship between the linguistic field, ideological field and social field. I argue that the two gender identities in question are constructed and indexed by wo-man's and ladyboy's multiple linguistic practices, mainly through stance-taking and role alignment (Jaffe, 2009; Mendoza-Denton, 1999; McIntosh, 2009).

5. Data from *U can U bibi*

Specifically, my focus is on the linguistic practices of three debaters who are representative of and recognized as wo-man and ladyboy in a Chinese online talk show. The show I am going to examine is titled *U can U bibi*. *Bibi* means babbling. It is produced by the Chinese online video service iQIYI. The show recruits people who are self-identified or labeled by others as weirdo, freak, or geek particularly referring to their eloquence. Each episode features a debate about a popular online-voted topic. Among the debaters are especially those who have attracted most public attention and become central figures in online gossip by the show's audience about their ladyboy and wo-man personae. The three debaters who repeatedly appear in multiple episodes are Fan Tiantian, Xiao Xiao and Hua Xi. It is also arguably convincing that the program plays an important role in shaping, strengthening and branding the personae of the debaters with assistance of the multimedia technology.

5.1. Ladyboy and Wo-man in *U can U bibi* Show

The distinction of ladyboy and wo-man are themselves based on contrasting and aligning with other individuated figures of personhood (Agha, 2005), which renders the ladyboy and wo-man personae distinctive and recognizable. Ladyboy identity is constructed through aligning with affective power while taking the stance against straight man, the stereotyped, heterosexual man. Wo-man is constructed through taking a stance against the girly-girl while appropriating those traits implicitly aligned with male power.

In wo-man's case, I am looking at her use of "rough" talk and self-addressing terms, as well as her parodic stylization of girly-girl's talk. As for ladyboys, I focus on two ladyboys' frequent use of sentence-final modal particles and the full tone realization in places of neutral tone, both of which are features associated with the metapragmatic label of *gang tai qiang* "Hong Kong-Taiwan accent" (Zhang, 2005).

5.2. Wo-man and stylization of girly-girl

Girly-girl, *ruan mei zi*, invokes a hyper-feminine image, which falls into the traditional gender ideology. Usually, girly-girls are super sweet and good at displaying and taking advantage of their weakness, tenderness and dependence, presenting themselves as

innocent, ignorant and seeking male protection. Wo-men stand in stark contrast to girly-girls, as wo-men often describe themselves as independent, self-supportive, not inferior to men both physically and mentally.

Stylization, according to Coupland (2001) can be analyzed as strategic recontextualization of a widely-known style. In Bakhtin's terms (1981), it is double voicing. According to Coupland (1988), styling has a motivation that can be explained by "strategic persona management". I would argue that in wo-man's case, stylization is a way of their stance-taking against a hyper-feminine persona represented by the girly-girl talk. This is achieved in her utterance based on shared knowledge and inferences among interlocutors. We can turn to an example of how a wo-man deploy stylization in her speech and her interaction with others.

In this episode¹, the debate topic is "Should a girl pursue a boy?" The wo-man, *nv han zi*, Fan Tiantian, was on the pro side, arguing for a girl's right to pursue a boy she likes; whereas the two ladyboys were on the con side, arguing that girls should be pursued by boys. The wo-man showed an obvious stylization in a clip. The first time, she interrupted a ladyboy's speech, commenting on what he said with an exclamation of "*tian a!*" (line 2) with an extremely exaggerated rising intonation and the camera also gave her a close-up scene when it was supposed to be the ladyboy's monologue presenting time. H represents one of the ladyboy debaters, Hua Xi, and F represents the wo-man debater, Fan Tiantian².

1 H: ... *yong zi ji guo shi de feng man...*

2 F: *Tia::n a!*
oh my gosh!

This interaction occurred when the ladyboy was arguing that girls should take advantage of their "natural" gender attractions to boys, and appeal to guys to seek after them. The interruption occurred exactly while the ladyboy was articulating his opinion with a metaphorical expression to suggest how a girl can make full use of her attractions to appeal to man. Precisely, his description of the scent, blossom and fruits of peach and plum trees gave rise to the wo-man's stylized response with a high pitched and sweet voiced "*tian a*" and a stereotypic and exaggerated feminine hand gesture. This is a case of a playful stylization of girly-talking. What the wo-man uttered was by no means simply girly shyness or surprise, rather, her taking-up of a hypothetical persona of girly-girl was quite strategic for the audience to infer her own voice and stance as non-girly-girl. The stylization is double-voicing, specifically, vari-directional double-voicing in which the speaker's voice is disaligned with the parodied voice and its girly-girl persona.

5.3. Wo-man and "Rough Talk"

Wo-men often use two self-address terms "*lao niang*" or "*lao zi*". "*lao niang*" is originally used to address one's or another's mother, or used as a self-address term by a woman expressing superiority. "*lao zi*" is normally used to be used by an adult man to address himself. To summarize, firstly, both terms were exclusively used to address senior people and "*lao zi*" was an address term exclusive to males and "*lao niang*" is also exclusively used to address females. Secondly, these two terms not only mark gender and seniority but also index hierarchical and patriarchal power.

The following examples are from the *nv han zi*, Fantiantian when she was saying that

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ct9NkC-MQNw>

² Speakers are labeled with their last name initials in the transcriptions.

girls need to show their feelings towards someone quite straightforwardly.

就算你名花有主，也待老娘来给你松松土。

jiu suan ni ming hua you zhu, ye dai lao niang lai gei ni song song tu.

Even if you are with someone, I (*lao niang*) am able to destabilize your relationship.

老子对你有意思。

lao zi dui ni you yi si

I (*lao zi*) have a crush on you.

By appropriating both to address herself, wo-men assigns herself higher rank in the hierarchical and patriarchal culture and also challenges the norm by appropriating male's addressing term. The *nv hanzi* not only positioned herself as the superior matriarch but also the patriarch. Such use is not unproblematic, as both literary critics, for example Li ao, and some males show strong aversion and objection to it. For example, Li ao has commented on a Taiwan talk show hostess' use of *lao niang* to address herself as inappropriate, ignorant and lacking education. Nevertheless, such use is still distinctive of wo-man persona.

5.4. Ladyboy and Hong Kong-Taiwan Accent

In addition to the general perception of ladyboy's use of high-pitched voice, ladyboys are heard speaking with the so-called *Gang-Tai qiang*, 'Hong Kong-Taiwan accent', particularly, the use of modal particles and full tone realization of a neutral tone.

Though Hong Kong-Taiwan accent is not exclusively used by women, it is characterized as "soft and affectedly sweet" because it lacks rhotacization or neutral tone but employs lots of modal particles in sentence final position. Despite that different particles carries with them different functions, sentence-final particles in Mandarin, are regarded as marking "subjective meanings such as affect, epistemic stance, and so on, and are often implicated in popular ways of characterizing women's language" (Erbaugh, 1985) and southern dialects as well. Hong Kong-Taiwan accent is construed by some northern dialect speakers as a designed and unnatural style when performed by mainland Chinese, especially for northerners to construct a cosmopolitan and professional identity. In ladyboy's case, these features are more associated with affect and gender. Two examples would be in the following from the ladyboy Xiao Xiao. See bold typeface for his use of modal particles "*ai yo*", "*a*" and "*la*".

唉哟，我没想到她最后给我来这么一手，我怎么弄啊！

ai yo, wo mei xiang dao ta zui hou gei wo lai zhe me yi shou, wo zen me nong a!

ai yo, I didn't expect that she said that. What shall I do?

也不能说三个都是妹子啦，三个都是姐姐啊~

ye bu neng shuo san ge dou shi mei zi la, san ge dou shi jie jie a

I can't say that all three are "*mei zi*". They are all "*jie jie*".

Straight man is what ladyboys often dissociate themselves with, due less to sexual orientations (because ladyboys don't have to be homosexual, which is a main gossip topic among audience though) than to the Chinese gender ideology of masculinity as being tough, bold, proactive, determinate and in contrast in every way to sensitivity, softness, innocent, which are deemed feminine traits. Since the modal/final particles can be used to index affect and by using such particles (and talking affectively), ladyboys disalign

themselves from the stereotypical masculine style of talk and consequently, the stereotypic masculine persona. By taking an appreciative stance towards an affective way of speaking, which indexes female gender, ladyboy is aligning themselves with feminine affective power.

6. The Co-construction of Ladyboy and Wo-man

In addition to wo-man's and ladyboys' own self-representation of their personae through role alignment and stance-taking, all the participants engaged in the co-construction of the two gender identities, including the mediation by the intra-lingual subtitling of the show as well.

The first excerpt below occurred before the debating show began while debaters on both sides were conversing with their team members, respectively.

In pro side room³:

- 9 F : Should girls go after boys?
 10 B: boys?
 11 F: It is so coincident that we have three girls
 on the pro side.
 12 B: The other side are three boys.
 13 F: are three boys.
 14 Are you sure all three are boys?
 [can't help but doubting]
 15 L: ((burst into laugh))
 16 All three: ((laughing))
 17 ((laughing))
 18 F: Huaxi, Xiaoxiao, Aili ((all person names))
 19 L: Aili can be counted as man (*nan ren*) .
 [to be fair to say so]
 20 F: can be counted as man.

In this excerpt, F, B and L question the gender identity of Huaxi and Xiaoxiao (line 14), whereas Aili was undoubtedly seen as a man (line 19&20). Here their use of the word “guy” and “man” (*nan ren*) suggested the words' neutral meaning of straight man. They explicitly identify Aili as “*nan ren*” masculine (straight) man. By not explicitly confirming that the other two as being “*nan ren*”, the women cast doubt on the masculinity of the two participants, who are ladyboys, *she jing nan*?

In con side room⁴:

- 21 X: On the pro side are three
 girls. But Fan Tiantian...
 [pondering]
 22 You can not say all three
 are girls/younger sisters ((*mei zi*)).
 23 All three are older sisters ((*jie jie*)).
 [*jie jie*]
 24 H: ((laughing))
 25 A: ((laughing))
 26 X: ((laughing))

³ F, B and L are the last name initials of the three debaters on the pro side.

⁴ X, H and A are the last name initials of the three debaters on the con side.

Interestingly, in the con side room, the participants had a similar conversation. But this time the focus was on Fantiantian, the wo-man, who was considered not as a girl. Both *meizi* and *jiejie* can be used as a kinship term referring to a female sibling and as an endearment term to refer to a woman. But *meizi* can be employed to highlight age difference or gender or both. In line 22, X playfully used the pun word “*mei zi*” which can generally refer to a young woman or refer to one’s younger sister. Therefore the use of “*mei zi*” allowed him to change his frame in the following line, where he cancelled the broader meaning of “*mei zi*” by evoking its antonym “*jie jie*” (line 23) which means older sister. Then all the three laughed. The subtitle highlighted the word “*jie jie*”, implicating that the three men might all agreed with this saying and laughed because of this clever way of addressing to avoid directly putting Fan Tiantian’s gender in question and suggesting her gender as different from female.

Another co-constructive works was accomplished through intralingual subtitles which are defined as “subtitles that are in the same language as the discourse they represent” (Gottlieb, 1998). The use of subtitles serves a variety of functions such as characterization of nonverbal action, highlighting/clarification/summary of discourse content, attribution of affect and thought, and metadiscursive commentary and evaluation by the program’s producer. As an entertainment talk show program, subtitling was widely employed for the various aforementioned functions. The show program producer was also taking a seemingly objective stance (in a sense that the producer are often invisible and non-identifiable in the show) to naturalize the two gender personae.

7. Conclusion and Implications

In my study, both woman and ladyboy confound conventional and established binary gender categories of male vs. female. They not only challenge but also lay bare the stereotyped gender ideologies which gave rise to the general conceptualizations of male and female genders in China. Through examining the discursive practices around wo-man and ladyboy, we are offered an opportunity to ask how people denaturalize and reconstruct their gender identities.

The traditional talking of the dynamics between language, gender and power often emphasizes men’s dominance and women’s powerlessness. I argue, however, that the social meanings of aforementioned variables which index some aspects of gender persona or identity shift across times and particularly in the context of neoliberal economy. People can overcome the structural barriers to attribute significance to some personal traits and lifestyles as of their choice. The notion of wo-man and ladyboy also helps to envision and understand individual’s quest for flexibility. Wo-men thus can deny the traditional norms imposed onto them as a proper gendered being, in the pursuit of a redefinition and flexible construction of their social roles. Ladyboy, likewise, can also seek the affective power conventionally thought as residing in femininity, including their linguistic practices and many other presumed aspects characteristic of female roles and practices, to fulfill their own self-project of an affective social being.

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