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Exploring the Importance and Social Status of “laoshi” as a Greeting Used by Chinese Students to Address Their Teachers

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Abstract

In China, “teacher”, as an honorific, represents a paragon of knowledge and virtue, a parent, as well as a symbol of great importance and high status, standing alongside Heaven, Earth, Monarch and Parent. For thousands of years’ time, teacher’s great importance has been greatly and constantly emphasized by both Confucianism and Taoism starting from Confucius (the founder of Confucianism) and Lao Tzu (the founder of Taoism). Thus, the present paper intends to justify the acceptability of “teacher” as a more culturally appropriate way of greeting for teachers in the Chinese context than the English way of “title + surname/Sir or Miss/given name”. This paper will be of help and value to those who teach and / or learn Chinese as a foreign language.

Keywords

“laoshi” as a greeting, “laoshi” as a paragon of knowledge and virtue, “laoshi” as a parent, “laoshi” as a symbol of great importance and high status

1 Introduction

Terms used to address another person are an important part of communication. In many situations, they serve as the initial information the speaker wishes to relay to the listener. Often, meanings in oral communication are not conveyed by specific utterances, but rather through terms of address. Ways of addressing differ very much from culture to culture. Those international students who study Chinese as a foreign language (hereafter CFL) need to know that in the Chinese system, three factors, according to Zhu (in Hu, 1999, p. 273-274), determine the term of address used particularly when speaking to relatives, neighbours and teachers, namely, position in the family hierarchy, age and social status. Quite different from the Western system of address, many occupational titles can be used as honorifics

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in Chinese, the most typical example being 老师 (*laoshi*, teacher). Greetings like “Good morning, teacher”, “How are you, teacher?” “Thank you, teacher!” “Goodbye, teacher!” are so often heard in daily communication in a teacher-student relationship, which are not only used by students ranging from primary school to university age, but also by Chinese English teachers and the influential media in China, regardless of the addresser’s English level. Below is an example.

In a China Central Television (CCTV) programme entitled *Voice* (2015), the host invited a Chinese guest speaker Xiong Xiaoge, Director of the Global IDG Capital, to talk to the young audience about his success as an influential business leader. Xiong used to be an English teacher. He went to America for his master’s and doctoral degrees and then worked there for years. Before his talk, he said that he had given up English teaching 20 years earlier and missed it greatly, particularly missing the feeling of being habitually greeted by students’ loud “Good morning, teacher”. He then requested the audience to recreate a Chinese English class. Here is how he started his “class”:

Host: Stand up!

Xiong: Good morning, class!

The host and the audience (loudly and cheerfully, in concert): Good morning, teacher!

Xiong: Great! Thank you. Sit down!

(Loud applause from the audience)

But CFL learners may know that in English, teacher refers to nothing but an occupation and is not a form of address. Therefore, many researchers (see Oatey, 1988; Bi 1999; Tang & Liu 2004; Wang 2011; Jia, 2013; Yang 2014) hold the view that the English equivalent of *laoshi* “teacher” cannot be used as an address term, perceiving “How are you, teacher?”, “Good morning, teacher” etc. as cases of “misuse”, “Chinglish”, “pragmatic failure”, and even “deformed English”, thus wrong and unacceptable. The present article, however, intends to justify the acceptability of “teacher” as a more culturally appropriate way of greeting for teachers in the Chinese context than the English way of “How are you?/ Good morning/ Hello/ Thank you/ etc. title + surname/ Sir or Miss/ given name” proposed by scholars like Oatey (1988). This is because “teacher” is an honorific as an address term in China, a country with “large power distance” (Hofstede, 2007, p.101) influenced by Confucian ethics. To be more specific, “teacher”, related to 孔子, Confucius, the first and best teacher in China, represents a paragon of knowledge and virtue, and “teacher” also represents a symbol of importance and high social status. The wide use of it in China is the proper communicative behavior based on culture choice.

2 Confucius as a Paragon of Knowledge and Virtue

What CFL learners may not know is that respect for teachers in China can be traced back to Confucius (551 B.C. - 479 B.C.), who founded Confucianism, a way of thinking to which he gave his name. As a teacher, Confucius was a very learned man who greatly enjoyed learning. 论语, *Lun Yu, the Analects*, is an enduring classic of Chinese culture which has exerted a huge impact on all thinkers, writers, teachers and politicians in the over-2000-year-long history of China. This work is a collection of Confucius’ many sayings and teachings compiled by some of his students and no scholar who has not read it could be said to genuinely understand Chinese culture or the inner world of the ancient Chinese. It depicts in great detail the pleasure Confucius had in acquiring knowledge. For example, when somebody asked 子路, Zi Lu, one of his students, about Confucius, Zi Lu did not reply. Confucius told him that he could have said something like the following:

This is the character of the man: he is driven by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat; he enjoys himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way. (Confucius, 1997, p.84)

Confucius loved learning and took pride in his diligence. He said to his students in great confidence:

In a hamlet of ten houses you may be sure of finding someone quite as loyal and true to his word as I. But I doubt if you would find anyone with such a love of learning. (Confucius, 1997, p.63)

Love of learning makes Confucius the personification of knowledge. In his teaching, he also puts great emphasis on the cultivation of “persons of 德, *de*, virtue or morality” which is regarded by him as the basic goal of education. Confucius himself becomes a paragon of virtue. One of Confucius’ students, 子贡, Zi Gong, made a famous comment on his virtue in *Lun Yu*:

There may be other good men, but they are merely like hillocks or mounds that can easily be climbed. Chung-ni (Confucius) is the sun and moon that cannot be climbed over..... It would be as hard to equal our Master (Confucius) as to climb up on a ladder to the sky (Confucius, 1997, p.261).

His follower 孟子, Mencius (372 B.C. - 289 B.C.), the second most influential Confucianist, one of the only two ancient Chinese scholars who enjoy latinized names, takes Confucius as an example when talking about the great importance of *de* (virtue, morality):

When people submit to the transforming influence of morality (virtue) they do so sincerely, with admiration in their hearts. An example of this is the submission of the seventy disciples to Confucius. The Odes (*or the Book of Songs*, the earliest existing collection of Chinese poems and songs, many of which range from the 10th to the 7th centuries B.C, inspiring Chinese poetic works throughout history.) says, “from east, from west, from north, from south, there was none who did not submit to this influence.” This describes well what I have said. (Lau, 2004, p.36)

Confucius’ knowledge and virtue are metaphorically depicted as “a wooden bell-clapper (木铎, *muduo*)” and “the precious pearl on a mat (席珍, *xizhen*)” in ancient China. When the wooden bell-clapper rings, the sound can be heard thousands of miles away and people from all directions will respond while the precious pearl on a mat can be passed on to thousands of generations (Liu, 2006, p.56). Considered “a great mountain of knowledge and virtue” by all Chinese in all ages, Confucius has a profound impact on Chinese education and sets an everlasting example for all Chinese teachers. Since Confucius’ time to the present, “teacher”, for as long as 2500 years, refers to a person of extensive knowledge and sound virtue who acts as a role model for students. So, if you hear somebody say “you are my teacher”, it is a compliment implying that you are a person of knowledge and virtue.

3 Teacher as a Parent

As a matter of fact, a teacher, being a role model, is more like a student’s parent, especially in traditional China where students used to live with their teacher once they left home for schooling. So the teacher shoulders the responsibility of teaching students by both imparting knowledge, giving moral education and even looking after their daily life. *Laoshi* (teacher) is thus given another name 师父, *shifu*, “teacher parent”, meaning “the teacher is a parent”, and the student is also called, 学子, *xuezi*, “student child”, meaning “the student is a child”. How a child behaves before their parents is the same as how a student behaves before their teacher. This vertical teacher-student relationship is also observed by Spencer-Oatey (1997) who reported a comparative study of students and their teachers in Great Britain and China about their mutual relationships. Chinese respondents (students and teachers) described the relationship as both closer and more unequal than did the British respondents. Several of the Chinese respondents in her survey described the teacher-student relationship as 师徒如父子, *shitu ru fuzi*, (teacher and student are like parent and child), which differs strongly from more solidarity-oriented Western situations. So, when 颜回, Yan Hui, one of his students, died, Confucius wailed without restraint like a father losing his son, and kept saying:

Alas, Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me! (Confucius, 1997, p.131)

Language is a reflection of the culture behind it. Respect for parents is manifested through a lot of honorifics as address terms given to parents in Chinese, such as 大人, *daren*, great person, 尊人, *zunren*, respectable person, 尊大人, *zun daren*, respectable great person, 尊上, *zunshang*, respectable superior, 尊老, *zunlao*, respectable senior, and many others. In a similar vein, *laoshi* (teacher) also enjoys a number of respectful address names. The following table lists the meanings of teacher and other different honorifics for teacher at different historical periods in China (Tian & Zhang, 2007, p.62):

Table 1.

The Honorifics for laoshi (teacher)

Period of time	Meaning of teacher	Other honorifics
Before the Tang Dynasty (before 618)	<i>laoshi</i> : not used as a fixed phrase yet; <i>lao</i> : adj., old /aged / senior; <i>shi</i> : noun, man of great learning or with skills in certain fields.	<i>shi</i> .
During the Tang & Song dynasties (618-1279)	<i>laoshi</i> : used as a fixed phrase referring to “a great man of learning”; also used as a religious term in Taoism and Buddhism, usually referring to preachers.	<i>daru</i> (great scholar), or <i>suru</i> (scholars studying Confucianism, senior prestigious learned literati).
From the Ming Dynasty (late 14th century) to early 20th century	<i>laoshi</i> became an honorific for teachers, also used by <i>mensheng</i> or <i>dizi</i> (disciples, pupils) on their <i>zuoshi</i> (imperial examiners).	<i>zuoshi</i> ; <i>xiansheng</i> (an especially respectful term for senior and learned university teachers).
From the 20 th century to China’s reform & opening-up (early 1980s)	<i>laoshi</i> used as an honoric for all teachers from primary schools to universities.	<i>xiansheng</i> ; <i>enshi</i> (teacher to whom student is grateful).
From the 1980s to the present	<i>laoshi</i> , with its expanded meaning, used as an honorific for teachers, also for those learned and respected people in the intellectual circles of literature, art, media, etc. such as writers, editors, artists and journalists.	<i>jiaoshou</i> (professor); <i>daoshi</i> (teacher, instructor, supervisor, tutor, mentor).

4 Teacher as a Symbol of Great Importance and High Status

The table above obviously shows that it has been a long-standing tradition to value education and respect teachers in China. 礼记, *Li Ji*, *The Book of Rituals*, written in Western Han Dynasty (202B.C.-8A.D.), one of the Confucianists’ most important Classics about ancient China’s social and individuals’ proper behavior, talks a great deal about the teacher’s importance. For instance, it says:

The teacher is respected first, and then the Tao (referring to the knowledge, the truth and the sound virtue the teacher imparts) may be respected; the Tao is respected, and then people may treat their learning with earnestness and diligence. (Dai, 2016, p.158)

The Book of Rituals proceeds to say:

Teacher is not related to kinship, but kinsmen will know very little about their kinship, other human relations, and how to behave, without the instruction by the teacher. (Dai, 2016, p.159)

Taoism, too, honours the teacher's importance. 老子, Lao Tzu (571 B.C. - 471 B.C.?), the founder of Taoism, has this to say in his famous book 道德经, *Tao Te Ching*:

He who does not respect his teacher and does not learn a lesson from his gains and losses, much learning though he may possess, is a great fool. This is the vital secret. (Lao Tzu, 2006, p. 62)

The great importance of the teacher undoubtedly determines the high social status of the teacher in China, which is historically and philosophically related to the concept of 天地君亲师, *tian-di-jun-qin-shi*, the English equivalents being Heaven, Earth, Monarch, Parent and Teacher. In Chinese tradition, these five elements are regarded as the most important spiritual belief and symbolic emblems to which every Chinese needs to show genuine respect in their lifetime. The first thing we need to respect is tian. It is difficult to translate tian into English. It is sometimes rendered as "Heaven" and sometimes as "Nature". "Perhaps if we mean by tian both nature and the divinity which presides over nature, with emphasis sometimes on the one and sometimes on the other, we have something approaching the Chinese term" (Fung, 2012, p.526). Tian is worshiped because Heaven is paramount, encompassing the law of nature. Chinese usually employ the terms "heavenly conscience" for conscience, "the Son of Heaven" (*tian zi*) for emperor, "Citizens of Heaven" (*tian min*) for people. When somebody is in trouble in surprise, they will cry out "Ah, wode tian!" ("Oh, my Heaven!") instead of "Oh, my God". Di (Earth) holds everything, our hopes as well as our crops emerging from it, which means we must respect all its resources. Also our respect must be extended to *jun* (Monarch), who rules over and is responsible for order in the human world, and which we do by helping to maintain this order. Then we must respect our *qin* (Parents), the ethical structure of the family being the most fundamental structure of China, where "filial piety is the basis of virtue, and the origin of Chinese culture".

Finally, we need to respect our 师, *shi* (teacher, shortened for *laoshi*) because *shi* is someone who imparts knowledge and skills, removes doubts, enlightens people, transmits culture and civilization, and takes up parent-like responsibilities which was discussed earlier in this article. Heaven, Earth, Monarch, Parent and Teacher, in sequence, are what one, as a member of society, has to worship humbly. Respect for these five elements constitutes a large part of Chinese 礼, *li* (rituals and politeness) on which Confucius placed considerable emphasis with the aim of preserving social order, stability and harmony.

According to Xu (2006, p.99), respect for *tian-di-jun-qin-shi* first appeared in *Guo Yu*, the earliest historical document dealing with each of the feudal kingdoms in China in turn, written by a well-known historian 左丘明, Zuo Qiuming (502 B.C.- 422 B.C.). It was further mentioned by 荀子, Xun Zi in his Collected Works, which was regarded as the most important Confucianist book in the late Warring States Period (475 B.C. - 221 B.C.). And then respect for *tian-di-jun-qin-shi* became widespread in the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - 8). In *Taiping Jing*, written in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), a major classic of Taoism, the concept of *tian-di-jun-fu-shi* (*fu*, referring to father) was mentioned instead of *tian-di-jun-qin-shi* but without any major difference of meaning. *Tian-di-jun-qin-shi* began to become a symbol of deep, quasi-religious respect in the early North Song Dynasty (960-1127) and since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) it has been adored in the way one would a shrine. The order of *tian-di-jun-qin-shi* was finally set and respected for the first time in the name of the Emperor Yong Zheng (1678-1735) and his Dynasty (1723-1735) early in his reign; the concept was then officially defined whereby the teacher was offered a unique status and importance. It thus became a nation-wide object of celebration.

One way for Chinese people to show their respect for *tian-di-jun-qin-shi* is to put up a memorial tablet or a scroll in the living-room and treat it as an object of worship and adoration. In the old days, it

was so common to see the five golden characters hung on the wall or shrine of the living-room in many households written on a black board or on a piece of red paper (see the following picture). Luxun (1881-1936), one of the greatest writers in modern China, whose works have exerted a profound influence on Chinese literature, wrote in one of his famous works, *My First Teacher*, as follows: in the centre of my living-room there is a memorial tablet, on which the five elements are written in gold, *tian-di-jun-qin-shi*, which has to be absolutely respected and deferred to.



Figure 1. A memorial tablet for *tian-di-jun-qin-shi*

Teacher, standing alongside Heaven, Earth, Monarch and Parent, is regarded as the engineer of the human soul in respect of students and responsible for their growth in wisdom. The teacher, endowed with multiple responsibilities, is metaphorically compared to a candle, his tears falling like wax until he, like the candle, no longer exists; the teacher devotes himself to teaching until he dies, just like a candle keeps burning to give light to people until it is no more. So, in such a teacher-student relationship, the quality of an individual's learning is virtually exclusively dependent on the excellence of his or her teachers, as is shown in the popular saying 严师出高徒, *yanshi chu gaotu* (excellent pupils come from strict teachers). This is quite different from the Western educational system which “is based on students” well developed need for independence and the quality of learning is to a considerable extent determined by the excellence of the students’ (Hofstede, 2007, p.101).

Nowadays, the great importance and the high social status of teachers in China is further strengthened by legislation: since 1985, September 10th every year has been celebrated as “Teachers’ Day”, which is originally known as *xieshi jie*, meaning “Festival of Thanks to Teachers”. The Teachers Law was issued by the National People's Congress in 1993, requiring that “teachers should be respected by the whole society”. The profession of teacher nowadays in China is regarded as one of the ideal professions. A survey of Beijingers’ views on “professions with the best reputation” indicated that sci-tech personnel, doctor, lawyer, university teacher, civil servant, school teacher, news editor are at the top of the list. Another similar survey conducted in Shenzhen, China’s first special economic zone, showed that university teacher came third and school teacher seventh among the top ten ideal professions (Shao, 2006, p.67).

CFL learners know now that “teacher”, not only as a professional title, but also as an honorific, is a manifestation of students’ respect. One of the ways they show their respect is to call a teacher “teacher (*laoshi*)”. In this vertical unequal teacher-student relationship, it will be extremely difficult and even unlikely for Chinese students to address their teacher by the first name like in the West because they never address their parents by the first name.

Therefore, knowledge of teacher as an honorific in a Chinese context can be very helpful for CFL learners to achieve efficient and effective intercultural communications. After all, teaching and learning CFL is also teaching and learning Chinese culture.

5 Conclusion

How to address teachers in English varies from culture to culture. In the native English speaking countries, it is appropriate to greet a teacher as follows: “How are you/ Good morning/ Hello/ Thank you/ etc. title + surname/ Sir or Miss/ given name”. CFL learners may know very well that it should also be appropriate to address a teacher as “*guru*” in India, “Monsieur le Professeur” in Belgium, “Hocam” (“my teacher” to university and senior high school teachers), “Ogretmenim” (“my teacher” to primary and junior high school teachers) in Turkey, and “*laoshi* (teacher)” in China, for “addressing rules are both culturally and contextually bound” (Hu & Luo, 2017, p.7). “Teacher”, a paragon of knowledge and virtue, a cultural transmitter who plays a very important role in helping pass on the 5000 year long uninterrupted Chinese civilization to the present day whereas all the other ancient civilizations have long disappeared, conveys special weight as a term of address, so “Good morning / How are you / Hello, teacher” is a more appropriate greeting than any other ways in a context where the teacher-student relationship is more like that of parent-child. And this is so well interpreted by one of the CFL students that the authors of this article teach in their university, when asked to give her judgement about the acceptability of “teacher” as an address term:

I truly believe that this is a good way of greeting as it puts the teacher in a more respectable post. In India, we used to follow the “gurukula” system of education. Students were supposed to leave their parents and join the teacher during their education period. It was not an education on a specific topic but of life itself. The student considered the teacher their master or parent.

So if there is one universally fixed addressing rule, it must be “when in Rome, first ask what the Romans do”. Our CFL learners, while addressing their Chinese teachers, need to remember that when in a Chinese context, names are not employed casually, and that “老师好 (Hello, teacher)” is an attractive greeting which makes their Chinese teachers pleased and proud.

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