

Senior-younger address: Cultural practice and socializing among Chinese university students

Chuyue Ou

As a part of two-year ethnography, this study combines social media ethnography with Ethnography of Communication, unpacking the senior-younger address practiced among Mainland Chinese students in Macao online and offline. The senior-younger address is rooted in Confucianism and focus on establishing the hierarchy between older and younger relationship to maintain social order and harmony. Therefore, the address of “*xuezhang* and *xuejie*” functions as a system of hierarchy, socialization and relation in Chinese campus culture. The hierarchy is related with showing respect, while the socialization involves with caring responsibility and building social network. However, as the relationship becoming closer, the address between seniors and youngers would change to be more personal address and even be more peer-like.

These years, my intercultural experiences keep me rethinking and reflecting the cultural difference between my home culture, that’s China, and American culture. In a nearly two-year ethnography, I have studied a group of Mainland Chinese students’ social life in Macao, exploring both their online and offline interactions. One thing has aroused my interest, which is the address between senior students and younger students. It was what I took for granted in my daily life, but has started to realize the hidden culture through comparing different cultural contexts (Hall, 1989). The relationship between the older and the younger is one of the five basic relationships in Confucian discourse. Those in the superior position or role have the authority over others, and gain respect and obedience from others (Walker & Truong, 2015). In other words, it is a virtue of having the older to take precedence over the younger, as Confucianism emphasizes the importance of hierarchy in maintaining social stability, social order and social harmony (Tu, 1998). Deeply rooted in the Confucian notions, Chinese students are not only showing the respect to their teachers, but also respect their seniors on campus. The address of senior-younger students, therefore, is the embodiment of this culture. As Sandel (2002)’s study demonstrated, the address is a meaning system through which the speaker could transform a cultural system.

However, few scholars concerned about this phenomenon. Similarly influenced by Confucianism, Lee (2012) pionted out the power distance and hierachy between university students in South Korean. His examples are aslo existing in Chinese university culture, such as the address, the respect and the obedience practiced in senior-younger students. On China’s campus, the seniors have a certain power in a variety of campus life and affairs, playing a leader role as well as a caring role for these youngers. As a contrast, the younger ones, especially the freshmen, demonstrate their respect to the seniors in their daily life. They address the seniors as “*xuezhang*”/“*xuejie*” (elder brother in academic/elder sister in academic), and are obedient to these elder sisters and brothers in school club activities. The seniors, instead, could address the youngers as “*xuedi*”/ “*xuemei*” (younger brother in academic/younger sister in academic), containing a social role of caring. Sandel (2002)’s study considered the address as a kind of language socialization, in which indicates interpersonal relationships and reflects in daily cultural practice. Language socialization is bidirectional (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). It is the speaking way to engage novice in a speech community and displaying “appropriate forms of sociality and competence” (Ochs &

Schieffelin, 2017, p.1). Therefore, the address of “xuezhang and xuejie” functions as a system of hierarchy, socialization and relation in Chinese campus culture, internalizing into university students’ daily life.

This study is not just a study of Ethnography of Communication. Instead, it combines the methods used by media ethnography, to explore the possibility of using the social media as a second “fieldwork environment” to conduct Ethnography of Communication (Postill & Pink, 2012). In other words, social media should be concerned about its social and experiential characteristics and be applied into doing research (Postill & Pink, 2012). Certainty, doing social media ethnography is by no means of limited in social media contents and practices; rather, it should be a social media-related ethnography, interweaving with offline activities (Postill & Pink, 2012). As such, the aims of this study have three aspects: 1). to understand the cultural meaning behind the senior-younger address; 2). to understand how university students practice and socialize with the senior-younger address; 3). to explore the application of both online and offline data.

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