



第一步 Dì yī bù: Beginners' Chinese

Forms of address and professional titles

Interviewer: How do you begin to negotiate your way through the maze of Mandarin? Well, here in the studio with me is Dr Kan Qian, who's the course chair for The Open University's Beginners Chinese course. Who better to help us explore the cultural insides that this rich language offers.

Well, Qian, so, could you tell us a bit about how people address each other in mainland China?

Qian: Mm, it's not as straightforward as you might think, so let me just try:

Now, before the economic reforms and opening up of China in the 1980s, the term 同志 *tóngzhì* (meaning 'comrade') was used widely at workplaces and in public places. So for example, if you went to a shop, and, in order to attract the attention of a shop assistant, you would call him or her 同志 *tóngzhì*.

Now, things obviously have changed, you know, in the last, say, 10/20 years. Occasionally now you may still hear the term 'comrade' (同志 *tóngzhì*) being used by elderly people, but the most often used terms to address a man you meet for the first time now is 先生 *xiānsheng* (meaning 'Mr'). So for example, if you meet someone whose surname is Zhang, you would put his surname before the term for 'Mr'. Ok so you would call him 张先生 *Zhāng xiānsheng* (so literally, in English it is Zhang Mr). Now, the popular terms to address women: so if it's a young woman you would use the term 小姐 *xiǎojiě* (is the equivalent of 'Miss' in English) and for an elderly or middle aged woman you might use the term 女士 *nǚshì* (meaning 'Madam').

Interviewer: Ok, that's actually not too different from what one would do in the West, but what if you don't know someone's surname, and say you're in a shop or a hotel and you want to catch the attention of someone by just saying 'excuse me Miss'. How would you say that in Mandarin? What would be the equivalent?

Qian: Right, interestingly, in shops, especially in restaurants or hotels the most popular term is actually the term we used during the Cultural Revolution in the 60s now. The term is 服务员 *fúwùyuán* (literally it means service person). Now, for a period of time in the 80s, the term 小姐 *xiǎojiě* (meaning *miss* or *mademoiselle*, you know) was used, but things have changed because there's a strange connotation now being attached to the term 小姐 *xiǎojiě*, because in massage salons that term is used, so

people now, you know, they do not want to be called 小姐*xiǎojiě* anymore, so the term 服务员*fúwùyuán* has become very, very popular.

Interviewer: Actually, that sort of thing is very useful to know, isn't it? Because you wouldn't want, inadvertently to cause offence just because you are, if you like, doing a direct translation from what you would do in the English. By saying 'excuse me Miss' you wouldn't actually use...

Qian: yes, also the advantage of using 服务员 *fúwùyuán* is you can use it to address both men and women.

Interviewer: Now, what about professional titles more generally. It seems that they're used much more frequently in Mandarin than in English. Tell us a little bit about that.

Qian: Yes, that's absolutely right actually, because China is very much a deferential and hierarchical society. So titles are very important, especially in formal business situations. Now, professional titles or official positions are often attached to the end of a surname so you can use that to address a person or to refer to someone, so, for example, my surname is Kan, and in China all my students would call me 阚老师 *Kǎn lǎoshī* (*lǎoshī* means teacher.)

Let me give you another example, if someone's surname is Li and she is a doctor, people would call her 李医生 *Lǐ yīshēng* (literally it means 'Li doctor').

Interviewer: OK. Actually that's not too different from what one would do in English because one would say Dr Smith or Dr Jones, but what I'm interested to know is that, if one is a lawyer, for instance, or some other profession, would you say the equivalent of Lawyer Jones, something like that, is that...?

Qian: You would, yes, you would, but only some of those high level job titles or, sort of jobs which are respected, those titles are being used, such as manager, director, or head of department etc, are used to address each other at workplaces. So for example, if your surname is Wang and you are a manager, the Chinese term for 'manager' is 经理 *jīnglǐ*, so your colleagues would call you 王经理 *Wáng jīnglǐ* (meaning 'Wang manager'). It sounds a bit strange but that's how people call each other in China.