

Abusive Language in Chinese and English

Jinwen Zeng

(University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Calvin Odhiambo and David Marlow

(University of South Carolina Upstate)

■ ABSTRACT ■

Abusive language used by college students reflects current social attitudes and values. Adopting a comparative and cross-cultural perspective, this study examines the frequency and perceived severity of abusive language in English and Mandarin Chinese. Because abusive language often includes sexual connotations, this paper employs a particular concentration on sexism. Gender differences in the use of abusive language illustrate a male bias across cultures.

Key Words

Sexism, Gender, Abusive Language, Mandarin Chinese, English

Introduction

Language, as a reflection of socialization, inevitably mirrors and expresses social attitudes and values. Often labeled a “bad” part of language, abusive words strongly associate “gender roles and the expectation of society”

(Thelwall 84). The study of abusive language provides us a window into deeper social attitudes and values, especially gender issues (Thelwall 84). However, this subject is often “largely ignored by those who investigate the nature of language”

(Wajnryb 1). Earlier academics demonstrated little interest in the study of profanity, considering it a social taboo connected to working class or other lower socioeconomic groups (Stapleton 22). Recently with the development of social ideology, researchers have recognized the significance of profanity and attached increasing importance to this formerly taboo topic.

This study extends this nascent investigation into abusive language. Most scholars thus far have focused on a single culture in examining abusive language and have employed content analysis to examine profanity in writing materials or mass media without surveying people in daily life. Moreover, many researchers focus on samples which are too small to draw convincing conclusions. In this study we survey over 200 college students in China and the United States as part of a cross-culture comparison of derogatory, insulting, and abusive words.

1. Goal of Study

The goal of the study is to examine similarities and differences in the connotations and meanings of abusive terms in Chinese and English with regard to gender. In pursuing this goal, this paper will focus on (1) referential functions with regard to semantic categories derived from an examination of the terms reported and, (2) the perceived severity of these terms.

2. Literature Review

i) History of Profanity in the US and China

It is difficult to define the history of profanity. As American profanity researcher Mencken pointed out (1944), “profanity has never had a scientific historian” (244). To fill this gap, he briefly explored American profanity of his time. From his research, he concluded that swearing began to move from England to America during the seventeenth century through sailors and prospered in the Revolutionary period (245). Even though the government authorized commanders to suppress the use of profanity by sailors, the effects were minimal and by the end of the century, profane words such as “damned” were very popular in the new Republic (246).

Even less research exists in the field for the Chinese language. Our literature review uncovered information on the history of Chinese profanity, but according to Sun, emancipation of profanity as a literary phenomenon did not appear in Chinese literary circles until the 1980s (111).

ii) Functions of Profanity

An interesting aspect of profanity lies in the fact that most children are encouraged by authority figures, such as schools, parents, and politicians to avoid its use (Thelwall 84). In fact, profanity is discouraged by authorities and considered “inappropriate” (M. Adams 354). From the sociological and linguistic perspectives, however, profanity is simply another aspect of culture.

Linguists argue that based on its different purposes, language has four functions—referential, affective, aesthetical, and phatic (emotional) (Thomas et al. 8). Profanity, as an aspect of language also shares these common characteristics particularly the phatic and referential functions. Cursing in both English and Chinese serves to release emotions, both negative and positive (Yang 47). Offensive terms are typically short, consisting of one to three words, and easy to pronounce (Liao 26). These

features enable the speaker to vent rage, disappointment or even happiness, as in “hell yeah” in English and *diǎo* (dick, meaning *awesome*) in Chinese. Additionally, cursing also helps promote relationships (Yang 47). Swearing between friends demonstrates and builds intimacy.

According to two Chinese researchers, profanity can be classified into several categories: sexual, family, animal, objects (excrement, waste, and filth), intelligence, social status and prestige, race/nationality, and religion (Liao 26; Sun 111). Due to the different cultural backgrounds, profanity in Chinese and English emphasizes different categories. A large portion of English curse words relate to religion, such as *god damn* and *hell*, while fewer cursing words in Chinese fall into this category. Instead, insulting social status and prestige plays a role in Chinese profanity (Sun 111). Furthermore, the object of an abusive verb in Chinese is normally the third person, especially her/his family, while it is the second person in English (Li & Liao 81; Sun 111). For example, Chinese people say *fuck your mother* or *grandmother* instead of *fuck you* as is most common in English.

Odhiambo deepens the exploration of taboo language into abusive language in particular when he argues that “insults act as a proscriptive and prescriptive socialization device by defining boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable social behavior” (30). What this implies is that, sociologically, insults are used as a form of social control where societal norms and expectations are created and reinforced through name-calling.

iii) Gender and Profanity

Most significantly for this paper, profanity provides a window into perceptions of gender. Previous studies showed that in both English and Chinese, men use profanity more frequently than women (Stapleton 23; Liao 29) and that when asked to list insulting names, males tend to list more demeaning and sexually explicit names for females than for themselves (Odhiambo 28). Researchers have suggested that this gender difference

evolves from the different social expectations of women and men regarding profanity (Sapolsky & Kaye, 294; Odhiambo, 28). According to Sapolsky & Kaye (294) profanity has been largely socially acceptable for men but unappreciated in women. In fact, women who use offensive language are likely to bear “negative social ascriptions” as well as discrimination regarding their morality and character (Stapleton 22). Hence, women are socialized to be more self-controlled and utter profanity less often. This thought was reflected well by one of the respondents in Odhiambo’s (28) study who was quoted as saying that “... even in class, girls were hesitant to say the names, whereas the guys would just blurt them out more – goes to show that some guys are more disrespectful and most girls are proper and try to follow what society thinks is right.” As Stapleton (22) argues, the use of profane language represents an accepted social means of constructing a masculine identity.

While many of the studies reviewed above show that the use of profanity tends to be a male reserve, other recent studies from both Eastern and Western societies, reveal that in both China and the US, young people have a tendency towards gender equality in terms of cursing (Yang 46), even though the abusive terms used by women tend to be less offensive than those used by men (Thelwall 85). Today’s women are familiar with and use profanity in their daily life (Stapleton 23). The stereotypical image of men cursing more than women emerges from the fact that most of men’s cursing happens in public (Yang 46), while women have traditionally limited their profanity to the private realm (Stapleton 23). Nevertheless, women nowadays tend to curse in public as well. Scholars indicate that the increasing rate of female cursing implies their contesting of the stereotypical images of women and their pursuit of discourse equality (Liao 29; Stapleton 23).

The above studies examined profanity in general. But in our study, we narrow that focus to terms of intrapersonal abuse. That is – abusive terms people use, hear or apply to themselves, according to their identity

and social construction.

iv) Abusive terms in Chinese and English

Even though a trend towards gender equality in the use of curse words exists in today's world, both men and women display deeply rooted gender bias in the choice of abusive terms. In this regard, Chinese abusive terms betray a male bias in that most of the words regard women as their targets (Chen, 106) and tend to focus on women's sexual organs (Li & Liao 80) or sexual behaviors (Liao 26), for instance, *cào-nǚ-mā* (fuck your mother), *tā-nǎi-nǎi-de* (his grandmother's [genitals]). Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) suggest that in English insulting words for males portray targets as sexually "inadequate, socially inept, or otherwise undesirable" (294), while words referring to "sexual promiscuity are directed almost exclusively towards women" (294). Moreover, abusive terms related to homosexuality are exclusively directed towards men (295). With regard to Chinese abusive language, but with apparent cross-cultural connections, Liao explains why abusive language often refers to sex. First, sexual organs and actions function as a way of reproducing, a sacred function, and profaning sacred things derives the greatest insult (26). Second, sexual organs are the most private parts of bodies and are seldom exposed (26). Because of this, it is regarded to be anti-traditional and insulting when people mention them (27).

Additionally, in Chinese, the term "woman" has several deprecating synonyms including: *huò-shuǐ* (disastrous flood), *mǔ-lǎo-hǔ* (female tiger) and *mǔ-yè-chā* (female monster of the night) (Tan 636). Even the written characters of many abusive words contain bias. Many written Chinese characters consist of combinations of other characters. For example, the symbol 女 (*nǚ*) which represents *female* and appears in each of the following abusive terms: 娘 (*niáng*: sissy), 娼妓 (*chāng-jì*: prostitute), 奸 (*jiān*: traitor or evil), and 婪 (*lán*: greedy) ["女" appears to the left side of the character in each except for 'greedy' where "女" appears

on the bottom of the character]. While the 娘 (sissy) and 娼妓 (prostitute) both refer to females by definition, both 奸 (traitor or evil) and 婪 (greedy) apply equally to both men and women. The inclusion of the radical 女 (female) in many non-gendered words with negative connotations reflects the traditional concept that “men are superior and women are inferior” which has been embraced in the Chinese society for thousands of years, and which is visible in ongoing prejudice towards females. With regard of abusive language, particularly in Chinese, people tend to degrade women by using terminology degrading to women both in semantic nature and in written construct.

3. Methodology

As the new generation college students represent a new social ideology and culture, their perspectives show a new orientation of society. Hence, this study focuses on college students. In order to examine abusive language in disparate languages and culture, we compare the use of these terms in China and America.

Questionnaires were developed to ask students to list insulting words used to describe their own sex, insulting words used for the opposite sex, and then to identify the most insulting term for each sex. Table one shows the questions used to elicit responses for this portion of the study.

Table 1. Questions asked in the questionnaires.

| Questions: |
|--|
| 1. Please list all the insulting words used to describe your gender. |
| 2. What is the most insulting term among these? |
| 3. Please list all the insulting words used to describe the opposite gender. |
| 4. What is the most insulting term among these? |

We went into several classrooms and took about ten minutes of their class time to do the survey. Before administering the questionnaires, we told the students that they were under no obligation to complete this survey. Also, to make sure respondents reported as honestly as possible, this survey was anonymous and students were required to respond individually without talking with or consulting their classmates. Questions and instructions were translated into Mandarin for the Chinese participants.

We collected 320 questionnaires in total. Among them, 170 were from college students in Zhejiang Agriculture and Forestry University, in the southeast of China, and 150 were completed at the University of South Carolina Upstate, in the southeast of the United States. The two schools are regional campuses in non-urban locations and generally attract students with average academic records. Of 170 respondents in China, 105 answered at least questions 1 and 3. As noted in Section 4.3, many respondents chose not to identify the most insulting terms. The final data includes questionnaires from 51 male respondents and 54 females. In the United States, 98 valid questionnaires were collected (see Table 2): 47 males and 51 females.

In addition, since the population of the USA is more ethnically diverse than China, respondents were classified into different racial/ethnic groups: Caucasian, African American, and others (including Asian, Indian and Hispanic).

Table 2. Numbers and ethnicity of respondents

| | Chinese | Caucasian | African American | Others | No Answer |
|-------|---------|-----------|------------------|--------|-----------|
| Men | 51 | 31 | 11 | 4 | 1 |
| Women | 54 | 24 | 22 | 4 | 1 |

Even though some of the literature we reviewed grouped the insulting names into categories, we found these categories inadequate for our study.

Consequently, our research team sat together to classify the data we collected in both Chinese and English. We began with categories suggested by previous studies and extended these based on the semantic values of abusive terms reported by our respondents. This process resulted in eight categories which encompass 95% of all of the terms reported in our data: sex, family, animal, object, appearance, intelligence, personality/manner/character, and race/social group. In addition, we developed four sub-columns under the sex category: anatomical, behavioral, gendered, and words related to sexual orientation. Some words fit multiple categories. For example, “bitch” is not only a gendered word for females, but also equates a person with an animal. We classified this word, as well as others that function similarly, in more than one category (see Table 3).

4. Results

In presenting and discussing the results, we have first categorized all of the insulting words that were reported by our respondents. This is followed by an examination of the frequency with which abusive terms were reported and then an examination of what labels respondents considered most insulting.

i) Categories

Most insulting words reported fall into the sex category for both countries, followed by personality/manner/character (Table 3). Furthermore, gendered insulting words are usually associated with females. In China, 32% of the abusive terms are female-related, while only 17% of the terms refer to males. Although the distinction amongst the American respondents is not as marked as that of the Chinese, American respondents reported 7% more gendered words for females than males (20% vs. 13%).

Noteworthy differences appear in categories of sex-behavioral, family, and race/ethnicity. Compared with the USA (12%), Chinese respondents

report more sex-behavioral insulting words (29%). Moreover, there are more sex-gendered abusive words in China (49%) than in America (33%). Chinese insulting words emphasize on family a lot (12%), compared to English words (2%). Furthermore, no race/ethnicity related insulting words are found in China, but 8% of abusive words in the USA fall into this category.

Table 3. Categories of insulting words reported by respondents in China and the USA

| | Sexual Reference | | | | | | Other Reference | | | | | |
|--------------|------------------|----------|------------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-----------------|------------|--------|--------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| | Anatomical | Behavior | Gendered: Female | Gendered: Male | Orientation | Family | Object | Appearance | Animal | Intelligence | Personality/Character | Race / Ethnicity |
| China | 14% | 29% | 32% | 17% | 3% | 12% | 10% | 8% | 15% | 8% | 29% | 0% |
| USA | 17% | 12% | 20% | 13% | 5% | 2% | 11% | 5% | 10% | 8% | 29% | 8% |

ii) Frequency

As shown in Table 4, females in both China (63%) and America (67%) have a longer list of abusive words for themselves than for men while only 22% of females in China and 18% females in the USA generated more names for males.

Although the numbers do not vary as greatly, 43% of male respondents in China have more names for women than for men (33%). While American male respondents in our study list more names for themselves (57%) than for females (32%). This contradicts patterns noted in previous studies (e.g. Odhiambo).

Table 4. Number of respondents in terms of naming each gender

| Country | Gender | China | | USA | |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| | | Female Respondents | Male Respondents | Female Respondents | Male Respondents |
| Comparison | | | | | |
| More Words for Females (%) | | 63 | 43 | 67 | 32 |
| More Words for Males (%) | | 22 | 33 | 18 | 57 |
| Equal Words for Both Genders (%) | | 15 | 24 | 16 | 11 |
| Total Respondents | | 54 | 51 | 51 | 47 |

iii) Most Insulting Words

Our question asking respondents to identify the most insulting term generated the least response rate. Many of the respondents chose not to answer this question. While we find the reason for this unwillingness, or inability, to respond to this question interesting, investigation into this area goes beyond the immediate objectives of this study and remains a promising subject of future research. Information presented in Tables 5-8 is based on those few surveys with specific answers.

Table 5. The top five most insulting words for male listed by respondents of both genders in China

| The Most Insulting Word for Men | Women | Men | Total |
|---|-------|-----|-------|
| yā (<i>Duck—Male prostitute</i>) | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| xiǎo-bái-liǎn (<i>Little White Face-Kept man</i>) | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| niáng-niáng-qīāng (<i>Womanish/Sissy</i>) | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| tài-jiàn (<i>Eunuch</i>) | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| yang-wě [nán] (<i>Impotent</i>) | 0 | 4 | 4 |

Note: These numbers are actual frequencies.

Table 6. The top five most insulting words for male listed by respondents of both genders in the US

| The Most Insulting Word for Men | Women | Men | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------|-----|-------|
| Nigga/Nigger | 6 | 6 | 12 |
| Faggot/Fag | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| Pussy | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Bastard | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Bitch | 3 | 2 | 5 |

Table 7. The top five most insulting words for female listed by respondents of both genders in China

| The Most Insulting Word for Women | Woman | Man | Total |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-----|-------|
| biǎo-zi (Whore/Prostitute) | 14 | 6 | 20 |
| jiàn/ jiàn-rén (Hussy) | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| jī (Chicken—prostitute) | 2 | 8 | 10 |
| sāo-huò (Coquettish Matter) | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| dàng-fū (Whore) | 3 | 1 | 4 |

Table 8. The most insulting words for female listed by more than three respondents of both genders in America

| The Most Insulting Word for Women | Woman | Man | Total |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-----|-------|
| Bitch | 25 | 11 | 36 |
| Cunt | 9 | 11 | 20 |
| Whore/Hoe | 6 | 9 | 15 |
| Slut | 5 | 4 | 9 |

a) All Females vs. All Males

From Table 5-8, it is clear that in both our Chinese and English data, a majority of the most insulting terms for both males and females are associated with sex. This confirms the extension of Liao's findings in Section 2.4 to the American portion of our data.

When comparing Table 7 and 8, we find a very interesting phenomenon that males and females in both countries generally agree on the most insulting words for females. However, the information in Table 5 and 6 suggest a difference between the terms males and females find to be most insulting for males. Table 5 shows that in the Chinese data, 7 males regard *yā* (duck—meaning male prostitute) as the most insulting word, while female respondents list *xiǎo-bái-liǎn* (kept man) as the top insulting

term, but only one male respondent considers this term the most insulting. *yang-wě* (impotent) is listed by 4 Chinese male respondents as the most insulting word, while no female reported thinking this term was most insulting. This contradiction appears in Table 6 as well where “Faggot/Fag” is regarded as the top insulting word for males by 7 female respondents in the US data, but only 4 males agree. Five females report “Bastard” as the most insulting term for males, while only one male reports this term as most insulting.

b) Chinese Males vs. US Males

The most insulting words for Chinese males as shown in Table 5 are all related to manliness, while the most insulting words in the US data are more diverse, including race, sex, family, and homosexuality.

Twelve respondents list “Nigger/Nigga”, relating to race, as the most insulting term for males in America (Table 7). One of these respondents stated that, “It (nigger) has developed a negative connotation beyond its original definition. It insults all aspects of the person.” Among these 12 respondents, 10 are Africa Americans, one is Caucasian, and the other is Asian. However, in the Chinese data, being called *yā* (duck, meaning male prostitute) is seen as the most insulting.

Additionally, both in the US and China, labeling a man with female-gendered term is regarded as insulting. Five Chinese respondents report *niáng-niáng-qīāng* (womanish or sissy) as the most insulting term for males. Similarly, five American respondents report “Bitch” is the most insulting one for American males.

c) Chinese Females vs. US Females

From the information in Table 7, we find that the most insulting terms for Chinese females are related to sexual immorality. For instance, *biǎo-zi* (whore/prostitute) “prostitute” is regarded as the most insulting term to women in China. Written comments on the surveys assert that “prostitute”

is an insult on women's character and personality. Sexual promiscuity also appears in the list of most insulting words for women in the US data. Examples of abusive terms included here are "whore" and "slut". However, both males and females in America believe that calling a woman "bitch" is the most insulting term. One respondent wrote, "It's very demeaning and it literally means 'female dog'. What person wants to be compared to a dog?" On the other hand, reducing a woman which is what women feel when called "cunt", makes this term rank second on the US data list with respondents calling this word "nasty" and "awful."

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss questions which arise from the findings based on information presented in Tables 3 through 7 and offer historical and current socio-cultural insights relevant to each key question.

i) Categories

From the overall statistical analysis, we find an overwhelming number of sexual terms employed to abuse and insult. Moreover, Chinese respondents report more behavioral words in the sex category. As mentioned in the literature review, sex is a covert and sensitive subject. Especially in China, normally people are reluctant to mention sex publicly. Hence, when one wants to insult another, he or she is likely to employ a term from this category.

Previous studies point out that insulting words betray a male bias in that they are usually oriented towards the female. Our study confirms these findings. The reason may derive from the male-dominated social structures in both China and the USA. Notably, misogynistic tendencies appear not only in the insulting words referencing females, but also for males. For example, insults applied to men include *son of a bitch*, *wěi-niáng*

(fake woman)”, and *mā-bī* (mother’s genitals).”

Our study results suggest Chinese has more sex-gendered insulting words than does English. This finding results from the Chinese written language which incorporates meaningful symbols in the orthography. The use of male (男 [*nān*]) and female (女) symbol inside Chinese written characters marks a distinction between male or female related words in a manner not available to English, thereby resulting into a higher percentage of gendered abusive terms.

Another difference between the results in English and Chinese relates to familial relationships. Family is highly valued in Chinese culture, especially respect for elderly family members. The concept that *filial piety tops all virtues* permeates traditional Chinese culture and remains strong in the hearts of nearly every Chinese person. By comparison, the attachment to family is not so strong in America. As abusive words tend to derive from items of importance, the higher percentage of insulting words in the family category for Chinese follows naturally.

Finally, the diversity of American ethnicity results in the fact that 8% of abusive words appear in race/ethnicity category. The relative mono-ethnicity of China versus the relative diversity of the USA explains this difference. While not a secret topic, race has often been afforded importance paramount to the sacred in the history of the USA.

ii) Frequency

Research suggests that we should expect more terms to be generated for females than for males based on the traditional power structure where males have historically tended to dominate over females in many societies. We found this to be true in the China data for both females (63%) and males (43%). Following the traditional Chinese belief that *men are superior to women* which has been embraced in the Chinese society for thousands of years, we can understand why there would be prejudice against females in the Chinese data. With regard to abusive language, our Chinese

respondents used more names for women, and even when males curse each other, misogyny was evident in the abusive language. As with *niáng-niáng-qīāng* (sissy) and *wěi-niáng* (pseudo-girl), calling a man a woman is an insult, and further denigrates the male. At the same time, that fact that being associated with a female should be considered negative also denigrates the female image.

In the US data, female respondents reported 67% more names for themselves than for males, while only 18% reported more names for men. This finding is consistent with other studies (such as Odhiambo, 2012) which have found the higher reporting of terms for females than males. This finding also correlates with the influence of traditional patriarchy in America. However, males in our US data unexpectedly contradicted this trend with only 32% of men generating more names for females, while 57% came up with more names for themselves. A possible explanation for this comes from Barry Sapolsky and Kaye Barbara's research that found that profanity is more likely to occur within intra-sex rather than inter-sex. Moreover, insulting terms used within the same gender are at a higher level of severity. That is words used to insult the same gender are more offensive and dirtier. This finding may also make sense in the light of the four different functions of profanity that were discussed earlier in this paper. If, as already seen, part of the function of profanity is to complement each other and to represent emotional closeness; it makes sense that the males in the U.S. data would have more names for themselves. However, this does not explain the finding in the China data. This conflicting finding warrants further research.

iii) The Most Insulting Words

a) All Females vs. All Males

1). The most insulting terms for all groups of respondents (both genders in both China and US) relate to sex. As we have already observed, sexual terms are generally private and sensitive. In general, people find their

use in public discourse both surprising and offensive.

2). Table 5 shows that, in the Chinese data, *yang-wě* (impotence) is regarded by males as the second most insulting term, while women believe *xiǎo-bái-liǎn* (kept man) is more insulting. This division is founded in the nature of gender differences. As Anne Moir and David Jessel (107) aptly conclude, “Men want sex, and women want relationships.” Males pay attention to their sexual ability, while women emphasize more men’s social ability.

b) Chinese Males vs. US Males

1). Although our data contains a variety of insulting terms for men in Chinese, our data suggests that the top-five most insulting terms all relate to manliness. On the other hand, the top five terms in the US data are related to ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual organs, and family origin. A possible reason for this is that the relative homogeneity of Chinese population may lend itself to more influence from the traditional patriarchal society where manliness is valued. However, in the United States the great diversity of categories of insulting words derives from its demographic diversity. This diversity is demonstrated in terms of the number one most insulting term: “nigger/nigga” in our US data. We hypothesize that this may be more of a reflection of the geographic location (rural southeast) and bias in our sample and that a study focusing on a different region could yield different results on this question. This is another area in which more research is needed.

2). In terms of Nigger being the number one insulting word, it is worth noting that 30% (10 out of 33) of African-Americans reported that this was the most insulting to them. For Caucasians, less than 2% (1 out of 55) reported this term. This higher percentage African-Americans reporting “Nigger” as the most insulting word likely has its origins in the historicity of slavery and the connections of today’s African-Americans to the memories of the objectification and perceived devaluation or even

worthlessness of that most Blacks in America felt as a result of their enslavement.

3). Because people in China are not as diverse as people in America, none of the most insulting terms in the Chinese data are associated with ethnicity. Rather, the most insulting term reported for men by both genders was *yā* (duck, meaning male prostitute). A possible reason for this could be because this abusive term goes against the traditional concept of male-domination. In China's traditional patriarchal society, the existence of male prostitutes was considered shameful to the dominant social status of males, not because male prostitutes were sexually active, but because they took money from women for having sex. This showed unacceptable weakness and demeaned other males as well.

c) Chinese Females vs. US Females

By comparing two tables (7 and 8) of insulting terms for females, we find that sexual promiscuity is used to insult females in both countries, but especially in China. All the most insulting words for Chinese females are related to sexual promiscuity (Table 7). Looking at the social structure of both countries, we see that both China and the USA once were, and to some extent remain, male-dominated societies, where women generally live under the patronage of men. In China, particularly, a woman was regarded as property or auxiliary of the man in her life (whether her husband, father, brother, etc.). Her sexual purity also belonged to her male patron. What is more, with the establishment of the patriarchal system, women were expected to starve to death rather than lose their virtue. Hence the most insulting words applied to women pertain to losing their sexual purity.

Although some of the words listed as the most insulting for women in America also relate to sexual promiscuity, a total of 36 respondents responded that calling a women "bitch" is the most insulting word. In other words, our respondents report that dehumanizing is more insulting

than sexual promiscuity to American females. This is contrary to previous findings (e.g. Odhiambo). Possible explanations come from Carol Adams' study where she suggests that the word "bitch" is insulting not just because it associates humans with dogs but because it denigrates women by associating them with *female* dogs. The suggestion here is that the female dog gets her "bitchiness" from breeding. This lowers the female to the status of a baby making machine.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to narrow the focus of our research from profanity in general to abusive terms used in intrapersonal insults. In terms of semantic categories, we found that insulting words referring to sex are the most frequently reported in both the American and Chinese data, followed by personality/manner/character. Gendered insulting words relating specifically to females are reported with much greater frequency than for males in both our survey locations. While this is a small sample that focuses on college students, these findings suggest a gender bias in both the American and Chinese cultures. Key differences between the Chinese data and the American data reside in race versus family foci, and behavioral versus gendered terms within the umbrella category of sexual terms.

With regard to perceived severity of insulting words, our data demonstrates that males agree with females more, suggesting that they understand what is insulting to a female more than females do for males. This is true in both China and the USA. However, Substantial differences appear when it comes to the most insulting term for the same gender in each culture. Dehumanizing is reported to be more severe than sexual promiscuity in the US, while the Chinese data demonstrates that sexual immorality remains a serious concern in China. Finally, due to the ethnic

diversity in the US, words relating to racism are regarded as the most insulting for the American males in our study.

In conclusion, our study found both similarities and differences in Chinese and English insulting words. These similarities may either point to rapid cultural diffusion across different societies or to the existence of some universal cultural norms and practices that defy any boundaries between different cultures. This presents a rich subject of investigation for follow-up studies.

❖ References

- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing. 2000. Print.
- Adams, Michael. "Teaching 'Bad' American English: Profanity and Other 'Bad' Words in the Liberal Arts Setting." *Journal Of English Linguistics* 30.4 2002: 353-365. Print
- Moir, Anne and David Jessel. *Brain Sex: the Real Difference between Men and Women*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1992. Print.
- Chen, Congyun. "On Sexism of the Chinese Language." *Journal of Nantong University* 21.4. 2005:105-107. Web. 25 Feb. 2012.
- Li, Jiayuan & Deming Liao. "'脏话'的多维度解构 (Multi-dimensional Analysis of Cursing Words)." *Journal of Leshan Teachers College* 22.3. 2007: 79-81. Web. 26 Feb. 2012.
- Liao, Deming. "Sexual Consciousness Orientation of Dirty Words." *Journal of Eastern Liaoning University* 11.4. 2009: 25-30. *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House*. Web. 25 Feb. 2012.
- Mencken, H.L. "American Profanity." *American Speech* 19.4 1944: 241. Print.
- Odhiambo, Calvin. "The Name Game: Using Insults to Illustrate the Social Construction of Gender." *College Teaching* 60.1. 2012: 25-30. Print.
- Sapolsky, Barry S., and Barbara K. Kaye. "The Use Of Offensive Language

- By Men And Women In Prime Time Television Entertainment." *Atlantic Journal Of Communication* 13.4 2005: 292-303. Print.
- Stapleton, Karyn. "Gender And Swearing: A Community Practice." *Women & Language* 26.2 (2003): 22-33. Print.
- Sun, Zhuoqun. "On the Dialectic Knowledge of Vile Languages in Chinese and English." *Science Education and Culture* Oct. 2011 (29): 111-112. Web. 26 Feb. 2012
- Tan, Dali. "Sexism in the Chinese Language." *NWSA Journal* 2.4 (1990): 635-639. Print.
- Thelwall, Mike. "Fk Yea I Swear: Cursing And Gender In Myspace." *Corpora* 3.1 (2008): 83-107. Web. 26 Feb. 2012.
- Thomas, Linda, Ishtha Singh, and Jean S. Peccei. *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction*. London: Routledge. 2003. Print.
- Wajnryb, Ruth. *Language Most Foul*. Australia: Allen & Unwin. 2005. Print.
- Yang, Yang. "话说脏话." *心理研究* Nov. 2008: 46-47. Print.

Appendix

Chinese characters for words used in the text, in alphabetical order:

| | | |
|-------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| biǎo-zi | 婊子 | whore |
| cào-nǐ-mā | 操你妈 | fuck your mother |
| chāng-jì | 娼妓 | prostitute |
| dàng-fù | 荡妇 | whore |
| dīào | 屌 | dick (awesome) |
| huò-shu | 祸水 | disastrous flood |
| jī | 鸡 | chicken—prostitute |
| jiān | 奸 | traitor or evil |
| jiàn/ jiàn-rén | 贱/贱人 | hussy |
| lán | 婪 | greedy |
| mā-bī | 妈逼 | mother's genitals |
| mǔ-lǎo-hǔ | 母老虎 | female tiger |
| mǔ-yè-chā | 母夜叉 | female monster of the night |
| nán | 男 | man |
| niáng | 娘 | sissy |
| niáng-niáng-qiāng | 娘娘腔 | womanish/sissy |
| nǚ | 女 | woman |
| sāo-huò | 骚货 | coquettish matter |
| tài-jiàn | 太监 | eunuch |
| tā-nǎi-nǎi-de | 他奶奶的 | his grandmothers' [<i>genitals</i>] |
| wěi-niáng | 伪娘 | fake woman |
| xiǎo-bái-liǎn | 小白脸 | little white face (kept man) |
| yā | 鸭 | duck (male prostitute) |
| yang-wě (nán) | 阳痿 (男) | impotent (man) |