Genderless Narratives: The Pragmatics of ta in Chinese Social Media

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Abstract: The 21st century is an era marked by an extensive and explicit interest in gender, identity, and social media across the world, and China is no exception despite it being labelled as the "World's Worst Place to be Gay" (Ross, 2017). Through examining digital narratives in which Chinese social media users employ the genderless non-standard third person pronoun *ta* written using the Roman alphabet instead of the standard Chinese characters, the study sheds light on both contemporary language use and manipulation of gender constructions.

Mandarin Chinese originally used the single character 他 (*ta*) to refer to the third person 'he', 'she', and 'it', which later gave way to three separate written "standard" forms: 他 (*ta* 'he'), 她 (*ta* 'she'), and 它 (*ta* 'it') all with the same pronunciation (see Chan, 2011). As a linguistic device that appears to be transferred from spoken language and designed to maximize the unique advantages of computer mediated communication (CMC), *ta* is at the forefront of understudied interpersonal dialogic practices with only two preliminary articles (Zhan, 2013; Zhong, 2015). The non-standard form *ta* thrives on the ability to obscure the gender of the intended referent by transferring its oral properties to written discourse. The study of *ta* is of particular importance with regards to its implications in Chinese CMC and advertising as its specific function and referent is defined, i.e. co-constructed, through writers' usage and readers' interpretation.

This research is part of the first systematic study which examines the textual and pragmatic usage of *ta* in Chinese CMC (Sluchinski, 2017). Specifically, the research presented here adopts qualitative and quantitative methods in analyzing *ta* in context from celebrity status verified accounts on Chinese CMC platform Sina Weibo. With an inductive approach to research, the study examines the pragmatic function of *ta* in digital narratives and how *ta* contributes to the emergent narrative (Walsh, 2011) through combined narrative analysis frameworks (Bamberg, 1997; Richardson, 2006; Turk, 2011; Utell, 2016) with a focus on empathy (Keen, 2006). The study operates with the following working definition for "narrative" in the context of the CMC data used in the study: A narrative is a written text that serves the communicative purpose of recounting either fictional or non-fictional events, also referred to as stories, involving characters, where the characters' emotions in relation to the event may or may not be explicitly addressed.

Adopting a constructivist approach to narrative analysis introduced in Squire et al. (2014:8), the study regards narratives as themes and *ta* as an interpersonal resource designed to facilitate the co-construction of emergent narratives based on empathy. Thus, as a primary performance-based, pragmatic approach to *ta* in narratives, the study draws on Bamberg's (1997) adapted narrative analysis methodology based on positioning analysis to further explain how the factors of co-construction and empathy work together to facilitate the reader's alignment with the character or situation presented in the text.

Preliminary observations reveal that celebrity status verified account users insert the gender unspecified *ta* into narratives with the function of soliciting empathy or alignment from readers. In order to achieve this function, *ta* is embedded in the following three prominent discourse types: 1) personal-narratives, 2) you-narratives, and 3) *ta*-narratives. Personal-narratives and *ta*-narratives are designed to seek empathy via character identification while you-narratives are designed to create situational empathy.

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