

## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN MANDARIN CHINESE

Unlike some European languages, Mandarin Chinese does not inherently distinguish between feminine and masculine forms, except in the use of third-person pronouns. Originally, the character '他' was used for both 'he/him' and 'she/her'. However, influenced by Western literature, the character '她' was created specifically to refer to 'she/her' in contemporary Mandarin Chinese. The character 她 incorporates the radical 女 (female) instead of the radical 亻 (people) found in 他, making it related specifically to females.

Despite having different written forms, both 他 and 她 share the same pronunciation 'tā', resulting in no gender distinction in verbal communication. To indicate social gender, the characters 男 (male) or 女 (female) need to be added before the noun, such as 女教授 (female professor) or 男学生 (male student).

Some Chinese characters containing the 女 component indicate biological gender (sex), such as 妻 (wife), 姐 (older sister), and 姑 (aunt). However, not all characters with the 女 component are associated exclusively with females; some carry positive or neutral meanings, while others carry negative and gender-discriminatory connotations.

Additionally, due to the influence of Confucian ideas that men are superior to women, some idioms are listed in order of male preference. For example, using the term '兄弟姐妹' (lit. older brother, younger brother, older sister, younger sister) for siblings reflects this male-centric preference.

When using inclusive Mandarin Chinese, we not only need to avoid using characters derogatory to women but also need to take into account issues such as gender, disability discrimination, and racial discrimination. Following are some examples.

1. Avoid emphasizing gender when unnecessary. For instance, when introducing Professor Wang Ming, it is not necessary to specify 王明是女教授 (Wang Ming is a female professor).
2. Use the third-person pronoun '他' if gender is unknown. Although suggestions have been made to use 'Ta' or create new Chinese characters like '无也' and 'X

## SMLC INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDES

- 也' as gender-neutral pronouns, they have not been widely accepted by Mandarin speakers in China.
- Utilize gender-neutral language whenever possible. For example, instead of 你妻子 (your wife), it would be preferable to use 你爱人 (your partner).
  - Challenge stereotypes. For example, use 姐妹兄弟 instead of 兄弟姐妹. Avoid terms like 理工男 (lit. science and engineering male). While the term itself does not directly express discrimination against men, it implies gender stereotyping regarding interests and career choices.
  - Avoid descriptions that discriminate based on gender, age, disability, race, and vulnerable people. For example:
    - Avoid the description like 他脆弱得像一个女人 (He is weak as a woman), or the phrase 剩女 (lit. leftover woman) for single women in China over the age of 27ish.
    - Use the phrase 不同性别 (different gender) instead of 异性 (opposite gender).
    - Refrain from using 弱智 (lit. weak intelligence) to refer to people with mental disabilities.
    - Avoid using 穷人 (poor people) to describe individuals with low income.
    - Do not use 歪果仁 (lit. wonky nuts) to refer to foreigners.

Last but not least, like other languages, Mandarin evolves constantly, so be cautious when using newly created online words. When you are unsure of the appropriateness of your wording in a certain context, always ask for help.<sup>1</sup>

### Further resources

Willian, Dan, '[The Search for Non-Binary Pronouns in Chinese](#)', *Multilingual* (2021)

Ferrari, Pisaba, '[The gradual rise of gender-neutral pronouns in Hong Kong and mainland China](#)' (2022)

[Gender in Language Project](#)

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