

从她到她们: Feminist Perspectives on Language Reform in Simplified Chinese

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Abstract

This thesis explores feminist approaches to language reform in Simplified Chinese, critically examining how gender biases are embedded and perpetuated through linguistic structures. By focusing specifically on Chinese characters and words with gendered implications, particularly those containing the female radical "女 (female)," the research reveals the historical and cultural origins of linguistic sexism and its contemporary manifestations, such as semantic pejoration and gendered word ordering.

Employing a transformative experience design (TED) framework, this study incorporates interactive methodologies including participatory workshops and a digital browser plug-in. In the workshop setting, participants explore possibilities for redefining words through storytelling, which serves as an effective form of amelioration. Participants directly gain inspiration and are encouraged to embrace the empowering idea that language can indeed be redefined. Concurrently, the digital plug-in highlights Chinese characters containing the “女 (female)” radical, along with gender-related phrases and expressions, enabling users to view and critically examine their current meanings and propose alternative definitions. This tool facilitates real-time identification and active community-driven reinterpretation of gender-biased terms, fostering broader societal awareness and continuous linguistic resistance. Together, these methods empower women by reclaiming linguistic agency and actively promoting gender-inclusive language. By combining semiotic analysis with user experience (UX) and participatory design methods, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on language as a critical site of feminist intervention, aiming ultimately to promote gender equality through systemic linguistic transformation.

Keywords

Language reform, feminist, Chinese characters, gender equality, storytelling, UX design, participatory design, cultural bias, co-design, language perception

Land Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) nations. Unceded means that this land was never surrendered, relinquished or handed over in any way.

Today, most of BC remains unceded sovereign Native lands, over which neither the Canadian or BC governments have the legal or moral authority to govern. I hope that our words and actions today can help to foster a better understanding of how we can support Indigenous sovereignty as settlers and uninvited guests on this land, AND to work to create new relationships with the Original Peoples of this land, based in honour and respect.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Chris Hethrington, whose thoughtful guidance, patience, and insightful advice have significantly shaped this research. Chris's invaluable feedback and continuous encouragement greatly enhanced my critical thinking and enriched the quality of my thesis.

My sincere appreciation also extends to my internal reviewer, Dr. Garnet Hertz, whose insightful comments and constructive critique substantially improved the clarity of my work.

I am deeply grateful to the countless women throughout history who bravely pioneered feminist language reform, challenging societal norms and paving the way for current and future generations. My gratitude also extends to contemporary advocates, scholars, and activists whose relentless efforts continue to make gender equality a reality. Their courage and dedication have profoundly inspired this work.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continuous support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies. Their unwavering belief in my abilities made this journey possible. A special thanks goes to my dear friends Asad Aftab, Qianxuan Chen, Joshita Nagaraj, Rebecca Zhong, Yahan Xing and Yunhui An. Each of you, in your unique way, has supported, inspired, and uplifted me during this process, and I am endlessly grateful for your presence in my life.

Introduction

Motivation: A Feminist Designer's Personal Connection to Language Reform

On September 29, 2021, a Weibo tag #I am not Bing-Yuan went viral on trends. Weibo is a social media platform in China, similar to X. I was drawn to the new internet slang, 病媛 (Bing-Yuan) in this trend. The term 病媛 (Bing-Yuan) emerged in an article published by a Chinese online news platform. According to this article, 病媛 (Bing-Yuan) describes young women who falsely claim to have serious physical or mental illnesses online, taking carefully staged and made-up selfies in hospitals to promote health products (ThePaper, 2021, paragraph 1). Figure 1 illustrates a screenshot from this trending Weibo topic page in which the topic host issued a public statement in response to the newly created term. She emphasized that she was an actual patient and strongly objected to being labelled as a 病媛 (Bing-Yuan). The character, 病 (Bing), directly translates as "illness." The character, 媛 (Yuan), was originally a complimentary term describing women's graceful demeanor and beautiful appearance while, in modern usage, it represents talented women (Wang & Wei, 2022). However, within this newly emerged context, 媛 (Yuan) gains a derogatory connotation associated with fake personas and performative online identities. Following the virality of 病媛 (Bing-Yuan), a variety of similar internet memes emerged, employing the character 媛 (Yuan) to label and stigmatize women in different contexts. Examples include 佛媛 (Fo-Yuan), where 佛 (Fo) means Buddhism, used sarcastically to describe women who pose as devout Buddhists for social media attention, and 公益媛 (Gongyi-Yuan), where 公益 (Gongyi) means charity, mocking women perceived as pretending charitable intentions while seeking personal gain or fame.



Figure 1: Screenshot. The topic page for the #I am not Bing-Yuan#, was viewed 660 million times and discussed with 288,000 posts. Weibo. Retrieved October 19 from <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E6%88%91%E4%B8%8D%E6%98%AF%E7%97%85%E5%AA%9B%23&from=default>

Figure 2: Screenshot. The topic page for the #Bing-Yuan appear after Fo-Yuan# with Thepaper’s post. Weibo. Retrieved October 19 from <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E4%BD%9B%E5%AA%9B%E5%90%8E%E5%86%8D%E7%8E%B0%E7%97%85%E5%AA%9B%23>

Over time, I noticed that many women who posted attractive photos would be labelled as "X-媛 yuan" and have the authenticity of their actions questioned. As a woman, I discovered that female-related terms were being weaponized against women and constricted their space to exist. This phenomenon isn't limited to just the character 媛 (yuan), nor is it something that only started recently. We begin learning language from birth, but many people seem to have never considered the relationship between

language and gender. As a feminist from China, I have gradually become curious about the long-standing inequality in the Chinese language. Language and culture are closely intertwined, and continue to be used to reflect and reinforce power structures and social norms (Montell, 2019). In the Chinese context, gender power structures are constantly reproduced through character construction and semantic evolution, forming an invisible system of symbolic violence. As sociolinguist Amanda Montell says, "If you want to insult a woman, call her a prostitute. If you want to insult a man, call him a woman" (2019). Women are objectified, while men are insulted by being feminized. This verbal violence exists not only in daily insults but is deeply embedded in the genetic blueprint of Chinese characters. Therefore, I want to re-examine this language that we are so familiar with. What power structures are actually hidden within Chinese written characters? Is it possible to eliminate or reduce sexism in language?

Language Reform Through Design and Early Inspirations: Nüshu

Historically in China, writing was a male privilege, and women were denied the opportunity to become literate. Even in eras when women could write and receive education, this education was largely limited to urban elites. However, an ancient Chinese language used only by women, called 女书 (Nüshu), was discovered in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Nüshu means "women's writing" in Chinese. "Out of the thousands of scripts that are gender-specific to men, here we have one that we know is gender-specific to women (Silber, as cited in Young, 2017)." While we don't know the exact origins of Nüshu, it was a secret communication system collectively created by women that allowed them to express themselves and communicate with others in a patriarchal society. It demonstrates how language can either empower or suppress, depending on who can use it and how it's used. What I find most inspiring is how women stepped outside of male narratives to form their own texts. Could we now also create a safe space for women to connect, co-create and empower themselves, reshape forms of expression and eliminate deep-rooted inequalities in language?

Beyond being a feminist from China, I am also an interaction designer. Throughout my journey in learning interaction design, I've come to realize that design is more than just aesthetics and functionality. I find myself increasingly drawn to the concept of "design for justice," recognizing that

design can be a powerful tool for creating social impact and change. Therefore, I want to explore how design can influence and facilitate language reform and communication to empower women and challenge traditional gender roles. Through creating design solutions, I hope to consciously encourage women to reclaim the power to define language in service of gender equality. In studying the relationships between women's empowerment, language reform, and its dissemination, I am both a learner and an advocate. I am committed to challenging the status quo, seeking innovative approaches, and putting research findings into practice to create impact. This research is not just an academic pursuit but a manifestation of my commitment to using language and design as a tool for social change.

Research Questions and Scope for Feminist Linguistic Intervention

Language does not simply describe reality; it shapes social perceptions and reinforces power structures. Given the pervasive nature of this linguistic stigmatization, it is crucial to explore how language reform can serve as a tool for female empowerment. Many Chinese characters and words associated with women undergo semantic pejoration, evolving from neutral or positive meanings to derogatory ones, which reflect deeper societal biases. This research examines how language reform can serve as a tool for female empowerment by critically analyzing and redefining gendered language in Chinese. This research seeks to explore the potential of feminist language reform to challenge and reshape gendered linguistic structures through participatory interventions and interaction design.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How can I investigate the relationship between female empowerment, language reform, and the transmission of reformed language in Chinese?

To answer this question, the research focuses on three key objectives:

1. Identifying the power structures embedded in Chinese language: Examining how linguistic hierarchies shape gender perceptions, particularly through characters with the 女 (female) radical and other female-associated terms.
2. Redefining biased characters and words: Exploring participatory methods, such as storytelling and co-design workshops, to collaboratively create inclusive and empowering linguistic alternatives.

3. Understanding the challenges of language adoption and transmission: Investigating how linguistic resistance occurs in response to gender-inclusive changes and how redefined words can gain acceptance.

This study primarily focuses on single Chinese characters with the 女 (female) radical and words related to women, rather than sentence structures or broader syntactic changes. This deliberate scope allows for a deeper analysis of individual linguistic units, where gender biases are structurally embedded. Sentence structure requires examining grammar, syntax, and pragmatic context, making it difficult to isolate gender bias within individual linguistic components. Unlike words, which have fixed meanings, sentence meaning shifts based on context, complicating efforts to redefine specific elements. Chinese characters contain meaning at the level of radicals and components, making them direct carriers of gendered ideology. Therefore, the strategy of redefining individual words or characters can be implemented more generally and it is also conducive to observing changes in language use. By limiting the scope, this research ensures a manageable, actionable, and impactful approach to feminist language intervention in Chinese.

Secondary Research: Historical and Cultural Overview of Chinese Language and Gender Bias

The Chinese language, as one of the world's oldest writing systems, is full of cultural, social, and ideological narratives stretching back centuries. I hope to identify and reveal existing power structures in Chinese through a literature review. Gender bias in Chinese is not the result of a single mechanism but is expressed in multiple ways. This research examines two primary mechanisms through which such bias appears: first, the meanings encoded within individual characters; second, the gradual negative shift of semantic terms related to women. Each mechanism reveals how cultural values and historical power structures are embedded within the language, thus reinforcing societal biases.

Chinese Language system

The structural formation of Chinese characters reveals the deep connection between linguistic elements and cultural narratives, highlighting the embedded biases. In the written Chinese language, 4% are pictographs, 13% are aggregates (new symbols made by combining basic pictographs), 1% are ideographs, and the remaining 82% are complex phonetic characters, also referred to as Phono-semantic characters (Pater, 2016). These complex phonetic characters are formed through the combination of pictographs and phonetic elements. Each Chinese character has its own unique form, meaning, and monosyllabic pronunciation (Huang, 2023). Phono-semantic compounds combine a radical, which conveys the thematic meaning of the character, with another element that indicates pronunciation but often carries an additional layer of meaning (figure 3). A "radical" in Chinese characters functions similarly to a semantic root in Western languages, providing a conceptual or thematic foundation for understanding a character's meaning category, such as elements relating to water, wood, or gender. This dual meaning allows many characters to be understood as narratives formed by their parts.

RADICAL	[pronunciation]		meaning	
木 wood	主	[zhǔ]	柱	column, pillar [zhù]
	反	[fǎn]	板	board, plank [bǎn]
言—讠 speech	青	[qīng]	请	to ask [qǐng]
	人	[rén]	认	to know [rèn]

1/2 Basic characters (usually called “radicals”) and their composition in compound characters. Typeface in use (Chinese characters): Noto Sans SC Regular.

Figure 3: Screenshot. Phono-semantic characters explanation. *About Chinese Type Design - 1/3*. Retrieved February 2, 2025 from <https://www.lisahuang.work/about-chinese-type-design-1-3>

As shown in Figure 4, 明 (bright) is composed of the 日 (sun) radical and the 月 (moon) part, symbolizing the brightness brought by the union of the sun and moon. Similarly, 好 (good) combines the 女 (female) radical with 子 (son), telling a cultural story that a woman is deemed good or virtuous within a family context when she bears a son. These combinations reveal how societal values are encoded into the structure of Chinese characters.

Chinese Character And Compound: *Storytelling*

“日” Chinese Radicals, means sun related character

明 (bright) → 日 (sun) + 月 (moon)
The sun and the moon have brought forth the brightness

“女” Chinese Radicals, means female related character

好 (good) → 女 (female) + 子 (son)
When a woman gives birth to a son, it's good for the family.

“木” Chinese Radicals, means wood related character

林 (forest) → 木 (wood) + 木 (wood)
There's a lot of woods that make up the forest.

Figure 4: Some examples of narratives composed of Phono-semantic characters.

The historical roots of bias in these structures can be traced back to the origin of the 女 (Female) radical. 女 (Female) is both a character and a radical. As shown in Figure 5, in oracle bone inscriptions, 女 (Female) was a pictograph of a woman kneeling with crossed hands, symbolizing obedience and submission (Dou & Dou, 2005). This image reflects the social norms of ancient Chinese culture, where women were relegated to secondary, submissive roles. Thus, the 女 (Female) radical became central to perpetuating patriarchal expectations by embedding restrictive norms within the language. These structural and narrative elements demonstrate that Chinese characters are not merely linguistic tools but

carriers of cultural ideology. The interaction between radicals and phonetic components provides insight into the values and hierarchies that shape language.

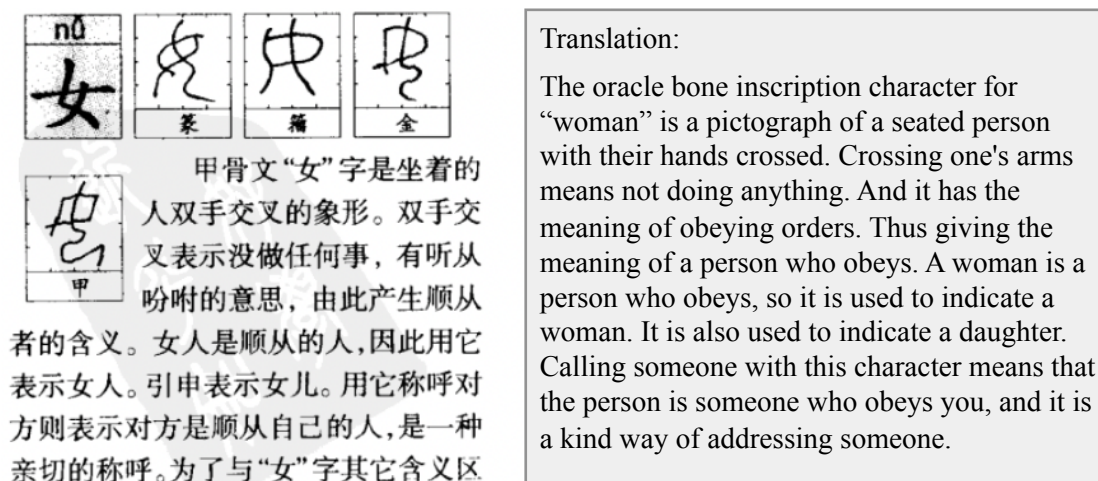


Figure 5: Screenshot. Origin, evolution and meaning of the “女 (female)” character. Retrieved February 2, 2025 from 汉字字源: 当代新说文解字(*Origin of Chinese characters: A contemporary new explanation of Chinese characters*). 吉林文史出版社(Jilin Literature and History Publisher).

Individual character with 女 (Female) radical

In ancient times, Chinese characters did not carry obvious gender bias as seen in many modern usages, and the "woman" radical symbolized women's central position in matriarchal society. Zi Jian Hong and Li Zhao Xiang (2001) point out that the character 姓, meaning surname, is composed of the radical 女 (Female) and the right component 生 (Birth), with its ancient meaning referring to being born of a human being (p. 725). The character 始 (beginning) symbolizes a woman's pregnancy and the act of giving life, with its meanings tracing back to Nüwa, the mythological ancestor of humanity and the female creator deity (Chen, 2019, p. 675). Additionally, several surnames with female radicals emerged during this period, such as 姜 (Jiang), 姚 (Yao), and 姬 (Ji), which serve as evidence of the existence of a matriarchal society (Chen, 2019, P675). However, the societal transition to patriarchal systems drastically altered the portrayal of women in written language. As polygamous practices emerged and Confucian doctrines gained prominence, women's societal roles became increasingly restricted, and

this subjugation was reflected in the evolution of characters with the 女 radical. In marriage, women were subordinate to their husband's family. The character 妇 (married women) translates to mean "to serve," depicting the image of managing household affairs and holding a broom to do housework (Chen, 2019, P676). The character 娶 (marry a woman) means taking a wife as a subsidiary possession (Chen, 2019, P676). Women even became spoils of war and accessories between men's battles. For example, the character 奴 (slave) means criminal, and its form shows the gesture of grabbing a woman with hands, representing how the victorious side would capture the women of the defeated tribe as war trophies (Chen, 2019, P675).

Although culture and marriage systems have evolved in modern times, the derogation and regulation of women in Chinese characters with the female radical has not changed with the times. By analyzing 178 Chinese characters with the female radical, Yan (2008) found that more than one-sixth of the characters have negative connotations, such as 嫉 (jealousy) and 奴 (slave). There is also one-sixth of the characters, such as 娴 (graceful) and 婉 (gentle) illustrate how societal expectations of women's behaviour—valuing compliance and delicacy—are ingrained within the language itself (Yan, 2008). This historical trajectory underscores the enduring power structures encoded in Chinese characters. Language reform is thus essential to challenge these biases and to reimagine how linguistic systems can reflect gender equity rather than perpetuate inequality.

The implications of these biases extend beyond language to shape societal perceptions and behaviors, echoing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language influences thought and worldview (Ali, 2023). By encoding and perpetuating gender stereotypes, the Chinese language contributes to the systematic marginalization of women. Reforming these linguistic structures is thus essential for addressing gender inequality.

Word Pejoration

Language reflects and perpetuates societal power structures, shaping how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Amanda Montell's (2019) *WordShut* highlights how the semantics of words associated with women often undergo pejoration. Words like "mistress," once a term of respect for a

woman in charge of a household, are now laden with negative connotations of impropriety (Montell, 2019). Similarly, the term "spinster" has shifted from a neutral descriptor of an occupation to a judgmental label for unmarried women. This process of semantic pejoration reveals the cultural forces at play, where male-dominated narratives dominate linguistic development, aligning language with patriarchal structures.

In Chinese, the phenomenon mirrors Montell's observations. Characters with the 女 (woman) radical and women-related words often reflect a similar trajectory. Earlier in the paper, the character 媛 (Yuan) underwent pejoration on the internet. Another example of semantic pejoration in the Chinese language is the word 小姐 (xiaojie), which originally meant "Miss" or "young lady" and was a respectful term used to address unmarried women. Historically, 小姐 was a neutral or even honorable title, often used to refer to daughters of noble families or young women of status. However, the meaning of 小姐 has shifted over time in certain contexts. In contemporary usage, particularly in informal settings, it has acquired a derogatory connotation, being used to refer to sex workers. This semantic shift reflects broader societal attitudes, where terms associated with women are disproportionately vulnerable to pejoration, gaining negative or demeaning connotations.

Furthermore, in the age of Internet media, the phenomenon of "pan-stigmatization" has emerged in society, where stigmatizing phenomena continuously multiply, stigmatized targets become increasingly generalized, and the content of stigmatization gradually diversifies (Wang & Wei, 2022). The stigmatizing vocabulary reflects the misogynistic atmosphere in daily life. According to Yue Lan's (2018) research on the trends of female group stigmatization in the internet communication era, the stigmatization of female-related vocabulary mainly focuses on sexual stigma (such as 荡妇 (slut) and 婊子 (whore)), objectification of women (such as 花瓶 (eye candy)), and devaluation of female worth (such as 女博士 (female PhD) and 女司机 (female driver)). These terms cover different professions, ages, and educational levels. For instance, 女司机 (female driver) is perceived as having poor driving skills and being easily panicked; 女博士 (female PhD) is seen as a bookworm lacking sexual appeal; 中国大妈 (Chinese aunties) represent people who like to take advantage of others and are rude; 女大学生 (female college students) are viewed as ignorant, vain, selfish, and sexually promiscuous in private

spheres despite their higher education. These stereotypes are continuously reinforced through repeated use of negative labels, and the stigmatization of women ultimately spreads from the internet to everyday language. Once these negative labels are established, it becomes nearly impossible for the women under these labels to reclaim their reputations.

Primary Research: Opportunities and Methods

Design Opportunity

In the previous section, the exploration of gender bias in China revealed two main issues. First, as historical narratives have not evolved with the times, leading to female radicals carrying inherent gender bias. This presents an opportunity to reconstruct empowering narratives through participatory storytelling workshops. Second, word pejoration has been increasingly perpetuated through the internet environment and has amplified the spread of stigmatizing language. To address this, I propose interactive interventions that encourage users to reclaim stigmatized terms in positive contexts through user experience design, ultimately promoting linguistic equality.

Both approaches emphasize the need for co-creation within communities. Language reform cannot be imposed from the top down but must emerge through collective discussion, and collaborative meaning-making. By integrating storytelling workshops with interactive digital tools, I aim to create a holistic user experience that promotes transformative engagement. Ultimately, this research aims to enhance personal empowerment, add gender perspectives, and improve the representation of women in Chinese language and society. Through these participatory interventions, our goal is not only to challenge linguistic inequality, but also to inspire lasting cultural change.

Storytelling: Semiotics-Inspired Linguistic Reform

These approaches are further informed by semiotic theories of language, which emphasize the dynamic interplay between signs, meanings, and cultural constructs. As cultural sociologist Richard Howells observes in *Visual Culture* (2003), within mythical systems a sign functions as a “signifier”

representing additional meanings. The concept of “signifier” denotes the physical form that stands for an abstract idea, known as the “signified,” while the sign itself constitutes the union of these two elements (Howells, 2003). The inherent arbitrariness of the sign—central to semiotic theory—suggests that meanings are not naturally fixed but are culturally constructed, since the connection between a word and the idea it represents is purely conventional.

As previously noted, in a Chinese writing system, many characters are complex phonetic compounds that combine semantic and phonetic elements; these components not only indicate pronunciation but also often carry additional connotations that embed cultural narratives within the language itself. Consequently, the distinctive characteristics of Chinese characters provide a unique opportunity to employ a semiotic framework for redefining gendered characters and the cultural narratives they sustain. Howells (2003) describes a signifier as an empty vessel into which cultural meaning is poured to imbue it with meaning. Engaging with these structures through a semiotic lens, gives us an opportunity to reinterpret Chinese characters containing the radical “female” so that they can challenge traditional associations and propose an alternative feminist narrative.

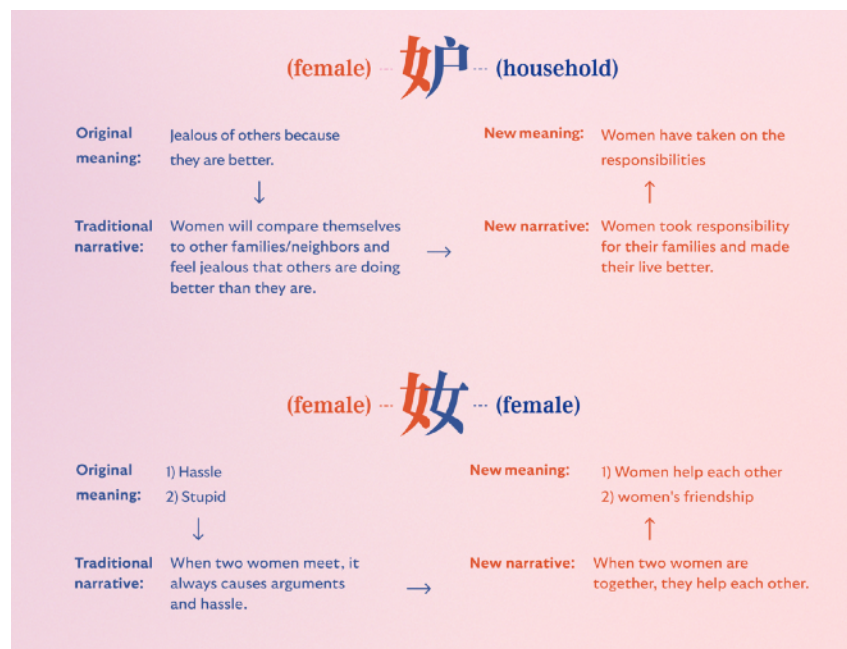


Figure 6: Some examples demonstrating how storytelling can reconstruct meanings to challenge gender stereotypes and promote female empowerment.

As shown in Figure 6, the 姦 character was originally defined as “hassle” or “stupid.” Composed of two instances of the character 女 (woman), its cultural meaning conveys an outdated narrative: when two women are together, they always cause arguments or trouble. However, if we discard this outdated cultural meaning from the “姦” vessel and replace it with a contemporary interpretation, new narrative can emerge: when two women are together, they support each other. This narrative implies the meanings of “female friendship” or “mutual assistance.” Moreover, this new narrative is not limited to a single interpretation—people can redefine and reimagine Chinese characters through their unique perspectives. By viewing language as a constantly evolving system of symbols, storytelling becomes a tool to challenge historical biases and foster a transformation in societal gender perceptions.

Participatory Design Approach

Participatory design (PD) is a collaborative methodology that actively involves stakeholders in the design process, equalizing power relations and fostering inclusivity and shared ownership over the outcomes (Drain & Sanders, 2019). Rather than positioning designers as the only decision-makers, participatory design acknowledges that those who will be directly affected by a design intervention should play a role in shaping it. This approach aligns closely with feminist linguistic reform, where language users—particularly marginalized groups—must be given agency in redefining and reclaiming linguistic narratives. As one of my Design Outputs, I developed a co-creative space using Participatory Design as the core methodology, inviting female Chinese language users to apply the storytelling approach discussed earlier to generate new narratives for Chinese characters containing the female radical (女). This approach ensures that linguistic redefinition emerges organically from lived experiences rather than being imposed externally.

My decision to adopt PD is deeply rooted in a feminist perspective. Feminism reveals that women have historically been excluded from cultural authorship. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2013) argues, women were not born, but rather made and shaped passively by structures that positioned them as the “Other.” De Beauvoir (1949/2013) points out that women are unable to construct subjective collectives that can resist patriarchal norms, largely because they lack their own common language, history or religion. Ueno Chizuko (2018/2023) similarly critiques how the category of “woman” is not self-

defined but assigned—a linguistic and cultural identity formed before the individual exists. From this view, language becomes both the medium and the evidence of exclusion. It precedes the individual and carries the weight of male-authored narratives. In accepting the name “woman”, women must also accept the history of that category and the historical misogyny it carries (Ueno, 2018/2023). Feminist resistance, therefore, must begin with reclaiming the right to define. As Ueno says (2018/2023), to be a feminist means to wrestle with misogyny, to change the mandatory definition of “woman” to one of choice, and therein lies the key to women's liberation. Participatory design offers a tangible, action-oriented methodology to do just that. It allows women not only to resist inherited definitions but to create new ones based on their own cultural interpretations and lived experiences. Through this framework, PD becomes more than a design method—it is an act of feminist agency. By enabling women to collaboratively redefine the linguistic structures that shape their identities, PD supports the formation of a community that can speak with its own voice and write its own history.

When designing specific activities in PD, I refer to the recommendations for PD practitioners proposed by Drain and Sanders. First, designers must understand the power dynamics within the participants' environment, ensuring that relationships among participants are equitable and that no one is marginalized (Drain & Sanders, 2019). Second, assessing participants' initial capacity to engage is crucial, which may require capacity-building sessions (Drain & Sanders, 2019). For example, participants may need to develop a foundational understanding of linguistic concepts, such as semantic change, amelioration, and pejoration, to contribute to the process of linguistic redefinition meaningfully. Finally, PD is a complex design approach, making it essential to evaluate its effectiveness and participant engagement throughout the process (Drain & Sanders, 2019).

Storytelling workshops process and finding

By integrating participatory design and storytelling, this project provides a unique opportunity to document and promote the reinterpretation of Chinese characters. Language reform is not an isolated action, but a collective effort to reshape gender roles and promote equality. Therefore, in order to better promote co-creation and discussion, I chose the Workshop format. Through Storytelling Workshops, I hope to use design as a bridge between feminist linguistics and practical action, providing insights into

how language reform can reshape cultural narratives. Through the participatory activities in the Workshop, I hope to achieve the following objectives:

1. Helping participants recognize gender biases in language and understand their historical and cultural origins.
2. Providing a community space for individuals to redefine gendered terms collaboratively.
3. Empowering participants with the knowledge and tools to challenge and reshape linguistic norms in everyday discourse actively.

The Demographic of the Participants:

Women above 19 years old who can read and speak Chinese.

To ensure an equitable and inclusive environment (Drain & Sanders, 2019), this workshop is open only to women. The Chinese language has historically been shaped within male-dominated frameworks, often marginalizing women's voices in both public discourse and linguistic evolution. At the same time, male gendered language style is more competitive and dominant, while female gendered conversations are more cooperative and flat (Montell, p75). In mixed-gender settings, power imbalances may unconsciously affect participation. Therefore, I decided to create a space for women only, creating a safe discussion environment for participants to share their experiences.

Tool Development:

As shown in Figure 7, in order to support participants in the redefinition process, I created word flashcards. On the front side, it shows Chinese characters with the "女" (female) radical and displays all the original explanations on the back.



Figure 7: Example of the word flashcard used in the workshop.

These flashcards serve as a reference tool, helping participants understand the historical meanings and cultural connotations of each character. By providing this information, participants can gain the basic knowledge needed for discussion through word flashcards to promote participation, regardless of their degree of linguistic knowledge.

Process:

1. Participants randomly selected three word flashcards.
2. Facilitator explained the narrative characteristics of Chinese characters based on the word flashcards, provided an example of how to use Chinese characters to complete the original narrative, and constructed a new narrative (for detailed examples, please refer to the Storytelling: Semiotics-Inspired Linguistic Reform section above).
3. Participants analyzed the original meaning of Chinese characters and their cultural connotations and created a reflection of the current meaning of Chinese characters in contemporary usage.
4. Participants shared the original narrative and discussed whether they identified with the narrative.
5. Participants were guided to associate the gaps between their life experiences and the narrative, brainstorming a more appropriate narrative outcome.

6. Group discussed and shared the new narrative. By expanding or refining the narratives of others, they collaboratively transform the narrative into an inclusive definition that aligns with the values of the participants present.
7. Participants demonstrated the words they'd redefined and discussed how to integrate these new meanings into daily language use.

Findings:

1. Collaborative Dialogue Sparks Creativity

Small-group discussions among women fostered a non-patriarchal environment that encouraged more nuanced and thoughtful reinterpretations of language. This setting enabled participants to hear diverse voices and perspectives. Notably, after one participant shared her redefined meaning of a word, others frequently expressed agreement or elaborated upon the idea with new insights. At the same time, while some participants could not come up with a fully formed alternative definition, their contributions often served as prompts for others to refine and expand upon. This dynamic interaction exemplified the collective power of co-create, as participants actively validated each other's perspectives and encouraged widespread engagement. Compared to individual reflection, collaborative exchanges allowed for the co-construction of meaning, ultimately leading to more creative and widely accepted redefinitions.

2. Storytelling Workshop Enhances Recognizing Gender Bias in Language and Reshaping Linguistic Norms

The session of the participatory design workshop that analyzed original meaning did enable participants to recognize gender bias in language. When characters with female Chinese radicals are collectively displayed, participants were surprised to find the hidden gender discrimination that exists in Chinese characters. A key example emerged in the discussion of Chinese marriage terminology, where distinct verbs are used for men and women. Participants discovered that the masculine character for marry (娶) is composed of the character 取 (take)

above the character 女 (woman), signifying that men are the active subjects who “obtain” women. In contrast, the feminine character for marry (嫁) implies leaving one's birth family to join a husband's household, embedding a notion of female displacement. The feminine character for marry (嫁) is made up of the characters 女(woman) and 家 (house/home), but the home here is not the woman's home, but a home belonging to someone else.

Subsequently, in the process of redefining the feminine character for marry (嫁), the participants applied the reshaping of language through storytelling. Some people believed that the “home” in 嫁 (house/home) should represent a woman's own house, and thus is defined as a symbol of women's economic independence and house ownership. Others believed that it should be a family made up of women, and thus be defined as a community of women supporting each other.

Evaluation and Future Improvement:

1. Providing Illustrative Examples

Storytelling through written text requires a learning curve. Participants often need clear examples to help them adapt to telling stories using commonly used words. Verbal explanations alone can be difficult to grasp, so preparing illustrative written examples in advance will provide better guidance and improve participant comprehension.

2. Expanding Word Flashcard Content

When participants used the Word Flashcards as a reference to develop both original and new narratives, I noticed that they often looked up the meanings of individual components beyond the radical part for inspiration. Participants struggled to recall certain components’ meanings, or the components were words that were rarely used independently. To address this, I plan to expand the content by including explanations of the character itself and the meanings of its individual components to offer a more comprehensive linguistic reference.

3. Add a Warm-up Activity During Workshop

Starting the workshop with an immediate focus on Chinese character structures left some participants feeling unprepared and in a state of confusion or adjustment. I noticed that participants needed time to engage in dialogue before feeling fully immersed in the discussion. To facilitate a smoother transition, I will introduce an ice-breaking activity that encourages initial conversation, helping participants prepare and enhance their engagement during workshop participation.

Importance of Language Reform

In addition to the words with female radicals, the phenomenon of female stigmatization has become more and more common with the development of the Internet. Female groups are labelled with various derogatory terms, and the anonymity of digital space has exacerbated the spread of stigmatization (Shi, 2023). As mentioned earlier, the terms 女大学生 (female college students), 媛 (Yuan) and 女博士 (female PhD) are frequently used negatively, and yet, few new positive terms have emerged for women to define themselves. This leaves women with limited linguistic space and often forces them to adopt distinctly masculine terms, when praising female achievements. In China, individuals with knowledge and achievements are often addressed as “xx先生(Sir xx)” (see Figure 7). The term 先生(Sir) is most commonly used as a title for men, serving as the counterpart to “Miss.” The term is considered a neutral title only when it is used for individuals who are knowledgeable. This ostensibly neutral term diminishes women's identities and binds positive characteristics with male authority (Su, 2024). It is as if only through the framework of masculine expression can a woman's contributions receive adequate recognition (Su, 2024). The term forces the woman who accepts it to accept the power relations implied. Montell reveals the dilemma women face in inheriting and using words that demean women; women are socialized to be compliant participants in male-dominated discourse (2019). On the other hand, while women are better at listening, men tend to focus solely on their own perspectives. As McConnell notes (as cited in Montell, 2019), the more one pays attention to perspectives different from their own, the more likely they are to understand and internalize those viewpoints. Consequently, women, as accommodating listeners, accelerate the internalization of oppressive discourse. Women should no longer give up the right to define their own terminology or passively accept the patriarchal occupation of positive vocabulary. Instead, proactive strategies must be pursued to resist the

stigmatization of female-associated terms by understanding the process of pejoration and striving to halt or reverse it.

Obituary

Sir Ye Jiaying, Chair Professor of Nankai University, Director of the Institute of Chinese Poetry Education and Classical Culture, Senior Fellow of the Central Research Institute of Culture and History, Academician of the Royal Society of Canada, internationally renowned educator, poet, and leading scholar of Chinese classical literature, passed away in Tianjin at the age of 100 on November 24, 2024 at 15:23 due to ineffective treatment of an illness.

Mr. Ye Jiaying was born in 1924 in Beijing. She graduated from the Department of Chinese Literature at Beijing Fu Jen University in 1945. She began teaching at Taiwan University in 1954. In 1969, he moved to Vancouver, Canada, where he became a tenured professor at the University of British Columbia. In 1991, he was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has also been a visiting professor at Harvard University, Yale University, Columbia University and other universities.

南开大学发布讣告：沉痛悼念叶嘉莹先生

2024-11-24 22:13 来源: 搜狐资讯 发布于: 北京市

Nankai University announces the obituary: In deep sorrow, we mourn the passing of Sir Ye Jiaying.



讣告

南开大学讲席教授、中华诗教与古典文化研究所所长、中央文史研究馆资深馆员、加拿大皇家学会院士、国际著名教育家、诗人、中国古典文学研究泰斗叶嘉莹先生，因病医治无效，于2024年11月24日15时23分在天津逝世，享年100岁。

叶嘉莹先生1924年生，北京人。1945年毕业于北京辅仁大学国文系。自1954年开始，在台湾大学任教。1969年迁居加拿大温哥华，任不列颠哥伦比亚大学终身教授，1991年被授予“加拿大皇家学会院士”，曾被哈佛大学、耶鲁大学、哥伦比亚大学等高校聘为客座教授。

Figure 7: Screenshot. News screenshot: Nankai University refers to Professor Ye Jiaying, a scholar of classical Chinese literature and poet, as “先生(Sir)” in the obituary.. Retrieved February 22, 2025 from https://www.sohu.com/a/829898477_121478296

Research on semantic change provides a theoretical pathway for countering stigmatization. Corresponding to Pejoration, **Amelioration** - the transformation of derogatory terms into neutral or positive ones - offers a potential strategy. Language reform is crucial because language not only describes reality but shapes it. Language shapes cognition, and cognition drives action. Therefore, addressing semantic shifts related to women—reversing pejoration and promoting amelioration—is essential for advancing gender equality. Montell (2019), in *Wordslut*, similarly encourages women to reclaim and redefine the words used to describe them by embedding these terms in positive contexts. Actively eliminate derogatory language against women in daily conversations.

In the context of the Chinese language, when addressing words influenced by the phenomenon of word pejoration in online environments, I argue that women should not avoid using these terms or give up

the authority to define them. Instead, women should intentionally use such words more frequently within positive contexts. One effective strategy is the use of homophone replacements, which allows characters associated with femininity to appear more prominently in positive expressions. For instance, the character 媛 (Yuan) shares the same pronunciation as 员 (Yuan), which means a member of a group. Consequently, the term 运动员 (athlete) can be rewritten as 运动媛 to signify a woman who is passionate about sports (figure 8). Similarly, 媛 (Yuan) is phonetically identical to 元 (Yuan), which means element or meta. As a result, 元宇宙 (metaverse) has been adapted into 媛宇宙 to represent a female-led organization. However, language cannot always be entirely positive. As Montell (2019) suggests, another strategy is to completely discard certain words (p. 41). Some expressions, including insults, will always exist as part of linguistic needs. In such cases, we can shift the focus to the action itself rather than using gendered language (Montell, 2019, p. 43). For example, instead of saying, "you drive like a 女司机 (female driver)," we can simply describe the behavior directly by saying, "your driving skills are poor." This word replacement strategy primarily addresses word pejoration within digital environments and is designed to be implemented through written rather than spoken forms. According to the Digital 2024 Global Overview Report, the average internet user spends approximately 6 hours and 40 minutes online daily (Kemp, 2024). Therefore, I believe this presents a valuable opportunity for digital intervention through UX design. My second design output is an online device that provides real-time interactive functions. It can redefine and display reorganized characters, while enhancing the transmission of positive semantics through a dynamic feedback mechanism. This helps integrate redefined vocabulary into daily reading and expression in digital environments.

Ultimately, language reform is not just an academic activity, but a social mission. At its core, language reform is a semiotic reconstruction of power relations. When we rescue 小姐 (Miss) from the context of sex work and restore 媛 (Yuan) to its original positive meaning, we are not only reclaiming the semantic domains of these words but also dismantling entrenched power structures. By redefining the linguistic structures that perpetuate inequality, we can foster a more inclusive and empowering cultural narrative. This is why language reform, particularly focused on semantic shifts, is a powerful tool for achieving gender equality. This thesis aims to make language a constructive force for gender equality rather than a mechanism of oppression.

Transformative Experience Design (TED)

Design plays a crucial role in my research, serving as a transformative tool for feminist language reform. To help participants identify, challenge, and reshape the deeply entrenched gender biases in the Chinese language, I have employed Transformative Experience Design (TED) in exploring language reform. According to Gaggioli (2015), TED can be defined as an event or experience that reconstructs an individual's worldview, leading to a shift in perspective or identity change, thereby profoundly and enduringly altering how we perceive ourselves and the surrounding world. Specifically, the transformative experiences referenced in this paper are those described by Paul (2014) as personally transformative experiences. Such experiences differ from mere psychological changes in that they fundamentally alter an individual's understanding of themselves and the world. They are not singular, isolated events—such as trying a new kind of fruit and learning “what it is like” to taste them—but opportunities to experience a whole new way of life (Paul, 2014). These transformative experiences not only impart new knowledge but also expand our subjective cognitive horizons, thereby significantly altering an individual's worldview, priorities, and self-concept (Gaggioli, 2015). Consequently, I argue that TED offers a promising research pathway for exploring how users can reconstruct linguistic structures from a feminist perspective, and sustain their engagement with redefined language. By inviting users to participate in experiences that have the potential to trigger transformative change, the design aims to fundamentally broaden gender perspectives, thereby improving the representation of gender in both language and society.

As noted previously, transformative experiences are hard to obtain through observation or viewing; they are more successfully achieved through direct, personal engagement with a process or event. Currently, there is no standardized procedure for the occurrence of transformative experiences, as they are complex and may exhibit a delay between the experience and the subsequent transformation. Nonetheless, several studies have proposed the use of interactive technologies to induce transformative affordances. As illustrated in Figure 8, Stepanova and her colleagues introduced a TED framework that categorizes transformative experiences into three stages: Perceptual Experience, Cognitive Shift, and Behavioral Change (Stepanova et al., 2018). This framework provides a viable design strategy for specific user experiences.

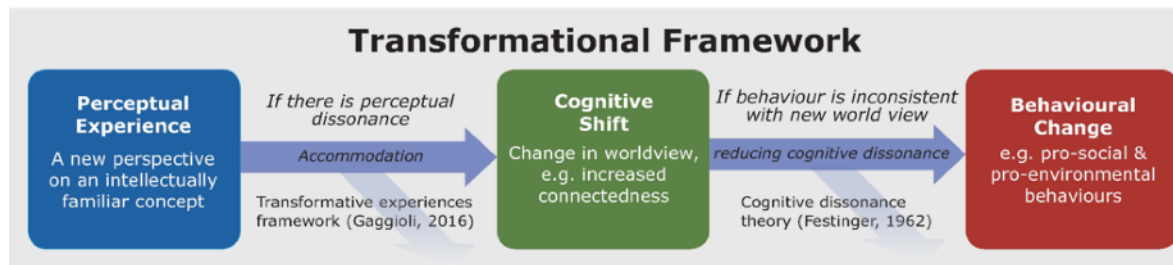


Figure 8: Screenshot. Transformational framework proposed by Ekaterina R. Stepanova, Denise Quesnel, Bernhard Riecke. Retrieved February 22, 2025 from <https://doi.org/10.1109/VAR4GOOD.2018.8576881>

During the Perceptual Experience stage, presenting a novel perspective on a familiar concept may lead individuals to respond in one of two ways: assimilation or accommodation (Stepanova et al., 2018). When an experience aligns with an individual's existing worldview, it is assimilated without inducing change; however, if the experience is incongruent with that worldview, cognitive dissonance ensues, necessitating an adjustment of the worldview to accommodate the new perspective, thereby triggering a cognitive shift (Gaggioli, 2015). Through storytelling workshops, I discovered that when participants look at the words with female radicals and their meanings separately from their daily lives, they can discover the built-in gender bias and outdated ideology in Chinese characters. At this point, they realize there is a big gap between the meaning of these words and their modern experiences or values, leading to a reflection on the language used and the gender environment. As Gaggioli (2015) has noted, genuine transformation cannot be imposed but must emerge through the individual's active engagement with new meanings, destabilizing old cognitive structures while inviting new interpretations. Upon recognizing the power structures embedded in language, I employ storytelling as a means to invite participants to reclaim the authority to define language collaboratively. This process guides participants toward a shared, empowering feminist cognition. Ultimately, once cognitive changes are achieved, individuals will reflect their new values through behavioral change to maintain consistency between their worldviews and actions (Stepanova et al., 2018). Stepanova (2018) and her colleagues assert that "the ultimate goal of understanding how to design transformative experiences is to create a caring society where an individual will find it unnatural to behave in a way that is destructive or ignorant." I hope to integrate interactive design, participatory design, and transformative user experience design to raise awareness that gender discrimination and structural injustice are present in many aspects of our daily lives. Through the reconstitution of language as a means of resistance and empowerment, this

approach ultimately aims to foster reflection and promote social equality. I will describe my design output in detail in the following section and how they apply the TED approach.

Design Output

Reflecting on my thesis question, I have used design as a medium, exploring ways to reform language to achieve women's empowerment. My design output consists of two main parts. One part of my project involves face-to-face design workshops that allow participants to critically reflect on, and challenge, existing language through storytelling. These workshops encourage participants to actively use their creativity to redefine words in an empowering way. The other part of my approach focuses on digital experiences by creating interactive online tools, including a plug-in and a mobile application, which fit easily into our daily text-based digital engagement with language. Specifically, the plug-in system can detect female-related words in the browser, similar to the workshop, allowing users to view the meaning of the word and redefine it. New definitions can be saved to the shared database of meanings, offering further suggestions for word replacements to future readers, and an integrated online community platform allows for discussion around terms and meaning. At the same time, when the user enters text, the plugin identifies opportunities for word replacements that the user can set in advance, helping users incorporate redefined words naturally into their everyday conversations. The mobile application will save the user's settings in the plug-in. The user can also change and edit these settings in the app. This digital tool helps participants become aware of how language biases exist in daily interactions and provides real-time support for gender-inclusive language reform.

Design Output 1 - Iterated Storytelling workshop

The workshop maintains the foundational framework of combining participatory design and storytelling while incorporating adjustments based on previously identified issues: the need for clearer illustrative examples, expanded flashcard content to aid understanding of character components beyond radicals, and an icebreaking activity to ease participants into the discussion. First, a warm-up activity has been added to create a relaxed atmosphere, allowing participants to recall and discuss words that

have undergone positive or negative semantic shifts. This helps participants comfortably prepare for the topic. Second, the content of the word cards has been expanded to include meanings of individual character components, addressing participants' need for more comprehensive information. Finally, illustrative examples have been prepared in advance to assist participants in better understanding how storytelling can effectively reshape language.

Tool Development:

X-Y Axis Chart: As shown in Figure 9, to facilitate discussion and visualization, I designed an interactive tool—an X-Y axis diagram. The horizontal axis (X-axis) indicates whether the meaning of a word changed positively or negatively. The vertical axis (Y-axis) indicates the degree of difficulty in adapting to the new meaning, ranging from natural at the top to challenging at the bottom.

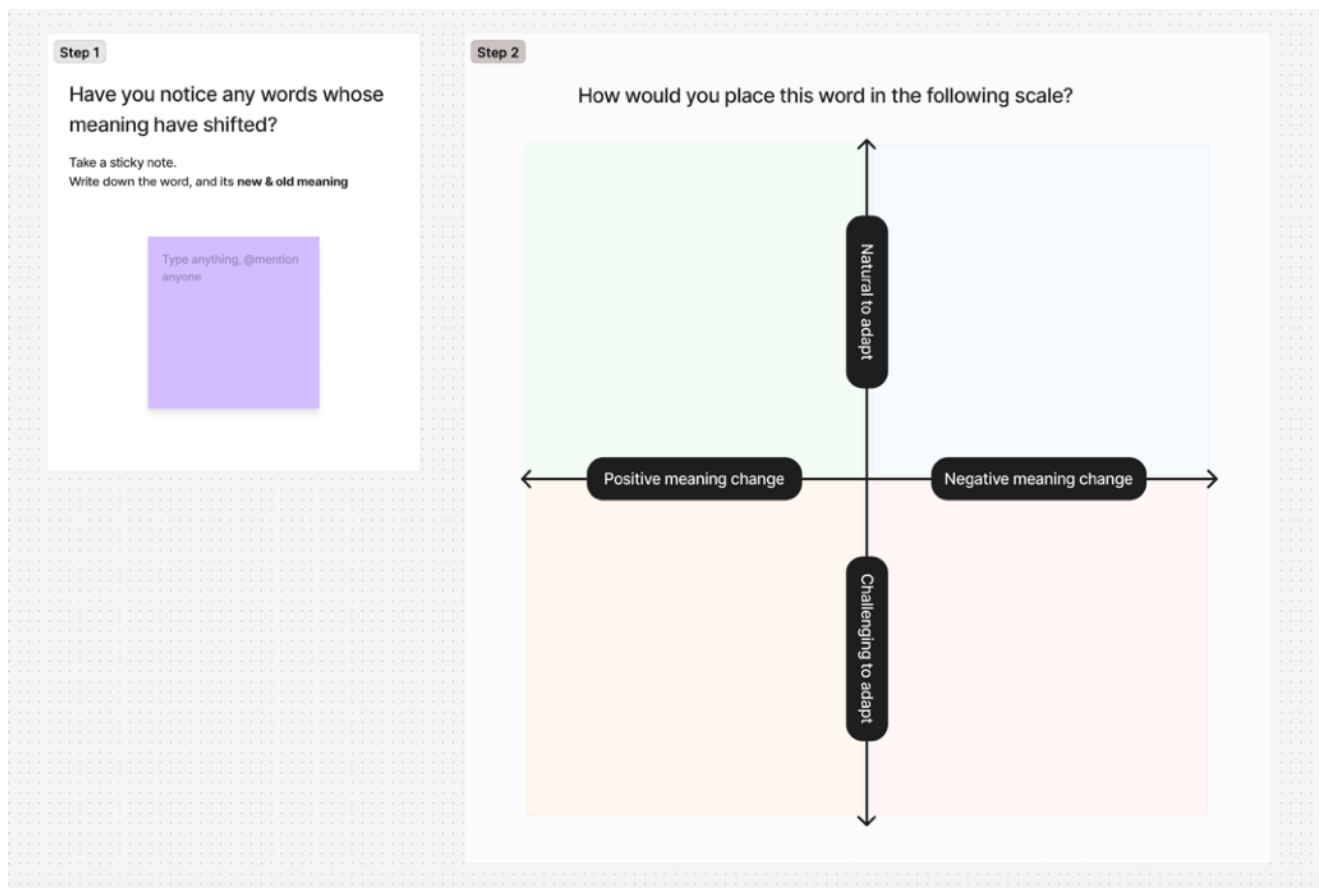


Figure 9: Pre-Workshop tool for discussing semantic shifts.

Word Cards: As shown in Figure 10, I designed a set of Word Cards featuring Chinese characters containing the "女" (female) radical to facilitate deeper reflection on the gendered dimensions of language. Each card provides the character's original meaning, historical and cultural contexts, and meanings of related characters without the female radical. Through these elements, participants are encouraged to critically examine embedded gender biases in the Chinese language. This tool not only provokes awareness of how language shapes perceptions but also empowers participants to actively reinterpret and create alternative, feminist meanings.



Figure 10: Word Card Example.

Participants receive a note card that corresponds to the word card, which they can use to record ideas and anything in the conversation that they find interesting (figure 11).



Figure 11: Note card. The other side of the card has a white writing area.

Explanation Poster and Storytelling Examples: As shown in Figure 12, to clearly illustrate how meanings in Chinese characters are constructed and can evolve, I prepared an Explanation Poster as part of the workshop toolkit. This poster explains the structural logic of Chinese characters, demonstrating how meanings emerge from the combination of radicals and their components. Providing examples of how these narratives can be reinterpreted and redefined in a feminist perspective.



Figure 12: Explanation Poster.

Warm-up Activity: Identifying and Analyzing Semantic Shifts

1. Participants start by identifying words in any language that have experienced semantic shifts over time.
2. Participants brainstorm multiple examples and discuss both the original and current meanings of these words. Write the words on sticky notes.
3. Participants place each word on an X-Y axis chart. The X-axis is used for positive or negative meaning shifts, while the Y-axis is for how difficult it is to adapt the new meaning, ranging from natural to challenging.
4. (Optional) Discussing and clarifying the reasons behind their categorization, how and why these shifts occur.

Workshop Activity: Reinterpreting Characters Through Storytelling

1. Participants randomly selected 3 word cards.
2. Designer explains the narrative characteristics of the Chinese characters based on the explanation poster. Show example of how to use Chinese characters to complete the original narrative and construct a new narrative. Explain the content included on word cards.
3. Participants analyze the original meaning of Chinese characters and their cultural connotations, and create a reflection of the current meaning of Chinese characters in contemporary usage.
4. Participants share the original narrative and discuss whether they identify with the narrative.
5. Participants are guided to associate the gaps between their life experiences and the narrative, brainstorm a narrative that justifies the present.
6. Group discusses and shares the new narrative. By expanding or refining these narratives on each other's ideas, transform the narrative into an inclusive definition that aligns with the values of the participants present.

7. Participants demonstrate the words they have redefined and discuss how to integrate these new meanings into daily language use.

Design Output 2 - Digital Intervention: Application & Plug-in

Building on the participatory and storytelling foundation established in the workshops, the Application and Plug-in serve as complementary digital tools designed to integrate feminist linguistic reform seamlessly into everyday life. Recognizing that language reform requires ongoing participation beyond the workshop context, these interactive online tools actively highlight biased terms in daily digital communication. The Plug-in automatically identifies gender-biased words during web browsing, allowing users to review and collaboratively redefine their meanings, mirroring the participatory and storytelling approach of the workshop. Additionally, it proactively suggests word replacements that have been set in advance as users type, facilitating the natural adoption of reclaimed terms in daily conversation. The accompanying mobile application retains user-generated definitions, selections, and settings, and provides a platform for continuous engagement and collaboration within a community. Here, users can search characters, explore their evolving meanings, contribute new interpretations, and participate in ongoing discussions. Together, the App and Plug-in aim to increase awareness of language biases, embed participatory linguistic reform into everyday contexts, document the historical and cultural contexts of semantic shifts, and ultimately foster behavioral change by promoting feminist perspectives through language.

Key Features: Plug-in

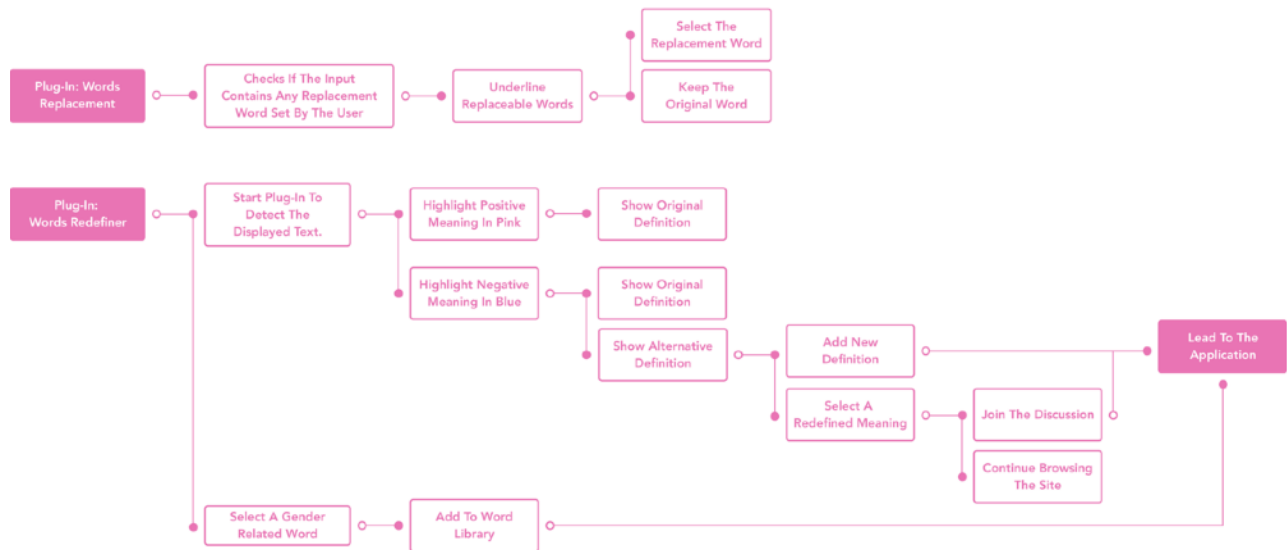


Figure 13: User flow of the plug-in's two main features: Word Replacement and Word Redefiner.

Redefiner, both designed to facilitate real-time participatory language reform in digital spaces.

1. Word Replacement:

- The plug-in scans the user's typed input to detect words that have predefined replacement options.
- Users are given the choice to underline and replace specific words with alternative terms or keep the original wording.
- This function allows for seamless integration of redefined words into daily communication, helping to normalize gender-inclusive expressions.

2. Word Redefiner:

- The plug-in analyzes the displayed text in a browser, detecting gender-related words.
- Words with positive meanings are highlighted in pink, while those with negative connotations are marked in blue for critical reflection.
- Users can view the original definition of a word and explore an alternative definition if available.

- If a word lacks a redefined meaning, users can add a new definition; If there is already a redefinition, users can select an existing redefined meaning, and join discussions in the linked mobile application.
- The plug-in also allows users to save words to a personalized word library, creating a record of redefined terms and fostering ongoing engagement with language reform.

Plug-in Prototype

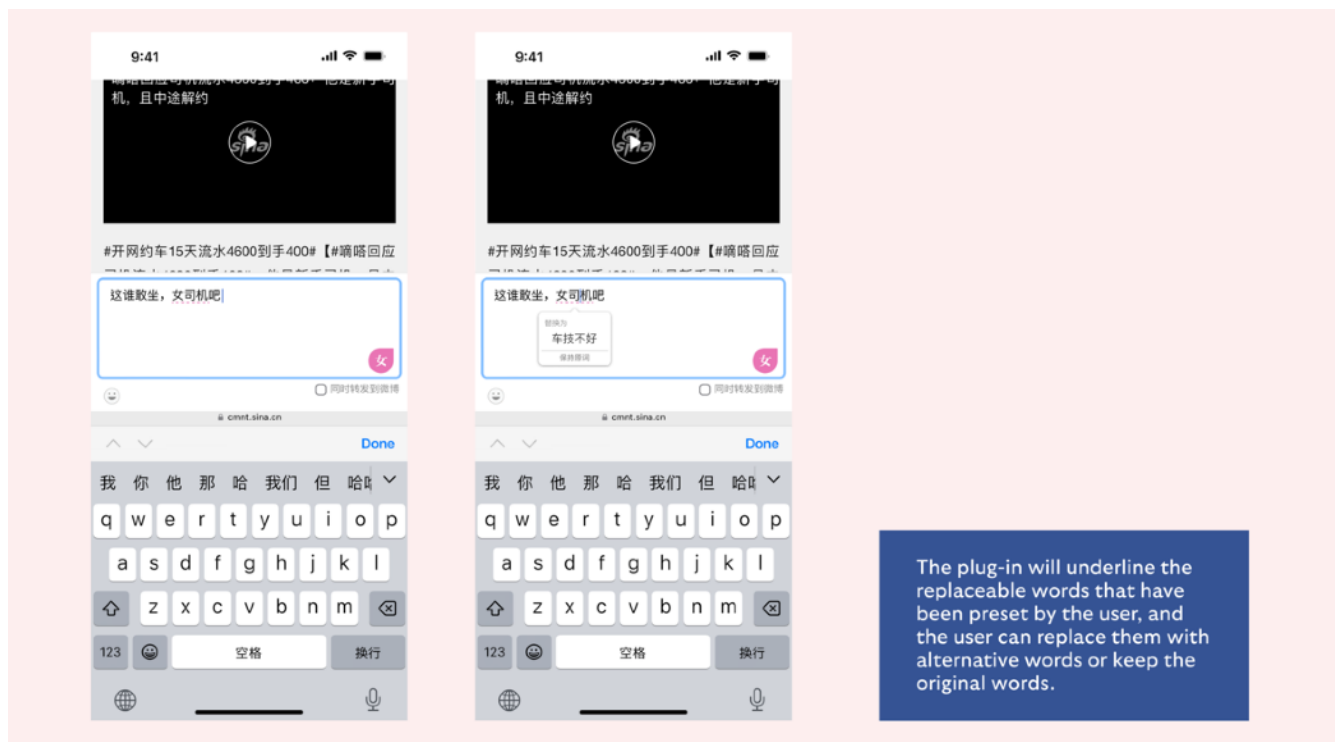
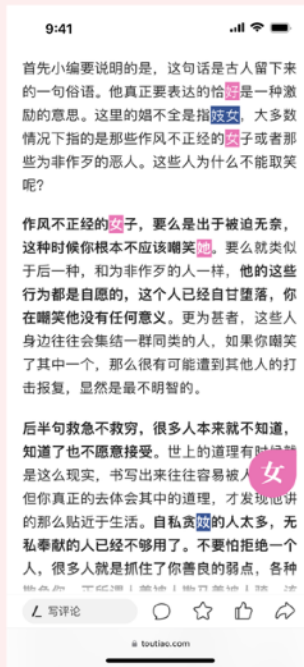
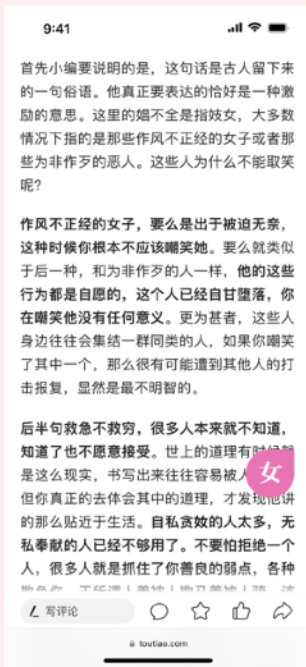
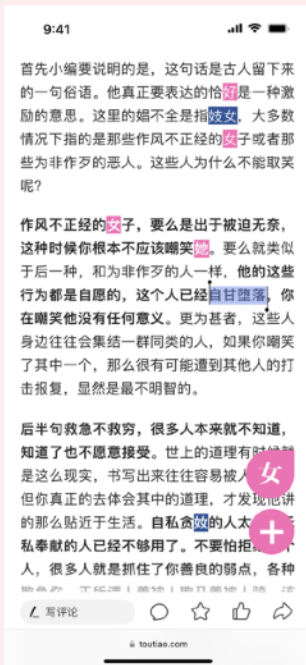


Figure 14: Prototype of Word Replacement



Using the start button, Plug-in will highlight the words and phrases next to the woman in the browser. Positive or neutral words are labeled in pink and negative ones in blue.



User can add words to the word library by selecting them.

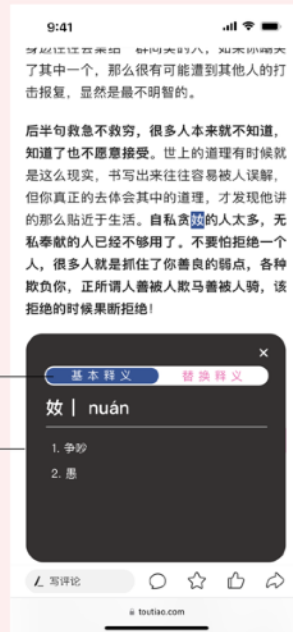
Figure 15: Prototype of Word Redefiner: The plug-in detects and highlights gender-related words in the browser. Users can select words to expand the word library as well.



Figure 16: Prototype of Word Redefiner: For words with negative connotations, the plug-in displays both the original and redefined meanings. If a word has not yet been redefined, users can contribute by adding a new definition.

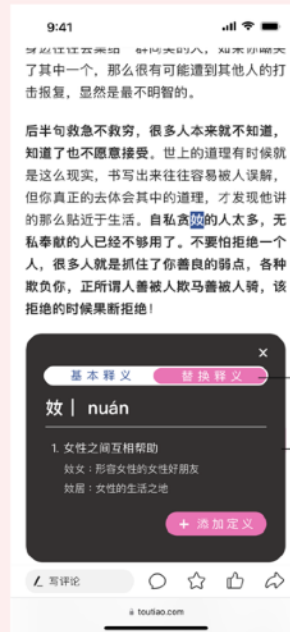
Basic meaning

1. Hassle
2. Stupid

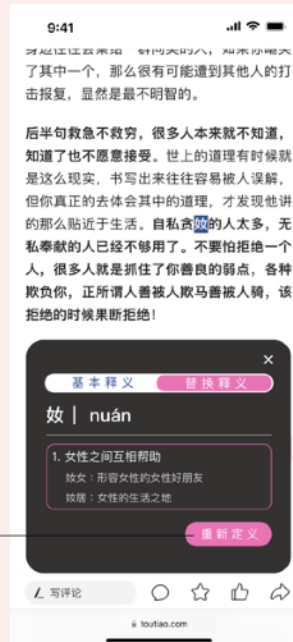


Re-defined meaning

1. Women help each other.
describes a woman's female best friend
a place where women live



Confirm redefinition



1. Women help each other.
describes a woman's female best friend
a place where women live

1- Hassle
2- Stupid

This character has been redefined by 3579 people
join the discussion



If there is already a redefinition, users select the definition they want to apply.
After selecting, users will see how many others have also selected this definition. They can also go to the Application to join the discussion on language reform.

Figure 17: Prototype of Word Redefiner: Users can browse existing alternative definitions and select the one they prefer. Users can continue browsing or join the discussion in the app for further engagement.

Key Features: Mobile Application

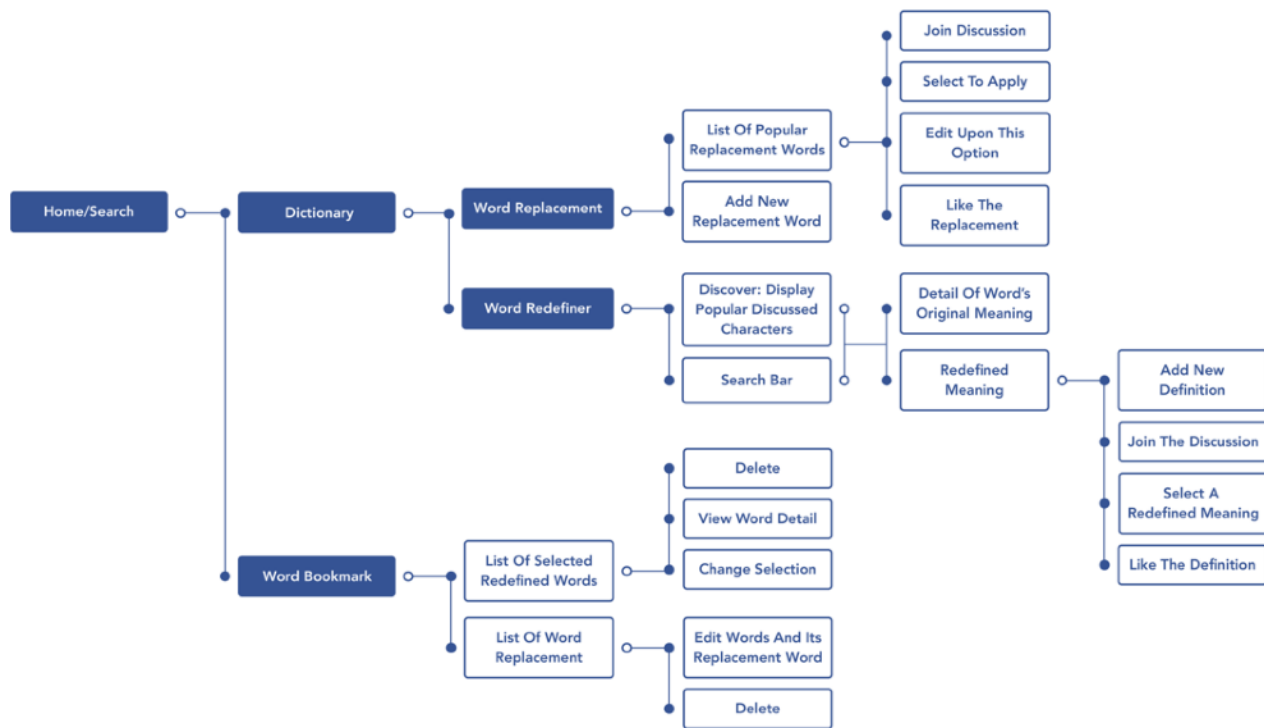


Figure 18: User flow of the mobile application's three main features: Word Replacement, Word Redefiner, and Word Bookmark.

As shown in Figure 18, the mobile app consists of three primary functions—Word Replacement, Word Redefiner, and Word Bookmark—all designed to extend participatory language reform into everyday digital usage and community interaction.

1. Word Redefiner:

- Users can search directly for words or browse trending discussions about characters.
- Detailed views show a word's original meaning, redefined interpretations, and provide options for users to contribute new definitions or join community discussions.
- This function can record the evolution of word meanings and leave an electronic version of the feminist language reform dictionary.

2. Word Replacement:

- Users can explore a list of commonly replaced words and add new replacement words.
- Users have the option to join discussions, apply preferred replacements, edit existing alternatives, or express approval by liking them.

3. Word Bookmark:

- Users can manage their personalized lists of redefined words and word replacements. Changes made here synchronize with the plug-in, ensuring personalized linguistic transformation across digital spaces.
- Users have the flexibility to edit, rearrange, delete, or further explore details of their selections.

Mobile Application Prototype

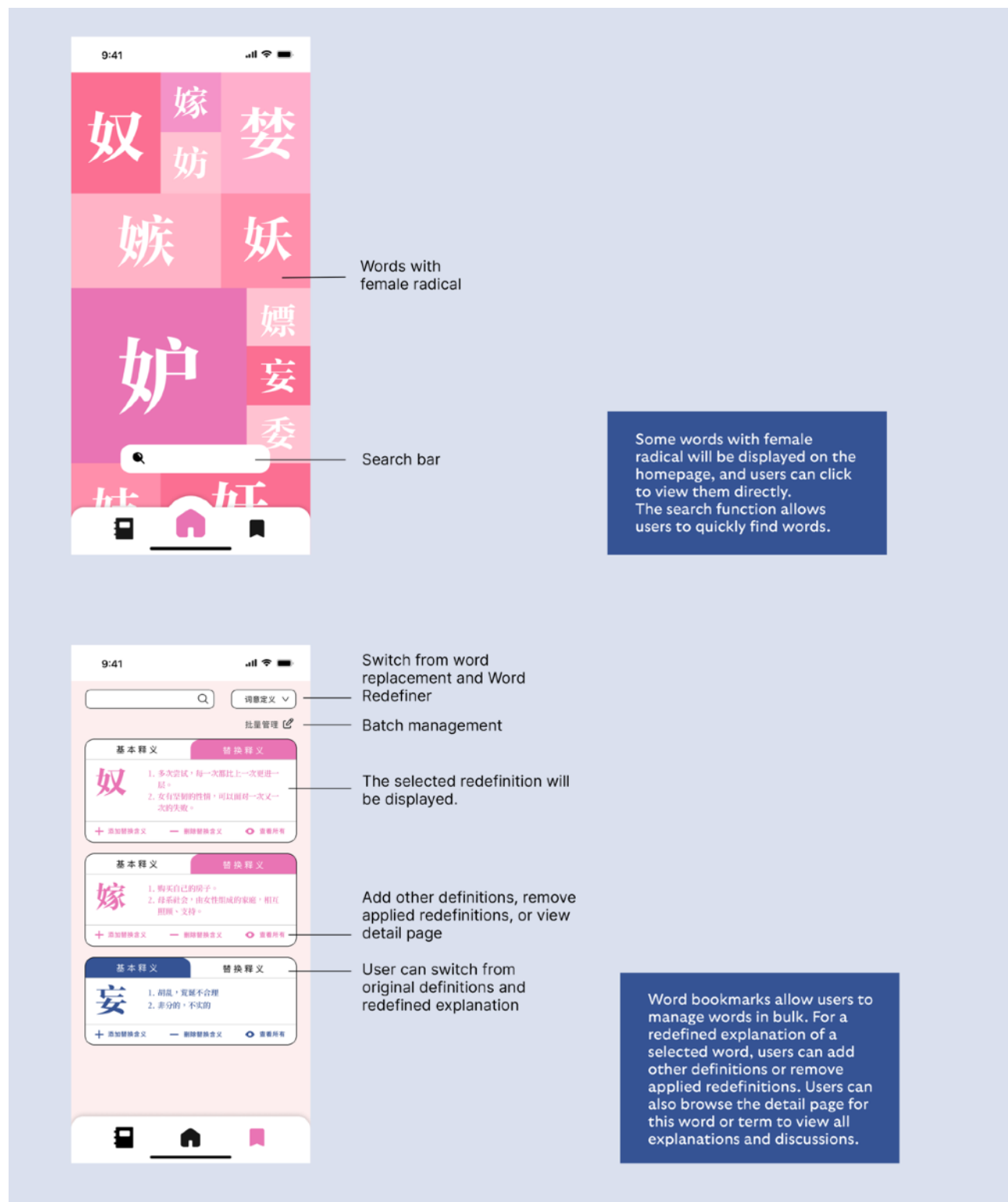


Figure 19: Prototype of Home/Search and Word Bookmark Feature.



Figure 20: Prototype of Word Redefine feature: the list and detailed views of words with female radical, users can actively contribute or apply the redefinitions.



Switch from word replacement and Word Redefiner

Each column shows a word with its definition

In the dictionary, users can switch to browse the word replacement lists that are currently being actively discussed. The list shows the word and its meaning. Users can also search for words directly.



Add replacement words

Word with its definition

Potential replace content

Click the plus sign to apply the replacement content.

Post an opinion

Discussion around the word, users can join discussion or like it

Users can browser to the word detail page. Here, users can choose the content to replace this word or add replacement content by themselves. Users can also participate in discussions about how to use the word, in what context, or when they should avoid using it.

Figure 21: Prototype of Word Replacement feature: the list and detailed views of words. The detail pages facilitate discussions on word usage contexts, allowing users to share opinions and suggest changes.

Aligning Design Outcomes with Transformative Experience Design (TED)

Phase 1: Reflection - Recognizing Gender Bias in Language

The first step of transformative design is to help participants recognize and critically engage with gender bias embedded in language. As Gaggioli (2015) points out, transformative experiences often arise when individuals encounter something that challenges their habitual perceptions, prompting them to rethink deeply ingrained beliefs. This initial phase aligns with TED's emphasis on epistemic transformation, in which participants are introduced to new information or perspectives that challenge their existing cognitive structures (Paul, 2014). The objective of this stage is to provoke cognitive dissonance, encouraging participants to question linguistic assumptions they previously took for granted.

In the storytelling workshop, participants engage in brainstorming sessions to collect examples of words whose meanings have changed, as well as to revisit Chinese characters containing the female radical. The browser plugin/app also draws attention to often-overlooked language by highlighting gender-related words in online content. Both deliberately reveal how language encodes gender power structures and prompts users to critically reassess the assumption that some words are neutral—a direct application of the perceptual experience phase, where encountering incongruent perspectives causes discomfort and sparks new awareness. In these activities, female participants may be required to personally describe and analyze gender-discriminatory language, an experience that could evoke a range of emotions. As Gaggioli (2015) demonstrates, transformative experiences that present significant emotional and cognitive challenges can lead individuals toward greater cognitive flexibility, making them more open to exploring new conceptual structures. In this sense, emotional engagement creates an opportunity for cognitive adaptability, increasing participants' receptiveness to language reform. Moreover, research has found that emotion serves as a key indicator of perceived injustice (Sun, 2022). Together, the workshop and the plug-in create a powerful first-stage experience: they present familiar terms with fresh, critical perspectives, triggering emotional and cognitive dissonance and thus laying the foundation for deeper transformation.

Phase 2: Cognitive and Behavior Change - Redefining Language

The Reflection alone is insufficient; participants must actively engage in redefining linguistic norms. When witnessing the stigmatization of women or other marginalized groups, individuals should offer support whenever possible to gradually diminish the prevalence of linguistic discrimination (Sun, 2022). According to Gaggioli (2015), when existing cognitive structures fail to accommodate new information, individuals develop new knowledge frameworks and undergo corresponding behavioral changes. While language reform is not the sole solution to gendered linguistic bias, this phase seeks to demonstrate and experiment with a viable approach, inspiring participants to rethink and reconstruct their understanding of gendered power structures. This stage invites participants to actively reconstruct language by co-creating new definitions and meanings for biased terms, fostering personal agency over linguistic reform.

The workshop cultivates this shift through participatory storytelling. Once participants recognize the power structure issues in language, they are invited to regain the power to co-define language by creating alternative definitions. Personal experiences are incorporated into the meaning of characters and new stories are created from a woman's perspective. Sharing personal narratives related to gendered language helps foster emotional connections among groups of women. When people share real experiences and emotions, it creates deeper empathy, which strengthens social identity and encourages wider participation in collective action (Sun, 2022). The digital component of the project reinforces the cognitive shift beyond the workshop. The browser plugin allows users to continue the process of redefining words in their everyday digital interactions. They can submit new word meanings or vote on other people's contributions in the plug-in, thus participating in an ongoing dialogue about language. This open and participatory approach ensures that the cognitive shift is not a one-off event but an ongoing process. By enabling collaborative meaning-making in everyday life, the design reinforces the second stage of cognitive shift—users collectively adopt a broader, more feminine perspective on language interpretation.

Phase 3: Habit Formation - Sustaining Linguistic Resistance

The third stage of behavior change focuses on translating new insights and attitudes into lasting behavior change. This means helping participants to use and promote gender-inclusive language in their daily lives consistently. Digital tools are important in this stage: browser plug-in and mobile app actively help users to develop new language habits. For example, they can suggest replacements for gender-biased words and use the redefined words for daily expression. By embedding new words in daily writing and reading, gender-inclusive expressions are normalized. Research shows that repeated engagement with new behaviors reinforces their adoption (Gaggioli, 2015). The plug-in therefore makes the use of inclusive language a continuous practice rather than a one-time reflection. Each time a biased word is flagged, it gently pushes the user to act according to the new worldview, thus reinforcing the habit loop. The mobile app and plug-in build a community around the practice. This community function reinforces individual behavior change and helps the new language norms gain wider usage. Through sustained individual practice and community engagement, the design intervention brings change to the behavior change stage, integrating feminist language reform into participants' daily lives and communication habits.

Discussion & Reflection

Key takeaways and contributions

This thesis proposes a unique approach to feminist language reform by integrating transformative experience design with participatory language interventions to empower women. By focusing on Chinese characters—particularly those imbued with gender bias—the study narrows its scope to individual characters and words, thereby revealing entrenched cultural ideologies in a direct manner. Unlike conventional research that analyzes language or gender inequality from a merely descriptive standpoint, this work adopts an interventionist strategy that actively engages users in redefining gendered language. Its innovation lies in the creative synthesis of interactive design methods, such as workshops and digital tools, with semiotic linguistic analysis and the application of Transformative Experience Design (TED) to facilitate personal transformation. This integrated approach not only

provides a novel perspective on how redefinition processes can empower marginalized voices, but also catalyzes societal progress in perceptions of women.

The paper also provides a practical model for language reform, thus significantly advancing feminist linguistic activism. The research focuses on Chinese characters, and through participatory workshops and interactive tools, people learn to identify these biases and collectively reshape linguistic narratives, extending feminist activism into the digital realm. This research connects theory and practice in feminist activism and demonstrates the potential of technology and design to empower women and challenge gender norms in language. It shows that interactive, user-driven interventions can raise social awareness and gradually influence broader cultural perceptions of women.

Challenges & Future Directions

Cultural Resistance and Ingrained Norms: The interrelation between cultural change and language evolution is complex and bidirectional. While language reform can catalyze shifts in cultural perceptions, deep-seated societal norms often resist such change. The long-term sustainability of language transformation remains a significant challenge, underscoring the need for ongoing support and community involvement well beyond initial interventions. It may be possible to expand participatory workshops beyond academia by collaborating with local feminist groups in China.

Organizing community workshops would test this approach in a context with greater cultural diversity and possibly more conservative attitudes, providing insight into its broader social impact. This could identify cultural resistance and explore ways to improve the approach to fit different contexts for action in China.

Long-Term UX and Efficacy Studies: This research employed Transformative Experience Design (TED) by directly involving users in the redefinition of gendered language, moving beyond theoretical critique to practical application. However, several limitations emerged. The outcomes from Transformative experiences can be delayed, and measuring long-term behavioral change remains difficult. Although TED has demonstrated considerable potential, its impact varies among participants, suggesting that further customization of interventions is necessary. Future research should explore more viable methods for long-term observation and develop improved quantification techniques to

more effectively assess cognitive shifts and behavioral changes. This might involve tracking the experiences of research participants using the plugin and app over time through regular surveys or interviews. Will users continue to use the tool? Will regular interactions with the plugin be enough to effectively challenge institutionalized gender biases over time? Such research could provide data on the duration and depth of the impact of our design approach. Insights from user experience research could guide future iterations of the system and help identify best practices for sustained engagement in feminist language reform.

Expanding the Scope of Language Interventions: The significance of this work transcends traditional language studies by challenging the entrenched power structures embedded in Chinese. Future studies should aim to broaden the scope of linguistic interventions beyond individual characters to include sentence structures, modes of expression, and habitual language practices. Additionally, developing reliable metrics to evaluate the long-term adoption of redefined language and its impact on societal gender perceptions is imperative for advancing the field.

Technological Advancements: The integration of digital tools represents a promising avenue for enhancing feminist language reform. In particular, AI technologies offer both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, existing AI systems often inherit gender biases from the data they are trained on. This project, through the redefinition of gendered Chinese vocabulary and the collection of alternative feminist meanings, could serve as an important dataset to train more equitable language models. On the application side, future development of the browser plug-in and App could integrate AI-driven processing to automatically detect gendered language in real time and suggest alternative phrasing grounded in community-generated redefinitions. AI could also be used to analyze semantic trends and user interaction patterns, improving the personalization and relevance of reform suggestions. Ultimately, AI can support the dynamic propagation of inclusive language practices, amplifying the social reach and long-term impact of language reform in everyday digital environments.

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[ult](https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E6%88%91%E4%B8%8D%E6%98%AF%E7%97%85%E5%AA%9B%23&from=default)

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Appendix

Workshop Props And Results

奴

奸

姁

𡇗

妄

𡇗

婪

妒

妓

1. 争吵。

2. 愚。

1. 阴险，虚伪，狡诈

2. 不忠于国家或自己一方的人

3. 男女发生不正当的性行为

1. 阶级社会中受压迫、剥削、役使的没有人身自由的人

2. 像对待奴隶那样地

3. 使人甘愿奴役地

• fù

1. 贡赋。

2. 女貌。

• yōu

1. 脸上有恨意。

1. 胡乱，荒唐不合理

2. 非分的，不实的

1. 寡妇守节

1. 以卖淫为生的女子

2. 古代称歌女，表演歌舞的女子

1. 因为别人好而忌恨

1. 贪爱财物

妖

奸

妨

嫖

委

姘

姣

嫉

嫁

1. 阻碍，伤害

2. 迷信的人指某人或某物对人不利

1. 阴险，虚伪，狡诈

2. 不忠于国家或自己一方的人

3. 男女发生不正当的性行为

1. 迷信的人指异于常态而害人的东西

2. 装束或神态不正派

3. 媚，艳丽

4. 邪恶而迷惑人的

1. 非夫妻而同居的不正当的男女关系

1. 任，把事交给别人办

2. 抛弃，舍弃

3. 推托，卸

4. 曲折，弯转

5. 积累

6. 末、尾

7. 无精打采，不振作

1. 玩弄娼妓的堕落行为

2. 旧社会男子到妓院游玩妓女

1. 女子结婚

2. 把不同品种的两种植物接在一起，让它变种，达到提早结果、增加抗性、提高品种质量等目的。

3. 把祸害、怨恨推到别人身上

1. 因别人比自己好而忌恨

2. 憎恨

• jiāo

1. 美好

• xiāo

1. 淫乱

1. 唐朝社会等级森严，
贵族、官僚的私有
财产受保护。

2. 唐朝等级森严，
贵族、官僚的私有
财产受保护。

3. 唐人行宫制度

nú

奴

1. 奴隶、奴才、不自由的
人。

2. 卑劣的、不义的。

3. 狂妄地、随意地

wàng

妄

1. 古代指专门从事歌舞
杂技的女子。

2. 妓女

jì

妓

1. 迷信的人指除了鬼魅
精灵的东西

2. 鬼魅或神志不正谓

3. 妖、魔

4. 妖怪或魔鬼的人

yāo

妖

1. 舅母、岳母

2. 迷信的人指人或某
物和人不同

fāng

妨

1. 女子结婚

2. 把不同品种的两种植
物种在一起，以改良
品种，达到提早结果，
增加抗性，改良品种
质量等目的。

3. 使损害，妨碍别人回
人身上

jià

嫁

1. 奸诈、诡计、阴谋

2. 不忠于国家或自己一
方的人

3. 指及发生不正当的行
为

4. 同“奸”

jiān

奸

1. 枉、屈辱受欺人办

2. 屈辱、受辱

3. 委托、卸

4. 委托、卸

5. 委托、卸

6. 委托、卸

7. 委托、卸

wēi

委

1. 唐朝社会等级森严，
贵族、官僚的私有
财产受保护。

2. 唐朝等级森严，
贵族、官僚的私有
财产受保护。

3. 唐人行宫制度

nú

奴

1. 奴隶、奴才、不自由的
人。

2. 卑劣的、不义的。

3. 狂妄地、随意地

wàng

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1. 古代指专门从事歌舞
杂技的女子。

2. 妓女

jì

妓

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精灵的东西

2. 鬼魅或神志不正谓

3. 妖、魔

4. 妖怪或魔鬼的人

yāo

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1. 舅母、岳母

2. 迷信的人指人或某
物和人不同

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品种，达到提早结果，
增加抗性，改良品种
质量等目的。

3. 使损害，妨碍别人回
人身上

jià

嫁

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2. 不忠于国家或自己一
方的人

3. 指及发生不正当的行
为

4. 同“奸”

jiān

奸

1. 枉、屈辱受欺人办

2. 屈辱、受辱

3. 委托、卸

4. 委托、卸

5. 委托、卸

6. 委托、卸

7. 委托、卸

wēi

委

1. In a class society,
people who are
oppressed, exploited,
and used without
personal freedom

2. are treated like slaves

3. and made to accept
servitude.

nú

奴

1. indiscriminate, absurd
and unreasonable

2. arbitrary

wàng

妄

1. In ancient times, women
who specialized in
singing, dancing, and
acrobatics were called

2. prostitutes.

jì

妓

1. Superstitious people
refer to things that
are different from the
realm and harmful

2. Indecent attire or
appearance

3. Tiresome, showy

4. Wicked and deceptive

yāo

妖

1. Impede, harm

2. superstitious people
refer to someone or
something as being
harmful to people

fāng

妨

1. A woman gets married

2. To graft two plants of
different varieties together
to make the seeds, gets
the use of achieving early
fruiting, increased resistance,
improved variety quality, etc.

3. To blame someone else for
one's misdeeds and
rashness

jià

嫁

1. Treachery,
hypocritical, cunning

2. unfaithful to one's
country or one's side

3. sexual intercourse
between a man and a
woman

4. same as "奸"

jiān

奸

1. extort to others

2. abandon

3. accuse oneself

4. make a defector

5. accumulate

6. and

7. fearless

wēi

委

1. In a class society,
people who are
oppressed, exploited,
and used without
personal freedom

2. are treated like slaves

3. and made to accept
servitude.

nú

奴

1. indiscriminate, absurd
and unreasonable

2. arbitrary

wàng

妄

1. In ancient times, women
who specialized in
singing, dancing, and
acrobatics were called

2. prostitutes.

jì

妓

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refer to things that
are different from the
realm and harmful

2. Indecent attire or
appearance

3. Tiresome, showy

4. Wicked and deceptive

yāo

妖

1. Impede, harm

2. superstitious people
refer to someone or
something as being
harmful to people

fāng

妨

1. A woman gets married

2. To graft two plants of
different varieties together
to make the seeds, gets
the use of achieving early
fruiting, increased resistance,
improved variety quality, etc.

3. To blame someone else for
one's misdeeds and
rashness

jià

嫁

1. Treachery,
hypocritical, cunning

2. unfaithful to one's
country or one's side

3. sexual intercourse
between a man and a
woman

4. same as "奸"

jiān

奸

1. extort to others

2. abandon

3. accuse oneself

4. make a defector

5. accumulate

6. and

7. fearless

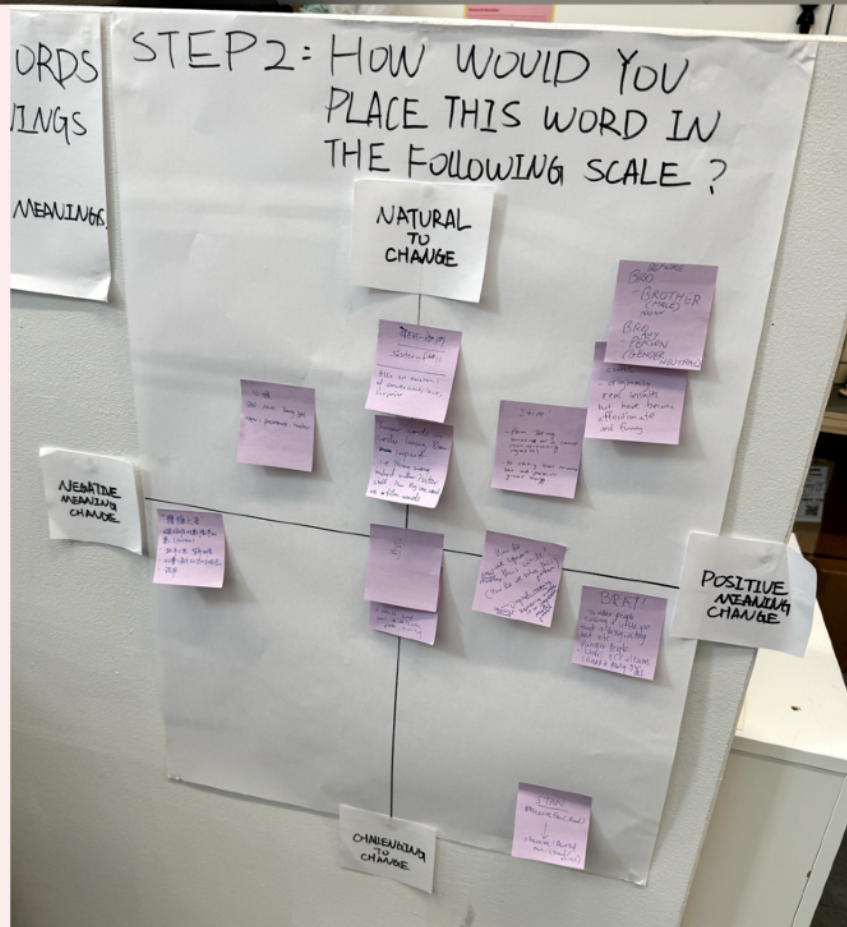
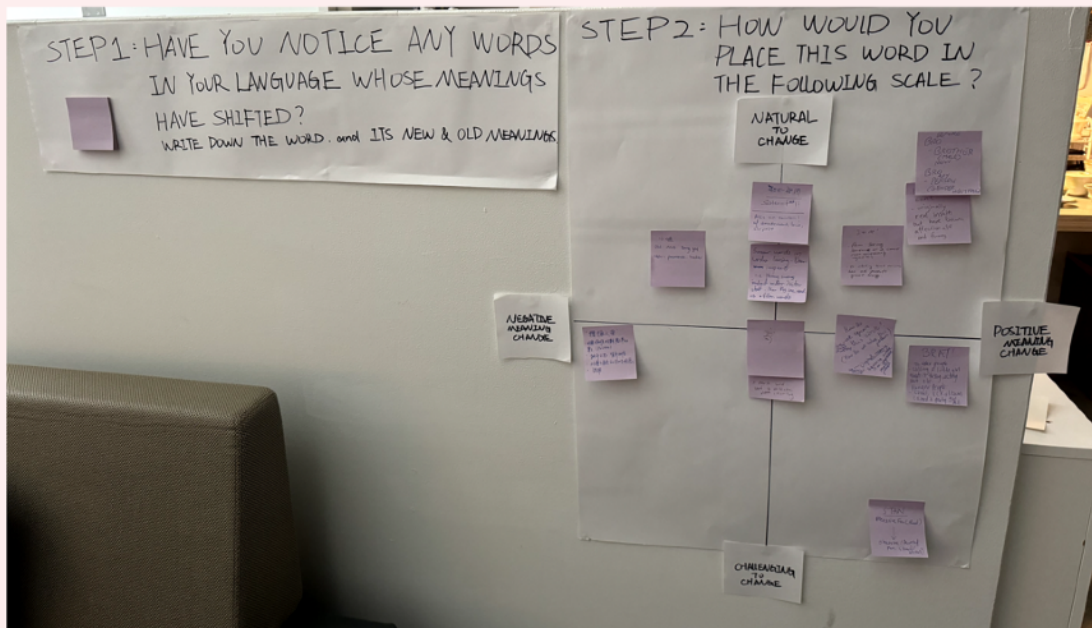
wēi

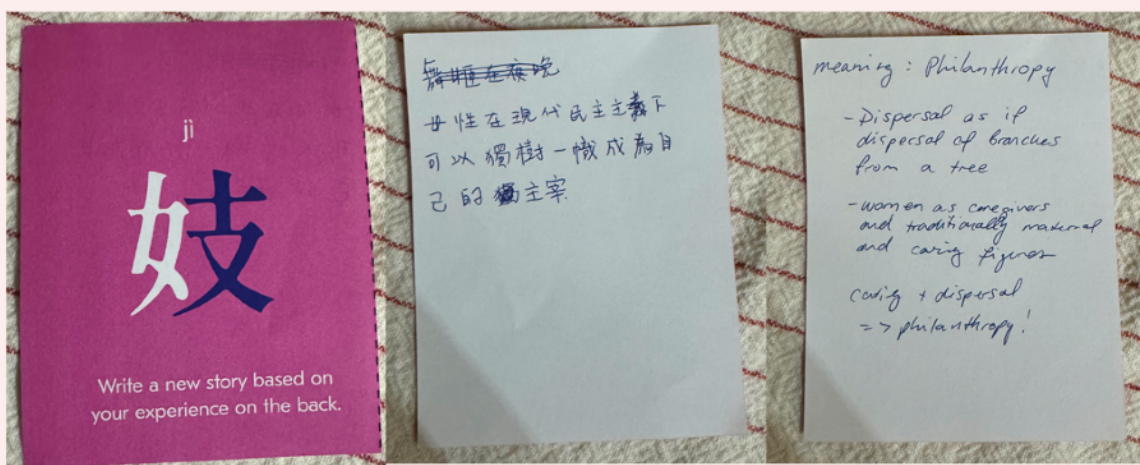
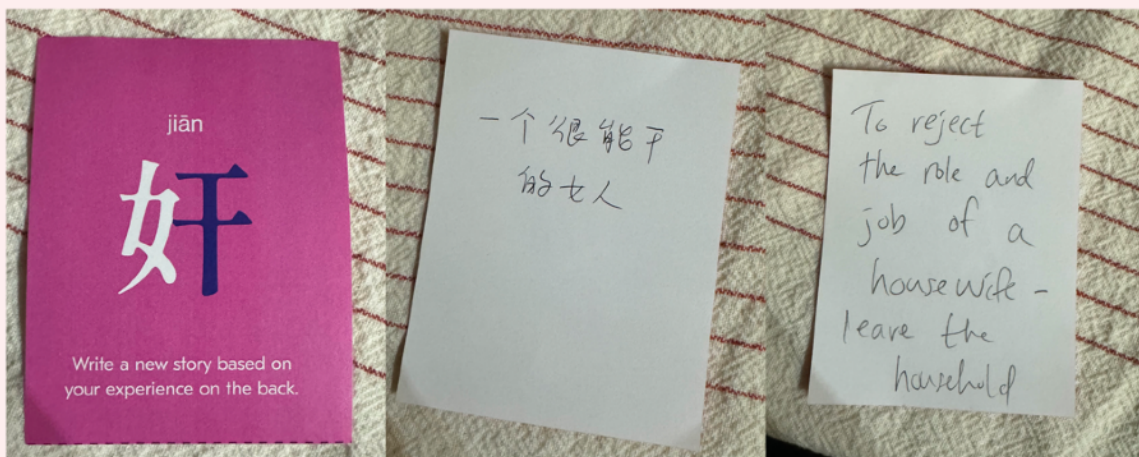
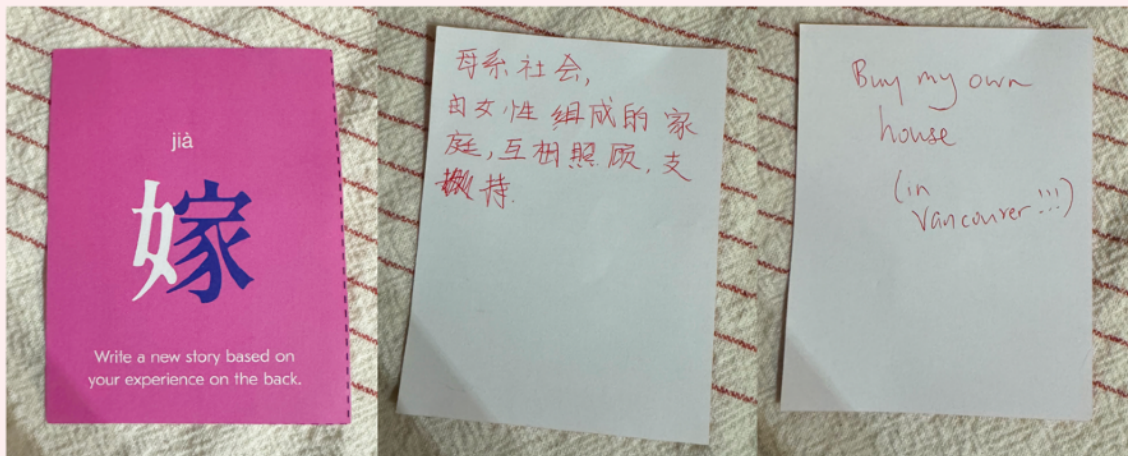
委

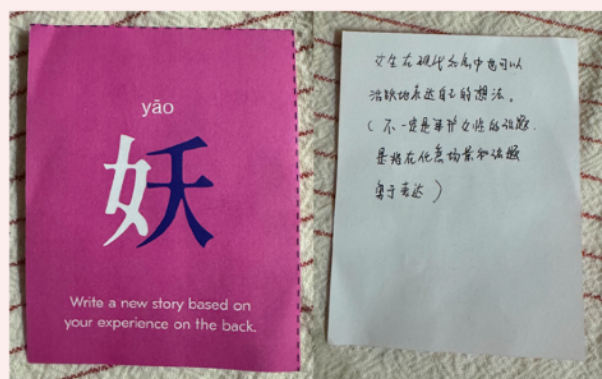
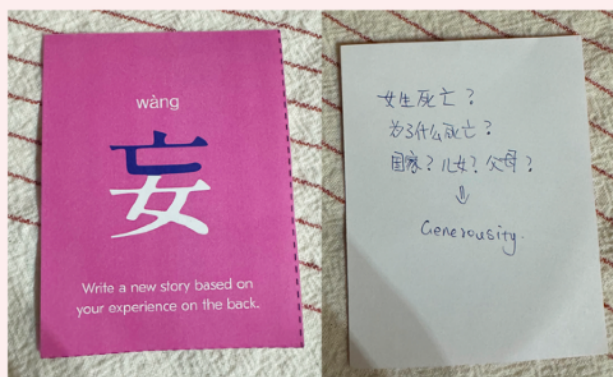
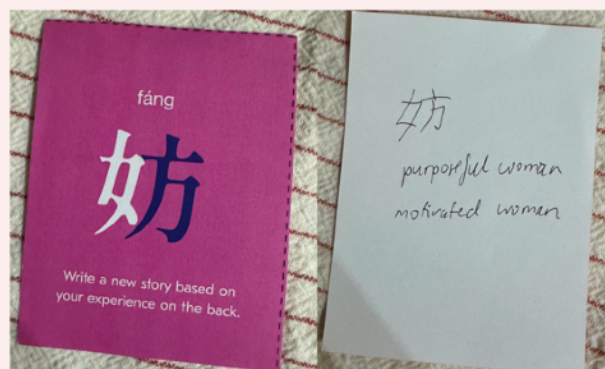
nú 奴	nú 奴	nú 奴
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
wàng 妄	wàng 妄	wàng 妄
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
wěi 委	wěi 委	wěi 委
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.

jī 妓	jī 妓	jī 妓
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
yāo 妖	yāo 妖	yāo 妖
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
fáng 妨	fáng 妨	fáng 妨
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.

jià 嫁	jià 嫁	jià 嫁
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
jiǎn 奸	jiǎn 奸	jiǎn 奸
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.
dù 妒	dù 妒	dù 妒
Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.	Write a new story based on your experience on the back.







Mobile App And Plug-in User Interface

