



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
(to be completed by marker)

<i>Student Name:</i> Qiyuan Wang	
<i>Module Code:</i> SICH6018 <i>Module title:</i> Exegesis	<i>Student number:</i> 2016002
<i>For completion by marker:</i> <i>Comments:</i>	
<i>Marker's signature:</i>	<i>Date:</i>
<i>Provisional mark:</i> NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.	

AI Acknowledgement

☐ I have not used AI in my assignment

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI agenerated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

☒ I have used AI in my assignment

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT to produce the image for powerpoint on the 22 November 2025. I used the prompt(s):

1. [Prompt]
2. [Prompt]
3. [Prompt]

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

(Delete or continue list as required)

I acknowledge the use of [AI Tool 2] [(AI Tool 2 url)] on [Date] to [Purpose my work (e.g. support my research/proofread/edit photographic material etc.)]. I used the prompt(s):

1. [Prompt]
2. [Prompt]
3. [Prompt]

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

From 'Rouge' 胭脂 to 'Yanzhi' 閼氏 :
Tracing the Name's Phonetic and Cultural Connections

Module tutor: Dr. Shushi Xu

Student name: Qiyuan Wang (2016002)

Date of Presentation: 25 November 2025

Contents

The background of the slide is a traditional Chinese painting. It depicts three women in elegant, flowing robes. The woman on the left is wearing a brown and gold robe and has a large, ornate floral headdress. The woman in the center is wearing a red and gold robe and has a smaller headdress. The woman on the right is wearing a light-colored robe with a red sash and has a large floral headdress. A white crane with a long neck is standing on the right side, and a small black dog is lying on the ground in the center. The painting has a warm, aged tone.

I. Introduction

II. The Origin of 'Yanzhi' 胭脂

III. 'Yanzhi' s 關氏 Variant Characters and Old Chinese Sounds

IV. Conclusion



- Part 1

Introduction

The Royal Title

- ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏
 - The title given to the consort of the ‘Xiongnu Chanyu’ 匈奴單于



Yang Shen's Poetic Reference



‘The Han envoy came with his official sign, while the ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏 strummed her pipa in line.’

‘漢使牧羊旌節，閼氏上馬琵琶。’

Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 (206 BC–8 AD)

The Pronunciation Puzzle

Mandarin Reading

- 閼氏 is read as 'è shì'

Historical Reading

- According to the *Hanyu Da Cidian*, it should be pronounced 'yān zhī'.

Cosmetic Connection

This pronunciation is identical to 胭脂 'yān zhī', meaning rouge

The Central Question

1. Is there any connection between ‘
關氏’ and ‘胭脂’ ?
2. Is the similarity in sound
accidental, or does it reflect a
semantic association?





• Part 2

The Origin of 'Yanzhi' 胭脂

Two Theories of Origin

1. Shang Dynasty Origin

- 1) It was produced in the Yan region and had the appearance of a thick paste, it came to be called 'Yanzhi' 燕脂.

2. Han Dynasty Origin

- 1) From Sima Zhen's Suo Yin commentary on the 'Xiongnu' chapter of the Records of the Grand Historian, linking rouge to red-and-blue flowers.

Two Theories of Origin

People in the north pick the blossoms to dye fabrics red and yellow, which women use as facial makeup.....

Among the Xiongnu, a wife is called ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏, because she is considered **as lovely as this rouge.**

The character ‘**閼**’ **is pronounced like ‘Yan’.**

Sima Qian 司馬遷, in *Shiji* 史記 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Press, 1963), pp. 3493–3494.



Key Historical Insights

1. Red-and-Blue Flowers

- The source material for creating rouge, grown at the foot of mountains in northern regions.

2. Xiongnu Term 'Yanzhi' 閼氏

- The Xiongnu called a wife 'Yanzhi' 閼氏, considering her as lovely as the rouge made from honglan flowers.



What is the relationship between 'red-and-blue flowers' and 'Yanzhi' 胭脂 (rouge)?

'Yanzhi' 燕支 has leaves like ji 薊 and blossoms resembling the bugong 捕公 flower. It comes from the western regions. The local people use it as a dye, calling it 'Yanzhi' 燕支. In China it is also known as red-and-blue flowers. Ground into powder and used as women's makeup, it is called Yanzhi powder 燕支粉.

燕支，葉似薊，花似捕公，出西方，土人以染，名為燕支。中國亦謂紅藍。以染粉為婦人色，謂為燕支粉。



The Evolution of Yanzhi 閼氏

Original Flower

Red-and-blue flowers called 'Yanzhi' 燕支



Beauty Product

Became rouge 'Yanzhi' 胭脂 in China



Term of Affection

Xiongnu title 'Yanzhi' 閼氏 for wives





- Part 3

Variant Characters and Old Chinese Sounds

Mountain's Name

‘Losing Qilian 祁連 Mountain means our livestock can no longer flourish; **losing Yanzhi 焉支 Mountain** means our women can **no longer** use their **cosmetics**.’

焉支 and 燕支 are written differently

Sima Qian 司馬遷, in *Shiji* 史記 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Press, 1963), p. 3514.



Phonetic Variations

	old Chinese sounds 'yan'	old Chinese sounds 'zhi'
燕脂	*ʔ iæn	*c jed
烟脂	*ʔ jen	*c jed
焉支	*ʔ jan	*c jed
燕支	*ʔ iæn	*c jed
閼氏	*ʔ iæn (邵榮芬)	*c jeg

‘Yan’ Syllable

- The vowels are /**e**/, /**a**/, and /**æ**/ respectively.
- All front vowels within the same sound range.

	old Chinese sounds ‘yan’
燕	*ʔ i æ n
烟	*ʔ j e n
焉	*ʔ j a n
燕	*ʔ i æ n
闕	*ʔ i æ n

‘Zhi’ Syllable

- The final consonant is ‘**—d**’,
only ‘zhi’ 氏 takes a ‘**—g**’ final
- The initials and vowels in all
five examples are similar.

關氏’s pronunciations similar 胭脂

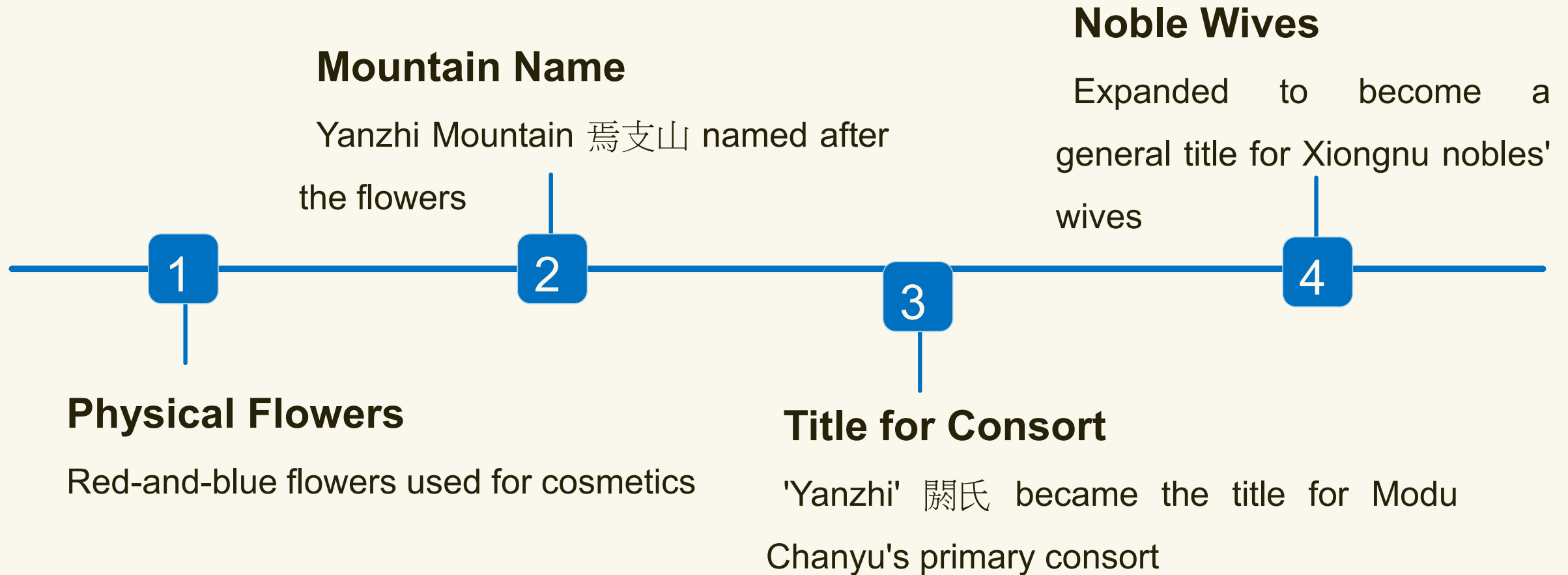
	old Chinese sounds ‘zhi’
脂	*c jed d
脂	*c jed
支	*c jed
支	*c jed
氏	*c jeg g



• Part 4

Conclusion

Conclusion



Bibliography

Books

1. Cui Bao 崔豹, in *Gujin Zhu* 古今注 (Shanghai Shangwu Yinshu Press, 1956)
2. Hanyu Daci Dian Bianji Weiyuan Hui, 漢語大詞典編輯委員會, in *Hanyu Daci Dian* 漢語大詞典 (Shanghai Cishu Press, 1986)
3. Lin Gan 林幹, *Xiongnu Shi Lunwen Ji* 匈奴史論文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Press, 1983)
4. Ma Gao 馬縞, in *Zhonghua Gujin Zhu* 中華古今注 (Shanghai Shangwu Yinshu Press, 1956),
5. Sima Qian 司馬遷, in *Shiji* 史記 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Press, 1963)
6. Yang Shen 楊慎, 'Dunhuang Yue' 敦煌樂, in *Shengan Ji* 升庵集 (Shanghai Guji Press, 1993)

Journal article

1. Liu Wenxing 劉文性, '“閼氏”語義及讀音之思考', *Xibei Minzu Yanjiu*, 22, (1998)

Website

1. Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University, and Institute of Information Science, Academia Sinica, 'Hanzi Ancient and Modern Pronunciations Database', The Conversation, 21 November 2025, <<https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/ccr/>> [accessed



Thank you for listening

From ‘Yanzhi’ 關氏 to ‘Rouge’:

Tracing the Name’s Phonetic and Cultural Connections

1. Introduction

‘Yanzhi’ 關氏 was the title given to the consort of the ‘Xiongnu Chanyu’ 匈奴單于. The Ming scholar Yang Shen 楊慎 once wrote a poem. He said, ‘The Han envoy came with his official sign, while the *yanzhi* strummed her pipa in line.’¹ In this passage, ‘Yanzhi’ refers specifically to Wang Zhaojun 王昭君, the woman whom the Chanyu Hanyu brought back from the Han 漢 as his wife. If we look only at its Mandarin pronunciation, ‘關氏’ is read ‘è shì’, which makes it difficult to infer its meaning. However, according to the *Hanyu Da Cidian*, the term should in fact be pronounced ‘yān zhī’.² This pronunciation happens to be identical to ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂, the ancient Chinese cosmetic—rouge. This raises a question for me. Is there any connection between ‘關氏’ and ‘胭脂’? Is the similarity in sound accidental, or does it reflect a semantic association?

2. The Origin of ‘Yanzhi’ and Its Variant Characters

Regarding the origin of ‘Yanzhi’ (rouge), I came across two explanations in the essays. The first traces it back to the time of King Zhou of the Shang dynasty, because it was produced in the Yan region and had the appearance of a thick paste, it came to be called ‘Yanzhi’ 燕脂.³ The second explanation comes from a passage in Sima Zhen’s *Suo Yin*, his commentary on the ‘Xiongnu’ 匈奴 chapter of the *Records of the Grand Historian*:

In the letter to the King of Yan, Xi Zuochi wrote, ‘At the foot of the mountain there grows red-and-blue flowers, have you heard of them? People in the north pick the blossoms to dye fabrics red and yellow, and they knead the freshest petals to make rouge, which women use as facial makeup.....Among the Xiongnu, a wife is called

¹ Yang Shen 楊慎, ‘Dunhuang Yue’ 敦煌樂, in *Shengan Ji* 升庵集 (Shanghai Guji Press, 1993), p.275. The Chinese original text is, ‘漢使牧羊旌節，關氏上馬琵琶。’

² Hanyu Daci Dian Bianji Weiyuan Hui, 漢語大詞典編輯委員會, in *Hanyu Daci Dian* 漢語大詞典 (Shanghai Cishu Press, 1986), p.127.

³ Ma Gao 馬縞, in *Zhonghua Gujin Zhu* 中華古今注 (Shanghai Shangwu Yinshu Press, 1956), p.32. The Chinese original text is, ‘蓋起自紂，以紅藍花汁凝作燕脂。以燕國所生，故曰燕脂。塗之作桃花粧。’

‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏, because she is considered as lovely as this rouge. The character ‘閼’ is pronounced like *yan*.’⁴

There are two key points worth noting here: 1. the mention of red-and-blue flowers, and 2. the fact that the Xiongnu called a wife ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏, because she was considered as lovely as the rouge made from *honglan* flowers. At this point, we might wonder, what exactly is the relationship between ‘red-and-blue flowers’ and ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂 (rouge)? As it turns out, *Gujin Zhu* provides the following explanation of red-and-blue flowers:

‘Yanzhi’ 燕支 has leaves like *ji* 薊 and blossoms resembling the *bugong* 捕公 flower. It comes from the western regions. The local people use it as a dye, calling it ‘Yanzhi’ 燕支. In China it is also known as red-and-blue flowers. Ground into powder and used as women’s makeup, it is called Yanzhi powder 燕支粉.⁵



(red-and-blue flowers)



(red-and-blue flowers)

flowers)

Therefore, we can see that red-and-blue flowers is essentially what later came to be known in China as ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂 (rouge). The flower itself was originally called ‘Yanzhi’ 燕支, although the written characters were different from the one we use today for ‘rouge’ 胭脂. In other words, it corresponds to what we refer to today as ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂. Secondly, the Xiongnu referred to a wife as ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏, because they saw her as being as charming as the rouge itself. In other words, they took the tangible idea of rouge and elevated it into a title of affection and respect.

⁴ Sima Qian 司馬遷, in *Shiji* 史記 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Press, 1963), pp. 3493–3494. The Chinese original text is, ‘習鑿齒與燕王書曰：「山下有紅藍，足下先知不？北方人採取其花染緋黃，掇取其上英鮮者作胭脂，婦人將用為顏色。吾少時再三過見烟枝，今日始視紅藍，後當為足下致其種。匈奴名妻作「閼支」，言其可愛如烟枝也。閼音煙。」’

⁵ Cui Bao 崔豹, in *Gujin Zhu* 古今注 (Shanghai Shangwu Yinshu Press, 1956), p.25. The Chinese original text is, ‘燕支，葉似薊，花似捕公，出西方，土人以染，名為燕支。中國亦謂紅藍。以染粉為婦人色，謂為燕支粉。’

Moreover, based on my analysis, it was precisely because ‘Yanzhi’ 焉支 Mountain was rich in red-and-blue flowers that the Xiongnu named the mountain after them. As recorded in *Xihe Gushi*, ‘When the Xiongnu lost the Qilian and Yanzhi mountains, they sang, “Losing Qilian 祁連 Mountain means our livestock can no longer flourish; losing Yanzhi 焉支 Mountain means our women can no longer use their cosmetics.”’⁶ Although the characters ‘Yanzhi’ 焉支 and ‘Yanzhi’ 燕支 are written differently in this quotation, their old Chinese sounds were essentially the same.

	old Chinese sounds ‘yan’	old Chinese sounds ‘zhi’
燕脂	*ʔ iæn	*c jed
胭脂	*ʔ jen	*c jed
焉支	*ʔ jan	*c jed
燕支	*ʔ iæn	*c jed
闕氏	*ʔ iæn (邵榮芬)	*c jeg ⁷

Let us first look at the ‘Yan’ syllable. In these five examples, the initial consonant is always a guttural. The initials are entirely the same. As for the vowels, For these three characters 燕, 烟, 焉, the vowels are /e/, /a/, and /æ/ respectively. But in essence, they are all front vowels, and they lie within the same general sound range.

Now let us consider the ‘Zhi’ syllable. In the first four cases, the reconstructed pronunciations are exactly the same. It is only the last one, ‘zhi’ 氏 that is slightly different. In the other four cases, the final consonant is ‘-d’, only ‘zhi’ 氏 takes a ‘-g’ final. But overall, the initials and vowels in all five examples are similar, so the pronunciations of ‘Yanzhi’ 闕氏 and ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂 would have been quite close.⁸

⁶ Sima Qian 司馬遷, in *Shiji* 史記 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Press, 1963), p. 3514. The Chinese original text is, ‘匈奴失祁連、焉支二山，乃歌曰：『亡我祁連山，使我六畜不蕃息；失我焉支山，使我婦女無顏色。』’

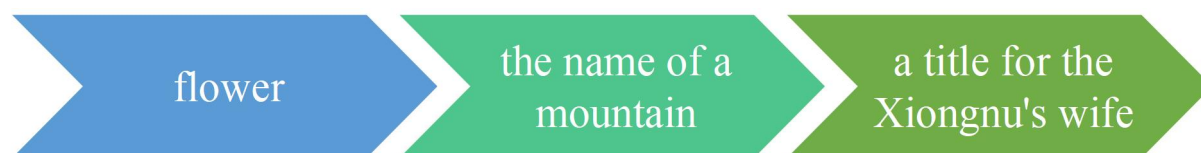
⁷ For these examples, I’m using Dong Tonghe’s system for all reconstructed readings.

⁸ I should note that there are two additional explanations often mentioned:

1. Some scholars try to relate ‘Yanzhi’ 闕氏 to the words for ‘wife’ in Mongolian, Japanese, or Korean. From Lin Gan 林幹, *Xiongnu Shi Lunwen Ji* 匈奴史論文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Press, 1983), p. 198.
2. others suggest that 闕氏 is a term of Turkic origin. From Liu Wenxing 劉文性, ‘“闕氏”語義及讀音之思考’, *Xibei Minzu Yanjiu*, 22, (1998), p. 253.

3. Conclusion

So from this perspective, the development of the term *yanzhi* can be outlined as follows:



The logic is similar to the naming of Dujian Mountain 杜鵑山 in Jiangxi province. It was named because the mountain is covered with azaleas every spring. In the same way, Yanzhi Mountain 焉支山 was named because it was rich in red-and-blue flowers, which Xiongnu women used to make their cosmetic powder. Therefore, when the region fell, the song declares, ‘Losing Yanzhi Mountain 焉支山 means our women can no longer use their cosmetics.’ This clearly demonstrates the significance of red-and-blue flowers to Xiongnu women. Furthermore, the title ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏 originally referred to the primary consort of Modu Chanyu. Because it sounded the same as ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂 (rouge), and carried a sense of beauty, the term gradually expanded and became a general title for the wives of Xiongnu nobles. So what we see here is a clear shift in meaning, starting from a physical flowers, turning into a mountain name, then the meaning broadening into a title for a consort. In short, a simple cosmetic term evolved into a title for a wife.

I do not dismiss these possibilities. However, I consider the passage in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, ‘The Xiongnu call a wife ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏, meaning she is as lovely as the rouge.’ This is to be both meaningful and reliable. Therefore, my interpretation follows the pattern indicated in the texts themselves. From red-and-blue flowers, to cosmetic rouge, to the name of a mountain, and eventually to a title for a wife.

In this way, I understand the connection between ‘Yanzhi’ 閼氏 and ‘Yanzhi’ 胭脂 as a case in which the name of a female cosmetic gradually came to be used as a term of address.