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***Lao* (old) + surname: why do Chinese address non-old people with “old”?**

<https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2025-2012>

Abstract: Chinese frequently use *lao* (old) + surname when addressing others. Based on a dataset collected from the Chinese literature corpus, i.e. novels and plays, this study analyzes its referents and functions. *Lao* + surname is unmarkedly used to refer to elderly people as a sign for respect, intimacy, or informality. The findings reveal that *lao* + surname markedly refers to a teenager, a tool, or even a member of the younger generation addressing an elder, a Chinese person, or a non-Chinese person. Its marked use aims to establish or maintain social bonds, strengthen solidarity, or achieve an aha effect. The use of *lao* + surname indicates the speaker’s observation of the Address Maxim of Gu’s Politeness Principle by taking *beifen* (辈分) and *weifen* (位分) (roughly age status and position status respectively) into consideration. The aim of this study is to advance existing research into forms of address.

Keywords: address maxim; deixis; forms of address; marked use; unmarked use

1 Introduction

Chinese people frequently choose to use *lao* (old) + surname, such as *Lao Wang*, when addressing people during their social encounters. To date, while numerous studies have addressed this Chinese-specific form of addressing practice, by and large focusing on its formal features, social variables and/or functions (e.g. Guo 2005; Yan 1992; Yang 1999), including its use in certain Chinese novels (e.g. Chen and Qu 2006), few have used a dataset to examine how it actually occurs. Consequently, the following interesting questions have so far remained unaddressed: Why do Chinese people often employ *lao* + surname? Is the addressee truly old, or older than the addresser? Are the participants familiar with each other?

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Therefore, on the basis of a dataset collected from Chinese novels and plays, we adopt a pragmatic approach to addressing these questions. We shall tentatively argue that *lao* + surname shows different usage patterns in interaction, aiming to achieve different pragmatic functions. The aim of this study is to both advance research on addressing practice and improve the understanding of other similar address terms, like *xiao* (young/small) + surname.

2 Research background

People make frequent use of address terms in communication, and systems of address terms vary in different languages or cultures (Liddicoat 2006; Wardhaugh 2002). In this sense, studies examine mono-linguistic address terms, such as the address term *mate* in Australian English (Rendle-Short 2009) and address terms in Tamil (Jayapal 1986), or make cross-cultural/linguistic comparisons of address terms, such as Chinese and American address terms (Hao et al. 2008), as well as Korean and English address terms (Koh 2002). Recently, Yang and Chen (2023) examined how *érzi* 'son,' a male child of any parent, underwent generalization to refer to the addresser's friend, classmate, or pet for rapport management.

Regarding the Chinese address practice *lao* + surname, Yang (2010) claims that *lao* is often added to Chinese forms of address to show respect, which contrasts with its use in Western cultures, as *old* suggests age and uselessness. And *lao* + surname is generally translated into *Old* + family name, such as *Old Wang* (Yang 2010). The *Modern Chinese dictionary* (2016: 782) lists 17 meanings of *lao*. Relevantly, *lao*, as a prefix, can occur to address others by preceding a surname, for instance, *Lao Wang*. *Lao* can also be an honorific, such as *Wang Lao*. The following literature shows the prevalence of the *lao* + surname construction, as well as its particular use across different situations.

Prior studies on the form or structural features of *lao* are also well-documented. For example, Yan (1992) views *lao* as a prefix that forms eight types of address terms, such as *lao* + N, *lao* + V, *lao* + A, and *lao* + surname, thus showing high productivity. Among them, *lao* + surname can occur in face-to-face addressing or absence addressing. And a surname is often characterized by its singularity, like *Wang* and *Zhang*, rather than a compound surname, like *Zhuge*, *Ouyang*. Then Yang (2003) analyzes the grammaticalization of the Chinese prefix *lao*. She enumerates its eight collocation types and four meanings for the purpose of demonstrating the process of its change. In addition, Mao and Pan (2014), from the perspective of cognitive grammar, take *lao* + surname as a fixed construction and examine the cognitive construal of *lao* + surname from the following dimensions: specificity, background, perspective, scope, and prominence.

Previous studies on *lao* + surname focus not only on its form features but also on its pragmatic functions due to its various uses. For example, Liu (2001) reports that

lao + surname constructions like *Lao Wang* are of importance in signaling respect by highlighting the addressee’s oldness. Lyu (1996) suggests that *lao* + surname demonstrates the speaker’s intimacy with the addressee and is hence inapplicable for a young addresser to an elder (Qiu 1990: 12). Chen and Qu (2006), based on certain literary works, illustrate how speakers utilize *lao* + surname to show their informality, especially when participants are of equal status.

In addition to *lao* + surname, other similar address terms have also been discussed in the literature. For example, surname + *lao* (e.g. *Qian Lao*, *Guo Lao*) is used by Chinese people to show respect, especially when addressing elderly men of high social status (Yan 1992). *Lao* + surname may also be appended by other nouns, like *zhuren* ‘director,’ *tongzhi* ‘comrade,’ constituting the construction “*lao* + surname + title noun,” to show the speaker’s respectful sincerity by simultaneously reducing the degree of intimacy.

Given earlier linguistic or pragmatic studies of *lao* + surname, some gaps remain: First, previous studies mostly adopt a qualitative approach, such as discourse/discursive analysis, to study *lao* + surname. Evidently, a dataset-based method will help guarantee the generalization of research findings (Haugh 2018: 637). Second, studies on *lao* + surname mainly address unmarked usage patterns, such as addressing an elderly person, but scant studies touch upon the marked usage patterns, such as addressing a teenager. As such, this paper offers a dataset-based pragmatic analysis, orienting to the question: Why do Chinese people address non-old people with “old”?

3 Methodology

3.1 Research questions

This article aims to explore the usage patterns of the address term *lao* + surname and the pragmatic functions fulfilled in interaction. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions: 1) How old are Chinese persons addressed with *lao* + surname? 2) Why do Chinese address non-old Chinese with “old”? 3) What (philosophy) pragmatically motivates the age-based Chinese form of address?

3.2 Data collection

To address these research questions, we collected data from eleven popular Chinese literature works by searching the keyword *lao*. The reason why we chose them lies in

their popularity, some having been adapted into TV series, and in the diverse themes involved. Moreover, these works vary significantly in terms of time and social contexts. For example, Wang Shuo, Lao She, and Qian Zhongshu differ greatly in both era and style. Through the data, we were able to examine the diversification of the address term *lao* + surname. To save space, unimportant or irrelevant information in some examples will be represented by ellipses, and several paragraphs may be condensed into one. We also render Chinese novelists' and playwrights' names in the standard Chinese manner (surname + given name).

Lao in this study literally means 'old,' in line with Yang's (2010) conceptualization, generally over sixty. During the data collection process, we searched for *lao* in e-book publications of the above literary works. A critical task is to identify the valid data containing *lao* + surname or to exclude invalid tokens using linguistic and contextual considerations. For example,

Ex. (1) *.....有个自命不凡的大白胖子,大家都管他叫老白.....

Tr. (1) *... There was a big, fat white man who was so pretentious that everyone called him *Lao Bai*... (Li Ke, *Du Lala's Promotion Story*)

Ex. (2) 凑巧老白送茶进来.....

Tr. (2) It happened that *Lao Bai* came in with his tea... (Qian Zhongshu, *Cat*)

Even though *Bai* can be a Chinese surname, "*Lao Bai*" in extract (1) fails to constitute the construction *lao* + surname, but a nickname named after his white skin, so the token is excluded. However, example (2) shows that the same construction "*Lao Bai*," valid for us, is included in the dataset, as "*Lao Bai*" here refers to the house servant, and most importantly, *Bai* is his surname.

This study bases the identification of participants' background information, including age, gender, and interpersonal relationship, on two forms of evidence: a) descriptions given by the author(s) of the literary works; and b) the character's narration. The distribution of such parameters as gender and age covers only those referees being people and excludes the 2 cases where a tool is the target. What is more, if the utterances containing *lao* + surname do not suffice on their own to ensure clear identification, further proof is to be obtained by searching through the whole of the works.

By calculation, 764 cases of *lao* + surname are identified (175 from *Song of Youth*, 136 from *My Workplace*, 134 from *Morning in Shanghai*, 114 from *Bean Bread Is Also Food*, 67 from *Spring and Autumn*, 63 from *Scrambling*, 30 from *I Am Your Father*, 21 from *Du Lala's Promotion Story*, 13 from *Cat*, 8 from *Who Knows Ma Yun*, and 3 from *Autumn Fury*), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Information on the data sources.

Work's title	Author	Number of tokens	Synopsis of the relevant story
<i>Song of Youth</i>	Yang Mo	175	Students like Lin Daojing living a difficult life during a war
<i>My Workplace</i>	Liu Zhenyun	136	Colleagues in a small department striving for power and profit
<i>Morning in Shanghai</i>	Zhou Erfu	134	Social life changing with the liberation of China
<i>Bean Bread Is Also Food</i>	Qi Tiemin	114	Wang Xi working as a group leader and taking it seriously
<i>Spring and Autumn</i>	Lao She	67	Factory workers battling against illegal commercial activities
<i>Scrambling</i>	Wei Runshen	63	Four neighbors struggling for a wealthy life
<i>I Am Your Father</i>	Wang Shuo	30	Ma Linsheng and his son Ma Rui holding conflicting values
<i>Du Lala's Promotion Story</i>	Li Ke	21	Du Lala endeavoring to become an entrepreneur leader
<i>Cat</i>	Qian Zhongshu	13	Li Jianhou and his wife living a life gilded on the exterior but shabby inside
<i>Who Knows Ma Yun</i>	Liu Shiyang, Peng Zheng	8	The legendary Ma Yun's entrepreneurial experience and life journey
<i>Autumn Fury</i>	Zhang Wei	3	Villagers experiencing changes of views in the revolution age

Each excerpt in the present study will be presented in the following format: Chinese source text and English version, *lao* + surname thereof highlighted. Here we are responsible for the English versions. We also use ellipses for unrelated information to save space.

4 Data analysis

4.1 Chinese addressing old Chinese using “Old”

The data shows that people in interaction adopt *lao* + surname to refer to a wide range of addressees intending to achieve varying functions. As Chen and Qu (2006: 35) observe, the practice of addressing people by adding the prefix *lao* prior to the person's surname tends to be quite complex. Based on the data, we observe two main types of use: unmarked (addressing old people with “old”) and marked use

(addressing non-old with “old”) as classified by participants’ background information, including age, gender, and interpersonal relationship. The study first presents how Chinese employ *lao* + surname unmarkedly.

Regarding the parameter of age, the data shows most addressees are aged over forty, accounting for 97 %, when taking contextual information into consideration. In these cases, *lao* + surname rings age-based or age-oriented, well in line with the first dictionary meaning of *lao*, i.e. oldness. In addition, the referees are mostly males, 726 cases (accounting for 95 %), whereas there are 36 cases for female addressees (accounting for 5 %), and thus more frequently for males than for females.

As for the parameter of interpersonal relations, the data manifests two types: participants of equal status (accounting for 76 %), like friends or classmates, or of unequal status (accounting for 24 %), like superior to inferior, or employer to employee (considering our focus on interpersonal relations in general, we do not show the number or percentage of any particular type of equal and unequal status). The above statistics are summarized in Table 2.

4.2 Chinese addressing non-old with “old”

Marked uses of the addressing construction *lao* + surname do occur, a topic to date unexplored. It is interesting, for instance, to observe the construction used by a son addressing his father or between teenagers. Why, then, the users opt for this address term in such marked cases is to be explored next in light of the sequential context or characters’ narration.

4.2.1 *Lao* + surname by children to parents

Deviating from the conventional usage pattern of *lao* + surname, i.e. inapplicable for a young addresser to an elder, as claimed in Qiu’s (1990: 12) work, the following

Table 2: Distribution of *lao* + surname regarding different parameters.

Age	≥40	741	97 %
	<40	23	3 %
Gender	Male	726	95 %
	Female	36	5 %
Social status	Equal status	581	76 %
	Unequal status	183	24 %

example shows how a son addresses his father using *lao* + surname (this father calls his son *xiao* ‘young’ + surname in return).

Ex. (3) “今儿起,你也甭管我叫爸爸了。”“那我管您叫什么呀?”“叫名字、嗨都成……你就把我当你的一个小哥们儿对待就齐活了。”“……我谢谢您了”……马林生有心再加盘查,又一想,别破坏了这好容易创造出来的哥们儿气氛,忍住了。“爸。”“叫老马,”他挤着笑说。“老马,你觉得你属于那种喜怒无常的人么?”……他和儿子像一对哥们儿一样吃了顿饭……“小马,真高兴你能对我说几句实话……”

Tr. (3) “From now on, you don’t have to call me Daddy.” “What should I call you then?” “Call me by my name, well, whatever... Just treat me like one of your buddies.” “... Thank you.”... Ma Linsheng was tempted to examine further, but he hated to spoil the buddy atmosphere he had built up so hard. “Daddy.” “Call me *Lao Ma*,” the father forced a smile on his face. “*Lao Ma*, do you think you’re temperamental?”... He and his son had a meal like buddies... “*Xiao Ma*, I’m so glad you are sincere to me for once...” (Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Father*)

In example (3), Ma Linsheng begins by asking his son not to address him as “Daddy.” Even so, his son still calls him “Daddy,” which motivates Ma Linsheng to select “*Lao Ma*” for his son. As such, the son accepts “*Lao Ma*” as a deixis for his father. The marked use of *lao* + surname here achieves a relaxing adult- or peer-talk atmosphere, as evidenced by the sequential context, i.e. “he hated to spoil the buddy atmosphere he had built up so hard” and “He and his son had a meal like buddies.” Given this term of address, the addressee addresses the addresser, his son, by *xiao* + surname.

However, this marked use of *lao* + surname violates (or actually deviates from) the social norm for father–son interactions in Chinese contexts, thus causing unintended negative effects on each other, not to mention on onlookers. Consider example (4), where the father commands his son to abandon the father-like term of address.

Ex. (4) 今后不许你再叫我名字和老马,改回来还是叫爸爸……我看你近来也是忘乎所以了,不但叫我的名字,还动不动就跟我顶嘴,很不像话……

Tr. (4) In the future, you are not allowed to call me by my name or *Lao Ma*, change back and call me Daddy... It seems you forget what you are, not only calling me by my name, but also disobedient, bad behaviors... (Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Father*)

The conversation in example (4) takes place after Ma Linsheng is asked to meet his son’s teacher for a talk. Ma Linsheng is blamed for inducing his son to read bad books. In addition, the son disobeys his father shortly after that talk. This prompts the father-and-son “negotiation” about the form of address.

4.2.2 *Lao* + surname between teenagers

Different from the conventional use of *lao* + surname to address elderly people, teenagers may address each other in this manner as a signal for maturity, as shown in example (5).

Ex. (5) “……走吧，老马。”他招呼马锐。“老铁，咱们是不是当着他们双方的面再把我们的态度重申一遍？”……孩子们的郑重使马林生觉得有些可笑，特别是他们互相之间成人式的称呼，使他有一种自己的名位僭越了的感觉。……“老马，留步吧，以后再接着聊。”“慢走呵，老铁，留神脚下。”……“还有，你们屁大的孩子，互相乱叫什么‘老李’‘老张’的？小小年纪一个个老气横秋的，看着也不像呵。”

Tr. (5) “... Let's go, *Lao Ma*,” he greeted Ma Rui. “*Lao Tie*, shall we reiterate our attitude again?”... The children's solemnity made Ma Linsheng feel a bit ridiculous, especially when they addressed each other like adults, as if he was not an adult... “*Lao Ma*, let's call it a day. See you later.” “Sure, *Lao Tie*, mind your steps and take care.”... “Why kids, so young you guys are you know, but why ‘*Lao Li*’ ‘*Lao Zhang*’ for each other? To look older? What a crazy idea!” (Wang Shuo, *I Am Your Father*)

Tie Jun and Ma Rui are middle school students, and their parents divorced many years ago. Given Tie Jun's mother and Ma Rui's father are single again, these two boys decide to match them up. The first part of the conversation happens in Tie Jun's home, where the two boys have arranged for Tie Jun's mother to invite Ma Rui's father to see if the two adults are a good match. After a brief introduction, the two teenagers leave for Ma Rui's home so as to leave room for their parents. Notably, Tie Jun and Ma Rui make use of the address form “*lao* + surname,” “*Lao Ma*” and “*Lao Tie*” respectively. Thus, despite being young, they view themselves in this situation as being fully developed grown-ups who are competent enough to matchmake their parents. Therefore, they reflect this by addressing each other in this way. Referring to the author's description, we can deduce the effects of this on the adults present: they initially see it as humorous and overstepping the boundaries. The second part of example (5) occurs at Ma Rui's house, when their parents have finished spending time together and Ma Rui's father has returned home. Tie Jun decides to go and ask his mother about the result. Then Ma Rui sees Tie Jun off at the gate of his apartment. They address each other by *lao* + surname. Now Ma Rui responds to this form of address with dislike, interpreting it as “precocity.”

4.2.3 *Lao* + surname for non-Chinese addressees

Even though *lao* + surname is by and large a China-specific deixis, the data shows that *lao* + surname is sometimes analogously applied to a non-Chinese person. Consider the following examples:

Ex. (6) “那家旅馆尽来老外, 美国的英国的俄国的……”

Tr. (6) “The hotel is full of foreigners (*Lao Wai*), Americans, Britons and Russians...” (Wei Runshen, *Scrambling*)

Ex. (7) 马云说“老克”乐坏了, 直呼杭州美。当晚, 马云与克林顿共进晚餐。

Tr. (7) Ma Yun said “*Lao Ke*” was delighted and praised Hangzhou’s beauty. Ma Yun and Clinton had dinner together that evening. (Liu Shiyong and Peng Zheng, *Who Knows Ma Yun*)

Lao Wai (outside/foreign) in example (6) refers to non-Chinese or “foreigners.” Here *wai* stands for *wai*guoren ‘foreigners’, so this serves merely as an ad-hoc “*lao* + surname” construction. Similar to (6), *Lao* + Ke in example (7) refers to former US president William J. Clinton, his surname being “克林顿” (*Kelindun*). Therefore, Ma Yun follows the Chinese addressing practice in calling the president *Lao Ke*, as if *Ke* were his surname and *Lindun* his given name (Chinese name pattern: surname + given name).

4.2.4 *Lao* + surname for a tool

In contrast to the above examples, human as a referent of *lao* + surname, the following example showcases how *lao* + surname refers to an instrument.

Ex. (8) “告诉多少遍也记不住, 用老镰!” 荒荒有些不耐烦。把镰刀叫成“老镰”, 惹得四周的人一阵大笑。

Tr. (8) “How often do I tell you, but you can’t remember. Use *Lao Lian*!” was Huanghuang’s impatient response. You see, he called the scythe “*Lao Lian*,” making all around laugh so. (Zhang Wei, *Autumn Fury*)

In example (8), *Lao Lian* refers to a farming tool. Considering that the addresser Huanghuang forgets the name of the instrument, he opts for the ad-hoc form of address as a parody of the “*lao* + surname” construction, adding to the laughter-evoking humor, evidenced by the subsequent “making all around laugh so.”

The above two marked uses, i.e. *Lao Wai*, *Lao Lian*, can be classified as the frequently-seen construction “*lao* + X” in interaction. Here, X covers a variety of word

classes, including adj, V, etc., characterizing some ad-hoc uses. For example, “老改” (*lao gai*, *lao* + V) describes someone who constantly changes their mind, “老赖” (*lao lai*, *lao* + adj) refers to untrustworthy people (cf. *lai* otherwise serves as a surname), “老懒” (*lao lan*, *lao* + adj) refers to lazy people, and “老乐” (*lao le*, *lao* + adj/V) refers to happy people. Also, the surname in the “*lao* + surname” construction may consist of compounds like *Ouyang* and *Sima*. Notably, this corpus supplements literary works by providing various genres, like online and face-to-face discourse, thus contributing to the occurrence of *lao* + compounds, a new member of the *lao* + surname patterning.

Similar to the singularity feature of *lao* + surname as mentioned in Yan (1992), double-word surnames also occur in the *lao* construction, like “*Lao Sima*,” “*Lao Zhuge*,” and “*Lao Dongfang*.” We searched the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) corpus and found an instance with “*Lao Sima*” referring to Sima Qian, who wrote *Records of the Historian*, the first chronological history of China.

As analyzed above, *lao* + surname can occur unmarkedly or markedly. In the former case, the deixis occurs to address old(er) Chinese, as a signal of respect, intimacy, or informality, as contextual clues vary. By contrast, in marked uses, *lao* + surname may occur to refer to a teenager (Chinese or non-Chinese), or even a tool. In addition to the above dataset-based results, based on Chinese people’s language habits there presumably exist other marked uses of *lao* + surname in everyday life. For example, students may address their course teachers or supervisors with *lao* + surname in their absence, although this would usually be considered rude in face-to-face address. In addition, *lao* + surname may occur among peers or youth in face-to-face interaction, and in son–parent interaction (more often than daughter–parent interaction).

4.2.5 Switching between *Lao* + surname and other address forms

Since this study primarily concerns the choice of address forms in interaction, we pay particular attention to how participants use *lao* + surname and whether they choose other forms of address for the same people. The data shows that, despite the overwhelming popularity of *lao* + surname, the speaker does not always use this construction to address the same addressee. Furthermore, the addressing practice *lao* + surname evolves with the plot development of the novels, the development of the participants’ relations, or a change in participants’ social status. As seen, the characters in literary works switch between *lao* + surname and other forms in addressing the same person. Specifically, when addresser and addressee enjoy a familiar friend-like partnership, *lao* + surname and other address forms could occur interchangeably. Please consider examples (9–10).

- Ex. (9)** 室内有女人的声音：“清波，该你出牌啦！”室内女人又催：“老管，你快着呀！”
- Tr. (9)** A woman’s voice in the room: “Qingbo, it’s your turn to play!” The woman in the room urged again, “*Lao Guan*, hurry up!” (Lao She, *Spring and Autumn*)
- Ex. (10)** 丁翼平：“听着，以前，你跟老管是对头。多亏了我从中说和……是这么一回事不是？”钱掌柜：“是！”丁翼平：“后来，管大哥这儿收拾好了，我提议大家时常在这儿碰头……大家说好，一致合作，什么事彼此都不瞒着，是这样不是？”钱掌柜：“是！”丁翼平：“那么，为什么你背着老管，大量收买钢料，又叫老方钻我空子，而且从我手里挖去王先舟？”
- Tr. (10)** Ding Yiping: “Listen, in the past, you and *Lao Guan* were rivals. I helped you reconcile... right?” Boss Qian: “Yes!” Ding Yiping: “Later, when *Bro Guan*’s [Elder Brother Guan’s] place was tidied up, I suggested we meet here from time to time... We’ll join hands and stop the hide-and-seek competitions, right?” Boss Qian: “Yes!” Ding Yiping: “Then, why did you buy a lot of steel without *Lao Guan*’s knowledge, and have *Lao Fang* cheat me and even poach Wang Xianzhou from my hand?” (Lao She, *Spring and Autumn*)

Example (9) takes place in Guan Qingbo’s house, where Guan Qingbo and his friends are playing cards for fun. Guan Qingbo has to answer the phone. His fellow player then reminds him of his turn by addressing him by his given name characterizing familiarity. By contrast, in her second utterance, she selects the address term “*Lao Guan*,” characterizing intimacy, to hurry him to take the turn. In addition, example (10) indicates how the character switches between *lao* + surname and other address terms in both directions, that is, from “*Lao Guan*” first to “Bro Guan [Elder Brother Guan],” and then to “*Lao Guan*.” Therefore, example (10) presents a full picture of the seesaw game of *lao* + surname and other forms of address in a given context. So, *lao* + surname can be used to refer to someone present, absent, old(er), young, and so on, in our data. The result is in line with what Dickey (1997: 256) claims, i.e. that it distinguishes the vocative from referential usage in studying the address system of a language. Consider example (11).

- Ex. (11)** “参加！”道静毫不迟疑地说道，“你也去吗？老卢呢？”“他吗，当然去！”……两个钟头之后……道静一眼望见卢嘉川穿着一套工人装站在门旁边，她高兴得一把拉住他，说：“卢兄，你好吧？”
- Tr. (11)** “Attending!” Daojing said without hesitation. “Are you going too? What about *Lao Lu*?” “Lu? Definitely, sure sure...” Two hours later... Daojing caught a glimpse of Lu Jiachuan standing next to the door in a worker’s outfit. She happily pulled him over, “Hi *Bro Lu* [Elder Brother Lu], how are you?” (Yang Mo, *Song of Youth*)

The above example consists of two parts with the ellipsis showing different conversation scenes. *Lao* + surname occurs once for absent reference, to lose out to “Bro Lu [Elder Brother Lu]” by the end, as a direct vocative. As analyzed above, Lin Daojing addressing Lu as *Lao* Lu signals her special respect, since the addressee is just over 20 years old. By contrast, “Bro Lu” exemplifies the generalized kinship term in address practice (Chen and Ren 2020: 1029), i.e. using a kinship term when addressing a non-kin person during daily social encounters. It mirrors the speaker’s viewing all patriotic students as a family, characteristic of the Chinese family culture (Chen 2019: 251).

Another interesting observation is that the appearance of *lao* + surname evolves from other address terms, implying certain specific meanings with reference to the development of the whole play. Please consider example (12).

Ex. (12) (第一幕第一场)唐子明:“丁经理,你用不着多交代……”(第一幕第三场)丁翼平:“老唐,你调查一下,看哪几个厂子能做多少活……”唐子明:“那行!丁大哥,我愿意多有活儿做,可是咱们也得小心点!”管清波:“老唐,你是又要吃又怕烫……”(第三幕第一场)唐子明:“老丁,你细细琢磨琢磨我的话!”丁翼平:“……”唐子明:“老丁,我可要走啦!林组长!我走啦!”

Tr. (12) (Act 1: Scene 1) Tang Ziming: “Mr Ding [Manager Ding], you don’t have to explain much...” (Act 1: Scene 3) Ding Yiping: “*Lao Tang*, go and see how much specific factories can shoulder...” Tang Ziming: “OK! *Bro Ding* [Elder Brother Ding], the more job for me, the better. But we must keep our eyes open!” Guan Qingbo: “*Lao Tang*, a hare on the grass too cautious will go hungry...” (Act 3: Scene 1) Tang Ziming: “*Lao Ding*, mind my words!” Ding Yiping: “...” Tang Ziming: “*Lao Ding*, I must be off now! My team leader, goodbye!” (Lao She, *Spring and Autumn*)

In the play (of 3 acts, comprising 7 scenes), Ding Yiping works as the manager of Rongchang Iron Factory, a leading national enterprise, and a Member of Federation of Industry and Commerce, and Tang Ziming is the manager of another small iron factory. Tang needs to collaborate with Ding. Notably, while Ding keeps addressing Tang as “*Lao Tang*,” Tang addresses Ding with three different forms of address: “Manager Ding,” “Bro Ding [Elder Brother Ding],” and “*Lao Ding*,” a sign of different degrees of formality and different nuances and styles of esteem. Whereas “Manager Ding” represents formality and awe due to the association of the addressee’s title, “*Lao Ding*” is less formal and respectful, and “Bro Ding [Elder Brother Ding]” the least (or more casual and familiar).

The following example then illustrates how the speaker selects proper address terms according to the relationship between participants and the speech acts involved.

Ex. (13) 但行政处的处长来找他……说：“张局长，我想跟您请示一个事！”老张说：“老崔，不要说请示，你说，你说。”老崔：“以后您上下班不要骑自行车了，车已经给您安排好了！”老张摆摆手：“不要安排车，不要安排车，我爱骑自行车，锻炼身体！”老崔不再说话，斜着坐在那里，很为难的样子。老张有些奇怪：“怎么了老崔？”老崔将烟头捻灭，为难地说：“老张，本来这话不该我说，您不要骑自行车了，咱单位又不是没车。别的局长副局长上下班都是车接，您想，您要老骑自行车，别的局长……”“那好老崔，从明天开始，我听你的！”老崔马上高兴起来，站起来说：“还是张局长痛快，让我们下边好做工作。”

Tr. (13) But the Director of the Administrative Division came to him...[and] said: “Director Zhang, there’s a thing I’ve got to discuss with you, is it OK?” Lao Zhang said, “Lao Cui, no problem. Fire away.” Lao Cui: “From now on, you don’t have to ride a bicycle to work, because there’s the car for you!” Lao Zhang waved his hand, “No car for me, please. No, don’t bother. I love cycling, for exercise, you know!” Lao Cui stopped, slumped over his chair, more than embarrassed. Lao Zhang was a bit surprised: “What’s wrong Lao Cui?” Lao Cui put out his cig, groping for the right words, “Lao Zhang, I’m sorry, perhaps I am not the right man to say this, but you coming to work by bike is unpleasant news to them: all the other directors and deputy directors deserve a car, you too. What will they say if you insist?...” “Alright then, Lao Cui, good, but not till tomorrow, OK?” Lao Cui immediately cheered up to his feet: “Director (Zhang), how great! It’s so great, and I’m so happy. It’s done.” (Liu Zhenyun, *My Workplace*)

This conversion takes place between Deputy Director Zhang and Head of Office Division Cui, typically characterizing a superior to an inferior. It is interesting to find that while the superior–inferior deixis remains unchanged, i.e. “Lao Cui” invariably, the inferior–superior deixis does undergo shifts: “Director Zhang,” “Lao Zhang,” and “Director Zhang.” “Director Zhang” is title-honorific. Cui employs “Director Zhang” twice to highlight the addressee’s higher position or his respect for this, in line with the selection of other words within the respective utterances, i.e. “请示” and “下边” (inferior–superior deference). “Lao Zhang” as deixis relates to the advising (act) in the setting. As noted in the literature, an act of advising is potentially face-threatening due to a threat to the addressee’s negative face, i.e. threatening hearer’s action freedom (Brown and Levinson 1987: 82; Hinkel 1997: 5). This is particularly true or more so when an inferior gives his superior advice. That is why Cui performs the advising act only after several tries. In this sense, the inferior’s shift from the honorific address “Director Zhang” to “Lao Zhang” contributes to shortening their sociopragmatic distance, to the benefit of the upcoming advising act. In addition, the metapragmatic utterance “perhaps I am not the right man to say this” mirrors the

speaker's metapragmatic awareness of their identities and inferior–superior distance. Interestingly, owing to the characters' use of *Lao* + surname, the author speaks of his characters likewise.

In addition to the above proper use of *lao* + surname, the data also shows some sociopragmatic failures, misuses of *lao* + surname, leading to misunderstanding or interaction breakdown, for example:

Ex. (14) 你是老王吧?我是老王, 没吧!……我跟你说, 你别一口一个老王的, 老王是该你叫的吗?我操, 你不就是一个小破工长吗?还自称领导呢!老王, 你也太能搞笑了!高平轻蔑地说。

Tr. 14 You are *Lao Wang*, right? I'm *Lao Wang*, not Wong! ... I warn you, don't call me *Lao Wang* all time, *Lao Wang's* no addressing for you. Damn, you are nothing but a group leader. No leader you are! *Lao Wang*? What a laughingstock you make yourself! Gao Ping said all that contemptuously. (Adapted from Qi Tiemin, *Bean Bread Is Also Food*)

In this conversation, Gao Ping and Wang Xi are acquaintances and colleagues (working at the same factory). While Gao, around 20, son of the Director of Labor and Employment, is working at the planning department, Wang, over 40, is a team leader. Wang has been to the Security Office of the factory to sue Gao for his misbehavior toward Wang's female inferior. Gao then comes to Wang's office to complain. With regard to Gao addressing Wang Xi as "*Lao Wang*," we can envisage it as a marked use of *lao* + surname, as the construction is used by a youth to an elder, by a worker to a leader, between two acquaintances. This conversation starts with Gao's greeting "You are *Lao Wang*, right?" Here "*Lao Wang*" plus interjection *ba* in Chinese, due to homophonicity, may ambiguously suggest "Old Turtle" (老王八), a taboo (fig. old cuckold). That is why Wang rejects it by claiming *mei ba* (not *ba* as a marker for interrogativity). Taking other factors into consideration, like social distance, power, rights, obligations, etc., it is understandable for the addressee to pour his displeasure onto the speaker for his misuse of *lao* + surname.

Why, then, do all the marked uses of *lao* + surname occur, at times resulting in a sociopragmatic failure?

5 Discussion

On the basis of unmarked uses of *lao* + surname, the study mainly unfolds its marked uses, for example, for addressing non-old people. To address old(er) people with *lao* reveals the speaker's concern about the contextual information, including the interlocutor's age, gender, and social status, as well as the sociopragmatic relation between the two sides. To address someone who is not old using *lao* + surname helps

establish or maintain sociopragmatic bonds, strengthen solidarity, and achieve an aha effect. For example, a son (younger generation) addressing his father (older generation) using *lao* + surname in example (3), if without special permission, is a sign of rudeness, or a signal of breakdown of the established social order. Then, the shift from the most formal (with occupational title) to less formal (kinship term), and to the least formal (*lao* + surname, as seen in example (12)), can be partly attributable to some of the abovementioned contextual information. Specifically, the address of “Manager Ding” occurs when Ding Yiping is elected as Member of the Federation of Industry and Commerce, and his friends and collaborative partners, including Tang Ziming, come to celebrate his promotion. The use of “Manager Ding” thus shows the speaker’s respect. Then “Bro Ding [Elder Brother Ding]” is adopted when Ding Yiping obtains a big project from the government and needs to allocate the tasks to his collaborative partners. The use of “Bro Ding” thus showcases the speaker’s determination to cultivate fellowship. Then “*Lao* Ding” is chosen as Ding Yiping is cross-questioned by the government for his illegal commercial activities. The use of “*Lao* Ding” thus indicates the speaker’s flippancy.

The use of *lao* + surname by and large demonstrates the speaker’s observation of Gu’s (1990, 1992) Politeness Principle with its Address Maxim. That is, speaker (S) addresses hearer (H) by an appropriate address in a situated environment. Cautious choice of a specific address term reveals “S’s recognition of H as a social being in his specific social status or role” and “S’s definition of the social relation between S and H” (Gu 1990: 248–249). Therefore, S needs to take multiple variables into consideration, like Gu’s (1990: 249) nine variables: 1) kinship, 2) superiority, 3) prestige, 4) familiarity, 5) gender, 6) age, 7) formality of occasion, 8) family members or non-relatives, and 9) privacy (in public or at home). Of these nine variables, 2–6 are closely relevant to the address term *lao* + surname in question.

In this sense, *lao* + surname is strictly constrained by *beifen* (辈分) and *weifen* (位分), two China-specific notions of ancient Chinese philosophy. Here *beifen* means roughly age seniority in a family (clan), or age/generation status of a person in a family (clan). A typical Chinese family has four *beifens*/generations: the speaker’s grandparents’ *beifen*, parents’ *beifen*, his own *beifen*, and son/nephew’s *beifen*. *Beifen* implies constraints on external behaviors and internal ethics of all family members (Wang 2018: 50). In contrast, *weifen* means prestige seniority or status in a group or community hierarchy, such that a white-collar worker is markedly higher than a blue-collar worker in *weifen*, and the latter higher than a gray-collar worker. Therefore, *weifen* emphasizes people’s social role or social status (Qian 1999: 43), in line with the Confucian thought “*junjun, chenchen, fufu, zizi*” (‘A sovereign acts like a sovereign, just as a courtier like a courtier, a father like a father, and a son like a son’). *Beifen* is measured on the scales of age (e.g. young or old) and age status (e.g. grandson’s or father’s age) exclusively, while *weifen* as a criterion correlates to, but is

not based exclusively on, age. For *beifen*, the older a person is in a family (clan), the higher the *beifen*. For *weifen*, the higher pay or position, the higher *weifen*, together with older age in most cases. *Beifen* and *weifen* help build up the social order and moral order (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016: 73).

In Chinese culture, people are given corresponding respect in accordance with their given and recognized *beifen* and/or *weifen*. The use of *lao* + surname manifests and externalizes *beifen* and *weifen* in China. Namely, *beifen* and *weifen* largely determine whether to use *lao* + surname in social interaction. To put it simply, while addressing someone, Chinese speakers need to consider the two parties' rank or position distance. They may conventionally address their elderly addressee using *lao* + surname, and use that deixis for equal social status, as in the case of friends, colleagues, husband and wife, and classmates. They can turn to this deixis too in cases of unequal status, like superior to inferior, employer to employee, for a marked effect. Also, for a marked effect, Chinese speakers may address non-old hearers with *lao* + surname.

Sociopragmatic failures do occur in *lao* + surname uses due to misassessment of *beifen* and *weifen*, among other things. If, for instance, Professor Zhang, over 50, called “*Lao Zhang*” by his wife and friends (unmarked use of *lao* + surname), happens to be thus addressed by his children and some “ill-behaved” students, it strikes him and listeners of course as marked, if not improper, deixis, as this form of vis-à-vis or non-vis-à-vis address largely rings impolite.

6 Conclusions

By exploring how Chinese people use the *lao* + surname construction in social interaction, this study presents the complexity of this Chinese-specific address term. Conventionally *lao* + surname occurs among elderly people of equal status, like friends, or of unequal status when addressing people of lower social status, like employees to show the users' respect, intimacy, or informality. By contrast, *lao* + surname may occur markedly when referring to teenagers or be analogously used so as to fulfill special pragmatic functions in a situated circumstance. What is more, people may switch between using *lao* + surname and other address terms or use this construction in the addressee's presence or absence, as they wish.

The use of *lao* + surname embodies the speaker's consideration of situations or context, which include, among other things, mainly *beifen* (roughly age status) and *weifen* (roughly position status); idiolect (i.e. the speaker's personal habit of language use), and impositions (i.e. what speaker expects of hearer). Therefore, the Address-term Maxim of Gu's Politeness Principle may provide an account of the addressing practice. Specifically, *lao* + surname can be an appropriate address term in a specific

context, for the sociopragmatic goal of creating a relaxed atmosphere or an aha effect, and so forth. Sociopragmatic failures, however, may occur in terms of use of *lao* + surname when users miscalculate sociopragmatic distance, relative power, imposition, etc., or simply override the Address Maxim.

This study may have limitations. First, the interpretation of the address forms used, particularly the causal analysis of the observed switches between address forms, is largely speculative due to the etic approach used, although occasionally taking the character’s narration or the author’s description into consideration. Future research can include interviews with language users to uncover their motivations for and/or their opinions of the use of *lao* + surname. Second, the intuition-based marked uses of *lao* + surname calls for more authentic data evidence. Third, in terms of uses of *lao* + surname, further research can address interactions between Han Chinese and non-Han groups, between Chinese within and outside mainland China, or between ethnic minorities, because more or fewer differences may be revealed.

Acknowledgements: We are indebted to Huaqiao University’s “Innovative Pragmatics Rhetoric Team,” especially Xinren Chen, Qihong Xing, Sisi Zhang, Haifang Xie, and Ran Liu.

Research funding: National Social Science Foundation of China (A study of the discourse construction and the international communication mode of “China’s Plan” of national governance in the new era), 21BYY091.

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