

## TERMS OF ADDRESS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE

Terms of address are the words we use when we speak to someone. The circumstances in which they are used are the same everywhere: when we call to someone; when we meet someone; when we want to attract someone's attention; when we speak to one person in a group—to ask a question or to give an order; at the beginning of a discourse; on an envelope; and at the beginning of a letter. Nevertheless, it depends on a particular society whether the use of these terms, in a given circumstance, is necessary or not. In Chinese, for example, when one meets someone he knows, he is not obliged to call him by name, title or any other term. The most normal attitude is to ask a question about what he is doing, a question whose objective depends on the circumstances and whose form depends on the degree of familiarity one has with the person addressed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the street one generally asks, "Where are you going?" (*Dao nar qu?*); in a shop, "What are you buying?" (*Mai shenme?*); around mealtime the most usual question, no matter where, is "Have you eaten?" (*Chi fan le mei you?*). The greater the familiarity between the speakers, the shorter the statement is: *ni mai shenme?* (you-buy-what) is less familiar than *mai shenme?* (buy-what). The subject pronoun is never obligatory when there is no ambiguity. For the second person, it is also a mark of courtesy. The unmarked form is *ni*. In Peking there is also a respectful form, *nin*.

There is a distinction between a term of address (when speaking to someone) and a designation<sup>2</sup> (when speaking of someone to a third party)—“presentation” being a particular case of designation. The address and the designation may or may not be different in form. In French, for example, proper names and certain appellations of kinship occasionally used as designations may have the same form: “Michel,” “Dupont,” “papa,”<sup>3</sup> but most of the terms differ in their determinatives: *Monsieur/le monsieur*; *Votre Excellence/Son Excellence*; *camarades!/mes (les) camarades*. In Chinese, in which the article does not exist, there is generally only one form: *tongzhi*, comrade (s), one, the, some comrade (s); *Wang laoshi*, Professor Wang, the professor Wang.

The absence of morphological signs for terms of address in Chinese leads to a reflection on the status of these forms. The fact that these words are systematically described in Chinese dictionaries with the term *chengbu*, appellation, suggests that the inventory is limited. Whatever the case, since these forms may also serve as designation to a third party, the function “address” is still to be precisely defined. This latter can only be expressed within the discourse; it is excluded from narrative. The forms of address are linked to the process of statement but do not belong to the series of forms that are exclusively dependent on the act of statement, such as “I,” “here,” “now”: these words have no definite referent *outside the discourse*, while a term of address may have one (for example, Professor Wang). Terms of address are in a way the *agents who set up the scene for the conversation*. They are a way for the speaker to present the conditions of the exchange, to more or less clear the ground for a possible dialogue. That is particularly evident in Chinese, where there is often a choice between several acceptable terms of address.

We have abundant information on pre-contemporary China. Not only do we have a good acquaintance with the formal terminology of kinship,<sup>4</sup> ritual and respectful appellations and titles

<sup>2</sup> Some authors prefer to call the words that are used to designate those being spoken of “terms of reference”.

<sup>3</sup> Only within the family and in certain milieus.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Han-yi Feng, *The Chinese Kinship System*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1948.

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of functionaries, but also, thanks to the theater and the great novels in the vernacular, the usage in everyday dialogues.

As for contemporary China (since the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949), we have written material, novels, texts of speeches, language manuals, comic dialogues and short pamphlets on proper usage for correspondence, but we have relatively few direct observations on actual oral usage, *not standardized*.<sup>5</sup> All of the above gives the impression that, the old vocabulary having become impoverished, there is a tendency toward a more uniform system—which would be the reflection of a “simple” society.

Suspecting that the actual situation is richer and more animated, I took the opportunity during a mission in China (March–April 1980) to make an inquiry into the terms of address currently in use. This inquiry was directed toward about fifty people, mostly urban intellectuals.

First, I will give the conditions of use of the various forms that may be used in address. Following that, I will illustrate the possibilities of choice that are most often available to the speaker, giving some examples. To conclude, I will give special usages for addressing foreigners, for joking, and, in extreme cases, for the use of insults in interpellation.

### I CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF THE TERMS OF ADDRESS

These elements will be presented under the following headings:

—Proper names.

—The determinants of proper names, *lao-* and *xiao-* and of titles, that is, the terms that may be preceded by a proper name.

—Terms of kinship, within the family and outside it (derived usage).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Yuen Ren Chao, “Chinese Terms of Address”, *Language* 32 (1956), pp. 217–241, re-edited in *Aspects of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, Stanford, 1976 (Ch. 23). This article refers to usages in the Republic of China (1911–1949), which are still essentially those of Taiwan. In this work, Y.R. Chao describes many real daily practices, but they are not exactly those that may be observed today in the People's Republic of China. We can also mention articles by Beverly Hong-Fincher, for example, “Language Use in Chinese Society”, in *Chinese Language Use*, Canberra, 1978, where there are important observations on usages derived from kinship.

## 1. PROPER NAMES<sup>6</sup>

A person's name is composed of a family name (*xing*) followed by a given name (*ming*). Effectively, Chinese family names are limited to a few hundred;<sup>7</sup> most of them are monosyllabic, but some have two syllables. For example:<sup>8</sup>

*LU Shuxiang*, a monosyllabic name with disyllabic given name. This is the form found most frequently.

*LI Rong*, both family name and given name monosyllabic.

*OUYANG Zhou*, family name disyllabic, given name monosyllabic.

*SITU Huimin*, both names disyllabic. This form is extremely rare.

Nowadays, a wife is free to keep her family name or to take that of her husband. The most frequent usage is that she keeps her own instead of taking that of her husband.

Parents may give their children the family name of the mother or that of the father. In the great majority of cases, they still choose that of the father. They are not obliged to adopt a single solution for all the children; thus, brothers and sisters may at times not have the same family name.

A Chinese given name is not a simple designation intended to identify, as is the case in other countries, nor is it a symbolic appellation (saints' names in some countries). It is also a descriptive form. It is made up of syllables (corresponding to a graphic "character") having a meaning, and this meaning subsists in the given name.<sup>9</sup> For example,

*X Jingchun*: *Jing* for *Beijing*, Peking, *chun*, spring: a young man born in the spring in Peking.

*X Zhaodi*: *zhao*, to beckon with the hand, *di*, younger

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Bauer, *Der chinesische Personennamen*, Wiesbaden, 1959, ed. Harrassowitz, 406 pages.

<sup>7</sup> The manual "One Hundred Family Names" gives 438 properly Chinese family names (*Han*). If we take into account the characters used to transcribe the family names of foreigners (Mongols, Arabs and others) we arrive at a total of nearly 800.

<sup>8</sup> The family name is written in capitals, the given name capitalized. In this study, they will be represented by X for the family name (*xing*) and M for the given name (*ming*).

<sup>9</sup> Y.R. Chao (*op. cit.*) is of the opposite opinion: according to him, Chinese given names are simple designations. In fact, the significative value of proper names is bound to Chinese writing: each graphic character has a meaning.

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brother. This is the given name of a girl whose parents have not yet had a male descendant and are hoping for a son. Given names of this type are current especially in the country and among the common people.

*X Songnian*: *song*, pine, a tree that weathers storms and symbolizes long life; *nian*, year(s), reinforces the idea of longevity.

Concerning this example, it must be mentioned that formerly the first of the two characters of the given name were common to all the males of the same generation within a family. This character was drawn from a text in the form of a poem that had been composed by a common ancestor. Today, this system of *jiapu* is no longer taken into account for choosing the given names of children, but many adults were named in this way. In the above example, the character *song* was not especially chosen for the person concerned; it is an element that he shares with all his brothers and male cousins ("generation name"). However, the meaning of the common noun *song*, pine, longevity, is not necessarily lost because of this fact.<sup>10</sup>

This is also the case for *Mao Zedong*. *Ze* is the generation name he shared with his brothers and male cousins. This *ze* signifies "pond," "to humidify," "to glaze." The third syllable, *dong*, means "east." Thus we may interpret the given name *Zedong* as "to irrigate the East."

Theoretically, the elements of a Chinese given name may be drawn from the totality of the morphemes of the language, but actually certain sectors of the vocabulary that have unlucky or ridiculous connotations are excluded. In addition, the most solicited forms are substantives and adjectives: action verbs are rare, and the presence of grammatical particles does not seem to be verified.

In addition to his name (family name plus given name),<sup>11</sup> a

<sup>10</sup> The system of *jiapu*, which seems on the way to disappearing in the People's Republic of China, still exists in Taiwan and in the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

<sup>11</sup> The current expression according to which formerly in China the common people "had no name" does not mean that they had no family name. For the most part, they also had a given name (*ming*) for private use. What they lacked, it seems, was the *zi*, social name, for which one made up the deficiency by the combination of family name and indication of seniority of age (*paibang* system).

Chinese man may always have a surname, one or more pseudonyms and, in his childhood, he had a “little name.” This abundance of names may be explained by the fact that it is not just a question of identifying the individual but also and primarily of characterizing him: life stages, different aspects of a personality may furnish the occasion for changing or enriching his name. Formerly, this was systematic for the *litterati*.

In the period that preceded 1949, political militants engaged in clandestine activity in territory occupied by the Japanese or the Kuomintang had numerous pseudonyms. At present, some *litterati* still have a *zi*, social name, but it is no longer a general rule.<sup>12</sup> Many writers have *noms de plume* (*biming*).

To return to the example of Mao Zedong, his social name (*zi*) was *Runzhi* (*run*, to give back life through irrigation) *zhi*, he. The *nom de plume* he chose for one of his early works was *Er shi ba hua sheng*, the student with twenty-eight strokes. In fact, it takes twenty-eight strokes of the brush to write the three characters of his name, *mao*, *ze*, *dong*.

—*The use of proper names.*

The freedom in the use of the elements of a proper name (family name and given name) is limited by the following rule, particular to this category: *a monosyllabic form may never be used alone*. When the two elements of the name are both monosyllabic, the minimum form is the complete name, for example, Li Rong.

Generally, when the person being addressed has a monosyllabic family name and a disyllabic given name, conforming to the above rule the family name (X) is never used alone. When it is not preceded by a determinant (*lao* or *xiao*: see the following section) it must be followed by a given name or a more general

<sup>12</sup> The social name, whose use was formerly a rule for public and literary men, was a designation acquired around the 20th year. It sometimes happened that the person concerned gave this name to himself, with the idea of characterizing his personality—something like a motto. We have examples of this kind of auto-designation, especially after the end of the last century. Most often, however, and it was the rule in ancient times, the choice was made by a professor or a friend. Today, many elderly intellectuals have a *zi*, but it is only known to their very close friends, and these rarely use it in address.

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term of address. That means it is then itself in a determinant position. For example,

*Lao Chen*, old Chen—determinant plus name

*Chen Zongbao*—name plus given name (XM)

*Chen Laosbi*—name plus title (X plus title).

On the contrary, a dissyllabic given name may be used alone but *only* among very close friends who are of the same sex, or when parents address their children, or older children address younger ones. Between persons of different sexes, the use of the given name implies a particular familiarity. In this case, it is generally not used in public. However, it is permissible on the part of a woman speaking to a man who is obviously younger than she, when she knows him well. It is, in effect, hardly plausible socially that they would have an amorous relationship, and the use of the given name thus has no ambiguous connotation. Of course, the difference in age precludes that the man call the woman by her given name in return. It is also permissible for a married woman to call a very close friend of the family by his given name: she is only conforming to the usage of her husband. This situation is considered in China as one of those that does not present ambiguities.

In the position of the determinant of a title, in general or specialized usage, there may be all the elements of the name. We have seen that it was one of the positions of the family name. The complete name and given name may also occupy this position. For example,

*Zhang tongzhi*, Comrade Zhang (X plus title)

*Zhang Chengzhong tongzhi*, Comrade Zhang Chengzhong (XM plus title)

This form is somewhat ceremonious. A professor may thus address the husband of a female colleague that he does not know very well.

*Chengzhong tongzhi*, Comrade Chengzhong (M plus title)

In this way may be addressed a superior in the hierarchy whom one has known a long time and with whom one has a certain familiarity.

## 2. DETERMINANTS AND TITLES

### —*The determinants Lao and Xiao*

Compound terms with the determinants *lao* (old) and *xiao* (small) followed by the family name (X) are used in all milieus, independently of the type of activity. They imply a certain familiarity with the addressee.

*Lao-X* is used with colleagues or friends of the same generation as oneself, or slightly older. When elderly people speak to people of middle age they have the choice between *lao-X* and *xiao-X*, according to the personality of the addressee and the length of the relationship. *Lao-X* is not permitted when speaking to people one does not know very well, especially when there is an important difference in age (difference in generation). For example, a young assistant who has just made the acquaintance of an elderly professor may not in any case use this term when addressing him.

*Xiao-X* is used when speaking to younger colleagues and to all those who, in one way or another, may be considered as beginners or apprentices, on the condition that they are relatively young. However, this qualification goes further than the translations “little Liu” or “little Wang” would suggest. In fact, if your colleagues have begun to call you *xiao Liu* there is no *a priori* reason that one fine day they should begin to call you *lao Liu*. However, with time, the passage from one term to the other generally occurs. It may happen when one changes employment, place of work, when one’s children are grown-up, or even progressively through renewal of the staff. In this last case, the newcomers, who in the beginning did not use the term *xiao Liu* (too familiar) may at the end of a certain time begin to call one *lao Liu*. It may happen that none of these factors pertains. We can mention the case of a woman teacher at the university, about forty and unmarried, a titular professor, whom all the other professors in her faculty continue to call *xiao X*. This is not a lack of respect but a friendly custom that is explained by the fact that there was little turnover in university personnel during the cultural revolution. She is still the youngest in the group.

In addition, it seems that the transition is more difficult and



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comes later for women than it does for men. This is one of the rare occasions in the system where we see a certain sexual differentiation.

The forms in *lao* and *xiao* are frequent especially in work relationships. They are less so with childhood friends, who are called by their complete names, and very intimate friends, who are called by their given name only.

### —Titles

I call “title” any form that can be determined, that is, in Chinese, preceded by a proper name. There are titles of general usage, such as *tongzhi*, comrade, or *shifu*, master, and specific titles corresponding to a certain function, such as *laoshi*, professor, or *changzhang*, director of the factory. A title may be used alone or preceded by the proper name or part of it.

#### *A) Titles of general usage*

##### —*Tongzhi*, comrade

This term, at first used among the Communists and attaining great popularity after 1949, has progressively lost its political connotation to become the most *neutral* form of address, at least as far as concerns the citizens of the People’s Republic among themselves. There are still some traces of the original meaning, in the specifically political domain, particularly within the Chinese Communist Party. Let us take the example of Hua Guofeng. When this study was made he was at the same time prime minister and president of the Chinese Communist Party. In the exercise of his functions he was called by his specific titles: *Hua zongli*, prime minister Hua, or *Hua Zhuxi*, President Hua, but his colleagues called him *Guofeng tongzhi*, Comrade Guofeng. At the other extreme of the political spectrum, from the beginning of the People’s Republic capitalists had never had the right to be called *tongzhi*. In early March, 1980 Deng Xiaoping declared that they could from then on be called with that title. This measure marks in a way the reintegration of the capitalists into the national community.

The use of *tongzhi* when addressing foreigners is rare and felt as an incongruity, except when the members of the Chinese Communist Party speak to members of foreign Communist parties, but that is not automatic. For example, the Czech or East German Communists who were addressed as “comrade” in the 50’s are, since the Sino-Soviet rupture, called *xiansheng*, Mister, like other foreigners.<sup>13</sup> The use of *tongzhi*, comrade, when addressing members of Communist parties that are close to the Chinese position (Marxist-Leninist) has a still more precise significance: the addressee is considered as politically engaged at the side of the Chinese Communist Party. In a contrary case, he is simply called *pengyou*, friend.

It seems that in the early years of the Republic, the use of *tongzhi* had been becoming generalized, up until the beginning of the cultural revolution in which it became the most admitted and most usual form. Today, it is not the most frequent term, but it is one that can be used in case of uncertainty about the identity or situation of the addressee, or when one does not wish to tire oneself. It is, however, avoided in situations marked by politeness or familiarity. Like all titles, *tongzhi* may be used alone or preceded by a determinant.

a) *tongzhi* alone

In addressing people whose name one does not know, for example a salesgirl in a department store, this is the most neutral form. If one wants to be especially polite and if the interlocutor is of an appropriate age, it is better to say *shifu*, master (see below). If, on the contrary, one wishes to show dissatisfaction, one may use a more specific title, such as *fuwuyuan*, supervisor, or *shoupiaoyuan*, ticket seller. If one calls to a passer-by one does not know in the street, for example, to prevent an accident, *tongzhi* is the only possible form of address; one can also dispense with all forms and just cry out what one wishes to say.

b) complete name (XM) + *tongzhi*

This is a somewhat ceremonious form, used to address persons

<sup>13</sup> See below, Section III.

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one knows slightly but not well enough to call them *lao-X*. However, it is not indicated for addressing someone to whom one should show a certain respect, for example, the wife of your professor or a very elderly and eminent person. It may be used by newcomers in a research center to address those with administrative responsibility who are middle-aged (in their 50's) and of medium rank. This is also the way a young interpreter (in her 30's) in the service of international relations of the Academy of Social Sciences addresses her superior.

### c) family name (X) + *tongzhi*

This is a less familiar variant of *lao-X*. It seems that this form is more popular than the following. It is used, for example, by administrative employees or in department stores to address customers or clients that they know.

### d) given name (M) + *tongzhi*

This is also a variant of *lao-X* used especially in intellectual circles. The use of this form shows a favorable disposition toward the addressee, which is not necessarily the case for *lao-X*.

These forms in *tongzhi* seem more common on the telephone than in face-to-face dialogue. They are then used to address people that one knows well.

### e) *lao* + family name (X) + *tongzhi*

This is a very current formula, vis-à-vis people that one knows well but not familiarly. For example, in an administration or a business, one generally calls those who work in the same room with one *lao-X*; those who work in the same building but in different services may be called *lao-X-tongzhi*. This formula is current only among people of middle age and assumes that the addressee has a status that is equal or inferior to that of the speaker. "Equal status" must be understood in the broad sense: it covers cases in which there is a slight hierarchical difference in favor of the addressee.

### f) specific title + *tongzhi*

For example, *jiefangjun tongzhi*, soldier of the Army of Liber-

ation-comrade. Soldiers desire to be called in this way: it sometimes happens that the old term *dabing*, soldier, is used jokingly. In the same way, to address a policeman, one is supposed to say *jingcha tongzhi*, policeman-comrade.

—*Shifu* “master”

This term, that is on its way to becoming one of the most frequently used in China, was originally reserved for those who had technical competence, who were “masters” at some kind of manual work. This was the way apprentices addressed those they were learning their trade from. The extension of the term has concerned both the addressees and those who use it.

*Shifu*, within the staff of the enterprise, has been generalized to show seniority and is finally used now to address all manual workers having a certain qualification and a certain age, whether they be workers or artisans. Excluded are only apprentices, newcomers and the youngest workers.

The wide diffusion of *shifu* is a recent phenomenon, dating from the 70’s, after the most acute phase of the cultural revolution, and has been amplified since the fall of “the Four”. Now it is used outside working relationships; anyone having to address a barber, a chauffeur, a waiter in a restaurant, *if he is old enough*, may use *shifu*. Even outside the professional cadre, if you know that your neighbor is a worker or an artisan, you may call him *shifu*.

When one knows the addressee personally, one uses the family name (X) followed by *shifu*. If not, one uses *shifu* alone.

—*Lao*, “venerable”, and *gong*, “(revered) Mister”

These forms, determined by the family name (X), are only used with very old and very eminent people. It seems that *X-lao* is used more by “cadres” and *X-gong* among intellectuals. The first form is reserved for “personalities at the national level,” as for example Guo Moruo, who was called *Guo-lao*. It is theoretically excluded for women, and in fact I have no examples, although some of my informants were less formal than the dictionaries on this point.

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### *B) Specific titles*

Specific titles are generally preceded by the family name, but not necessarily.

There is a governmental decision that forbids the addressing of someone by his title. This decision was renewed after the fall of "the Four." Administrations, such as the Academy of Social Sciences, seem to abide by this rule. However, forms such as *buzhang*, minister, or *zhuren*, director, are as much used in addressing the titularies of these charges as when speaking of them. In other milieus, the rule does not seem to be respected.

I will give the most usual titles found in factories, schools and the Communist Party.

#### —In the factory

*Changzhang*, factory-director, for the director of the factory.

*Gongchengshi*, engineer: to address engineers one knows slightly. When one is rather familiar with them, one calls them by their name.

*Zonggongchengshi*, chief engineer. *Zong*, chief, may determine all kinds of specific titles.

The last two forms are often shortened to *-gong* and *-zong*, and then they are preceded by the family name: *Zhang-gong*, Engineer Zhang; *Hua-zong*, Chief engineer Hua. The syllable *gong* in engineer and *gong* (revered) Mister, are written with different characters but have the same sound. There is little risk of confusion, however, the two forms being used in entirely different milieus and contexts.

*Shifu*, which has elsewhere become a title in general use, here keeps its original meaning of "master worker."

There is no specific term of address for apprentices: they are called by their given name or by their family name preceded by *xiao*, little.

#### —In the teaching profession

The director of a teaching establishment, school or university, is called *xiaozhang*, school-director.

*Xiansheng* has lost its previous meaning of "Mister" since the

foundation of the People's Republic of China. However, up until the mid-60's all teachers, regardless of sex, could be called "professor," not only at the university level but also in secondary and elementary schools. Now, this title is reserved for very learned and aged scholars. It has become a particularly respectful title that is usually preceded by the family name. One may also use it, should the case arise, to address a very important woman.

*Laoshi* has become the normal term for "professor." It is the form used by students when they speak to their professors, even outside the university. This term has been extended to the secondary and elementary schools, where it has replaced *xiansheng*. It is used alone or preceded by the family name, according to the degree of acquaintanceship with the addressee.

During one's studies, one uses this term indifferently with all the members of the faculty of the school or university where one happens to be.<sup>14</sup> After one's studies are over, the term is reserved for those whose courses one has followed. It suffices that someone has been your professor at any given moment for you to address him as *laoshi* up until his death. It thus results that in teaching and research milieus, when one speaks to one's elders, one is led to distinguish between those who have been one's professors and those who have not. It would be considered improper to call someone *laoshi* if one had not been his pupil.

Professors' wives are most often called *shimu* by their husbands' students (literally, wife of the master, *-bi*) or *bomu* (see below the use of terms derived from terms of kinship).<sup>15</sup> In the very rare cases in which one calls the husband *xiansheng*, one has the choice of calling the wife *shimu* or *taitai*, Madam, the latter a term that has completely fallen into disuse.

*Shimu*, like *laoshi*, is a respectful title, and this may pose problems. A colleague at the University of Nanking who had married a woman much younger than himself, actually of his students' generation, thus describes the embarrassment of the latter: they could not address his wife as *shimu*, the proximity of their ages excluding such a respectful form, nor by using

<sup>14</sup> When one designates a professor of whom one has not been a student (term of reference) one calls him *jiaoshou*, teacher. For example, Wang *jiaoshou*, Professor Wang.

<sup>15</sup> *Shimu* is more common in the south, *bomu* in the north.

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*tongzhi*, comrade, which would not have been respectful enough for the wife of their professor. Most often they managed by saying, "Hum! Hum!" and smiling, or they took it on themselves in spite of everything to say *shimu*.

It seems that in Peking and in all of northern China, *shimu* is only a specific title, reserved for the wives of *laoshi*, professors. On the contrary, in the south the wives of all the men who may be called *shifu*, master, are called *shimu*, and we have seen that the use of *shifu* is widespread. The existence of these two values is explained by the fact that the two terms *shifu* and *laoshi* have in common the element *shi*, master.

### —Within the Communist Party

The title *shuji*, secretary, is current in all the echelons of the hierarchy, from the highest to the lowest. The only difference is the indication of the unit in which the person concerned exercises his activity (factory, provincial committee, central committee, and so on), but this precision is only remarked in formal discourse. There may be assistant secretaries, but there as elsewhere the determinant *fu*, "vice", "assistant", "under", is usually omitted when the title is used in address.

### 3. TERMS OF ADDRESS USED WITHIN THE FAMILY, AND THEIR DERIVED USES

There are two distinct sets of terms. The system underlying them is the same, only the degree of specificity varies. They are 1) the formal terminology of kinship, and 2) the corresponding current forms.

#### 1) *Formal terminology*

We could write the history of the formal terminology of kinship dating from ancient China.<sup>16</sup> Formerly in China the exact place-

<sup>16</sup> The *Er Ya*, a dictionary compiled in several stages throughout the last millennium B.C. has a section on terms of kinship (*shi qin*) that probably dates from around 200 B.C. The first great rituals treating in detail the problems of kinship also date from after 500 B.C.

ment of family ties had a great importance for the organization of relationships within large family groups and for the observation of rites, particularly those of mourning. At present, this terminology, that in a way represents the Chinese model of kinship, is not completely mastered in all its complexity and extension except by some, generally the old people who make up the family "memory."<sup>17</sup> However, reading the great classic novels, particularly the *Hong lou meng*, which illustrates this rich terminology, helps maintain a certain knowledge even among the young. These designations are still used when a) a member of the family is presented to a third party; b) histories of a family are told, either those of one's own family or of another; c) writing a letter. They are used orally only when it is a matter of simple formulas of two or three elements, which result in terms of two or three syllables, and always concurrently with more familiar forms.

This is not the place to discuss the nature of the system under consideration nor to describe it in detail. I will simply mention two of its characteristics, that are involved in the recent evolution of usage in terms of address.

—the absolute distinction between those who have the same family name as the speaker or the person being spoken of, and the others;

—the transgression of classification by generation when there is a *substitution of speaker*. This is the case when a wife uses the same terms to designate the members of her husband's family as her own children. For example, *bofu*, that designates the elder brother of the husband, that is, the elder brother of the father of one's own children.

In formal terminology, every syllable has a meaning. One word may have several syllables, but it is then *analyzable* in meaningful syllables. The terms of kinship indicate the intended formula of kinship.<sup>18</sup> For example, *biaojiefu*, male cousin, that is

<sup>17</sup> The attention given to the system of kinship seems to be greater in the country. In most villages, the inhabitants share a very small number of family names. The exact knowledge of family ties is as useful for marriages as it is for the choice of daily appellations.

<sup>18</sup> It is according to the same principles that modern terminologies have been established, particularly chemical nomenclature.



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the husband (*fu*) of a cousin who is older than the subject (*jie*) and not having the same name (*biao*).

### 2) Forms in current use

Essentially, this vocabulary consists of dissyllabic words constructed either by a doubling of the monosyllabic word used in formal terminology (for example, *jie*: *jiejie*, older sister), or by the doubling of a monosyllable not belonging to formal terminology (for example, *gege*, older brother).

Although the system is unique as far as its principles are concerned, we see many dialectal variants. Each dialect has its own vocabulary, but in all the Chinese world the lexicon in force and the structure of the system are the same because of the existence of a common canonic model, formal terminology.<sup>19</sup>

Generally, within a given speech, there is no lexical differentiation between the designations in current use and terms of address. The only exception is in the case of parents: *mama* and *baba* (and the short variants *ma* and *ba*) are the only forms used to address one's mother or father orally, while to designate them there is, along with the same forms *mama* (or *ma*) and *baba* (or *ba*) used familiarly, the pair *muqin* (mother) and *fuqin* (father).<sup>20</sup>

The rule according to which familiar forms of address are never used with older people or those who have a higher status, while they are normal with younger people, is well illustrated within the family. Here is the example with brothers and sisters.

Person addressed	Normal designation	Term of address
older brother	<i>gege</i>	<i>gege</i>
older sister	<i>jiejie</i>	<i>jiejie</i>
younger brother	<i>didi</i>	{ first name, nickname, <i>xiaodi, didi, etc.</i>
younger sister	<i>meimei</i>	

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jacques Lemoine, "Asie Orientale", in *Ethnologie régionale 2, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*. The author has tabulated indications furnished by various sources.

<sup>20</sup> However, when one writes to one's parents, after the age of childhood, it is not suitable to call them *mama* or *baba*: one uses the terms *muqin* or *fuqin* and when one addresses them both together, *fumu*.

Sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law are subject to the same rule. Only the spouses of the speaker's older brothers have the *right* to a term of kinship; the others are most often called by their given name or their "little name."

This is a very ancient characteristic that seems to be kept up solidly in most of the population. The line of demarcation thus traced between the older and the younger brothers of the speaker is only crossed within some families of intellectuals or cadres where it now happens that the youngest also call their elder brothers by their given name or "little name." The choice between this new way—still seldom found—and the ancient habits is not determined by social situation but by cultural level.

As for the present evolution of terms of address within the family, there is an apparent contradiction between the manner in which my interlocutors describe their own usage—not much different from the one found in works anterior to the People's Republic—and their affirmation according to which we are witnessing a very great simplification of the entire system. Several of them have declared that the usage of their younger brothers, children or grandchildren is noticeably different from their own.

This evolution, if it is confirmed, would put into question one of the basic principles of the system of Chinese kinship, which is the strict distinction between relatives having the same name and the others: urban children would tend no longer to differentiate between the maternal grandfather (outside the clan) and the paternal grandfather, or even to call all their uncles *shushu*, a term normally reserved for the younger brothers of the father. That point has not yet been reached, certainly; in most families the children call their maternal uncle *jiujiu* and distinguish among the paternal uncles the older ones, *bobo*, and the younger ones, *shushu*.

This tendency toward confusion is explained by the change in traditional rules of habitation and, accessorially, by the reverse influence of derived family terms on their use with the family itself.

#### —Weakening of the patrilocal system

Up until recently, after her marriage the wife went to live with

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her husband's family. It was considered one of the fundamental characteristics of Chinese society. The only case in which the husband went to live in his wife's family was that in which, this family not having male children, the husband took his wife's family name. It was not a transgression but rather an ingenious realization of the system, since the identity of name between the grandfather with whom one lived and the father was preserved. With the exception of this case, any accidental infraction of the principle gave rise to numerous jokes—which are current in any case in spite of the frequency with which this happens today. At present, because of the exiguity of urban dwellings, it is not rare that a young family lives with the wife's family, if it has more room than that of the husband. In addition, when a family obtains a lodging or when it goes to another town for work, the generations are separated. From then on, the elements of definition of the term *yeye*, paternal grandfather/grandfather with whom one lives, no longer being necessarily linked, this word may become the general term for grandfather.

Here are the terms of address used for grandparents.

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Observed today</i> <sup>21</sup>
paternal grandfather ( <i>zufu</i> ) <sup>22</sup>	<i>yeye</i>	<i>yeye</i>
maternal grandfather ( <i>waizufu</i> )	<i>laoye, waigong,</i> <i>ganggong</i> etc.	<i>yeye</i>
paternal grandmother ( <i>zumu</i> )	<i>nainai, popo</i> etc.	<i>nainai, popo</i> etc.
maternal grandmother ( <i>waizumu</i> )	<i>laolao</i>	<i>laolao</i>

<sup>21</sup> This seems to be the most frequently used by those under twenty in the cities; the traditional system survives in the country, obviously, but also in some urban families.

<sup>22</sup> The terms in parentheses are designations of the formal system. It must be kept in mind that these terms are analyzed in monosyllables.

It seems that the confusion with grandmothers has not gone as far as it has with grandfathers.

The progressive abandonment of the father's home also influences the way one addresses one's parents-in-law. In the traditional system, there were two pairs of terms according to whether the wife addressed the parents of her husband or the husband addressed those of his wife. The wife had entered the family of the husband by marriage, whereas the wife's family remained "outsiders" to the husband. Now, it is more and more frequent in urban families that the couple both call their parents-in-law *baba* and *mama*, as they do their own parents. This is the same type of phenomenon as the confusion with the grandfathers, and the essential cause is the same, the great changes in the rules of habitation. Perhaps the effect of a certain tightening of close family ties, connected with the reduction in size of the family unit should also be added.<sup>23</sup> *Baba* and *mama* have an emotional nuance that the old terms did not have.

—*Derived uses and their effects*

Formerly, an exact degree of respect corresponded to each term of address within the family, the degree being determined by the number of years, months or days of mourning the addressee is entitled to. The metaphorical use of some of these terms toward strangers to the family permitted a great subtlety in the nuances of respect shown toward them, depending essentially on their age or, rather, on the relation between the generation of the speaker and that of the person spoken to.

Although the ritual connotation has disappeared, these derived uses are still very common. The most recent dictionaries give precise descriptions of their usage.<sup>24</sup>

In this system, one addresses people a) according to their

<sup>23</sup> One still sees much of one's parents, grandparents, parents-in-law, brothers and sisters, some cousins and close uncles and aunts—certainly more than in some other countries—but not to the same degree as when the "great family" was grouped in the same buildings and included parents, children, uncles, close or distant cousins, often several dozen people.

<sup>24</sup> In the *Xiandai hanyu cidian*, "Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese", Ed. 1979, the definition of all these derived uses begins with the term *zun Cheng*, respectful appellation.

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generation, depending on whether they belong to that of one's grandparents, parents or one's own; b) for one's parents' generation, most often the person addressed is classified according to whether he is younger or older than the parents; c) the sex of the speaker is not pertinent, but for married people terms may differ according to whether the addressee is closer to the husband or to the wife. As can easily be imagined, in some cases there are several possible solutions, thus there is a matter of reflection and choice. The situating by generations, by the fact that one is "outside the family," is necessarily arbitrary. For example, a young man of twenty may hesitate when faced with a man of thirty and treat him either as his father's younger brother (*shushu*) or as his own elder brother (*dage*). The following table gives the most common forms.

*Derived uses (outside the family)*

*Kinship*

I. Generation of the grandparents of the speaker:

men: <i>yeye</i>	paternal grandfather
women: <i>nainai</i>	maternal grandmother

II. Generation of the parents of the speaker:

men:

—older than the father,	<i>dabo, daye</i>	"oldest brother of the father"
	<i>bobo, bofu</i> <sup>25</sup>	"older brother(s) of the father"
—younger than the father,	<i>shushu</i>	"younger brother(s) of the father"
—related through the mother,	<i>jiujiu</i> <sup>26</sup>	"brother(s) of the mother"

<sup>25</sup> There are few formal terms used in the derived way. *Bofu* and *bomu* are exceptions.

<sup>26</sup> The derived use of *jiujiu* and *gugu* outside actual kinship is rather limited. In fact, *jiujiu* is used rather for male friends or relations of the mother and *gugu* for female friends or relations of the father, but within the actual generation of the parents it is permitted that a man has few women friends outside those of his wife and a wife has few men friends outside those of her husband. As the reality no longer corresponds so much to this schema (school friends, colleagues at work, and so on) in those cases, children tend to use the term corresponding to the "normal" situation: they call their mother's male friends

women:

—older than the father,	<i>daniang</i> , <i>dama</i> <sup>27</sup> <i>bomu</i>	“wife of the oldest brother of the father” “wife (wives) of the older brother(s) of the father”
—younger than the father,	<i>gugu</i> , <i>guma</i> <i>shenshen</i>	“sister(s) of the father” “wife (wives) of the younger brother(s) of the father”
—related through the mother,	<i>ayi</i> , <i>yima</i>	“sister(s) of the mother”

### III. Generation of the speaker:

men:

<i>dage</i>	“oldest brother”
<i>gege</i> , <i>ge</i> <sup>28</sup>	“older brother(s)”

women:

—direct relationship	<i>dajie</i> <i>jiejie</i> , <i>jie</i> <sup>28</sup>	“oldest sister” “older sister(s)”
—indirect relationship (through the husband)	<i>dasao</i> <i>saosao</i> , <i>saozi</i> , <i>sao</i> <sup>29</sup>	“wife of the oldest brother” “wife (wives) of the older brothers”

Derived forms may be used preceded or not by the family name. For example, *dage* is more impersonal than Zhang *dage*; determination through the family name implies that one is slightly acquainted with the addressee, that at least his name is known. It is rather a mark of a friendly attitude.

These derived forms are used frequently. For example, when

*shushu*, as if they were those of the father, and the female friends of the father *ayi*, as if they were those of the mother. On the other hand, a middle-aged, unmarried woman may be called *X-gugu*, affectionately, by her young colleagues (she is a teacher of medium rank).

<sup>27</sup> The forms in *-ma*, rather familiar, are only used to address married women and have an affectionate connotation.

<sup>28</sup> Monosyllabic terms show great intimacy and are often preceded by the given name.

<sup>29</sup> *Saosao* is the unmarked form. *Saozi*, more familiar, is especially used in the north. *Dasao* is used to address the oldest when there are several women of the same generation in a group. There may even be a series according to age: *dasao*, *ersao* (*er* two), *sansao* (three), ending with *xiaosao* (*xiao*, small).

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a girl invites several of her girl friends to her home, they address the father of their hostess in a manner relative to the age of their own father: those whose father is older or of a comparable age may call him *shushu*, those whose father is much younger call him *bobo*. Addressing the mother of their hostess, the guests observe the same criteria, calling her either *ayi*, sister of the mother, or *bomu*.

There is probably nothing new in that. On the contrary, there is a current tendency of children that unsettles the system: it is that of calling all adults who do not belong to their family, for example, the colleagues and friends of their parents, *shushu*, for men, and *ayi*, for women.<sup>30</sup> In most cases, they are people of their parents' generation—which is already a great reduction with respect to the previous system—but some children go so far as to address all adults in that way, whatever their generation.

Now, because of the widespread use of these two words outside the family, it may happen that children extend its usage *within the family itself*, to all adults except their parents and grandparents, and in any case to distant relatives whose exact relationship to themselves is not clear. For example, the wife of the father's younger brother (*shushu*) should, in theory, be called *shenshen*. In fact, she is more and more often called *ayi*.

It must also be noted that the extension of the metaphorical use of *shushu* and *ayi*, though more widespread among children, is also seen among young adults.

This phenomenon of *reduction* is striking to Chinese observers, who readily speak of the approaching disappearance of appellations of kinship. Seen from the outside, the change does not impress one as so rapid or so radical. However, I must quote the remark of a lexicographer colleague who, seeing me devote so much time to this question, exclaimed, "What you are doing is completely useless, because in a few generations there will no

<sup>30</sup> In familiar language, *shushu* designates the younger brothers of the father and *ayi* the mother's sisters. While *shushu* seems to have been for a long time the dominant form as a term of address, *ayi* is only a variant among others (*yima* is also common in everyday speech). *Ayi* is also the appellation for a nursemaid. See above, note 26.

longer be uncles or aunts in China, and even before that there will no longer be brothers and sisters! Don't you know about the demographic regulations that forbid more than one child?" It is doubtful that such a Utopia will come into existence—although the regulation does exist and has begun to have some effect, at least in the cities—but it is interesting that it should be put in those terms.

—*The case of married couples*

There is no specific term by which married people address each other. The current designation *airen*<sup>31</sup> (literally, the beloved person), which is reciprocal, is never used in address. Most often, *one does without a term*, simply using the pronoun *ni*, you. However, there is a series of solutions that are in public or private use and more or less frequent according to the age of the speakers.

In young urban generations, husband and wife most often call each other by their given name. They may also use their "little name" or a form in *xiao*, little, or *lao*, old, followed by the family name.

Among people in their 50's, there has been no important modification in traditional habits; the most frequent usage seems to be, in the presence of a third person, to address each other the way others address you. If the others are colleagues or friends, husband and wife will call each other *lao Li*, *lao Shi* (old, plus family name). If it is their children, it may happen that they call each other *baba*, *mama*. In this generation, the given name is of strictly private usage; it is not even used in the presence of the children.<sup>32</sup> In certain households it may happen, but rarely, that in the presence of a third person the husband calls his wife by her given name, but not the reverse. Also used, and it seems more and more often, are slightly ironical affectionate expressions of the type *laotouzi/laotour*, old head (addressing

<sup>31</sup> This is the usual oral form in intellectual circles, cadres or workers. The terms *zhangfu*, husband, and *fufu*, wife, are literary and are rarely heard.

<sup>32</sup> The exceptions are some "modern" intellectual households, people who have had extended contact with foreigners, and of course mixed marriages.



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the husband<sup>33</sup>) *laotai*po (addressing the wife) or *laopo*zi (mutual). With the exception of the first, these expressions are current only with middle-aged couples and are generally not used in public, although it is not considered as shocking to use them in the presence of family members. Among intellectuals, they are viewed somewhat as domestic jokes. *Laoban*nr, which has the same value, seems to be popular in Peking. These expressions are used only by people who have lived together for a long time.

In the country the indirect form is still very common. One addresses one's spouse in his or her quality of father or mother of one of the children of the household, usually the smallest. This custom is observed in the workers' milieus but much more rarely. For example, *Xiao-san ta ma*, little one-number three-his-mother, the little one's mother.

## II POSSIBILITIES OF CHOICE

As the preceding inventory suggests, the use of terms of address in contemporary China is subject to a certain number of restrictions. Nevertheless some degree of freedom remains. In a given situation between two given speakers, there is usually no one term of address that automatically imposes itself but several acceptable terms from among which the speaker may choose the best suited to the tone he wishes to give to the exchange. In other words, the terms of address contribute to the expression of the *modalities* of the statement.

This possibility of choice may be illustrated by some concrete examples:

—A woman in her 50's has been working for twenty years in the administration of a research center and knows personally all the researchers. Most of them call her *lao-Li* (*lao* plus family name). The director of the center calls her either *lao-Li* as the rest do, or by her given name. That is acceptable, because he is very elderly and his own eldest daughter is older than the person in question.

<sup>33</sup> *Laotouzi* is neutral or pejorative, whereas *laotour* has a more affectionate nuance.

—A professor (H) meets in work conferences a young woman (of 25), a researcher not belonging to his own university. He may address her in one of the following ways:

—family name + first name + *tongzhi*, comrade

—*xiao*, nickname, + family name

—family name + first name

This last solution seems to be the most informal. The professor makes it understood that he acts “without ceremony” to put her at her ease.

—a child has a friend with older brothers. He will have the choice of calling one of them, whose given name in Jingping:

—*da*, big, + *ge*, older brother *dage*

—first name + *ge* Jingping-*ge*

last syllable of first name plus *ge* Ping-*ge*

—family name + first name Zhang Jingping

This last solution is acceptable only if the difference in age is slight.

—A young assistant professor takes part in a conference in the company of a research director who is much older than he, who has never been his professor (which in theory excludes *laoshi*) but whom he has known for a long time. He has the choice of addressing him with:

—family name + *xiansheng*

—family name + first name + *tongzhi*, comrade

—*lao* + family name.

—With colleagues and friends of long standing, one has the choice between:

—*lao* (or *xiao*) + family name

—nickname

—first name (if the interlocutors are of the same sex).

—A member of the Academy addressing another older and higher in rank but whom he knows well, has the choice among:

—*lao* + family name

—first name + *tongzhi*, comrade

—family name + *tongzhi* (if he wants to be ceremonious) rarely used.

However, this last term (family name + *tongzhi*) may be used

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by a chauffeur of the Academy speaking to high-ranking administrators whom he knows well, concurrently with *lao* plus family name.

According to the speakers, the same person may be called in many different ways. Thus a famous academician who is over 60 may be addressed, outside his family, in seven different ways:

- first name + *tongzhi*
- first name + *xiong* (formal term for older brother)
- first name + *xiansheng* (on the part of elderly people: rare)
- family name + *laoshi*
- tongzhi* (comrade) by people unknown to him
- lao* + family name (equal level)
- family name + *lao*.

In a given situation, the terms among which one has a choice may be equally acceptable, and the use of one or another of them will mark the tone in which one wishes to hold the dialogue. It is then properly a modality of the statement.

It also happens that solutions are not equivalent and that one is “better” than the others. For example, a writer of about 60 meets a painter of more than 70. They had known each other previously but had lost touch with each other.

The “suitable” term is not easy to discover:

—*tongzhi*, comrade, is excluded because of the difference in age and the lack of familiarity

—*xiansheng*, or family name + *xiansheng*, are not really appropriate because a painter does not belong to the university milieu and is not a scholar.

—*laoshi* is also not indicated, the person concerned never having been the professor of the interlocutor. The writer stopped at *biaoshu*, a term of the familial system used here in a derived way: *shu*, younger brother of the father; *biao*, the mark of exteriority from the clan, since the addressee does not have the same family name as the person speaking to him.

### III SPECIAL USES

Certain terms are only used when addressing foreigners. The most current titles are *xiansheng*, Mister—a term that we have

seen has a particular value among Chinese and is limited to the university milieu—and *furen*, Madam. When foreigners are addressed collectively, it is customary to call them *pengyoumen*; *pengyou*, friend, *-men*, sign of plurality. This would be left over from Soviet influence linked to the idea that any foreigner admitted into the country is assumed to incarnate, in a way, “the friendship of peoples.” The automatic use of this term in this context has no rapport with the privileged individual relationship that the Chinese express with this same term, *pengyou*, friend.

In addition, when the specific title of a person in his own country is known, its Chinese translation is used.

At the highest level, the equivalent of “Your Excellency” is the ancient term *gexia*. This title is only given to high foreign dignitaries. However, it may be used between Chinese in a joking way, to make fun of someone who is a little pretentious. This usage is current only among people who know each other very well, childhood friends, former classmates. One would say, for example, “*gexia you ging!*” (“Your Excellency-there is-to invite”) “Your Excellency, there is someone who is inviting you!” In the same key, one may use the form “family name *lao*,” to which as we have seen only very old nationally important figures had the right. It is a pleasantry that is current rather in workers’ circles.

On the other hand, in jest one may use rather deprecatory terms. This is the case with *houji*, clerk, employee, that is used most often as a collective form of address. One may thus hail a group of friends, *huojimen*, “Hey, you guys!” Addressed to an individual the joke becomes clearly condescending. For example, *lao huoji gei wo gundan!* Old-*houji*-for-me-get out here (Old wreck, get out of here!)

A disagreeable way to call to people, and not usually meant as a joke, is the form *xing*, to be named, plus family name plus the participle *de*. For example, *Xing Wang de!* “Called Wang!”

To conclude, in Chinese, as in any language, insults may serve as a summons. This is not the place to go into the rich repertory of Chinese insults. Forms such as *gou*, dog; *mapigui*, horse-ass-devil, “stool-pigeon,” are hardly specific. The most current insult is *dongxi*, “thing, object,” that may be used in address preceded by a determinant such as *huai*, bad: *huaidongxi*, filth!

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This formerly vulgar expression is now in general use, and one even hears it at the university when people are angry—or possibly as a joke.

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It is generally admitted that terms of address essentially serve to make the social relationships between speakers explicit; this is the reason these terms have been the object of many sociolinguistic studies.

Now, Chinese usage—at least that of city-dwellers and intellectuals—is a particularly clear illustration of another function in the order of modality. By choosing one term in preference to another, the speaker opens the verbal exchange on a more or less familiar level.

Of course, the choice of suitable terms is always limited, particularly by considerations of age. We have seen that age is the major criterion, since an important difference in years excludes any symmetrical relationship, and even between brothers and sisters it establishes a differentiation. However, in spite of this unshaken hierarchy, usage remains flexible thanks to the wealth and complexity of the terminological system. One can hardly speak of conditioned choices or of automatisms if one considers the frequency of delicate cases in which the speaker consciously looks for the socially “best” expression and especially the fact that in all circumstances the individual has the possibility of expressing a personal attitude by his choice. He gives an indication of not only the distance he establishes with his interlocutor but also of the interpretation he must give to his statements.

While the primary function—that of social indicator—tends to constitute a bi-univocal code and suggests a behavior determined by social realities, the modal function is the expression itself of the freedom of the speakers. The problem for a given language and society would be to appreciate the proportion of the one and the other.

For that it would not be enough to complete the present description by an inquiry on statistically pertinent samples of

the population. It would still be necessary to compare the usage of the different social groups living in China. In addition, it would be useful to compare this work with similar studies made in Chinese communities outside of China, such as Hongkong or Singapore, and in non-Sinophone socialist countries.

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