

An Online Survey on the Contemporary Use of Spousal Terms in the Chinese Language

Ri Nin

Division of Language and Culture Studies, Institute of Engineering, Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Tokyo, Japan
Email: ninri@cc.tuat.ac.jp

How to cite this paper: Nin, R. (2023). An Online Survey on the Contemporary Use of Spousal Terms in the Chinese Language. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 13, 174-193.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2023.131011>

Received: January 9, 2023

Accepted: February 24, 2023

Published: February 27, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The present study conducted an online survey on the use of spousal terms in the Chinese Language with 460 participants (327 female, 133 male) aged between 20 and 50. The results showed that both young and older people most commonly use “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) to refer to male spouses and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) for female spouses. The gender-neutral term “爱人 àiren” (loved one), popular in the 1950s through the 1970s, is only used by a few middle-aged and elderly people. Meanwhile, the traditional terms “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) are making a comeback. Notably, “太太 tàitai” (madam), which used to be taboo, was the second most preferred term among female spouses. “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) are now used almost exclusively in formal written language rather than casual spoken language.

Keywords

Spousal Terms, Chinese Language, Married Couples, Gender-Neutral, Resurrection

1. Introduction

Spouses commonly use affectionate terms and endearments when addressing each other in English, such as “honey”, “darling”, “love”, “sweetheart”, and “baby” (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). However, the terms couples use for each other may vary based on their individual preferences and dynamic of their relationship. For example, some couples may use more formal terms of address, such as Mrs. or Mr., followed by their spouses’ last name, while others may prefer more casual terms. How spouses address each other is a personal choice that cultural and personal factors can influence. The use of spousal terms varies across lan-

guages, cultures, and social backgrounds, and it is also subject to the effects of social change. For example, there has recently been a significant shift in the use of spousal terms in Chinese by married couples due to the rapid social transformation occurring in China. This study aims to analyze the results of an online questionnaire survey on spousal terms in the Chinese language, examining the current usage of the terms and how they have changed.

This paper includes many Chinese words due to its research focus. In Chinese, each character has a meaning, and words are comprised of combinations of these characters. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the meanings of both the combined terms and the individual characters to understand Chinese words fully. This paper describes Chinese words with Chinese characters, their phonetic transcription (pinyin), and rough English translations in brackets. However, as stated above, more than a simple translation is needed for most readers. Accordingly, we list the main Chinese words in this paper and the meaning of the individual characters in **Table 1** separately.

2. Previous Studies

The use of spousal terms in the Chinese language has been a topic of study in various fields of linguistics, including lexicology, semantics, and sociolinguistics. Historically, China had a rigid social hierarchy and polygamous system that valued male dominance and control over the household. These values, such as “男尊女卑 nánzūnnǚbēi” (male dominance) and “男主外女主内 nán zhǔ wài nǚ zhǔ nèi” (men outside, women inside), were reflected in the use of spousal terms

Table 1. Chinese words appearing in this paper.

Chinese	Pinyin	Simple translation	Constituent characters and their meanings	
老公	lǎogōng	old lord	老 = old, elder	公 = lord, official
先生	xiānsheng	senior	先 = prior	生 = born, life
丈夫	zhàngfu	tall man	丈 = tall, strong	夫 = man, husband
老婆	lǎopo	old granny	老 = old, elder	婆 = grandmother, old lady
太太	tàitai	madam	太 = great-grand	
妻子	qīzi	wife	妻 = wife	子 = child
爱人	àiren	loved one	爱 = love	人 = person, man
全名	quán míng	full name	全 = all, whole	名 = name
名字	míngzì	first name	名 = name	字 = letter, character
对象	duìxiàng	object	对 = opposite	象 = object
昵称	nìchēng	nickname	昵 = intimacy	称 = name
亲爱的	qīn'ài de	darling	亲 = intimate	爱 = love 的 = of
其他	qítā	others	其 = it	他 = other

in the Chinese language. For example, in the old days wives often used honorific terms to refer to their husbands, such as “官人 guānrén” (officer) or “老爷 lǎoye” (master). In contrast, husbands used derogatory terms to refer to their wives, such as “拙荆 zhuō jīng” (my clumsy wife) or “贱内 jiànnèi” (my cheap wife) (Kim, 2002: p. 7). This unequal and male-dominated social structure had persisted for centuries, disrespecting women and disregarding their rights..

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and particularly after the implementation of the Marriage Law promoting monogamy in 1950, the principles of gender equality and marital equality were promoted, leading to changes in the use of spousal terms. In the 1950s, “爱人 àiren” (loved one) became widely used and accepted in China, especially in urban areas (Chen, 1979: p. 9; Jia, 1999: p. 318). It is a gender-neutral term used by either spouse to refer to their partner. It represents a departure from traditional male-dominated spouse terms and reflects the breakdown of the patriarchal family system in which the husband held dominance. As women have increasingly participated in social activities, the social status of men and women has tended toward equality, potentially leading to a shift in household dynamics from a dominant model in which the husband holds the authority to a partnership model in which both spouses are equal (Cao, 2003: p. 54).

According to Jia (1999: p. 293), while the use of “爱人 àiren” (loved one) became more common, the use of other spousal terms such as “爷们 yémen” (man) and “媳妇儿 xífuer” (young married woman) has decreased in usage. Additionally, the use of terms like “男人 nánren” (male person), “女人 nǚren” (female person), “当家的 dāngjiāde” (our family master), “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) as spousal terms has also become increasingly rare and has been gradually phased out (Jia, 1999: pp. 317-318).

Meanwhile, since China’s reform and opening up, the use of “爱人 àiren” (loved one) has tended to decline. In the late 1990s, highly educated individuals often used words such as, “先生 xiānsheng” (senior), “夫人 fūren” (lady), and “太太 tàitai” (madam) to refer to their spouses. In contrast, those with lower levels of education typically used more informal terms such as “孩子他爸 háizi tā bà” (the child’s father), “孩子他妈 háizi tā mā” (the child’s mother), “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) (Chen, 1994: pp. 108-110; Chen, 1999: p. 131; Kim, 2002: p. 36). According to a survey conducted in Shanghai, more than 80% of married couples in the city use their names to address each other (Cao, 2003: p. 48). Recent surveys in various regions have also shown that using full names is the most common choice among married couples in China (Feng, 2012; Lian & Han, 2015; Yan, 2016; Fan, 2018).

Previous studies on spousal terms have often relied on the researchers’ personal experiences rather than empirical data. While this approach can provide valuable insights, it is also important to consider general trends in language use. In addition, recent research by Feng (2012), Lian and Han (2015), Yan (2016), and Fan (2018) has focused on language usage in specific regions of China.

While these investigations are helpful, they may not fully capture the overall trend of language usage among married couples in China.

In addition, previous research on spousal terms primarily used methods such as introspection, interviews, home visits, and questionnaire surveys. This study utilizes the online survey method, which has several advantages, including a wider geographic area, anonymity for more honest responses, and ease of collecting and analyzing data. Therefore, this study aims to conduct an empirical investigation using online survey data to examine the relationship between spousal terms and social changes. It should be informative and beneficial to the sociolinguistics researchers in China as well as in other countries.

3. Outline of the Survey

This study conducted an online survey, using the internet survey website “问卷星 wènjuàn xīng” (Questionnaire Star) to investigate the use of spousal terms in China. The survey was limited to married individuals with children and was conducted from November 16 to December 16, 2022. A total of 460 responses were received (327 women, 133 men). The age distribution of the respondents was as follows: 6.74% were aged 20 - 29, 31.09% were aged 30 - 39, 42.83% were aged 40 - 49, 18.48% were aged 50 - 59, and 0.86% were in the other age groups. In addition, the educational backgrounds of the respondents were as follows: 16.09% had a high school education, 57.61% had a college education, 13.70% had a master's or doctoral degree, and 12.60% had other levels of education. Responses came from all regions of China (except Tibet and Xinjiang).

How people refer to their spouse can vary depending on the context in which they are introducing them to others or when they are alone. In the present online survey, we selected questions for asking about the terms respondents use when introducing their spouse to others in different situations, such as when speaking with a business client, a boss at work, a colleague, or a friend. Additionally, we set questions that asked respondents to select the terms they would ideally use when referring to their spouse. We also included questions to explore how the level of intimacy or hierarchy may influence the choice of terms in the relationship with the conversation partner. Accordingly, the survey included 14 questions, which were divided into three categories:

- 1) Indirect spousal terms: how respondents introduced their spouses to others (such as business clients, bosses, close colleagues, or close friends);
- 2) Direct spousal terms: how spouses addressed each other when they are alone; and
- 3) Preferred spousal terms: the terms respondents preferred their spouses to use when addressing them.

4. Results

In this study, we surveyed the use of different spousal terms in different cases in Chinese. We report the results under three categories: indirect spousal terms,

direct spousal terms, and preferred spousal terms. For each category, we provide separate analyses of male and female respondents. Additionally, we examine whether the term usage patterns vary among respondents of different ages and educational backgrounds. This survey was conducted online, and the sample size for each age and education group was not fixed. However, we received enough responses to analyze overall trends in each designated spouse group.

4.1. Indirect Spousal Terms

Here, we present how Chinese individuals refer to their spouses when speaking to others such as business clients, bosses, close colleagues, or close friends. We start by reporting how men introduce their spouses to others and then how women do the same.

4.1.1. Results from Male Respondents

As shown in **Figure 1**, “老婆 *lǎopo*” (old granny) was the most frequently used term by male respondents when introducing their female spouses to close colleagues and friends, with 58.65% and 54.14% of respondents using it with colleagues and friends, respectively. The second most commonly used term was “爱人 *àiren*” (loved one), which was chosen by 11.28% of respondents when introducing their spouses to colleagues. All other terms were utilized by less than 10% of male respondents.

Meanwhile, when introducing their female spouses to a business client and a boss at work, male respondents displayed four main variations in their responses: “老婆 *lǎopo*” (old granny), “爱人 *àiren*” (loved one), “太太 *tàitai*” (madame), and “妻子 *qīzi*” (wife) (**Figure 2**). Therefore, in public situations with a sense of tension or distance, such as in the business or at workplace, more than 30% of men refer to their spouses as “老婆 *lǎopo*” (old granny). Around

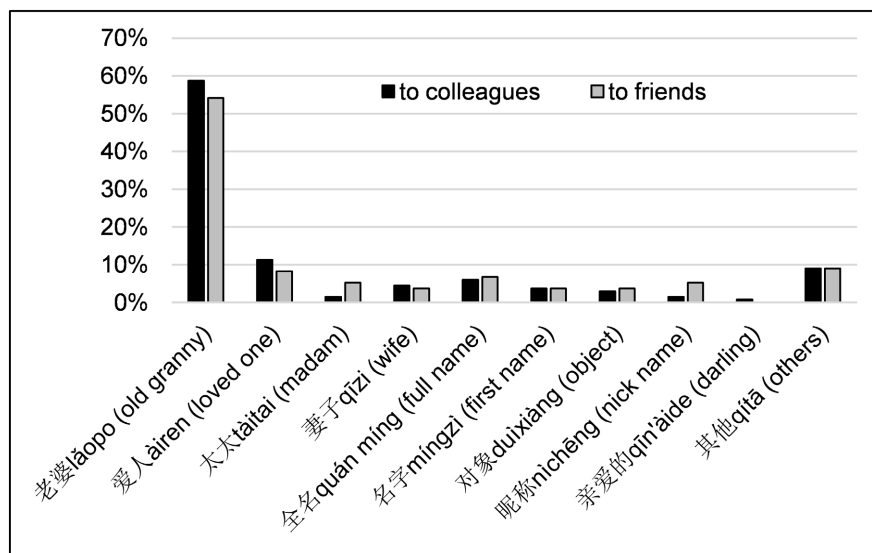


Figure 1. The proportion of terms used for introducing a female spouse to close colleagues (black) and friends (gray).

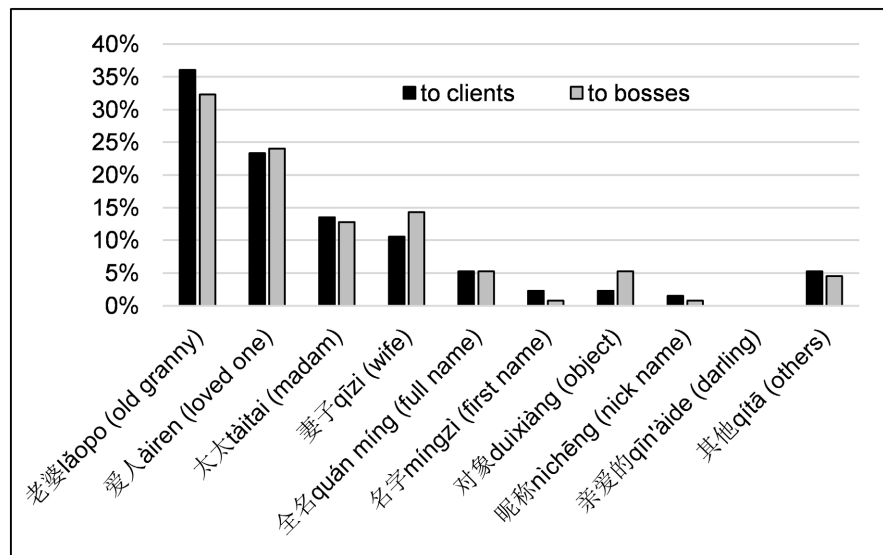


Figure 2. The proportion of terms used for introducing a female spouse to business clients (black) and bosses (gray).

20% of men commonly use the term “爱人 àiren” (loved one) in these situations. A few men use “太太 tàitai” (madam) or “妻子 qīzi” (wife), depending on the context. The usage rate shows a role division, with “太太 tàitai” (madam) being used more in business settings and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) being used more in the workplace.

A closer examination of age-specific data shows that each age group uses “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) most frequently. Especially, 50% of men in their 40s use “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) when introducing their spouses, while about 40% of men in their 50s use “爱人 àiren” (loved one) for this purpose. There are notable differences in terms used based on the age of the men (Figure 3).

Finally, another analysis of data specific to educational backgrounds shows that all groups use “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) most frequently (Figure 4). While the difference is subtle, high school graduates use “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) more than other groups. College graduates tend to use “爱人 àiren” (loved one) more, and master’s and doctoral degree holders use “太太 tàitai” (madame) more than other groups. Notably, men of all ages rarely use full names, men in their 50s do not use full names, and those with master’s and doctoral degree do not use them at all. These results differ from those of previous studies (Cao, 2003; Feng, 2012; Lian & Han, 2015; Yan, 2016; Fan, 2018).

4.1.2. Results from Female Respondents

As Figure 5 shows, most female respondents used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) when introducing their spouses to close colleagues (69.42%) and to friends (58.10%), and the second most used term was their spouses’ full names (10.70% to a close colleague, and 17.74% to a close friend). The other terms were rarely used.

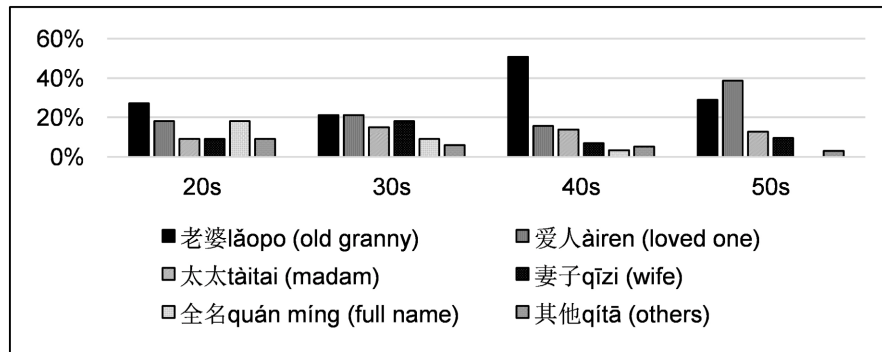


Figure 3. The proportion of terms used for introducing a female spouse by each age group.

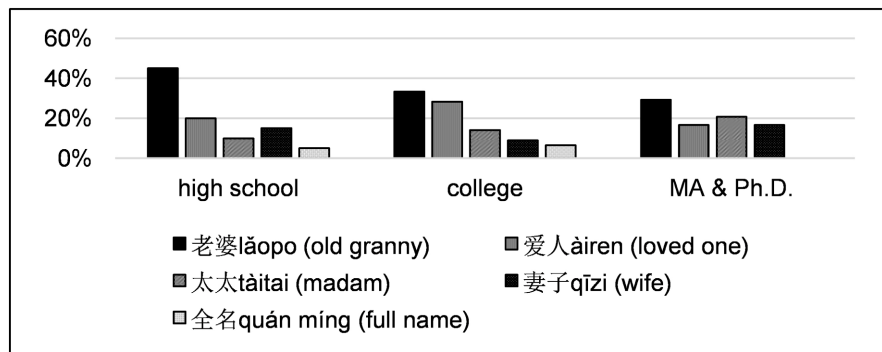


Figure 4. The proportion of terms used for introducing a female spouse by each educational background.

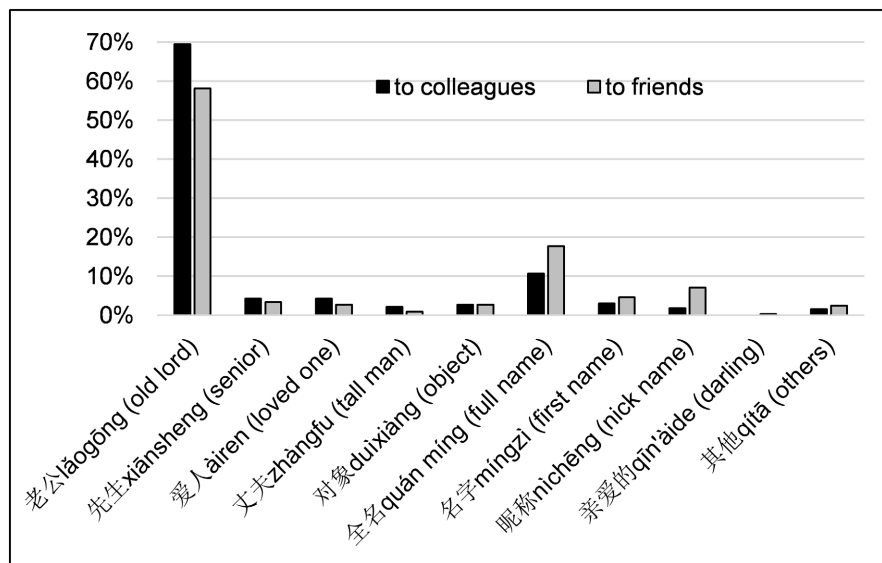


Figure 5. The proportion of terms used for introducing a male spouse to close colleagues (black) and friends (gray).

Like the male respondents, women also showed different usage patterns when introducing their male spouse on more formal occasions to business clients and bosses at work (Figure 6). Women mostly use “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and

“先生 xiānsheng” (senior) (for both 37.00%) when introducing their male spouses to business clients. In particular, to bosses at work, 42.81% of female respondents used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord), and 26.91% of them used “先生 xiānsheng” (senior), and 15.9% of them used “爱人 àiren” (loved one).

In the analysis of term usage among respondents based on their ages and educational backgrounds, we observed that Chinese women in their 50s displayed different usage patterns compared to the other three age groups (see **Figure 7**). Women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s primarily used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) while hardly using the other terms. In contrast, although women in their 50s also primarily used “先生 xiānsheng”, they used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) less frequently and used “爱人 àiren” (loved one) more often. The most notable difference among the age groups was the second term used by the younger three groups and those in their 50s. While the former groups predominantly used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “先生 xiānsheng” (senior), the latter group still used “爱人 àiren” (loved one) as their second most popular term.

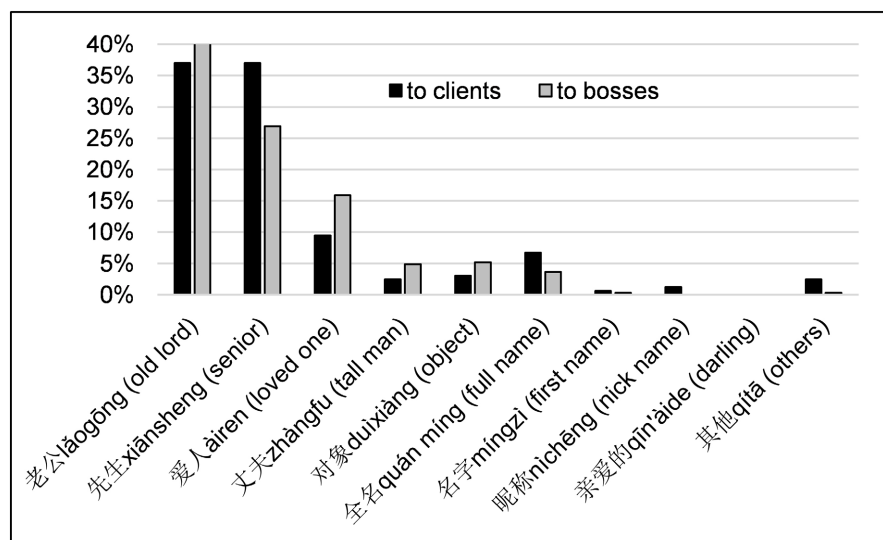


Figure 6. The proportion of terms used for introducing a male spouse to business clients (black) and bosses (gray).

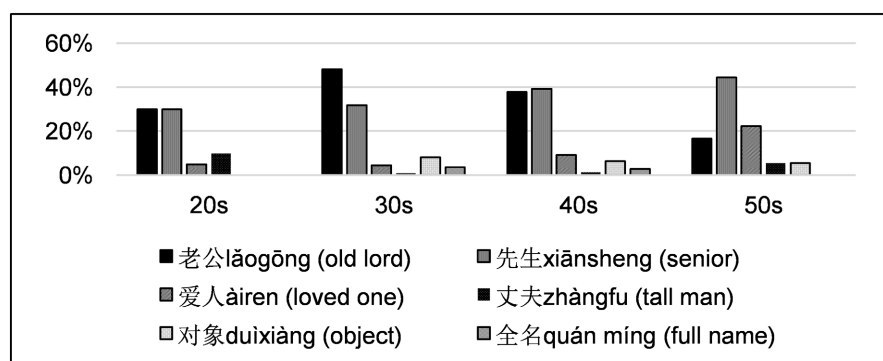


Figure 7. The proportion of terms used for introducing a male spouse by each age group.

Meanwhile, a closer examination of educational background-specific data reveals that all groups use “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) frequently (Figure 8). Although the difference is subtle, high school graduates use “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) more than the other groups. College graduates use “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) more than the other groups, and the master’s and doctoral degree holders use “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) the most, with “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “爱人 àiren” (loved one) used at the same rate, and using “爱人 àiren” (loved one) more than the other groups. For women, the higher the level of education, the higher the rate of “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) use.

We observed that the term “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man), which was previously used by women in formal situations to refer to their male spouses, is now rarely used by women of all ages regardless of the person they are talking to. Especially women with master’s and doctoral degrees do not use “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) at all. The usage of “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) will be further discussed in the discussion section. Additionally, it is notable that Chinese women, particularly, those in their 20s, rarely use their spouse’s full name in current communications. Furthermore, women seldom use the full name regardless of their educational backgrounds. These results differ from those of previous studies (Cao, 2003; Feng, 2012; Lian & Han, 2015; Yan, 2016; Fan, 2018).

4.2. Direct Spousal Terms

In this section, we report how Chinese couples address each other directly. Here we describe both male and female responses as a comparison. The top part of Figure 9 shows how men use the terms to address their spouses, while the bottom part shows how women do so.

According to the results, the ranking of usage rates for men is as follows: both “昵称 nìchēng” (nickname) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) were used by 24.81%, followed by “全名 quánmíng” (full name) at 22.56%. The ranking of usage rates for women is as follows: “昵称 nìchēng” (nickname) ranked first (29.66%), followed by “老公 lǎogōng” (22.63%) and “全名 quánmíng” (full name) (19.88%).

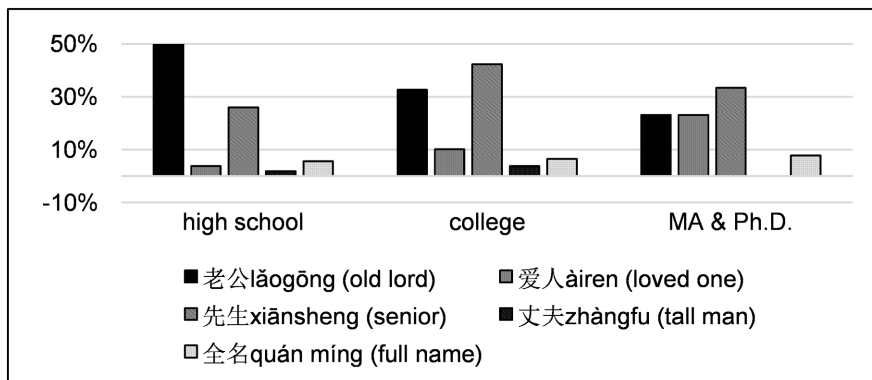


Figure 8. The proportion of terms used for introducing a male spouse by each education background group.

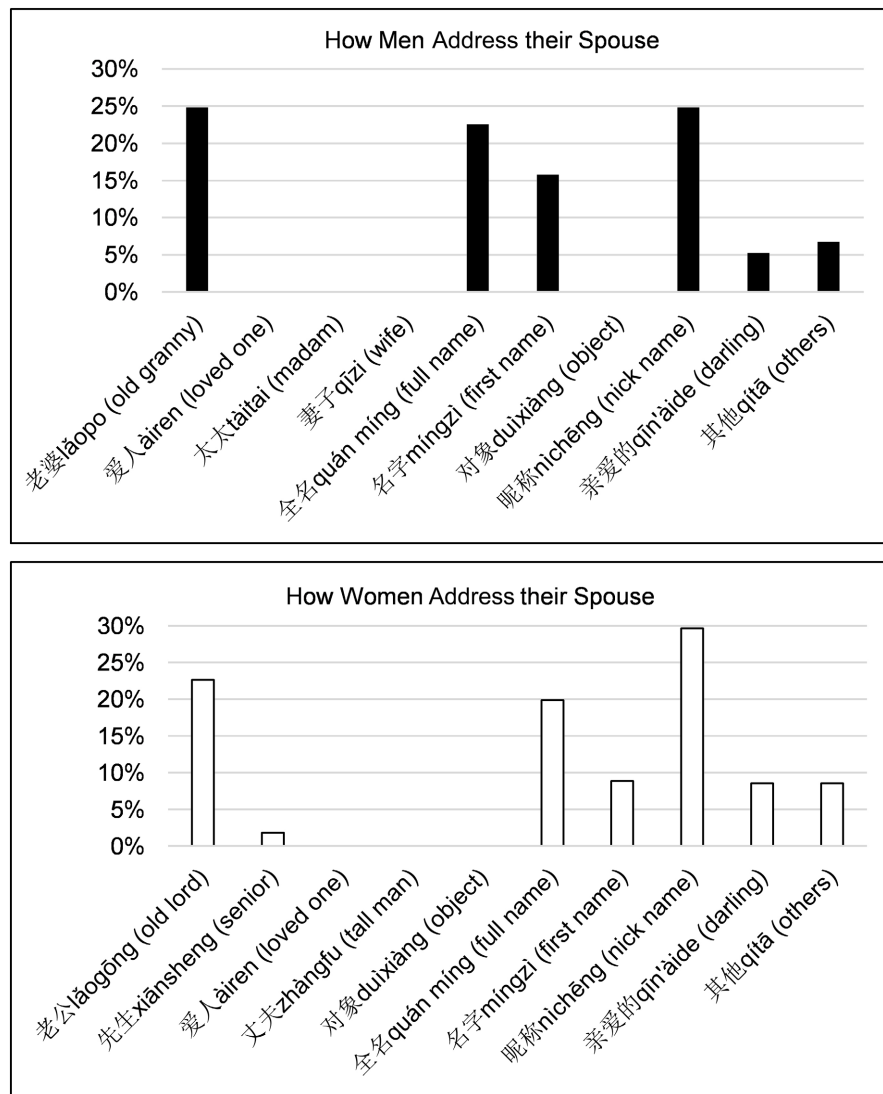


Figure 9. How couples address each other: Men's terms (top) and women's terms (bottom).

This suggests that married couples commonly use these three terms to address each other privately. There is a slight preference for nickname use among women, but overall, there are no significant differences in term usage between men and women.

4.3. Preferred Spousal Terms

Lastly, we present the results of the preferred spousal terms among Chinese couples in both public and private settings. **Figure 10** presents the data collected in response to the question: "If your spouse introduces you to others, what would you most like to be addressed?"

The results show that among men, the most preferred term is "老公 lǎogōng" (old lord) (57.89%), followed by "先生 xiānsheng" (senior) (18.05%) in second place and "爱人 àiren" (loved one) (10.53%) in third. Among women, the most preferred term is "老婆 lǎopó" (old granny) (49.85%), followed by "太太 tàitai"

(madam) (18.96%) and “爱人 àiren” (loved one) (16.51%). It is worth noting that there are no significant differences between the preferred and actual usage of these spousal terms (as shown in **Figure 1**, **Figure 2** and **Figure 5**, **Figure 6**). In reality, Chinese couples predominantly use terms “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) for addressing their spouses in public.

Figure 11 presents the responses of the question: “What would you most like to be addressed when you are alone with your spouse?”. Among men, the most common response was “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) (41.35%), followed by “昵称 nǐchēng” (nickname) (25.56%) and “全名 quánmíng” (full name) (12.03%). When couples are alone together, men prefer to be called “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) by their wives rather than nicknames, indicating that they feel that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) better conveys the intimacy between husband and wife in private. However, in reality, women more commonly use nicknames (29.66%) followed by “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) (22.63%).

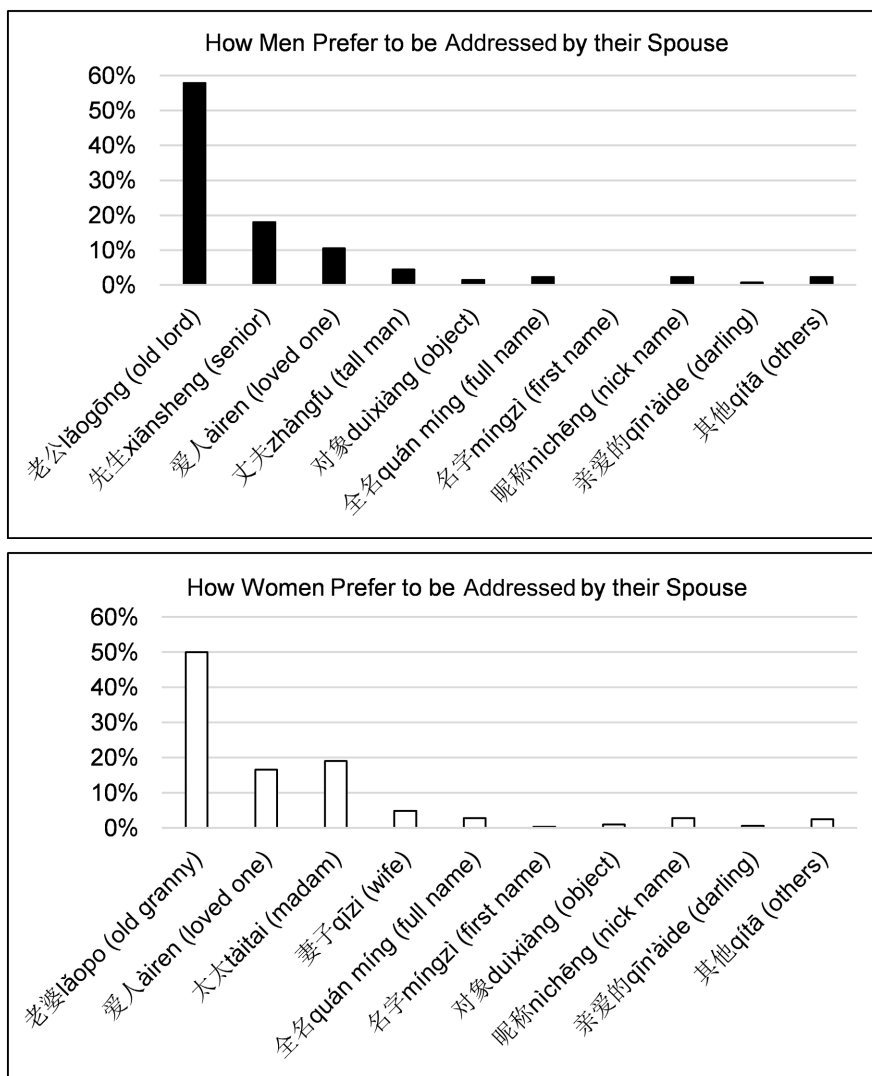


Figure 10. How couples prefer to be addressed publicly: Men’s terms (top) and women’s (bottom).

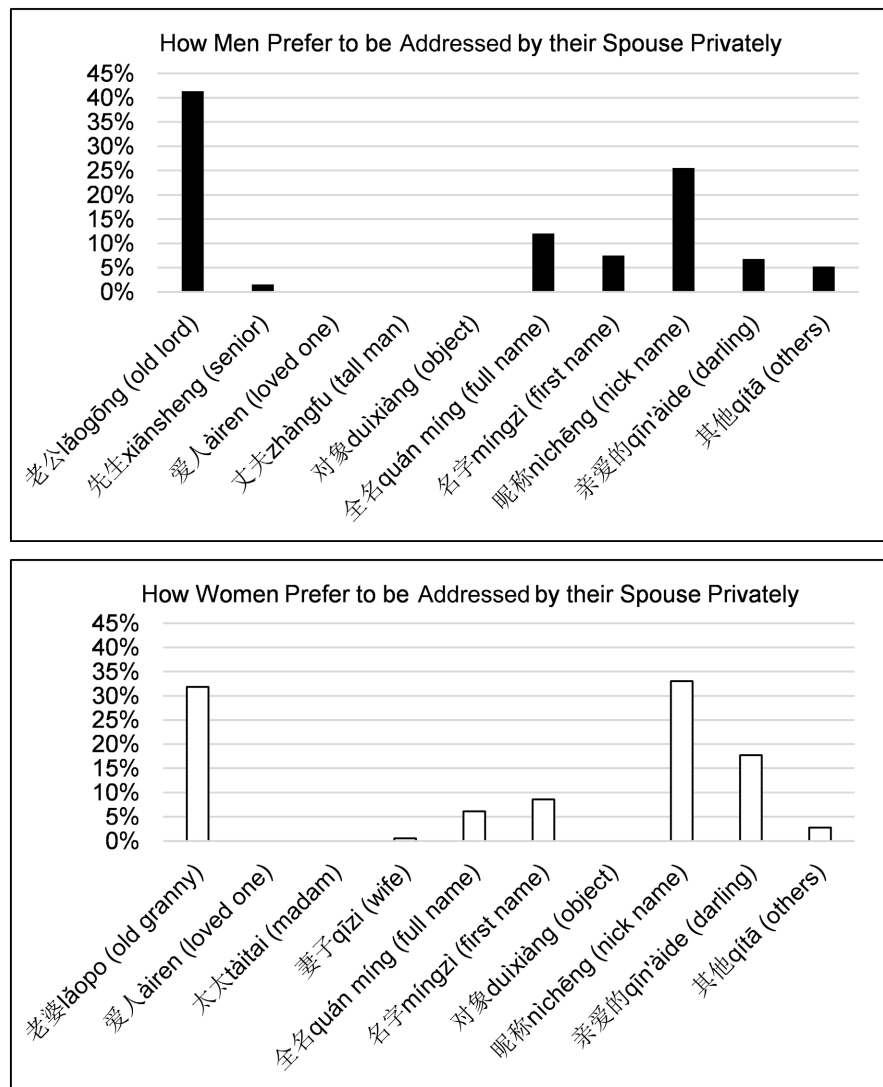


Figure 11. How couples prefer to be addressed privately: Men's terms (top) and women's terms (bottom).

Meanwhile, women's most common responses were “昵称 nìchēng” (nickname) (33.03%), followed by “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) (31.80%) and “亲爱的 qīn'ài de” (honey/darling/dear) (17.74%). The ranking is the same as in actual usage. However, a few women preferred being addressed “亲爱的 qīn'ài de” (honey/darling/dear) when alone with their spouses.

Again, these results suggest subtle differences in the preferred and actual usage of these terms between men and women. Nevertheless, overall, the results show that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) are overwhelmingly preferred by both men and women among the contemporary Chinese, regardless of age or educational background.

5. Discussion

Before concluding the present study, we discuss the four major findings com-

pared with the literatures on spousal terms usage in Chinese. First, the most commonly used spousal terms are “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny). Second, the use of the gender-neutral term “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is restricted. Third, “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) are making a resurgence. Lastly, “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) are limited to the official written language categories.

5.1. The Most Common Spousal Terms “老公 Lǎogōng” (Old Lord) and “老婆 Lǎopo” (Old Granny)

The results of this online survey differ from those of previous studies in some ways. In this survey, it was found that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) are the most commonly used terms for spouses, while previous studies showed that the most commonly used term was the full name. For example, a 2001 survey in Shanghai found that 83% of men and 84% of women chose to use their spouses’ full name when alone with their spouses. Moreover, when introducing their spouses to others, 58% of men and 68% of women also used their spouses’ full name (Cao, 2003: p. 53).

In addition, a questionnaire survey of 104 married couples in northern China found that full name was the most commonly used in any situation: formal, general, or relaxed (Feng, 2012: p. 62). When the couple is alone, next to the use of the full name, the most common term used by wives for their husbands is “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord). For men, “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) comes right after full name and first name (Feng, 2012: p. 66). Furthermore, a questionnaire survey of 269 people (132 men, 137 women) in Henan province found that when referring to a couple directly, full name was chosen most often by 56.8% of men and 59.9% of women. On the other hand, when referring to a spouse to others, the term “爱人 àiren” (loved one) was selected most often by 35.6% of men and 43.8% of women (Lian & Han, 2015: p. 145).

Two recent master’s theses arrived at similar conclusions. A survey of 248 people (123 men, 125 women) conducted in Jiangxi province in 2016 found that most common way of addressing a spouse in public was by using their full names in all age groups, exceeding 50% and even reaching 68%. The detail results are as follows: 20s: 50%; 30s: 53%; 40s: 52%; 50s: 67%; and 60s: 68% (Yan, 2016: p. 54). In private, the most common terms used were the full name (34%) or “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) (18%) (Yan, 2016: p. 65). Another survey with 216 people (104 men, 112 women) by face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted in Harbin in 2018 found that the most common way of addressing a spouse when talking to others was by using their full name (11.34% for men, 18.31% for women). When couples were alone, the highest percentages were of “zero term”, meaning 21.49% of men and 20.74% of women did not use any specific term to address their spouses (Fan, 2018: pp. 13-14).

Technically, full names are not specifically used as terms of address for spous-

es. However, their usage can be seen as a reflection of China's unique social system and values. One reason is that married couples in China typically have different surnames. In public, it is necessary to specify both the surname and first name, so full name is often used when introducing one's spouse to others. Additionally, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, new social norms and values, including gender equality and marital equality, have been promoted and become more widespread within households. Even after getting married and becoming a spouse, an individual is still a person with their own personality and human rights. Using the full name to address one's spouse may be seen as a way to show respect for their personality and dignity as an individual, both when introducing them to others and when addressing them in private.

This study's results may differ from previous studies due to the difference in research methods. This study used an online survey, while previous studies may have used other methods. The online survey has the advantage of not being limited to a specific geographic location and allowing for anonymous responses, which may make it easier to obtain honest opinions from respondents. Spousal terms are a sensitive issue of personal privacy. Married individuals may be more likely to conceal their actual usage in front of others. Online surveys, which offer a high level of anonymity, can elicit respondents' true intentions and subconscious usage compared to face-to-face or in person discourse methods.

The most significant difference between the results of this survey and those of previous studies is that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) are found to be the most commonly used terms when introducing a spouse to others. Notably, about 70% of women use “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) when introducing their spouses to a close colleague, and about 60% of women use it when introducing their spouses to a close friend. It was found that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) is generally used as a male spousal term in conversations with close relationships. On the other hand, when men introducing their spouses to others, “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) is most frequently used, regardless of person they are talking to. More than 50% of men chose “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny), especially when the conversation partner is a close colleague or friend. It was found that “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) is generally used as a female spousal term in conversations with close relationships. Even in public situations, the usage rates of “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) are also ranked top among the various spousal terms.

Some studies have pointed out from a critical perspective that “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) were used initially as secular terms among the lower class in Shanghai (Cao, 2003: p. 52); the popularity of these terms has been influenced by movies and TV shows from Taiwan and Hongkong (Kim, 2002: p. 33); their popularity is mainly in films and television dramas and may not reflect actual language usage in real life (Lian & Han, 2015: p. 147). Moreover, despite their widespread use, there have been instances of abuse,

which reflects a trendy mentality among modern people (Fan, 2018: p. 7).

According to Lian and Han (2015), 69.1% of respondents chose the option “It does not matter if the meanings of ‘老公 lǎogōng’ (old lord) and ‘老婆 lǎopo’ (old granny) are elegant or vulgar”. This suggests that most people do not frequently use these terms in their daily lives but are willing to accept and do not resent others using them in public (Lian & Han, 2015: p. 146). In fact, the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* published in 2008 explains “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) as “the wife’s nickname for her husband” (Gong, 2008: p. 1059). This reflects the contemporary usage of the term. Even the most academically authoritative dictionary in China, the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* compiled by the Institute of Linguistics of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, initially explained “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) as “a term for husband in dialects” in its 4th edition (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Linguistics, 2002: p. 758). However, in the 5th edition published in 2005, “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) is explained as “a term for husband used in spoken language”, while “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) is explained as “a term for wife used in spoken language” (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Linguistics, 2005: p. 818, p. 820). This interpretation confirms the effects of significant changes in the use of spousal terms in the 21st century. Old terms with traditional connotations of vulgarity have gained new, evolving meanings.

The principle of linguistic convenience may contribute to the widespread usage of “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny). This online survey showed that these terms could be used both when couples are alone and when introducing their spouses to others, making them very convenient. Additionally, “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) may be accepted by many people because they have no connotations other than indicating a marital relationship. These terms represent a formal, legitimate marriage. On the other hand, other spousal terms lack this convenience. Some terms can only be used when introducing or mentioning a spouse to others and are unsuitable for couples to use directly, such as “爱人 àiren” (loved one). Some terms have other meanings besides that of spouse, such as “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man), “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “爱人 àiren” (loved one). Some terms cannot express a married relationship, such as a full name. Some terms are too direct in expressing the intimate relationship between a husband and wife, such as “亲爱的 qīn'àide” (honey/darling/dear) or “昵称 nìchēng” (nickname).

5.2. The Restricted Use of the Gender-Neutral Term “爱人 Àiren” (Loved one)

The term “爱人 àiren” (loved one), a symbol of free love and free marriage, emerged during the May 4th Cultural Movement (1919) and was used within the Chinese Communist Party in the early 20th century (Kim, 2002: p. 93). Its usage peaked during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as other spousal terms became unavailable. Chen (1979: p. 9) notes the frequent use of “爱人 àiren”

(loved one) in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Chen (1999: p. 131) pointed out that “爱人 àiren” (loved one) gradually declined in the 1990s due to its association with a specific era. This online survey confirmed that the usage rate of “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is limited, with only a few men and women in their 50s using it when introducing their spouses in public. It is clear that women in the younger age groups (20s - 40s) rarely use “爱人 àiren” (loved one). The fact that the use of the gender-neutral term “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is age-restricted reflects the changing zeitgeist of Chinese society.

According to a survey conducted in Henan Province, “爱人 àiren” (loved one) was the term most commonly used by both men (35.6%) and women (43.8%) to refer to their spouses when speaking to others (Lian & Han, 2015: p. 145). Furthermore, the research also reported that “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is the primary term used in formal situations in this region (Lian & Han, 2015: p. 148). Therefore, it is worth considering whether the heavy use of “爱人 àiren” (loved one) in Henan Province is a local characteristic or a trend that can be found in the other regions in China.

In addition, as Yan (2016: p. 1) pointed out, the most distinctive feature of the modern Chinese spouse appellation system is secularization and de-gendered. The use of terms like “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) can be pointed out as examples of secularization. However, the present online survey has shown that the gender-neutral “爱人 àiren” (loved one) may be on the decline, and, both men and women seldom use another gender-neutral “对象 duìxiàng” (object), leading to debate about whether the spouse appellation system can be considered de-gendered.

Meanwhile, the term “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is typically used to introduce a spouse to others but cannot be used when the couple is alone or addressing each other directly. In addition to expressing the meaning of a spouse, “爱人 àiren” (loved one) also means “lover”, that is, a lover in love or outside marriage. Recently, “爱人 àiren” (loved one) is also used among same-sex couples. However, in modern Chinese society, monogamy and heterosexual marriage are norm, and same-sex marriage and extramarital affairs are not permitted. As with the term “同志 tóngzhì” (comrade), once widely used in China (Chen, 1979: p. 9; Kim, 2002: p. 100), “爱人 àiren” (loved one) may not keep up with the changing social norms and eventually become obsolete. It suggests that social changes may eventually sublate a term even though it has long been popular while being supported by an idea or policy.

5.3. The Resurgence of Spousal Terms “先生 Xiānsheng” (Senior) and “太太 Tàitai” (Madam)

According to the *Ancient Chinese Dictionary*, “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) has been used since ancient times as “a woman refers to her husband” (*Ancient Chinese Dictionary Editorial Group*, 2012: p. 1693). Nowadays, when speaking to others, “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) is an honorific word that refers to another

person's or one's own husband. Meanwhile, the term “太太 tàitai” (madam) was initially used to refer to high-ranking married women, but later applied to the wives of officials. In modern times, all married women were addressed as “太太 tàitai” (madam). In the 1930s, these terms were used for ordinary urban married people regardless of status (Li, 1996: p. 32). However, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the promotion of egalitarian ideals, terms like “同志 tóngzhì” (comrade), “爱人 àiren” (loved one) became more and more prevalent than before. The use of “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) in daily life declined. According to Chen (1979: p. 9), they were used only to address foreigners or people from overseas in the 1970s to respect the social customs of different ethnicities and regions. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the use of “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) wholly disappeared, especially the latter, which was criticized as a bourgeois term.

However, the present survey revealed that contemporary Chinese women use “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) almost as frequently as “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) when introducing their spouses to a person in public setting, such as a business client or a boss at work regardless of age or educational background. The results also show that among women, the higher the level of education, the higher the rate of “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) use. Furthermore, when introduced by a spouse in a similar context, the second most preferred term selected by men is “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) followed by “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord). On the other hand, men tend to use “太太 tàitai” (madam) followed by “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) and “爱人 àiren” (loved one) when introducing their spouses to a person in public setting. The term “太太 tàitai” (madam) is also the second most preferred term selected by women when introduced by their husbands in public.

The spousal terms “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) were once commonly used in the old days, but they wholly disappeared for a long time and now they have become popular again in recent times. With an increase in global exchange, these terms have seen a resurgence in use for international interactions to conform to international customs and facilitate communication within the global community. The results show that “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam) are making a resurgence. However, it is important to note that the term “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) not only refers to a male spouse but also serves as an honorific or common term of address for all men in social interaction. In China, “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) can also refer to a teacher, a doctor, or a professor, regardless of gender (Kim, 2002: p. 94, p. 102).

5.4. The Limited Use of “丈夫 Zhàngfu” (Tall Man) and “妻子 Qīzi” (Wife) in the Official Written Language

The spousal terms “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) are the legal terms for “husband” and “wife” in Chinese, respectively (Kim, 2002: pp. 76-77). These two terms are considered to be the most formal way to refer to

one's spouse in China. However, according to the results of this online survey, the use of “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) are infrequent in various forms of conversations. Even in formal situations, such as introducing a spouse to a business client, or a boss at work, only about 10% of men use “妻子 qīzi” (wife) to refer to their wives. Furthermore, women rarely use “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) to refer to their husbands in any context. Fan (2018: p. 33) similarly found little to no use of the term “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man), which used to be a common use in Harbin in the past. It is worth noting that language use can vary depending on region, age, educational level, and other factors, so it is not necessarily the case that these trends hold for all speakers of Chinese.

The spousal term “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) is seldom used by women in many situations maybe because there is another meaning besides representing a husband. That is “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) carries connotations of male chauvinism, as seen in the Chinese proverb “男子汉大丈夫 nánzihàn dàzhàngfu” (Masculinity makes a man). This is may be due to the traditional Chinese values it represents, which are not in line with the current norms of gender and marital equality in China.

According to a survey by Yan (2016), among all the spousal terms, “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) were the most frequently used between 2006-2015 in the *People's Daily*, a very famous government-run Chinese newspaper in China. “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) appeared 3,114 times, and “妻子 qīzi” (wife) appeared 4,721 times. In addition, Yan (2016) notes that they are the most stable and frequently used spousal terms in modern Chinese (Yan, 2016: p. 21). However, it is worth considering that the use of these terms in the *People's Daily*, as a media outlet, may be limited to the official written language rather than the casual spoken language.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we conducted an online survey of married couples with children to investigate the various terms for spouses in the Chinese language. The results showed a rich vocabulary of spousal terms in Chinese. Some terms, such as “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) initially used among the lower classes and having a vulgar image before, are now widely used and overwhelmingly preferred by contemporary Chinese men and women, regardless of age or educational background. Another term, “爱人 àiren” (loved one), which began to be used in the early 20th century and peaked in use during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), has completed its historical mission and is currently in decline. The traditional spousal terms, such as “先生 xiānsheng” (senior) and “太太 tàitai” (madam), used since ancient times, disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, but have regained popularity after the country's reform and opening up in the 1980s, and are currently favored by married men and women in public. Some terms, such as “丈夫 zhàngfu” (tall man) and “妻子 qīzi” (wife), as legal terms, are primarily used in official written language rather than

in casual spoken language.

This study offers insights into how social change and the transformation of values in China are reflected in the evolution of spousal terms. However, it is worth noting that online surveys may be subject to bias because they only include respondents with internet access, although the widespread use of smartphones in China may reduce this bias compared to the past. It will be necessary to continue monitoring the changes in spousal terms through future online surveys.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported in part by MEXT's Subsidy Program for Human Resource Development for Science and Technology. The author expresses her thanks to Dr. Kazuo Mori for kindly assisting during the preparation of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Ancient Chinese Dictionary Editorial Group (2012). *Gudai Hanyu Cidian [Ancient Chinese Dictionary]*. The Commercial Press. (In Chinese)
- Cao, W. (2003). Language Use and Social Values: Using Forms of Address between Married Couples in China. *The Japanese Journal of Language in Society*, 5, 48-57. (In Japanese)
- Chen, J. (1994). *Shuohua de Yishu [The Art of Speaking]*. Language & Culture Press. (In Chinese)
- Chen, J. (1999). *Zhongguo Yuyan he Zhongguo Shehui [Chinese Language and Chinese Society]*. Guangdong Education Press. (In Chinese)
- Chen, Y. (1979). *Yuyan yu Shehui Shenghuo [Language and Social life]*. Joint Publishing. (In Chinese)
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Linguistics. (2002). *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian [Modern Chinese Dictionary]* (4th ed.). The Commercial Press. (In Chinese)
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Linguistics (2005). *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian [Modern Chinese Dictionary]* (5th ed.). The Commercial Press. (In Chinese)
- Fan, J. (2018). *The Sociolinguistics Study on Couple's Appellation in Harbin*. M.A. Thesis, Harbin Normal University. (In Chinese)
- Feng, L. (2012). A Research Report on the Forms of Address between Husband and Wife in Cities of North China. *The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, 2012, 62-73. (In Chinese)
- Gong, X. (2008). *Dangdai Hanyu Cidian (Guoji Huayu Ban) [Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (International Chinese Edition)]*. The Commercial Press International Ltd. (In Chinese)
- Holmes, J., & Wilson, N. (2017). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728438>

- Jia, Y. (1999). *Hanyu Yuyixue [Chinese Semantics]*. Peking University Press. (In Chinese)
- Kim, H. (2002). *Jiaoji Chengweiyu he Weiwanyu [Communicative Terms and Euphemisms]*. Taihai Publishing House. (In Chinese)
- Li, S. (1996). Wushinianlai de Shehuichengwei Bianqian Zayi [Miscellaneous Memories of Changes in Social Terms over the Past 50 Years]. *Language Planning*, 9, 32-34. (In Chinese)
- Lian, X., & Han, M. (2015). A Sociolinguistic Study of the Spouse Appellation: Laogong and Laopo. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 18, 142-148. (In Chinese)
- Yan, S. (2016). *The Study of Spouse Appellation*. M.A. Thesis, Jiangxi Normal University. (In Chinese)