A Study of Identity Construction of the Elderly in Weibo News on Public Health Emergency

Estudio sobre la construcción de la identidad de los ancianos en las noticias de Weibo sobre emergencias de salud pública

突发公共卫生背景下老年人在微博新闻中的身份建构研究

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Abstract: This paper, taking the perspective of pragmatic identity theory, investigates identity construction of the elderly in Weibo news on public health emergency. 157 news reports are collected from three Weibos *People's Daily, WuhanChina* as well as *Voice of Elderly* to explore identity types constructed and strategies adopted in constructing the elderly on Weibo. Results show the tendency of positive and diversified construction of the elderly in China's Weibo news on public health emergency. Strategies in constructing the elderly involve identity modifications, identity foregrounding, backgrounding, contrasting and identity shift and crossing.

Key Words: identity construction; public health emergency; Weibo news.

Resumen: Este artículo, tomando la perspectiva de la teoría de identidad pragmática, investiga la construcción de identidad de los ancianos en las noticias de Weibo sobre emergencias de salud pública. Se recopilan 157 informes de noticias de tres Weibos: People's Daily, WuhanChina y Voice of Elderly, para explorar los tipos de identidad construidos y las estrategias adoptadas para construir a los ancianos en las noticias de Weibo. Los resultados muestran la tendencia de la construcción positiva y diversificada de los ancianos. Las estrategias para construir a los adultos mayores implican modificaciones de identidad, tanto en un primer plano de identidad como en el trasfondo, así mismo, aparecen contrastes, cambios y cruce de identidades.

Palabras clave: construcción de identidad; emergencia de salud pública; Weibo noticias.

摘要：本文以语用身份理论为分析框架，以新浪微博中老年人新闻报道为语料，探讨突发公共卫生情况下老年人在微博新闻中的身份建构特点。文章收集了人民日报、武汉发布和老年之声三类微博中关于老年人报道的157篇新闻，分析了微博新闻中所建构的老年人身份类型及其建构策略。研究表明，突发公共卫生事件报道中老年人的身份类型呈现出多样化和积极化的趋势。老年人身份建构的策略包含身份的修饰、身份的凸显、隐匿或对比、身份的流变与跨越等。

［**关键词**］身份建构；突发公共卫生；微博新闻

1. Introduction

With the aging of the global population, the representation and identity construction of the elderly group has received extensive attention from sociology (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2007), communication (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004; Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004) and critical discourse analysis (Fealy, Mcnamara, Treacy & Lyons, 2012), etc.

Representations are the totality of semiotic means by which items and categories, individuals and social groups, along with their attributes and values, are identified, thematized, focused, shaped and made intelligible (Coupland, 2014: 242). In this sense, representing a class of people, especially in media discourse, is more than merely referring to them. Social groups can be represented in many different possible ways (Van Leeuwen, 2008), with linguistic representations of social groups lying

at the heart of both social integration and social division. When we classify or name something, we always compare it to a conceptual prototype to ask whether the object compared is normal or abnormal in relation to that prototype (Gwyn, 1996, cf: Coupland, 2014).

In public discourses, the elderly tend to be represented as vulnerable, fearful and weak (Pain, 2001) due to their categorical distinction of chronological age, which gives rise to particular ways of naming and referencing old people and distinct constructions of ageing and age identities (Fealy et al, 2012). Particular naming and referencing terms carry differences in positioning older people as not only a distinct demographic category but as a group outside of or different to the average citizen (Richardson, 2007). Besides, the previous studies seem to provide some evidence for the pan-cultural character of ageism, which is found widespread in both developed western countries (Bodner & Lazar 2008) and in some eastern collectivist societies[1] (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005).

This paper adopts pragmatic identity theory (Chen, 2013, 2018) to explore identity construction of Chinese elderly in Weibo news reports on public health emergency. The study aims to offer an interpretation of elderly people from a collectivist culture, which emphasizes the value of filial piety and respect for elders (Sung, 2001), and in context of public health emergency like Covid-19, which is causing untold fear and suffering for older people across the world (Guterres, 2020).

2. Research Background

Since the 1970s, communication and aging research has concerned age stereotyping, intergenerational communication, and ageism (Williams & Ylänne-McEwen, 2000), particularly with the simultaneous growth in the discipline of communication and in the population of older individuals across the world (Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004). Mass media concerning elderly people demonstrate the presence of both "positive ageism" and "negative ageism" (Palmore, 1999), but negative stereotypes still predominate (Fealy et al, 2012).

Representations of the elderly in television programs involve both underrepresentation (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli & Morgan, 1980; Prieler, Ivanov & Hagiwara, 2016) and negative stereotypes (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Skill, 1995) and more and positive representation (Bell, 1992; Cassata & Irwin, 1997). The representation of the elderly is subject

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[1] In their study, data about collectivist culture came from Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea.

to gender difference (Gerbner et al., 1980; Prieler, et al, 2016), and ethic discrimination (Elliott, 1984). The negative attitude towards ageing and the lack of knowledge related to aging leads to "an extremely pessimistic picture of older adults and the aging process" (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004: 125). Ageing is equated with the look of ageing in commercialized discourses (Coupland, 2009). Discursive constructions of identity in old age are often with reference to health and social services utilization, giving rise to an identity of dependency (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2007), a 'problem' in health care provision (Reed & Clarke, 2010).

In newspapers and magazines, the elderly have been underrepresented, cast in minor roles, given negative description (Vasil & Wass, 1993; Evers et al, 1998), and largely invisible (Murthy, Krumholz & Gross, 2004). In nearly every study, elderly women are even more underrepresented than elderly men (Vasil & Wass, 1993). Miller, Miller, McKibbin & Pettys (1999) find an increase of negative portrayals of the elderly in US magazines. By classifying language pertaining to the elderly, Martin, Williams & O'Neill (2009) illustrates that most articles show a predominantly ageist view of the elderly as a burden on society, often portraying them as frail non-contributors. Fealy, et al (2012) investigate discursive formations of ageing and age identities in newspaper texts, finding that five distinct identity types collectively produce ageing and age identities of implied dependency and otherness.

The elderly in Chinese media have gained attention since the 1980s (Guo & Jin, 2014). Content analysis shows similar underrepresentation of the elderly, especially elderly females (Ding, 2016), with more representations of elderly people in cities than in countryside (He, 2015), and portrayed as unhealthy, traditional and conservative (Yin, 2008). Attention is given to specific groups of elderly people, like "empty nesters", "elderly in conflicts", etc. Reports on empty nesters involve more and favorable representations of females than males (He, 2015). The elderly in conflicts are stigmatized through labelling strategy like "the old person falling down" (Wang, 2012; Guo, 2014), or the journalist's negative comments (Ge & Wang, 2018). With the frame "the blackmailing elderly" gradually formed (Zhang, 2017), different updated stories are produced, presupposing the frame that "elderly people become evil" (Ding, 2017). Recent years, media identity of Chinese elderly has become diversified. According to positive discourse analysis, changing reference and name can shape negative representation of the elderly (Tang, 2012). Positive frames like "heroic narrative" are adopted in some main-stream media (Dai, 2014). Liu and Li

(2017) compare identity construction of elderly people in newspapers and Sina Weibo. Their findings suggest that positive narrative frameworks are commonly used in newspapers, whilst in new media the negative narrative frameworks are adopted and more diversified identities of the elderly are constructed.

Current research on elderly people in media discourse is still insufficient in proportion to the increasing number of elderly people in different cultures despite the global attention to the issue. Besides, representations of the elderly are often pragmatically reductive, homogenised as well as pejorated. The increasing globalization has already encouraged more fluidity of group definition, and less adversarial and more complex group relations and representations (Coupland, 2014: 257). Whether there is diversified representation of elderly people and whether it is a universal culture of ageism deserve more empirical research on eastern culture. Moreover, the pragmatic function of discourse in identity construction on new media is not fully discussed. The current analysis of Weibo involves a pragmatic perspective to reveal the diversity and complexity of elderly people's identity construction in media discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

With the discursive turn of identity research (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 4), an increasing number of scholars started to explore the dynamic construction, negotiation, management of identity in discourse (Antaki & Widdicome, 1998; de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006). Following this constructionist approach, "identity is not fixed, pre-existent and one-way, but dynamic, active and co-constructed online through discourse" (Chen, 2018: 1). Constructionist researchers emphasize identity as a process embedded in social practice, where discursive practice plays a central role (ibid: 24).

Chen (2013, 2014, 2018) proposes the notion "pragmatic identity" and emphasizes the communicative nature of identity in context rather than its social or psychological attributes. In this view, pragmatic identity refers to the specific realization, application or fabrication of a certain identity in communicative context. It is the contextualized self or other identity selected by the communicator, consciously or unconsciously, or other identity mentioned by the speaker or author in discourse. Pragmatic identity can be approached as an interpretive resource, an illocutionary resource, an interpersonal resource, an explanatory resource, and finally as an evaluative resource (Chen, 2018).

Identity is treated as the product of particular forms of 'discursive work' (De Fina, et al, 2006: 2). Tracy and Robles (2013: 25-26) proposes that the relationship between discursive practices and identities is a reciprocal one. The specific discursive practice a person chooses will shape who he or she is taken to be and who the partner is taken to be. The terms we select in ordinary exchanges are an important way in which we build our own identities and a fundamental part of how we alter cast others (ibid: 74). Based on Tracy and Robles (2013), Chen (2013, 2018) sums up types of discursive practice related to identity construction, which include codes, styles, discourse structures, discourse contents, discourse manners, speech acts, person-referencing, grammar, lexicon, sounds of speech, and paralinguistic features. Of all these, person referencing is taken in this research as a salient strategy to construct the elderly in Weibo news. As Bucholtz & Hall (2005: 594) proposes, the overt introduction of referential identity categories into discourse is the most obvious and direct way that identities can be constituted through talk. Besides, the circulation of such categories within ongoing discourse, their explicit or implicit juxtaposition with other categories, and the linguistic elaborations and qualifications they attract all provide important information about identity construction (ibid).

A pragmatic view of identity encompasses the interpretation of identity in late modernity where "traditional boundaries of many sorts are loosened and made available for more creative reworking" (Coupland, 2014: 256). By destabilizing traditional binaries of cultural homogeneity, the pragmatic perspective can help to explore the hybridity of identities and the underlying ideological factors that contribute to elderly people in news reports.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Questions
The study aims to address the following questions:

1) What identities of the elderly are constructed on Weibo in contexts of public health emergency?

2) What pragmatic strategies are adopted in constructing identities of the elderly on Weibo in contexts of public health emergency?

4.2. Data Description
Sina Weibo (simply Weibo in this study) is one of the most important Wemedia platforms in China. By March 2020, Weibo had 550 million monthly active users. Weibo has many similarities with Twitter, such as the word limit of 140 characters for each post, with pictures, videos, the 'addressivity'

function realised by the @ symbol, the function of replying, commenting, and reposting messages by users (Shen, 2019).

Data are collected from three Chinese Weibos *People's Daily* (the national newspaper), *WuhanChina*, the local government Weibo as well as *Voice of Elderly*, the one for the elderly (from January 21 to April 8[2]). There are 157 news texts concerning elderly people, 66 from *People's Daily*, 56 from *WuhanChina*, and 36 from *Voice of Elderly*.

4.3. Data Analysis

Following Yuan (2020), we take into account both the fixed properties and dynamic features of identity together. For the types of identity constructed in specific contexts, we resort to disparate reference process of labeling and other language choices made to explore various representations of elderly people. Identity attributes such as gender, age, physical condition, occupation, institution, residence, etc. are considered in contextualized identity analysis. Then, pragmatic strategies on the hybridity and complexity of old people's identities and social-cultural values are discussed.

5. Various Identities of the Elderly in Weibo News

References to people will almost always be linked with aspects of identity (Tracy and Robles, 2013: 74). This section analyzes the specific identities constructed through references and other language choices made when characterizing elderly people. Data analysis of 157 news texts reveals various identities constructed, for example: active fighters, generous donors, optimistic patients, encouragers, the elderly in need, confirmed (or dead) cases, non-cooperators in epidemic control and prevention. It is noteworthy that these identities do not exist alone, but display complexities within themselves or across different identities.

5.1. Active Fighters

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, doctors and nurses throughout the whole country are rushing to the epidemic-stricken city, Wuhan. These medical workers and volunteers are often portrayed as active fighters in fighting Covid-19.

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[2] On January 21 Covid-19 broke out in Wuhan and on April 8, Wuhan started lifting outbound travel restrictions.

(1)【感动！武汉86岁呼吸内科专家全副武装坐镇一线，笑称"我有粉丝啊"】

1月23日，武汉全城抗击肺炎。#武汉儿童医院呼吸内科，中国儿科医师终身成就奖获得者董宗祈主任全副武装坐镇一线。子女担心…，已经86岁高龄的他笑着安慰："我有粉丝啊！…" 武汉发布, 2020/1/23

[Touching! A fully-armed 86-year-old expert of Respiratory Medicine in Wuhan is seeing the patients. He smiled, "I have fans!"]

On January 23, the whole city of Wuhan is fighting against COVID-19. Dong Zongqi, director of Respiratory Medicine at Wuhan Children's Hospital and winner of Lifelong Achievement Award for Chinese Pediatrician is fully armed on the front line. His offspring were worried… The 86-year-old man smiled and comforted them: "I have fans! …." *WuhanChina*, 2020/1/23

In this example, the 86-year-old doctor is constructed as a fully-armed fighter in the pandemic war. The reference term in the headline highlights his age, place, major, expertise and his light mood. The word "fans" reveals the confidence and pride of the doctor, who regards himself as an idol of patients. In the news text, the doctor is given a lot of identity modifiers, such as "呼吸内科"(*respiratory department)*, "中国医师终身成就奖"(*the lifelong achievement award for Chinese Pediatrician)*, "86岁" (*86-year-old)*, and proper name, which strengthen his expertise and experience with a definite reference. While people over 80 are expected to receive help and care, in this example, the adverb"笑着"(with a smile) and speech act verb "安慰" (comfort) highlight Doctor Dong's competence and calm in offering professional help. In addition to medical workers, some elderly volunteers also act as active fighters, who are often given the agent roles and whose actions are described with positive verbs.

5.2. Generous Donors

In addition to professionals, who participate in the war directly, some ordinary people contribute to the fight indirectly. They donate money, masks or even promise to donate their body for medical research when they pass away. In the following example, the reference term and the speech act verbs work to indicate the elderly's occupation, competence and generosity.

(2)【环卫大爷派出所捐12000元转身就走，纸条留言：急转武汉】

31日，山东日照，一位头戴环卫帽子的大爷，来到东港公安分局西湖派出所，放下一个纸包就转身离开。派出所民警打开纸包，里边是1万2千元钱，一张纸条写着："急转武汉，为白衣天使加油，我的一点心意，东港环卫。" 人民日报, 2020/1/31

[Sanitation Grandpa donated 12,000 yuan at the police station and immediately left with a note: Urgency! To Wuhan.]

On the 31st, in Rizhao, Shandong, a grandpa in sanitation hat came to West Lake Police Station of Donggang Public Security, put down a paper bag and left. The police found 12,000 yuan in the bag and a note read: " Urgent transfer to Wuhan and cheer for the angel in white!...Donggang Sanitation." *People's Daily*, 2020/1/31

In this example, a new term "环卫大爷" (Sanitation Grandpa) is coined to refer to the elderly man, highlighting his occupation. Grandpa is given the agent role in the description, who donated money and left without words. The verb "捐" (donate) in the headline displays the old man's ability to help others. "东港环卫 (Donggang Sanitation) with which the note was signed makes his donation institutional instead of being personal. Grandpa's immediate leaving also shows his insistence, with no chance to be refused.

5.3. Warm-Hearted Encouragers

As patients, elderly people in hospital are usually taken care of by doctors and nurses. However, they also serve to offer comfort, encouragement or care to doctors and nurses, which can be represented by different reference terms and speech act verbs.

(3)【转发这一幕！抗美援朝老兵和医护人员互敬军礼】

抗美援朝老兵张兆堂，因新冠肺炎住进武汉火神山医院后，身上还带着最珍惜的立功证书和老照片。治疗期间，张爷爷敬礼鼓励医护人员，说"你们都立功！"医护人员回敬军礼，说"是爷爷先立了功，给我们做了榜样！"网友：薪火相传！为你们点赞！老年之声, 2020/3/4

【Retweet it! A veteran and medical staff salute each other】

Zhang Zhaotang, a veteran of Korean War, still carried his precious certificates of merit and old photos when he was treated in Wuhan Huoshenshan Hospital. Grandpa Zhang saluted and encouraged medical workers, "All of you are making contributions!" Medical workers saluted back, saying: "Grandpa had made contributions earlier, setting a example for us!" Netizens: "Such spirit has been passed down from generation to generation! Thumb up for you!" *Voice of Elderly*, 2020/3/4

In the headline, two reference terms "老兵"（veteran） and "医护人员" (medical staff) are put together as both subject and agent, indicating their equality. When Grandpa Zhang saluted and encouraged medical workers,

"你们都立功[3]" (You are making contributions), medical staff saluted back, "Grandpa made contributions earlier...!", which confirms grandpa's identity as "senior contributors". Usually people who can offer encouragement and compliments are powerful, competent and experienced. The patient identity is backgrounded to parallel the contributions to the country made by both veterans and doctors. A quote from a netizen "薪火相传" (passing on the cause) indirectly puts Grandpa as the predecessor and medical workers as the younger generation within the same group of contributors.

5.4. Optimistic Patients

Some elderly people, though being infected and treated in hospital, are trying to be cooperative with optimism in fighting the disease. They, as patients, encourage each other and share with other patients the experience of getting well and being cured.

(4) 【暖💗#火神山86岁患者和老伴的约定#】

火神山医院感染三科一病区86岁的患者杨爷爷，一直惦记住在另一家医院的老伴，可...护士们就当起"电话信使"。电话里传出奶奶乐观坚定的声音："早日康复，我们夫妻双双把家还！向90岁奋斗，向100岁进军！"加油，祝福💗武汉发布，2020/2/28

[The heart-warming appointment between the 86-year-old patient in Huoshenshan Hospital and his wife].

Grandpa Yang, an 86-year-old patient in Ward One of Infection Division Three in Huoshenshan Hospital, had been concerned about his wife, who was in another hospital, but .... The nurses became "phone messengers". The grandmother's optimistic voice came out, "We will get well soon!... We will live to be 90, fighting for 100! " Come on, best wishes 💗. WuhanChina, 2020/2/28

This news is about the elderly couple's happy appointment. In both the headline and the news body, Grandpa Yang is described as an 86-year-old patient. With the help of the nurses, he got encouragement from his wife: "We will get well soon ..." The grandma's optimistic voice and the couple's appointment give confidence to each other, to medical workers as well as the anxious public. The heart symbol 💗 at the beginning and the end strengthens this sense. Elderly people are often considered easily infected for their physical weakness. News that some patients, especially the elderly group, are cured, conveys the positive message that virus is not

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[3] "敬礼" and "立功"are usually used in military discourse.

that terrible. In this situation, patients' good mood is infectious and being cured means being a victory.

5.5. Elderly People in Need

Elderly people are often regarded as weak physically and psychologically. When they are described as people in need, they are often given a special reference label and regarded as the passive patient.

(5)【独居老人说民警是她的精神支柱】

每隔一两天，...中南警务站站长刘俊，都会去看望76岁的独居老人李婆婆。...疫情发生后，刘俊警官担心老人无法自理，经常...在老人心里："他是朋友，也是精神支柱。"老年之声，2020/2/24

【An elderly person living alone says the policeman is her spiritual support】

Every day or two, Liu Jun, the chief of Central South police station, ... comes to visit the 76-year-old Grandma Li who lives alone. ...Officer Liu is worried that the elderly lady cannot take care of herself after the outbreak of epidemic, so he often .... In grandma Li's eye, "He is not only a friend, but also a spiritual support for me." *Voice of Elderly*, 2020/2/24

The elderly woman is nominated as "独居老人" (elderly person living alone) to put her as a member of the group in need, not only for material help, but for spiritual support. The reference term "76岁的独居老人李婆婆" (Grandma Li, a 76-year-old person living alone) makes salient "age" and "living alone", with only her surname given, while the policeman who offers help is given the full name. Elderly people are often put as the grammatical object or semantic patient to describe their passive roles who need love and care.

5.6. Confirmed or Dead Cases

When elderly people are confirmed, treated in hospital, but finally fail to be cured, they become a member of the unfortunate group. In contrast to being cured, being confirmed or dead is always discouraging.

(6)【#天津现首例死亡病例#，#天津公布首例死亡病例抢救措施#】

2月5日凌晨，天津一名新型冠状病毒肺炎确诊病例出现...，为天津首例死亡病例。死亡病例为第50例患者，女，66岁，天津市宝坻区人...人民日报，2020/2/5

【#The first death case in Tianjin# #Tianjin announced rescue measures for the first death case#】

On the early morning of February 5, a confirmed case of Covid-19 in Tianjin developed the syndrome of .... The patient was ... the first death

case in Tianjin. The death case was the 50ᵗʰ patient, female, 66 years old, from Baodi District… *People's Daily*, 2020/2/5

This example highlights the basic information of the elderly woman as a confirmed and dead case, without other personal information. The headline highlights her being the first death case in Tianjin. The news body gives further information, the 50th case within the confirmed group. The ordinal numbers "首例" and "第50例" serve to strengthen their group identities. Then, other information about gender, age and residence, etc. is given.

5.7. Non-Cooperators

Some elderly people, not realizing the seriousness of virus, do not wear masks, nor report the information when they or their family are infected with the disease. They are often constructed as non-cooperators.

(7) 【高科技！#无人机喊话<u>老奶奶</u>戴口罩#，不要乱跑😁】

无人机：<u>老奶奶</u>别看了，这是<u>咱们村</u>的无人机啊！你不戴口罩就不要出去不要乱跑~<u>咱们村</u>这么多人说你都说不过，非得派无人机飞你。网友：请过来飞一下我爷爷，谢谢！ 人民日报**2020/1/29**

【High-technology！#The drone called out an old grandma to wear a mask#, don't go around😁】

The drone: Stop looking, grandma! This is our village's drone. If you don't wear a mask, please don't go around. So many people in our village can't persuade you that we must send a drone to remind you. Netizens comment: Please send a drone here to urge my grandpa! *People's Daily* 2020/1/29

In this example, "老奶奶" (elderly Grandma) is used to construct a naughty family member, warned by an inanimate drone to wear a mask. Employing a mysterious hi-tech product is a humorous way of disciplining elderly people who do not observe the rules. "咱们村" (our village), with the tone of neighbors, works to mitigate the warning tone. The emoticon 😁 in the headline, which conveys a sense of self-mockery, functions to weaken the seriousness of discipline. For serious non-cooperators who intentionally conceal the infection with the disease, their personal identities are usually obscured with reference terms like "Surname+mou" or put as agents of negative verbs.

Among the seven types of identities constructed, the first three types are positive-oriented, while the final two types are negative-oriented, the fourth and the fifth stand in between. More positive identities tend to be represented as definite and specific through proper names and positive

modifiers and portrayed as agent roles of positive verbs, while more negative identities tend to be represented as indefinite, general or hidden and portrayed as patient roles or with negative verbs.

6. Pragmatic Strategies of Constructing the Elderly in Weibo News

Identities are complexes of meaning potential, waiting to be triggered or activated or made salient under particular circumstances (Coupland, 2009: 855). They emerge only in relation to other identities within the contingent framework of interaction (*Bucholtz* & Hall, 2005: 605). When providing the identity information, the journalist often adopts some modifiers to expound on the relevant figures (Lee, 2010), to specify or strengthen a certain identity, obscure or conceal the identity involved. In this section, we focus on complex interactions among different identities, which involve identity modifications, identity associations, and identity shift and crossing.

6.1. Identity Modifications

The specificity of an entity is often a function of accompanying modifiers, increasing in degree with the elaboration of the details of its identifying attributes (cf, Chen, P. 2009: 1660). The consideration of all the accompanying identity information reveals the identity complexity of the elderly. The simplest reference contains one identity message, such as "old person", "Grandma", "patient", while the complex expression contains at least 2 identity messages, as the following example shows.

(8) 【98岁！#全国年龄最大危重症患者出院#】

3月1日上午，截至目前全国年龄最大的新冠肺炎危重症患者、98岁高龄胡汉英从武汉雷神山医院治愈出院。…。人民日报，2020/3/1

【98 years old! #The oldest critically ill patient nationwide is discharged from hospital #】

On March 1st morning, the oldest critically ill patient of covid-19 so far in China, Hu Hanying, aged 98, was cured and discharged from Wuhan Leishenshan hospital. …People's Daily, 2020/3/1

In this example, the reference term underlined contains 23 Chinese characters, 7 identity messages, as "全国"（nationwide）, "年龄最大"（the oldest）, "新冠肺炎"（Covid-19）, "危重症"（critically ill）, "患者"（patient）, "98岁"（98-year-old）, "高龄"(senior), among which three phrases highlight the age, three are related to the patient identity, one about the place. All the modifiers work together to construct a round character with more identity information instead of a flat one with a single identity and the proper name makes the identity specifiable.

Chinese noun phrases tend to put modifiers before head nouns, making the reference very long. The frequently used reference terms are structured like "武汉87岁婆婆" (87-year-old grandma in Wuhan), "87岁抗美援朝老兵"(a 87-year-old veteran who participated in Korean war), etc. From cognitive perspective, salient aspects of identity are often selected as modifiers of noun phrases especially in headlines to get attention from readers.

6.2. Identity Associations

Discursive constructions of age identity occur in association with other identities, and certain identities get foregrounded, such that one identity gets privileged over another (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2007), which, in contrast, is backgrounded. Another possibility is juxtaposing two or more identities to form a contrast. In this section, identity foregrounding, backgrounding or contrasting are discussed to explore the identity associations between different individuals/groups.

6.2.1 Foregrounding

Cognitively speaking, more important or positive individuals or groups are often given more attention and more salient description. Identity foregrounding means a certain identity intentionally mentioned or highlighted when unnecessary (Chen, 2018:123). In this study, it mainly involves identity comparions of two individuals or groups, as the following example illustrates.

(9)【连续7天没回家 60岁老医生坐楼道吃饭感动网友】

1月31日晚，一张两鬓斑白的医生坐在楼道吃饭的图片出现在朋友圈，令不少网友感动不已。图片上的这位医生叫朱少华，今年60岁，是江夏区中医医院的一名内科主任。新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情发生后，朱少华与该院200多名医护人员在请战书上签下自己的名字，主动要求到临床一线。 武汉发布, 2020/2/2

【Not having gone home for 7 days, a 60-year-old doctor eating in the corridor moved netizens】

On the evening of January 31, a photo of a doctor with gray hair sitting and eating in the corridor in Wechat moments moves numerous netizens. The doctor in the photo is called Zhu Shaohua, aged 60, is a chief physician of internal medicine department at Jiangxia Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine. After the outbreak of Covid-19, Zhu Shaohua and over 200 medical staff in the hospital signed their names on the petition, volunteering for frontline work. WuhanChina, 2020/2/2

This news foregrounds "60岁老医生" (a 60-year-old doctor), with grey hair, eating in the corridor, in sharp contrast to "不少网友" (quite a

few netizens) as a nameless, fuzzy group. In a similar way, the doctor as an individual specified through proper name is highlighted against over 200 doctors/nurses in volunteering for frontline work. In this manner, a heroic doctor is constructed among the medical group. Usually, the model or those worthy of more attention among a group are foregrounded; in fighting against pandemic, active fighters, warm-hearted volunteers, and the eldest, the critically ill patient are more salient and given more attention.

6.2.2 Backgrounding

Backgrounding or shadowing strategy is often used to eliminate or weaken a certain identity (Chen, 2018: 125). In news reports about negative events as breaking rules (Xu, 2013) or heavy illness or infections (Liu, 1996), the identity is often obscured through "Surname + mou/moumou[4]" or other generic nouns, because the focus is on the event, instead of the person concerned.

(10) 【#91岁高龄的新冠肺炎治愈患者出院#】

2月7日上午，<u>91岁高龄的新冠肺炎患者王某</u>从宜昌市第三人民医院出院，这是目前年龄最大的治愈患者。"老人家属于早诊断、早治疗的受益者。"<u>宜昌市新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎医疗救治专家组组长、市三医院副院长杜德兵介绍，患者</u>…武汉发布, 2020/2/7

【A 91-year-old senior patient with Covid-19 is cured and discharged from hospital】

On the morning of Feb 7th, <u>Wang Mou</u>, a 91-year-old senior patient with Covid-19 is discharged from The Third People's Hospital in Yichang. This is the oldest patient cured to date. "The old person benefits from earlier diagonosis…" introduced by <u>Du Debing, head of the rescue expert group of Covid-19 in Yichang, Deputy director of The Third Hospital in Yichang</u>… WuhanChina, 2020/2/7

The news adopts the reference "91岁高龄的新冠肺炎患者王某" (Wang Mou, a 91-year-old elderly patient with Covid-19), which highlights the information about age and disease but without giving full name, while the doctor is given a lot of authoritative identity information as well as proper name. The patient is backgrounded in contrast to the doctor in this doctor-patient dichotomy; the purpose is to introduce the process of treatment. When old people are constructed as patients in need of care, usually their age and disease are highlighted, other identity attributes backgrounded, while in contrast, doctors and nurses who offer treatment and help are often given specific and definite references.

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[4] See Jin Yingzhe & Chen Xinren (2020) on Mouren in Chinese as a definite reference.

6.2.3 Identity Contrasting

Social identity is also constructed within discourses of dichotomy, such as young–old, male–female, professional–non-professional, and so forth (Pain 2001). In this study, elderly people are often put in parallel with other groups to form different kinds of dichotomies.

(11) 【"90后"照顾"90后"我光荣！】

...有一家妇幼保健院收治了一批特殊的"90后"，他们都是九十多岁、甚至是百岁老人，而救治、照顾他们的大多是二十多岁的年轻"90后"医护人员。...老年之声，**2020/3/5**

【"Post 90s" are looking after "Post 90s". My honor!】

...A group of "post 90s", in their 90es or 100s, are admitted **to a** maternal and child health hospital and are treated and looked after by young post 90s in their 20s. ... Voice of Elderly, 2020/3/5

In this example, both young medical workers and elderly patients are nominated as "90后" (post-90s) to form an identity contrast. The term "90后" is ambiguous in referring to both young people born in the 1990s and the elderly who are in their 90s. Through the same reference, the doctor-patient dichotomy gives way to solidarity between two generations.

(12) 【94岁母亲举报65岁女儿打麻将】

近日，...袁婆婆的女儿将自家麻将馆的门锁起来，让人偷偷在里面打麻将，94岁的袁婆婆发现后立即向村干部举报。经批评教育，65岁女儿认识到问题的严重性，主动加入到防控疫情的志愿服务中。网友：硬核版《听妈妈的话》。老人之声，**2020/2/21**

【A 94-year-old mother reported her 65-year-old daughter playing mahjong】

Recently, when noticing that her daughter locked the door of their mahjong room so as to secretly play mahjong inside, the 94-year-old granny Yuan immediately reported to the village. After criticism, the 65-year-old daughter realized her serious mistake and volunteered to join the service for epidemic prevention and control. Netizens: hardcore version of "*listen to your mom*". Voice of Elderly, 2020/2/21

In this example, the title highlights an identity contrast between "94-year-old mother" and "65-year-old daughter" through the "reporting" act. In a pandemic-stricken situation, the mother-daughter relationship gives way to the reporter-reported relationship. The 94-year-old mother, an active fighter, seriously follows the rules of control and prevention against Covid-19, while the 65-year-old daughter just played. This identity contrast also stimulates the stereotypical relationship between an anxious mother and a rebellious daughter in Chinese family. The quote from netizens echoes this contrast: *Listen to mom*!

6.3. Identity Shift and Crossing

Identity is shifting dynamically within ongoing discourse or chronologically with the change of reporting purpose. As Bucholtz & Hall (2005: 606) says, "Any given construction of identity ... is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts". The following two examples illustrate the identity shift in the current situation or across different contexts.

(13) 【保持好心态！武汉#方舱医院<u>医生患者</u>一起打太极拳#：<u>患者大爷</u>带头教】

9日，湖北武汉。上午约9点，国际会展中心方舱医院内的<u>医护人员和部分患者</u>一起打起太极拳，带队的是<u>一个患者大爷</u>。...<u>网友</u>：心态好，一切好❤武汉发布，2020/2/10

【Be positive! Medical staff and patients are playing taiji in Wuhan Makeshift hospital-Grandpa patient is teaching】

On Feb 9, Wuhan, Hubei. Medical staff and patients are playing taiji in makeshift hospital built at the international conference and exhibition centre about nine o 'clock in the morning, with a "grandpa patient". ... Netizens: everything is good when you are in a good mood. ❤ WuhanChina，2020/2/10

In the headline, "医生" (doctors) and "患者"(patients) are put together with an identity contrast. The stereotypical doctor-patient division is eliminated in this makeshift hospital when they are playing Taiji together. Moreover, the elderly patient, who is usually in the weak position, now is shifting to take the lead in this new group temporarily formed, which presupposes that Chinese elderly are experienced in playing Taiji. This is a group with love and strength, appealing to more medical workers and patients. The cooperation between doctors and patients will surely defeat the pandemic war.

In example (14), the construction of the elderly person is shifting in different news reports chronologically.

(14) a 【#2020最治愈的瞬间#，刻骨铭心！】

3月5日，武汉大学人民医院东院,上海援鄂医疗队刘凯医生在护送<u>病人</u>做CT途中，特意停下来，让已经住院近1个月的<u>87岁老先生</u>欣赏了一次久违的日落。...人民日报，2020/3/5

[The warmest scene in 2020! Unforgettable!]

On March 5, at Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University, Liu Kai, a doctor from Shanghai assisting medical team, stopped for <u>the 87-year-old man, who has been in hospital for one month,</u> to enjoy the sunset on their way back from a CT scan. ... *People's Daily, 2020/3/5*

b【*#看夕阳老人*拉了曲送别#】

因为一张躺在病床上看夕阳的照片，87岁的新冠肺炎患者王欣受到了
很多关注。...为感谢上海和成都的医疗队员，今天，王欣又站在夕阳下拉了
一曲《送别》。**人民日报, 2020/4/7**

[The old person who watched the sunset plays "Departing"]

For a photo of enjoying the sunset, Wang Xin, a 87-year-old patient of Covid-19 has been given a lot of attention. ...To extend gratitude to Shanghai medical team and Chengdu medical team, Wang Xin is playing the violin "Departing" in the setting sun. People's Daily, 2020-4-7

From March 5 to April 7, a series of reports are given on the elderly person, whose identity is shifting from a passive patient lying in bed to an active artist playing the violin for the medial team. In (14a), the elderly man is portrayed as "病人" and "住院近一个月的87岁老先生" (a 87-year-old man in hospital for one month), who enjoys the sunset with the help and care offered by the doctor. In (14b), the elderly man playing the violin is given the definite reference. Along with the recovery, the portrayal of the elderly man is becoming healthy, competent and specified. This identity shift is accomplished through different references - a bare noun "病人" (patient), an indeterminate noun phrase "赏日落老人[5]" (an old person watching the sunset), and finally, a definite noun phrase "87岁的新冠肺炎患者王欣" (Wang Xin, the 87-year-old patient with Covid-19).

Coupland (2014: 247) mentions a creative means by which individuals or groups fashion identities for themselves, "crossing", where speakers invoke apparently outgroup speech norms and rework them. Identity shift and crossing is echoing another concept "hybridity", developed in post-colonial theory (Ashcroft, et al., 1998). In representing the third party, identity crossing also occurs. In this paper, identity shift and crossing functions to eliminate the division between different groups, or to reverse the relationship between different groups. Identity construction of elderly people in Weibo news demonstrates the diversification and hybridity instead of stereotypical description.

7. Conclusion

In contexts of public health emergency, elderly people are constructed as more positive-oriented with definite reference than negative with indefinite or obscure reference, but not categorized in polarized terms of

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[5] This phrase is taken from another report during the recovery, which is omitted for limited space.

'Us' and 'Them'. Identities construction of elderly people exhibit a distinct feature of hybridity and heterogeneity through the pragmatic strategies of identity modifications, identity associations, identity shift and crossing. Many elderly people, the stereotypically weak, become competent contributors, instead of being a burden, when the pandemic disease is striking the whole country. This finding is different from previous studies in that the vigilance-based principle of the negativity bias (Jing-Schmidt & Jing, 2011; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) does not beset China's Weibo news in this context, where readers have been expecting good news rather than negative ones.

This is related to the nature of China's journalism, the health emergency as a kind of "disaster", and the ideological notion of Chinese family culture (Chen, 2019). Chinese journalists are asked to 'contact the people', 'be close to people's sentiments', and 'speak for the people' (Guo & Li, 2012). In reporting the pandemic situations, journalists tend to be sympathetic with elderly people, regarding them as family members. Besides, the values of "filial piety", or "respect for elders" etc. are deeply rooted in the Confucian teachings that have helped to shape East Asian cultures (Sung, 2001). As the easily infected group, the elderly are expected to be given the top priority. If they can be cured, the public can have more confidence. Different from the "conflict" frame to add drama to the news story (Nussbaum & Coupland，2004: 385), the media frame "nation is family", influenced by Chinese ideology of "close like one family" (Chen, 2019), is adopted in Weibo news reports on elderly people in public health emergency situations. Chinese Weibo news reports follow Guterres (2020) and aim to "respect the rights and dignity of older people" and "to build more inclusive, sustainable and age-friendly societies".

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