

Beyond Romance: An Interview-Based Study of Neological Terms of Reference for Intimate Partners in Mandarin Chinese

Recent research has shown that terms of reference for intimate partners in Mandarin Chinese are undergoing increasing diversification, reflecting broader social and cultural transformations (Nin, 2023; Lee 2020). Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of social meaning and pragmatic inference (Eckert, 2019; Beltrama, 2020; Acton & Hunt, 2025), this study examines the emerging use of three pre-existing relational terms 搭子 dazi ‘buddy’, 队友 duiyou ‘teammate’ and 室友 shiyou ‘roommate’ as neologism to refer to intimate partners among young Mandarin speakers. Here are examples taken from Weibo:

- (1) 带娃看电影，娃说害怕，队友带娃回家了¹
‘(We) took the kid to watch a movie. The kid said he was scared, so my partner took the kid home’
- (2) 我家室友说话真的是难听，心拔凉拔凉，家里三个娃，连一块尿片都没有换过。周末休息就和他朋友去钓鱼，一钓鱼就是一天²
‘My partner really has a nasty way of talking—cold enough to break your heart. Three kids at home, and he hasn’t even changed a single diaper. On weekends, he just goes fishing with his friends, and once he goes, it’s the whole day gone’
- (3) 晚上一进家门，带娃搭子眯着眼（八成是偷闲补觉）躺在沙发上，妹崽举着小听诊器认真给她爹“体检”，哥哥在旁边安安静静做手工³
‘As soon as I walked in the door that evening, my co-parenting partner was lying on the couch with his eyes half-closed (probably sneaking in a quick nap). Our little girl was holding up a toy stethoscope, seriously giving her dad a ‘check-up,’ while her older brother quietly worked on his crafts nearby’

These terms, which do not conventionally belong to the semantic domain of romance, represent a marked departure from more established referring expressions towards intimate partners. Based on semi-structured interview data of 14 participants, this study investigates how speakers interpret these terms and the social meanings they index in contexts of romantic relationship.

Thematic analysis identifies four interrelated processes: functionalizing, de-romanticizing, blurring, and egalitarianization. These processes point to a reconfiguration of intimacy in which relationships are increasingly organized around practical coordination, negotiated responsibility, and social risk management rather than affective intensity or normative romantic commitment (Hull et al, 2010). The findings demonstrate that neological relational terms are not merely descriptive alternatives but sociolinguistic resources through which speakers recalibrate intimacy, obligation, and equality in contemporary Mandarin Chinese.

Keywords: terms of reference; social meaning; intimacy; sociolinguistic; neologism

¹ <https://weibo.com/3196971331/5238426685410641>

² <https://weibo.com/7882984961/5053238850094270>

³ <https://weibo.com/7372860504/5238402226062841>