Chinese L2 users as active social agents: Sentence final particles variation and identities

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This study investigated the sociolinguistic pragmatic performance of eight advanced Chinese learners from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on the variable appearance versus absence of Mandarin sentence final particles (SFPs) in non-interrogative sentences. These learners participated in a Chinese TV talk show and have become popular on social media platforms. The speech data from the talk show (400 tokens) and online data from Chinese social media platform Weibo (400 tokens) were collected and analyzed. These Chinese L2 users productively demonstrated variation in their use of SFPs in non-interrogative sentences, in that they added SFPs to a sentence in around 20% of variable contexts. Rbrul (logistic regression) analyses revealed that the variable presence of SFPs was conditioned by their duration of time spent in China and gender-related personalities. Follow-up case analyses explored how they made use of SFPs in different situations and how they were received by other participants. The study found that these Chinese L2 users became active social agents who made decisions to shift styles in different contexts or to strengthen their identities. The results are discussed within a broader context of identity, language socialization, and L2 social agency. This study also attempts to offer pedagogical implications for the acquisition of Chinese SFPs.

Keywords: variationist sociolinguistics, L2 variation, Chinese sentence final particles, L2 pragmatics, identity

1. Introduction

Sentence final particles, referred to as SFPs hereafter, are bound morphemes that are attached to the end of sentences, serving to indicate speech act, evidentiality, and emotion coloring (Law, 1990; Matthews & Virginia, 1994; Wu, 2004). Chinese native speakers typically are not consciously aware of the rules they follow in their

use of SFPs; however, they will naturally be conscious of the speakers' intention or emotion through SFPs. Apart from "ma (吗)" and "ne (呢)," which can be obligatory for marking interrogative sentences, the use of SFPs in a declarative/imperative/exclamatory sentence is not mandatory; however, it can convey the speaker's affective stance and establish common affective ground in a given context. The presence or absence of SFPs in a non-interrogative sentence may convey the same meanings but with different emotions or pragmatic functions. Example (1) below tells the fact that the book is expensive, while (2) may be used after the speaker had just checked the price of the book and felt very surprised about the high price; (2) can also be used to create common affective ground for exclaiming the high price of the book. The use and non-use of the SFP "a (啊)" here will not change the meaning of the sentence. However, its presence will provide different pragmatic functions by adding emotions and attitudes into the context.

(1)   zhèběnshūhěnguì
这本书很贵。
This book is expensive.

(2)   zhèběnshūhěnguì   ā
这本书很贵啊!
(Oh,) this book is so expensive! **a** (SFP)!

For non-native speakers of Chinese, acquiring SFPs is highly challenging. First, the rules of using SFPs properly in conversation are not clearly addressed in Chinese language classroom instruction. Second, SFPs are highly complicated, elusive, and dynamic based on context and the speakers' intentions and backgrounds. Third, many learners do not have opportunities to immerse themselves in a Chinese environment to interact with native speakers and, thereby, lack the exposure needed to understand or distinguish the unexpressed meanings or emotions behind SFPs. Therefore, to facilitate the dynamic and strategic use of SFPs in relation to sociocultural factors, a language-rich context and societal interactions, in addition to instruction, are needed. Societal interactions are structured by the sociocultural norms of communities and are not easy to replicate in foreign language classrooms.

Foreign language learners who do not have the opportunity to interact with native speakers of the language face more challenges in acquiring these SFPs. Therefore, studying abroad provides learners with opportunities to interact in natural settings with the host country's speakers (Diao, 2014; Kinginger, 2013; Taguchi, 2016). With recent globalization and immigration trends, along with advancements in technology, language learners now have more opportunity to develop their target language incidentally "in the wild" through cybercommunication, playing online games, or sojourning in the target culture for work-related pur-

poses. However, a point to note would be that incidental language development has not been sufficiently studied. The present study focuses on the use of Chinese SFPs in non-interrogative sentences by L2 users outside of classrooms. This article explores whether and how advanced L2 users are socialized into becoming active agents who make decisions on using SFPs based on macro- and micro-social factors (Terkourafi, 2012), including geographical locations in China (north/south), duration of time lived in China, and gender-related personality traits. The following linguistic factors are also included in the data analysis: the existence of SFPs in their L1s (yes/no) and communication mode (oral speech/social media written language).

In what follows, I first review the research on SFPs acquisition and second language socialization. I then explain the use of variationist sociolinguistics for analyzing L2 sociopragmatic performance. Next, I describe the data and methods used in the present study. By discussing the findings of the active sociopragmatic variation performance of advanced Chinese L2 users, the study can improve our understanding of the acquisition of sociopragmatic function of SFPs. The pedagogical implications of Chinese SFPs acquisition are also explored in the study.

2.   Literature review

2.1   Previous research on SFPs and acquisition of SFPs

Chinese sentence final particles are clitics located at the end of a sentence and are considered as phrase suffixes (Chao, 1968; Sun, 2006). Rather than carrying any referential meaning of their own, these are often used to signal the epistemic or affective attitude of a speaker toward the utterance (Wu, 2004). The most common and studied functions of SFPs are *ba* (吧) "suggest," *a* (啊) "asserting," *ma* (吗)and *ne* (呢) "question marker," *me* (么) "topic marker" and "sharing," and *o* (哦) "friendly warning." Yet, the specific characterizations of the function of each particle are still open to dispute. Moreover, more and more SFPs are created and widely used nowadays in daily life and across social media platforms. Some scholars argue that these particles typically occur in informal or colloquial speech (Lee-Wong, 1998; Sun, 2006). By collecting subtitles from contemporary Chinese TV shows in China and Taiwan, Shei (2014) analyzed and detailed several more SFPs currently in use, such as *ye* (耶) "expressing surprise" and *bei* (呗) "marker of light-heartedness." In an era increasingly defined by digital communication, mass media and social media have become the seedbed of new SFPs and new functions of SFPs, making the SFPs system even more dynamic and networked.

The variety of pragmatic functions of SFPs – such as expressing affect, stance, softening the force of an utterance, adding emphasis, and adding surprise – have led scholars to recognize the importance of Chinese SFPs for research and language acquisition. In addition, they also carry regional differences and emerging meanings associated with gender. Some SFPs (e.g., "ye (耶)," "la (啦)," and "me (么)") are semiotically linked to a more feminine personality. For example, women in Taiwan use SFPs to infantilize themselves in a bid to persuade listeners (Chuang, 2005). Today this style has spread all over China and the frequent use of SFPs is associated with a more feminine "lady-like" speech. Regional factors also play a part in the frequency of the appearance of SFPs. The frequency of SFPs use is higher in southern Mandarin Chinese (Callier, 2007). Thus, the use of SFPs also has caused region-associated stereotypes. For example, the northern part of China is ideologically associated with being more masculine or even macho, while the people of southern China are associated with being more feminine or cute. Hence, these SFPs can be considered as sociolinguistic variables.

The pragmatic importance of Chinese SFPs in spoken discourse dictates the indispensable role of the acquisition of SFPs in the development of interactional competence (Maynard, 1989). Unfortunately, many textbooks or curricula fail to offer explicit instructions and pragmatic explanations of SFPs. A few studies have been conducted on the acquisition of SFPs, most of which focus on Chinese SFPs acquisition in classroom learning and heritage learners (Taguchi, Zhang, & Li, 2017; Yang, 2013). For example, Yang (2013) investigated the acquisition of SFPs at different levels of language proficiency and between heritage and non-heritage students in a classroom setting. The findings show that heritage learners performed better than non-heritage learners. In another study, also with a focus on heritage learners' SFPs acquisition, Taguchi et al. (2017) found that the amount of social contact varied greatly among heritage learners, and this variation was a major indicator of their SFPs competence. Fewer studies have explored the acquisition of SFPs outside of the classroom. In particular, Diao (2014) studied how students become socialized into using SFPs as gendered linguistic practices in dorm conversations during their study abroad sojourn. She found that those students engaged in using SFPs to index gender and their learning experiences were greatly shaped by how their gendered use of SFPs was received and reacted to by other interlocutors in their language socialization process.

2.2 Expanding second language socialization

Research on L2 learning has been shifting from focusing only on students' linguistic gains to paying more attention to the language socialization process (Kramsch, 1993). One of the most important categories during the language socialization

process is identity (Diao, 2014; Kinginger, 2013; Lam, 2004, 2009). In study abroad contexts, Kinginger (2013) studied the role of identity in L2 French students' sojourns abroad, including variables such as nationality/"foreigner" status, gender, linguistic heritance, age, and ethnicity. She concluded that the learning experience of L2 learners during study abroad depends on whether they were able to negotiate identity, how they evaluated the performance of identity in different contexts, how they were positioned by others, and which elements of language they chose to incorporate into their own language repertoires. Similarly, Diao (2014) focused particularly on gender identities by analyzing naturally-occurring dorm conversations during study abroad in China. Students' learning and language socialization experiences were greatly shaped by how their use of SFPs was received by native speakers as gendered linguistic practices.

In online contexts, which have attracted a growing body of research in computer-mediated communication, the importance of identity has also been recognized by scholars. Learners are viewed as engaged and authentic members of society – not just as L2 learners – and the virtual world offers them opportunities to extend their identities and observe how they are positioned by their online interlocutors (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lam, 2004, 2009). For example, Lam (2004) studied how two Chinese immigrants socialized their English practice in an online bilingual chatroom. By analyzing L2 users' online practices, she found that L2 users were engaged in the practices of English that were related to group formation, identity, and socialization. There is an emergence of viewing the Internet as a valuable research site to investigate second language socialization and the importance of understanding L2 users' identity construction during language socialization in both physical and digital contexts.

Opportunities offered by language socialization in face-to-face contexts include being able to observe first-hand how the language is used, to use the language, and to observe how one is positioned by others in subsequent interactions (Iwasaki, 2010; Taguchi, 2016). In order to further investigate and certify the opportunities provided by second language socialization in both face-to-face contexts and digital spaces, I collected and analyzed data from both physical and digital language socialization contexts to gain more insight into the sociolinguistic aspect of language acquisition.

2.3   Sociopragmatic competence and variationist sociolinguistics

Variationist SLA theory has been used in investigating the acquisition of native speaker norms of language use by L2 learners (e.g., van Compernolle, Williams, & McCourt, 2011; Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2010). Early studies of interlanguage variation focused on the L2 variation between a non-native form and a

native form (Adamson, 1980, 1988; Huebner, 1985; Tarone, 1988). A more recent strand of variationist research tends to focus on the L2 variation between two native forms (Adamson, 2009). In other words, the focus has been shifted from the acquisition of the categorical rules of L2 to the ability to make pragmatic choices according to certain social factors. From a variationist sociolinguistics perspective, sociolinguistic competence includes knowledge of how forms and structures vary under specific internal (e.g., phonological, morphosyntactic) and external (e.g., pragmatic, regional) conditions (van Compernolle & Williams, 2012). Scholars have suggested that variationist methods could be used in investigating L2 pragmatic development, with a specific focus on the influence of external social variables such as age, gender, location, and formality (Barron, 2005; Clyne, 2006; Terkourafi, 2012; van Compernolle & Williams, 2012). Additionally, variationist sociolinguistics can contribute to second language teaching by discovering social, pragmatic principles that govern the use of linguistic variables (Adamson, 2009; Mougeon et al., 2010).

A recent volume on pragmatic variation in first and second language contexts (Koike & Félix-Brasdefer, 2012) has offered new insights into the field of pragmatic variation. There is a call to extend the variationist methodology to the level of pragmatic and discourse variation in the co-construction of meanings mediated by social factors that occur between the speaker and the listener (Terkourafi, 2012). It has been pointed out that both the speaker and the listener are socially-situated active participants in the negotiations of meaning. The present study adopts a mixed-methods approach (Koike & Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). The quantitative analysis focuses on the external social factors that impact the SFPs variation. For qualitative data, I analyze the SFPs variation practices at the discourse level, taking both speakers and interlocutors into consideration. The goal is not to conclude pragmatic variable rules of Chinese SFPs use. Instead, by looking at L2 users' SFPs variation both quantitatively and qualitatively, I intend to reflect on the factors which condition L2 users' learning of pragmatic variation for the benefit of educators who are looking to develop pedagogical materials and activities which take the acquisition of Chinese SFPs variation into consideration.

Previous literature on L1 Chinese SFPs variation provides the impetus for the current study. Due to different geographical environments, customs, and dialects, the Mandarin spoken in the south of China contains more SFPs than the Mandarin spoken in the north (Callier, 2007). Southern Mandarin is ideologically associated with being more feminine because the frequent use of several sentence-final particles is associated with women's talk (Farris, 1994; Chan, 1997). Gender is a frequently visited variable in L1 SFPs variation. According to Chang (2014), the average SFPs used by a Chinese female in every conversation is 2.1 compared to 1.8 for males. However, it has been noticed that the biological

gender difference in Chinese language use has been minimized in recent years due to a more open and tolerant social environment. It is not indicated that the gender-related differences in Chinese language use have disappeared. In fact, one could argue that nowadays, gender-related differences in Chinese language use are presented differently – through the self-presentation of gender-related personality traits. Masculine and feminine traits are two continuums with individual differences existing within gender groups (Dinella, Fulcher, & Weisgram, 2014; Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Thus, both gender groups could possess varying levels of a conjunction of both masculine traits and feminine traits (Spence & Buckner, 2000). Masculine traits reflect instrumental traits (such as independence and assertiveness) and feminine traits reflect expressive traits (such as sensitivity and kindness) (Spence, 1993). Such self-presentation of gender-typed personality can be constructed through language use. For example, a man can play a "ladylike" (娘) role in conversation by adding certain SFPs and a woman can also discard "girly language" to sound like a "tough girl" (女汉子). Additionally, as the modern Chinese-speaking society is becoming more open and accepting of the LGBTQ community, people feel more comfortable using language to express their constructed gender-related identities rather than biological sex differences.

As the participants of the present study are all males, there is no traditional biological sex category, as is often the case in research on language socialization. In this study, I divided the gender-related personality variable into two categories: feminine (one that shows a higher level of expressive traits) and masculine (one that shows a higher level of instrumental traits) based on their self-presentations in a talk show, social media interaction (through observation), and comments from the show audience and fan groups. For example, one subject is called "Madam Qian" (钱夫人) by his fans because he is very emotional when expressing his ideas, and he cries a lot on the show. Thus, I put him under the feminine category. Interestingly, another participant is called "Daddy Mu" (穆爹) by the audience because many of his opinions expressed in the show are a little macho, and he can be aggressive sometimes. Thus, I put him under the masculine category.

In summary, using a variationist perspective to investigate L2 SFPs variation informed by previous literature on L1 SFPs variation, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How often, if at all, do advanced Chinese language users add SFPs to a declarative sentence?

RQ2: How, if at all, does the place of residence in China influence the use of SFPs in declarative sentences?

RQ3: How, if at all, do gender-related personality traits influence SFPs presence in declarative sentences?

RQ4:   How, if at all, does the duration of time spent in China influence SFPs presence in declarative sentences?

RQ5:   How, if at all, does the SFPs existence in their native language favor or disfavor SFPs usage in declarative sentences?

RQ6:   How, if at all, does the mode of communication (conversation in talk show versus social media language) influence the use of SFPs in declarative sentences?

3.   Methods

3.1   Informal talks

The data for this study come from the conversations of Chinese L2 speakers who participated in *Informal Talks* (非正式会谈), a Chinese TV talk show, where they share their opinions on cultural issues and social topics through a debate in Chinese. Each episode begins with a culture discussion, for example, "dating in different cultures," followed by a discussion on social issues, where representatives from different countries can share their opinions on a certain topic (e.g., "does social media cause social isolation?"). The show has 2 million followers on its social media page (as of the end of 2017). Because of the popularity of the show as well as its rich conversation data from advanced Chinese L2 users, it was used as the primary site for data collection in order to explore advanced Chinese L2 users' sociopragmatic performance. In the present study, I targeted *Informal Talks* season 2 (2016), in which there were 11 representatives, all advanced male Chinese L2 speakers. I selected 8 of them because these 8 representatives had attended *Informal Talks* season 1 (2015). By the time of season 2, they all had had a large number of fans on their social media pages. Because the other 3 representatives were new in season 2 and their social media pages were not fully developed at the time, I chose to only focus on the 8 representatives. All the selected people were present for each episode in season 2. The 8 Chinese L2 users had presented their strong personalities in public and were given nicknames by their fans. The 8 L2 speakers included: Yoyo, a Japanese model, called "Uncle Yoyo" by the audience; Yi, a Korean singer with several tattoos who is called "Bro Yi" by the audience; Alistair, an Australian art student who is called "Little Bei" by the audience; James, a kindergarten teacher from Nigeria who is called "Madam Qian" by the audience; Alec, a marketing manager from Britain, called "Sweetie" by the audience; Vlad, a Russian actor and Kungfu student, called "Russian Warrior" by the audience; Mohammed, a journalist from Egypt, called "Daddy Mu" by the audience;

and Zach, an actor from the US with the least Chinese proficiency, called "Little Angel" by the audience.

3.2   Weibo.com

Weibo.com is one of the most popular social media platforms in China launched by the Sina Corporation with a market penetration similar to the US's Twitter. A user may post with a 140-character limit, mention or talk to other people using "@UserName," add hashtags with "#HashName#," and follow other users and comment on the posts. Each of the Chinese L2 users in this study had become very popular on this social media platform and had a fan club on Weibo. For example, one of the L2 users, "Madam Qian," had 560K followers and 540 entries on Weibo.com (as of 2017). The selected participants had an average follower number of 200K, with a maximum of 560K and a minimum of 170K (2017). They were very active on Weibo as they frequently interacted with their fans and shared their personal lives.

3.3   Data collection

For the purpose of the present study, I transcribed and collected conversation data from the talk show *Informal Talks* season 2 (8 episodes) and textual data from social media platform Weibo.com (posted in April and May 2017). All the data in this study were publicly available. There were 400 tokens of conversation data and 400 tokens of social media language data in total. All the interrogative sentences were excluded from data collection because the use of SFPs is grammatically mandatory in interrogative sentences. Focusing specifically on SFPs variation in non-interrogative sentences, the study attempts to relate these pragmatic variations with social categories rather than grammatical conventions. Thus, I transcribed the conversations, selected non-interrogative sentences from the transcripts, and sorted them under each participant until the units of conversation data of each participant reached 50. The same criteria and procedures were applied to the collection of social media data. For each subject, I collected the most recent 50 Weibo entries that contained a non-interrogative sentence (posted in April and May 2017). I recorded demographic information given by the 8 L2 users only to the extent that they provided such information (i.e., nationality, location) in their public profiles and in the talk show. A mixed-methods approach was used for analyzing the data. The transcripts of the 8 episodes of *Informal Talks* season 2 and replies of the collected entries were archived as a qualitative data source.

3.4 Statistical and qualitative procedures

A quantitative data analysis was performed before the qualitative data analysis. The variable rule program was used as a tool to analyze linguistic variation quantitatively (Tagliamonte, 2006). A variable rule program "evaluates the effects of multiple factors on a binary linguistic choice – the presence or absence of an element" (Johnson, 2009, p. 359). In this study, each token was identified and coded as either SFPs presence or SFPs absence. The variable rule program identifies which factors significantly affect the presence or absence of SFPs in non-interrogative sentences, in what direction and to what degree. GoldVarb is an often-used software for the variable rule program. However, many variation linguists have started to use the open-source statistical software environment R and the new program Rbrul designed to replicate the functionalities and factor-weight-based output of GoldVarb (Johnson, 2009). In the present study, all tokens were then coded for variable rule analysis using R (Rbrul). Rbrul performs the same functions of GoldVarb – multiple logistic regression – while presenting advantages over GoldVarb. For example, it simplifies the procedure of data input and supports continuous predictors and continuous responses (Johnson, 2009). In the present study, the SFPs present vs. absent variable was explored according to the participants' geographical locations in China (north/south), gender-related personality traits (feminine/masculine), duration of time spent in China (more than 5 years/ less than 5 years), SFPs existence in native language (yes/no), and communication mode (TV conversation/Weibo data). The gender-related personality traits were identified based on participants' performance on the talk show and publicly available comments from the audience and social media fan groups. A one-level coding was first conducted in Rbrul, which shows the probability of SFPs being present in a non-interrogative sentence with respect to these independent variables. A step-down analysis was then performed to see which variables were selected as statistically significant predictors that impact the SFPs variation. A factor weight less than or equal to 0.49 indicates that SFPs presence is disfavored while a factor weight greater than or equal to 0.5 means SFPs presence is favored. After the quantitative analysis, I decided to center the qualitative analysis around two participants – "Madam Qian" and "Daddy Mu." I selected these two because Madam Qian possessed the highest frequency of use of SFPs (33%) and Daddy Mu had a 17% rate of SFPs use, which was the lowest among all the participants. Additionally, Madam Qian, a male participant on the show, possessed a high level of feminine traits manifested through his performance on the talk show such as crying on the show, and through his nickname given by his fan club, "Madam," which shows incongruence with his biological sex. In the case of Daddy Mu, he presented a strong masculine image to the public due to some of his macho opinions

expressed in the talk show. Analysis of these two participants' SFPs performance situated in certain contexts and negotiated with other interlocutors revealed how they actively use SFPs as pragmatic devices to construct and negotiate moment-to-moment identities and to achieve different communicative needs.

4.   Results

4.1 Quantitative findings

The first one-level coding of the Rbrul analysis of the SFPs presence in the non-interrogative sentences considers geographical location, gender-related personality traits, time, SFPs existence in L1, and communication mode as independent variables. The results are presented below in Table 1. Based on the statistical analysis of frequencies and percentages, there was a tendency for these advanced L2 users to favor the usage of SFPs if they lived in the south of China, possessed more feminine traits, lived more than 5 years in China, had SFPs in their L1, and utilized online communication.

Table 1. Rbrul analysis: One-level

Factor	Number	Percentage (%)
Geographical Locations		
North	71/400	17.8
South	84/400	21.0
Gender-related Personality Traits		
Feminine	77/300	25.7
Masculine	78/500	15.6
Time in China		
More than 5 years	123/500	24.6
Less than 5 years	32/300	10.7
SFPs existence in L1		
Yes	41/200	20.5
No	114/600	19.0
Communication Mode		
Talk	71/400	17.8
Weibo	84/400	21.0
Total	**155/800**	**19.4**

A second coding of step-down analysis was conducted to find out the significant predictors of SFPs presence. The results are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Rbrul analysis: Step-down

Factor	n	%	FW	*p* value
Geographical Locations				*p > .05*
North	71/400	17.8	0.47	
South	84/400	21.0	0.53	
Gender-related Personality Traits				*p = .001*
Feminine	77/300	25.7	0.57	
Masculine	78/500	15.6	0.43	
Time in China				*p < .001*
More than 5 years	123/500	24.6	0.62	
Less than 5 years	32/300	10.7	0.38	
SFPs existence in L1				*p > .05*
Yes	41/200	20.5	0.54	
No	114/600	19.0	0.46	
Communication Mode				*p > .05*
Talk	71/400	17.8	0.47	
Weibo	84/400	21.0	0.53	

Note. FW refers to factor weight. Factor weight is an amount given to increase or decrease the importance of an item. A factor weight less than or equal to 0.49 indicates that SFPs presence is disfavored while a factor weight greater than or equal to 0.5 means SFPs presence is favored.

The data indicate first that these advanced L2 users productively demonstrated variation in their use of SFPs in declarative sentences, in that they added SFPs to a declarative sentence in 19.4% of variable contexts.

Second, geographical location, SFPs existence in L1, and communication mode were selected as non-significant factors in the variation, by the step-down analysis. Thus, there was a non-significant difference in SFPs use by geographic location, SFPs existence in L1, and communication mode. Possible explanations could be that, for the geographical location factor, the regional differences of language use are being reduced due to the promotion of "proper" Mandarin Chinese all over China. For the communication mode factor, due to the fact that "netspeaks" are "invading" daily language use in China, even in a formal setting, such as nation-wide news broadcast, one may also hear netspeak from a broadcaster. Such a phenomenon may predict a trend of language cyberization in the future in China. For the L1 existence factor, it may be that their willingness to be socialized

into active agents outweighs linguistic difficulty of SFPs, which makes L1 transfer non-significant. In order to confirm these hypotheses or to reject them, more data or a larger corpus is needed for further research.

In addition, the gender-related personality traits factor was found to be significant. As mentioned above, masculine and feminine traits are two continuums with individual differences existing within gender groups (Dinella et al., 2014; Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Those who present more feminine traits favor the presence of SFPs in non-interrogative sentences. This finding may demonstrate and support a difference in language socialization based on gender-labels (Zheng, Lippa, & Zheng, 2011). In a more open and tolerant social environment, people tend to manipulate language to index constructed gender-related identity and personality; thus, a more emotional person, such as "Madam Qian" in this study, uses more SFPs to express and emphasize his emotion. Due to the fact that being emotional is often associated with women as one of the feminine traits, a man might be labeled as "lady-like." However, in the case of "Madam Qian," both himself and his fans accepted his identity presentation and public comments without feeling offended. In fact, "Madam Qian" even explicitly talked about this and expressed that he is proud of being himself in public. What is more, being "Madam Qian" is considered as his personal charm. This new form of multidimensional gender difference is also becoming salient among active L2 social agents who cross national borders and actively participate in societal interactions. As native speakers manipulate language to express personality and identity, L2 learners are also socialized into ways of using sociolinguistic devices, SFPs in this study, to index and negotiate identities. It is worth mentioning that the ways that such sexual incongruence is treated play an important role in the process of language socialization and the subsequent sociolinguistic variation.

Finally, the duration of time spent in China was found to be statistically significant. Those who stayed longer in China (more than 5 years versus less than 5 years) used more SFPs in non-interrogative sentences. In response to RQ4, we can see that more time in China increased SFPs presence. This can be explained by the fact that more time in China provides more opportunities of societal interactions in which these active L2 users can observe the use of SFPs, use SFPs themselves, and observe how their use is received by others (Iwasaki, 2010; Taguchi, 2016). Therefore, as more time increases the opportunity of language socialization, the L2 users can gain more understanding of social meanings of SFPs and actively use SFPs to present themselves and to express friendliness as native speakers do, especially when they interact with their fans or when they want to create a friendly image on the talk show.

4.2 Qualitative analysis

Pragmatic variation in L2 contexts is a complicated and dynamic social practice. The quantitative analysis helped answer the research questions (RQ1–6) by showing the significant factors that impacted L2 users' SFPs presence in declarative sentences. Two social factors were found to be significant predictors in SFPs presence. Based on the quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis purposefully centered around two participants with salient gender-related personalities in order to gain a deeper understanding of how these choices were made in certain contexts and with certain interlocutors.

4.2.1 *Madam Qian*

Among the participants of the study, "Madam Qian" possessed the highest frequency of the use of SFPs (33%). Meanwhile, his high level of feminine traits was manifested both through language use and personal appearance. For example, in an episode where representatives were presenting different traditional hats from their cultures and asked to choose one to wear in the show, "Madam Qian" chose to wear a female hat. His choice was evaluated by other participants as looking like the opposite gender ("you look like a lady"). Instead of avoiding such incongruence, "Madam Qian" enacted a cute persona by adding feminine SFP *ma*(嘛) to the utterance:

Excerpt 1. *"You look like a lady" (01 January 2016. Q=Madam Qian, P1, P2, P3=conversation participant 1, 2, 3)*

    1 Q: Wo you name gaoxiao ma?
              Do I look so funny?
              Tamen weishenme dou xiaode hao high a?
              Why are they laughing at me?
    2 P1:   Tade hao keai. Xiang dongman li nazhong.
              He looks so cute. Looks like from manga.
    3 Q: Na wo dai zhege huibuhui hao yi dian'er.
              Do I look better in this one?
    4 P1, P2, P3: Hahahahahaha.
              Hahahahahaha.
    5 P2:   Gengxiang kongjie.
              You look like a stewardess.
    6 P1:   Xiang guifu.
              You look like a lady.
    7 Q: Hahahahaha. Aiyo, nimen yao dui wo hao yidian'er **ma**!
              Hahahahaha. Oh, you guys be nicer to me **ma**!
    8 P1:   Ni ziji mingming hen xiangshou. Hahahahaha.
              You are obviously enjoying yourself. Hahahahaha.

In the excerpt, though being told that he looked like the opposite gender, "Madam Qian" strengthened the incongruence by using feminine SFPs to enact a cute persona to soften the conversation (line 7). His language use was received with friendliness by other conversation participants. Along with enacting a cute and friendly persona, being sympathetic and considerate (expressive traits) is also a dimension along which "Madam Qian" manipulated his use of SFPs. Excerpt 2 is an instance in which he frequently used SFPs to express being sympathetic and emotional when debating "should we offer seats to elderly people on public transport":

Excerpt 2. *"I feel very sad" (25 December 2015. Q=Madam Qian, P1=conversation participant 1)*

> 1 Q: Wo xinli hen nanshou. Ni an shenme deng an de **ya**!
>   I feel very sad. Why did you push the button (disagree button –
>   we shouldn't offer seats) **ya**!
> 2   Ni xuyao zhege weizhi shi shuijiao de. Dan laoren xuyao shi
>   shenti anquan **a**!
>   You need the seat to take a nap. But elderly people need it for their
>   safety **a**!
> 3 P1: Danshi…
>   But…
> 4 Q: Xiongdi, ni rangwo xian shuowan **ma**!
>   Brother, allow me to first finish **ma**!
> 5 P1: Ni shuo.
>   Go ahead.
> 6 Q: danshi, laoren ta keneng shuaidao **a**…
>   But, elderly people might fall down **a**…

In the excerpt above, "Madam Qian" frequently used SFPs ("ya (呀)," "a (啊)," "ma (嘛)") in non-interrogative sentences to emphasize his affective attitudes. He first used "ya (呀)" (line 1) to show that he was angry that some people said there was no need to offer seats to elderly people. The SFP "ya (呀)" is often associated with female talk and often used to express excitement, anger, or other strong emotions in a conversation. He then used SFP "a (啊)" when explaining the reason for offering seats to elderly people (line 2, line 6). The appearance of SFP "a (啊)" does not change the meaning of the two sentences; however, it served to emphasize his opinions and strong emotions in order to persuade people and to create common affective ground in the debate. In addition, "Madam Qian" also knew to how to use SFP "ma (嘛)" (line 4) to gain back his turn of speaking in a soft way when being interrupted by other speakers (without the SFP "ma (嘛)," the sentence would sound quite aggressive). His frequent use of SFPs shows that he

understood, to some extent, how to use SFPs to perform pragmatic functions, to achieve certain communicative needs, and to construct his public self-image.

4.2.2 *Daddy Mu*

Although "Daddy Mu" had left the audience with a masculine image due to some of his macho opinions on gender issues, he still had a 17% rate of SFPs use. According to his conversation and social media data, the most salient feature was using SFPs to express friendliness to his audience, especially on social media platforms. For example,

Excerpt 3.   Women de tuandui bangbang **da** (smiley face emoji)!
                   Our team is the best **da** (smiley face emoji)!

Excerpt 3 is from his Weibo. The SFP "da (哒)" is an Internet-born new SFP used among Chinese youth culture. It can be used to enact a friendly and cute persona to the audience. Additionally, the use of "da(哒)" also reflects that the speaker is in a good mood (in line with the following smiley face emoji). Sounding cute used to be associated with heterosexual femininity in China (Zheng et al., 2011); however, in modern Chinese society, a man could also sound cute, especially when he intends to create a friendly public image. Thus, his use of the feminine SFP "da (哒)" was received with friendliness by his followers (79 replies with positive comments and emojis). No one commented below this Weibo, saying that he sounds like the opposite gender.

Excerpt 4.   Jintian you paile xinde yiqi @feizhengshihuitan. Nimen yiding yaokan **o**!
                   Today we shot a new episode of @ Informal Talks. Don't forget to watch **o**!

In Excerpt 4, the use of SFP "o (哦)" is an instance of using SFP to change the mood of the sentence. Without "o (哦)," this sentence would sound like an imperative ("you must watch!"). However, with the appearance of "o (哦)," this sentence has a friendly and causal mood that would not make the audience feel offended. The SFP "o (哦)" has the pragmatic function of making a suggestion sound softer and less imperative. For "Daddy Mu," his intention was to remind his audience to watch the show, and he knew how to use SFPs to achieve his needs without offending others.

In the case of "Daddy Mu," his frequency of SFPs use was largely conditioned by his interlocutor/audience. He tended to use SFPs when his interlocutor/audience was his friend, fan groups, or social media followers. He learned to enact a friendly image by using SFPs. Additionally, he was able to use social media specific SFPs (e.g. "da (哒)") to fit in the Chinese digital community. Language socialization happens during his interaction and is manifested through his intentional use of SFPs.

4.2.3 *Summary of findings*

From the two cases, we can see that SFPs were used by the two L2 users to perform sociopragmatic functions, including expressing personalities and identities, softening the discourse, creating common ground, and showing friendliness. By analyzing their SFPs use in certain contexts, we can understand how these participants' positions were enacted and how they were received by others. In the case of "Madam Qian," although he was evaluated as sounding like the opposite gender, such incongruence was treated with respect and appreciation. In other words, the language practices that were seen as incongruent with his heterosexual masculinity ("Madam Qian" has a wife) were pointed out but not rejected. Such treatment provided him with opportunities to be more aware of the sociopragmatic meanings of SFPs and to become an active social agent in using SFPs. In the case of "Daddy Mu," his performance revealed that he learned to adjust his SFPs use according to different interlocutors/audiences and different communicative needs.

The findings shed some light on the acquisition of Chinese SFPs. For example, educators should reconsider heterosexuality in the pragmatic use of SFPs. Women can sound "boyish," and men can also sound "cute." It would be helpful to have explicit conversations regarding current sociopragmatic uses of SFPs to help learners make use of SFPs in real life to achieve communicative needs and to present themselves.

5. Discussion and conclusion

SFPs have been seen to be used in talk show and social media interactions by these advanced L2 users with other L2 participants and native speakers. The findings from the variable rule program analysis and excerpts of online and offline communication give us insight into how these active L2 users intentionally manipulated SFPs to construct identities and create connections in their communities. Similar to the findings of the study of second language socialization in dorm conversations where L2 users were found to be socialized into gendered linguistic practices (Diao, 2014), the results of this study further demonstrate how L2 users constructed and articulated gender-related personalities empowered by SFPs through negotiation of meaning and self. Madam Qian's experience of using the SFPs seems to create incongruence with his heterosexual masculinity. However, this was the choice he intentionally made in order to "be himself." This position was well-received and appreciated by other L2 users in the talk show and his followers on social media. This intentional choice of manipulating SFPs denotes

that identities were negotiated and co-constructed between speakers and listeners in situated discourse and that SFPs can be valuable sociopragmatic devices that contribute to their identity construction.

It is not responsible to claim that more time spent in China ensures second language socialization and the acquisition of SFPs. Consistent with previous claims made by SLA researchers (e.g., Diao, 2014; Kinginger, 2013), it was found in the present study that the speaker-listener relationship plays a key role in shaping the L2 experience. Active and meaningful interactions between speakers and listeners facilitate self-construction and the learning aspects of SFPs. In turn, the understanding and strategic use of SFPs engendered by fruitful interactions help L2 users reach a broader audience and more communities to practice negotiating meaning and identities. Digital platforms foster greater interactive opportunities for active L2 users to enact memberships in various communities to fully engage in second language socialization.

SFPs are valuable sociopragmatic devices that contribute to the construction of identities and the development of social connections in various communities for L2 users. The acquisition of SFPs empowers L2 users by giving them social agency as users of the language. An awareness of viewing L2 learners as engaged and authentic social members – not just learners – is needed (Godwin-Jones, 2018). L2 users should be made aware of the sociopragmatic functions of SFPs, which will increase the opportunities to open up fruitful conversations and potentially more meaningful language experiences in their personal lives.

Before drawing any conclusions, it should be acknowledged that the sample size of the present study was not big enough and that all the data collected were not 100% spontaneous. The talk show conversation requires preparation beforehand and since it is not a live TV show, what we actually see may be edited for certain purposes. Moreover, I was not able to reach and interview the participants in this study. Performance data alone may not be sufficient for evaluating how they perceive SFP variation and how they make a choice for different purposes in different situations.

Keeping these limitations in mind, we can conclude that the results reported above indicate that these advanced Chinese L2 users productively demonstrated variation in their use of SFPs in non-interrogative sentences. Gender-related personality traits and duration of time were found to be significant predictors of SFPs presence. Those who presented a higher level of feminine traits favored the presence of SFPs and those who showed a higher level of masculine traits disfavored the presence of SFPs. Generally speaking, all participants used SFPs to negotiate meanings and identities and to express friendliness as native speakers do; however, those who worked and lived in China for a longer time used more

SFPs in non-interrogative sentences. The gender-related personality traits factor reveals that these participants had some understanding of social meanings of SFPs and actively made choices to manipulate SFPs to highlight their personalities and identities. The somewhat surprising result that geographical location in China, L1 transfer, and communication mode (social media or talk show) play non-significant roles in the variation requires a larger corpus and further study to confirm or reject the possible explanations or hypotheses I made in the previous part.

Apparently, socialization in the target language community facilitates the sociolinguistic aspect of language acquisition. From the perspective of variationist sociolinguistics, in order to help teach L2 learners who may not have a chance to go abroad perform stylistic variation of SFPs according to situations, interlocutors, and identities, I would like to offer some implications for classroom sociopragmatic variation instruction. First, an explicit explanation of SFPs and some discussions and brainstorming of the sociopragmatic meanings of SFPs would be useful when we introduce SFPs in the classroom. Educators should be mindful about making learners aware of how SFPs can serve them as agentive L2 users in real life. Second, resources of successful advanced L2 users, e.g., talk shows like *Informal Talks* and Weibo screen shots, could be good material for an awareness-raising activity in which we ask learners to pay attention to the target variation, settings, relationships between interlocutors, genders and personalities, emotions behind SFPs, etc. Analyzing certain conversation clips or social media screen-shots could be helpful activities to help learners gain more insight into the sociopragmatic meanings of SFPs. In addition, these resources help show classroom L2 learners how other successful L2 users are empowered by these pragmatic devices and become agentive L2 users in real life.

There is obviously a need for future research to contribute to the relatively under-researched field of second language sociopragmatic performance. Future research should take learners' metalinguistic explanations and self-reports into consideration (if accessible) as triangulation data for interpreting L2 sociopragmatic performance (van Compernolle & Williams, 2011). With regard to the acquisition of Chinese SFPs, more research should be done from a sociolinguistic perspective and its related pedagogy. Digital spaces offer a rich opportunity to examine L2 SFPs authentic practice and use. The best method of teaching Chinese SFPs, addressing individual factors and contextual factors in the teaching of Chinese SFPs, and compensating for the missing of language socialization in a classroom setting await future research.

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