

## COMMENTARY

# About Being Called Old in Two Cultures

by Jesse Hwa

It's not that I am an octogenarian. I shall address the question of being called old in the American and the Chinese cultures. Webster defines old as aged. Clear enough.

When I first came to America as a graduate student in 1946, I said to a friend's mother: "You are old." What I intended was a compliment, in the sense that my mother was old and kind. I got a mild rebuke. That was my introduction to American culture. As I later learned, besides asking a person "how much do you make," "how old are you" is also a big social no no. In America, it's a country that worships youth; age is a carefully guarded secret. People don't like to appear old, or be identified or addressed as old people. Old people are called senior citizens.

In China old people are called old people. I would be very happy to go to a theater in China and call myself an old man and get a discount. The society reveres old age. In China if I should approach a stranger, who appears to be an old person, and ask a question, I would address him as lao (old) xiansheng (mister), or her as lao (old) tai tai (mistress). This is proper and polite in China. An old friend may be called old Wang. An aged painter would sign his name and identify himself as an old man of 74, for example. They

like to be recognized as such. (Perhaps I do likewise in writing this essay.)

In special situations, a revered old person is now called not old Wei, but Wei Old. This reversal of words is a special recognition of this person being old. It is rare honor, as I had the privilege of meeting and addressing Tang Lao (former professor and president of Nan Kai University) and Lu Lao (former professor and president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences).

A few years ago, I was on a train from Guangzhou to Shenzhen. I sat next to a young man who left home hoping to find factory work there. I wrote a note addressed to a friend in Shenzhen who had an office there and asked him to extend some help. One sees such things in the movies. It pleased me as I could actually do it myself. As the train station had changed from the 70's, I could not find my way to the terminal where the border crossing used to be. That young man went out of his way and led me to the right place. I stuck a 100RMB bill (about \$ 12) in his shirt pocket. He refused, as was Chinese custom. I insisted, also Chinese custom. Most of all, he addressed me as lao xiansheng (old mister). I was startled as it was the first and only time ever someone called me as such. But I was sort of pleased and honored. It is a gentle world there.