

Ritual public humiliation

Using pragmatics to model language aggression

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Abstract: This paper investigates cases in which people who are perceived to have violated a major communal and/or social norm are humiliated in public in a ritual way. As a case study we examine online videos drawn from the Chinese videosharing site Youku. Humiliation as a form of punishment has been thoroughly studied in sociology (see e.g., the seminal work of Foucault 1977). This interest is not coincidental, considering that studying humiliation may provide insight into the operation of shame as a punitive phenomenon, as well as the role of publicity and complex participation structures when shame is inflicted on others. Yet, punitive humiliation has been understudied in pragmatics; in particular, little research has been done on cases in which it is not an institutionally/socially ratified person (e.g., a judge) but the members of the public who inflict humiliation. The study of this phenomenon contributes to the present Special Issue as it demonstrates that pragmatics provides a powerful tool to model the dynamics of (language) behaviour such as humiliation that might be difficult to capture by using more conventional linguistic approaches. We demonstrate that while ritual public communal humiliation tends to be highly aggressive, it also shows noteworthy recurrent (meta)pragmatic similarities with institutionalised forms of punishment.

Keywords: punishment; humiliation; ritual language behaviour; Chinese

1. Introduction

The present paper studies the ways in which public communal humiliation operates on the interactional level. As a case study we examine Chinese data in accordance with the objectives of the present volume. However, we argue that communal humiliation is a universal form of interpersonal behaviour, and so it is important to emphasise that the data examined is neither ‘exotic’ nor specific to Chinese culture. Yet, what makes Chinese an

interesting case to study is the importance of self-image (or ‘face’) in Chinese sociocultural life, and the consequent gravity of humiliating someone in public. In addition, our paper will demonstrate that – as an interesting paradox – instances of public abuse in Chinese culture are imbued by conventional forms of behaviour which are stereotypically associated with linguistic etiquette rather than aggression.

Any form of public punishment is ritual (e.g., Muir 2005), and so communal humiliation is a type of a broader category of ritual interpersonal behaviour. We use ‘communal’ as a label for this practice type instead of ‘collective’ in accordance with the terminology of studies on public violence such as Klinken (2007). The ‘communal’ nature of these forms of punishments does not necessarily entail the existence of a ‘community’ in the incidents; however, as our paper demonstrates, communal humiliation as a punishment is often inflicted by a group who has power to coerce a victim.

We aim to demonstrate that seemingly ad hoc forms of ritual public communal humiliation (henceforth RPCH) follow a cluster of interpersonal pragmatic criteria through which they reinforce perceived principles of communal and/or social behaviour. As such, they are pragmatically modellable in spite of their seemingly confusing interactional dynamics. The study of this phenomenon can provide insight into the punitive mechanism of interpersonal aggression which has received scarce attention in pragmatics. Unlike more gentle forms of shaming (see e.g., Santamaría García 2000), RPCH has received limited attention in research on inflicting shame (see an overview in Perlemutter 2015; Chapman 2017), even though a few scholars, including historians (Arnovick 1999, 81), experts of language and law (Jacobsen 2008), and scholars engaged in the pragmatic study of ritual (Al-Ameerdy 2012) have touched on ritual public humiliation.¹ Thus, the present exploration fills an empirical knowledge gap.

It has to be clearly stated that while we are interested in the (meta-) pragmatic features of the ritual behaviour studied, we are in no way in support of any of such behaviour. We believe that it is important to study instances of language aggression due to the implications of such study to pragmatic theory. The theoretical modellability of language aggression is a key motivation for such research: we aim to demonstrate that linguistic pragmatics – in particular politeness research – is capable to delivering contribution to the understanding and prevention of abusive phenomena that are unfortunately parts of human lives across languages and cultures.

¹ In addition, ‘punishment’ in a broader sense occurs in studies such as Watzlawick et al. (2011, 106), and Handel (2016).

2. RPCH: a punitive and moralising practice

Since RPCH has been understudied, let us briefly discuss its position within practices of communal punishment.

2.1. RPCH as a punitive practice

Following previous research on public violence (e.g., van Klinken 2007), it is reasonable to argue that RPCH represents a ‘mid-way’ between humiliating ‘mob justice’ and ‘institutionalised’ – i.e., legal/ised – forms of public humiliation:

1. Humiliative ‘mob justice’ (a) typically ends with the death or serious physical injury of the victim (Ng’walali & Kitinya 2006); (b) it is regarded as illegal and usually triggers authority intervention (van Klinken 2007); and (c) it does not have no clear-cut executive roles, in the sense that responsibility for punishment tends to be diffused amongst members of a mob (see Mullen 1986).
2. Institutionalised/legalised forms of humiliating punishment, such as court-ordering a person to wear a shame placard in public, (a) are exempt of inflicting bodily torture (Spierenburg 2004); (b) in such institutionalised forms of public humiliation it is the authorities that inflict the punishment; and (c) they operate with institutionalised roles.

In RPCH the victim may or may not get injured, but ultimately this ritual action is about humiliating and not crippling or killing someone. This feature accords with the fact that usually this form of punishment is performed by a smaller group, that is, responsibility cannot be defused, and so those who perform the punishment may keep the harm caused on a relatively minimal level (see section 4). In this respect of symbolic rather than actual harm, RPCH is closer to its institutionalised counterpart than to mob justice. At the same time, RPCH is a communal rather than authority-initiated action, and in this sense it is closer to mob justice than institutionalised public humiliation.

2.2. RPCH as a moralising practice

RPCH as a form of punishment is **moralising** by nature (Kádár 2017). Firstly, RPCH is intrinsically anchored to a moral norm of how things

should be, since it is a communal **reaction/reflection** to a perceived extra-interactional violation of a major communal/social norm with moral authority (Habermas 1990). The major moral breach preceding RPCH empowers a (self-)ratified (Goffman 1981) group of individuals to penalise the alleged violator, and the punishment itself embodies (self-claimed) morality (Kohlberg & Hersh 1977). This ‘moral’ character may not be endorsed by other members of a social group, even though communal punishment can usually unfold as there is a group who has the power to execute it. At the same time, quantitative evidence shows that perpetrators of RPCH can often reasonably assume that many others will endorse their action (see Table 3 in section 4).

Secondly, RPCH as a **practice** operates with rights and obligations (section 4), i.e., these seemingly violent and ad hoc ritual practices follow a certain sense of uncodified but recurrent dynamics. People who participate in RPCH act in perceived communal statuses and make metapragmatic appeals to moral norms practically as judges (section 4). While the victim (and some others, such as bystanders who do not endorse humiliation) may accept the flow of events simply due to being coerced, these interactions show a noteworthy pragmatic similarity with institutionalised forms of punishment, by being interactionally ‘orderly’. This ‘orderliness’ of RPCH does not imply that it is exempt of struggles, i.e., there are cases when the humiliated persons fight back. In our view, a plausible reason why such fight-backs do not escalate in bigger injuries, and also why RPCH remains a ritual rather than transforming into mob-justice, is ‘tradeoff’. That is, it is the participants’ sake of interest to keep the intensity of aggression below a certain level,² to avoid escalation, which is a typical pragmatic feature of ritualised aggression (Bax 2010).

It is worth mentioning that practically all forms of punishment are morally-loaded, but this moral load becomes more evident in punishment that inflicts humiliation in public. Such forms of punishment encompass corporal and archaic forms such as public flogging and more modern forms like the shaving of the hair of French female collaborators after WWII and they may even include seemingly light public displays of shame, such as children at school being ordered by the teacher to write a repeated promise on the blackboard in front of their peers (see Smith et al. 2002, which provides a general theory of shame and public exposure).

² Note that we do not intend to claim that public communal humiliation as a ritual action may not cause physical harm at all, only that causing physical injury is not its goal. There may be significant cultural-legal variations in the ways in which this form of punishment is exercised.

Humiliation has been playing a key albeit hidden role in many societies, due to its capability to discourage potential perpetrators (Lankenau 1990): many argue that public humiliation is a psychologically highly threatening form of punishment due to the shame and subsequent face-loss (Liao & Bond 2011) it causes. Many industrialised societies continue to exercise this form of punishment: for instance, a child molester in the U.S. was recently ordered by a judge to display a sign ‘I am a bully’ in public.³

3. Data

Our database consists of 50 video-recordings that we collected from the Chinese video sharing website Youku 优酷,⁴ between February and May 2018. We conducted this search by inputting the simple search word *xiaosan* 小三. This term originates in the more formal phrase *di-san-zhe* 第三者 ‘third party’, and owing to the Internet it has gained popularity in everyday language use. We had to limit the number of size of our dataset to 50 videos of approximately two hours of interaction since many of such incidents are poorly audible, include many paralinguistic features and involve heavy dialectic elements, i.e., their transcription raises significant challenges.

The video-sharing platform of Youku provides strict policies and privacy guidelines for sharing videos: when an individual is identifiable in image, name and other personal information, a moderator removes the video. Thus, a large proportion of such online videos are either already anonymised online as a mosaic coverage covers the participants’ faces, or have a low image quality due to the legal requirement of Youku. These legal criteria decrease the ethical concern that the study of these videos trigger. For further ethical considerations, we carefully checked any possible exposure of facial features and excluded cases in which we felt that the participants may be identifiable due to interactional references to interpersonal histories. The final dataset is available on request but strictly for academic purpose, and in the present paper we do not provide the weblinks of the incidents analysed.

We have divided the 50 cases transcribed into two types:

³ See: *REUTERS/Aaron Josefczyk*.

⁴ See: www.youku.com.

- A larger body of videos (37 cases) were filmed **after** a couple was caught and the punishing person and their in-group people (extended family/friends) dragged the couple/victim into a public space. Most of these videos were made by the punishing person or their group members, but 2 of the recordings seem to have been made by onlookers.
- A smaller number of videos (13 cases) were made on the spot of an ‘affair’, in hotel rooms (although often the events that start in these private spaces end up in public ones, and so there is no clear border between these video types).

In the majority of cases (38 incidents) the spouse who inflicts punishment is escorted by their kin/friends, which is logical if one considers that communal punishment may need physical power to operate. The frequent involvement of family/friends also supports the claim made in section 2 that normally responsibility for inflicting communal public punishment is either diffused among the mob members or institutionalised, but belongs to a (ratified) group. Due to the importance of familiar bonds in traditional Chinese society when it comes to social actions, there are also cases in our data in which it is not the wife but rather the wife’s family that inflicts the punishment of humiliation in absence of the wife, supposedly to protect her ‘face’.

In the course of analysing our dataset, we have transcribed certain interactional features, such as interruption and overlap. We have also described aspects of physical behaviour as part of our transcript, by adding annotation boxes to our text. Owing to space limitations, in the present paper we only provide the Chinese script and translation of the incidents studied, without Pinyin Romanisation.

4. Micro-level analysis: Impoliteness in RPCH

In the present section, we focus on the micro-level features of RPCH with special respect of what we regard as linguistic and non-linguistic manifestations impoliteness and aggression in these rituals. We illustrate that impoliteness in these clashes is a ritual in that it is not ad hoc but rather it aims to increase the ratification of the punishment, and as such shows similarities with institutionalised forms of punitive behaviour.

Our dataset shows that the seemingly violent RPCH triggered by extramarital affairs displays recurrent features both in behavioural and

verbal interactions. Table 1 and Table 2 present the verbal and physical attacks in the data ('Case no.' refers to our numbering of the incidents):

Table 1: The overall occurrence of recurrent verbal aggression in the data

| Verbal features | Recurrence | Case no. |
|--|------------|---|
| Making derogatory moral verdicts | 39/50 | 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50 |
| Derogative addressing | 29/50 | 1, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 26, 28, 31, 34, 35, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 50 |
| Recruiting members of the public to support the punishment | 24/50 | 1, 4, 6, 9, 10, 12, 18, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 41, 42, 44, 49, 50 |
| Demand apology in front of the public | 8/50 | 4, 7, 14, 15, 21, 23, 30, 43 |

Table 2: The overall occurrence of forms of physical attack in the data

| Verbal features | Recurrence | Case no. |
|-----------------------------|------------|--|
| Face slapping/Torso hitting | 38/50 | 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 49, 50 |
| Hair pulling | 37/50 | 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49 |
| Stripping | 27/50 | 1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33, 34, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 49, 50 |
| Forcing to kneel down | 7/50 | 4, 6, 8, 23, 24, 30, 43 |

As our dataset does not feature every incident in full length, these figures are only indicative. As Table 1 shows, there are three frequently occurring types of impoliteness/aggression behaviour in our dataset:

1. Making derogatory moral verdicts

In practically all cases the victim is condemned by the cheated spouse. We believe that the goal of making such verdicts is to set the tone of the punishment by positioning its executer(s) as moral and the victim

as immoral. As section 5 illustrates, moralisation is a key also in the overall rhetorical structure of RPCH.

2. Derogative addressing

Along with such statements, the accused party is frequently addressed by derogative forms of address – most often metaphors – such as *huli-jing* 狐狸精 ‘fox spirit’ (Extract 3). A noteworthy feature of these forms of address is that they are rather ‘weak’ compared to some other expletives that Chinese language would frequent in interpersonal conflicts. In our view, semantically ‘weaker’ forms are frequented in RPCH as part of the attempt of getting the punishment supported/ratified by others.

3. Appeal to the public attention

The cheated spouse often attempts to recruit members of the public by exposing the event, supposedly not only to inflict ‘face loss’ on the victim but also to recruit support and make the RPCH ratified.

Due to space limitation, we analyse a single extract from our dataset to illustrate the operation of various of these pragmatic features.

- (1) Scene: A wife encounters her husband and his mistress walking on the street. A crowd of spectators gathers around the extraordinary scene.

W: wife (henceforth used as abbreviation for the same role)

E: the ‘extramarital partner’ who receives the punishment inflicted (henceforth used as abbreviation for the same role)

1. W: 做人家小三！做人家小三！做人家小三！上一次我已经放过你了！

2. 靠边站！靠边站（对老公说）！（听不清）

3. 这是对她的惩罚！这是对她的惩罚！

4. 我告诉你！你做小三就是这个样！上一次我已经抓到你一次，

5. 我已经忍了。没动手啊！这一次我忍无可忍啦！你他妈，要不要脸！

6. （（对围观者说））在我店里做服务员！做完服务员，勾引我老公啊！

7. E: 我没勾引他！

1. W: Adulteress (xiaosan)! Adulteress! Adulteress! I already forgave you once!

2. Stand aside ((to her husband))! Stand aside! (Inaudible)

3. Now I will punish her! I will punish her!

4. I tell you! I will now expose you as a xiaosan! I have caught you

5. I already caught you once and that time I didn’t hurt you! But this time you won’t get away! You are a whore! You lost your face!

6. ((To the crowd)) She’s a waitress in my shop! And she goes and seduces my husband!

7. E: I didn’t seduce him.

The pragmatic features above can be observed in full operation here. W makes a set of derogatory moral verdicts about E: for instance in line 1 she points out that this is not a first time when she caught her with her husband, while in line 5 she states that the woman lost her ‘face’ (*lian* 脸). In terms of derogatory expressions, W calls E *xiaosan* several times and ‘whore’ on one instance, i.e., in spite of the gravity of the event the semantics of the words exchanged remains relatively ‘mild’ (i.e., moralising). W actively recruits bystanders as she addresses in line 6, supposedly to justify the action of punishment.

The responsive denial of E (line 7) is rather ‘weak’. The wife catches the couple on the site in public, demonstrates the moral breach, and attracts sufficient attention to humiliate E who does not seem to have much opportunity to fight back. Note that the husband who is also caught on the site is simply ordered to stand aside (line 2). This is supposedly due to Chinese gendered folk, i.e., folk perceptions of ‘adultery’ as a ‘female responsibility’, even though the study of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

As extract (1) has illustrated, the various verbal features of RPCH interrelate: for instance, making moral verdicts also helps recruiting bystanders. The following extract further illustrates this point:

(2) Scene: A wife encounters her husband and the mistress on the street.

1. W: 奸夫淫妇啊！快来看啊！奸夫淫妇！（听不清）这个男的女的通奸！

1. W: Adulterer and adulteress! Come and see! Adulterer and adulteress! (Inaudible)
This man and woman committed adultery!

Along with verbal abuse, physical attacks also play a key role in the operation of RPCH and it is worth to briefly mention here these physical characteristics, all the more because physicality is a key in both the operation and the symbolics of rituals. As is shown in Table 2, the most representative manifestations of physical punishment are face slaps/body strikes and the pulling of hair – not surprisingly, the latter form of attack operates when females are abused. Note that (a) body strikes are infrequent in that one does not get continuously punched as in a street fight, and also that (b) face slapping is usually not limited to a single slap but rather a series of slaps. In terms of symbolism, targeting the (physical) face may have unique importance in Chinese culture. Following a Foucauldian logic, in folk understandings of such forms of punishment it is feminine beauty that causes the breach of the communal moral norm. It is thus logical for shaming to unfold via the symbolic destruction of face and hair, which are regarded as symbols of beauty in many East Asian cultures (Cunningham

et al. 1995). The importance of this symbolism seems to be supported also by the prevalence of stripping in our dataset: in many interactions the cheated spouse and their peers force the victim to strip in public. Such physical attacks are in no doubt attracting bystanders' attention.

A less frequent but still important element of physical punishment is forcing the adulterous person, both men and women, to kneel down and bow their heads in front of the cheated spouse. This kneeling – which is often referred to in English as kowtowing, or performing 磕头 (*ketou*) in Chinese – is an archaic form of body language, which can rarely be observed in modern Chinese interpersonal behaviour, except some emotive outbursts such as cases of public ritual apology (Kádár et al. 2018).

Since ours is online data, it is relevant to touch on here how net users react to these incidents – we believe that such reactions explain why people who perform RPCH follow recurrent forms of behaviour instead of engaging in unconstrained aggression. We have studied online comments (altogether 759 cases, the total number of online comments) of the ten most broadly commented videos in our data (see Table 3). There are overall three comment types:

1. Comments that claim explicit agreement with the humiliation presented in the videos, for example:

- (3) 这种人打死活该。
'Such people deserve to be killed.' (20/08/2013, comment on Case no. 2)

2. Comments that condemn the events, for example:

- (4) 好有心机的男人，离婚就好了。有必要闹得全国人民皆知吗。她有外遇难道你没有责任吗，家庭幸福感情好的话，会有出轨这一说吗。
'The man is devious: he could sue the wife – is it really necessary to make the cheating known by the whole of our country? Is he not responsible himself for his wife looking for pleasures elsewhere? If you have a happy family with love, how could there be any of such affair(?)' (30/05/2012, comment on Case no. 2)
- (5) 作为路人我会救下被虐女子，都他妈变态的不行了，其实是严重违法暴力行为，这么软弱的女子面对几个母夜叉任由凌辱，有碍观瞻。大庭广众之下施暴者最丑陋。
'If I were a passer-by I would have saved the abused woman. What these people do is just too extreme – it is illegal violence. It is horrible to abuse such a weak woman. The perpetrators are ugly.' (06/12/2016, comment on Case no. 21)

3. Other non-explicit/irrelevant comments, for example:

- (6) 北方人就是彪悍啊。
'Northern Chinese are tough and fierce.' (15/06/2017, comment on Case no. 22)
- (7) 台州方言。
'Taizhou Dialect.' (03/02/2018, comment on Case no. 49)

The following table summarises our supplementary online dataset:

Table 3: Online comment statistics of 10 cases with the largest number of comments

| Case No. | Category 1 | Category 2 | Category 3 | Total |
|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| 1 | 34 | 23 | 56 | 113 |
| 2 | 259 | 64 | 100 | 423 |
| 7 | 5 | 6 | 9 | 20 |
| 8 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 13 |
| 21 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 18 |
| 22 | 10 | 35 | 14 | 59 |
| 23 | 18 | 20 | 19 | 57 |
| 42 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 12 |
| 49 | 4 | 14 | 8 | 26 |
| 50 | 6 | 2 | 8 | 16 |
| Total | 346 (45.6%) | 183 (24.1%) | 230 (30.3%) | 759 |

As Table 3 indicates, there is a significant portion of net users who agree with that the breach of the moral value of 'chastity' deserves public humiliation (45.6%). From a pragmatic point of view, this is a noteworthy figure as it explains that the interactional engagement of perpetrators to align with the bystanders is motored by the perception that RPCH may be ratified by others.

The examination so far has revealed that RPCH operates with distinctive interpersonal pragmatic characters that reflect perceived rights and obligations. Due to these characters, RPCH shows similarities with institutionalised forms of punishment in which the judge or other representatives of an institution are constrained by interactional obligations – i.e., RPCH is not an ad hoc form of behaviour and in spite of the dramatic and often confusing course of events in the videos, the ongoing aggression behaviour is modellable.

5. Macro-level analysis: the discursive features of RPCH

The macro-level dynamics – i.e., the ways in which the construction of the rhetoric of RPCH and the broader interpersonal involvement operate – also confirm that these events are not ad hoc manifestations of aggression but rather operate with rights and obligations as other ritual events.

5.1. Rhetorical behaviour: RPCH as a moral monologue

In section 4 we have already pointed out that RPCH is heavily loaded with ‘moral verdicts’. This moralisation is also present in the broader rhetoric of the attacks (Shafer-Landau 1997). In any interpersonal conflict the participants claim the moral upper hand (Haidt 2012): it is often the context that decides whether it is an implicit or explicit appeal that works better, and ultimately it is difficult to establish a hierarchy between these forms of metapragmatic behaviour. However, RPCH seems to be different from this general trend: it tends to operate with very explicit moral appeals. This metapragmatic behavioural tendency correlates, in our view, with contextual power: once there is the (self)ractified group of people that has sufficient power to justify a punishment, moralising metapragmatic behaviour becomes very explicit, as the following example illustrates:

(8) Scene: A wife and her peer (a muscular man) break into the hotel room where the wife’s husband is found in bed with a woman.

H: husband

M: the man who accompanies the wife

1. W: 我就说这天下没有不吃屎的狗，

2. 你们这两个不要脸的东西，给我起来，

3. 看看什么骚包狐狸精？(啊：？

4. 勾引别人老公给我下来！给我下来！

5. H: 你干嘛？干嘛呀？

6. M: 有你事儿吗？有你事儿吗？有你事儿吗？

7. W: 把脸给我露出来！狐狸精！

8. H: 你谁啊？

9. M: 要脸吗？

10. H: 你谁啊？

11. M: 要脸吗？

12. W: 帮我把这被掀开。给你放到网上。

13. W: 狐狸精，过来拍一下！

14. E: 别拍了。((哀求))

[...]

1. W: I told that a dog can't stop himself eating
 2. shit. You two shameless things! Get up.
 3. Let us see how a Fox Spirit looks like. Huh.
 4. Seducing someone's husband. Get down! Down!
 5. H: What d'you wanna do? What d'you wanna do?
 6. M: Is it your business? Is it your business? Is it your business?
 7. W: Show me the face! Fox spirit!
 8. H: Who are you?
 9. M: Want [reserve] your face?
 10. H: Who are you?
 11. M: Want [reserve] your face?
 12. W: Help me to take it off. Put you online.
 13. W: Fox spirit. Come and let yourself be filmed.
 14. E: Please don't. ((whimpering))
 [...]

W goes directly to the bed and forces A down to the ground, while pulling off the duvet A is using to cover her face and body. The husband in bed is quickly trying to move away from the bed.

While calling E "Fox spirit", W slaps her face violently.

W uses her mobile phone to start video recording E.

W is pulling E by her hair to face a bigger camera held by M, while E is desperately trying to lower her head and using her hands to cover her face.

In the above extract, W in the interaction engages in explicit moralisation, in a similar fashion with a judge in a trial, which demonstrates that in the ritual dynamics of the humiliation event she feels ratified to deliver a judicial verdict.

- She opens the interaction with the idiomatic abusive animal metaphor (see Haslam et al. 2011) *meiyou-buchi-shi-de-gou* 没有不吃屎的狗 ‘there is no dog who doesn't eat shit’, which frames the cheating couple as of people of the lowest moral standards.
- In line 4, she orders E to kneel down in front of her by uttering *Gei wo xia lai* 给我下来 ‘Get down!’ (following her initial order for E to leave the bed). Due to the above-discussed traditional Chinese symbolics of kneeling as an action that defendants are supposed to do in courtroom, W's interactional move is important, since it boosts her ratified status (and it implicitly positions her as the party who is ratified to deliver a verdict). In the same line, she summarises E's violation of ‘public morality’, by explicitly appealing to communal moral values, as she utters *Gouyin bieren de laogong* 勾引别人老公 ‘Seducing someone's husband’.
- In various lines she calls A *huli-jing* 狐狸精 ‘Fox Spirit’, which is an archaic expression from Chinese folk tales; it describes miraculous foxes that take the shape of beautiful young women and make young man sex-addicts. As Wang's (2009) study insightfully points out, fox spirits are conventionally regarded in Chinese cultures as enemies of the society, and their relationship with men in folktales is regarded as the quintessence of “the realm of the extraordinary, controversial,

and taboo” (*op.cit.*, 4). Thus, W’s use of this constative derogatory term is an explicitly moralising move, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that she calls E *huli-jing*, instead of using a stronger expression (e.g., ‘bitch’).

Note that W (line 4) makes a communal accusation *gouyin bieren laogong* 勾引别人老公 ‘to seduce someone’s husband’ instead of accusing the victim with seducing **her** husband, which in our view is part of the moral rhetoric. Such communal accusation in moral verdict are recurrent in our dataset.

On the level of interpersonal interactional behaviour, usually public conflicts tend to be characterised by moral clash on the metapragmatic level. Taking an example of the rite of communal intervention, Kádár (2017) presented such an example: When a neighbourhood representative (or a person who believes to be ratified to represent the neighbourhood) tells off an antisocial neighbour, the intervention appeals to how the perceived ‘wrongdoer’ should (or should not) behave to fit in. However, irrespective of how this intervening person forms the intervention, it may represent an intrusive form of behaviour, which means that the intervention by itself may not work because it appeals to another norm (at least within the neighbourhood) of how interpersonal relationships and interactions should allegedly be organised. Consequently, the antisocial neighbour may not open her or his door or even threaten the intervening person by simply pitting the norm of privacy that the intervention upsets against the intervener’s moral appeals, i.e., there a social ought may be pitted against the moral ought (Kádár & Márquez Reiter 2015). However, unlike in ordinary conflict scenarios, in RPCH one can rarely observe such a tension, and this is why it can be argued that RPCH represents a moral monologue (in a similar fashion with courtroom verdicts; see Pearce & Littlejohn 1997, 37). This monologic character is particularly visible in the interaction in (9).

In various lines E attempts to verbally resist, until the moment she finally breaks out in tears as she is forced to kneel (line 12). Yet, until this point in the interaction, her main strategy is to vehemently protest her innocence rather than trying to argue, for instance, that threatening her is aggressive and socially improper. As this extract illustrates, once there is sufficient ratification and contextual power behind an RPCH to coerce the targeted person, the humiliated person has little space to debate by using moral arguments, owing to the fact that the act she is claimed to have committed is regarded as a violation of a major communal norm, which cannot be alleviated by an alternative moral argument.

- (9) Scene: The incident takes place in the context of alleged online ‘sexting’: W and her peers are forcing E to apologise for allegedly performing this indecent behaviour with W’s husband after she added her to her group of online acquaintances.

1. W: 你怎么这么贱呢?
 2. E: (听不清)
 3. W: 嗯?! 嗯?!
 4. E: 好了! 别这样了!
 5. W: 视频也是我跟你视频。
 6. E: 我告诉你
 7. W: 你不要以为你了不起, 知道吗? 是我约你哦, 你还以为我老公
 8. 约你啊?
 9. E: 够了!
 10. W: 够了, 够了, 够啦! 够: 啦! 够了吗? 跪下! 跪: 下!
 11. E: ((哭)) 我什么都没有[做。
 12. W: 跪下! 跪下!<

1. W: Why are you so cheap?
 2. E: ((inaudible))
 3. W: Hah?! Huh?!
 4. E: All right! Please don’t be like this!
 5. W: You were video chatting with me.
 6. E: Let me tell you
 7. W Don’t think you are extraordinary, you know? It’s me who
 8. asked you out, hah, you believe it’s my husband who asked you out?
 9. E: Enough!
 10. W: Enough, enough, enough! Enough!: Is this enough?! Kneel down! Kneel:
 down!
 11. E: ((crying)) I haven’t done anything
 12. W: Kneel down! Kneel down!

E begins
to cry

5.2. Forcing apology

As part of the broader dynamics of courtroom judgements, a judge is supposed to tell the condemned person and the society what kind of behaviour is to be avoided in the future, and the condemned person is expected to express regret (Baumgartner 1988, 3). The dynamics of RPCH is similar in that the ultimate goal of these interactions is to coerce the victim to publically apologise:

- (10) Scene: F who is W’s kin is lecturing E on the street.

1. F: 看看这不要脸的老娘们啊, 人家三个孩子了, 啊! 人家三孩子, 俩闺女
 2. 一儿, 你上人家干啥去你说。
 3. E: 我再也不来了。

4. F: 再也不来了。来这几年了还不行啊！啊！
 5. F: 哪样的男的你找不着啊？这世界上有的是人爱咯！
 6. [你恋着他，人家有法过啦！
 7. E: [我再也不来了。
 8. F: =人家有法过啊？
 9. E: 我不来了。
1. F: Come and look at this faceless old woman! Ah! She is having 3 children. Ah!
 2. Three children, two sons and a daughter. What are you doing here?
 3. E: I will not come again.
 4. F: Never come again. Hasn't it been enough to come here in the past years?!
 Heh?!
 5. F: What kind of man can't you find? Huh? There are so many men in this world
 6. for you to love, you now fall in love with my husband, destroying his life?
 7. E: I will never come again.
 8. F: How can people live their life after what you've done?
 9. E: I will never come again.

Following F's moral monologue (lines 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6), the victim in this example accepts the punishment, by repeatedly offering her repentance – she promises she will not interfere with the life of the family she disturbed (lines 3, 7 and 9).

Note that while sincerity is often regarded as a felicity condition for a successful apology (Márquez-Reiter 2000), in the case of RPCH the humiliating element is pivotal. As cases in our dataset illustrate, the extramarital partner cannot usually escape from the situation via making a single sincere apology. That is, (s)he needs to repeat repentance to show humbleness. In the following example (11), E is required to kneel down: and in many other cases it is part of the symbolism of the punishment that (s)he is being visibly **forced** to apologise, even if (s)he is visibly **willing** to perform the apology, as the extract in (11) illustrates.

- (11) Scene: W catches her husband and E at E's home with her kins surround, W requires E to perform kowtow and apologise in front of W.

1. W: 跪下来！给我磕三个头！
 2. E: 对不起啊！
 3. W: 我跟你讲没有下一次啊！我跟你讲啊！你知不知道啊！
 4. E: 知道啦！

1. W: Kneel down! Give me three kowtows!
 2. E: ((kneeling down, knocking her head 3 times on the ground)). I do apologise!
 3. W: Listen, I tell you: there's no next time! I am telling you clear! You understand?
 4. E: I understand!

| |
|--|
| E remains kneeling on the ground even after performing the kowtows |
|--|

What seems to add to the intensity/excessiveness of the ritual (cf. Bax 2010) is the sense that E is coerced into following W's instructions, and that she continues to respond to her from the ground. While we have no way of knowing the exact role of physical coercion in this subservient behaviour, it is clear that forced repetition of repentance is one of the key interactional feature of RPCH. W enforces such performance of repentance and apology from E in order to further prove that the victim admits openly the moral violation accused of her/him and accept the moralisation and punishment against her/his behaviour. This is similar to the expected performance in the institutionalised punitive practice in that it intends to restore a sense of moral equilibrium by the humiliating punishment.

5.3. Limited bystander intervention

Public aggression tends to encourage bystander intervention in the form of moralising meta-appeals (Kádár & Márquez Reiter 2015), even though such intervention may not necessarily occur (see the 'Kitty Genovese Effect'). However, there are only five cases in our data in which bystanders actively intervene in scenes of communal humiliation – and, in three out of these five cases they take the punishing person's side. This illustrates that once there is a reason that is deemed sufficiently grave to trigger RPCH, and once there is a sufficient amount of physical/contextual power to carry out this form of punishment, from a default bystander perspective communal public humiliation might qualify as a justified action. This, of course, does not imply that every bystander automatically agrees with this form of punishment (see section 4). However, bystander's intervention is rather limited according to our dataset.

The following extract illustrates a case when potential bystander intervention is discouraged by coercion:

(12) F, F1: the wife's friends (F is video-recording the event)

1. F: 哎！快来看打小三咯！快来看哦！快来看打小三咯！
2. 快来看打小三咯！
3. 一会儿还扒衣服，快来看哦！
4. F1: 脱裤子！
5. F: 把裤子扒了！
(远处有男声询问事由)
6. F1: 小三，小三
(男声消失，没有任何干预行为出现)
7. F: 快来看打小三咯！

1. F: Hey! Come and see the xiaosan got beaten up! Come and see! Come
2. and see the xiaosan got beaten up! Come and see the xiaosan got
3. beaten up! She'll be striped naked. Come and see! Oh!
4. F1: Rip off her pants!
5. F: Yeah, let's rip it off!
((Male voice in the distance asking what is going on, with a disapproving tone))
6. F1: A Xiaosan! A Xiaosan! ((Overshouting the male))
7. F: Come and see a Xiaosan being beaten up!

6. Conclusion

The present paper has examined the pragmatics of RPCH. We intend to rehearse here that the phenomenon of humiliation is universal, and so our Chinese data is not 'exotic' – if there is a sense of pragmatic culture-specificity involved in the incidents studied, it may be the gravity of being humiliated in the notably face-sensitive Chinese cultural context. It might be this face-sensitivity why participants of RPCH follow a strong sense of rights and obligations, i.e., why RPCH is ultimately a ritual form of behaviour rather than an ad hoc form of outburst of aggression. This ritual behaviour helps us to model this recurrent form of language aggression, and from the perspective of the broader Special Issue it fills a knowledge gap as it illustrates that pragmatics provides a powerful tool for linguistics to model aggressive forms of interpersonal behaviour that would be difficult to systematically capture by using other linguistic approaches.

From a politeness theoretical point of view, the topic investigated reveals that traditional norms fulfil an important role in Chinese language use. Paradoxically, while traditions are often associated with etiquette, our research has revealed that they are also integral part of language behaviour that saliently violates what is regarded as 'appropriate' in public. For instance, forcing the guilty person to kowtow roots in Chinese traditions associated with courtroom trials. In a similar fashion, the preference of archaic expressions and metaphors over semantically ruder swearwords may reflect Chinese understandings of how such forms of aggression need to be moral justified.

We hope that our tentative analysis of RPCH will initiate further academic discussions on the phenomena of punishment and humiliation, and the importance of studying Chinese data to understand sociopragmatics beyond the limitations of the present study.

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