

‘Family-culture’ and Chinese politeness

An emancipatory pragmatic account

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Abstract: While researchers have questioned the suitability of classic Western models for accommodating Chinese linguistic politeness phenomena, inadequate attention has been devoted to the role of ideologies in understanding Chinese language use. This study examines the key ideological notion of *jia wenhua* 家文化 ‘family culture’, and uses it to model some typical discursive practices of (im)politeness in contemporary China. As an ideology, ‘family culture’ has its roots in ancient Chinese philosophy, and it continues to prevail to the present day. Adopting this ideological notion as an analytic construct, this study seeks to formulate a set of new maxims to account for some discursive practices of Chinese politeness, which neither previous Western nor Chinese models have captured. In so doing, it contributes to emancipatory pragmatics by demonstrating the necessity of deploying culturally-grounded ideologies as analytic constructs, such as ‘family culture’ in this study, to rationalize some types of Chinese sociopragmatic behaviour.

Keywords: politeness; ideology; Chinese language; family culture; emancipatory pragmatics

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the first-wave politeness research (e.g., Lakoff 1973; Brown & Levinson 1978/1987; Leech 1983), there has been an upsurge of interest in challenging the ‘universalist’ politeness theories. First, various scholars (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1982; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984; Fukushima 2003; Gu 1990; He & Ren 2016; Ide 1989, 2011; Kyono 2017; Matsumoto 1989; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár 2016; Trosborg 2010) have questioned the universal applicability of politeness theories from a cultural perspective. Second, variational pragmatic studies (e.g., Schneider & Barron 2008; Barron & Schneider 2009) have suggested that the ideologies and practices of politeness also vary to a remarkable extent across countries with the same language but different cultures (e.g., Mainland China and Singapore). Third, recent studies have revealed a social variation in the perception of (im)politeness; e.g., in China, the ideologies and practices of politeness are subject to significant variation across genres (Chen 2017), gendered language use (e.g., Chen 2005; Li et al. 2019), regions (Deng &

Qiu 2019; Lin et al. 2012; Ren et al. 2013), occupations (Shen & Qian forthcoming), generations (Duan 2008; Wang & Ren forthcoming), and urban–rural areas (Chen & Li 2019).

Amongst such endeavours, the emancipatory pragmatic perspective initiated by Sachiko Ide and others (e.g., Ide 2011; Kádár 2017a,b; Katagiri 2009; Saft 2014) is the primary inspiration for the present study. Emancipatory pragmaticists aim to break away from Anglo theoretical paradigms, and to deliver politeness theories based on their own cultural concepts. In the Chinese field, Yueguo Gu has perhaps been the most influential emancipatory pragmaticist. By adopting a number of important cultural values, such as respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement, Gu (1990) proposed a set of politeness ‘maxims’ (cf. Leech 1983), which are rather different from the (im)politeness maxims of Brown & Levinson (1978/1987). However, he did not explore any specific ideology that could be used to rationalize some of the discursive practices of Chinese politeness. In other words, there is a knowledge-gap in the field in this respect: while some tendencies of Chinese (im)politeness behaviour are known to be different from those in other languages and cultures, these differences have not been rationalized from an ideological angle. This can become problematic when one attempts to rationalize Chinese sociopragmatic behaviour, such as the tendency for the Chinese to use kinship terms when addressing people who are non-kin (Ren & Chen forthcoming) and the prioritization of harmony over criticism (Li 2015; Zhang & Wang 2004). This study intends to follow the strand of emancipatory pragmatic research, by investigating the cultural ideologies that underlie Chinese politeness; i.e., it intentionally uses ideology as an analytic construct. Specifically, it proposes to use *jia wenhua* 家文化 ‘family culture’ as an ideological analytic notion to interpret some typical Chinese discursive practices of politeness behaviour/evaluation.

In this paper, after reviewing the existing research on Chinese politeness (section 2), I will present the various core notions of Chinese ‘family culture’ (section 3). In section 4, I will propose a new set of politeness maxims which are based on ‘family culture’ and supported by the analysis of data from the Chinese corpus linguistics research center of Peking University (<http://ccl.pku.edu.cn>) and online novels.¹ It will be shown how these maxims can rationalize some typical discursive practices of politeness in

¹ This study is conceptual rather than empirical. For this reason, it is not strictly data-driven. The examples used are meant to serve the purpose of illustration. To collect these examples, the author searched on the web-based corpus using metapragmatic expressions such as *wairen* 外人 ‘outsider’) that could define the maxims.

Chinese, which previous models may not be able to do. Section 5 concludes the study by discussing some implications and the future direction of research. It is hoped that this study may contribute to a growing body of literature which seeks to enrich Chinese politeness research by using native academic conceptualizations (e.g., Chen 2018a,b; Ran & Zhao 2018; Zhou & Zhang 2018).

2. Previous research

In the past three decades, Chinese politeness has attracted extensive attention (e.g., Gu 1990; 1992; Xu 1993; Qian 1997; Pan 2000; Kádár & Pan 2011; Pan & Kádár 2011), primarily due to the fact that its study can bring alternative concepts to the theory of politeness (and, as such, Chinese politeness research represents a key area of emancipatory pragmatics). Perhaps, the most influential criticism of Western thoughts on politeness (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1978/1987; Leech 1983) has been that of Gu (1990), who – without explicitly mentioning this endeavour – has delivered a primarily emancipatory account of Chinese politeness, by arguing that it cannot be described via universal frameworks like that of Brown & Levinson (1978/1987). Gu (1990) proposed various maxims through which one can capture Chinese politeness behaviour, namely the Self-denigration Maxim, the Address Maxim, the Tact Maxim, and the Generosity Maxim. In a later paper published in Chinese, Gu (1992) elaborated further on these maxims and added new ones like modesty.

As an emancipatory attempt, Gu's conception of Chinese politeness is based on some important notions of Chinese *li* 礼 'polite ritual', namely, respectfulness, modesty, refinement and attitudinal warmth. Such characterization of politeness from the perspective of Chinese culture is helpful for explaining many types of politeness phenomena, such as the reasons why Chinese speakers use kinship terms when addressing people who are non-kin and why the use of the appropriate form of address plays an important role in (im)politeness evaluation. However, it is worthy of note that some of the cultural notions that Gu invoked, such as respectfulness, are widely shared across different cultures.²

Other scholars, such as Suo (2000), Qian (1997), and Zhou and Zhang (2017), have also attempted to theorize Chinese politeness from a native angle. For example, Zhou and Zhang (2017) conducted a metapragmatics-

² Chen et al. (2013) once challenged the notion of modesty as a typical Chinese ideology.

based study on ‘face’ in Chinese. Zhang (2018), while agreeing with Gu on many accounts, suggested replacing attitudinal warmth with friendliness.

Despite the pioneering work undertaken by Gu and others, many questions remain that need to be explored from a culturally emic perspective, particularly the following: (1) why do Chinese people often show politeness by using a kinship term for a person who is non-kin?,³ (2) why do they tend to avoid saying polite words to close friends or intimates?, (3) why do they sometimes show deference with kinship terms?, and (4) why have they a tendency not to verbally show disagreement or challenge others? While the behaviors projected by these questions are not necessarily unique to the Chinese culture, they are salient and influential in China. Explicating these behaviors from a culturally emic perspective helps to understand and communicate with the Chinese people. Therefore, it is imperative that we further pursue the emancipatory line in the study of Chinese linguistic politeness. Specifically, the present study will utilize ‘family culture’ as an analytic construct, a cultural ideology that permeates almost every corner of Chinese society. Hopefully, the current endeavour may have implications for the study of other cultures.

3. A sketch of ‘family culture’ in China

Chinese culture is ‘a culture of family’ (Li 1988) because it is by and large family-based and family-oriented. Chu (2003) defined the ‘family culture’ as follows:

‘以血缘亲情为纽带的家庭、家族为实体存在形态，以父系原则为主导，以家庭、家族成员之间的上下尊卑、长幼有序的身份规定为行为规范，以祖先崇拜和家族绵延兴旺为人生信仰的一整套家法族规，并把这一套家法族规从理论上升泛化到全社会各个层面，成为华人社会传统中占主导地位的思想体系。’

‘a dominant ideological system in the social tradition of Chinese people, which has stemmed from the society-wide generalization of a whole set of family norms, values and customs, such as the rule of the patriarchal principle, respect for superiority and seniority, worship for ancestors, and creed of familial continuity and prosperity, with the family and clan as concrete entities of existence bonded by blood or marital relations.’ (Chu 2003, 16)

The ‘family culture’, from which Chinese social and political culture is derived, is at the core of (traditional) Chinese ideological system.⁴ ‘The

³ It should be cautioned that I am not claiming that it is only Chinese people who generalize the use of kinship terms, but rather it is characteristic of them to do so.

⁴ Fei Xiaotong, a renowned Chinese sociologist, argues that the crucial factor that makes it possible for Chinese culture to pass down from generation to generation is

family culture and its generalization is truly the core of traditional Chinese culture’ (*op.cit.*, 15). According to some classic works of traditional Chinese culture such as the *Analects of Confucius*, family is both a unit of Chinese social structure and the foundation of the entire value system. Indeed, ancient China is sometimes described as a ‘state-as-family society’, unlike the ‘city-as-state society’ of ancient Greece (Feng 1985/2012, 33). It is thus no coincidence that *jia* 家 ‘family’ has an essential association with *guo* 国⁵ ‘state’: the Chinese word *guojia* 国家 ‘country’ contains the character *jia*. Thus, in Chinese national ideology, the whole society is familial. Liang Shuming, a celebrated Chinese thinker, philosopher, educator and master of sinology, pointed out that all Chinese ethics originate from the family and go beyond it (2005, 72). He further remarked:

‘[...]更为表述彼此亲切，加重其情与义，则于师恒曰‘师父’，而有‘徒子徒孙’之说；于官恒曰‘父母官’，而有子民之说；于乡邻朋友，则互以伯叔兄弟相呼。举整个社会关系而一概家庭化之，务使其情益亲，其义益重。’

‘[...] To express intimacy and intensify affect and loyalty, Chinese people often address a teacher by *shi fu* 师父 (literally means ‘master-father’), hence the so-called *tu zi tu sun* 徒子徒孙 (literally means ‘apprentice-son and apprentice-grandson’); they often address an official by *fu mu guan* 父母官 (literally means ‘parent-official’), hence the so-called *zi min* 子民 (literally means ‘child-subject’); they address neighbours and friends by uncles or brothers. Thus, all social relations in the whole society are seen as those of the family, in order that the affect among social members becomes deeper and loyalty becomes stronger.’

(Liang 2005, 72–73)

Since social relations are quite often largely regarded as being extended versions of familial relationships, it is perhaps no exaggeration to argue that ‘family culture’ is an archetypal norm of Chinese social life and interaction. Indeed, among Yang’s (2004) four major cultural orientations⁶ in Chinese society, ‘family orientation’ is the most influential one.

The following three core notions derivable from Chinese ‘family culture’ are particularly relevant to our discussion of Chinese politeness (as presented in the next section):

First, ‘family culture’ stresses the notion of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 ‘close like a family’ (e.g., Yang & Li 2017). This normative notion is present in

‘probably kinship’ (1998, 84), the cornerstone of the Chinese family culture. Wang (1995) claims that the notion of family is still at the core of Chinese people’s belief and behaviour.

⁵ 国 is the simplified form of 國 in the contemporary Chinese writing system.

⁶ The other three are relation orientation, authority orientation, and other orientation.

various Chinese idioms,⁷ such as *tian xia yi jia* 天下一家 ‘all people in the world are a family’, *si hai yi jia* 四海一家 ‘all people in the world are a family’, and *qing tong yi jia* 情同一家 ‘we feel like coming from the same family’. Essentially, the notion is reflected in addressing people who are non-kin as family members. Examples include: *shi xiong/shi di* 师兄/师弟 ‘senior/junior academic brother’, *shi jie/shi mei* 师姐/师妹 ‘senior/junior academic sister’, (to strangers) *shu shu/da bo* 叔叔/大伯 ‘uncle’, (X) *ye ye* (X) 爷爷 ‘(X) grandpa’, (X) *nai nai* (X) 奶奶 ‘(X) grandma’, (X) *jie* (X) 姐 ‘sister (X)’, (X) *xiong/ge* (X) 兄/哥 ‘brother (X)’, *ge ge/di di* 哥哥/弟弟 ‘senior/junior brother’, *jie jie/mei mei* 姐姐/妹妹 ‘sisters’, etc. All the above ways of addressing, sometimes designated as *cheng xiong dao di* 称兄道弟 ‘to call each other brothers’, reflect that one characteristic of Chinese politeness is the generalized use of kinship forms of address (Ren & Chen forthcoming). The notion of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 ‘close like one family’ also finds expression in the traditional Chinese practice that people with close relations *bai ba zi* 拜把子 ‘to become sworn brothers’, or *ren gan qin* 认干亲 ‘to become pseudo-relatives’. In addition, pupils, students, or disciples of the same master/teacher are regarded as *tong men* 同门 ‘members of the same family’. The notion of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 ‘close like one family’ leads to the distinction between *jiaren* 家人 ‘family member’ and *wairen* 外人 ‘outsider’.

Second, ‘family culture’ emphasizes the notion of *jiazu* 家族 (meaning ‘family clan’ (e.g., Zheng 2015; Hu & Huang 2018)). As a social unit, *jiazu* consists of a number of families sharing a common surname and ancestor. This explains why, in Chinese, we often say *wu bai nian qian shi yi jia* 五百年前是一家 ‘Five hundred years ago we were of one family’ to people bearing the same surname. More importantly, a person’s position in the family tree is clear. This not only leads to a sense of family honour, but also to the formation and operation of a strong hierarchical system in Chinese culture, which requires obedience to parents, teachers⁸ and leaders. Naturally, but unfortunately, the system is very conducive to the formation of a patriarchal style of leadership, as is often observed in many Chinese organizations and institutions. Due to the notion of 家族, Chinese people

⁷ This notion, as well as the next two, may be supported by other types of evidence, yet it may not be easy to present them in words. Here, I just follow Gu (1990) in demonstrating them by virtue of well-known and extensively used idioms or set expressions.

⁸ In traditional China, teachers are considered to be the parents of students, as evidenced in the Chinese idiom *yi ri wei shi zhong sheng wei fu* 一日为师，终生为父 ‘being a teacher one day amounts to being a lifelong parent’.

have a strong tendency to value the family above the individual and are more accustomed to living in a network of contact (Qin 2009).

Third, ‘family culture’ highlights the notion of *he wei gui* 和为贵 ‘harmony is the most precious’ (e.g., Sun 2017; Zhang 2017). The stability and prosperity of a family is impossible in the absence of harmonious family relationships, as manifested in the Chinese idiom *jia he wan shi xing* 家和万事兴 ‘all things flourish in a harmonious family’ and *he qi sheng cai* 和气生财 ‘we make a big fortune in a harmonious atmosphere’. This notion of harmony is extended to both society and country, and is manifested in the central government’s urge to build a *he xie she hui* 和谐社会 ‘a harmonious society’. Although this can sometimes lead to the inhibition of one’s desires, ideas, hobbies, interests, etc., it can or even must be accepted for the sake of familial, social or national harmony.

In the following section, we will elaborate on how the three key notions of ‘family culture’ serve as the basis for the four important maxims of linguistic politeness, as outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: Core notions of ‘family culture’ and related maxims of politeness

Family culture	Core notions	Maxims of politeness
	yi jia qin 一家亲 ‘close like one family’	Maxim of Addressing Closeness
		Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth
	jia zu 家族 ‘family clan’	Maxim of Familial Deference
	he wei gui 和为贵 ‘harmony is the most precious’	Maxim of Interactional Harmony

Using these maxims, I will be in a good position to answer the four questions which were raised at the end of section 2. What needs to be clarified at this stage is that deference in the third maxim is motivated by the core notion of *jia zu* 家族 ‘family clan’ in the family culture, thus different from the idea of deference based on social hierarchical order in Gu’s (1990) exposition of *li*. The same distinction applies to the notion of harmony in the fourth maxim. Yet, since the core notions of the family culture are projected to the social system, there are intrinsic relations between Gu’s interpretation and mine.

4. Maxims of politeness based on the notions of Chinese ‘family culture’

The core notions of ‘family culture’ (not exactly equivalent to collectivism)⁹ which were outlined above have given rise to some discursive practices of politeness in China, as I shall demonstrate in this section. Based on these notions, I would like to propose a set of new maxims to account for these discursive practices, which previous Western or Chinese models of politeness have not been able to properly accommodate.

4.1. Maxim of Addressing Closeness based on *yi jia qin* 一家亲 ‘close like a family’

From the cultural notions of 一家亲 ‘close like a family’ in ‘family culture’, we can derive the Maxim of Addressing Closeness. The maxim may serve as a criterion for (im)politeness judgement when people address or refer to each other. According to this maxim, it is polite to identify a person who is non-kin as a family member (such as *gege* 哥哥 ‘brother’) so as to draw close the distance between each other, but impolite to regard one as an outsider (such as calling someone *wairen* 外人 ‘outsider’).¹⁰ This may suggest that the Chinese conception of politeness highlights the internal relationship between politeness and identity (kin vs. non-kin in this maxim). Consider (1):

- (1) Context: Tang Aying was wronged by Granny Qiaozhu in her factory and went to find the party secretary to complain.

她刚走到门口，郭彩娣和管秀芬迎面走来了。郭彩娣看见汤阿英一脸忧愁，直率地问道：

‘啥事体不高兴？阿英！’

汤阿英四顾无人，深深叹了一口气，不知道从啥地方谈起，便没有开腔。

‘拿我彩娣当外人吗？我们姊妹有啥不好讲的？’

‘不是拿你当外人……’

‘那么，是拿我当外人了，’管秀芬多心地说，‘那好，我走开，让你们自家人谈谈。’

⁹ Collectivism is not a traditional notion in Chinese culture, as it has only become salient after the introduction of communism and socialism in China. While collectivism is based on the organizational system of a labor or work unit, ‘family culture’ derives its unity and integrity from the family as a social cell.

¹⁰ While quite a few scholars (e.g., Pan 2000; Kádár & Pan 2011; Pan & Kádár 2011) have discussed the generalized use of kinship terms, none of them have used ‘family culture’ to account for the ideological foundation of the politeness phenomenon.

‘小管，’ 汤阿英讲到这里，几乎要哭出来，说不下去，紧紧咬着下嘴唇。

‘小管，谈正经的，别和阿英开玩笑。你这张嘴总不饶人！’

(周而复, 《上海的早晨》第44章)

‘The moment she got to the office, Guo Caidi and Guan Xiufen came up. Seeing that Aying appeared to be worried, Guo Caidi asked directly:

‘Why are you unhappy, Aying?’

Finding that no one else was around, Tang Aying sighed. She did not say anything, not knowing where to start.

‘Do you see me Caidi as an outsider? What can’t we sisters say to each other?’

‘No, I do not see you as an outsider.’

‘So you are treating me like an outsider,’ Guan Xiufen said oversensitively. ‘Well, I’ll go away and let your family talk to each other.’

‘Guan,’ Tang Aying said, almost shedding tears and choking, biting her lower lip.

‘Guan, take it seriously. Stop kidding her. You are such a big mouth!’

(Zhou Erfu, *Morning in Shanghai*, Chapter 44)’

In (1), Tang Aying, Guo Caidi, and Guan Xiufen were co-workers at the same factory. They were on good terms with each other. When Guo Caidi found Tang Aying was reluctant to share her woes with her, she showed her dissatisfaction by questioning whether Tang Aying was treating her as an outsider. True, she was not a ‘family member’ of Tang Aying, but by addressing each other as *wo men zi mei* 我们姊妹 ‘we sisters’, she conveyed her affection to Tang Aying. Thus, in her eyes, as ‘sisters’, they ought to be able to speak their mind to each other. In the same vein, upon hearing Aying’s reply to Guo’s question, Guan Xiufen oversensitively believed that Tang Aying was treating her, instead of Guo, as an outsider. She appeared to be rather offended and threatened to leave. Her contrast of 外人 ‘outsider’ and 自家人 ‘family member’ (actually, Guo Caidi and Tang Aying were not members of the same family, either) highlighted her dissatisfaction. Essentially, her response was a misunderstanding of Tang Aying’s actions.

To date, none of the often cited Western models of politeness have answered the question as to why the generalized use of kinship terms is a salient feature of politeness. Although Gu (1990) did propose the Address Maxim, he only emphasized the proper way to address others, without capturing the (non-)choice of a kinship term as a means, or mark, of (im)politeness. However, by postulating the Maxim of Addressing Closeness based on the notions of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 ‘close like a family’, we can offer an account of the politeness practice in question, such as Guo Caidi’s use of *zi mei* 姊妹 ‘sisters’ to refer to Tang Aying and herself and Guan

Xiufen's use of *wai ren* 外人 'outsider' as opposed to *zi jia ren* 自家人 'family member'. Specifically, the metapragmatic use of the above terms presupposes the operation of a politeness evaluation which is based on the notion of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 'close like a family'.

4.2. Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth based on *yi jia qin* 一家亲 'close like a family'

From the notion of *yi jia qin* 一家亲 'close like a family' of 'family culture', we can also derive the Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth. It is polite to be hospitable and take the initiative in showing care and concern for relatives, friends, colleagues or other acquaintances (again, not strangers, who are not inside the family's social circle). Thus, we regard them as being our guests and with whom we are supposed to be courteous. In contrast, Chinese people are not supposed to be courteous with their family members. The maxim may account for the use of some common types of metadiscourse such as *ke qi* 客气¹¹ 'to treat sb. like a guest' and *jian wai* 见外 'to treat sb. like an outsider'. Using *ke qi hua* 客气话 'words that serve to treat sb. like a guest', such as imposing directives *duo chi dian* 多吃点 'Eat more', *zai lai yi bei* 再来一杯 'Have one more glass', and non-serious invitations (Ran & Lai 2004) such as *you kong lai jia li zuo ke* 有空来家里做客 'Come to my house when you are free' and *you kong qing ni chi fan* 有空请你吃饭 'I will treat you when we have free time' is a token of politeness, rather than a threat to negative face. In addition, the maxim may explain why Chinese people often show interest in the private matters of others (in the eyes of Westerners) such as incomes, marital status, and party membership.

According to the Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth based on 'family culture', one is polite by being attitudinally warm to relatives, friends and other acquaintances and, in return, by expressing gratitude for the hospitality or favour that one receives.¹² Following the same maxim, we can understand why Chinese people are not obliged to say words of gratitude to family members for favour or hospitality received (as captured by the

¹¹ The Chinese Dictionary defines *ke qi* 客气 as (1) being polite in public places; (2) being modest; (3) using polite expressions, or acting politely. There are further usages of *ke qi* 客气, such as when a person is praising you, you may say *ke qi le* 客气了 'it's very kind of you'.

¹² Ran and Zhao (2018) studied a similar interpersonal phenomenon in Chinese society in terms of *qingmian* 情面 'affection-based face', but they did not incorporate Chinese 'family culture' into their discussion.

saying *zi ji ren bu shuo ke qi hua* 自己人不说客气话, 'one's own people don't need to say polite words'. Such social practice extends to people who do not come from the same family but may see each other as family members. One may sometimes interpret words of courtesy as estrangement, and thus one can become offended. Consider example (2):

- (2) Context: Luofeng, who was in love with Qin Shitong, has just given a medical treatment to her father. Wei Qinman, Qin's friend, was also present.

秦诗彤马上想起了父亲还一个人在房间里那! 赶忙问着母亲。洛风也非常想知道秦诗彤父亲的情况, 毕竟着他第一次有意识地使用灵气治病, 也想知道效果!

‘放心吧, 他早就待不住满地走了, 这要不是我拦着, 早就跑你这来啦! 这么多年没有走了, 现在一下能走了, 别提多高兴了, 对了, 还让我把谢谢你的话一定带到!’

‘谢什么呀谢, 秦叔太客气了, 这不就是我应该做的吗?’

‘是啊, 阿姨, 都是自家人, 就不要和洛风客气了。’

(不忧风, 《都市山民》第120章)

‘Qin Shitong suddenly thought of her father who was alone in the room, and asked her mother about him. Luofeng was also eager to know about her father's condition, since it was the first time he had treated someone with nimbus and he wanted to know its effectiveness.

‘No worries. He couldn't wait and he has walked here and there. If I hadn't blocked him, he would be here now! He hasn't been able to walk for ages. He is overjoyed now that he can walk. Yes, he asked me to thank you!’

‘No need to thank me. Uncle Qin is really too courteous. Isn't that all I should do?’

‘He's right. Auntie, you're all one family. Don't stand on courtesy with Luofeng.’

(Bu You Feng, *Mountain Villagers in Cities*, Chapter 120)’

In example (2), Luofeng performed a great favour for Qin Shitong's father by giving him an effective treatment. The father asked his wife to express his gratitude to Luofeng, which would have been common practice. However, Luofeng did not accept the offer of gratitude, partly because he was Qin Shitong's father. As he was in love with her, he was supposed to regard her father as being his family member as well. In that case, it would have been improper for Luofeng to accept the father's gratitude. Hearing his reply, Wei Qinman immediately made it explicit that Luofeng and the Qins should regard each other as being family members (都是自家人 ‘you're all one family’). Her request for Qin Shitong's mother not to ‘stand on courtesy with Luofeng’ (不要和洛风客气 ‘Don't stand on courtesy with Luofeng’) was justifiable in light of the Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth.

While both Leech (1983) and Gu (1990) propose the Tact Maxim and the Generosity Maxim, their maxims cannot explain why Chinese people do not need to be courteous with family members (*jia li ren bu*

ke qi 家里人不客气 ‘family members do not stand on courtesy with each other’) and may feel alienated or even offended when they are treated with more attitudinal warmth than they expect. This explains why Luofeng declined the words of thanks from Qin Shitong’s parents, and why Wei Qinman asked them not to thank him. Again, the Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth underscores the relation between politeness and identity (insider vs. outsider in this maxim) in Chinese, as far as attitudinal warmth is concerned.

4.3. Maxim of Familial Deference based on *jia zu* 家族 ‘family clan’

From the notion of *jia zu* 家族 ‘family clan’ in ‘family culture’, we can derive the Maxim of Familial Deference. Specifically, it is polite to show respect by saying words that deliberately belittle oneself, elevate others, or both, on a familial basis. For instance, Chinese people may show familial deference by calling others *lao xiong* 老兄 ‘elder brother’, *laoda* 老大 ‘eldest brother’, *xuexiong* 师兄 ‘academic elder brother’, or *qianbei* 前辈 ‘elder generation’ to elevate them, but call themselves *xiaodi* 小弟 ‘younger brother’ or *wanbei* 晚辈 ‘younger generation’ to denigrate themselves. Essentially, the maxim also points to an intrinsic relation between politeness and identity in Chinese culture (senior vs. junior in this case). Consider (3):

- (3) Context: Xi Ziqiang, head of the Football League of England, was coming with his subordinate Bihu to a negotiation meeting at Pujing Casino, Macao. Bihu was now introducing Xi to He Tianhong, a leading gambler, who was the owner of the casino.
- ’没想到吧，亚洲的赌王，竟然会是我这么一个瘸腿的老头子！呵呵 ‘何天鸿开起了自己的玩笑。
- ’不不不，何老，您永远都是亚洲的赌王！‘壁虎奉承完了，然后开始介绍谈判人，‘我是‘驭风者’的头领，这位是英足总主席习自强，这位是他的恋人，曹梦萱女士！’
- ‘哈哈，习老弟，久仰久仰，搞足球你可真称得上是一位‘小老大’啊！’何天鸿夸奖道。
- ‘不敢，何老先生！’习自强拱手作揖道，‘还希望前辈能多提携晚辈！’
- ‘哎，’何天鸿厌恶地摆了摆手，‘什么前辈后辈的，以后，这些虚伪的礼节全给我扔掉，以后大家就兄弟相称了！’（点响羊肉汤，《足球青训营》第43章）
- “You wouldn’t imagine that the leading gambler of Asia is such an old guy with a lame leg!” He Tianhong started to joke about himself.
- ‘No no no, senior He, you’re always the leading gambler of Asia!’ After the flattery, Bihu started to introduce the negotiators. ‘I’m head of ‘Yufengzhe’. This is Xi Ziqiang, head of the Football League of England. This is his girlfriend, Ms Cao Mengxuan.’

'Haha, brother Xi, I've heard a lot about you. You're really a 'junior boss'.' He Tianhong commended.

'No, I dare not take all this, senior Mr. He!' Xi Ziqiang bowed. 'I really wish you elder generation could help me younger generation.'

'Eh,' He Tianhong waved his hand displeasingly. 'Down with the elder generation or younger generation! From now on, get rid of the pretentious etiquette. Let's call each other brother!' (Dian Xiang Yang Rou Tang, *Football Youth Camp*, Chapter 43)

In example (3), both Bihu and Xi Ziqiang observed the Maxim of Verbal Deference when interacting with He Tianhong. Specifically, Bihu used *he lao* 何老 'senior He' to flatter He Tianhong (in Chinese, to call someone X 老 is a way of showing respect to someone of advanced age). Xi Ziqiang not only used a similar expression *he lao xian sheng* 何老先生 'senior Mr. He', but also addressed He Tianhong as *qianbei* 前辈 'elder generation' and himself as *wanbei* 晚辈 'younger generation'. The notion of the family clan in Chinese 'family culture' distinguishes people of the same clan according to their position across the generations, such that an older person may be considered as junior to, and therefore needs to show deference to, a younger person from an earlier generation. This notion has extended beyond the family clan. This explains why it is deferential for one to call another *qianbei* 前辈 'elder generation' or to call oneself *wanbei* 晚辈 'younger generation', as represented in example (3). Having recognized Xi's deferential intention, He Tianhong deemed it to be 'pretentious etiquette' and turned it down. Instead, he pressed for a more equal and close relationship by asking Xi to call them each 'brother'.

Note that this maxim is meant to be much narrower in scope than Gu's (1990) Maxim of Self-denigration. For Gu, a whole range of Chinese expressions show self-denigration or other-elevation, such as *nin* 您 the honorific form of 'you', *hanshe* 寒舍 'my humble house', *zhuo* X 拙 X 'clumsy X', *gui* X 贵 X 'honorable X', and *dazuo* 大作 'your great writing'. Some addressing practices explored in He and Ren (2016) also testify to Gu's maxim, such as the use of *juzhang* 局长 'director' to address a deputy director. However, for the Maxim of Familial Deference here, only those expressions that belittle oneself or elevate another as a family member will be considered as following the maxim, such as Xi Ziqiang's use of the self-denigrating *wanbei* 晚辈 'younger generation' or other-elevating *qianbei* 前辈 'elder generation' in (3). Thus, the use of kinship terms for deference sake, captured by the Maxim of Familial Deference, is rooted in the notion of *jia zu* 家族 'family clan'.

4.4. Maxim of Interactional Harmony based on *he wei gui* 和为贵 ‘harmony is the most precious’

From the notion of *he wei gui* 和为贵 ‘harmony is the most precious’ in ‘family culture’, we can also derive the Maxim of Interactional Harmony. According to this maxim, it is polite to refrain from disagreeing with, refusing, or displeasing others. This maxim assists in understanding much of Chinese politeness phenomena, such as the dominant use of compliments in Chinese book reviews, an over-enthusiastic applause for a superior’s opinion, ‘harmonious’ silence (e.g., listeners do not voluntarily propose questions in lectures and students are unwilling to ask their teachers any questions in order to avoid possible conflicts), and a comparative lack of criticism in academic literature reviews and other genres (Li 2015; Zhang & Wang 2004).

The Maxim of Interactional Harmony can be deployed for explaining the commonly observed interactional practice in China in which people refrain from disagreeing, challenging, questioning, or even retorting for the sake of harmony. This is often testified by the interlocutor’s deliberate silence, not just in the context of the family but also outside of it. Consider (4):

- (4) Context: Goudan was an orphan. Born into a poor family, he did not marry until the age of 30. His wife was somewhat ugly, which became a laughing stock for many people in his village.

孤儿狗蛋，模样蛮俊，而立才娶。媳妇是牛家湾豆腐匠牛二家千金牛秀。

牛秀芳龄26，皮不黑，个不矮，就那磨盘脸、小眼睛、大嘴巴不惹人喜。

狗蛋却心满意足。当初，村里有人问狗蛋，牛秀那么丑，你喜欢？

狗蛋笑笑，不吱声，心里自有主张：咱山里人吃饭靠力气，过日子图实惠，

牛秀面相丑心蛮好，活计也不赖，找个杨柳细腰，样子倒中看，当太太养着？

(樊如萍：《惑》，《知识与生活》1993年第5期)

‘Orphaned Goudan looked rather handsome, and got married at 30. His wife, Niu Xiu, was the second daughter of a bean curd maker, Niu Er, in Niujiawan. Niu Xiu was 26 years old, not black, not short. The millstone-like face with small eyes and big mouth, though not attractive, was to Goudan’s satisfaction. Some villagers asked Goudan: ‘Why do you like a woman as ugly as Niu Xiu?’

Goudan smiled and said nothing, but at the bottom of his heart he knew: as mountain dwellers, they needed strength to make a living. Ugly as she was, Niu Xiu was kind and good at manual labour. A beauty with a tiny waist looked good, but must he raise her as a lady throughout his life?

(Fan Ruping, *Puzzles, Knowledge and Life*, 1993, 5)’

In (4), in response to the co-villagers’ gossip about his ugly wife, Goudan did not argue back or quarrel with them. Rather, he smiled and said noth-

ing (*bu zhi sheng* 不吱声 'said nothing'). This did not mean that he had no ideas or opinions. Indeed, he knew very well (*xin li zi you zhu zhang* 心里自有主张 'knew at the bottom of his heart') that what he needed was a capable wife, instead of a beautiful but incapable one. He could have shared his wise thoughts with the co-villagers, but that might have resulted in meaningless arguments or even disputes. In effect, his reticence and silence could serve to maintain harmony with them.

Apparently, the Maxim of Interactional Harmony echoes that of seeking common ground proposed by Gu (1992) and the Maxim of Opinion Reticence (retaining their own opinions) and that of Feeling Reticence (avoiding expressing their own feelings) proposed by Leech (2014). What differs here is that my maxim is intended to cover a wider scope and has a cultural motivation. That is, aside from expressing agreement and avoiding expressing different opinions, retaining one's own views and not troubling others are also manifestations of this maxim. Besides, it also encompasses the observation that Chinese people tend to comply with the requests, advice and the like from their friends, colleagues, relatives, and family members, whenever possible, with a view to maintaining harmony.

5. Conclusion

Unlike previous research that discussed the relationship between culture and politeness, both globally and in general cultural terms, this study has attempted to account for some typical Chinese discursive practices of politeness from the perspective of 'family culture'. Specifically, adopting the ideology of 'family culture' as my analytic construct, I proposed a new set of maxims, namely, Maxim of Addressing Closeness, Maxim of Familial Deference, Maxim of Attitudinal Warmth, and Maxim of Interactional Harmony, for capturing the typical Chinese politeness phenomena in question. It was shown that these maxims could account for these discursive practices, whilst previous Western or Chinese models were unable to do so.

Essentially, the present paper has attempted to contribute to the emancipatory perspective initiated by Sachiko Ide and others, by using Chinese language data. By breaking away from the Western mainstream paradigm, which is based fundamentally on an individualistic culture,¹³ it explicated some Chinese conceptions and practices of politeness on the basis of an array of core notions characteristic of 'family culture', such as *yi*

¹³ But this may be debatable since the Western paradigm of politeness largely embodies an individualist ideology

jia qin 一家亲 ‘close like one family’, *jia zu* 家族 ‘family clan’ and *he wei gui* 和为贵 ‘Harmony is the most precious’. Considering that Gu (1990; 1992) approached Chinese politeness from the perspective of Chinese *li* 礼 ‘polite ritual’, I might designate the present endeavour as a ‘Neo-Gu-ian approach’. The difference is that while Gu stopped at proposing the various maxims of Chinese politeness, I went a step further in exploring the ‘family culture’ root for some of his maxims. It is hoped that this study could contribute to the burgeoning body of knowledge of Chinese politeness in general, and emancipatory research into Chinese politeness in particular, by providing a culturally emic explanation for the foundations of some micro-level politeness conceptions and practices. In so doing, I hope to have highlighted that resorting to relevant culturally-specific ideological notions is an informative route that can be adopted for understanding the politeness conception and practices of a particular society and culture. Thus, it might serve as a reference for exploring the cultural ideologies of politeness in other cultures.

To prove the validity of the maxims I have proposed, I should also supply some negative evidence. A potential source of evidence might come from younger generations of Chinese people. It should be noted that they do not appear to follow the maxims of politeness which have been postulated in this study to the same degree as their (grand)parents, as is frequently observed. If this is indeed the case, we might attribute it to the weakening of ‘family culture’ ideology, presumably due to the impact of the one-child policy over the last four decades (1978–2016). As a result of this policy, the only child of a family has no further brother(s) or sister(s) from the same parents, nor is he or she a cousin, an uncle/aunt, a brother/sister-in-law for the next generation. This fact could largely reduce his or her awareness of an extended family that existed for his or her (grand)parents. While largely speculative, my above reasoning could be tested by future research involving a large-scale survey.

It must be conceded that the present study is not intended to cover all the politeness implications of ‘family culture’. For example, family honour in a culture may prioritize the respect for family face over individual face. Therefore, more effort is needed to further investigate the relationship between ‘family culture’ and Chinese politeness using a corpus-based approach.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the data used in the study were all literary in terms of genre. The sampling might be misleading in the sense that the ‘family culture’ does not affect Chinese polite behaviours in other genres of communication. This is not the case, as the core notions of the

culture may find expression in virtually all aspects of Chinese social interaction. For example, Chen and Ren (2018) reveal that the ‘family culture’ can provide an explanation for the generalization of kinships in academic settings. It is only due to space limit and for ease of collection that this paper chose to be consistent in the use of the same genre of examples for illustration.

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