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# Managing multiple identities: A new perspective on compliment responses in Chinese

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, we offer an identity perspective on compliment responses (CRs). Our purpose is twofold: first, to enrich our understanding of CRs by addressing the bias in research towards CRs as an im/politeness phenomenon; second, to question the assumption of the correlation between CR strategies and identities and to challenge the essentialist view of identity implicit in previous studies. We propose a fourfold perspective on identity by incorporating cultural identity into the influential three levels of self-construal formulated by Brewer and her colleagues (e.g. Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We present it by illustrating the dynamic construction of individual identity, relational identity, group identity, and cultural identity through qualitative analyses of naturally occurring CRs in Chinese. We show that macro strategies (i.e., acceptance, refusal, and in-betweenness) and, by implication, micro strategies (e.g. upgrade) can all construct the above four identities depending on context. We aim to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a simple correlation between CR strategies and identities widely assumed in the existing literature.*

## 1. Introduction

Compliment responding in at least 50 (varieties of) languages has been heavily investigated. Our survey of this literature shows that the speech act has hitherto been investigated principally as an im/politeness phenomenon, which dates back to Holmes's (1986, 1988) studies on giving and receiving compliments in New Zealand English. However, too little attention has been given to the identity facet of the speech act that is inextricably linked with im/politeness. For one thing, no mention is made of identity-related key concepts such as 'identity', 'identification', and 'self-presentation' in most of the compliment response (CR) literature. For another, some studies sporadically refer to notions such as "cultural identity" (Lee, 1990; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Huth, 2006), "Chinese identity" (Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001), and "individuals' identity" (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), but all devoid of systematic discussions within any identity framework, let alone providing a clear definition. Consequently, it is not clear what these identities exactly refer to and how they are related to im/politeness and face in executing CRs.

Three fundamental issues thus need our attention. Firstly, identities as alluded to above are to a large degree assumed to be essentialist entities that cannot be verified empirically or observed interactively. This, among other things, is radically and ironically at odds with the (re)conceptualisation of face and im/politeness as an interactional and discursive phenomenon, a theoretical stance some previous studies adopt. Secondly, the existing research generally assumes a correlation between CR strategies (e.g. denial/refusal) and identities (e.g. Chinese cultural identity), thereby oversimplifying the complex relationship between language and identity. These issues raise the questions of how compliments can situationally trigger a dynamic identification process and how CRs can be used as strategies of constructing various identities. Thirdly, lack of a systematic attempt to investigate identity in CRs and its importance in understanding the speech act call for a dedicated inquiry into this topic. This study, therefore, is designed to address this research gap by examining the ways in which the complimentee juggles between different identities, with the end

of providing a new perspective on CRs.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 overviews CR studies, in which Subsection 2.1 shows previous preoccupation with face and im/politeness to the exclusion of the identity facet of the speech act, and Subsection 2.2 criticises the essentialist view of identity and the correlation between CR strategies and identities assumed by the existing literature. In Section 3, we propose a fourfold perspective on identity, which synthesises two social psychological theories of identity. Section 4 discusses the construction mechanism of the fourfold identities by outlining the interrelationship between attributes or compliment topics, CRs, and identity. Section 5, consisting of four subsections, presents authentic examples that demonstrate the ways in which the fourfold identities are constructed through CRs in Chinese. Section 6 summarises how the fourfold identity perspective can provide a window into this much-studied speech act that has hitherto been principally approached as an im/politeness phenomenon.

## 2. Studies of compliment responses

In this selective literature review, we start by showing that most CR studies have examined the speech act as an im/politeness phenomenon at the expense of its identity facet. Then we question the underlying essentialist view of identity and the assumed correlation between CR strategies and identities in previous work.

### 2.1 Compliment responses as an im/politeness phenomenon: A bias in research

Despite the exponential growth of CR studies, the speech act has to date been investigated principally as an im/politeness phenomenon. This bias in research is shown by outlining previous publications according to their theoretical orientations.

Early studies, as noted by Chen and Yang (2010), mainly draw insights from disciplines such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, and psychology. This seems to be especially clear in Manes (1983), Manes and Wolfson (1981), Wolfson (1983, 1989), and Herbert (1986, 1989, 1990), exclusively from US instructions. Then, starting with Holmes (1986, 1988), the late 1980s witnessed an upsurge of interest in

pragmatics, featuring the increasing use of politeness theories as the framework. Im/politeness or face has since become the dominant concern of CR studies. Due to space constraints, this subsection just sketches out the relevant studies rather than providing an exhaustive literature review.

Above all, more often than not, most CR studies adopt either of the two major approaches to im/politeness currently available in the literature (cf. He, 2012a). To begin with, framed within a modern approach to im/politeness, most of them investigate certain aspects of CRs. At the cultural level, some look at cross-cultural differences and similarities (Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Tang & Zhang, 2009; Cheng, 2011), whereas others seek to characterise the cultural specificity of CRs (Holmes, 1986; Jaworski, 1995; Ye, 1995; Sifianou, 2001; Yuan, 2002; Yu, 2003; Lee, 2009; Danziger, 2018). On the other hand, there have been researchers who are fascinated by spontaneous face-to-face interaction, examining CRs in intercultural settings. Wieland (1995), for example, scrutinised CRs between French and American English speakers and Cheng (2003) between Chinese speakers and English speakers.

Notwithstanding the shared interest outlined above, studies tend to differ greatly in focus. Up till now, researchers have examined the taxonomy of CR strategies (Holmes, 1988; Yu, 2004), research methodology (Yuan, 2001; Golato, 2003; Jucker, 2009), teaching and learning (Holmes & Brown, 1987; Billmyer, 1990; Rose & Kwai-fun, 2001; He, 2018), preference organisation (Pomerantz, 1978; Golato, 2002), and syntactic and semantic formulaicity (Holmes, 1988; Yuan, 2002). This listing, although far from complete, suffices to indicate the richness of CR studies. As noted by Chen and Yang (2010), new avenues of investigation are opened up every time the speech act is approached from a different angle.

Then, in concert with the discursive turn at the beginning of the third millennium (cf. Mills, 2011), interest has increasingly shifted to a more nuanced analysis of participants' evaluations of im/politeness. For instance, by analysing a corpus of naturally occurring CRs in Chinese, He's (2012a, 2012b) studies reveal participants' diverging perceptions about the functions

of utterances and generational variations of im/politeness judgments about CRs in naturally occurring conversations. Similarly, based on results from Chinese people's evaluative judgments of CRs, Spencer-Oatey and Ng (2001) argued that modesty in Chinese is managed in a much more complex way than previously theorised.

Finally, several attempts have also been made to seek alternatives to the above approaches. Some studies, for instance, resort to emic concepts. A good example is Sharifian (2005, 2008), who argued in favour of the so-called cultural schema of *shekasteh-nafsi* ('modesty') in describing CRs in Persian. A few others either propose new notions or draw insights from neighbouring fields. For instance, Ruhi (2006, 2007) advanced the notion of self-politeness to characterise CRs in Turkish. Ruhi, drawing on Chen (2001), argued that CRs are in effect self-politeness strategies, by which the recipient displays confidence, individuality, or impoliteness. Further, Ruhi (2007, p. 107; see also Ruhi & Doğan, 2001) turned to Relevance Theory for insights, arguing that "evaluations of (im)politeness [in CRs] emerge via higher-level explicatures as a metarepresentation of the higher-level intention of the addressee".

Despite their tremendous contributions, CR studies of the above scholarly traditions fail to give enough attention to identity claims, which, according to many studies (Tracy, 1990; Spencer-Oatey, 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Ruhi, 2007; Locher, 2008; Blitvich, 2013), are crucial for understanding interpersonal communication. While we cannot rule out the possibility of multiple reasons, it seems fair to say that the marginalisation, if not total neglect, of the identification function of CRs is largely attributable to the bias in research just sketched.

2.2 Compliment responses as a marker of identity: More questions raised than answered

Here we review studies that concern themselves with identity in one way or another. We maintain that for the concept of identity to be meaningful in analyses of CRs it needs to be clearly articulated. We take issue with the assumption about the correlation between CRs and identity, arguing that their

relationship is far more complex than previously assumed. We then show the essentialist view of identity implied in the CR literature and argue that the constructionist view is the legitimate approach to the dynamics of identification in interaction.

Given the intimate relationship between identity, face, and im/politeness (Spencer-Oatey & Ruhi, 2007; Blitvich, 2013), identity seems to be present implicitly or explicitly in most, if not all, CR studies. This may be especially apparent in investigations framed broadly within variational pragmatics, particularly those focusing on differences between cultures (see a detailed survey in Chen, 2010), regions/varieties (Creese, 1991; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Lin, Woodfield, & Ren, 2012), generations (He, 2012a, 2012b), people of different sexes (Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1990), and L1/L2 speakers (Yu, 2004; Sharifian, 2008; Cheng, 2011). Nonetheless, we restrict ourselves to work that explicitly mentions this important yet largely overlooked aspect of the speech act. Overall, studies that touch upon this topic seem to have raised more questions than they have answered.

To begin with, identity as an analytical concept remains rather vague. Due to the lack of systematic and consistent discussions in the existing literature, the concept is generally assumed to be self-evident. This can be partly seen from the way the concept is used in the literature. For instance, sex identity (Holmes, 1988), personal identity (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), self-identity (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), group identity (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), social identity (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), cultural identity (Lee, 1990; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Huth, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, Ng & Dong, 2008), Chinese identity (Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, Ng & Dong, 2008), among others, have been used without being defined or being distinguished from their neighbouring concepts such as self-image, self-presentation, and self-concept. Moreover, rather than demonstrating in detail how participants engage in contextualised identity negotiation, they tend to speculate on the potential function of CRs. This, as Spencer-Oatey and Ng (2001) suggest, is partly attributable to the nature of their data – most of them are solicited, for example, through the

instrument of DCTs (discourse completion tasks) and hence lack the subtle nuances of spontaneous interaction (cf. Yuan, 2001; Golato, 2003).

A second major issue with previous studies is the widespread assumption that CR strategies correlate with identities. Notably, such an assumption is, more often than not, masqueraded as claiming that CRs mirror cultural values despite individual and contextual variation in motivations. Preference for rejection or non-agreement in many Asian languages, for instance, is often equated with displaying cultural identity (Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001; Yu, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, Ng & Dong, 2008). Acceptance or agreement, by contrast, is often believed to enact individuality and independence in Anglo-Saxon cultures. Such a dichotomous view sometimes leads some to attribute Chinese speakers' increasing use of this strategy to the influence of Western cultures (Chen & Yang, 2010), although internal socioeconomic changes may also contribute to such a change (He, 2012a, 2012b).

To take a concrete example, Lee (1990, p. 135) claimed that a denial of compliment functions as “a marker of cultural identity” for Hawaii Creole English speakers because it conveys “a sense of modesty”. This claim is open to challenge and criticism. First, as noted by Ruhi (2006), rejection responses can sometimes be substantive, although they are normally intended as a polite ritual. Second, we cannot rule out the possibility that individuals may use modest responses strategically to achieve some other interactional goals. Third, the strategy may simultaneously have multiple identity motives, including, for example, one or more levels of identity, and it is hard to say exactly which identity is invoked out of context (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011; see Section 3).

Another important issue has to do with the assumption of essentialism that underlies much of the existing work. Identity is often implicitly assumed “as housed primarily within an individual mind, so that the only possible relationship between identity and language use is for language to reflect an individual's internal mental state” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 587). In other words, identity under this view is a taken-for-granted category and a feature of a person that is absolute and



objectively knowable. In empirical studies, this often becomes observable when identity is equated with social categories. For example, when interpreting her finding that ironic upgrade was regularly used by Spanish but not British informants, Lorenzo-Dus (2001, p. 122) claimed that “unless speakers are made aware otherwise, they may bring into their intercultural encounters pre-conceived, often stereotypically negative, evaluations about the other individuals’ identity”. Lorenzo-Dus went on to claim that, at the macro level, differences in CRs between the two languages “are believed to have considerable weight in evaluations, often stereotypically negative, concerning the identity of individuals in both cultures”. The two claims share the assumption that identity is *something out there* for people to evaluate before interactants even come into contact.

While acknowledging cognitive elements of self-aspects, we believe that identity is social in nature. People “not only *enact* elements of their personal, relational and collective [and culture] selves through the process of social interaction, but they also *negotiate* and *construct* them, with the result that identities *develop* and *emerge* through interaction” (Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 642; italics added). Rather than treating identity as fixed, pre-given and pre-existing, and hence as a resource of discourse as the essentialist view does, we consider identity as constructed, fluid, and multiple in discourse. From the constructionist perspective, identity “is a process – *identification* – not a ‘thing’; it is not something that one can *have*, or not, it is something that one *does*” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 6; original italics). Therefore, it is crucial that we unpack the identification process in social interaction.

### 3. A fourfold perspective on identity

“An exhaustive discussion of identity as a concept or of the many existing approaches to its study would be a monumental task” (De Final, 2012, 263; see Bucholtz & Hall, 2005 and Vignoles et al., 2011 for useful reviews). Our literature review in this section is thus highly focused. We begin by outlining the sociopsychological theory of identity known as ‘three levels of identity’, highlighting its advantages in identity research. We then proceed to propose a fourfold perspective on identity by

arguing for the need to incorporate the cultural aspect of identity into the above theorisation.

Among the many traditions of research on identity is the influential theory known as 'three levels of identity'. Identity, according to Brewer and her colleagues (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2016[2001]), can be defined at several different levels of inclusiveness, i.e. the individual (or personal) identity, the relational (or social) identity, and the collective (or group) identity. Correspondingly, the individual self, characterised by personal attributes and self-characteristics, is individuals' differentiated self-concept. The relational self is the self-concept derived from personal connections or relationships with significant others. The collective self is characterised by individuals' in-group membership. As such, the individual aspect defines self as 'I', whereas the relational and collective aspects shift focus of self-definition to 'we', hence they can be seen as socially extended self-concepts.

This theory has been the focus of many perspectives within the identity literature because of its robustness. Some scholars, for example, maintain that any aspect of identity can be viewed as defined by the individual, relational, and collective processes. The principal thrust of the three-level formulation of identity was recently summarised as follows:

[M]ore or less any perspective on identity implicitly or explicitly engages with multiple aspects of identity that might be viewed at different levels of content and in terms of different levels of processes. Viewing identity through these multiple lenses is therefore necessary if we are to capture the full richness and complexity of what identity means and how identity processes operate.

(Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 10)

Put another way, the three-level formulation of identity provides a general theory of identity in the sense that multiple aspects of identity with which its alternatives engage could all be viewed and analysed at three levels of inclusiveness. Moreover, this also means that a three-level (or four-level as discussed herein) analysis of identity is "necessary to capture

the full richness and complexity” of identity and identification regardless of the age, sex, generation, language fluency, or cultural background of interactants as indicated in Subsection 2.2.

Nonetheless, the theory does not seem to be as robust as Vignoles et al. claim and hence needs modification. Some of the strongest criticisms come from cross-cultural psychologists who argue that the above theorisation neglects the cultural aspect of the self. Notably, for instance, Hong et al. (2010) argued that on the surface, cultural identity, i.e., “self-definition with reference to a *knowledge tradition*, or a collection of ideas and practices shared or widely distributed in a delineated population” (2010, p.324; original italics), appears to be redundant with collective (or group) identity as theorised by Brewer and others (see above). Individuals’ strong identification with a knowledge tradition, according to these scholars, means that cultural identity is part and parcel of their self-concept, and people with weak identification with a knowledge tradition see cultural identity as being peripheral to their self-definition. Similarly, individuals’ identification with a collective indicates the degree to which the group membership is integral to their self-definition. For example, an individual who strongly identifies with Confucianism may strongly identify with the collective; one who identifies with this collective is also very likely to value Confucianism.

Clearly, a major issue with the three-level theorisation of identity arises from its apparent assumption that cultural identity is subsumed under collective identity. This cannot stand up to strict scrutiny. For example, Hong et al. (2010, p. 324, italics added) argue convincingly:

*Treating culture as a group* is defensible only when a particular knowledge tradition is completely shared in the designated group. To be sure, there are cases where a particular knowledge tradition is widely distributed in a collective. However, even the most widely distributed knowledge tradition is seldom shared completely among all members of a group.

If this argument applies to intercultural encounters in countries such as the USA, where culture often refers narrowly to ethnic

culture (e.g. that of Chinese as an ethnic group), then it would be truer to say that we need to distinguish between collective/group identity and cultural identity in interactions between participants from different national cultures. In this view, the drawback of the tripartite-level formulation of identity can be readdressed by incorporating cultural identity. Consequently, people have four ways to represent the self, namely, the individual self, the relational self, the collective self, and the cultural aspect of self. Individuals are thus able to define the self in four corresponding ways: individual identity, relational identity, group identity, and cultural identity. For brevity, we call the extended framework 'a fourfold perspective on identity' in this study.

Culture defies precise definition due to the diversity of intellectual traditions and disciplines (cf. Kim, 2007), hence we provide a working definition. In the present study, culture refers, roughly speaking, to Chinese traditional culture, excluding sub-cultures such as youth culture, ethnic (e.g. Mongolian) culture, and local (e.g. Minnan or Hokkien) culture. It is akin to the concept of cultural memory – “all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p.126). Consistent with this, the definition of cultural identity embedded in the quotation from Hong et al. (see above) is adequate for the purpose of this article. With two notions defined as such, CR strategies perceived by interactants to be prescribed by long-held Chinese cultural norms and values including, for example, modesty, self-denigration, humility, and reserve (cf. Gu, 1990; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) could be interpreted as occasioning cultural identification.

Unlike cultural identity, central to the construction of group identity, as suggested above, is 'sharing' something that members believe to be able to bind them together. When CRs are concerned, an instance of group identity construction can be located in conversations when interactants agree to share certain attributes as a cohesive tie. This is why group identity and cultural identity cannot be conflated and how they can be empirically examined as distinctive levels of identity.

#### 4. Self-attributes, compliment responses, and identity

Self attributes, CRs and identity are intimately interrelated. It is usually self-attributes, variously referred to as 'topics', 'merits' and 'characteristics' in the CR literature, that draw compliments. This positive evaluation then triggers the process of identification in which certain aspects of identity become prominent when the complimentee aligns herself or disagrees with the complimenter in reassessing the praised self-attribute.

Despite scarcity of literature related to this interrelationship, Spencer-Oatey's (2007) discussion of the convergences and divergences between identity and face provides invaluable insights into the usefulness of CRs and attributes in analysing identity in everyday conversation.

Identity and face, Spencer-Oatey contends, share 'self-image (including individual, relational, and collective construals of self) as their interface and both comprise a multitude of attributes and self-characteristics such as personality traits, abilities, and physical features. This suggests that individuals' sense of identity is largely based on self-attributes, which fall into three groups: personal identity attributes, relational identity components, and group/collective identity elements (cf. Berzonsky, 2011). Since a CR in effect reassesses the complimenter's attribution of attributes, by taking a particular stance in the response, the complimentee intentionally or unintentionally conveys the degree to which she is similar to or distinct from the complimenter and other co-participants, if in multiparty interactions, or builds or reinforces her relationship with significant other(s). Further, as indicated in many previous CR studies, the complimentee may also communicate the message that her response, motivated by certain self-attributes such as modesty, is socioculturally determined. In other words, it is in this process that the fourfold identities can be dynamically constructed.

Moreover, as argued in Section 2, identity, like face, is socially constructed in interaction although it has cognitive foundations. When criticising the essentialist view of attributes implied in Goffman (1967), Spencer-Oatey argues that people's evaluation of a given attribute, and hence the face claims, varies across

contexts:

[The] attributes ... will *vary dynamically in interaction*, and will not always conform to the socially sanctioned ones (or non-sanctioned ones, in the case of negatively evaluated traits). In fact, it is possible that people will choose to contest one or more approved attributes, and to claim other attributes that are more important to them in that particular context.

(Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 644; italics added)

In line with this argument, the complimentee may, consciously or unconsciously, accept or present some attributes while denying or withholding others in order to project a certain self-image or identity in a given context. From this it follows that identity attributes are subject to complimentees' situational evaluation and hence identity is essentially a socioconstructive phenomenon. For instance, the complimentee may accept, deny, or judge to be negative these 'compliment-worthy' ('positive' or 'approved' in Goffman's (1967) terms) attributes out of different identity concerns as articulated in the preceding section. Therefore, like the dynamic relationship between face and 'the positive social value' or 'approved social attributes', the relationship between self-attributes and identity is subject to situational variation.

As suggested above, the construction of identity unfolds when certain attributes complimented are re-evaluated in CRs with different identity motives. While the complimenter seems to praise the attribute as distinctive, the complimentee can redefine herself in terms of her relationship with the complimenter or group in reassessing the merit or by attributing the attribute-triggered CR as culturally defined. The next section illustrates this identification mechanism.

## 5. Constructing fourfold identities through compliment responses

In this section, we present a number of examples that demonstrate how each of the four aspects of identity is constructed. All examples were derived from naturally occurring conversations recorded in China, and the

compliments and CRs were verified by interactants themselves in follow-up interviews (see He 2012a for a detailed account of the data collection and interviews).

Two caveats are in order here. First, as argued earlier, despite the availability of other theories of identity, we engage with illustrating the fourfold perspective elaborated above because of its universal relevance in identity research. Second, while acknowledging the multifunctionality of language and the multifaceted nature of identity (e.g. it may be simultaneously a personal, relational, collective, and cultural phenomenon, Vignoles et al., 2011), we focus on the salient identity that becomes manifest in the conversations.

### 5.1 Individual identity

In responding to a compliment, the recipients sometimes claim the aspect of their attributes that they perceive to differentiate themselves from others. In addition to interactional evidence, interviewees' emphasis of their choice of a specific CR as intended to express their self-uniqueness is evidence of individual identity construction in the conversation. The strategies, at the macro level, can be acceptance, rejection, or something in between. In our follow-up interviews, some recipients attributed rejection or opting out to their 'identity attributes' including personality traits such as introversion and shyness; others, in contrast, perceived the strategy of acceptance, including upgrade and self-elevation, as predetermined by the value they attached to individuality. These identification strategies are illustrated respectively below.

(1) This example comes from a mixed-sex conversation in a tea bar among university students. The C (compliment) and CR sequence took place when Xiong, male, volunteered to serve drinks. No particularly intimate or romantic relationship had been developed among them<sup>1</sup>

- |     |        |   |
|-----|--------|---|
| 1   | Xiao:  | <i>Xiǎo kěndìng yīhòu shì yīgè hǎo zhàngfū.</i><br>Xiao is surely to make a good husband in the future. |
| → 2 | Xiong: | <i>ā</i><br>Ah  |
| 3   | Duan:  | <i>Kàn de chū, kàn de chū.</i>  |

- We can see, we can see.
- 4 Luo: *nǐ bù yào ... hāhā ... zhème kuājiǎng rén*  
You don't ((laugh)) compliment people like this
- 5 Xiao: *Shì ma*  
Really
- 6 Luo: *bùyào zhème kuājiǎng rén.*  
Don't compliment people like this.
- 7 Xiao: *kànkàn tā duō tiēxīn.*  
See, he is really so nice.

Xiong was voluntarily serving drinks at table when Xiao, female, issued a C, predicting that Xiong would make a good husband in the future (Turn 1). The positive evaluation was supported by Duan (Turn 3) but opposed by Luo (Turns 4 and 6). Despite these conflicting reactions, the complimenter insisted and reinforced her earlier assessment with a further positive comment (Turn 7). The intention of the monosyllabic response 'Ah' appears rather ambiguous. Among other interpretations, it may express embarrassment, surprise, or doubt in the multiparty mixed-sex conversation. Worse yet, the conversation does not appear to provide sufficient evidence as to pin down exactly his perception of self. For instance, it is hard to say whether the response is meant to present the participant as "an interchangeable exemplar of some social category" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p.83) or as a unique and independent person. However, our interview extract, as reproduced below, provides insights into his self-definition as differentiated from others.

*tā shuō wǒde xìnggé fāngmiàn – wēnróu ... yǒu diǎn bùhǎoyìsī, wǒ zhè gè rén bié rén chēngzàn wǒ de shíhòu dōu huì yǒudiǎn bùhǎoyìsī ... kěnéng shì yīnwéi bǐjiào nèixiàng yīdiǎn, érqǐě bǐjiào qiānxū ba.*

She complimented me on my character, i.e. gentle ... A little embarrassed. I am the kind of person who would feel a little embarrassed when people compliment me ... Probably because I am very shy by nature, and very modest.

It becomes clear that the response 'Ah' expresses embarrassment at the C issued by a female friend in public. This seems to suggest that the recipient perceived his personality



traits, such as gentleness, shyness, and modesty, to be 'core' self-aspect (Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 641). These attributes, suggested by Spencer-Oatey, concern the complimentee's individual, personal qualities and hence are central to, or defining of, his sense of who he is. Xiong's sense of distinctive self and individual identity becomes salient when he repeatedly highlights 'I' and 'me', which apparently assigns more significance to his private self than to his public and relational self. By using two 'personal self-descriptions' (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p. 90), i.e. 'I am the kind of person who ...' and 'I am very shy ... modest', the complimentee presents himself as distinct from others because of his relatively unique traits. Moreover, the above self-perception indicates that identities, including individual identity, are "in part habitual and less than fully conscious" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 585).

The implicit refusal, as revealed by the complimentee, is attributable to his propensity to get embarrassed in such a context. This indicates the complimentee's awareness of this personality trait as an important aspect of individual self-concept, thereby diverging from previous etic interpretations of similar strategies as marking Asian or Chinese cultural identity (Lee, 1990; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2001). Interestingly, as demonstrated in the next subsections, a refusal can actually be used to represent all the other three aspects of self, relational, collective, and cultural. The multiple identification functions of CRs provide counterevidence to the correlation between refusal and Chinese culture as widely assumed, explicitly or implicitly, in previous studies, especially those based on DCT data (e.g. Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Tang & Zhang, 2009; Chen & Yang, 2010). Moreover, a modest refusal is indeed able to build cultural identity (see details in Example 6), but identification is context dependent such that there does not exist a direct link between refusals and Chinese culture. This suggests that quantitative studies as mentioned above risk missing the nuances and subtlety of the speech act and ultimately risk making blanket assumptions about identity (cf. Section 6).

The same level of identity, as noted above, can be achieved using strategies other than refusal. The following example illustrates how the complimentee legitimises her individual

level of self-construal by accepting or agreeing with the compliment.

(2) Taken from a conversation among eight university undergraduates, the C and CR were exchanged between Xiao (female) and Li (male)

- 1 Xiao: *Nǐ de nà gè chún de línkuò tǐng hǎokàn de.*  
Your lip contour is very good-looking.
- 2 Li: *Yībānrén dōu shòubùliǎo, lián wǒ zìjǐ dōu shòubùliǎo.*  
Ordinary people can't resist (the temptation of my lips), even I myself can't resist.

Li accepts the C by upgrading the charm of his lips in public (other participants present at the table). By dismissing the Confucian philosophy that suppresses people's desire to accentuate personal distinction, the unconventional and creative CR deviates from the 'socioculturally required' norm of politeness in Chinese (cf. Gu, 1990). The individuated self-image stands out even more conspicuously when the complimentee positioned 'I vis-à-vis 'ordinary people', thereby highlighting his distinctiveness. Consistent with this, the complimentee praised himself in our interview: 'My lips are so well-shaped that they are literally irresistible to anyone. If girls kiss me, just once, and they would fall in love with me.' The otherwise implicit individual self ('I') is made salient in the comments.

Alternatively, Li may be joking given that the extract under analysis is embedded in a multiparty conversation replete with teasing and banter, particularly between the complimenter and complimentee. If this is the case, like the use of non-fixed and original compliments in Greek (Sifainou, 2001), this jocular interaction could simultaneously be interpreted as constructing relational identity as illustrated in more detail below.

## 5.2 Relational identity

Identity, by definition, is formed in relation to others. This intuitively is especially evident at the relational level. It is an interdependent self typically represented in dyadic relationships such as parent-child, doctor-patient, superordinate-subordinate, and intimates. Technically, as illustrated by the following two examples, interactants often

achieve this identity by (re)distributing their relationships through the use of CR or identification strategies appropriate to the context.

(3) This exchange took place between male and female ex-classmates at the beginning of a social gathering among a group of alumni in their late twenties.

1 Jun: *Ó, nǐ zhēnde shì yuèlái yuè niánqīng, yuèlái yuè piāoliàng ma.*

Oh, you are really younger and younger, prettier and prettier [particle].

→ 2 Xue: *Ó, nǐ shì yuèlái yuè yǒu wèidào le.*

Oh, you are more and more charming.

Modesty has been theorised as being characteristic of politeness in Chinese (Gu, 1990). Empirically, however, the motivations of CRs are far more complicated than previously thought. For instance, there is mounting evidence that the traditional norm is giving way to emerging norms of interaction. Recent studies such as Chen and Yang (2010) show that generally Chinese have become more receptive of compliments. To complicate matters further, CRs in Chinese vary greatly with other dimensions, including generational and regional variations (He, 2012a, 2012b; Lin et al., 2012). Moreover, as in the American white middle class (Wolfson, 1989), compliment responding in Chinese is associated with the social distance between the parties involved:

[T]he occurrence of compliments is shown to be relatively low in equal relations and the respondents prefer using a compliment response strategy which deviates from the prescriptive politeness norm. Offering compliments and responding with ritual denials to show modesty are applied more to interlocutors of distant social relationships than to those of close relationships.

(Ye, 1995, p. 275)

This is widely shared among interviewees who made comments such as “There is no need to denigrate yourself in front of people who are close to you” and “If one’s too modest

about a good friend's compliment, it seems too distant" (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008, p. 107). They unmistakably tell us the function of CRs as a linguistic device to reinforce and negotiate social relationships. This is echoed by the complimentee by using a range of relational self-descriptions:

*Shuōdàodǐ, shǒuxiān, wǒmen shì lǎo tóngxué. wǒmen guānxì hěn hǎo, suǒyǐ bìng bù tài zàiyì zěnme shuō. wǒde yìsī shì, rúguǒ bù shì hěn shúxī de huà, wǒ jiù bù huì nàme shuō le. wǒmen shàng zhōngxué de shíhòu jiù shì péngyǒu le, suǒyǐ bù huì yīnwéi shuō le shénme jiù shēngqì de. rúguǒ wǒ shì dìyīcì jiàn dào tā, tā gōngwéi wǒ shí wǒ shì bùhuì nàme huí yīng de. yěxǔ huì shuō 'ō, xièxiè!' huò 'xièxiè nǐde gōngwéi!'.*

After all, above all, we're old classmates. Our friendship is very good, so we don't mind too much how we say. I mean, if we weren't very familiar, I wouldn't have said so. Since secondary school we have been friends, so neither would feel offended by whatever we say. If I had met him for the first time, when he complimented me I wouldn't have responded that way. I would have probably said "Oh, thank you" or "Thanks for your compliment".

The complimentee repeatedly highlighted her close relationship with the complimenter as motivating her indirect acceptance of the compliment. In other words, the creative compliment and CR were designed to maintain and reinforce their close friendship and old 'classmateship'. Precisely, in producing the jocular response, the complimentee communicated the message that she was claiming her relational aspect of identity. Equally interesting is the recipient's metapragmatic comments that she would have responded differently, i.e. expressing appreciation, if the complimenter was a stranger. This counterfactual thinking not only further reinforces the above identity claim, but points clearly to the basic function of CRs as a discursive strategy of presenting the relational aspect of self-construal.

While the above example illustrates relational identity that is more likely to be taken by essentialist-oriented studies as a static social category, the following excerpt exemplifies the discursive construction of relational identity purely in a local context.

(4) Juan and Luo were from the same department of a university. Luo

was an officer from the Students' Union. Juan had just returned from her student teaching placement in a secondary school before the party.

- 1 Juan: *Wǒmen qù jiàoshū de shíhòu, tāmen jiào wǒmen lǎoshī, āiyō, hàixiū le.*  
When we did our teaching placement, they [the students] called us *laoshi* ((teacher)), oh, really embarrassing.
- 2 Luo: *((laugh)) wǒ ruò shì nǐ de xuéshēng, jiù jiào nǐ Juānjuān lǎoshī.*  
*((laugh))* If I were your student I would call you Juanjuan *laoshi* ((Teacher Juanjuan)).
- 3 Juan: *Hēi, wǒde xuéshēng yě jiào wǒ Juānjuān lǎoshī.*  
Wow, my students, too, called me Juanjuan *laoshi*.
- 4 Luo: *Nǐ kàn ma, Juānjuān lǎoshī.*  
You see [particle], Juanjuan *laoshi*.
- 5 Juan: *Āiyō, bùgǎndāng.*  
Aah, I don't deserve it.

Juan started by talking about the embarrassment she experienced when she was addressed as *laoshi* ('teacher') by her students at the placement site (Turn 1).<sup>2</sup> Her friend Luo (male) then made an attempt to build an unequal student-teacher relationship with her by announcing that he would call her 'Juanjuan *laoshi*' ('Teacher Juanjuan') if he were her student (Turn 2). Juan was surprised, since it is exactly the way she was addressed by her students (Turn 3). In the subsequent turn, a verified compliment, Luo simply addressed her friend as 'Juanjuan *laoshi*', hence positioning Juan as his teacher (Turn 4). A student-teacher relationship is thus emerging from the process of switching between address terms. Juan's rejection of the compliment suggests her unwillingness to endorse the proposal to form such a new relationship (Turn 5). This example highlights the emergent, interactional and negotiatory nature of identity (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

### 5.3 Group identity

Above all, a conceptual and terminological clarification is needed. The term 'group identity' is used in lieu of 'collective

identity' based on the assumption that the former is shared by group members. However, as evaluated in Section 3, collective identity as theorised by Brewer and her colleagues is conceptually flawed in that some of their core assumptions, for example, their assumption of culture- (or nation-) wide homogeneity, cannot always be legitimised.

The notion of group identity, as outlined earlier, "addresses the 'we-ness' of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes, around which a group coalesce" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 386). As far as CRs are concerned, this level of identity becomes manifest when the complimentee presents herself as sharing certain attributes with her co-participants including the complimenter. A recurring pattern we observed is that the attribute claimed by the complimentee differs from the ascribed one but is claimed to be shared among participants. This, as will be illustrated below, is motivated by her pursuit of group membership because claiming the compliment-worthy attribute would suggest her desire to stand out from the crowd (but see Turn 28 in Example 5). Regarding CR strategies, the complimentee refuses the compliment and instead underlines the shared or similar attribute. She secures her in-group membership when a consensus is achieved among the group, which, as unpacked below, can be a long negotiation process.

(5) This episode is excerpted from a light-hearted party conversation that took place in County YY. Participants, all in their forties, are secondary school teachers from the three neighbouring counties of YY, SP, and JS in SW China. QJ is a town in JS. Lee is from SP, Shao from JS, and all other participants from YY.

- |   |       |   |
|---|-------|---|
| 1 | Feng: | <i>Lee lǎoshī jiā bù shì běndì de, nǐ jiā shì QJ ma?</i><br>Teacher Lee is not a local. Are you from QJ?  |
| 2 | Shao: | <i>SP.</i><br>He's from SP.   |
| 3 | Feng: | <i>SP, wǒ yī tīng nǐ de shēngyīn jiù yǒu diǎn xiàng SP huòzhě QJ.</i><br>SP, the moment you began to talk I felt you spoke with a slight SP or QJ accent. |
| 4 | Shao: | <i>bù shì hěn tūchū le.</i><br>No longer very obvious.  |
| 5 | Mei:  | <i>SP rén shì yào cōngmíng diǎn, hái yǒu.</i>   |

- 6 Lee: SP residents are a little cleverer, by the way.  
*Zhèr shàng qù diǎn, xiǎohédī shàng qù diǎn, wǒ jiā shì.*  
Just a little bit farther than Xiǎohédī is my hometown.
- 7 Shao: *lái le liǎnghuí, qùnián hé jīnnián hóngyīngjiǎng, liǎng nián wǒ dōu shì shuō SP rén gēnběn jiù méiyǒu yīdiǎn SP rén huá de gǎnjué*  
Two times, last year and this year, when I was approached for nominating someone for the Red Cherry Award, I said SP resident ((Lee)) was not at all like a devious SP resident”.
- 8 Lee: ((laugh))
- 9 Hang: *yuánlái huá, dào YY jiù biàn hǎn le.*  
He used to be devious, but has become simple since moving to YY.
- 10 All participants : ((laugh))
- 11 Lee: *bù huá, wǒmen běnshēn jiù shì zhèyàng.*  
Not devious. I am always simple by nature.
- 12 Mei: *Shì ā, SP rén shì yǒudiǎn huá.*  
Yes, SP residents are a little devious.
- 13 Shao: *dàjiā xīnmù zhōng shì “SP rén huáhúlu”, Lee shì gēnběn jiù méiyǒu SP rén huá de nàzhǒng gǎnjué, lǎoběnlǎoshí de.*  
In people’s eyes, “SP residents are slippery gourds ((city slickers))”. Lee does not give even the slightest air of a devious SP resident. He is simple and honest.
- 14 Lee: *nàxiē shì bàqū de, wǒmen shì xiāng tóu shàng de.*  
Those (devious residents) live in the plains, but we live in the mountains.
- 15 Yun: *běnběnfēnfēn de a.*  
Very open and honest.
- 16 Shao: *“SP de huáhúlu”, “JS de hānshānyào”, bù guāng shì zhèzhǒng xiǎoshì ma, zhèngcháng qíngkuàng xià dōu, nǐ bié shuō, SP rén bǐ JS rén gēng ...*  
“SP residents are slippery gourds” ((slick)) whereas “JS residents are simple potatoes” ((simple, open and honest)). Not just in small matters, but in many other respects, you know, on normal occasions, when

- compared with JS residents, those from SP are more ...
- 17 Feng: *cōngmíng*  
Clever.
- 18 Shao: *cōngmíng hěn duō de.*  
Much cleverer.
- 19 Hang: *cōngmíng yě bùjiàndé, jiù shì 'guǐ'.*  
Not necessarily cleverer, but 'sneakier'.
- 20 Shao: *En, en, guǐ hěn duō de.*  
Yeah, yeah, much sneakier.
- 21 Mei: *guǐ diǎnr kěnéng.*  
Sneakier, probably.
- 22 Shao: *Lee shì tèshū diǎn, fǎnzhèng shíjìshàng zài wǒmen HH zhōu, shíjìshàng dōu shuō JS rén hǎn, quèshí shì hǎn diǎnr*  
Lee is an exception. In fact, in our HH prefecture many people say JS residents are a little simple. They are indeed a little simpler.
- 23 Lee: *nǐ bié shuō, zhè liǎng nián bù hǎn le.*  
Don't forget – these years they are no longer simple.
- 24 Shao: *hǎnde, shǐzhōng xiàng wǒmen yīyàngde ma*  
Simple, still simple, just like us [particle].
- 25 All participants ((laugh))  
:
- 26 Feng: *Shao lǎoshī jiā shì JS de?*  
Teacher Shao is from JS?
- 27 Lee: *nǐ dǎo shì lǎoshī.*  
You ((Shao)) are indeed simple.
- 28 Shao: *En, wǒmen shì diǎnxíng de JS hǎn shānyào.*  
Yeah, I am a typical JS simple potato.

The group identity construction in this example takes at least 28 conversational turns. The length itself is evidence of identification as a communicative process. In refusing indirectly Mei's compliment on his *cōngmíng*, 'cleverness', Lee, the only participant from SP county, revealed his accurate place of origin



in the CR, i.e. a village in SP (Turn 6). In so doing, he apparently orients to stressing the participants' shared characteristics, i.e., *han*, 'openness, simplicity and honesty', while distancing himself from the 'slick' SP residents, who, according to Lee, lived in town. This is followed by Shao's and Yun's further compliments on his openness, honesty, and trustworthiness (Turns 7, 13, and 15), which were all accepted by Lee indirectly (Turn 8) and directly (Turns 11 and 14). As it turned out later (Turns 22, 24, and 27), the attribute of *han* is also characteristic of JS residents, which is represented by Shao (Turn 28). Alongside the fact that the party took place in YY county and Hang's suggestion that YY residents are generally open and honest (e.g. Turn 9), the above compliments and CRs serve as linguistic devices to show the participants as a flock of birds flying together. Sharing the attributes of being open, honest, and trustworthy, they presented themselves as a social group that was formed in the process of attribute assessment and reassessment. This lends support to Brewer and Gardner's (1996, p. 86) contention that people who perceive themselves to be similar, for example in attitudes, values, and personal attributes, are more likely to form a group.

Interestingly, as Figure 1 shows, the group identity was formed in the process of constructing two relevant social groups, which was triggered by the first compliment (Turn 5). First, the in-group is composed of YY residents (including participants Hang, Feng, Mei, and Yun), JS residents (Shao as the 'good' representative), and the exceptional SP resident Lee. Second, the out-group consists of the non-present SP plains-dwellers, who were perceived as *hua*, 'slick' (Turns 12, 13, and 16) and *gui*, 'sneaky' (Turns 19, 20, and 21). In his CRs, Lee consistently categorises himself as one from the mountainous countryside and hence draws a boundary between an open and honest self and the sneaky SP plains-dwellers. Moreover, his acceptance of all compliments on his personal trait of simplicity, his agreement with the negative assessment of the SP plains-dwellers as devious, and disagreement with the compliment on his 'cleverness' at the beginning strengthen the intragroup 'common tie', i.e. the characteristics of honesty, simplicity, openness, and straightforwardness. In a similar vein, Shao's

agreement with Lee's compliment, his self-stereotyping as epitomising simple JS residents, his earlier compliment on Lee's simplicity, and distinction between 'slippery gourds' and 'simple potatoes' all contribute to the construction of the positive in-group identity. Clearly, a thread running throughout this extract of conversation is the focus on intragroup similarities and intergroup difference and ultimately on the formation group identity. This, according to Brewer and Gardner (1996, p. 85), is 'the essence of social identity', which provides evidence that an important role "that in-groups play in defining the individual's self-concept derives from comparisons between characteristics shared by in-group members in comparison to relevant outgroups".

Insert Fig. 1 about here

Figure 1: The dynamic process of group identity construction through CRs.

#### 5.4 Cultural identity

Questions of cultural identity, however defined, have acquired increasing visibility and salience in research in the social sciences, cultural studies, and the humanities. Perhaps most notably, it is a major concern in intercultural communication studies and cross-cultural psychology (cf. Kim, 2007). It is little wonder that Berry et al. (2002, p. 357) claim that cultural identity "usually come[s] to the fore when people are in contact with another culture, rather than when living entirely within a single culture".

However, it is not hard to imagine or recall cases where people's cultural self-awareness becomes salient in intracultural contexts. When it comes to CRs, complimentees sometimes identify with 'cultural traditions' or 'ideas' (cf. Section 3) that have long been viewed as pillars of Chinese culture. They include, but are not limited to, modesty, humility, and reserve that have long been believed to govern Chinese speech behaviour, including CRs (Gu, 1990; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). More importantly, this identification is often confirmed in interviews, which have been found to be useful in triangulating investigators' interpretations (Spencer-Oatey &

Ng, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2007; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008; He, 2012a, 2012b). It seems plausible to assume that this is evidence of the enactment of the cultural aspect of the self in the CR under scrutiny. Consider the following conversational extract from a dinner party attended by participants of three generations.

(6) Yuan and Jeli, both female, are good friends from the same place of origin. Jeli, who now works at a university in a different province in China, hosts a party in a restaurant, entertaining six visitors, alongside her parents.

- |     |          |   |
|-----|----------|---|
| 1   | Waitress | <i>Jīntiān wǎnshàng yǒu zhāodài bù zhōu de dìfang qǐng duōduō yuánliàng.</i><br>:   |
|     |          | Please excuse us if our service doesn't fully meet your expectations this evening.  |
| 2   | Yuan:    | <i>Ó, kěyǐ, kěyǐ, nǐ shuō zhè jù huà yuēfā juéde nǐ zhāodài de tài zhōudào le.</i><br>Oh, good, good, your words make us feel even stronger that you provide superb customer service. |
| 3   | Jeli:    | ((laugh))   |
| → 4 | Waitress | <i>Bùhǎoyisi, bùhǎoyisi.</i><br>:<br>(I'm) embarrassed, embarrassed.  |
| 5   | Jeli:    | <i>Kěyǐ le, kěyǐ le.</i><br>Good enough, good enough.   |
| 6   | Yuan:    | <i>Kěyǐ le, yóuqí wǒmen xiǎo de zhè gè zhāodài de zuì hǎo, zhè gè Jeli.</i><br>Good enough, especially, little Jeli ((hostess)) treats us with the greatest hospitality.              |
| → 7 | Jeli:    | <i>Bù hǎo, bù hǎo.</i><br>No, no.   |

Two compliments were issued here, respectively to the waitress and the hostess (Turns 2 and 6). The first one was refused by expressing embarrassment (Turn 4) while the second is structurally and pragmatically equivalent to *nali nali* ('No, No'), which is almost invariably branded as a default strategy in Chinese. Both of the refusals, albeit divergent in linguistic realisations, apparently observe the traditional

Chinese norm of modesty as theorised by Gu (1990). By upholding this time-honoured norm, they displayed cultural identity (cf. Section 3).

However, given the potential of refusals to construct the other three levels of identity (see the preceding subsections), caution needs to be exercised. As an argument running throughout this article, to establish an immediate link between CR strategies and identification oversimplifies the complexity and nuances of the functions of language. Fortunately, as championed by Spencer-Oatey (2007) and Spencer-Oatey et al, (2008), participants' retrospective comments provide insights into the cognitive underpinnings of their responses. For instance, when approached for her comments regarding the second formulaic CR (Turn 7), the complimentee pointed out the causal relationship between humility or modesty and Chineseness or Chinese culture:

*zhèzhǒng bù shì jùjué, shì qiānxū, kěndìng yào qiānxū sa, yīnwéi nǐ zài biǎoyáng wǒ sa, qíshíwǒ juéde hái shì kěyǐ, jiù shuō qǐmǎ fēnwéi hēnhǎo. wǒ juéde hái shì jiēshòu, wǒ juéde hái shì fúhé zhōngguó rén de rénjì jiāowǎng zhōng de yīzhǒng kètào, wǒ juéde shì yīzhǒng kètào.*

It [the response] is not rejection. It is modesty. Surely, I would be modest because you complimented me. Actually, I think it's not bad. At least the atmosphere at the party was very good. I think I actually accepted, which, I think, conforms to the conventions of Chinese interpersonal communication. I think it is some kind of civility.

The ritualised response, according to the complimentee, is culturally prescribed in this particular context. Her comment "It is not rejection, but is modesty" provides emic evidence that the CR is not a substantive refusal, which is possible on occasions (Ruhi, 2006). The formulaic and ritualistic response is thus arguably intended to perform culture and hence enact cultural identity. Perhaps more interestingly, this identification is clear in her acknowledgment that she internally accepted the merit or identity attribute (i.e. hospitality), although externally the response was phrased as a refusal.

Furthermore, as noted elsewhere, the conversation by its very nature is intracultural, but, contrary to Berry et al.'s (2002) claim, cultural identity can sometimes figure prominently.

Precisely, it manifests itself when the ‘imagined Other’ (Davies, 2007; Irvine & Gal, 2009), i.e. ‘Europeans and Americans’ in our case, is conceptualised by some complimentees as the counterpart of Chinese or Chinese culture. Note that ‘Other’ is not at all imaginary, as obviously Westerners and Western culture “are experientially real in everyday life” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 11). In making the comparison, the complimentees present their cultural aspect of self vis-à-vis the implicit Western Other or alterity. Let us look at the following meta-comments made by Jeli on her habitual CRs as illustrated in Example (6):

*Yīnwéi qiānxū shì zhōngguórénde měidé, zhōngguórénde bù xiàng ōuměirén, nǐ kuā tā zěnmē zěnmē, tā hěn zìxìn...zhōngguórénde bù jùbèi zhèzhǒng xìnggé. biǎoshì qiānxū gēng fúhé wǒmen zhōngguórénde xíxíng*

Because modesty is a Chinese virtue. Chinese are not like Europeans and Americans, who, when you compliment them on such-and-such, are very confident ... Chinese do not have such a character. Showing modesty conforms more closely to the Chinese habit.

With this evidence, many would agree that Chinese cultural identity is salient in the second CR, if not the first one, in Example (6). By using this strategy, the complimentee showed humility and modesty in the social encounter because it is a Chinese ‘virtue’, ‘character’, and ‘habit’, which are part and parcel of the participant’s cultural memory. This instance fleshes out the argument that “cultural self-perception is often hidden as ‘the right way’ to organise life [producing a ritual and modest refusal CR such as ‘No, no’ in the present case]” (Jensen, 2004, p. 9). Moreover, the above identity attributes, according to the interviewee, are the opposites of those of Europeans and Americans, which are often vaguely referred to as Westerners or Western culture in Chinese discourse, academic and popular alike. Evidently the complimentee identified with Chinese culture while dis-identifying with the Western counterpart.

In a nutshell, the above CR instantiates the concretion of cultural identity by showing ‘we are this’ versus ‘that’s our opposite’ (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130) and, again, we would like to note that the cultural identification differs from the identity motives of refusals in the preceding examples.

## 6. Concluding remarks

We summarise how the fourfold perspective on identity can be beneficial to a better understanding of CRs as an alternative to the im/politeness perspective. We highlight that there is no simple correlation between CR strategies and identities, including that between Chinese culture and refusals that has long been taken for granted in current literature. We would also note that, in the end, no parallel seems to exist between the fourfold identities and the three elements/aspects of face by Spencer-Oatey (2007).

First and foremost, we have presented a fourfold perspective on identity construction through CRs. As well as complementing the im/politeness perspective, this identity framework has successfully addressed the problematic assumptions about identity in studies that touch on this facet of the speech act by demonstrating the dynamic identification mechanism as summed up below.

To begin with, fourfold identities – individual, relational, group, and cultural – can all be constructed through CRs. CRs are thus discourse resources at the complimentee's disposal in managing multiple identities in social interaction. Compliments and CRs revolve around the assessment and reassessment of certain attributes of the complimentee. Hence, the identity, be it individual, relational, collective/group, or cultural, manifests itself in the process when the complimentee, through a negotiation with the complimenter and significant others present, judges the identity attributes to be distinctive, indexing/constructing interpersonal relations, shared among the group, or ritual enactments of Chinese cultural traditions.

Contrary to previous assumptions, a direct correlation does not exist between CR strategies and identities. More precisely, three macro CR strategies, i.e., acceptance, refusal, and ambiguous in-between responses, and, by implication, micro-level strategies all have the potential to construct the four identities in the dynamic discourse context.

Given the prominence of modesty in Asian and particularly Chinese culture, the act of refusing compliments used to build identities is especially noteworthy. As suggested by our definition of cultural identity (cf. Section 3), this strategy is

theoretically most likely to invoke the complimentees' cultural awareness or cultural memory. It is thus tempting to interpret all CRs under this strategy as enacting Chinese (or East Asian) culture (Lee, 1990; Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Tang & Zhang, 2009; Chen & Yang, 2010). To avoid making sweeping assumptions and claims, however, we need to take into account the following two factors that can help disambiguate situational identification. First, Chinese people, like all other nationals, are not monolithic (Gu, 2010), and even the pragmatic meanings of the same speech behaviour by the same individual as an agent can vary considerably (He, 2012a, 2012b). Second, like the distinction between substantive and ritual apology (Goffman, 1971), refusals can be genuine/substantive and ritual (Kasper, 1995). This means that refusal cannot be simplistically equated with modesty. For instance, as suggested by Ruhi (2006), there is always the possibility that some refusals actually deny the attribute substantively for different reasons. Of these two subtypes of refusal, only the ritual one symbolic of modesty is interpretable as identifying with Chinese culture, whereas the substantive one, often accompanied with legitimate reasons, can be variously motivated. In light of this ambiguity, establishing a simple correlation between refusals and Chinese cultural identity would not be able to bear critical scrutiny.

The construction of cultural identity differs from that of the other trio because of its apparent association with refusal. It hence deserves a closer look. Ritual modesty is a politeness norm in Chinese that is believed to have remained intact since antiquity (Gu, 1990; Chen, 1993; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Thus, CRs in conformity with this heritage could all be interpreted as enacting and constructing cultural identity. However, this argument may not be tenable because, as just cautioned above, it is essential first to determine whether the refusal in question is ritualistic in nature. This entails the analyst looking for evidence in interaction or interviews. For instance, studies such as Kasper (1995) demonstrate that ritual refusals are usually conventionalised in form and content. Moreover, Chinese cultural identity can also be constructed using an acceptance strategy, for example by accepting a compliment on one's modesty as a virtue, although this appears to be

fundamentally paradoxical.

Finally, there does not appear to be a parallel between Spencer-Oatey's (2007) individual, relational, and collective elements of face and the three (or four) aspects of identity we have illustrated in the present article. For instance, within her framework it is the individual or relational analytic frame, rather than the collective one, that would allow us to unpack the face concern in constructing group identity in Section 5.3. Similarly, the collective frame is apparently not suitable for interpreting the example illustrating cultural identity because arguably it is not "the face of the group [members at the dinner party] ... that was primarily at stake" (Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 646) in this example. Therefore, the present study not only opens up a new agenda for CR research, but casts fresh light on the theorisation of face and identity.

About the authors

#### Bio statements

Jensen Chengyu Zhuang, PhD, is a co-founder and director of A. J. AcaVice, a UK-based academic proofreading, editing and translation services provider. Jensen previously worked in different capacities at the University of Huddersfield, Loughborough University and several reputed universities in China. While his earlier research interests span sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, anthropology and psychology, Jensen currently focuses on English for academic purposes, English as an international language of scientific publication and academic translation. Jensen has hitherto completed several funded research projects and published over twenty articles in the above areas of research.

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#### Notes

1. Personal and place names in the illustrative extracts in this article are pseudonymised for ethical reasons.
2. *Laoshi* is a very common term of address in Chinese, usually translated as 'teacher'. The term, which is functionally equivalent to Mr, Mrs, Miss, or Ms. as used in the British school context, shows considerable respect for the addressee.

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