

## Educating for Chinese Politeness

# A Lifelong Learning Pursuit

**The Chinese language has many expressions of politeness such as “Li rang” or comity and “Rang li” or ceding profit. Yet, there is a contradiction between an image of Chinese amity and hospitality in private and the brashness exhibited in public places. Several factors explain this, not least the social anxiety of living in such a populous country.**

**Chinese society is steeped in Confucian ethics of hierarchy and propriety. These are based on the ancient concept of “Li”,**

in which politeness is assumed. It is a cultural given found in primary school textbooks as in the story of Kong Rong who, as the youngest child, leaves the biggest pears to his siblings as he is the youngest child. In business negotiations, conceding to break the deadlock is encouraged as necessary if an agreement is to be reached. Thus, the saying “Take a step back, then you’ll have a brighter future”.

Interestingly, the renowned Chinese writer Lin Yu-tang, a doctor of philology of Leipzig University, wrote this about the Chinese people’s sense of courtesy in his well-known book “My Country and My People” (1936):

“Chinese courtesy cannot be defined, so much depends on who it is you are doing things with. Is he of your family or a friend of your family? The Chinese are not bad mannered toward their friends and acquaintances, but beyond that limit, the Chinese as a social being is positively hostile toward their neighbour” (p. 175).

Although dated, this makes for reflection on how little progress has been made in the Chinese sense of social consciousness. There remains a duty to one’s family, friends, work circle, and business associates. This gives Chinese politeness a distinctive character.

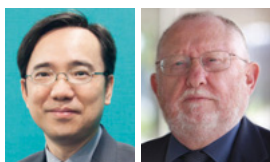
Hu Hsien-chin (1944), an anthropologist, was the first to relate the English word “face” to “Mianzi” and “Lian” in Chinese. She established that these concepts have communal, social, and moral value in Chinese society with public censure of non-observance. This study of face influenced Western scholars in developing a theory that linked face to politeness. Again, in the early 1990s, Gu Yueguo, a linguist, formulated his Politeness Principle. This comprised four notions (modesty,

respectfulness, attitudinal warmth, refinement) and seven maxims explaining that Chinese politeness is culture-specific and distinct from the universal phenomenon assumed by the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (Zhou/Zhang 2018). Nowadays, the status of Chinese politeness as an independent research topic is well-established.

### Chinese-Western Versions of Politeness

Those investigating Chinese politeness begin with the concepts of “Mianzi” and “Lian”, seen as cognates of face, and politeness through the concepts of “Limao” and “Keqi”. These concepts have subtle differences in meaning. For example, whereas Mianzi and Lian both refer to the social appearance of face, the latter carries a moral connotation and is a social judgment on personal integrity. Mianzi suggests conduct in public that adds to a person’s status and prestige. Lin Yu-tang commented that the Chinese face is “...not only to be shaved and washed, but can also be humiliated, appreciated, and contested”. Mianzi represents the face of vanity compared with neighbours. Lian is the face that maintains integrity and dignity. Limao is the closest translation for politeness incorporating Chinese cultural elements of propriety combining Li and Mao. The term Keqi has to do with a formal ambience of welcome. Limao refers to polite behaviour and Keqi to polite speech and a welcoming attitude (Hinze 2012).

When comparing Chinese politeness and Western face, several differences may be found (Aziz 2005). First, the Chinese concept of Mianzi face is communal rather than individual as understood in the West. Secondly, the Chinese Mianzi concept of face is subject



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## “Where there is politeness but no warmth of heart, how pitiful the world will become.”

Lin Yu-tang (1895-1976)

to normative constraints by the community, the Western face is not. Thirdly, the Western concept of face is both positive and negative. The latter recognizing an individual's need to be free of external imposition. There is no equivalent in “Mianzi”.

### Misunderstandings about Chinese Politeness

There are many instances, such as in business negotiation and classroom discussion, where foreigners do not understand the behaviour of their Chinese counterparts. The examples cited here show how problems may arise because of cultural differences. Understanding Chinese politeness improves cross-cultural communication.

Student silence in class is a concern of foreign teachers according to Zhao (2016). It is viewed negatively as non-Chinese teachers expect their students to participate actively. However, many Chinese students lack confidence, aggravated by the fear of losing face in front of classmates. An experienced foreign teacher knows that Chinese students do engage with their teachers outside class which is a comfortable environment in which to share their views. Again, Chinese students are expected to show respect to teachers' authority. The issue is one of cultural-specific learning and different teaching styles rather than of politeness.

Another anomaly is the assumed correlation of expressions of politeness with Mianzi face-giving and face-saving strategies in business negotiations. As Hinze (2012) notes, first-hand encounters in business transactions showed that honestly stating expectations (such as meeting contractual obligations) should not be considered impolite. The direct speech employed is not giving face or Mianzi to the other party. Again, not saying something directly to someone to avoid giving face Mianzi is the opposite of politeness especially when comments are made to a third party as that affects the face Mianzi of the person in question. An

example is when a Chinese student will not speak to a foreign teacher about teaching issues but goes instead to a Chinese teacher. The foreign teacher is justified in perceiving a lack of respect, which is impolite on the part of the student.

### Changing Chinese Politeness

Although the Chinese conception of politeness is steeped in history and culture, it is not static. Population migration to cities, communicating online, and growth in national confidence, have led to new expectations for social interaction both within Chinese society and in the way its people relate to the rest of the world. An informed approach to cross-cultural communication that takes this into account would avoid misunderstanding and help in achieving common goals.

For example, migration to cities is continuing and by 2035 it is estimated that 70 percent of the Chinese population will be urbanized. The question is whether urban residents understand polite speech and behaviour differently from their rural counterparts? Aziz's (2005) study of urban and rural residents of Shanghai found that politeness in Chinese culture according to the concept of Mianzi with its face gaining and face-saving strategies, was practised in the same way by both urban and rural residents. The preservation of harmony and avoidance of conflict, found in Confucian ethics, set relational, communal, hierarchical, and moral norms for everyone to follow. However, urban residents differed from rural residents concerning the maintenance of social distance, although trying to meet communal expectations of politeness. They refrained from being intrusive on others despite the fast pace of city life with its many demands. Being considerate was itself a cultivation of politeness. However, moving from a close-knit rural community has altered the traditional notion of Mianzi and its notion of the communal aspect of face.

### Online Communications

Deng (2016), in a study of online communications on the Chinese internet relay chat (QQ platform), showed a similar adherence to conventional norms for face-to-face discussions. Both positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies (taking care of the other party's negative face by being indirect and avoiding imposition on the listener) were employed. However, the anonymity of online discussions has allowed direct speech that did not attempt to minimize a face threat to the other. The study shows that, apart from established norms based on cultural tradition, politeness in speech acts occurring in the virtual space is subjected to online social norms that are reenacted daily. Contrary to what has been said about the absence of a Western "negative face concept" in the Chinese notion of face Mianzi, it is found in online communications. This, together with the gradual detachment of Mianzi from the communal aspect of face, is one of the changes to Chinese politeness experienced in recent years.

How will the growing importance of China internationally affect the practice of politeness? Given that the Chinese have a strong inclination to maintain traditional conceptions and practices of politeness, the country's growing confidence in projecting its influence abroad will be accompanied by reinforcement of traditional values. Chinese expectations about business decorum – introductory protocol, image projection, language use, information presentation, persuasion, and making concessions – are aspects to take note of in business settings. Zhu and Zhu (2004), studying unsuccessful business meetings between Chinese and foreign parties, point to the need to overcome cultural communication differences. Being courteous and paying attention to face is insufficient if the initial "get to know each other" stage is not managed. They conclude that the building of trust through "Guanxi" or a social capital network is as important as how one behaves in a business meeting. Recalling what is considered to be true over many generations from Lin Yu-tang to present-day commentators, the Chinese relate fundamentally to those in an inner circle of trust, and it is wise to establish this in business as elsewhere.

China's societal transformation always necessitated some form of direction from the top. In recent decades, there has been a move towards building an harmonious

society with lifelong learning instrumental in this (Wang/Morgan 2012). In schools, good manners and politeness in face-to-face conversation and online messaging are taught to raise the quality of future citizens (Wang 2011). Such efforts are likely to be intensified as China becomes a "moderately prosperous society".

### The Future for Chinese Politeness

What is the future for Chinese politeness? How will the next generation define behavioural and linguistic expressions of politeness? There is little doubt that individualism is growing among the group dubbed the post-95s and this needs to be understood as it has the potential to perpetuate or to disrupt established social norms and the conduct of communication. Recent research shows that the younger generation takes pride in the country's achievements. They show greater interest in creating a Chinese popular culture than in imports and are establishing new conventions on social media (He 2021).

Again, the over-dominance of material life has led to spiritual exploration as young people yearn for personal space, abhor unwanted socializing, and express dislike for vague boundaries between people, even among kin. This is a paradox in the making. One can see that traditional Chinese cultural preference for harmony, order, and hierarchy persist, and support for collective progress from which the individual stands to benefit continues. On the other hand, an alignment with Western values of respecting personal privacy and rules of engagement is also found. The latter has even been popularly called "Jingfen" or spiritually "Finnish" (Zhao 2020) to describe Chinese millennials' liking for a Finnish appreciation of peace, quiet, and personal space.

### Three Developments

We envisage three developments, each determined by individual perceptions of how it impinges on the private sphere.

First, politeness speech used in formal occasions and in the workplace, such as employing honorifics in addressing superiors and guests, modesty, courtesy, attribution of work achievements to leaders and the collective, will likely persist. This continuing usage can

enhance the status and welfare of the individual without infringing on personal space. It is an example of the cultural practice of Chinese politeness continuing to meet social expectations.

Secondly, earlier practices signifying politeness such as declining a present several times before accepting it and leaving something on the plate at a formal meal may be deemed outmoded and wasteful, the latter also contradicting official policy to reduce food wastage. These are examples of cultural practices of politeness that face obsolescence as they no longer meet social expectations.

Thirdly, communication approaches from relatives and personal questions used as conversation openers, such as asking about relationship status, salary earnings, and offering unsolicited advice on plans for the future, that are deemed intrusive of personal privacy, are not likely to find acceptance amongst the post-95s. Given a wish to protect personal space, the expectation to

of demonstrating politeness to others by not hurting their Mianzi face may no longer hold.

Young adults in China are not only faced by the demands of tradition, but also by the dominance of mobile social communication apps such as “WeChat”. It is common to communicate through texts rather than in person or by telephone. This brings new uncertainties regarding how to determine polite practices online and when to revert to face-to-face communications. There is also the need to decide on courtesy expressions, such as concluding a textual exchange with an infrequent contact person by an invitation to meet for lunch that may or may not take place. The earlier preoccupation with face that required politeness is facing a twin challenge because of the reduced chances of physical encounter and the migration to the virtual dimension of social interactions. These factors combine to make the practice of Chinese politeness a lifelong learning pursuit. ■

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