

Chinese Politeness

Politeness in Chinese is a well-researched concept in pragmatics; however, this pioneering book sheds an original new light on the subject. It provides a thorough diachronic investigation of Chinese politeness and argues for universality in politeness theorizing. The author takes us on a journey through changes in Chinese politeness from Confucius to the present day, showing how these processes are reactions to the changing world, rather than to changes in the principles of politeness itself. He splits Chinese face into Face₁ and Face₂ – the former referring to the person and the latter to the persona of the speaker – and presents a model of Chinese politeness (MCP). He then proposes B&L-E (Brown and Levinson Extended) by incorporating the theoretical constructs of self-politeness and impoliteness. This title is part of the Flip it Open Programme and may also be available Open Access. Check our website Cambridge Core for details.

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Chinese Politeness

*Diachrony, Variation, and Universals
in Politeness Theory*

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To my parents

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Prologue

This monograph has two objectives: to offer a thorough discussion and analysis of Chinese politeness and to argue for a universal theory of politeness.

The reason for the first aim lies in the importance of Chinese politeness in politeness research. As is well known to students of politeness, the notion of Chinese face is one of the key components of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. As such, it has generated a huge amount of literature, possibly larger than on the politeness of any other language besides English. Two patterns are discernible from this impressive research output. First, scholars diverge on what Chinese politeness is. Second – in spite of the first – scholars converge on the position that findings on Chinese politeness are evidence against universality in politeness theorizing. The present monograph is a dialog with these two trends.

With regard to the diversity of views about Chinese face, I will propose that Chinese politeness be best captured by the notion of harmony, a Confucian ideal of social stability in a society that has been pronouncedly and consistently hierarchical. Harmony is here seen as a *purpose* of Chinese politeness, an overarching concept under which other notions such as modesty, deference, civility, and respect are subsumed. Viewed this way, my proposal does not refute previous proposals per se. Instead, it offers a different way of looking at the same phenomenon. What I shall propose is called MCP, standing for model of Chinese politeness.

With regard to universality in politeness theorizing, my view differs from those of most previous scholars in the literature. These scholars either assert or imply uniqueness of Chinese politeness; I explicitly advance the position that Chinese politeness is fundamentally *similar* to the politeness in other lingua-cultures, differing from them only in nonfundamental ways. Specifically, evidence will be provided that the Chinese language is similar to other languages despite its heavy encoding of the notions of face and politeness; Chinese culture is similar to other cultures despite its notable features in social structure and values; and the Chinese linguaculture is similar to other linguacultures, its characteristics being pronounced but not unique.

Uniqueness leads to particularism in theorizing; similarity supports universality in theorizing. Hence my proposal intimately engages in the all-important

discussion of particularism versus universalism, which ties in with the second aim of this book. My position is that a universal theory of politeness is needed, logically plausible, and has a workable model in Brown and Levinson (1987). Specifically, I argue that each linguaculture has its own construct of politeness. The constructs of politeness of different cultures are then subsumed under a universal theory. A universal theory of politeness, I argue, will help us reveal some of the most fundamental principles undergirding human interaction and communication in general, discover what bounds different social groups together, and – at the same time – investigate politeness in the varied, specific, and dynamic contexts with a set of general guidance.

Readers will probably agree that the universalist view of politeness is not popular. The field of pragmatics – as is the case with its sister fields in the social sciences and humanities – is experiencing a distrust of universal theories, due to the decades-long emphasis on difference, variation, specificity, and dynamism in social interaction. I will argue that this distrust is not entirely warranted. Particulars and differences matter. But so should undergirding principles, abstractions, and generalizations – the sort of things that characterize a universal theory. For it is principles, abstractions, and generalizations that help us discover what transcends different social groups, at both the macro and micro level.

The nine chapters in this book follow a from-specific-to-general thematic progression. Chapter 1 offers a quick introduction of the position politeness holds in pragmatics and then the role Chinese politeness plays in politeness research. Chapter 2 is devoted to the roots of Chinese face and politeness: the hierarchical social structure and the societal value of harmony. Chapter 3 discusses the content of Chinese face, arguing that Chinese face is a bifurcated notion that includes both those elements that define the person(hood) of the speaker and those that contribute to their persona. Chapter 4 is a transitional chapter between Chinese politeness and politeness theorizing. In it, I will propose a model of Chinese politeness (MCP), followed by a refinement of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, resulting in what will be called B&L-E: Brown and Levinson-Extended.

In Chapters 5 and 6, MCP and B&L-E are utilized to analyze Chinese politeness. Chapter 5 investigates Chinese politeness synchronically and demonstrates that MCP and B&L-E, together, offer a coherent account of variation in Chinese politeness, covering self-denigration and self-presentation, moral order and morality, conflict resolution, and humorous mockery. Chapter 6 is a diachronic study of changes in Chinese politeness in three speech events: the rituals of marrying, food offering, and compliment responding. Changes are identified in each, but they offer evidence for, not against, MCP and B&L-E.

Chapters 7 and 8 are comparisons, the former comparing Chinese politeness with the politeness in neighboring linguacultures: Japanese, Korean, and

Vietnamese, while the latter, with English. The results of these comparisons suggest that, within the framework of B&L-E, similarities are observed at the deeper level whereas differences are seen as surface phenomena.

In the concluding chapter – Chapter 9 – I discuss several issues in politeness theorizing. I will argue that much of the critical commentary of Brown and Levinson’s universal theory of politeness is insufficiently supported by evidence and that Brown and Levinson’s theory is in fact quite capable of accounting for the dynamism of social interaction and variability across social groups. In the second part of the chapter, I will critique politeness evaluation, a new and popular strand in politeness research, arguing that it suffers several weaknesses. In the Epilogue, I conclude the book with a discussion on the larger intellectual environment in which particularism has been emphasized at the expense of universalism.

The completion of this book has benefitted from the help of colleagues around the world too numerous to mention here. Special acknowledgment must be made, however, of the reviewers of the proposal and the complete draft of the book; Lin He and Ming Dong, both of Xi’an International Studies University, who supported this project from beginning to end in more ways than one; and Rueyling Chuang, dean of the College of Arts and Letters at California State University, San Bernardino, who generously provided me with much-needed release time and travel funds in the form of research grants. Helen Barton, senior commissioning editor of CUP, has offered me wisdom and insights that go far beyond the role of a commissioning editor; Izzie Collins, who managed the administration of the production of the book, is a model of professionalism and courtesy. Cheryl Hutton, my copy-editor, has the eyes of an eagle and a relentless insistence on getting every detail right. They are one heck of a team.

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