



# Evaluations of Chinese compliment responses: Accounting for individual differences in attributed pragmatic reasons

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## ABSTRACT

Recent studies on Chinese compliment responses (CRs) have shown that the preferred response has evolved from rejection to deflection/evasion and acceptance. When interpreting these findings, previous studies often rely on predefined cultural, regional, and sociological factors, running the risk of overlooking the inherent variabilities between different individuals in the same group. To better account for people's varying perceptions of compliment responses, this paper reports on an online survey experiment that tested Chinese college English majors' evaluations of three CR strategies in three compliment response scenarios. The results showed that acceptance strategies were rated as more appropriate, less conceited, and left a better impression than deflection and rejection strategies. More importantly, compared to sociological factors such as age and gender, respondents' evaluations of compliment responses are better explained by their varying attributions of pragmatic reasons, such as being modest and seeking agreement with others. This study contributes to the growing research landscape on the variability in (im)politeness perceptions by demonstrating the utility of examining respondents' individual differences in specific communicative contexts. The findings of this study have implications in addressing (im)politeness researchers' need to balance between making generalizable conclusions and accounting for the inherent heterogeneity among individuals in predefined groups.

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## 1. Introduction

When responding to a compliment, the complimentee usually adopts one of the three overarching strategies: acceptance, rejection, or deflection/evasion (Holmes, 1986; Knapp et al., 1984). Accepting the compliment is preferred among English speakers because it is often treated as a positive politeness strategy and conforms to the English convention of giving higher values to others. In contrast, accepting the compliment in the Chinese context is often seen as a face-threatening act and goes against the Chinese maxim of modesty (Chen, 1993). In more recent years, however, an

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increasing number of studies have shown that Chinese college students are more likely to accept a compliment than deflect or reject it (Chen and Yang, 2010; Tang and Zhang, 2009). Such a shift in preferences is often attributed to the growing influence of Western values in China that favor individuals' need for self-presentation over the conventional Chinese value of modesty.

More recently, researchers have cautioned that the interpretation of these differing strategies should not overly rely on innate cultural values, such as Confucianism, collectivism, and the East-West divide (House and Kádár, 2023). Indeed, an essentialist approach to culture overlooks the inherent heterogeneity between interlocutors who come from the same national background but may bear different communicative expectations (Jia and Yang, 2021). As evidenced in Haugh and Chang (2019), respondents from a single nation can hold widely different perceptions of the same face-sensitive apology, underscoring the need to study individual differences. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address this inherent heterogeneity by examining how individuals' attribution of pragmatic reasons (i.e., modesty, self-presentation, agreement, obligation) shapes their evaluations of different compliment responses.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the previous research on Chinese CRs, tracing the changing patterns of the response and the pragmatic explanations to the underlying motivations, pointing out the need for conducting CR evaluations at the individual level. Section 3 introduces the participants, experimental materials, and the procedures of carrying out the online survey experiment. The findings of the experiment are reported in Section 4. The implications of these findings, limitations, and future directions are discussed in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Changing patterns of Chinese compliment responses

Research on Chinese CRs has been mostly approached from discourse completion tasks (DCTs), which usually ask participants to write down the responses they consider appropriate to a given compliment. Using written DCTs, Chen (1993) compared the CRs elicited from English and Chinese native speakers in the United States and China, respectively. The results showed that, contrary to American speakers' frequent acceptance of the compliment (39.3 %), Chinese speakers hardly accepted the compliment (1.0 %), and the vast majority of them (95.7 %) rejected it by showing disagreement, denigrating, expressing embarrassment, or explaining. It is important to note that while explaining was categorized as a rejecting strategy in Chen (1993), it is often categorized as a deflecting/evading strategy by other researchers (Culpeper and Pat, 2021; Guo et al., 2012), as well as in his later study (Chen and Yang, 2010). Nevertheless, after removing the explaining responses (18.8 %), rejection remains to be the dominant response strategy (76.9 %). Subsequent studies also fully or partially corroborated this observed pattern in both DCT and naturalistic observation (Lee, 2009; Xia et al., 2021).

In more recent years, however, the patterns of Chinese CRs have changed drastically. For example, Chen and Yang (2010) replicated Chen (1993) with a younger generation of students from the same city, finding that acceptance (62.6 %) became the dominant strategy and rejection became the least produced one (9.1 %). Similar patterns were also identified among Chinese students studying in Australia (Tang and Zhang, 2009), Chinese speakers born before and after the One Child Policy (He, 2012), residents from first and second tier cities in China (Yang, 2020), students from different grades (Li et al., 2011), Hong Kong Chinese speakers (Culpeper and Pat, 2021), and dyadic interactions between college students in Beijing (Xia and Wang, 2019; Xia et al., 2021). A few others observed that while acceptance is used more frequently than rejection strategies, Chinese speakers used deflection/evasions the most in both face-to-face (Guo et al., 2012) and mediated interactions (Eslami and Yang, 2018).

Interlocutors' responses to compliments also vary by different sociodemographic and contextual factors. For example, while both Chen (1993) and Yuan (2002) identified more uses of rejection than acceptance responses, far more instances of rejection were identified in the former than in the latter. Yuan (2002) attributed such differences to the different varieties of the Chinese language spoken in Xi'an and Kunming. He (2012) found that while both the younger and the older generations of Chinese reported more accepting than rejecting responses, the younger generation reported far more accepting responses than the older generation. The contextual variability is also exemplified in Tang and Zhang's (2009) comparisons across different compliment topics, such that Chinese speakers preferred to accept compliments made on appearance and ability but preferred to evade compliments made on character and possession.

In summary, the above review shows that the patterns of Chinese CRs have evolved from rejection-dominant to deflection/evasion-dominant to acceptance-dominant based on Chinese speakers from various demographic characteristics and data collected from both field observation and questionnaire elicitation. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Summary of compliment response strategies in previous research.

Study Citation	Subjects	Accept	Deflect/Evad	Reject
Chen (1993) – DCT	Chinese in Xi'an	1.0 %	3.4 %	95.7 %
Loh (1993) – DCT	Hong Kong Chinese in UK	41.0 %	34.0 %	25.0 %
Yuan (2002) – naturalistic	Kunming Chinese	15.6 %	34.8 %	34.0 %
Yuan (2002) – DCT	Kunming Chinese	7.0 %	20.8 %	28.9 %
Yu (2004) – DCT	Taiwan Chinese	13 %	63 %	24 %
Tang and Zhang (2009) – DCT	Chinese in Australia	48.8 %	36.6 %	14.6 %
Lee (2009) – naturalistic	Singaporean Chinese	22.8 %	24.2 %	53.0 %
Chen and Yang (2010) – DCT	Xi'an Chinese	62.6 %	28.3 %	9.1 %
Li et al. (2011) – DCT	Grade 7 Chinese	60 %	17.5 %	16.5 %
Li et al. (2011) – DCT	Grade 10 Chinese	51.1 %	23.2 %	22.7 %
Li et al. (2011) – DCT	Sophomore Chinese	52.7 %	26.7 %	12.1 %
Guo et al. (2012) – naturalistic	Shanghai Chinese	37.2 %	40.3 %	22.5 %
He (2012) – naturalistic	Younger Chinese (unspecified)	66.0 %	20.8 %	13.2 %
He (2012) – naturalistic	Older Chinese (unspecified)	49.0 %	42.2 %	8.8 %
Eslami and Yang (2018) – Facebook	Chinese (unspecified)	32.4 %	44.1 %	20.6 %
Eslami and Yang (2018) – Renren	Chinese (unspecified)	36.7 %	38.9 %	20.0 %
Xia and Wang (2019) – written DCT	Chinese students in Beijing	56.1 %	21.0 %	10.1 %
Xia and Wang (2019) – oral DCT	Chinese students in Beijing	64.2 %	12.5 %	12.5 %
Xia and Wang (2019) – naturalistic experiment	Chinese students in Beijing	47.9 %	20.8 %	20.2 %
Yang (2020) – DCT	Chinese in China	52.0 %	31.2 %	16.8 %
Culpeper and Pat (2021) – DCT	Hong Kong Chinese	64.1 %	27.5 %	8.4 %
Xia et al. (2021) – naturalistic, dyadic	Chinese in Beijing	43.5 %	20.4 %	20.4 %
Xia et al. (2021) – naturalistic, triadic	Chinese in Beijing	17.6 %	41.6 %	28.0 %

Note. Percentages in some of the studies do not add up to 100 % because the authors included other compliment response types, such as rejoinder and no response.

## 2.2. Pragmatic reasons for responding to Chinese compliments

The adherence to modesty is often seen as an overarching pragmatic reason for the more frequent adoption of rejection over acceptance responses among Chinese speakers (Chen, 1993; Xia et al., 2021). These explanations are derived from culturally based models of communication. Drawing on Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, for example, Gu (1990) proposed a set of four maxims based on the Chinese culture, including Self-denigration, Address, Tact, and Generosity. Specifically, the Maxim of Self-denigration states that Chinese speakers are expected to denigrate the self, and the violation of this maxim is considered impolite. Similarly, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) argue that the tendency to downplay self-achievement is an enduring Chinese attribute that is internalized as a part of their child's education. Moreover, when unpacking the dialectic relationship between "yes" and "no" in Chinese culture, Ma (1996) notes that accepting compliments can be face-threatening. If a host says yes to the guest's compliment on her food, it implies that the host has spent a long time preparing the food and makes the guest feel guilty eating it.

The emphasis on modesty is also used to explain the cross-cultural differences in CR patterns between Chinese and English speakers. For example, Chen's (1993) classical study explicitly associated the differences with the distinct social values upheld by American and Chinese societies, such that while self-denigration often damages one's self-image in the United States, it is an important component of self-image in China. Similarly, in their comparison between Chinese and Australian speakers, Tang and Zhang (2009) suggested that the emphasis on modesty and collectivism in China motivates more Chinese speakers to adopt rejecting or evading responses than their Australian counterparts. The influence of native cultural values also leads to negative pragmatic transfer as (non-proficient) Chinese learners of English tend to use more rejection and fewer acceptance strategies even when responding to a compliment in English (Ren and Gao, 2012; Yu, 2004).

Researchers have also argued that the necessity to uphold modesty varies by different communicative contexts. For example, Xia et al. (2021) pointed out that although accepting the compliment is becoming more popular in China, this strategy is often studied in dyadic interactions; when examining naturally occurring CRs in the presence of a third person, rejecting or deflecting/mitigating/evading the compliment becomes much more common than directly accepting it, suggesting that the Maxim of Self-denigration remains to be a critical factor in the contemporary Chinese society. Shifting from face-to-face to online interactions, Eslami and Yang (2018) showed that Chinese bilingual speakers tend to follow different cultural norms when responding to compliments posted on different social media platforms. Specifically, when the compliment was posted on the Chinese social media platform (Renren), participants aligned more closely with the Modesty Maxim and used accepting strategies less frequently (40.4 %); in contrast, when the compliment was posted on the American social media platform (Facebook), participants aligned more closely with the Agreement Maxim and used accepting strategies more frequently (68.0 %).

While modesty is often invoked as the primary explanation for different CRs, an increasing number of studies have emphasized the competing values that are emerging in Chinese society. For example, Chen and Yang (2010) suggested that the influx of Western cultural influences in China led more Chinese college students in Xi'an to accept rather than reject

compliments. The Western influence on the pragmatics of Chinese speakers also receives support from two studies that focus on Chinese living in Western countries (Loh, 1993; Tang and Zhang, 2009). Specifically, Loh's (1993) research of Hong Kong students living in the United Kingdom found that accepting strategies (41.0 %) were the most common, followed by deflection (34.0 %) and rejection (25.0 %). Tang and Zhang's (2009) research on Mainland Chinese students living in Australia revealed a similar pattern of acceptance (48.8 %) over deflection (36.6 %) over rejection (14.6 %). Using retrospective interviews to follow up on the DCTs, a few others also found that participants' variation in CRs can be accounted for by their sensitive cultural awareness and the changing perceptions of the Chinese cultural values (Cheng, 2011; Yang, 2020).

Moving beyond resorting to the Maxims of Modesty and Agreement, studies have also explored other possible explanations for Chinese CRs. For example, Chen and Yang (2010) suggest that in addition to considering the face need of the complimentee, complimentees also have strong considerations for their own face need or practicing self-politeness. In his updated theory of politeness, Leech (2014) suggests that communicators are expected to assign a higher value to the speaker's obligation to others through thanking and apologizing. Drawing on Leech's updated theory, Culpeper and Pat (2021) examined the CRs that Hong Kong Chinese students would make on WhatsApp conversations and collected their metapragmatic comments on the responses. The findings suggest that participants' frequent use of accepting strategies can be better explained by the Obligation Maxim than the Agreement Maxim because acceptance is predominantly realized through expressing gratitude and thanking. Treating compliment response as a complex communicative act, Spencer-Oatey et al. (2008) suggested that it can be jointly determined by various pragmatic reasons, including modesty, agreement, and self-presentation. These studies all point to the need to further examine the multiple pragmatic reasons that underlie Chinese compliment responses.

Researchers have further questioned the validity of an essentialist approach that treats Chinese culture as homogenous. For example, two studies conducted by Spencer-Oatey and her colleagues found that compared to British English speakers, rejecting the compliment led to more favorable evaluations among Hong Kong Chinese speakers but not among mainland Chinese speakers (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008; Spencer-Oatey and Ng, 2001). These findings suggest that Chinese speakers' understanding of modesty is not homogeneous and varies by different regions. In a similar vein, He (2012) showed that age is also a crucial factor that shapes participants' responses to compliments, highlighting the need to move the analysis below the cultural level. Taking the step further, House and Kádár (2023) problematized the utility of culturally-anchored concepts such as Confucianism and collectivity, calling for a more bottom-up and language-anchored approach to compliments and speech acts research in general.

### 2.3. Summary

In summary, the above review suggests that while many studies have highlighted the changing patterns of Chinese CRs, most of them generalize the likely pragmatic reasons at national (e.g., Chinese vs. American), regional (e.g., Chinese mainland vs. Hong Kong), or sociodemographic group levels (e.g., age, gender). While making sensible explanations, these studies tend to assume that people within each of the national, regional, and sociological groups behave in a similar manner, respectively. Few studies, however, have discussed the pragmatic reasons for CRs at the individual level. Therefore, the objective of this research is to investigate how Chinese participants evaluate different CR strategies across compliment topics and examine whether respondents' attributed pragmatic reasons would shape their evaluations of the same compliment.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research design

In this study, I reported on an online survey experiment among Chinese college English majors about their evaluations of three CR strategies (acceptance, deflection, rejection) on three compliment response topics (English proficiency, public speaking, new dress). Strategy is the main message variable of concern, and topic is included as a replication factor. The dependent variables include respondents' evaluations of appropriateness, conceitedness, and communicated impression of the complimentee.

Since an experimental design "can tell us who considers which compliment appropriate in which type of situation" (Jucker, 2009, p. 1631), it best suits the present study because it enables researchers to more precisely understand how the evaluation of CR is contingent on the communicative factors associated with the message (e.g., CR strategy) and the communicator (e.g., attributed pragmatic reasons). The four main reasons investigated in this study include modesty, agreement, obligation, and self-confidence. Three research questions are proposed as follows:

- RQ1** How would Chinese college students evaluate different compliment response strategies?
- RQ2** How would the topic of the compliment influence respondents' evaluations of the compliment response?
- RQ3** How would the respondents' attributed pragmatic reasons shape their evaluations of the compliment response?

### 3.2. Respondents

Respondents ( $N = 536$ ) were undergraduate and postgraduate students from Chinese universities. Twenty-four people were removed from the analyses because they provided incomplete or irrelevant answers to the study questions (e.g., respondents answered what they would say when the prompt asked them to explain the CR in the vignette). The final sample consists of 512 respondents. All of them were self-identified as native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and were English majors at the time of data collection. English majors were recruited because these respondents match well with the demographics of the speakers who have been heavily influenced by Western values. Among them, 375 (73.2 %) were women, 111 (21.7 %) were men, and 26 (5.1 %) preferred not to reveal their gender or identified as nonbinary. Their age ranged from 18 to 29 years old ( $M = 21.10$ ,  $SD = 2.61$ ).

### 3.3. Experimental materials

The experimental materials were adapted from previous studies on Chinese CRs (Chen and Yang, 2010; Spencer-Oatey and Ng, 2001). Since the target participants were university students, three common scenarios related to college life were constructed, including asking for directions, attending a public speech contest, and wearing a favorite new dress. Each vignette depicts one ordinary compliment event that happens to a student named Xiaohong, which is a common Chinese name for females. Each compliment is followed by one of the three overarching response strategies, namely acceptance (e.g., *Thank you! I also think my speech went quite well*), deflection (e.g., *I really don't know. I think my speech is just okay*), and rejection (e.g., *Oh no. I think I did terrible up there.*) The experimental materials were written in Chinese, and their English translations are attached in Appendix A.

### 3.4. Measures

Three items from Spencer-Oatey et al. (2008) were adopted to measure respondents' evaluations of the CR. Response appropriateness was assessed by one item asking, "To what extent do you think Xiaohong's response is appropriate?" (1 = *Very inappropriate*, 5 = *Very appropriate*). Response conceitedness was measured by one item asking, "To what extent do you think Xiaohong's response is conceited?" (1 = *Not conceited at all*, 5 = *Very conceited*). Respondents' impression of Xiaohong was assessed by one item asking, "Based on her response, what is your impression of her?" (1 = *Very bad impression*, 5 = *Very good impression*). All three items were measured on five-point Likert-type scales.

Respondents were also asked to report in an open textbox about their attributed reasons for Xiaohong's response. Allowing respondents to type in their metapragmatic comments offers insights not only into the rationales for those ratings but also the nature of the ratings themselves (Haugh and Chang, 2019). The reasons for deflecting and rejecting the compliment were assessed by whether respondents explicitly recognized the response as showing modesty. Examples of the modesty judgment include "being modest", "do not want to show off", and "reflects typical Chinese communicative norms". The reasons for accepting the compliment were assessed by whether respondents explicitly recognized the response as showing agreement, fulfilling obligations, or showing self-confidence. Examples of showing agreement include "agreeing with her compliment" and "making the completer feel good". Examples of fulfilling obligations are "thanking her classmate for her compliment", "needing to acknowledge and respond", and "showing respect to the other". Examples of showing self-confidence include "she is really confidence", "she is very satisfied with her performance", and "she genuinely thinks that she looks nice in that dress". These reasons were selected because they are the commonly attributed reasons for responding to a compliment (Chen and Yang, 2010; Culpeper and Pat, 2021). Two native speakers of Chinese independently coded all four reasons, and any differences were discussed to reach an agreement.

### 3.5. Experimental procedures

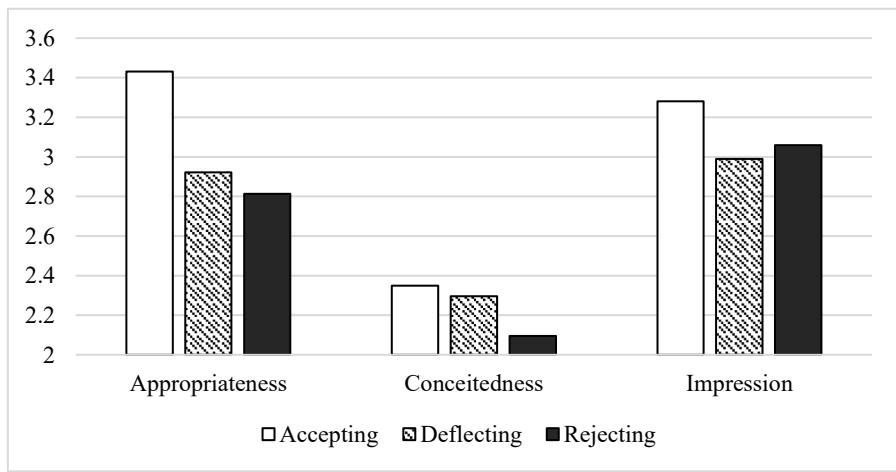
To ensure that the study meets all the ethical considerations for studies that involve human participants, approval from the Institutional Review Board of the researcher's affiliation was obtained (protocol number: 2019-03-0002). The experiment was set up on the online survey platform Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>), and the link to the survey was circulated among the researcher's contacts in China who are university teachers from departments of English. The link was then distributed among their students via social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the nine experimental conditions using the "randomizer" function in Qualtrics. In each scenario, participants were shown a short vignette depicting a compliment made to Xiaohong and her response to the compliment. They were first asked to complete an open-ended question about their perceived reason for Xiaohong producing the given CR. Then, they were instructed to evaluate the appropriateness and conceitedness of the response as well as their impression of Xiaohong. Finally, respondents were directed to fill out some basic demographic information (e.g., age, gender) and thanked for their participation. No financial compensation was provided. About 90 % of the respondents completed the survey within 7 minutes. All data were collected in April 2019.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Effects of compliment response strategies on response evaluations

The first research question aims to understand how the employment of different CR strategies influences respondents' evaluations of the response and the complimentee. Before proceeding to the main analysis, preliminary analyses were carried out to test the assumptions of the analysis of variation (ANOVA). Following Byrne's (2010) suggested cutoff values of skewness (between -2 and +2) and kurtosis (between -7 and +7), the normality assumption was met as the skewness ranges from 0.178 to 0.201 and the kurtosis ranges from 0.354 to 0.399 across conditions. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was met because the results of Levene's test based on median were not statistically significant for all three dependent variables ( $p > 0.05$ ). The assumption of independence of observation was also met as each participant only read one scenario. Finally, randomization was successful as respondents of different ages and genders were equally distributed across all conditions ( $p > 0.05$ ). Based on these assessments, the ANOVA tests were carried out as planned.

A set of ANOVAs was carried out to determine the main effects of CR strategies on respondents' evaluations of the response (RQ1). Response strategies and compliment topics were entered as the independent variable, and appropriateness, conceitedness, and impression were entered as the dependent variables, respectively. The results showed that adopting different CR strategies significantly influenced respondents' evaluations of response appropriateness [ $F(2, 512) = 21.04, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.077$ ], response conceitedness [ $F(2, 512) = 4.31, p = 0.014, \eta_p^2 = 0.017$ ], and their impressions of Xiaohong [ $F(2, 512) = 6.75, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.026$ ]. These differences were plotted in Fig. 1. Post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD showed that accepting the compliment ( $M = 3.43, SD = 0.96$ ) was rated as significantly more appropriate than deflecting ( $M = 2.92, SD = 0.88$ ) or rejecting ( $M = 2.81, SD = 0.96$ ) the compliment. Accepting the compliment ( $M = 2.35, SD = 1.03$ ) was also rated as significantly more conceited than rejecting ( $M = 2.10, SD = 0.86$ ) the compliment. Moreover, Xiaohong was rated as creating a more positive impression when accepting the compliment ( $M = 3.28, SD = 0.79$ ) than deflecting ( $M = 2.99, SD = 0.70$ ) or rejecting ( $M = 3.06, SD = 0.76$ ) the compliment.



**Fig. 1.** Response evaluations by response strategies.

Respondents' metapragmatic comments also corroborate this pattern, as shown in comments 1–3. These three comments suggest that Chinese college students not only find accepting the compliment appropriate but also find it necessary, representing a sign of showing respect to others and addressing one's need for self-affirmation. Respondents in all three cases gave generally low ratings of Xiaohong's conceitedness and high ratings of their impression of her. Respondents, however, may consider the response as appropriate for a completely different reason. In Example 4, the participant evaluated the response as appropriate, not out of addressing one's need for self-affirmation, but for conforming to the American norm of accepting the compliment. In the meantime, the participant also implicitly acknowledged that the expected Chinese response would be different by upholding the Chinese modesty (probably through deflecting or rejecting the compliment)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The numeric ratings of the corresponding commenter are listed here. A stands to appropriateness (1 = Very inappropriate, 5 = Very appropriate). C stands for conceitedness (1 = Not at all conceited, 5 = Very conceited). I stands for impression (1 = Very bad impression, 5 = Very good impression).

- [1] Acceptance – Public Speaking, A = 4, C = 1, I = 4  
因为小红确实演讲的很棒,面对恭维,坦诚说出自己的真实想法也是对他人的尊重。  
Because Xiaohong did give a great speech, and in the face of compliments, speaking her true thoughts honestly is also a sign of respect for others.
- [2] Acceptance – New Dress, A = 5, C = 1, I = 4  
因为小红很开心听到对方这么说,她自己也很喜欢这条裙子。  
This is because Xiaohong is very happy to hear the other say so. She also likes this dress very much herself.
- [3] Acceptance – English Proficiency, A = 4, C = 2, I = 3  
我觉得每个人心里或多或少都想到鼓励和认可,这是对自我的肯定,很有必要。  
I think everyone wants to be encouraged and recognized to a certain extent. It is a kind of self-affirmation and is very necessary.
- [4] Acceptance – English Proficiency, A = 5, C = 1, I = 4  
符合美国人的心理,因为外国人在受到表扬的时候,不会像中国人一样表示谦虚,而是骄傲地接受别人对自己的认可。  
This is in line with the American mentality, because when foreigners are praised, they will not express modesty like the Chinese, but will proudly accept the recognition from others.

Accepting the compliment, however, is not always considered appropriate. For example, although the participant for comment 5 recognized Xiaohong's accepting response as direct and open-minded, their evaluations of Xiaohong and her response were rather negative. One-sample *t*-tests showed that this participant rated the response as significantly less appropriate, more conceited, and formed a less favorable impression, compared to all 49 respondents who read the same experimental condition. Similarly, examples 6 and 7 also suggest that although the subjects recognized Xiaohong's self-confidence, they rated the responses as somewhat inappropriate. As explicitly acknowledged in example 7, this is due to her lack of modesty.

- [5] Acceptance – New Dress, A = 2, C = 4, I = 2  
现在大家的思想已经很开放了,会很直白地表达想法。  
Nowadays, people are very open-minded, and they will express their ideas very directly.
- [6] Acceptance – English Proficiency, A = 2, C = 3, I = 3  
为了迎合自己的内心,自信,对自己很满意,很高兴得到赞扬。  
To cater to one's inner self, be confident, be satisfied with oneself, and be happy to receive the praise.
- [7] Acceptance – Public Speaking, A = 2, C = 3, I = 2  
因为小红是一个非常有自信而不自谦的人。  
This is because Xiaohong is a person who is very confident but not modest.

Comments 8–13 exemplify respondents' evaluations of deflecting and rejecting responses. It is interesting to point out that while all six comments are related to modesty judgments, the evaluations vary widely in terms of perceived appropriateness. Specifically, respondents tended to view the response as less appropriate when they also considered the response pretentious (comment 8), used in the wrong situation (comment 11), or revealing Xiaohong's lack of confidence (comment 13). In contrast, respondents' perceived appropriateness tended to be higher when they considered the expression of modesty sincere (comment 9) or conventional (comments 10 and 12). Taken together, these comments show that the same compliment response may induce very different evaluations that are driven by different pragmatic reasons.

- [8] Deflecting – Public Speaking, A = 2, C = 3, I = 2  
我感觉她不想太招摇但不是谦虚,有点装。  
I feel like she doesn't want to be too flashy but isn't being modest, a bit pretentious.
- [9] Deflecting – English Proficiency, A = 4, C = 2, I = 3  
第一,她有可能在表达谦虚;第二,她有可能认为自己英语真的不够好。  
First, she might be expressing modesty; second, she might think her English is really not good enough.
- [10] Deflecting – New Dress, A = 4, C = 4, I = 3  
我认为小红的话是谦虚的说法,同时也有客套的成分在。  
I think Xiaohong's words are expressions of modesty, and it is also a form of ritual politeness.
- [11] Rejecting – Public Speaking, A = 2, C = 2, I = 3  
因为小红比较谦虚,但是在那个场合不恰当。  
This is because Xiaohong is modest, but it is not appropriate in that situation.
- [12] Rejecting – English Proficiency, A = 4, C = 3, I = 3  
她习惯性谦虚。  
She is habitually modest.
- [13] Rejecting – New Dress, A = 2, C = 1, I = 3  
小红是出于谦虚这么说,另一方面也表现了她的不自信  
Xiaohong said so for being modest. On the other hand, it also shows her lack of confidence.

In summary, the findings presented in this section show that while respondents generally gave more positive ratings to the acceptance response than the other two response types, their reasons for doing so varied widely. Therefore, it is important to account for such variation at the individual level which will be analyzed in Section 4.3 (RQ3).

**Table 2**

Response evaluations by response strategies and compliment topics.

Evaluations	Topics	Accepting	Deflecting	Rejecting
Appropriateness	New dress	3.86 <sup>a</sup>	2.86 <sup>b</sup>	2.73 <sup>b</sup>
	English proficiency	2.97 <sup>a</sup>	3.11 <sup>a</sup>	2.87 <sup>a</sup>
	Public speaking	3.51 <sup>a</sup>	2.82 <sup>b</sup>	2.87 <sup>b</sup>
Conceitedness	New dress	1.80 <sup>a</sup>	2.40 <sup>b</sup>	2.18 <sup>ab</sup>
	English proficiency	2.85 <sup>a</sup>	2.29 <sup>b</sup>	1.83 <sup>c</sup>
	Public speaking	2.38 <sup>a</sup>	2.22 <sup>a</sup>	2.23 <sup>a</sup>
Impression	New dress	3.63 <sup>a</sup>	2.93 <sup>b</sup>	2.95 <sup>b</sup>
	English proficiency	3.00 <sup>a</sup>	3.05 <sup>a</sup>	3.25 <sup>a</sup>
	Public speaking	3.22 <sup>a</sup>	2.99 <sup>a</sup>	3.03 <sup>a</sup>

Note. In each row, mean values that have different superscripts are significantly different from each other at  $p = 0.05$ . For appropriateness, 1 = Very inappropriate, 5 = Very appropriate; for conceitedness, 1 = Not at all conceited, 5 = Very conceited; for impression, 1 = Very bad impression, 5 = Very good impression.

#### 4.2. Effects of compliment topics on response evaluations

RQ2 is set to explore how the compliment topic influences the effect of response strategies on respondents' evaluations. Although no statistically significant main effects of compliment topic was identified ( $ps > 0.05$ ), results of ANOVAs identified statistically significant interaction effects between response strategies and compliment topics on respondents' evaluations of response appropriateness, [ $F(4, 512) = 6.96, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.052$ ], response conceitedness, [ $F(4, 512) = 10.16, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.075$ ], and their impressions of Xiaohong, [ $F(4, 512) = 6.18, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.047$ ]. Pairwise comparisons of means using the Bonferroni approach were conducted to further decompose the findings (Table 2).

As is shown in Table 2, respondents' evaluations of CR strategies varied by different topics such that accepting the compliment was evaluated as more appropriate in the new dress ( $M = 3.86, SD = 0.87$ ) and public speaking ( $M = 3.51, SD = 0.94$ ) scenarios but not in the English proficiency scenario ( $M = 2.96, SD = 0.86$ ). Moreover, the acceptance response was considered significantly less conceited in the new dress scenario ( $M = 1.80, SD = 0.79$ ) but more conceited in the English proficiency scenario ( $M = 2.85, SD = 1.06$ ). Furthermore, accepting the compliment can lead to a more positive impression of Xiaohong, but the effect was only significant when discussing her new dress ( $M = 3.63, SD = 0.64$ ). These variations point to the inherent variability of people's evaluations across different scenarios.

Since each participant was exposed to only one of the three compliment topics, they rarely commented on features that are unique to the specific topics, without reading other topics that were implemented in the study. Comment 14 is an example of discussing a feature that's specific to this public speaking scenario. The participant considered that Xiaohong's response was not only meant to conform to the conventional social norms of being modest but also to gain a strategic advantage of protecting their own image. One-sample  $t$ -tests showed that the participant who made this comment evaluated the response as significantly less appropriate and more conceited compared to all 65 respondents who read the same experimental condition.

[14] Deflecting – Public Speaking, A = 2, C = 2, I = 3

以这种模糊谦虚的话来表达自己的看法,既不想让人认为自己太自负,太张扬,又不想大放厥词,给对手施压,以免会遭受最后成绩不佳的尴尬。

By expressing one's own views in such vague and modest terms, one does not want others to think that they are too conceited or ostentatious, nor does one want to speak too loudly and put pressure on the opponent, lest one suffers the embarrassment of a poor result in the end.

#### 4.3. Effects of attributed pragmatic reasons on response evaluations

RQ2 seeks to understand how respondents' attribution of pragmatic reasons (i.e., modesty, agreement, obligation, self-confidence) impact their evaluations of the same response. Of the 146 respondents who read the accepting conditions, 88 of them (60.3 %) related it to showing self-confidence, 34 of them (23.3 %) related it to showing agreement, 19 of them (13 %) related it to fulfilling the obligation, and others attributed it to reasons such as "she is being direct" and "she wanted to fulfill her sense of vanity". The predominant attribution to self-confidence suggests that the expected norm of accepting the compliment is more about showing self-confidence and is less about conforming to the Agreement Maxim. An independent samples  $t$ -test revealed that respondents considered the accepting response more appropriate when they explicitly recognized the response as showing agreement with the complimenter ( $M = 3.79, SD = 0.63$ ) than attributed the behavior to other reasons ( $M = 3.38, SD = 0.99$ ), [ $t(33.13) = 2.43, p = 0.021$ ]. Additionally, although not reaching statistical significance, respondents' impressions of Xiaohong tends to be higher when they explicitly recognized her behavior as showing agreement ( $M = 3.58, SD = 0.69$ ) than did not ( $M = 3.24, SD = 0.81$ ), [ $t(144) = 1.77, p = 0.079$ ]. All other evaluations of the accepting responses were comparable regardless of recognizing the attributed reasons ( $ps > 0.05$ ).

Of the 188 respondents who read the deflecting scenarios, 108 of them (57 %) related the response to showing modesty, and 71 of them (43 %) related it to other reasons, such as "she is not confident enough" and "she actually thought that she did poorly". An independent samples *t*-test showed that respondents considered the deflecting response more appropriate when they explicitly recognized the response as showing modesty ( $M = 3.04, SD = 0.84$ ) than attributed the behavior to other reasons ( $M = 2.75, SD = 0.91$ ), [ $t(177) = 2.19, p = 0.030$ ]. Another independent samples *t*-test showed that respondents evaluated the deflecting response as less conceited when they explicitly recognized the response as showing modesty ( $M = 2.10, SD = 0.80$ ) than did not ( $M = 2.59, SD = 0.95$ ), [ $t(131.32) = 3.59, p < 0.001$ ]. In a similar vein, approaching statistical significance, respondents had a more positive impression of Xiaohong when they explicitly recognized the response as showing modesty ( $M = 3.06, SD = 0.66$ ) than did not ( $M = 2.87, SD = 0.74$ ), [ $t(177) = 1.82, p = 0.071$ ].

Of the 187 respondents who read the rejecting scenarios, 173 of them (92.5 %) related the response to showing modesty, and the remaining 14 (7.5 %) related it to other reasons, such as "she was showing off implicitly" and "she didn't think what she said was good enough." Independent samples *t*-tests did not identify any statistically significant differences of the modesty attribution on respondents' evaluations of appropriateness [ $t(185) = 0.69, p = 0.489$ ], conceitedness [ $t(185) = 1.12, p = 0.248$ ], and the impression of Xiaohong [ $t(185) = 0.07, p = 0.949$ ].

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Research implications

This study contributes to the research on Chinese CRs in three ways. First, the present study corroborates previous research on Chinese CR by examining respondents' evaluations rather than their production of different CR strategies. Specifically, respondents rated accepting responses as more appropriate and created more positive impressions of Xiaohong compared to deflecting and rejecting strategies (RQ1). In line with Spencer-Oatey and Ng's (2001) previous findings, this study found that although accepting the compliment may sound conceited, it does not necessarily create a more negative view of the response than deflecting or rejecting the compliment. In fact, it created a more positive outcome than the other two strategies, despite being perceived as being more conceited. It is also worth noting that although the accepting response led to higher perceived conceitedness, the mean ratings for all three strategies were below the midpoint (3) on the five-point measure adopted in the study, namely 2.35 for acceptance, 2.30 for deflection, and 2.10 for rejection. In other words, while the accepting strategy was rated as more conceited, the level of conceitedness is generally low among the surveyed sample. Since these statistically significant results are main effects across three replication scenarios, it has the potential to be generalized, supporting the commonly held claim that Chinese speakers now favor accepting strategies over deflecting and rejecting strategies (Chen and Yang, 2010; Xia et al., 2021). The evaluation approach adopted in the present study may stimulate new research to examine how subtle language differences shape communicators' reception of different speech acts (Jia and An, 2021).

Second, focusing on the topic of the compliment, the present research demonstrates the contextual sensitivity of CRs, where the English proficiency scenario produced ratings that are significantly different from the other two scenarios. Specifically, accepting rather than deflecting or rejecting the compliment led to higher ratings of appropriateness and/or impression in the new address and the public speaking contexts, but not in the English proficiency context. Moreover, accepting the compliment on Xiaohong's English proficiency was rated significantly more conceited than the other two response strategies, whereas the three CR strategies on the other two topics were rated as equally conceited. One possible reason is that in the English proficiency context, respondents may rely on varying communicative norms from China and America. Xiaohong was conversing with an American student who speaks intermediate Chinese. Moreover, the study did not find any statistically significant main effects of compliment topics on any of the three evaluation measures. Since each scenario was only represented by one compliment and one response for each of the three response strategies, the non-significant result may stem from a confound between compliment topic and individual speech act realizations. Therefore, the implications of the compliment topic should be interpreted with caution, awaiting further investigations.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of examining individuals' attributed pragmatic reasons when conducting evaluation research on CR. In the present study, while respondents' evaluations of CRs did not significantly differ by their gender and age ( $p > 0.42$ ), they differed significantly by the attributed reasons the respondents reported in their metapragmatic comments. Specifically, the findings showed that respondents considered the deflecting response as more appropriate and less conceited when they explicitly attributed the response to showing modesty than to other reasons. Approaching the conventional statistical cutoff of 0.05, treating modesty as the most likely reason also increased respondents' ratings of their impressions of Xiaohong than those who did not. Moreover, those who attributed agreement as the primary reason for accepting the compliment rated the response as more appropriate than those who attributed it to other reasons. These findings corroborate previous research in that the choice of CRs may be attributed to varying reasons, which include modesty, agreement, self-presentation, and obligation (e.g., Culpeper and Pat, 2021; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008).

Taken together, the significant findings at the individual (i.e., attributed pragmatic reason) rather than the group level (i.e., age, gender) present critical implications for advancing perception studies on (im)politeness and speech acts. Haugh and Chang (2019) argue that cross-cultural pragmatics research overemphasizes cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences but overlooks the inherent individual variabilities. Their results showed that Australian English speakers' evaluations of the same apology form almost a normal distribution, ranging from "very impolite" to "very polite". Moreover, accounting

for sociocultural factors such as age was also unable to explain the wide range of variations. Building on this study, Chen (2024) further questions the value of evaluation research if people from the same group have inherently different perceptions of the same issue.

The present study offers at least some initial answers to Chen's (2024) worries. It shows that to account for the inherent variability of individual perceptions, it is essential to also measure individual levels of differences, such as the attributed pragmatic reasons in the present study. Compared to previous studies that move below the national level and analyze predefined categories such as age and region (e.g., He, 2012; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008), this study pushes further to identify the differences that individual respondents have at the time of making their evaluations. These individual differences are subsequently grouped together to form the basis of comparison, such as between those who explicitly attributed modesty as the reason for the response and those who did not. As such, researchers can generalize their findings across individuals without necessarily superimposing essentialist cultural attributes to the respondents. Certainly, concepts such as modesty and self-presentation may derive from culturally embedded communicative norms. They should, however, not be used without empirically measuring them at the individual level.

## 5.2. Limitations and future directions

This study also bears several limitations that should be addressed in future studies. First, the experimental materials used in the study were rather short and only included very limited contextual information, such as not specifying the relationship between the two interlocutors (see Appendix A). It is possible that respondents may hold different assumptions when reading the same compliment response. For example, when evaluating the compliment on Xiaohong's new dress, some may assume that they are close friends and this is a routine ritual compliment, whereas others may assume that they are only acquaintances in the same classroom and the compliment is a pretext for initiating a request. In fact, such variability constitutes another possible individual factor, i.e., perceived communicative intention (e.g., achieving instrumental, relational, or identity goals). Future studies could further examine whether respondents' evaluation of the same compliment response would vary systematically when they attribute different intentions to the interlocutors in the vignette.

Second, although the study found that respondents' evaluations of CR varied by different compliment topics, it is unable to generalize the interaction effect from tokens of compliment topics (i.e., English proficiency, public speaking, new dress) to types of compliment topics (i.e., competence, performance, appearance, respectively). Moreover, the same compliment topic may be realized by three interrelated speech acts which include Congratulate ("You've arranged a fantastic party"), Opine ("Your party looks great"), and Remark ("What a nice shirt") (c.f., Edmondson et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025). Similarly, responses to these compliments may also be realized through different speech acts, such as following Xia et al.'s (2021) four-part classification of CR responses or measuring against Edmonson et al. (2023) taxonomy of speech acts. Nevertheless, this limitation does not undermine the main findings because the three scenarios are mainly used as a replication factor.

Another limitation of the study is the methodological paradox pointed out in Culpeper and Pat (2021), such that verbal compliment exchanges should not be studied in written formats. Therefore, future studies could consider using the survey experimental design to investigate communicators' evaluation of compliment exchanges and other (im)politeness phenomena in text-based online settings, such as online forums, text messaging, and social media platforms. Furthermore, the present study only examined how informants evaluated compliment exchanges that were presented to them. This is different from directly assessing conversational participants' personal calculations when responding to compliments themselves. Future studies should also consider adopting simulation technologies to allow respondents to make more naturalistic comments while getting the different conditions experimentally controlled. These limitations, nevertheless, do not affect the established associations between respondents' evaluations of different CR strategies and the attributed pragmatic reasons across individual respondents.

## 6. Conclusions

To better account for the individual variability in CR perceptions, this online survey experiment tested Chinese college English majors' evaluations of three CR strategies (acceptance, deflection, rejection) on three compliment response topics (English proficiency, public speaking, new dress). The findings of this reception study corroborate the observations in previous production studies, such that Chinese college students now favor accepting over deflecting or rejecting compliments. More importantly, this study identified that respondents' evaluations of the CR are contingent on the evaluators' attributed pragmatic reasons (e.g., being modest, seeking agreement with others). The interactional contingency identified in this study suggests that people's varying perception of a face-sensitive act would be better explained by the individual differences that arise from a specific interaction than by predefined cultural, regional, and sociological factors.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Mian Jia:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Experimental Scenarios and Their English Translations

### Public Speaking (Performance)

小红参加演讲比赛。她觉得自己发挥的很好。当她讲完下台后,一位观战的同学走过来对她说:“我很喜欢你的演讲!讲得真好!”小红回答说:

Xiaohong delivered a speech in a public speaking contest. She feels that the speech went well. When she finished her speech, one audience member came to her and said, “I really like your speech! Well done!” Xiaohong replies:

Agreement	谢谢!我也觉得自己今天发挥的挺好。 xiè xiè ! wǒ yě jué de de zì jǐ jīn tiān fā huī de tǐng hǎo. Thank you! I also think my speech went quite well.
Deflection	我也不知道。我觉得还可以吧。。。 wǒ yě bù zhī dào. wǒ jué de hái kě yǐ ba... I really don't know. I think my speech is just okay.
Rejection	哎呀,我也不知道自己在胡说什么。。。 āi yā, wǒ yě bù zhī dào zì jǐ zài hú shuō shén me... Oh no. I don't even know what I'm talking about.

### English Proficiency (Competence)

小红是英语专业的学生,学业成绩很好。有一天,她走在校园里。一位美国交换生向她问路。她用英语流利地作了回答,美国学生用生硬的中文说道:“你的英语很棒!你说的和美国人一样好!”小红回应说:

Xiaohong majors in English and she gets high scores in school. One day, as she is walking through the campus, an American exchange student asks her for directions. She answers the question fluently and the American student comments using awkward Chinese: “Your English is great! You speak like an American!” Xiaohong replies:

Agreement	谢谢!我英语口语课拿了满分呢。 xiè xiè ! wǒ yǐng yǔ kǒu yǔ kè ná le mǎn fēn ne. Thank you! I actually gained full marks in my spoken English class.
Deflection	嗯。。。我是英语专业的嘛。英语就应该好的。 èn... wǒ shì yǐng yǔ zhuān yè de ma. yǐng yǔ jiù yǐng gāi hǎo de. Well, I major in English. I should speak good English.
Rejection	哪里哪里,我也刚开始学英语。我英语还不怎么好。 nǎ lǐ nǎ lǐ, wǒ yě gāng kāi shǐ xué yǐng yǔ. wǒ yǐng yǔ hái bù zěn me hǎo. No, no, no. I am still a beginner. My English is poor.

### New Dress (Appearance)

小红穿了一条新裙子,她很喜欢这条裙子。班上的一个女同学遇到她说:“你的裙子真好看。你今天真漂亮!”小红回答说:

Xiaohong wears a new dress, and she loves it. One of her female classmates sees her in class and says: “I like your dress. You look pretty today!” Xiaohong replies:

Agreement	谢谢!这是我最喜欢的裙子! xiè xiè ! zhè shì wǒ zuì xǐ huān de qún zi ! Thank you! This is my favorite dress!
Deflection	真的么?我今天从寝室走的时候随便穿了一条。 zhēn de me ? wǒ jīn tiān cóng qín shì zǒu de shí hou suí biàn chuān le yì tiáo. Really? I just randomly picked one when I left my dorm.
Rejection	开玩笑,我哪会打扮。。。 kāi wán xiào, wǒ nǎ huì dǎ bàn... You are making fun of me. I'm really bad at choosing clothes.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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