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Emancipating Chinese (im)politeness research: Looking back and looking forward

Mian Jia [a,*], Guoping Yang [b]

[a] Department of Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 2504A Whitis Ave. (A1105), 78712 Austin, USA

[b] School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University of Technology, 1801 Zhongwu Rd., Changzhou, Jiangsu 213001, China

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Abstract

Chinese data have been frequently used as a testing ground of Western theories of (im)politeness. While making significant progress, most of the existing studies still concentrate on the dominant Confucianist social norms and analyze a limited number of variants of face-to-face and mediated interactional contexts. By adopting an emancipatory approach to (im)politeness research, we seek to broaden the scope of Chinese (im)politeness research. In this paper, we review the major studies of Chinese (im)politeness published in English and Chinese outlets from the emancipation of theories of (im)politeness, research methods, and contextual variations. The results show evidence for both the *Same Position* and the *Different Position* in the East-West debate at various levels of analysis. We argue that scholars should further examine underlying assumptions held by researchers and interlocutors, constructing generalized models for contrastive analysis and seeking for cross-fertilization between Chinese and Western politeness theories.

Keywords: Chinese; East-West divide; Emancipatory approach; Evaluation; Face; (Im)politeness

1. Introduction

In recent years, the (im)politeness research community has witnessed a surge of publications studying Chinese data in the form of books (e.g., Chen, 2017; Pan and Kádár, 2011a), special issues (e.g., Kádár, 2019; Kádár and Pan, 2012), and articles in top journals (e.g., Chen and Ren, 2020; Ran and Zhao, 2018; Xia and Lan, 2019). In addition to using Chinese data as a ''testing ground'' for Western (im)politeness theories (Kádár, 2019), many of the recent publications have explicitly or implicitly adopted an emancipatory approach that departs from the Western Brown and Levinson (1987) paradigm and instead, constructs theories of (im)politeness based on Chinese socio-cultural values (e.g., Chen, 2019a; Ran and Zhao, 2018), exploring social, cultural, and regional regularities and variations (e.g., Chen and Li, 2019; Lin et al., 2012).

While making significant progress, most of the existing studies continue to concentrate on the dominant Confucianist social norms and analyze the variants of several types of face-to-face and mediated interactional contexts. With a few

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: mianjia@utexas.edu (M. Jia), yangguoping@jsut.edu.cn (G. Yang).

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exceptions on rural populations (e.g., Ran et al., 2020), the current presentation of Chinese social norms is largely limited to those reflecting traditional Confucian values and the recent introduction of Western values of individualism and a market economy, largely focusing on practices in academic, familial, political, and business settings (Chen, 2017; Pan, 2000; Zhu, 2019). The focus on well-educated urban Chinese interactants such as politicians, scholars, and college students coincides with the Confucian hierarchy of scholar-officials (*shi*) that receive the utmost respect in the society (Xiong, 1995). However, the traditional *shi* class only represents a small portion of China's 1.4 billion population. This overemphasis on Confucianism to explain Chinese behaviors is unreflective (Dervin, 2015). Since these ideologies are used as the bases of (im)politeness evaluations, overly generalizing Confucianism could also be pernicious to culturally grounded analyses (Kádár, 2017). An emancipatory approach, therefore, seeks to broaden the scope of Chinese (im) politeness research.

Following this emancipatory approach, the purpose of this paper is to survey the theoretical and empirical studies of Chinese (im)politeness interactions, highlighting the theories and methods that are particularly helpful to broaden the scope of Chinese (im)politeness research and discussing the implications for a broader cross-cultural agenda on (im) politeness research. We begin with a discussion on the emancipatory approach to Chinese (im)politeness research and then review some major advancements from theoretical, methodological, and contextual perspectives. At the end of the paper, we use a case study to further illustrate this emancipatory approach to Chinese (im)politeness research.

2. An emancipatory approach to Chinese (im)politeness research

To enrich our understanding of (im)politeness, we adopt an emancipatory approach to Chinese (im)politeness that seeks to emancipate Chinese (im)politeness theories, methods, contexts, and publications across English and Chinese languages (see Fig. 1). Such work stems from the latest third wave of (im)politeness research (Kádár, 2019). According to Grainger (2011), (im)politeness study has undergone three waves of development in theory. The first wave concerns universal attempts to examine (im)politeness phenomena and is centered on the strategic management of face (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996) and maxims-based approaches to politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). While producing fruitful results, the first wave suffers from the imposition of researchers' predetermined Western categorization onto Asian cultures such as Chinese and Japanese cultures. For example, as one of the precursors of constructing non-Western theories of politeness, Ide (1989) argues that Brown and Levinson's goal-oriented model does not explain the Japanese ''discernment'' that the use of polite expressions is determined by social norms rather than interactional strategies. Mao (1994) contends that Chinese notion of *face* has a moral component that has not been captured by Brown and Levinson's theory. Referencing the critiques from East Asian scholars, the second wave scholars emphasize participants' situated evaluations and interpretations of (im)politeness, rejecting a priori predictions of (im)polite meaning in utterances (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). Despite its sharp criticisms of the first wave research, the second wave precludes any theorization of (im)politeness, reducing the focus to mere descriptions of individual cases (Terkourafi, 2005). The third wave, however, seeks to build on participants' emic evaluations of (im)politeness phenomena in the second wave but establishes different scientific models for rigorous analyses as is celebrated in the first wave (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Terkourafi, 2015). In the current review, we aim to synthesize the specific linguistic regularities and variations of (im)politeness shared by groups of Chinese speakers, laying a firm foundation for constructing generalizable theories of Chinese (im)politeness.

First, emancipating Chinese (im)politeness theories seeks to depart from the Anglo theoretical paradigm that is based on individualism, rationality, and market economy and, in turn, theorizes (im)politeness phenomena based on their own cultural, linguistic, and situational norms (Kádár and Zhang, 2019; Ren, 2019). It is essential to point out that a departure

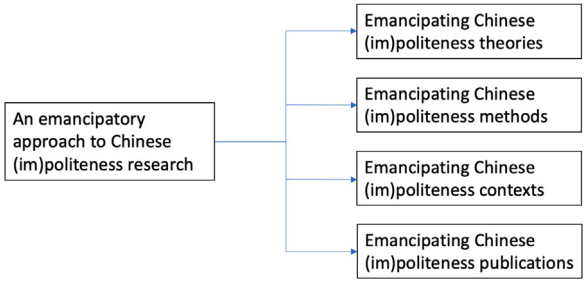

Fig. 1. Components of an emancipatory approach to Chinese (im)politeness research.

from the Anglo theoretical paradigm does not imply that Chinese cultures do not embody any of these values. Instead, Chinese people's behaviors are often guided by layers of individual, group, and societal values. For example, Zhai (2004) argues that Chinese society is organized in reasonableness (*qingli*) in which Chinese people do not treat favor as merely a rational calculation of reciprocity in the Western social exchange theories, but as a joint consideration of rationality and emotion. In the meantime, a culture-specific approach to (im)politeness still runs the risk of overly essentializing one culture to a single ideology. For example, Mills (2017) finds that extant studies of English (im)politeness are largely centered around middle-class white populations and often construe their norms as the default national norm. The same tendency toward essentialization is also found in Chinese intracultural (Kádár, 2017) and intercultural communication (Feng et al., 2019). Therefore, it is also necessary to broaden the characterization of Chinese (im)politeness away from a single interpretation of norms.

Second, emancipating Chinese (im)politeness methods advocates for adopting research methods that are most suitable to the Chinese data. In a recent review of approaches to Chinese (im)politeness, Kádár and Zhang (2019) argue that Chinese politeness researchers should not simply follow the dominant Western analytic methods, but instead adopt research methods that best suit for Chinese data. They outlined four major approaches to Chinese (im)politeness: contrastive corpus-driven and speech act-based research, historical pragmatic/discourse analytic approaches, contrastive and intercultural pragmatic approaches, and discursive/interactional approaches to politeness. One particularly important approach is the study of Chinese philology (*xiaoxue*). For example, in his seminal article on Chinese terms of address, Chao (1956) notes that Chinese honorifics goes beyond the choice of different pronouns such as using *ni* or *nin* to refer to *you* in English. When referring to more than two people, the Chinese classifier *wei* represents a polite way of speaking.

Third, an emancipatory approach expects scholars to examine a wide range of contexts. Sifianou and Blitvich (2017) argue that cross-cultural studies need to focus on regularity and variability at the same time, balancing the pan-human universality on the one hand and the extreme individualistic constructivist claim on the other hand. The emancipation of contexts is often associated with the variational approach to (im)politeness (Schneider and Barron, 2008; Schneider and Placencia, 2017). While plenty of studies have been carried out in pluricentric languages such as English, Spanish, and French, few have examined the variations of (im)politeness in Chinese that is mainly spoken as the native language in China (Ren et al., 2013).

Finally, while international publications of Chinese research are insightful, a survey of research published in Chinese outlets could be particularly helpful for addressing the demise of English as the default scientific metalanguage (Wierzbicka, 2014). Linguists have cautioned the influence of language on human conceptualization (Whorf, 1956), arguing that linguistic theorizing has to be grounded in its ordinary language (Lyons, 1977). In particular, (im)politeness scholars have advocated for raising greater awareness of the cultural connotations embedded in the English language when analyzing and reporting (im)politeness in other languages (Haugh, 2016; Ogiermann and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019). Therefore, using Chinese to analyze Chinese linguistic (im)politeness could reduce the linguistic biases of English toward Chinese data, producing analyses that are closer to the emic understandings of the phenomena of interest. Therefore, we also include research articles published in leading Chinese journal outlets but have not been reported in international outlets. In fact, many of the theoretical breakthroughs in Chinese (im)politeness research heavily referenced important works that were published in Chinese (c.f. the reference lists in Chen, 2019a, and Ran and Zhao, 2018). To sum up, the emancipation of theories, methods, and contexts could broaden the scope of Chinese (im)politeness research and the inclusion of research published in China could further contribute to the expansion of Chinese (im)politeness work.

3. Emancipating Chinese (im)politeness theories

The varying beliefs and practices in Chinese (im)politeness give rise to an extensive theoretical debate on the East-West divide (Chen, 2010; Chen et al., 2013; Leech, 2007). On the one hand, the *Different Position* scholars (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994) argue for fundamental distinctions between Chinese and Western cultures, challenging the Eurocentric models devised by Western scholars (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987). Many of these studies proclaimed that Chinese society has distinct historical, social, and cultural practices from the Western individualism and rationality and should utilize analytical models based on their emic cultural understandings (e.g., Chen, 2019a; Ran and Zhao, 2018; Zhou and Zhang, 2018b). On the other hand, the *Same Position* scholars (Chen, 2010; Leech, 2007) argue for cross-cultural commonalities across human behaviors. For example, Chen (2010) contends that scholars need to examine the generalizability of cross-cultural findings beyond reporting the surface linguistic differences. Theories that merely emphasize cultural uniqueness may shut the door for cross-cultural comparisons. In this section, we review the major theoretical developments in the two positions and discuss how an emancipatory approach can contribute to this East-West divide.

3.1. The different position

Inspired by the works of Japanese scholars such as Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1988), *Different Position* scholars started to examine the applicability of Western notions of *face* in Chinese contexts. For example, Gu (1990) notes that Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative face threat does not apply to Chinese cultures because the seemingly imposing actions of invitation and offering in English-speaking countries are commonly perceived as face enhancing strategies in China. Mao (1994) points out two major differences between the English notion of face and the Chinese counterparts of *mianzi* and *lian*: First, while English negative face refers to one's want for freedom of imposition, *mianzi* connotates one's dependence on social recognition; second, *lian* differs from the positive face because it concerns morality and is earned cumulatively. Further, based on his analysis of business data, Hinze (2012) found that face concern is not the central motivation of politeness in Chinese, arguing for disassociation of *mianzi* and *lian* with Chinese politeness theorization. While such a separation echoes the Western advocacy for the independence of facework from (im)politeness (Arundale, 2006), Chinese facework is not limited to repairing the relational face damage but also to addressing interlocutors' emotional need, which is inseparable from *face* in Chinese (Ran and Zhao, 2018). Building on previous introspective and qualitative studies, Zhou and Zhang (2017) conducted a corpus-based study to further disambiguate Chinese notions of *face*. They found that *mianzi* and *lian* largely overlap with each other, but the former is frequently associated with positive attributes, whereas the latter is associated with negative ones. These metapragmatic findings help advance our understanding of Chinese facework.

In addition to challenging the Western models of politeness, Chinese scholars also constructed independent theories to explain Chinese linguistic politeness. While Western politeness is instrumental (goal-oriented) and emphasizes managing face-threats (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987), Chinese politeness is normative and is associated with conversational maxims of appropriateness, respectfulness, modesty, self-denigration, attitudinal warmth, refinement, and friendliness (Gu, 1990; Zhou and Zhang, 2018a). For example, Chen (1996) observed that Chinese food-plying, which means insisting on serving more food to someone, is a ritualistic way of showing attitudinal warmth rather than imposing on the guests' individual freedom. Moreover, compared with the Western Aristotelian rhetoric of finiteness and linearity, Ma (1996) proposed that Chinese speakers display a pattern of ''contrary-to-face-value communication'' that is guided by the Taoist concept of infinity that saying ''yes'' may indirectly mean rejection, and saying ''no'' may convey indirect consent. While indirect communication can be observed in almost all cultures, Chinese speakers tend to use them much more frequently than most Anglo-Americans. For example, when the guests compliment the host for their delicious food, Anglo-American hosts tend to respond with ''no'' if they sincerely believe that they did not prepare a decent meal for the guests or they have done better. In contrast, Chinese hosts tend to say ''no'' even if they believe that they are good at cooking. A fake ''no'' from the Chinese hosts would best be understood as a modest way of acknowledging the compliments. Furthermore, grounded in the Chinese notions of face and favor, Ran and Zhao (2018) propose a conflict mediation model that manages participants' mutual 'affection-base' face that is treated as a moral order evoked by participants. In a similar vein, Zhao and Ran (2019) depart from Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of face-threat and examine Chinese interpersonal conflicts and impoliteness from an affection-based face threat viewpoint. Zhao and Ran's study is particularly illuminating because it shows that in Chinese contexts, face, emotion, and impoliteness do not interact on an individual level (as evidenced in Vergis and Terkourafi, 2015); impoliteness actually threatens the affection between two people, which is consequently argued for as the minimal unit of analysis in Chinese data.

Some scholars have also theorized Chinese politeness in relation to families and kinship. By examining the Chinese idioms and the *Analects of Confucius*, Chen (2019a) argues that the Chinese see social relations as extended familial relationships, proposing four maxims of addressing closeness, attitudinal warmth, familial deference, and interactional harmony. The Chinese view *Jia* (family) as the overarching group of interpersonal organization. Kinship terms are not only reserved for family members with blood ties but are frequently used among non-kin members as a strategy to claim solidarity (Wu, 1990). Based on an ethnographic study of addressing practice in academic seminars, Chen and Ren (2020) reported that the frequent use of general kinship terms (e.g., *shijie*, academic elder sister) among non-kin graduate students is driven by the family culture as a cultural meme. The extended notion of ''self'' also extends to the use of linguistic impoliteness. For example, Li and Li (1996) note that the practice of self-denigration extends to their family members by referring to their loved ones as ''stupid wife and ugly daughter''. Similarly, by analyzing compliments made during a diner talk, Xia and Lan (2019) show that an originally impolite utterance in a dyad can be transformed into a polite utterance in a third-party communication. Moreover, Chang and Haugh (2011) show that, in Taiwanese business interactions, the successful employment of strategic embarrassment is predicated on the prevailing norm of *guanxi* that describes reciprocal rights and obligations among business partners.

3.2. The same position

While acknowledging cross-cultural variations, the *Same Position* scholars argue for cross-cultural regularities beyond the surface differences, laying foundations for contrastive studies. The earlier attempts, as implied in their

names as ''absolute politeness'' (Leech, 1983) and ''politeness universals'' (Brown and Levinson, 1987), strive to construct universal models that can explain politeness phenomena across cultures. To accommodate variations evidenced in inter- and cross-cultural studies, scholars have downplayed the universality, maintaining some degrees of similarities between the East and the West on their use of language (Holtgraves, 2005) and their perceptions of culture (Leech, 2007). Drawing on various examples from Chinese, Japanese, and English, Leech (2014) shows that, when talking about politeness, the East and the West are not referring to utterly different things. Facing the challenges from the *Different Position* scholars, Brown (2017) contends that the similarity lies in the analogous patterns of language use across different settings. To falsify this position, one must find evidence showing that such a parallel does not hold. In other words, there has to be a culture where a small face-threat defined by that culture is redressed with a high degree of politeness, and a significant face-threat in that culture is redressed with minor politeness. Based on empirical studies of Chinese and English ritual frame indicating expressions (RFIE) of *qing* and *please*, Kádár and House (2020) propose a pragmalinguistic framework of ''ritual frame'' to establish a foundation for contrastive analysis. They argue that forms such as honorifics and other RFIEs represent the word choices in standard situations and should be best understood as rituals rather than politeness.

Moreover, existing theories of Chinese (im)politeness provide ample evidence to support the similarity claim. For example, while Gu (1990) argues that Chinese politeness is largely normative, Fraser (1990) proposes a conversational-contract view, arguing that politeness is not a cost-benefit analysis, but a social norm that individuals accumulate over their everyday interactions. In a similar vein, while constructing a culturally indigenous model of Chinese politeness as appropriateness, Zhou and Zhang (2018a) also point out that such theorizing coincides with Meier's (1995) proposal of politeness as appropriateness in the West. Similar examples can also be found in communication studies, an area of inquiry rooted in North America and often independent from the (im)politeness frameworks in the rest of the world (Haugh et al., 2013). For instance, Chinese scholars have consistently argued for an extended framework for analyzing Chinese data, such as viewing the triad as the minimal unit of analysis (Xia and Lan, 2015, 2017) and grounding the family as the basic unit for Chinese culture and the extended self (Chen, 2019a; Li and Li, 1996; Wu, 1990). Poole (1998) also proposes that the small group should be the fundamental unit of analysis in communication research, echoing the organization of Chinese family culture. Moreover, while Yuan (2013) highlights that the Taoist philosophy of *yin* and *yang* is uniquely Chinese, Baxter's (2004) relational dialectics theory also emphasizes the tension between two opposing forces in one system. Although these Chinese and Western theories may stem from different knowledge bases, the striking similarities between them clearly shed light on the *Same Position*.

The debate on the East-West divide indicates that (im)politeness research is a complex phenomenon that shares cultural similarities but also displays cultural differences. The difference between the Chinese and the West should not be understood as mutually exclusive. Such a conclusion has received ample support from social psychological studies (Nisbett, 2005). For example, to debunk the myth that Chinese are relational and Americans are analytical, Nisbett (2005) found that Chinese people can have the same level of analytical skills as Americans do. In fact, the difference is about the tendency to adopt one or the other. The blurring East-West divide also echoes Chen's (2009) proposal that we should not dichotomize Chinese and Western communication studies. The most salient evidence is that *face*, as an analytical term of Western (im)politeness models, is actually drawn from Chinese culture (Goffman, 1955) and should share commonalities with the Chinese notions of face.

To account for this cultural complexity, an emancipatory approach is particularly suitable for studying (im)politeness behaviors that are evaluative in nature and rely on interlocutors' situated judgment. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge differences between Chinese and Western dominant ideologies and practices, constructing indigenous models to a specific culture. On the other hand, the similarities reflected in the underrepresented data suggest the possibilities to connect different theories and establish foundations for contrastive analysis. Therefore, scholars need to construct generalized models that critically assess underlying assumptions and norms across different settings, groups, and cultures. Although these generalized models are by no means universal, they provide important cultural baselines for analysts to explore communicators' motivations to comply or deviate from such bases. These compliances and deviations could further account for our instrumental, relational, and identity goals across different cultures.

An emancipatory approach also suggests that communication between Chinese and Western research should be bilateral. We have seen a growing number of studies highlighting non-Western theories, and Chinese and Asian theories are expected to ''supplement, enrich, and challenge Western optics'' (Miike, 2006: 6). However, the recent advancement in comparative rhetoric informs us that a comparison between East and West is not simply meant to create binary distinctions and build up better theories of the West, but to build theories that are mutually supportive of each other (Mao et al., 2015). In a similar vein, while rejecting the incongruities between China and the West, (im)politeness scholars could actively seek for applicability of Chinese theories and methodologies to Western phenomena (e.g., Goffman, 1955) and Western theories and methodologies to Chinese phenomena (e.g., Ran and Zhao, 2018; Zhou and Zhang, 2018a).

4. Emancipating Chinese (im)politeness research methods

Building on the methodological advancement proposed in Kádár and Zhang (2019), we aim to highlight three specific methods that are particularly suitable for analyzing Chinese data and theorizing Chinese (im)politeness research. First, Chinese (im)politeness research needs to focus on more longitudinal or quasi-longitudinal studies. Chinese society has seen an influx of Western values that have changed the norms of social interactions. One of the notable examples is research on compliment responses (Chen, 2010). When responding to a compliment, complimentees are expected to show agreement by accepting the compliment or to avoid self-praise by rejecting the compliment (Pomerantz, 1978). Earlier studies show that Chinese college students predominantly (95.73%) chose to reject others' compliments to show modesty (Chen, 1993), forming a sharp contrast with the English speaker's tendency to accept compliments (Holmes, 1986). Such findings reflect the Western desire to protect negative face want (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and the Chinese norm of self-denigration (Gu, 1990). Almost two decades later, Chen and Yang (2010) adopted the same research design in Chen (1993) and surveyed student participants from the same institution. They found that the patterns of compliment responses have drastically changed from rejection to acceptance, ascribing this change to the increasing influence of Western values. Although a truly longitudinal study may be less feasible, conducting quasi-longitudinal studies by replicating research designs of earlier studies on Chinese (im)politeness could offer us insights on how sociocultural factors influence people's perceptions and actions of (im)politeness.

Second, Chinese (im)politeness research could benefit from comparing Chinese data with cultures sharing similar interactional norms. Kádár and Zhang (2019) pointed out that more comparisons are needed between Chinese and other Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean because of their historical influence from Chinese culture. For example, since terms of address or honorifics are both salient in Chinese (He and Ren, 2016) and Japanese (Ide, 1989), it would be interesting to compare the indexing functions evidenced in these two languages, contributing to a better understanding of the social norms in China and Japan. Moreover, comparisons can also be made between Chinese culture and other lingua-cultures that share similar conceptualizations of face and politeness with China. For example, studies have shown that in addition to the Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualization of individual face, languages such as Igbo in Africa (Nwoye, 1992) and Spanish in South America (Mugford and Félix-Brasdefer, 2020) also consider face at a group level. Since China is distant away from the African and South American continents, it would be more interesting to explore how these geographically distant cultures display similar cultural norms.

Finally, corpus-based methods could be adopted to explore the linguistic and meta-linguistic issues in Chinese (im) politeness. While corpus-based methods are often criticized for lacking contextual information, they are powerful tools to study politeness phenomena that have identifiable forms such as conventional formulae and politeness markers (Jucker, 2018). For example, Kádár and House (2020) demonstrated that a corpus-based approach to politeness research is particularly suitable for comparing ritual frame indicating expressions in different languages, such as *please* and its Chinese counterpart *qing*. More importantly, the advent of large-scale corpora such as Google Books (Michel et al., 2010) and Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) offers viable means to supplement our perceptions of politeness and its related concepts. For example, using Google N-gram Viewer, Kádár and Ran (2019) found that the word *guojihua* (globalization) surged since the 1980s in Chinese books, co-occurring with the increase of Chinese term *limao* (politeness). Their results show a divergent understanding of globalization and politeness, whereby the Chinese associate globalization with improving politeness while the West associates it with inducing impoliteness. Moreover, large-scale corpora are particularly suitable for Chinese scholars to explore the emic conceptualization of Chinese facework. Its rationale stems from the explicit metaphorical use of *lian*, *mianzi*, and related terms in lay communication among the Chinese (Zhou and Zhang, 2018a). Other than the idiomatic expression of *give face*, English speakers rarely use the word *face* as a metacommunicative term in everyday conversation, making it harder for researchers to capture facework in naturally-occurring corpus data. In contrast, since Chinese people frequently use *mianzi* and *lian* as metapragmatic evaluations of their (im)polite behaviors, analysts can directly extract their face-related evaluations from corpora and theorize interlocutors' emic understanding of (im)politeness to build emic-etic models advocated in the third-wave of politeness research (Kádár, 2019).

5. Emancipating Chinese (im)politeness research contexts

An emancipatory approach entails that the norms of (im)politeness within China may vary across different contexts. Pan (2000) points out that the variation of (im)politeness is shaped by four social factors of rank, age, gender, and connection. First, the difference in social ranks often creates an asymmetrical use of politeness (Pan and Kádár, 2011b). For example, Pan (1995) found that, in Chinese official settings, only people with dominant power can determine their relationship with others and decide the appropriate level of politeness between them. In contrast, Tong and Xie (2019) show that while professors with institutional power are relatively free from imposition from students, students tend to

negotiate their relations and use ritualistic self-display as a means of interrupting their professors to boost their self-image. Their ritualistic face-threatening interruptions are not evaluated as impolite or inappropriate by the professor in power. The bottom-up interactional approach adopted in Tong and Xie's (2019) paper challenges the dominant cultural belief that threatening people with higher power is intolerable.

Second, Chinese politeness practices also display gender differences. For example, Pan (2000) found that while what men said is often evaluated positively, women's utterances were largely downplayed. By analyzing date refusals on reality TV shows in China, Ren and Woodfield (2016) found that females prefer to save the (positive) face of the male candidate in public when rejecting their date invitations. Their date refusals were mostly realized through apologies, with reasons, and to a lesser degree through adjuncts to refusals (including positive comments and expressions of gratitude) and direct refusal strategies. In addition, Chinese females demonstrated a preference for strategies of involvement politeness in their date refusals, conforming to Tannen's (1986) typical female communication style. While gender differences are often consistent in international publications (Pan, 2000), Song (1998) proposes a more dynamic view of gender roles and politeness, arguing that as the society becomes more civilized, men and women can adopt more flexible gender roles in communication. Moreover, Li et al. (2019) found that male and female college students have no significant differences in their levels of politeness in apologies because they perceive similar levels of power relations. Instead, a significant difference was found in their perceived necessity to initiate apologies. Such a difference is ascribed to male students' emphasis on self-image and female students' orientation to social responsibility. Moreover, Duan (2008) argues that it is the hearer's rather than the speaker's gender that influences the choice of polite expressions. Therefore, joint consideration of speakers and hearers may yield a better understanding of gendered (im)politeness.

Third, age could also influence expressions of Chinese politeness. Chen (1996) observed that young people are more open to Western values and more likely to adopt Western norms of behavior than the elderly. This divergence stemmed from their different conceptualizations of face and politeness before and after China's reform policy (He, 2012; Pan and Kádár, 2011b). The older generation was exposed to the traditional Chinese norms of self-denigration and modesty, whereas the younger generation was influenced by the Western individual values of presenting self-image and identity. In fact, most of the evidence to support East-West universals came from college students rather than senior participants (see Chen and Yang, 2010; Feng et al., 2019). As an important factor of (im)politeness, age could be moderated by other communicative factors. For example, Liu (2007) found that vendors use more polite vocatives (honorifics) only when they are younger than the customers. If they are older than their customers, they would opt for the non-honorific set of vocatives even if customers usually enjoy a higher status and are expected to be addressed with polite vocatives. In contrast, Li (2001) found that the effect of age on politeness could be moderated by participants' group membership. On the one hand, younger people used a significantly higher number of politeness expressions to older people and they, in turn, used a significantly lower number of politeness expressions to younger people when they are acquaintances or strangers. On the other hand, they tend to apply comparable bald on-record strategies when making requests to their close relatives. Furthermore, Duan (2008) found that the speaker role moderates the speakers' age and their use of politeness when purchasing bus tickets. While younger conductors often use more politeness strategies than older conductors, older passengers often use more politeness than younger passengers. This is because older passengers are unfamiliar with transportation services and try to use politeness as an instrumental strategy to facilitate their communication.

Fourth, Chinese speakers display distinct practices of (im)politeness among different types of connections (Chen, 2019a; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, 2016). Group membership becomes particularly salient in anonymous online communication, where social status, gender, and age are blurred. For example, Kádár et al. (2013) found that Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese adopted varying (im)politeness strategies to associate with and disassociate from each other when discussing sensitive political issues. Based on recorded conversations at a driver training center, Zhang and Xie (2016) show that, while conventional impoliteness can be face-threatening when directed to each other, these impolite formulae can foster positive interpersonal relations when impoliteness is directed at a third party (e.g., learners complaining to each other about the terrible performance of their instructor.) Moreover, (im)politeness strategies can also be used to actively construct online identities when their real identities are unknown. For example, Mao and Zhao (2019) found that Chinese doctors used markers of politeness to demonstrate their professional and authoritative identities. He and Chen (2015) found that owners of online stores sometimes used jocular vocatives to address their customers, claiming an in-group identity with the customers. In other cases, when building group membership is unnecessary, impoliteness tends to become the new norm. Li (2020) found that many Chinese online viewers have little concern for protecting other's face and being polite, preferring strong and direct offensive language when expressing anger or rebutting others.

Fifth, linguistic (im)politeness also varies by the communication styles upheld in different regions. For example, Deng and Qiu (2019) found that when interlocutors hold similar levels of power and solidarity, Easterners tend to use more casual forms of apology, whereas Northeasterners and Northwesterners tend to use more formal styles of apology. A deeper examination of the data shows that Easterners consider politeness as part of appropriate behavior in situated contexts. In contrast, Northeasterners and Northwesterners view politeness as embedded in language structures, so

formal styles could elicit polite interpretations. Such a divide is also found between urban and rural areas. Chen and Li (2019) found that urban residents generally have a stronger awareness of politeness when making apologies over rural residents because people from rural areas consider that using too many politeness expressions would index a distanced relation and harm the other's face. Similar differences can also be found in Chinese public signages. As a form of public discourse, these signs are often expected to uphold the principles of etiquette and politeness (Sun and He, 2019; Yuan and Chen, 2010). Appeals to face threats, however, were frequently used to persuade villagers to practice social distancing during the early stage of COVID-19 pandemics. For example, by stating ''If you bring COVID-19 back to the village, you are an unworthy descendant of your family'', the signage threatens the addressees' group face of their family members and their local community. This observation shows that urban and rural regions may uphold different norms of politeness and need to be analyzed separately. In addition, linguistic politeness can also be constrained by the different dialects used across regions. For example, Hong (1999) notes that, while Hangzhou and Lanzhou residents both valued politeness, Hangzhou speakers tend to use fewer varieties of politeness modifiers due to the limited number of lexemes in Hangzhou dialect that can indicate politeness. Nevertheless, regional dialects do not entail fewer polite expressions. Zhou (2015) shows that Wuhan dialect speakers use *tanjia* as an honorific pronoun to refer jointly to self and someone who is not present in the conversation. In contrast, Mandarin Chinese does not have pronouns that carry the same function. The same word can also be interpreted differently across regions. For example, adopting an ethnographic approach, Emu (1999) found that while ''pregnancy'' is considered a politic expression among the *Han*, it is evaluated as a taboo word and is avoided by the *Yi*. Moreover, different from the norm of complimenting others' children among the *Han*, the *Yi* speakers believe that compliment to children could attract monsters and demons, endangering the children. Furthermore, people from different regions may hold different language attitudes The food-plying behaviors that were seen as appropriate by Chinese living in the inland city of Xi'an, the same behaviors were commented as ''old-fashioned'' and ''hypothetical'' by people in Shenzhen, which is a coastal city that has much more Western influence (Chen, 1996). Spencer-Oatey and Ng (2001) found that compared to mainland Chinese, Hong Kong citizens showed a stronger urge to uphold the traditional Chinese politeness norms, possibly due to their stronger desire to maintain their Chinese identity in a very much Westernized city of Hong Kong. These examples support the cultural regularities and variations of politeness norms.

Finally, contrary to Gu's (1990) deemphasis on instrumental (im)politeness, Chinese data also reveal an instrumental urge in specific communicative scenarios. For example, Zhou and Cao (2017) found that different from the normative understanding of politeness in daily interaction, military training represents a strategic use of linguistic impoliteness to discipline the novice recruits, helping them construct a new identity as qualified soldiers. Similarly, Niu and Luo (2015) show that institutional impoliteness can achieve positive pragmatic functions such as entertaining the audience, weakening antagonism, and regulating power asymmetry. The instrumental orientation becomes more salient in mass communication contexts. For example, Chen (2013) found that an increasing number of personal involvement markers such as person deixis is used to boost the persuasive effect of advertising discourse.

6. Case study: (im)politeness in Chinese rap battles

As is shown in the above review, while Chinese politeness has been extensively studied, Chinese impoliteness is still in its infancy (Ran and Kádár, 2019). The existing studies of Chinese impoliteness are largely confined to a limited number of contexts, such as everyday conversation (e.g., Xia and Lan, 2019), fictions (e.g., Chen, 2019b), and mediated communications (e.g., Li, 2020). The freestyle rap battle is a form of ritual insults originated from African American communities (Labov, 1972; Mavima, 2016) and is largely remained to be an underground art in China due to its vulgar language use (Amar, 2018). The present case study is based on 51 rounds of battles from *Iron Mic*, China's oldest and the most famous underground rap battle competitions.

The results show that Chinese rappers frequently employed impolite language to deliberately attack the face of their opponent and breaking polite norms people would have usually upheld in daily conversations. Table 1 presents the frequently used impoliteness expressions by Chinese rappers. Mavima (2016) notes that African American rappers often use impolite language to outflow, outdiss, and outwit their opponent. To outflow their opponent, taboo words are used as a filler between different lines. To outdiss their opponents, rappers often show their relatively high power over their opponent, associate negative values to their opponent, and frighten their opponent. Teasing and sarcasm are also frequently seen as indirect strategies to outwit other rappers. Our results show that Chinese rappers used similar types of linguistic strategies, demonstrating cross-cultural commonalities of language use in rap battle competitions.

(1) Excerpt Grand Final of 2010 Iron Mic by Rapper Ma Jun
1. lái ràng nǐ míng bái yī xiē zhēn zhèng de dào lǐ
Come here and let me teach you some real lessons
. . .

Table 1
Major output impoliteness expressions used by Chinese rappers.

Categories	Frequency	Examples
Using taboo words	*n* = 157	*You look like a pussy. Fuck.*
Showing relatively high power	*n* = 110	*This champion is mine, not yours.*
Giving negative associations	*n* = 72	*You are stupid, and you just have a fat belly.*
Teasing and sarcasm	*n* = 31	*See, he cannot catch my flow at all.*
Frightening the opponent	*n* = 30	*I double dare you and I will kill you.*

2. nǐ shuō shén me dōu kě yǐ
   You can say whatever you want to say
3. dàn shì bié shuō wǒ de jiā xiāng xīn jiāng
   But do not insult my hometown, Xinjiang
   . . .
4. zǐ bú jiào fù zhī guò
   It is the father's fault not to teach his child
5. hái bú xiào mǔ zhī cuò
   It is the mother's fault that the child does not obey 'filial piety'

In addition to following the Western battle traditions, Chinese rappers also employed a number of strategies that are salient in Chinese cultures. First, as a Confucianist society, people are expected to show respect to teachers. The *Confucian Analects* states that ''When three are walking together, I am sure to find teachers among them.'' Line 1 in the above excerpt reflects Ma Jun's efforts to claim the role of a moral educator to his opponent by alleging to teach his opponent some lessons. Such a move automatically placed Ma on a higher power status compared to his opponent. Second, the Confucianist thinking is also reflected in lines 5 and 6 whereby Ma was accusing his opponent's parents of failed education. The mainstream Chinese social value considers it a huge disgrace if one's action brings shame to their family, especially to their parents. The breach of filial piety, in turn, will be under moral sanction. By accusing his opponent of failing to obey filial piety, Ma demonstrated an effective insult to his opponent in the rap battle. Furthermore, although offenses are expected and are often evaluated as appropriate, attacking rappers in terms of their ethnic background falls into one of the taboo topics. Similar to the racial tensions in the United States, China also experiences ethnic tensions between the *Han* majority and the Uighur minority living in Xinjiang. To prevent it from further escalation, the Chinese government condemns all speeches that are intended to denigrate the Uighur minority. In lines 2 and 3, by reminding the audience of the fact that his opponent attacked his ethnic identity as a Uighur minority, Ma was able to evoke another moral sanction on his opponent. Together with many other similar performances, Ma finally defeated his opponent and became the champion of Iron Mic in 2010.

The brief case study presented above demonstrates an emancipatory approach to studying an underrepresented context of verbal impoliteness in China. From an intra-language perspective, Chinese rap battle lyrics share similar impolite expressions (swearing, teasing, etc.) with many deliberate uses of impoliteness such as military training (Zhou and Cao, 2017) and online aggression (Li, 2020). However, the Chinese rap battle is also different from many other impoliteness practices for its ritual component that an insult is not responded to by denials or defense but by further insults from their opponents. From a cross-language perspective, the similar sets of linguistic impoliteness in Chinese and African American English seem to support the *Same Position* in the East-West debate. What differs are the specific lyrics shaped by the norms of Confucianist views and the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. This case study shows similar ritual frames between Chinese and African American rap traditions and their varying linguistic realizations. Researchers could further determine what commonalities can hold relatively constant at what level of analysis.

7. Conclusion

The present paper reviews the existing studies of Chinese (im)politeness research from an emancipatory perspective. The results show that on a theoretical level, scholars have discussed extensively on the issues of face and politeness, trying to disentangle them from the typical Western theorizations represented by Brown and Levinson (1987), instead constructing theories of facework and politeness based on Chinese cultural norms. In addition to exploring cultural differences evidenced by the *Different* scholars, more studies are needed to construct models that are applicable across cultures and identify the underlying regularities beyond the surface linguistic East-West divide. Second, on a methodological level, Chinese studies could benefit from researchers adopting methods that are particularly suitable for

the Chinese data by conducting more quasi-longitudinal studies, comparing Chinese (im)politeness practices with other similar cultures and languages, and using corpus-based methods to conduct metalinguistic studies of face and related terms. Third, on a contextual level, Chinese (im)politeness research could further explore contexts that are frequently underrepresented in the Chinese society, such as underground arts, practices in rural areas, and more inclusive comparisons concerning the LGBT community. Finally, we also show that various research articles published in Chinese outlets could significantly enrich the pool of findings reported in international publications.

To sum up, the emancipatory approach postulated in the paper seeks to present a clearer map of the regularities and variations in Chinese (im)politeness practices across theories, methods, and contexts of examination. By comparing the various representations of Chinese (im)politeness, we are more likely to identify the commonalities across different topics and consequently constructing theories that best serve the Chinese (im)politeness research. By and large, broadening the scope of Chinese research could better contribute to cross-cultural research by identifying the regularities and variations at the cross-cultural level. By uncovering the layers of regularities and variations, scholars could construct theories that best suit their research questions and levels of analysis. Finally, in the present review, we only discussed the tip of an iceberg of Chinese (im)politeness research. Further studies could continue examining Chinese (im)politeness and compare it with other lingua-cultures at various levels of analysis.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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