

A Cross-Cultural Pragmatics Perspective on Teaching *Intercultural Communication*

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Abstract: Politeness in speech acts plays a crucial role in maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships within society. People from different sociocultural backgrounds often have divergent understandings of what constitutes politeness, reflecting varied cultural pragmatic presuppositions. *Intercultural Communication Skills* by Don Snow, published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, is a widely used textbook for public English courses on *Intercultural Communication* in Chinese universities. The textbook features authentic language and a moderate level of lexical difficulty. Each unit comprises "typical cases of cross-cultural pragmatic failures between Chinese and American interactions + analysis + conceptual interpretations". The textbook's primary focus is on how to interact with Westerners, emphasizing American individualistic values of politeness while inadequately addressing or occasionally misinterpreting Confucian relational ethics inherent in Chinese politeness. Drawing upon sociological research on the Chinese concept of "face", this paper supplements the textbook's analysis with additional insights from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective to enhance classroom teaching. The fundamental difference between Chinese and Western politeness lies in their interpretations of "personhood": the "role-bearing individual" in Chinese culture versus the "rights-bearing individual" in Western contexts.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure, Politeness, Confucian Relational Ethics, Concept of Face.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, pragmatics has increasingly incorporated interdisciplinary theories to conduct cross-disciplinary research, emphasizing the social construction perspective to explore supra-disciplinary issues such as linguistic politeness, face, identity, stance, image, and trust (Xie et al., 2023). Cultural pragmatics, a significant subfield of pragmatics, includes three paradigms: cross-cultural pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics, and intracultural pragmatics. It considers culture (encompassing values, beliefs, attitudes, and social categories) as a central explanatory factor in interpreting language usage patterns (Zu & He, 2018).

Emerging in the 1980s within Western academia, cross-cultural pragmatics evolved as a discipline combining pragmatics, contrastive linguistics, and intercultural communication studies (Zhu, 2016). This field aims to compare the realization of speech acts across different cultures and to address communication challenges arising from cultural differences, such as conflicts, misunderstandings, and pragmatic failures, thereby enhancing understanding of speech acts in intercultural communication (Ran & Liu, 2018). It examines communicative behaviors from a micro-perspective, seeking evidence of how cultural differences influence interactions (Kang & Pu, 2019).

Since the 20th century, politeness in social interactions has been a focal topic in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Linguists have extensively studied various speech acts to uncover the politeness strategies embedded in different cultural contexts (Wang, 2023). Social pragmatic failure refers to inappropriate use of communicative rules in social contexts, as individuals interpret and express behavior based on their cultural values. This phenomenon is closely related to sociological factors (Liu & Zhong, 2002). People from diverse cultural backgrounds often judge others' behavior through

their own cultural frameworks. Politeness itself is culturally bound, and perceptions of politeness vary significantly across cultures (Ran & Liu, 2018). Traditional politeness theories, particularly Brown and Levinson's face theory, have been criticized for their "Anglo-centrism" and lack of universal applicability (Zhu, 2016). Consequently, "situated pragmatics" emphasizes respecting the unique features of a culture and interpreting relevant discourse within its specific cultural framework (He & He, 2018; Xie, 2023).

Since 2017, the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Zhaoqing University has offered a public English course on *Intercultural Communication* for undergraduate students across non-arts disciplines. The course employs *Intercultural Communication Skills—How to Interact with Westerners*, an English-language textbook published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press and authored by renowned intercultural communication scholar Don Snow. Divided into ten units, the textbook adopts a case-based approach to introduce common pragmatic failures in Chinese-American cross-cultural interactions, exploring their underlying cultural causes and relevant intercultural communication theories from an American perspective. The textbook prominently highlights Western "individualistic values" as reflected in politeness practices, emphasizing equality, independence, and efficiency. However, its analysis of Chinese politeness behaviors and the associated sociocultural psychology is relatively limited and occasionally includes misinterpretations, potentially undermining the effectiveness of teaching. Based on the principle that mutual understanding between civilizations should involve bidirectional exchange, this paper draws on sociological research on the Chinese concept of "face" (Hu, 1944; Fei, 1985; Jin, 1986; Zhai, 2001) and seeks to supplement the textbook's analysis of Chinese politeness behaviors from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective. By exploring the Confucian role-based ethics inherent in these behaviors, the study aims to elucidate the fundamental differences in politeness and moral concepts between China and the West, thereby offering a more comprehensive cultural perspective for teaching *Intercultural Communication*.

2. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE DIFFERENTIAL MODE OF ASSOCIATION: RITUALS, FACE, AND PRESTIGE

Confucian culture, which underpins Chinese society, seeks to establish a hierarchical and harmonious social order through the "differential mode of association". This order is maintained by a set of cultural mechanisms collectively referred to as *li* (rituals). Rural China has traditionally been a society governed by *li*, where each individual is assigned a specific identity and role. These rituals provide detailed regulations regarding individuals' social status and roles; any deviation from these norms constitutes a breach of propriety, or "loss of ritual" (Jin, 1986).

In *The Chinese Concept of Face* (1944), Hu Hsien Chin provides an in-depth analysis of how "face" and "prestige" are understood in traditional Chinese society. "Prestige" (*mianzi*) reflects the recognition of an individual's social reputation, including achievements attained through diligence and intelligence. It is highly dependent on external circumstances. By contrast, "face" (*lian*) represents the collective respect for an individual with strong moral standing, reflecting societal trust in their integrity. The loss of "face" would render an individual incapable of functioning normally within the social framework.

Li functions as a behavioral regulatory system that emphasizes an individual's social identity and role. Those who are highly conscious of face must exhibit "appropriate attire for the occasion, a fitting demeanor for the context, and due respect according to hierarchical relationships". Even minor errors can result in accusations of impropriety, leading to mockery and a loss of face. Consequently, "face" becomes a critical cultural concept governing interpersonal interactions (Jin, 1986). The following section examines case studies from the textbook to illustrate these points.

3. SOCIOCULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN SINO-AMERICAN INTERACTIONS: A "FACE" PERSPECTIVE

In intercultural communication, interpretations of "politeness" behaviors often differ significantly due to underlying sociocultural contexts. These differences are particularly pronounced in face-to-face interactions between Chinese and American cultures. In traditional Chinese culture, *li* (rituals) serves as a social norm centered on role ethics and relationships, aiming to preserve social harmony and interpersonal cohesion (Fei, 1985). "Face", as a critical component of this culture, not only reflects an individual's pursuit of social reputation and status but also embodies the responsibilities and obligations among people.

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In Chinese culture, politeness behaviors are strongly imbued with social and collectivist characteristics, often manifested in actions that demonstrate care for others and adherence to social rules. By contrast, American politeness is primarily grounded in individualism, emphasizing independence, equality, and efficiency (Gao, 1998). These cultural differences frequently lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in specific communicative contexts, resulting in typical cross-cultural pragmatic failures.

The following discussion examines behaviors such as competing to pay the bill after a meal, exploring the sociocultural implications of politeness in Chinese and American cultures and their impact on communication.

Case Study 1: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Competing to Pay the Bill in China (Unit 6, pp. 89-91)

In this case, a Chinese university student, Lin, encounters an American exchange student with whom he had previously conversed a few times. The American student invites Lin to dinner, and after dining at a nearby noodle shop, Lin, following traditional Chinese hospitality norms, insists on paying the bill. This action, however, visibly displeases the American student. Despite the exchange student's repeated suggestion, "We should go Dutch", Lin's persistent refusal leads to an uncomfortable conclusion, leaving both parties dissatisfied.

The textbook explains this behavior through the lens of American cultural values of *Equality, Fairness, and Efficiency*. Americans often prefer to pay their own share to avoid feeling obligated to others. This practice reflects the emphasis on equality and independence, as splitting the bill eliminates any indication of disparity in wealth or status. Moreover, Americans' preference for individual payment demonstrates their prioritization of efficiency, avoiding unnecessary disputes over who should pay. While Chinese individuals often enjoy the ritual of competing over the bill, many Americans perceive this as an unnecessary complication.

Gao (1998) observed that Chinese politeness often follows the "rite of offer-decline" formula: *offer-decline-offer-decline-offer-accept*. In this formula, the host goes to great lengths to ensure the guest feels welcome, while the guest reciprocates by attempting not to impose on the host. Initial refusals, such as saying "No" to an invitation, are not taken literally but rather seen as polite responses, prompting the host to persist until the guest accepts. This exchange symbolizes the host's genuine sincerity.

Zhai (2001) describes the Chinese concept of *impression management* as embedded in a society that highly values rituals. In such a society, *li* takes the form of reciprocal exchanges, comprising both behavioral reciprocity and linguistic politeness. Among these, linguistic politeness often outweighs behavioral reciprocity. Failure to adhere to this principle of reciprocity could be perceived as impolite by the other party.

The sociologist Fei Xiaotong, in *From the Soil* (1985, pp. 78-79), characterizes traditional Chinese society as an agrarian community with strong roots in familiarity and continuity. Social order is maintained through *li*, which embodies collectively accepted behavioral norms. Such societies are composed of close-knit, face-to-face communities where social bonds are reinforced through the exchange of favors and obligations. In these contexts, fighting to pay the bill symbolizes creating a "debt of favor", akin to an investment in the relationship. Repaying such favors, often with added weight, maintains mutual cooperation and trust. Settling debts immediately, on the other hand, is characteristic of impersonal or transactional relationships—such as those in modern, unfamiliar urban societies. Immediate settlement could even signify an end to the relationship, as no further interactions or obligations remain.

In this case, Lin's actions align with the norms of Chinese traditional hospitality. By paying for the meal, he followed the practices of a familiar society, making a modest social investment in the relationship. Lin, adhering to the *offer-decline* ritual, likely misinterpreted the American student's insistence on splitting the bill as polite refusals rather than genuine preferences.

From the perspective of Chinese sociological *face* theory, Lin's action could also be seen as an attempt to gain face by demonstrating generosity and earning the American student's positive regard. This would, in turn, strengthen their social connection. However, the American student's firm insistence on paying her share, perceived by Lin as ungrateful or disrespectful, undermined Lin's effort to gain face and could be seen as lacking human warmth. This cultural disconnect exemplifies the differing notions of politeness and social expectations in Chinese and American cultures.

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Case Study 2: Chinese Self-Deprecating Responses to Compliments (Unit 3, p. 46)

On page 46 of the textbook, a Chinese student named Xiao Feng assists an elderly American woman at a local museum by translating Chinese exhibition captions into somewhat hesitant English. At the end of the visit, the woman compliments him by saying, "Your English is very good". Xiao Feng responds instinctively with, "I'm sorry. My English is very poor".

The textbook notes that in North America, people typically avoid directly rejecting compliments, as outright denial is considered impolite. Xiao Feng's negative response to the compliment might be perceived as rude in an American context. The textbook contrasts this behavior with common American positive politeness strategies for responding to compliments:

Examples:

A: Helen, your dress is lovely.

B1: (*Accept*) Thank you. Yours is also quite beautiful.

B2: (*Deflect*) Thank you. My mother made it for me.

B3: (*Thank but decline*) It's very kind of you./It's nice of you to say so.

However, the textbook does not delve further into the cultural reasoning behind the instinctive self-deprecating politeness exhibited by Chinese individuals.

In *The Chinese Concept of Face* (1944), Hu Hsien Chin highlights that Western scholars often view Chinese modesty regarding personal achievements and status as either insincere or indicative of low self-esteem. However, in Chinese culture, overestimating one's talents or exaggerating one's abilities invites social disapproval. Individuals who display overconfidence are perceived as frivolous and unreliable. By contrast, those who are cautious in their self-assessments and considerate of others are seen as "mature and steady", qualities that inspire trust. Many Chinese social interactions are built on the foundation of mutual trust.

Given that individuals cannot perfectly assess their abilities or predict the outcomes of their actions, overconfidence increases the risk of failure, which leads to "losing face". Such a loss undermines societal confidence in a person's integrity, making the fear of "losing face" a genuine concern. As a result, it is considered wise to undervalue oneself to avoid being labeled as frivolous. Consequently, Chinese individuals habitually downplay their intelligence and abilities, trusting that others will still hold them in higher regard. Conversely, those who disregard others and boast about themselves are often viewed as "uncultured".

Gao (1998) similarly notes that Chinese politeness is reflected in self-deprecating language. From an early age, Chinese children are taught to be humble and avoid ostentation. "Undervaluing oneself while elevating others" constitutes a fundamental Chinese social etiquette. When complimented, Chinese individuals often respond with polite phrases such as "na li, na li", indicating humility. Publicly accepting a compliment is seen as impolite.

This principle is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural values, as illustrated in *The Book of Rites* (Li Ji), which states: "*Rituals involve lowering oneself to honor others*" (礼记, 曲礼上). This linkage between *li* (rituals), deference, and humility forms the foundation of courteous speech in Chinese society. Modesty is regarded as a virtue, as reflected in proverbs like "Complacency leads to failure; modesty brings benefit" (满招损谦受益, *man zhao sun, qian shou yi*) and "Modest gentleman" (谦谦君子, *qianqian junzi*), which are widely celebrated in Chinese culture (Lee, 2000).

Xiao Feng's response can thus be understood as a natural expression of these ingrained cultural values, reflecting an instinctive adherence to self-deprecating politeness, even when it conflicts with American expectations of positive responses to compliments.

Case Study 3: A Young Chinese Woman Assisting an Elderly Foreigner with Luggage (Unit 2, p. 28)

In this scenario, a young Chinese female university instructor is tasked with picking up a retired Canadian professor in his sixties at the airport. The professor has two large suitcases and several smaller bags. Unable to find a luggage cart, the

young instructor proactively offers to carry one of his suitcases. Despite the professor repeatedly stating, "I can handle these myself", the instructor seizes the opportunity when he sets a bag down and carries it to the car. This act visibly annoys the professor, who refuses to converse with her during the remainder of the journey.

The textbook explains this situation by highlighting North American cultural values that emphasize self-reliance, encapsulated in the maxim "God helps those who help themselves". Taking care of one's own needs is regarded as a virtue. Additionally, allowing a woman to carry luggage for a man may conflict with Western notions of chivalry.

The young Chinese instructor's behavior can be analyzed through the lens of traditional Chinese social norms, as described by Fei Xiaotong in *From the Soil*. In Chinese agrarian society, interpersonal interactions are structured around a hierarchy based on age and seniority. Respect for elders is deeply ingrained, and hospitality is highly valued. According to the Chinese "rite of offer-decline" formula, the instructor likely misunderstood the professor's repeated refusals as polite rejections rather than genuine objections, prompting her persistence.

Why is respect for elders so prevalent in Chinese culture? From a cultural anthropology perspective, the agrarian societies of the Yellow River basin, shaped by the Zhou Dynasty's agricultural traditions, relied on land as their primary resource. The immobility of land fostered stable, generational communities, placing a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the dependence of agricultural productivity on accumulated experience contributed to the formation of a tradition of revering elders (Ames, 2017).

Historical rituals, such as those detailed in the *Rites of Banquets for the Elderly*, exemplify the extraordinary respect accorded to older individuals: "Those in their sixties are seated, while those in their fifties stand to serve them. This arrangement reflects the reverence for seniority and duty. Sixty-year-olds are served three courses, seventy-year-olds four courses, eighty-year-olds five courses, and ninety-year-olds six courses. This system promotes filial piety and respect for elders, forming the foundation of harmonious human relations" (Li, 2007). Such rituals illustrate how reverence for elders is fundamental to Chinese social norms, binding clan members through an ethos of compulsory respect and observance.

The young instructor's act of carrying the luggage aligns with these deeply rooted cultural values, demonstrating respect and hospitality toward the professor as an elder. Her interpretation of his refusals as mere politeness reflects the influence of the *offer-decline* ritual. However, the professor's annoyance stems from a clash of cultural expectations, highlighting the differences between collectivist Chinese values and individualistic Western norms of independence and chivalry.

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Case Study 4: A Chinese Student Violating Rules to Help a Friend (Unit 8, p. 120)

In this case, a Chinese student working as a night guard at an American university library is asked by a close Chinese friend to unlock the library door to retrieve a forgotten notebook needed for an exam the following day. Feeling uncomfortable refusing the request, the student unlocks the door to let the friend in. Unfortunately, the student's supervisor catches them in the act, loudly reprimanding the student on the spot. The student feels aggrieved, arguing that they did not allow a stranger access but rather someone they knew and trusted, which was fundamentally different. Additionally, the student believes the supervisor should not have scolded them so publicly, especially in front of their friend.

The textbook points out that the dilemma of following rules versus making exceptions for friends is common. However, Americans and Chinese tend to respond differently. Broadly speaking, Chinese individuals are more likely to prioritize helping friends over adhering to regulations, whereas Americans tend to separate personal friendships from professional responsibilities. Americans generally refuse friends' requests if fulfilling them would require breaking rules.

Fei Xiaotong, in *From the Soil* (1985, p. 37), describes Chinese society's "differential mode of association" as a network of countless personal relationships, each imbued with moral elements. Value standards in Chinese culture are inherently relational, shaped by the nature of one's connection to others. Therefore, the application of moral or legal principles is elastic, adjusted based on the identity of the other party and their relationship to oneself. In such a society, universal standards seldom apply universally; instead, decisions are relational and context-dependent (Gao, 1998). This distinction between insiders and outsiders in Chinese communication provides a key cultural context for understanding the student's actions.

From the perspective of the Chinese concept of *face*, this case reflects the importance of maintaining interpersonal harmony and preserving face for both oneself and others. "Face-saving" in Chinese interactions involves various social strategies aimed at avoiding humiliation and maintaining mutual respect, particularly in direct, face-to-face encounters. Refusing a request outright is difficult in Chinese culture, as it risks damaging the other person's face. A refusal must therefore be accompanied by a compelling reason that preserves the other's face; otherwise, the refusal may be seen as inconsiderate or impolite (Jin, 1986). Consequently, the student likely found it challenging to deny their friend's request, as doing so could have been perceived as a rejection of their friendship or an insult to the friend's face.

Given the cultural importance of face, Chinese individuals often go to great lengths to avoid causing others to lose face. The adage "A gentleman does not shame others in public" reflects the emphasis on preserving harmony through courteous behavior. Those in higher social or professional positions are expected to "save face" for others, an attitude often referred to as "generosity of spirit" (Jin, 1986). The supervisor's public reprimand in this case, which disregarded the student's need to save face in front of their friend, would have been perceived as deeply disrespectful and humiliating by the Chinese student.

This cultural clash highlights the divergent expectations in Chinese and American contexts. While the American supervisor's actions may have been intended to enforce rules and establish authority, the student interpreted the behavior as unnecessarily harsh and face-threatening. These differing perspectives underscore the challenges of navigating cross-cultural interactions where personal relationships, rule adherence, and professional responsibilities intersect.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the Chinese concept of "face" is deeply rooted in Confucian ethics, embodying the cultural characteristics of collectivism. Within this cultural framework, individual social behaviors and communication patterns are intricately embedded in specific social relationship networks. "Face", as a unique cultural phenomenon, not only represents the external expression of personal dignity and reputation but also serves as an internal mechanism for maintaining social harmony and order (Zhang, 2019). Feng Youlan, in *The New Rational Man* (1996), noted, "Man must be a part of society, and thus must fulfill a social role". This highlights the fundamental logic of Chinese social ethics: fulfilling one's moral obligations according to one's social role. Within this social framework, "face" operates as a behavioral norm tightly linked to individual social roles and group identity.

The cultural origins of the term "politeness" are closely related to the traditional Chinese concept of *li* (rituals). *Li* not only constitutes a behavioral code but also represents a form of reverence internalized through social education (Cheng, 2006). This code is reflected in interpersonal interactions, emphasizing respect for others and adherence to one's own role through appropriate words and actions. Meanwhile, *mao* (appearance, or face) fulfills a specific social function by ensuring harmony in interpersonal relationships. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the statement "Worldly wisdom is knowledge; understanding human relations is art" vividly underscores the importance of "face-work" in Chinese social behavior. Without comprehending the essence of "face-work", one cannot fully grasp the social interaction patterns and behavioral motivations of Chinese people (Jin, 1986). The dual mechanisms of *li* and *face* work together to shape the distinctive cultural framework of Chinese society.

Unlike Western cultures, which are rooted in the notion of "rights-bearing individuals", Chinese culture regards individuals as integral parts of a network of social relationships. In Confucian ethics, *li* serves as the standard for individual behavior, achieved through respect for and maintenance of social relationships (Ames, 2017). The core of this ethical perspective lies in the fulfillment of roles and the practice of *li*, enabling individuals to find their place in family, community, and society at large (Ames, 2021). Through the practice of *li*, Chinese people regulate their social behaviors, forming the core of national culture and reflecting the resilience of Chinese civilization. This concept of *li* provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding Chinese pragmatic cultural behaviors.

As globalization accelerates, cultures and civilizations increasingly seek recognition. This process involves both affirming other cultures and strengthening self-identification (Tang, 2021). Modernization does not equate to Westernization. In an era of cultural diversity, we must seek spiritual foundations within our cultural roots to balance Western civilization. By reevaluating both Western and Chinese cultures, we can achieve internal cultural self-recognition and external cultural tolerance.

In teaching intercultural communication, incorporating the Confucian concepts of *li* and *face* into the classroom can help students better understand the core values of Chinese culture. Supplementing textbook analysis with relevant case studies enables teachers to deepen students' insights into Chinese politeness behaviors. Additionally, comparing Chinese and Western concepts of politeness helps enhance students' intercultural awareness and communication skills (Zhang, 2019). This approach not only helps students uncover the underlying logic of Chinese culture that is "used daily but rarely perceived", but also strengthens their understanding and appreciation of their cultural values.

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