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Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1   Background and Objectives

We write this book as natives of two countries – China and Hungary – whose histories share certain similarities: the rise of Communist regimes shortly after the Second World War and abrupt changes in society since then. Both of us have lived and worked in China for long periods of time. We have witnessed various aspects of communication, politeness in particular, which seem puzzling not only to foreign visitors but also to native speakers of Chinese.

China has been (and continues to be) famed for its long tradition of courtesy, deference and ritualized behaviour in social and interpersonal interaction. However, much of this tradition seems restricted to the ideological level, rather than as part of everyday communication. In colloquial Chinese 'traditional' politeness seems to be lost, or at best, obscure. Many politeness practices – even ones as simple as the use of colloquial terms of address such as 'miss' (*xiaoje* 小姐) – have gone through numerous changes in the past century. Consequently, conflicting views and contradictory perceptions of Chinese politeness have formed.

This phenomenon can only be understood through retrospection: the system of Chinese communication underwent an unprecedentedly huge transformation under the influence of (early) modern historical events. In the course of the period spanning the second half of nineteenth century to the 1990s – which is quite short from a historical linguistic/pragmatic perspective – the traditional norms of deferential communication and the huge Chinese honorific lexicon practically disappeared from Chinese society and were replaced by a new set of norms and a small lexicon of polite expressions. In other words, Chinese that had been an 'honorific-rich' language like Japanese and Korean (cf. Chapters 2 and 3) became an 'honorific-poor' language with many new language behavioural rules.

As linguists and sinologists ourselves with fairly similar sociocultural backgrounds, we are fascinated by Chinese linguistic politeness, in particular by the mysterious loss of tradition and the astonishingly large gap between 'old' and 'new'. Our joint interest in these issues led us to work on the present volume, which (a) comparatively examines historical (eighteenth century to early twentieth century) and contemporary (1950 to present) Chinese norms of polite communication, and (b) uncovers the motivating factors behind the large-scale changes that took place during modern times. Reconstructing the changes within Chinese politeness during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not at all easy because to do so one needs to examine a complex interaction between language, language ideology, style and history, as will be shown in Chapter 5.

This comparative diachronic approach is unique – as far as we know – because while intercultural politeness research is a thoroughly studied area (see, for example, Nakane, 2006 and different studies in Spencer-Oatey [2000] 2008), intracultural comparative politeness research is regretfully neglected.

2   Intended Audience

This book is written with two circles of readers in mind: the first encompasses researchers and students in fields that share interest in Chinese politeness, such as communication studies, sociopragmatics and sociolinguistics, (historical) pragmatics, discourse analysis and Chinese linguistics; and the second, 'lay' readers who come to this book with the practical goal of understanding Chinese communicative norms and practices. While the present volume is a research monograph and not a manual, we believe that the research presented here is relevant not only to experts but also to those who wish to understand the Chinese. The retrospection to the development of Chinese communicative norms and practices can fulfil a practical role as it may help to overcome stereotypical views such as the demonization of modern Chinese as 'rude' people. Considering the increasing importance of China in the global economy, international trade and business, tourism, and other areas, and the continually increasing migration of the Chinese people into the 'developed' countries (see, for instance, Pieke, 2002), understanding Chinese politeness norms – or, in many cases, their absence – is pivotal to successful communication and understanding of the cultural 'other'.

Keeping a wider audience in mind, we will present linguistic data in a way that makes it accessible to readers who do not speak Chinese. The main text

includes the Chinese original texts and their literary English translation. This representation of data suits both those readers without previous learning in Chinese and those who are fluent in Chinese already. It should be noted that in the main text we use the so-called traditional or *fantizi* 繁體字 characters in order to give a uniform style to the data (the historical sources are written with traditional characters while most of the modern/contemporary sources from mainland China are written in the so-called simplified or *jiantizi* 簡體字 form). Appendix II includes the extracts in simplified form, which may be useful to those who are currently involved in learning Chinese as a foreign language.

3   Data

Since Chapter 2 will introduce the data studied in detail, it is sufficient here to mention that the present volume, due to its comparative nature, involves two major datasets – one historical and one contemporary – as well as data from the early 1900s, a historical period that we define as 'transitional'. In the collection of data our primary goal was to study a wide variety of genres and styles, and many examples of language use in various social settings.

The historical linguistic data, which represents language usage in the final years of historical China, includes three major genre types: letters, vernacular novels and a unique intercultural Sino–Japonic source, a historical textbook. The contemporary Chinese dataset, which covers the period of early 1990s to 2000s, consists of recordings of authentic language use and naturally occurring data in a range of social settings. This dataset includes audio-taped governmental and business meetings, service encounter interactions, family dinner conversations, conversation among friends, business telephone calls, focus group discussion, and survey interviews and debriefing sessions. The 'transitional' data includes letters and novels.

4   Structure

In order for the reader to gain an overall picture of the issues and points discussed, Chapter 2 begins with a summary of the historical events that led to the disappearance of historical Chinese politeness. This brief introduction is followed by a preliminary summary of the differences between historical and contemporary Chinese politeness, and the myths and misconceptions that arise from these differences. Next, we define the

framework adopted and the aspects of politeness studied in the present volume. Finally, the chapter summarizes the rationale behind the selection of data, discusses some terminological issues, and introduces the datasets.

Chapters 3 and 4 present historical and contemporary Chinese politeness. In each chapter, we briefly outline previous studies of historical and contemporary Chinese politeness in chronological order, and overview the social 'standards' of politeness behaviour. We also cite cases in which standards are flouted – or the standards themselves are ambiguous for some reason – in order to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of politeness and the problems inherent in making evaluative judgements about historical and contemporary Chinese politeness and impoliteness. It should be noted that these chapters follow the same structure, studying politeness first on a lexical and then on a discursive level (see more in Chapter 2); following these analyses the chapters deal with anomalies of historical and contemporary Chinese politeness behaviours.

Chapter 5 first addresses the puzzle of the disappearance of historical Chinese politeness by trying to answer whether the gap between historical and contemporary politeness in China is due to linguistic/stylistic or socio-ideological changes, or perhaps both. While it would be easy to blame certain historical events for the disappearance of historical Chinese politeness, we will argue that this phenomenon is more complex than it may appear. Focusing on historical evidence and sources from the 'transitional' (early twentieth century) era, and comparing historical and contemporary Chinese historical events and ideologizations of politeness, the chapter argues that the collapse of the historical system of Chinese politeness is the direct consequence of the fact that historical Chinese politeness was vulnerable due to certain ideological and linguistic reasons.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the book by outlining the arguments of the previous chapters and discussing theoretical and methodological implications of the findings.

The chapters are followed by five Appendices, as well as Indexes of Names and Subjects and Chinese Expressions Studied. Appendix I provides a chronological list of Chinese dynasties, and as previously mentioned Appendix II includes the extracts studied in simplified Chinese form. Appendices III, IV and V overview issues related with the contemporary database of the present volume.