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Original Citation

Kádár, Daniel Z. (2008) A Situated Model of the Historical Chinese Deferential Denigration/Elevation Phenomenon. In: 4th International Symposium on Politeness 'East meets West', 2nd-4th July 2008, Budapest, Hungary.

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A Situated Model of the Historical Chinese Deferential Denigration/Elevation Phenomenon

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Keywords: denigration/elevation; Chinese; deference; historical pragmatics; letter writing

The aim of this study is to inquire into the features of the historical Chinese phenomenon of self-denigration and addressee-elevation.

The pragmatic examination of the modern Chinese polite elevation/denigration (henceforth E/D) phenomenon began with Gu Yueguo's (1990) renowned paper and it has been studied by both East Asian experts (e.g. Ide 1989) and Western theorists (cf. Eelen 2001). Furthermore, historical Chinese E/D has been thoroughly examined by Peng (1998, 2000) and Kádár (2005, 2007). Examining E/D in a historical context has particular significance because in traditional Chinese, E/D had a much more elaborate system, and an incomparably larger lexicon, than E/D in modern China. However, in spite of its relatively long research history, the interactional working of E/D has not yet been mapped in-depth: scholars tend to take it for granted that E/D is realised through a vast inventory of honorifics and certain socially negotiated forms of linguistic behaviour.

The present study explores the linguistic means by which the inhabitants of old China elevated their addressees and denigrated themselves. As becomes evident from the analysis, E/D is arguably more complex than it is suggested by the technical literature:

- Firstly, although it is often claimed that in old China E/D was basically realised through an extensive honorific lexicon and certain forms of prescribed deferential behaviour (see Kádár 2007), in fact, as illustrated by several historical examples, E/D could be practised by a more varied set of linguistic tools. These tools include, amongst others, proverbs, allusions, literary citations, onomatopoeic words, as well as seemingly 'neutral' expressions that gain E/D connotation in a given situated context. For instance, proverbs, such as *bi-xue-furen* 婢學夫人 ('the servant girl learns to behave in a ladylike manner'), could become addressee-elevating and self-denigrating expressions in certain historical contexts, and in certain interpersonal relationships, even if in other contexts they did not fulfil such function.
- Secondly, the E/D phenomenon could be practiced through forms of varied lexical meaning, including expressions of *linguistic rudeness*, *humour*, and *emotions*. For instance, utterances such as "Sir, I wonder whether you have a depraved taste?" (*Qi zuxia you shijia-zhi-pi yu* 豈足下有嗜痂之癖歟) could be utilised to deferentially refuse the addressee's appraisal and thus denigrate oneself. This, similarly to the previous point, illustrate that the E/D phenomenon was often realised in situated contexts.
- Thirdly, the textual analysis of the studied corpus illustrates that E/D was often realised in historical Chinese communication beyond word and sentence units. For instance, writers of historical Chinese letters often utilised long parabolas in order to convey the message of E/D to the addressee. In such instances E/D could be simultaneously practiced on a 'surface' lexical and a 'deeper' discourse level. This, again, illustrates that E/D could become a situated interactional phenomenon.

This study, relying on the analysis of the aforementioned points, argues that historical Chinese deferential – elevating and denigrating – communication provided a more complex linguistic inventory than the application of the extensive historical Chinese E/D lexicon and socially predetermined behavioural norms discussed by previous studies. In fact, this is in line with the claim that the E/D phenomenon had particular significance in historical Chinese communication. In order to be able to capture the historical Chinese E/D phenomenon in its full complexity, it has to be studied in particular interactions as a situated phenomenon, or, in other words, a situated model is needed to capture several aspects of the E/D.

In order to be able to examine E/D as a situated phenomenon, the present work adopts the so-called *pragmaphilological* approach to study a historical corpus, that is, it focuses on the "contextual aspects of historical texts" (see Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 11). The present study examines a corpus of sixty letters, drawn from the famous Qing dynasty (1644–1911) collection of historical Chinese private letters, *Letters From Snow Swan Retreat* (*Xuehong-xuan chidu* 雪鴻軒尺牘), written by Gong Weizhai 龔未齋 (1738–1811). This corpus, which has also been translated to English (see Kádár 2008), contains letters that belong to fifteen different subgenres (such as, letters of celebrations and letters accompanying gifts; each subgenre is represented by four letters); this generic variedness makes this corpus suitable for the study of the situated aspect of the E/D phenomenon. It should be noted that private letters, written in Classical Chinese (*wenyan* 文言), were chosen in general because they are particularly apt to reconstruct historical language use (see Nevelainen 2007). Furthermore, in historical Chinese letter writing, which served the practical goal of interpersonal communication, the E/D phenomenon played a more important role than in other, more literary genres.