Chinese Politeness (Limao) – Theory and Practice

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Abstract. In this paper I will first attempt to confront two of the main ways of thinking about Chinese politeness (limao) as they are presented in contemporary scholarship. Subsequently, relying on this theoretical background and my own research, I will try to establish what it is exactly that allows the notion of limao to remain a crucial factor even in modern Chinese society.

Introduction

China is a cultural unit that has gone through numerous cultural and political changes. Along the way Chinese culture that developed under the influence of Confucianism, the official ideology of the empire from the second century B.C.E, has taken a distinct shape with features that cannot be overlooked. Even though, modern times have seen those features and values openly opposed and even rejected, such as during the May 4th Movement (1919-1921) [*] and later, to an even larger degree during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), [†] their influence on Chinese mentality and the way in which Chinese people perceive and deal with the world remain significant. As we investigate contemporary Chinese society, either through systematic academic research or as “participating observers”, we find a number of elements of the utmost importance in traditional Chinese culture, that still are important factors in shaping the Chinese way of life [‡]. Among them is the notion of limao (roughly: politeness [§]) which has troubled researchers for quite a while.

Limao in Contemporary Scholarship

Limao is a word that is heard quite often among Chinese and it is most frequently translated as “politeness” in English. However, its meaning can hardly be reduced to what (mostly) western literature understands as politeness, literally a “linguistically polite behaviour”. As

[*] Most of the intellectuals associated with May 4th Movement were veracious critics of what we call “Traditional Chinese culture.” Among them Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Wu Yu (1871-1949) are worth notice, since both, in a “Diary of the Madman” (“狂人日記”, 1918) and in “Cannibalism and Confucian Etiquette” (“吃人與禮教”, 1919) respectively, called Chinese culture a “Humans eating culture.”
[‡] Importance of family and its perseverance; dominant position of parents, mostly father, in a family; emphasis on children’ education; emphasis on social character of human existence; hierarchy; “face”; propriety in behaviour and relations with others, would be among those that come to mind first. And what “Traditional Chinese culture” stands for here is the culture of Imperial China. I am well aware of the “generic” and “vague” character of the term, but for our purposes here it is necessary to make the distinctions between Imperial and post-imperial China.
[§] Another possible term that I would propose to represent limao is: “appropriateness.”
such it has been a subject of scientific analysis for quite some time, with many incompatible
theories put forward by numerous researchers. Due to the very limited scope of the presented
paper, we will focus on the most typical ones that mark the two main ways of thinking about
the phenomenon called *limao*.

The beginning of research on Chinese politeness dates back to the activity of American
missionary, Arthur Henderson Smith (1845–1932). In 1894 Smith published a book entitled
*Chinese Characteristics*, in which the phenomenon was described in a more systematic way
for the first time.

The theory that stirred academic research on politeness the most however was the one first
put forward in 1978 and later developed in 1987, by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson
(further as B&L). B&L claimed that politeness is a way of dealing with what they called
“Face Threatening Acts” (further as FTA) [**]. A phenomenon common to most cultures and
as such can be the subject of one common theory (B&L: 1978, 1987). Another prominent
scientist who first wrestled with politeness in general, and later with Chinese politeness
(*limao*) in particular was Geoffrey Leech (1983 and 2007 respectively). In his research on
Chinese politeness (*limao*) he actually acknowledged its “local flavour,” and even tried to
analyse it. However, he still claimed that his Principle of Politeness, [††] developed in his
earlier works, could be applied to Chinese politeness (Leech: 2007).

Being inspired mostly by Leach (1983), and writing in opposition to Brown and Levinson,
Gu Yueguo denies claims from foreign researchers that a general theory of politeness could
be applied to Chinese politeness (*limao*). (Gu: 1990) As a linguist, he admits that *limao* is the
most approximate Chinese equivalent to the English word “politeness”. However, *limao*
morphemically means “polite appearance” and as such exceeds the semantic scope of the
English word “politeness”. The word itself is derived from the old Chinese word li (禮) used
widely by Confucius. According to Gu, for Confucius it described the need to restore the
social order of the Zhou period by “rectifying names” (正名), that means putting one into
his/her correct social position. (Gu: 1990, p.238) [‡‡] Following his “Confucian” style of
thinking, Gu defines what he sees as essentials features of Chinese politeness. These include
“Four notions” (respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement), and “Two
cardinal principles” (sincerity and balance) (Gu:1990, p.239). What is very distinct in Gu’s
approach is the fact, that he, along with some other Chinese researchers, believe that Chinese
*limao* is something unique and it cannot be reduced to a local expression for the global
phenomenon of “politeness” [§§].

As we can see from the above, interpretations of the phenomenon called “politeness”, are
quite numerous and far from being mutually consistent [***]. What is quite apparent though
is the fact that foreign researchers tend to claim the applicability of universal theories of

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** A face threatening act is an act that inherently damages the “face” (what “face” means here see footnote 12) of
the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other (B&L: 1987).
†† The Principle of Politeness (PP) –is a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us
to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord. (Leach, 1983).
‡‡ As a matter of fact it was not earlier than 300 years after Confucius when the understanding of 礼 as a
“politeness” was firmly established in the Book of Rites (禮記).
§§ Similar way of thinking about limao has been presented by Bi Jiwan (1996), but Ji Shaojun (2000) for
instance, presents quite different approach, claiming that Gu Yueguo was totally mistaken in his analysis and
B&L theory applies to the Chinese politeness as well.
*** Another worth mentioning researches on Chinese politeness are: Chen Rong (1993); Lu & Mao (1993); Ji
politeness to Chinese politeness (*limao*), while Chinese authors (Gu: 1990; Bi: 1996) insist on its uniqueness.

**Research and Findings**

In order to develop a more comprehensive and practical theory, while bearing in mind what has been said about *limao* so far, one must carefully look at more concrete expressions of the phenomenon.

Probably the most common expression of *limao* are the numerous honorific titles and proper ways of addressing people which can be observed in both, classical and contemporary Chinese. It would be difficult to find another culture (except those that developed under Chinese influence such as Korea and Japan) where the number of proper addresses among kinsmen would be as great as among Chinese. When the paternal grandfather is called *yeye*, the maternal one is *waigong*. When the elder brother is called *gege/xiong*, the younger is *didi*. Cousins of the same surnames are *tang* (*ge/di/jie/mei*), the ones of different sure names are *biao*(*ge/di/jie/mei*). Using proper addresses towards professional acquaintances is no less important. It is expected that one would address a professor Lin as *Lin jiaoshou*, and the principle (or president) of a school as *xiaozhang*. The very common “ritual” of exchanging name/business cards when meeting a Chinese person, has important informative and social structuring functions. It allows both sides not only to know each other’s names, but also their respective titles and social/professional positions. If initial meetings give way to an ongoing relationships it is quickly apparent how the exchange of name cards and specifically the information contained in them structure those relationships [†††].

Another common situation when politeness is applied is when inviting someone to dinner. If Mr. Wang invites Mr. Li it is implied that Mr. Wang will pay, but he still faces the possibility of rejection [‡‡‡]. For B&L inviting someone to do something is an act that is a threat to what they call “Negative Face” [§§§]. According to their theory, Mr. Wang may not really want to invite Mr. Li, and thus once rejected can happily give up. Observing the behaviour of Chinese people however, we find the situation to be quite different. Not only would Mr. Wang keep insisting post rejection, but he is also more than happy to pay the bill! It is, in fact, quite common to see people dining together who are struggling to pay (not “not to pay”) the bill! In our example Mr. Li should finally agree to let Mr. Wang pay in order “to give face” (*gei mianzi*), or “return a favour” (*renqing*). To do so is another

††† Simply speaking, person with a lower social/professional rank is supposed to let the one with a higher rank speak, eat, go through the door first, and is not supposed to openly disagree with her.

‡‡‡ What actually is a norm is to reject an invitation two times, and once it is repeated for the third time, the invitation should be accepted. The whole “ritual” is “giving-saving face” based. To invite someone to dine, is a recognised way of establishing good communication, but not always the invitation is an actual desire to have someone over for, or treat someone a dinner. Two denials live an inviting party a room to fulfil social expectation, and the same time allow to go away without actually treating invited party a dinner in case it is not an original desire of the inviting party. The third invitation expresses a sincere will to treat someone a dinner, and unless supported with a really good reason, refusing such an invitation is always face-harming to the inviting party. More on the notion of “face”: Hwang and Hu (1988); and Zhai (1995).

§§§ “Negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. (‘want of every ‘competent adult member’ [of a society] that his actions be unimpeded by others.’) (B&L 1987: 61-62)

**** This is the expression that actually exists in Chinese language, when the notion of “saving face” is non-existent in Chinese. More on “face- favour-relations” (*mianzi-renqing-guanxi*): Yang (1994).
important and common way of expressing politeness among Chinese, that as a consequence establishes (or confirms) a special relation between the two (關係, guanxi).

Chinese politeness, despite all the emphasis on being modest and sincere (as Gu, and Bi insist), might also be an expression of a sense of superiority of the one who is being polite over the one who is not. In Taiwan someone who misbehaves might be referred to as a someone who has not got enough xiuyang (修養, acculturation), or jiaoyang (教養, education training). In Mainland China a term of similar meaning and usage would be suzhi (素質), a personal (moral) quality [††††]. So people who act according to certain norms and/or expectations are perceived as being of a higher (moral) status. Polite (fitting norms) behaviour might then be a form of self-appreciation and/or gaining a better social status. The one that acts against the rules loses face (丟臉, diulian) and might subsequently lose social status.

This then may highlight another consequence that is a characteristic feature of Chinese politeness. Being that Chinese politeness is not only instrumental (as for instance B&L would like to see it), but is also, and maybe first of all normative. Persistence in acting against socially defined rules and expectations may be a reason for exclusion and punishment. A person, for example, that acts against limao (無禮, wuli) risks losing (moral) face (丟臉, diulian) and might be defined as someone “without shame” (無恥, wuchi). As such, she almost automatically excludes herself from the community. Limao is then a way of communicating obedience to the social norms, rules and expectations, and lack of such a communication might procure severe consequences.

An almost logical corollary of such an approach is the fact that those with higher social position might challenge such an arrangement. Contrary to what has been said above, polite behaviour and language could be seen as an expression of lower (subordinate) status and impolite behaviour and language as a way of “emancipation” and a display of a higher social status. The person acting in this way might be losing (moral) face (臉, lian), but at the same time shows off, or gains another sort of “face,” called mianzi (面子), roughly translated as “prestige” [‡‡‡‡]. This “struggle” for mianzi used to be very apparent in many local governmental agencies, such as household registry offices, immigration offices, local police stations, etc. Such ostensive rudeness [§§§§] then is a method of displaying someone’s status and reminding those seeking assistance of his or her place. While the one who needs assistance must display cooperative behaviour: being polite and deferent. And this not so much in line with a number of theories (Leech, Gu), according to which self-denigration should be displayed by the polite person, as a display of proper acculturation and an embodiment of honesty and modesty - highly appraised virtues among Chinese. In contemporary China though, the application of the politeness (limao) mentioned by Gu and others, but of course not always, limited to situations where some sort of special relationship (關係) exists. In consequence, the practice of polite behaviour is usually only active in those interactions where the parties are related in some way by power, solidarity or other factors (有關係的) at the first place.

‡‡‡‡ For more detailed analysis of the notion of face and the differences between lian and mianzi: Hu (1944).
§§§§ Although we must admit that such a behaviour, especially in last years has become rarer than it used to be.
**Limao: a Tool of Social Communication**

From the above examples we might conclude, that limao is a method of fitting and/or communicating an acceptance of social constrains, expectations and requirements. It is difficult then to deny direct links between limao and the notion of face and a struggle for power, status and social recognition. Polite activities (verbal or not) are often a response to Face Threatening Acts (as B&L would like to see it). But the relation between these often goes the other way round. That is, they are not only a reaction to face threatening acts, but also a way of creating situations in which face (power, status and social recognition, etc.) is not only ‘not lost’ (diulian), but quite to contrary, face (mianzi, and power, status and social recognition) is gained. Limao is then a form of verbal and non-verbal communication that on the one hand can prevent the undesired reaction (aggression) and contribute to the “maintaining of communicative concord” (as Leech would like to see it). Or to evoke the Chinese equivalent, preserve so-called “harmonious society.” On the other hand, however, it might be a form of creating social ties, a method and a tool of establishing community. Again though, it is not just a form of searching for concord and harmony. It may also (or just) be a form of “social battling,” through which a social position is communicated/claimed and/or gained. In other words, it is not only a prevention from “losing the (social) concord” (Leech) or an expression of proper acculturation (traditional Chinese approach supported by researchers like Gu). It is also, especially among strangers, a way of mitigating the effects of FTA (Brown & Levinson), and yet sometimes a form of “passive aggressive” attempt at gaining social recognition and assuring one’s social status. Demanding limao from others, on the other hand, might hint at a superior position and an attempt towards subordinating the other. Or at least gaining a confirmation, that they acknowledge the same social symbolic reality as the one who requires polite behaviour/language. As a consequence, displaying polite behaviour, and using of polite language (limao) can be, as mentioned above, an expression of someone’s subordinated position, and an act of deference. Especially in contemporary Mainland China, examples of such behaviour are not rare. In other words, limao is a complex and multi-layer phenomenon. By no means can it simply be reduced to “polite language and behaviour”, but rather it is an expression of a traditional Chinese approach towards humans’ relationships. As such it is part of an exceedingly more complex system and bundle of socio-linguistic ties.

**Conclusion**

**Limao** is a polite behaviour, polite language, but also a way of communicating certain contexts. To be more specific: a way of claiming someone’s status and power, a way of mitigating negative (face-threatening) effects of such claims, and a way of social-battling for power and recognition. Despite being denied and to large degree abandoned in the past, limao as a method of structuring Chinese society remains an indispensable element of the phenomenon that we call “Chinese culture”.

**References**


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