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INTERSUBJECTIVE POLITENESS IN A CHARLIE CHAN DETECTIVE STORY: A CASE OF INTERCULTURAL FACEWORK

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of cultural identities in fictional dialogic interactions, focusing on a famous (and controversial) detective from the 1930s novels by E.D. Biggers, Charlie Chan, linked to the model minority Chinese stereotype, which implies traits like modesty and self-representation. Chan's (stereo)typical politeness is expressed in the dialogues that represent the backbone of the novels, involving the main character and his suspects. The *fictional* nature of the dialogues makes them particularly interesting, as the intercultural exchange is conceived by a Western author, who stages his characters complying with stereotyped models and with a view to the expectations of his intended (Western) audience.

The dialogic interactions examined in this paper are from Biggers's novel *The Black Camel* (1929), and involve Chan and Tarneverro, an ambiguous character who offers his assistance to Chan, while remaining a suspect. In the dialogues, the two resort to recurring strategies which will be analyzed in the framework of intercultural politeness theories, with specific attention to their relevant linguistic traits. On the one hand, facework depends on their different roles in the investigation; on the other, different stereotypical cultural traits may lead to the exploitation of a different set of strategies.

Key words

Intercultural pragmatics; Chinese American Stereotypes; Politeness; Face; Fiction; Charlie Chan

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper¹ is to explore intersubjective politeness in a fictional intercultural dialogue, which will be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively as a case study. The dialogues examined for this research involve two fictional characters of a detective story, where the protagonist is a Chinese American, with stereotyped traits, who interacts with a Western suspect. Given the nature of the data selected for this investigation, before describing methodology, context and results, it is necessary to comment briefly on the three fundamental features of the materials, namely their *interactional*, *intercultural* and *fictional* nature.

When discussing politeness issues, it is quite obvious to focus on *interactions*, as speakers perform their acts of (im)politeness in situations of verbal exchange, and their language behavior is functional to shaping their relation with the interlocutor. Moreover, in the last few decades the intersubjective nature of politeness has been strongly emphasized in research, also from a theoretical viewpoint.

This is particularly evident when considering the crucial concept of face. In this respect, the definition given by Goffman (1967: 5), who considered face “the positive social value a person effectively claims of himself” or “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes”, actually focuses on the context where face values are attributed and displayed so that, as noted by Mao (1994: 454), “face is a ‘public property’ that is only assigned to individuals contingent upon their interactional behavior”. The social nature of face is in tune with its ritual character, independent of specific cultural norms, and characterizes it as a sort of anthropological prerequisite to any form of interaction. This in turn guarantees a universal value for politeness, as it concerns communication strategies aiming to meet face-wants through adequate face work. Yet the social nature of face is not a prominent element in Brown & Levinson’s definition of face, which describes it as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1987: 61). In this seminal work, which has been highly influential in pragmatic research, face is presented as “an image that intrinsically belongs to the individual” (Mao 1994: 454), and this may have contributed to emphasize the individualistic approach typical of Western politeness as opposed to the models put forth by Eastern researchers. Besides this cultural contraposition (which will be amply discussed in this paper), it is worth noting that criticism and revision of Brown and Levinson’s paradigm of politeness have frequently included this self-oriented characterization of face: as noted by Held (2021), a line of evolution develops parallel to the interactional, discursive and cognitive approaches to pragmatics itself. Thus, face “is discursively negotiated” (Locher 2006: 251) or “conjointly co-constructed” (Arundale 2010: 2078). In the Face-Construction Theory, in particular, face is a set of “characteristics, conditions or states evinced in the relationship that the partners achieve interactionally” (Arundale 2006: 203).

The interactional nature of politeness in general, and face work in particular, is particularly relevant when subjects with profoundly different cultural backgrounds are involved in the exchange. In such an *intercultural* situation, different interpretations of the very notion of politeness are at stake, and behavioral norms may be inspired by different, if not conflicting, principles. With reference to face, for example, it has been noted that the individualistic approach promoted by B&L may be adequate to explain Western interactional dynamics, but “can be problematic in a non-Western context” (Mao 1994: 455). As a consequence, distinct and diverging norms govern intercultural interactions, which can be investigated with reference to different theoretical frameworks. The case study selected for this research involves a Westerner and a (stereotyped) Chinese American, thus offering a good example of intercultural exchange – although not one deemed to generate complete estrangement. In fact, as will be seen later on, both characters know each other’s cultural background and lan-

guage by personal experience, and are not completely uninfluenced by the foreign culture they are interacting with throughout the book.

Finally, the texts which will be analyzed here are taken from an American novel, *The Black Camel* by E.D. Biggers (2017[1929]). Their *fictional* nature makes them particularly interesting, as the intercultural exchange is conceived by a Western author, who stages the two characters complying with a stereotyped model and with a view to the expectations of his intended (Western) audience. Characters in a novel are cultural representations, which in this case include the representation of otherness, and as such “use demarcation principles set out along geographical, regional, national and cultural lines [...], image building and various forms of stereotyping” (van Doorslaer et al. 2016: 1). In the context of fiction (both written and audiovisual), representations are conceived in accordance with generic norms and with a special attention for the audience. As noted by Ramos Pinto: “Knowing the social stereotypes and assumptions readers have and share with the rest of the society they are a part of, the author uses fictional varieties with the expectation that this will encourage certain reactions and assumptions which will aid characterization. It leads to the stratification of the participants in the dialogue” (Ramos Pinto 2009: 291).

2. Background, theory, and method

2.1 Face theories between Chinese and Western culture

As mentioned above, some pragmatics theories formulated in a western context were questioned by Chinese scholars, who have presented paradigms that they deem more applicable to Chinese pragmatic behavior. Thus, in order to analyze fictional dialogues involving characters of different ethnic origin, we decided to integrate two paradigms, one from western studies and one from Chinese studies, which will be briefly described in what follows.

As for face, Chinese scholars usually prefer Goffman’s (1967) definition, because he maintains that “while his social face can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it” (Goffman 1967: 10). The word “face” itself translates two Chinese words (Hu 1944; Mao 1994; Yu 2003; Tao 2018), the first being 面子 (miànzǐ), i.e. one’s prestige and reputation, which is gained through success. The other is 脸 (liǎn), which indicates the adherence to a moral standard.² A Western concept of face that does not have space in classic Chinese pragmatics, however, is that of negative face (the desire not to be imposed on), as “offering, inviting, and promising in Chinese, under ordinary circumstances, will not be considered as threatening H’s [hearers’] negative face” (Gu 1990: 242), but as appreciable acts of sincerity and politeness.

The word politeness, too, can be translated in more than one way. However, the one that appears most frequently in pragmatics studies is 礼貌 (lǐmào, lit. “polite appearance”) that Gu (1990) links to Confucius’ 礼 (lǐ), which is a deep

awareness and appreciation of hierarchy as a guarantor of social harmony and peace: “*lǐ* (i.e. social hierarchy) [...] gives rise to *lǐ* (i.e. politeness), and [...] *lǐ* (i.e. politeness) [...] expresses and helps maintain *lǐ* (i.e. social hierarchy and order)” (Gu 1990: 239).³ In the Western world, the classic theory of politeness is Leech’s elaboration, which features Tact Maxim and Generosity Maxim, and actions like minimizing praise to Self and maximizing praise to Other, as well as maximizing cost to Self and minimizing cost to Other⁴ (Leech 1983). This only partially overlaps with the Chinese elaborations, recently summarized by Zhou and Zhang (2018: 711) who defined Chinese politeness as: “Act in an appropriate or acceptable way so as to meet social norms or regularities such as of modesty, respectfulness, friendliness and refinement.” They listed Chinese politeness maxims as follows:

Modesty

1. Belittle yourself to others
2. Depreciate yourself to others

Respectfulness

1. Seek agreement with others
2. Appreciate face need of others

Friendliness

1. Show your hospitality to others
2. Share your attitudinal warmth with others

Refinement

1. Speak in refined manners to others
2. Behave in refined manners to others

This scheme features elements that are unknown to western pragmatics, e.g. refinement, and does not consider negative face. The maxim of refinement is a key element in Chinese politeness, overarching all other behaviors, as it originates in the mentioned *Doctrine of the Mean*, which prescribes “to take an impartial attitude to what you do and what you say by standing right in the middle course without going to two extremes” (Zhou & Zhang 2018: 709). Western politeness, on the other hand, gives equal space to positive and negative face and to Self and Other, as can be seen in the visual summarization provided by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011) and Santulli (2011), where the words in bold represent negative politeness:

Table 1. Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s (2011) politeness scheme re-elaborated in Santulli (2011: 277, our translation)

	Positive face	Negative face
Self	Self-criticism	Promise, offer
	Boast	Refusal, rejection
Other	Praise	Thanking, homage
	Reproach	Order, request

These two schemes, along with the differences in terms of face, were the basis for our methodological framework, aimed at exploring the intersubjective encounter between two characters from Biggers's novel *The Black Camel*, Charlie Chan and Tarneverro.

2.2 Charlie Chan as a Model Minority detective

Charlie Chan is a fictional Chinese Hawaiian detective inspired by real-life legendary detective Chang Apana, who became a hero in a time when Chinese Hawaiians were mostly relegated to low-wage hard labor and labelled as “coolies” (Huang 2010: pos. 243-247). Chan was born as a secondary character in E.D. Biggers' *The House Without a Key* (2017[1925]), but the audience liked him so much that he then became the protagonist of a detective story series and of several cinematic transpositions between the 1920s and the 1940s (Huang 2010: pos. 1965-1973). Just like his written self was forged by a white American, his cinematic persona was written, directed and interpreted by WASPs, with white actors donning yellowface, a scene makeup that is today seen as unacceptable, but was completely normal in the 1930s, when it was almost impossible for non-white actors to play main roles (Ono e Pham 2009: 33).

Charlie Chan is a sheer example of how an exogenous portrayal of a minority can become its most popular representative, for a long time and across different media. In fact, he is among the first cinematic embodiments of the model minority stereotype, attached to Chinese Americans in particular, and in general to Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). This stereotype is particularly toxic because it is presented as positive, and it mainly evokes two complementary images. On the one hand, a model minority AAPI is a clever and studious person, but not very creative and too career-oriented (Ono and Pham 2009: 83–87; Chang 2003: 9–10). Success stories about Chinese Americans started to hit the headlines in the 1960s, just as other minorities were fighting for civil rights, and the achievements of “a minority group that had quietly ‘made it’ in society” thanks to “strong family values, determination, and hard work” (Mok 1998: 192) were weaponized against protesters in the public discourse. And here it is possible to see how the second image derives from the first: a model minority is made of tireless workers who never complain about their condition, a nostalgic projection of an idealized, bygone rural America (Greene 2014: 77–8) but, even more, a justification for labor exploitation (Chang 2003: 105–6). This stereotype also generates an immense pressure on the individual, who feels unentitled to pain and fatigue, and is blamed for any difficulties or failures, regardless of whether those depend on them (Chao et al. 2013: 90). Chan is a genius detective, but he is also modest and (in most cases) meek (key model minority features), and his lasting success makes him even more controversial and always political. In fact, “to write about Charlie Chan is to write about the undulations of the American cultural experience” (Huang 2010: pos. 236).

In the novel *The Black Camel*, here taken as a case study, he is in Honolulu, where he usually works, when the murder of a famous actress disturbs the “eternity of sky and water” (Biggers 1929: 691). Chan finds himself investigating

on this murder with an unusual, and rather eccentric, assistant: Tarneverro the Great, a white British psychic who knew the victim and spoke to her the same day of the murder. Tarneverro, whose real name will eventually turn out to be Arthur Mayo, is a mysterious figure, whose motives remain unclear until the very end – Chan allows him to be part of the investigation even if he is among the main suspects.⁵ Tarneverro also reveals he has spent some time in China, and has a working knowledge of Cantonese language and Chinese culture. Throughout the diegesis, the two have a multi-layered communication, as they ostensibly help each other while studying the other's weaknesses and inconsistencies.

Chan, albeit forged by an American author, is a Chinese character, whose Chineseness is constantly stressed in the novel, also in terms of pragmatics, as can be seen when a crucial piece of evidence is taken away from him in front of everyone, causing him to feel deeply ashamed:

Charlie Chan *had lost face* in the presence of seven witnesses. Though he had lived many years in Hawaii, *he was still Oriental enough to feel a hot bitter anger* that startled even himself.

He sought to conquer that feeling immediately. *Anger, he had been taught, is a poison* that destroys the mind, and he would have need of all his faculties in the ordeal that impended. (Biggers 1929: 791)⁶

There is a direct reference to the concept of face that has been lost, in this case most likely intended as 面子⁷ (miànzi), the type of face that is linked, as will be seen shortly, to public recognition of value and success (Hu 1944). Following, an indirect reference to the typical idea of Oriental(ist) imperturbable calm, a simplification of the implications of both Daoist and Confucian teachings, for example, from Chapter LXVIII of *Daodejing*: “One who excels in fighting is never roused in anger.”⁸ Confucian teachings also value the ability to avoid excesses, as can be evinced from this excerpt from *The Doctrine of the Mean*: “While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium.”⁹ While these few lines are particularly dense of references, justifications of Chan's behavior by virtue of his being “Oriental” are rather frequent, both in the narrators' voice and in Chan's own utterances.

2.3 Method

Chan's dialogues with Tarneverro were selected as a corpus to ‘test’ the pragmatics of a fictional intercultural encounter, as in their interaction social role and ethnic differences are at stake, underneath and beyond the murder case. The novel was analyzed qualitatively to read the interactions between Chan and Tarneverro using the rest of the novel as context information to support utterance interpretation. The content analysis was carried out in NVivo, a powerful and flexible software that allows to create one's own research structure, by designing tagging hierarchies with parent nodes that are themselves divided into child nodes, the sub-categories. In particular, the framework of analysis included two distinct structures, corresponding to the two pragmatic paradigms previously illustrated.

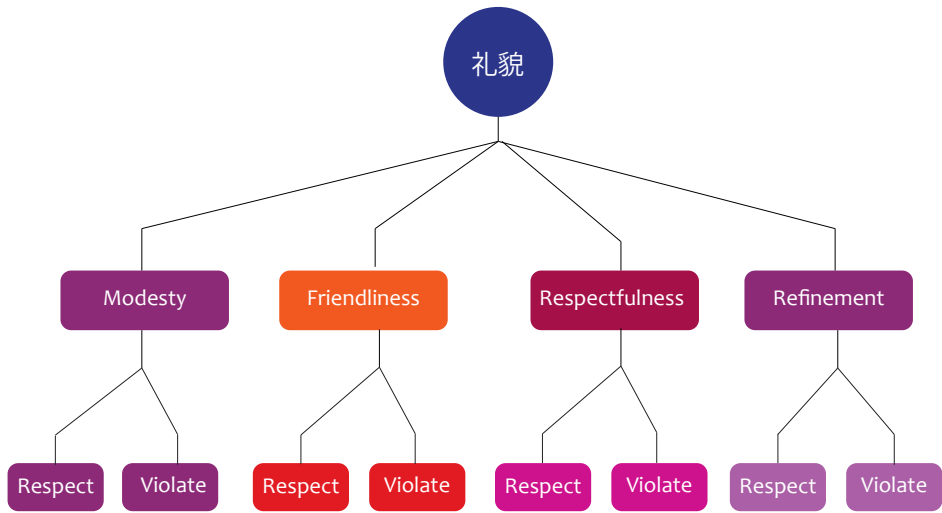


Figure 1. Chinese politeness 礼貌 (lǐmào), drawn from Zhou and Zhang (2018) and adapted into NVivo

The dialogues between Chan and Tarneverro were then annotated twice, according to the two paradigms, whose graphic representation looked as in Figures 1 and 2.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the primary parent node for 礼貌 (lǐmào) is the politeness paradigm itself, with the child nodes being the four maxims, which could then be either respected or violated in an utterance (further child nodes).

Figure 2 shows that in the Western politeness the various instances are all child nodes on the same level, with positive and negative politeness directed towards the self or the other juxtaposed to show the mutual relation.

After manually annotating all the dialogues between the two characters, we calculated the frequencies and visualized the data using NVivo and Microsoft Excel. In total, we counted 109 instances of 礼貌 (lǐmào) and 121 of Western politeness for Charlie Chan and 39 instances of 礼貌 (lǐmào) and 78 of Western politeness for Tarneverro (bearing in mind that Charlie Chan occupies larger spaces in the dialogues, which is understandable since he is assigned longer lines by the

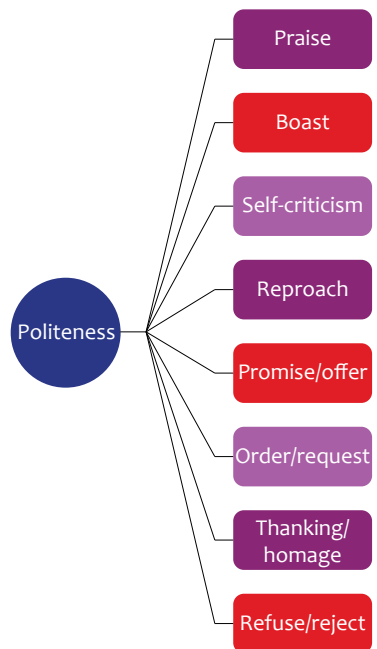


Figure 2. Western politeness drawn from Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011) and Santulli (2011) and adapted into NVivo

author). The recurrence of the same utterance being annotated for both systems was also counted, so as to assess which parts can be seen as overlapping – either because similar or because they generate opposite results according to each paradigm.

Here we first present the results of our annotation and then we select some examples to comment on among those that we deemed particularly relevant for our analysis. It is worth noting that the two characters' use of pragmatics may be influenced by the fact that they are both hiding their real motives to the other: this does not invalidate the results, but attributes to them an even greater importance, as the lack of sincerity (or at least complete sincerity) between the two makes the way they behave even more central to the achievement of their interactional goals.

3. Results

Both characters resort more often to Western politeness, which for Chan could be explained in two ways: from a diegetic point of view, we may assume that, since he has long lived in Honolulu, he either adapts to his interlocutors or naturally “Americanized” his ways in time. However, the margin is not too broad in Chan, while Tarneverro, as could be expected, uses Western politeness nearly twice as much as he resorts to 礼貌 (lǐmào).

It is worth looking at the quantitative results in more detail to have a broader picture of the way interactions take place. Starting with 礼貌 (lǐmào), the following pie charts (see Figure 3 for Chan and Figure 4 for Tarneverro) illustrate which maxims were respected and violated by the two characters and to what extent.

The instances of respect (R) and violation (V) of the maxims are represented in the same color for both characters in order to provide immediate visualization of the difference between the two characters. Chan's tagged utterances (see Figure 3) respected respectfulness in 43.1% of cases, which implies that he mostly paid close attention to his interlocutor's face and sought agreement with him, despite his role as a detective would allow him to disregard Tarneverro's face needs. The psychic's respect of respectfulness (see Figure 4) apparently does not score much lower (28.2%), but it must be noted that he violates this maxim just as many times (28.2%), which means that he did not take Chan's face needs into consideration at all times. These violations happen often when Tarneverro treats with contempt the detective's peaceful attitude and the fact that he seems to be proceeding slowly in the investigation – he does not know that Chan keeps some of his progress from him because he does not trust him and he wants Tarneverro to feel safe from suspicion. Chan, on the other hand, hardly violates respectfulness (0.9%), on the rare occasions he decides to limit his opponent's presumptuous statements.

As for modesty, they both respect it in similar proportions (Chan 14.7%, Tarneverro 15.4%), but Tarneverro violates it slightly more: 2.6% vs 1.8%. Chan shows respect for this maxim for instance in the initial interaction, where he downplays his successes and his importance in Honolulu police, while Tarneverro

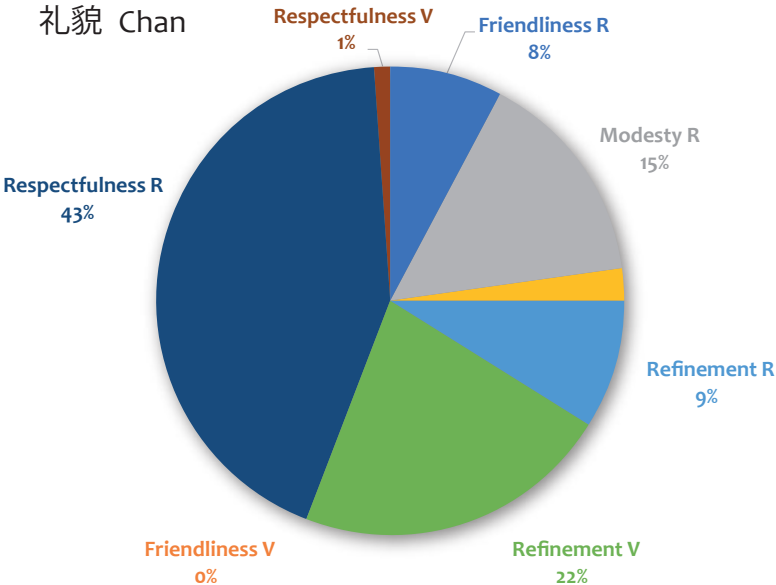


Figure 3. Charlie Chan’s use of 礼貌 (lǐmào), V = violate, R = respect

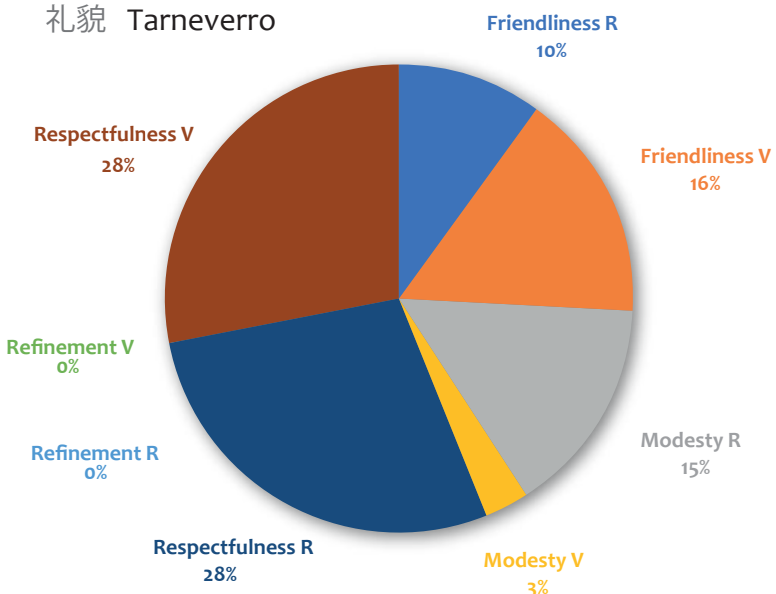


Figure 4. Tarneverro’s use of 礼貌 (lǐmào), V = violate, R = respect

tends to use modesty to eschew Chan's frequent compliments to his intuitions and talents as an amateur detective.

Friendliness is not per se a maxim in western politeness, where it seems to be more relevant in the conceptualizations of social distance (Svennevig 1999). For 礼貌 (lǐmào), however, to be warm and hospitable even with those you do not know is integral part of being polite.¹⁰ This difference is to some extent linked to the very concept of negative face, as reducing social distance before the relation between the interlocutors makes it appropriate can constitute a violation of one's will not to be imposed on. A case on point can be the use of kinship terms beyond the family to extend solidarity to a whole community: it is perfectly normal for a Chinese child to address a young woman they had never seen before as "auntie" (阿姨, Āyí), and this creates family-like obligations, especially of seniors towards juniors (Wu 1990, 86). Such a behavior is mostly unusual, when not rude, if transposed into English-speaking cultures (imagine how an older woman would react in the US upon being called "grandma" 奶奶, Nǎinai, by a person in their thirties she does not know). This maxim appears less frequently in Chan than in Tarneverro who, however, violates it more frequently than he respects it (15.5% vs 10.3%). As mentioned with respectfulness, Tarneverro is critical of Chan's ways, and criticism is often accompanied by a cold attitude. He also often rejects Chan's proposals and ideas, and he even occasionally interrupts Chan abruptly during the investigation (e.g. when he fears for his alibi). Chan does not make extensive use of the friendliness maxim, but when he does it is only to respect it (8.3%), for instance when he offers Tarneverro a ride to the scene of the crime upon their second encounter.

As seen in the theoretical background, the maxim of refinement is a pragmatic consequence of the strong Confucian influence on China, still present to this day, even after the Cultural Revolution. A polite Chinese, one who has 礼貌 (lǐmào), should always observe this maxim, respect Confucian 礼 (lǐ) and maintain social order, first and foremost by willingly following social hierarchy. The graph shows that Tarneverro, despite his alleged knowledge of Chinese culture, seems to ignore refinement as a whole. Chan, on the other hand, does respect refinement on many occasions (22%) but, very importantly, he violates this maxim a non-negligible number of times (9.2% in total). This happens when he lowers himself well below his detective status: while letting Tarneverro 'help' in the investigation is certainly a strategic move, it is at times deployed at the expense of social order.¹¹

Moving on to Western politeness, the graphs below report the results of our analysis (see Figure 5 for Chan and Figure 6 for Tarneverro).

Here it might be useful to proceed by positive/negative face and positive/negative politeness pairs. In positive facework, a pair with some link to the Chinese maxims is self-criticism/boast, which have some features in common with modesty and respectfulness. The fact that Chan was not too modest compared to Tarneverro shows here, where the two seem to boast with very similar frequencies, 9.1% for Chan and 7.7% for Tarneverro. It is important to note, however, that Chan's brags are often not just self-satisfaction. For instance, when Tarneverro is praising his own alleged psychic powers (which eventually prove to be 'mere' intuition), Chan states that "Chinese people are psychic, too" (Biggers

Western Politeness Chan

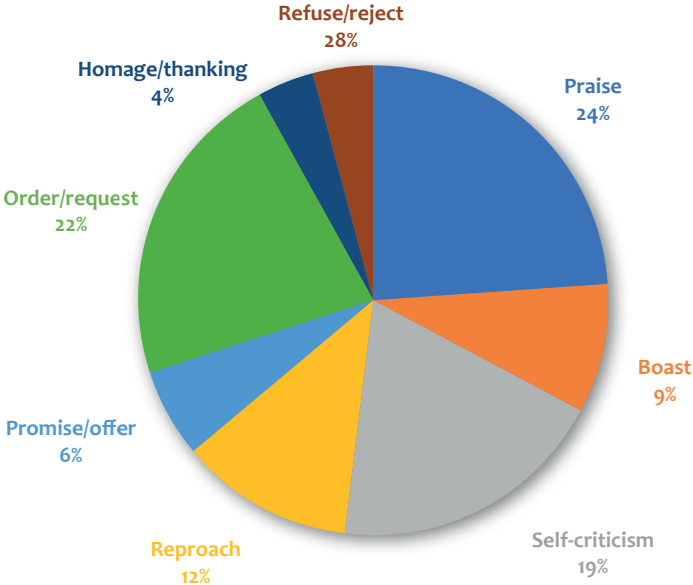


Figure 5. Charlie Chan's use of Western politeness

Western Politeness Tarneverro

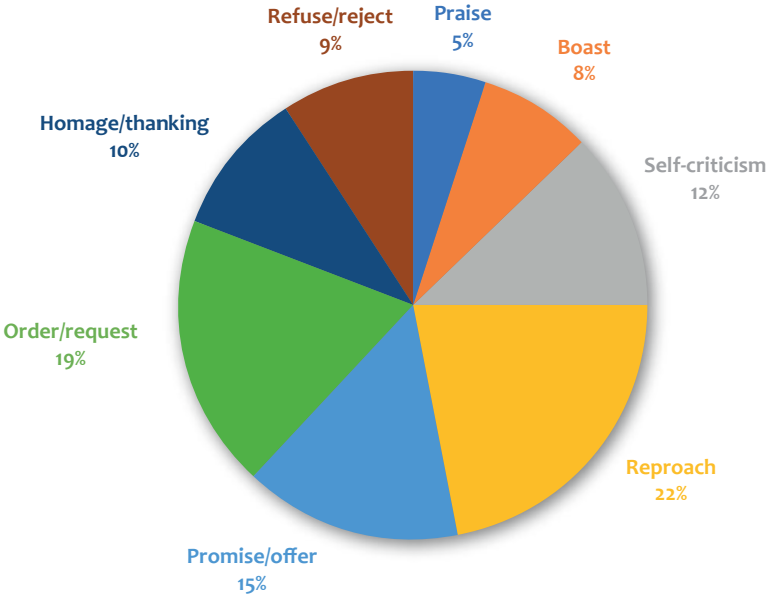


Figure 6. Tarneverro's use of Western politeness

1929: 701),¹² implying that his abilities are not to be credited to himself only. This mitigates his boasting, by turning it into a praise to a group of people he belongs to. Self-criticism is significantly present in both characters, although more in Chan (19.0% vs 11.5%). As will be seen, this positive politeness manifestation will often coincide with the respect of modesty maxim in the Chinese system, with both opponents attaching little importance to their respective talents in various occasions. While this can be seen as a polite behavior, the context also suggests that the two may be doing this with strategic purposes: Chan to make Tarneverro believe he is clueless, so that the suspect can rest on his laurels and reveal important details on the murder; Tarneverro, on the other hand, may have two reasons. The first is similar to Chan's, while another could be to appear selfless in offering help, while he really has all interest in misleading Chan or at least to keep the investigation far from discovering the psychic's role in the murder.

While the first pairs explored concern the Self, the praise/reproach pair naturally has to do with the Other. With a total of 24%, Chan's resort to praise is abundant: nearly one in four times he lauds his interlocutor, which may also be the reason why Tarneverro sometimes uses modesty to dodge the numerous compliments, even to actions that were not actually brilliant. This excessive praise, while certainly preserving his interlocutor's positive face according to western politeness and giving him face 给面子 (gěi miànzi) according to Chinese politeness, is a threat to his own position as an authoritative figure and, therefore, to 礼 (lǐ). Tarneverro, on the other hand, makes much less use of this positive politeness (5.1%), while his use of reproach is more frequent: as mentioned earlier with respectfulness, Tarneverro openly criticizes Chan, even just with subtle remarks, which disregards Chan's positive face while also threatening his 面子 (miànzi).

Before passing to negative face results, it might be worth reminding that while all of the face work actions in the scheme can happen with Chinese interlocutors, they do not constitute threat or safeguard to the negative face, which does not exist, but they may be seen as forms of respect or violation of 礼貌 (lǐmào) maxims. The first negative face pair is aimed at the self, and is the promise, offer/refusal, rejection opposition. As for promise and offer, it is more frequent in Tarneverro, who offers his help or promises to succeed in 15.4% of the annotated occurrences. This happens less in Chan, who only does it in 5.8% of the cases. Tarneverro wants to display a genuine interest in helping Chan solve the case, and tries to prove his intentions by making himself useful, which is also a display of attitudinal warmth and generosity and, therefore, of friendliness according to 礼貌 (lǐmào). Chan, on the other hand, knows it is his duty to solve the case, but he also realizes it is not an easy one. Therefore, he tends to avoid promising results, but he does offer his help to Tarneverro in more than one occasion. Refusal and rejection also appear more often in the psychic (9%), who quickly dismisses Chan's ideas and opinions when he fears they may lead the detective closer to the truth. Charlie Chan's use of refusal and rejection is less frequent, and mitigated by face-preserving acts like praise.

The last pair is thanking, homage/order, request. It is fascinating to see that the two score very similarly in order and request (21.5% for Chan, 19.2% for Tarneverro), given that only Chan is in the position to give orders and make requests (a feature

that is typical of authority figures). Moreover, just like refusals, Chan's orders are on more occasions mitigated by praise – which does not happen that frequently when Tarneverro makes his requests or even tells Chan what he should do. Tarneverro, however, also displays more acts of homage and thanking (10.3% vs 4.1%).

As anticipated, not only did the two systems frequently appear in the same communicative event, but they were also annotated simultaneously in the very same utterance. This happened more often in Charlie Chan, with 47% of his utterances being annotated twice. Of these overlapping instances, some could probably be easier to expect: 18% of the double annotations were a combination of praise and respect/respectfulness, as praising is a good way to appreciate one's face needs. Another expectable combination is that of self-criticism and respect of modesty, which happened in 13% of Chan's double annotations. Another co-occurrence is that of order/request with the respect of respectfulness (10%), which further proves Chan's consideration of his interlocutor's face needs even while doing his job as a police officer. Finally, Chan also violates refinement while praising Tarneverro (9%): as mentioned, Chan exceeds with his compliments, to the point he sounds adulatory, assuming an attitude that is proper of inferior social positions.¹³ Tarneverro's overlapping annotations are less common but not negligible, with 25% of the total. He, too, respects modesty while self-criticizing (10%). Moreover, as suggested above, his respect of friendliness manifests itself through promises and offers in 10% of the double annotations. Finally, Tarneverro's belief of being the dominant figure in the interaction is made visible in the overlapping between reproach and violate respectfulness, with a striking 20% of his double annotations: he often treats Chan with condescension, which could reflect his attempt to remain ahead of the investigation, but also ill-concealed racism.¹⁴

4. Examples of interaction

To complete the analysis, we are now going to comment briefly on a few lines of dialogue which are exemplary of the interaction between the detective and the psychic, starting with their very first encounter. The two characters have their first contact in the hall of the hotel where Tarneverro is staying: Chan addresses Tarneverro, initially introducing himself as a businessman who wants to exchange a few words with the famous fortune-teller. It is worth noting how the author describes the scene, emphasizing the attitude of the protagonist, who is actually trying to deceive his interlocutor, putting on a “placid mask of a face, behind which life seemed nonexistent” (Biggers 2017 [1929]: 700). Chan succeeds in showing such a modest and blank expression that can be mistaken for sheer stupidity:

The ivory face was wearing a somewhat *stupid expression*; the black eyes were veiled and sleepy-looking. *Not a very intelligent Chinese*, Tarneverro thought, wondering vaguely what this visit presaged. (Biggers 2017 [1929]: 699)

This physical self-presentation is functional to hiding Chan's role as a police inspector, and thus gives the character an initial advantage (which however will not

last long). Moreover, it is not in contrast with the excessive politeness strategies adopted by Chan to mitigate his request to a stranger (a FTA) with homage and the expression of modesty, conveyed through both his attitude and his words:

The oriental *placed one hand on his broad chest*, and achieved a *grand bow* despite his waist-line.

“A *thousand pardons*,” he remarked. “Have I *the undisputable honor* to address Tarneverro the Great?”

“I am Tarneverro,” answered the other bruskiy. “What can I do for you?”

“Permit that I introduce myself,” continued the Chinese, “*unworthy of your notice though I am*. The name is Harry Wing, and I *am humble business man* of this island. *Do I extend my remarks too far when I say I wish to see you alone?*” (Biggers 2017 [1929]: 699)

With this behavior, Chan may be in tune with Western expectations of Eastern politeness, but is actually violating the Chinese refinement maxim. He continues with excessive compliments when the dialogue is resumed in Tarneverro’s bedroom, but the psychic has noticed a place on Chan’s waistcoat from which the detective badge had been removed and is thus able to uncover the truth about the inspector’s real identity. However, when he tries to convince Chan that the discovery is the result of his magic perceptions, the detective understands which clue has actually helped Tarneverro, whom he praises for his exceptional investigating qualities. Also in the second part of the dialogue, Chan combines praise and flattering (as typical expressions of politeness addressing the positive face of the Other) with humble (and again excessive) self-criticism.

The way the two characters behave during their first encounter is a sort of kickoff to their subsequent exchanges, where Chan repeatedly indulges in over-abundant expressions of both praise and modesty, violating refinement, but offering to the readership a more reassuring representation of a minority character. A partial re-adjustment of the relationship occurs in the last exchange between the two, when, the case being solved, they comment on the events and Tarneverro explains his position – admitting his defeat. Tarneverro eventually turns out not to be the murder, but to have tried and covered the identity of the real assassin, Anna, the wife of his late brother. It was Anna who killed the actress, who in turn had previously shot Tarneverro’s brother.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “*I’ve made you a lot of trouble*, Inspector. But I was in a horrible position - you can realize that. Should I have handed Anna over to you at once? Perhaps, but as I told you last night, I saw immediately that I was responsible for the whole affair. Innocently so, of course, but none the less responsible. I ought never to have told her - but I wanted a witness. If only I had kept my discovery to myself.”

“*The man who looks back sees his mistakes piled up behind*,” Chan nodded.

“But I never dreamed Anna would lose her head like that. *These women*, Inspector.”

“They are primitive creatures, these women.”

“So it would seem. Anna has always been a strange, silent, unfriendly person. But there was one bond between us - we both loved Denny. When she proved last night how desperately she loved him - well, I couldn't betray her. Instead *I fought my duel with you. Fought to the limit of my ability - and lost.*” He held out his hand.

Chan took it. “*Only the churlish are mean-spirited in victory,*” he remarked. (Biggers 2017 [1929]: 908-909)

Tarneverro tries to justify his behavior, admitting that he may have been more honest with the inspector and, at the same time, acknowledging his responsibility in determining the course of the events. Chan nods, and quotes what looks like a saying (a rough equivalent of the Latin: *errare humanum est*) to show that he understands the motives and accepts Tarneverro's apologies. Then, when Tarneverro seeks agreement to find an acceptable justification for the murder, Chan joins his interlocutor in putting the blame on the “primitive” features of women, thus showing a tolerant, perhaps condescending attitude. Finally, when the fortune-teller openly admits his defeat, representing the whole confrontation with the inspector as waged war and confessing his inability to win despite his full commitment, Chan resorts to proverbiality again to preserve his adversary face wants.

5. Discussion and conclusions

While he often violates 礼貌 (lǐmào) and displays less-than-perfect facework, Tarneverro's ambiguous behavior from a pragmatic perspective reflects his role as someone who acts suspiciously but is not a villain. Chan, on the other hand, prefers to violate the sacred values of 礼 (lǐ) by acting too politely, and in so doing he obtains multiple results: he provides the 1920s audience with a non-threatening minority character they can appreciate (a model minority), and he also embodies the genius-above-suspicion detective. It is important to note that other detectives in this category belonged to minority groups: one example can be Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (Shaw and Vanacker 1991), an elderly woman who, written more or less in the same period as Chan, solves murder cases between the 19th and the 20th century – certainly not an era in which women enjoyed the best position in society. Another more recent example is Lieutenant Columbo, whose series *Columbo* aired from 1968 to 2003 (although the character has appeared in other TV programs before and after his own series). He investigates the murders committed in affluent Los Angeles neighborhoods with a run-down look and an apparently chatty and clumsy behavior, which lead people to underestimate him as a working-class officer with probably immigrant family background. Chan is a more ‘exotic’ version of this diegetic *topos*, who eventually proves to be, more or less intentionally for the author, an Orientalist and simplified take on Chinese philosophy, as it may be evinced by reading the full version of the aforementioned Chapter LVXIII of *Daodejing*:

One who excels as a warrior does not appear formidable;
One who excels in fighting is never roused in anger;
One who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issue;
One who excels in employing others humbles himself before them.

This is known as the virtue of non-contention;
This is known as making use of the efforts of others;
This is known as matching the sublimity of heaven.

Some may argue that Chan's subjectivity deletion, visible in his exaggerate complimenting his WASP interlocutors and humbling himself, may represent an instance of 崇洋媚外 (chóngyáng mèiwài, veneration of the foreigner), an attitude that is often frowned upon in China. For Charlie Chan, however, downplaying his virtues, which eventually become manifest when he solves the murder, is a survival strategy. In fact, it allows him to be appreciated by a mostly racist audience while letting his diegetic opponents underestimate him, to eventually succeed. And yet, this way of achieving results is part of what generated the model minority stereotype (Asians succeeding with humbleness and hard work), an image that still impacts the AAPI community to this day.

The violation of some aspects of Chinese politeness can be interpreted as a consequence of the fictional nature of the analyzed texts. In other words, Chan is a Chinese character conceived by a western author for a western audience, and is therefore – at least to a certain extent – the embodiment of western convictions and prejudices, leading to a representation rather distant from actual Chineseness. The writer is led by his western eye to depict a very humble man who, despite his position as a police officer, continually expresses his modesty to the point that he sounds inadequate in his social role. In this respect, despite his being (even excessively) polite, Chan is definitely not *political* (Watts 2003) by western standards. Yet this potential misalignment with expectations based on Chan's professional function is compensated with the need to comply with a stereotyped representation of a minority character, which turns out to be much more important for both the writer and his audience.

These observations have rather interesting implications, as the intercultural nature of the exchanges analyzed in this paper is itself a fake. Projecting stereotypes and assumed (readers') expectations onto the fictional characters, the novelist constructs interpersonal exchanges that only apparently involve distant and different cultures. Even the effort to mediate between eastern and western attitudes (presenting Chan as a US citizen with a public role in society, on the one hand, and giving Tarneverro background knowledge of Chinese language and culture on the other) is only a narrative device. The two reproduce a modestly original variation of the detective vs suspect interaction, where the 'oriental' component, beyond its reassuring function in the representation of a model minority, offers the possibility of enriching the plot with elements of deception and challenge. From the point of view of the genre, the intercultural contraposition is a promising, and highly exploited, fictional strategy. Within this framework, politeness strategies play a special role in both 'mono-cultural' and multi-cultural

contexts. The examples discussed in this paper suggest that the intercultural component allows variation, friction and possibly conciliation, showing a potential that deserves further attention.

Despite its non-authentic nature – actually, mostly *because of* it – a fictional manifestation of linguistic politeness is an interesting opportunity for the analysis of strategies that are explicitly and intentionally exploited for the representation of a character, contributing to emphasizing traits of their both personal and cultural identity, and to the construction of schemes of interaction functional to the development of the plot. Indirectly, this reveals how politeness *is thought to be* crucial for both the expression of the self and the success of human relationships.

Finally, from the point of view of pragmatics, and of politeness theory in particular, this investigation has shown that using different models of classifying intercultural interlocutions in a fictional context makes it possible to single out traits in the behavior of the characters that combine, overlap and conflict to generate complex representations. Indirectly, this is ultimately a promising way to explore the applicability of contraposed interpretations of politeness itself.

Notes

- ¹ This article stems from the joint efforts of the two authors. However, Francesca Santulli wrote sections 1, 4 and 5; Dora Renna wrote sections 2 and 3.
- ² The centrality of face in Chinese pragmatics has been criticized as attributed to incomplete and orientalist translations. For instance, Hinze shows various examples aimed at showing that, especially in the business field, “it is quite common for participants in an interaction to engage in polite verbal or non-verbal behaviour in a manner that does not ‘give face’ (gei mianzi 给面子) or ‘consider face’ (gu mianzi 顾面子) to or for other participants in the interaction” (Hinze 2012: 20).
- ³ It is important to note that, at the time the novel was written, the imperial power in China had already been removed, but the emergence of the People’s Republic of China was yet to happen, with the deep transformations that Mao’s era brought along in all fields of public life, including language and pragmatics (Lee-Wong 1997). The character inspiring Chan’s writing, the Chinese Hawaiian detective Chang Apana, was born in 1871 in Hawaii, but he spent most of his early childhood in China (Huang 2010). It could be reasonable then to assume that Chan, first appeared in a novel in 1926 as an adult, could be born slightly later than Apana (who died in 1933), but probably still during the Qing dynasty, hence his closeness to the Confucian values that are reflected in his behaviour.
- ⁴ While this paper focuses on the interaction between Chan and Tarneverro, pragmatic instances of this can also be found in other interactions. For instance, when another character, Wilkie Ballou, refuses to answer Charlie’s questions on the case because he considers him a member of an inferior race, Charlie does not respond aggressively, but instead reacts to a stiff yang by adapting to it with a more yin attitude, and in so doing he follows Daoist principles.
- ⁵ It might be fascinating to note that, in the cinematic transposition, Tarneverro is interpreted by the Hungarian-American actor Béla Ferenc Dezső Blaskó, AKA Bela Lugosi, probably best known for his iconic role as Count Dracula in the film *Dracula*, released the same year as *The Black Camel* (1931). Lugosi was particularly appreciated for his (numerous) sinister roles, some examples can be found here: <https://screenrant.com/sinister-bela-lugosi-roles-ranked-dracula-phantom-ship/>

- (last visited December 24, 2022). His fame as the face of dark characters adds layers to his Tarneverro.
- ⁶ In all quotations from *The Black Camel*, unless differently stated, emphasis is added.
- ⁷ In this paper, simplified Chinese is the preferred writing system, as it is the one the authors are most familiar with. However, Gu's paper (1990) features the traditional version of the character 礼 (lǐ) which is 禮. The simplified version of this character will be used here throughout the paper for uniformity.
- ⁸ In Chinese, 善戰者，不怒 (Shànzhàn zhě, bù nù), translation from <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Daodejing&no=68> (last visited December 24, 2022). It must be noted that there are several editions and translation of this text, but all those that were consulted for this article had the same overall meaning, albeit with stress on specific aspects and different registers.
- ⁹ In Chinese, 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中 (Xǐ nù āi lè zhī wèi fā wèi zhī zhōng), translation from <http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/doctmean.html> (last visited December 24, 2022).
- ¹⁰ For instance, at the beginning of the novel, when Charlie is introduced to the company of Van Horn, Martino and Alan Jaynes by Tarneverro, and he responds by saying: "The honor is immense. Distinguished company, as a blind man could see" (Biggers 2017 [1929], 715).
- ¹¹ The authoritative and universally respected role of the detective during investigation is displayed even in more recent cultural products. For instance, the sci-fi thriller Chinese drama *Reset* (2022) features a detective who embodies authority and wisdom. No one questions his role, and he, in return, is able to listen to his juniors and even to the suspects and to sacrifice for them and for the victims.
- ¹² This is a statement that can often be found in the whole Chan's novel collection, uttered either by Chan himself or by his collaborators (Biggers 2017 [1929]).
- ¹³ Chan himself tends to assume different attitudes with white people and to other AAPIs in lower social positions, for example when he threatens the Filipino hotel staff member not to tip him if he does not follow his instructions carefully: "otherwise, when moment arrives for your tip, I develop far-away look in eye and can not see you" (Biggers 2017 [1929], 821-826). To compare Chan with more recent Chinese cultural products, a good example of adulatory behaviors can be found in imperial eunuchs in historical TV series. For instance, in *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2018) the Head Eunuch Li Yu is just as humble with the nobles as he is authoritative with those lower in rank. This is not seen as a cowardly behavior in the series (he is overall a positive character), but as a consequence of his social position.
- ¹⁴ It should be noted that Tarneverro's behavior does not include openly racist remarks like those by the aforementioned Wilkie Ballou, who talks about Chinese as an "inferior race" in front of Chan himself, and even asks "why don't they send a white man out here?" (Biggers 2017 [1929], 758). Chan does not respond using his authority as a police officer, which allows him to keep his own face (留面子 liú miànzi, and 禮貌 lǐmào) by being polite. Nonetheless, when he is alone with fellow Chinese he spares no criticism, for instance at the end when, talking to the Chinese chef Wu Kno-ching, he wonders: "Tell me something, Wu, how was it I come upon this road? Why should one of our race concern himself with the hatreds and misdeeds of the haoles?" (Biggers 2017 [1929], 910).

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