POLITENESS OF SERVICE ENCOUNTERS IN HONG KONG[1]

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Politeness, as a linguistic phenomenon, has been extensively studied in the past. The most well-known example is Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987), which has been applied in various settings, from casual service encounters to EFL classrooms. However, Brown and Levinson's model has been criticized for being too geared to Western (especially American) notions of 'independence' and, hence, for its limited applicability in Asian contexts. One of the most puzzling features of Chinese politeness behaviour to Westerners has been the direct and blunt approach people take in casual service encounters, in which almost no greeting and facework are required of both participants involved. Customers simply go to the service counters, say what they need, take it with their outstretched hands, and then leave. To explain this phenomenon, the distinction between in-group and out-group relationship has been proposed. Scollon and Scollon (1991) argue that, to the Chinese, there are two types of relationship governing their behaviour: inside (*nei*) and outside (*wai*). Inside relations are those of intimate regular contacts, including family members, friends, colleagues, whereas outside relations involve temporary contacts in service encounters, such as sales interactions. Sophisticated face redressing strategies are not required in dealing with a *wai* relationship.

Hwang (1987) made an even finer distinction by classifying Chinese relationships into three categories: Expressive ties, such as those with family members; mixed ties, such as those with friends and colleagues; and instrumental ties, such as those with strangers and outgroup members with whom there is only a short-term relationship. The expectations and resulting interaction patterns will vary according to the relationship one is in. However, in proposing the 'mixed ties' between the two poles of inside and outside, Hwang has, in fact, recognized the cross-cutting nature of in-group and out-group relationships and the resulting difficulty in distinguishing in-group and outgroup behaviour. Yang (1992) made a similar distinction in understanding interaction patterns of the Chinese by using terms such as *sheng* 'raw or

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outside', *shu* 'cooked or inside', and *jia* 'family'.

However, these distinctions have come into question. One of the most obvious problems is that the politeness behaviour of some outgroup relationships, such as those between salesmen and clients in service encounters, is quite varied and, in some situations, resembles closely the politeness behaviour found in in-group relationships. In a recent study of sales interactions in privately-owned shops in China (Pan 1996), a large number of facework is found; in other words, an outgroup relationship has been turned into an ingroup's, in contrast with the commonly-known Chinese direct blunt style used by participants in 12 state-run shops. On the other hand, in recent decades, the traditional ingroup relationship has been 'penetrated' by commercial activities, such as network marketing; hence, ingroup behaviour among friends and colleagues may contain politeness patterns that used to belong to outgroup behaviour.

Therefore, the variations and interdiscursitivity of ingroup and outgroup behaviour have asked for the need to undertake a more vigorous examination of the validity of those categories postulated, and also a more context-specific politeness model for understanding the politeness behaviour in Chinese service encounters. The investigation has two main objectives:

(1)   Evaluate the effectiveness of Brown and Levinson's politeness model as well as the attempts to distinguish between in-group and out-group relationships in understanding Chinese politeness behaviour in service encounters.

(2)   Propose a more context-specific model for understanding Chinese politeness behaviour in service encounters.

1. Inside versus outside relationship in Chinese interactions

It has been found that Chinese interaction patterns are strongly influenced by their relationship orientation. However, care should be taken when interpreting this proposition, since the Chinese culture is not the only one in which role relationship orientation is a factor determining the appropriateness of an utterance. It is the stronger emphasis that the Chinese place on those parameters that has led to the apparent cultural differences in these interaction patterns. For example, the Scollons (1991) contend that topic introduction is influenced by the role relationship of the participants concerned. The call-answer-topic sequence is strictly observed in Western service encounters, whereas Chinese customers can go into the topic directly, without any greetings or the service providers' acknowledge of readiness to help. This, the Scollons argue, has given rise to the common Western stereotype of the Chinese as rude and aggressive customers, and hostile and unresponsive service providers. This discoursal difference has been attributed to the cultural differences in the participants' roles. To the Chinese, the service encounter is a kind of outgroup relationship; therefore, no sophisticated

facework is required of either of the participants:

> "This topic-response pattern (without the preliminary call-answer sequence) contrasts strongly with the Western practice. In Asia in an outside relationship the positions of the parties are tightly fixed within a service role relationship; one is a teller, the other a customer; one is a waitress, the other a customer. Before the encounter begins the possible moves are limited within a narrow range… . Because this is an outside relationship Asians regard it as impossible for any other topics to be introduced or for any other relationship to develop; therefore, no facework is required, no preliminaries are necessary to establish who you are or why you are there. The topic can (and, in fact, must) be introduced directly." (Scollon and Scollon 1991: 118-119)

The brusqueness and directness in Chinese outside relationships have posed an interesting opposition to the indirectness in their inside relationships, where directness or a deductive approach to topic introduction is preferred by their Anglo-western counterparts. The Scollons argue that this is due to the greater sensitivity of the Chinese to the hierarchical positions of the participants:

> "Inside relationships are governed by culturally established hierarchical relationships or jen ('benevolence' or 'authoritative person'). This has major implications in determining who speaks first as well as implications for when topics are introduced." (Scollon and Scollon 1991: 119)

However, these distinctions between inside and outside relationships are problematic when applied in real context. The 'tightly fixed' assumption about relationships cannot stand under close scrutiny. For example, in his study of routine business request letters in Chinese and English, Kong (1998) found that the same genre in each of the two cultures uses different discoursal strategies. Chinese letters tend to delay the introduction of a topic, and place greater emphasis on interpersonal rapport-building tactics, whereas English letters exhibit a deductive introduction of topic, concentrate on ideational propositions, and make frequent use of face-threatening moves. Returning to the hypothesis of Chinese people's greater sensitivity to hierarchy, one explanation is that the Chinese letter writer, concerned that the recipient may have a position senior to his, attempts to be tactful and polite by delaying the topic. However, another argument is also valid. Those letter writers and recipients have an outside relationship and, according to the inside/outside relationship hypothesis, the letter writers would use a direct way of introducing topics. In contrast, indirect strategies are most frequently used in order to show the writer's sincerity in building a long-term relationship with the recipient. This example illustrates that it is too simplistic to assume that there can only be two polarities. In real-life situations, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to define precisely what is an inside and outside relationship, except those related to family. There are always fuzziness and uncertainty in our relationships. Inside and outside relationships are but manipulable and negotiable variables, rather than fixed governing factors of politeness behaviour in Chinese settings. This will be elaborated in the following section.

2. Positive and negative face and their corresponding redressing strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1987) and Scollon and Scollon (1995), our face has two elements. Positive and negative face represent the desire for approval and the desire to be unimpeded, respectively. In redressing these, two sets of politeness strategies are used: Those of involvement and independence. Briefly, the involvement strategies emphasize the commonality or mutual benefits of the participants, while the independence strategies denote the need and desire not to impede another's territory. According to Brown and Levinson and Scollon and Scollon, the key elements determining the appropriate strategy to be used in any social interaction are first, the relationship between participants, and second, the degree of imposition. The relationship between participants can be analyzed at two levels: the difference in power (social status) between them, and their social distance (degree of closeness or intimacy). However, as the degree of imposition varies according to the urgency of the situation and the interlocutors' individual characters, it is usually treated as a constant in making generalizations about discourse patterns or systems. The interplay of the two factors (power and social distance) is the product of three discourse patterns: deference, solidarity, and hierarchy (Scollon and Scollon):

Symmetrical deference (-P, +D): Both participants use strategies of independence in preference to strategies of involvement.

Symmetrical solidarity (-P, -D): Both participants prefer to use strategies of involvement.

Asymmetrical, hierarchical (+P, +D): Face strategies of involvement are used by the person (or participants) in the higher social position or position of higher power; face strategies of independence are used by the person in the lower position.

(+P = High Power Difference, -P = Low Power Difference)

(+D = High Social Distance, -D = Low Social Distance)

3. The 'Universality' of politeness model

Although the politeness model, based on the concept of positive and negative face and their corresponding redressing strategies, offers a clear taxonomy of politeness strategies and the motivation behind them, it has been criticised for its ethnocentrism and its limited value in

understanding politeness behavior in non-Western cultures. In fact, Brown and Levinson admit the "non-universality" of their own model by pointing out that politeness markers are not quantifiable signals of politeness and that the use of politeness strategies may not be motivated by politeness alone (Brown and Levinson 1987: 21-22); hence, "a multifunctionality, a relativity, a dependency on context …. makes B/L's politeness model of little more value to empirical investigation than more general concepts of politeness" (Meier 1995: 351). In fact, there have been constant criticisms of applying the model to Chinese data. Gu (1990), in studying the politeness in modern Chinese, points out that the Chinese notion of negative face is different from that of Brown and Levinson. Acts such as offering, inviting, and promising, which may threaten the hearer's negative face in Brown and Levinson's model, will not be considered as impeding the hearer's freedom in Chinese. On the contrary, those 'face-threatening acts' could be 'face-supporting acts' in Chinese. For example, in making a request, the requester is expected to repay the requestee many times over, according to the Chinese theory of reciprocity (Yang 1957). Besides, Gu points out that the function of politeness is not only instructmental but also normative, since failure to observe politeness may lead to social sanctions; hence, politeness should not be treated as only a matter of face wants.

Apart from the problematic interpretation of face wants in Brown and Levinson's model (i.e., the failure to consider the different notions of negative face across culture and the over-emphasis on instructmental value in motivating politeness behaviour), the two important factors, power and social distance, that determine the choice of strategies in their model are also misleading and obscure the complexity of social interactions. Power and social distance are not static, pre-ordained properties, but dynamic features that can be negotiated in interactions.

First, power has been shown to have its emerging and negotiable properties during interactions. In the prototypical interactions marked by high power difference, such as expert-layman interactions (Heath 1992; Linell and Luckmann 1991) and employer-employee interactions (Gavuseva 1995), power asymmetries may not be sustained throughout the whole interaction, since power, as a local discursive phenomenon, is contestable and negotiable. For example, in his study of employer-employee interactions, Gavruseva (1995) points out that the asymmetrical pattern is discursively constructed and contested. Employees, despite their situational disadvantage, are able to resist and contest the existing asymmetrical structure by revoking changes in frames and footings.

However, power has been found to be still a non-negotiable factor in Chinese workplaces. Pan (1995) found that power is an overwhelming factor in determining politeness strategies in Chinese workplaces. Those with power usually do not redress the negative face of their subordinates by using bald-on-record commands. Treated in this way, the subordinates do not feel their freedom has been impeded, and by showing total deference to their superior, the subordinates are attending to the "superior's positive face want of being recognized and respected as the one who is in a higher position." Further investigation is needed, since Pan's data were found in Mainland China and variations may occur in other Chinese workplaces, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, which are heavily influenced by Western individualistic

values.

As far as the factor of social distance is concerned, Brown and Levinson's model suffers from two infelicities. First, the term "social distance" is not clearly defined by either Brown and Levinson's model or the work based on it. The problem is then multiplied by the use of seemingly similar terms to refer to social distance, as Spencer-Oatey (1996) points out:

> "The precise meaning of many of the terms that the authors use often remains unclear, even when glosses or alternative wordings are given. For example, distance/closeness and familiarity could potentially refer to one or more of the following: frequency of contact, length of acquaintance, amount of self-disclosure, and amount and type of affect. Yet very few of the authors discuss exactly how they interpret the terms". (p. 5)

Clearly, the term "social distance" must be clarified and expanded upon in order to better understand its precise impact on interactions.

Another limitation of the Brown and Levinson model is its narrow view of the identities people can have in interactions. Our identities are much more complicated and fuzzy than the rigid categories Brown and Levinson claim. Entities such as friends, colleagues, acquaintances, enemies, business partners are all valid, but these social labels can be manipulated for various social goals. In other words, the attribution of level of social distance depends, to a large extent, on our interactional goals and our identities can be interactionally constructed, contested, resisted, or rejected. Relyiance on those static labels to understand our politeness behaviour is doomed to failure, since our identities can shift, as can the ways we construct our identities (Kong 1997). Moreover, it has already been pointed out that role relationships are extremely variable across cultures; different expectations and behaviour can be attached to the same role relationships in different cultures (Spencer-Oatey 1996). As a result, neither the model of rigid identities and their social labels, nor the in-group versus outgroup distinction that is purportedly important in understanding Chinese relationships, is accurate in predicting and generalising communication patterns.

So far I have challenged the basic assumptions of Brown and Levinson's model by pointing out two fundamental problems. First, face wants have cross-cultural variations not recognized by the model. Second, the two important factors in determining politeness strategies, though clearly delineated in the model, are misleading and fail to explain the complicated picture of politeness in post-modern societies in which our identities are marked by interconnection, intermittence, and fuzziness. The polarity of in-group/out-group presents an oversimplified view of the behaviour, ignoring the dynamics and fuzziness of human relationships.

In the following, four patterns of service interactions in Hong Kong will illuminate the weaknesses of the Brown and Levinson model and the in-group/out-group hypothesis as tools for understanding politeness as an interactive and dynamic phenomenon. The present study focuses only on initial service encounters; that is, encounters in which the servers and clients

have never met before (except in network marketing interactions in which the participants are friends, but try to negotiate a new identity of server/client). This means that the social distance is the same, that is, high social distance (except in network marketing interactions) across the three categories of service encounters. However, as will be seen, social distance, one of the two important politeness factors proposed by Brown and Levinson cannot explain the discrepancies between different politeness strategies employed by the interlocutors, nor can the in-group/out-group hypothesis. The other factor, power, can only partially explain two patterns of the interactions. In contrast, in the network marketing interaction, which is marked by low social and low power distance, the interlocutors employ unreciprocal politeness strategies.

What will be argued is that even with the same variables, for example, high social and power distance, interlocutors may employ different politeness strategies to achieve their interactional goals. Or, to use the in-group/out-group hypothesis, different politeness strategies may be employed even within the same category of relationship.

The main argument raised in the present study is that the two factors proposed by Brown and Levinson, social distance and power, are insensitive to the strong contextual variations found in real-life encounters. The in-group and out-group polarities share this insensitivity. Social distance can be manipulated by interlocutors to the point where it has little effect on the interaction pattern. Power can either override all other factors, or be played down to achieve interactional goals. While power remains important in governing politeness behaviour in some situations (such as gatekeeping interactions in which one participant has an insitutionalised power advantage over another), a new factor is needed in place of the social distance variable in order to understand the highly contextual phenomenon of politeness in Chinese settings. This study proposes a new factor - the mutual expectation of relationship continuity. This factor avoids the oversimplification problem of the social distance and in-group/out-group variables and is more sensitive to the interactional and dynamic context in which participants are using language to achieve their various social goals.

4. Data and methodology

The data of the present study come from the database of a large research project on identity construction and management in network marketing interactions. (Please refer to Section 5.4 for a detailed explanation of network marketing and how it works.) Briefly, network marketing is a type of selling that involves webs of relationships. The distributors in network marketing can earn money by selling directly to their friends and relatives, and by successfully persuading them to become distributors themselves. Along with the study of these non-typical service encounters involving clients who are also the distributors' friends, data have also been collected from ordinary service encounters, in order to examine how network marketing encounters may deviate from those ordinary encounters. These interactions, however, form the backbone of the present study.

Twenty-two service interactions (including network marketing interactions) were audio-recorded from a variety of settings, ranging from interactions in vegetable markets to underground ticket buying/selling encounters. An effort has been made to cover as many different types and sizes of shops or organisations as possible so that more reliable generalisations can be made. Most interactions last less than 30 seconds, although some interactions, especially those in private shops, may last much longer, mainly for rapport building. As already pointed out earlier in Section 3, all of the interactions(with the exception of the network marketing interactions) involved participants who had never met before in order to ensure that the social distance of the participants was consistent.

The participants involved, apart from the service providers, are three of my friends and myself. Two of my friends are female, around 30 years old and university-educated. The other is a 27-year-old male who has been educated to Form 7 level (the approximate equivalent of GCE "A" Level in Britain). I, the investigator, am around 30 years old and have been an English instructor for many years. The interactions, mainly conducted in Cantonese, were all recorded in Hong Kong. Some ethnographic notes were also made regarding the interlocutors' non-verbal signals and their personal information such as age and sex. The interactions were transcribed, romanized [2] and translated into English. In the following examples, only the romanization and translation are given.

5. Different types of sales interactions:

5.1. *Gatekeeping encounters*

The following is an interaction between a government official and a citizen asking for an application form, which occurs in an office of Housing Authority in a public housing estate:

Citizen: *jo san*

C: Good morning.

(*After a silence of about 2 seconds, the officer begins to look at him.*)

C: *ng goi, ngoh seung yiu jeung gui-uk ge san-ching-biu a*

C: Please can I have a application form for subsidized housing scheme?

Officer: *baak sik ding luk sik a?*

O: White or green?

C: *yau mat fan-bit a?*

C: Please tell me what is the difference?

O: *nei yi ga jue hai bin a?*

O: Where are you living?

C: *hai ngoh yi-ma uk-kei loh.*

C: In my aunt's house.

O: *ha?*

O: What?

C: *hai ngoh yi-ma uk-kei a.*

C: In my aunt's house.

O: *hai mai kung-uk lei ga?*

O: Is it a public house?

C: *hai a.*

C: Yes.

(Without response to C's reply, O takes a form from his left and gives it to him without looking at C and then leaves the counter.)

C: *ng ho yi si.*

C: Excuse me.

(It seems that O cannot hear.)

C: *ng ho yi si a, sin saang.*

C: Excuse me, sir,

(O turns around reluctantly.)

C: *gei si hai bo ming gg jit-ji-yat-kei a?*

C: Please tell me the deadline for handing in applications.

O: *tai ha nei yau ge ji-liu la, soh yau ye do hai saai lui min ga la.*

O: Look at the information you have. Everything is in here.

C: *ahh. Ng ho yi si ha, ng goi saai, bye bye.*

C: Oh, Sorry. Thank you. Bye.

Obviously, the participants in the above interaction use two different sets of politeness strategies. Negative face redressing strategies are frequently used by the citizen, whereas very little or even no facework is found in the officer's behaviour. The citizen initiates his request politely and makes his polite request for an application form with frequent use of *cheng* (please). After he has gotten the form from the officer, he asks for further information about the deadline, but only succeeds after his second attempt, in which he addresses the officer as *sin-saang* (mister). Then he closes the interaction by using a number of polite phrases to apologize to (*ng ho yi si* 'I am sorry') and thank (*ng goi saai* 'thank you') the officer.

In contrast, the officer neither greets the citizen nor even acknowledges the citizen's existence before his request is made, nor does he respond to the citizen's apologies, thanks, and farewell. His behaviour is characterized by frequent use of questions, lack of facework, and unwillingness to do anything beyond his routine (for example, he is reluctant to answer the citizen's question about the deadline for application). In short, the citizen shows a maximum level of deference to address the officer's negative face, while the officer does not employ any face redressing strategies.

The above bureaucratic pattern of politeness relates to power differences. Most bureaucratic interactions between officers and citizens are so-called gatekeeping encounters. The officer, having the right to scrutinize citizens' eligibility for government benefits or services, has a power advantage over citizens. The officer has neither the need nor the motivation to address clients' faces. Although some Asian cities, such as Hong Kong, have undertaken measures (such as politeness campaigns) to correct this problem of bureaucratic behaviour, the results are still limited. Most government officials think that they have succeeded as long as they do not make their clients angry. They still tend to be apathetic and insensitive, especially in terms of face wants. On the other hand, Chinese have been found to be more sensitive and obedient to hierarchy and authority than their Anglo-Western counterparts. Gabrenya and Hwang (1996: 313) point out that "Chinese tend to be very sensitive to their hierarchical position in social structures and will behave in ways designed to display, enhance, protect both the image and reality of this position."

Another reason for the above pattern of politeness behaviour relates to their mutual expectations of relationship continuity. The failure of the officer to take care of the citizen's face is due to not only the power differences between them but also their different expectations of their relationship continuity. The officer in charge of an application form distribution

counter understands that the relationship with citizens, his clients, is short-term. As a result, the officer does not have the motivation to build up good rapport with them. But what about the citizen? Like the officer, the citizen may recognize that the relationship will not last long. However, the citizen has another consideration. As an applicant for the government subsidized housing scheme, he expects that the relationship with the government organization will be a long-term one. Although, strictly speaking, the officer may not be the person who will handle his applications later on, the officer, as the gatekeeper and representative of the organization, offers the only means through which a relationship can be built at that point. The citizen must avoid spoiling their relationship in an initial encounter. Thus this type of bureaucratic service encounter is marked by high power difference as well as different (opposite) expectations of relationship continuity.

5.2. *Casual sales service encounters*

The second type of service encounter is marked by power difference, but a similar expectation of relationship continuity, that is, a low expectation that the relationship will continue in the future. The following is a recorded interaction between a teller and a customer in a local bank in Hong Kong:

Teller: *jo-san, siu-je.*

T: Good morning, miss.

(The customer gives the teller money and a bank passbook.)

Customer: *yi do ng chin man, yap lok lei goh woo-hau.*

C: Here are five thousand dollars. Put into this account.

(The teller, with a smile, takes the money and passbook, and then performs some bank routines, which take about 25 seconds.)

T: *lo siu-je, yi-ging bong nei yap joh ng chin man lok nei woo-hau le, lo siu-je, nei yau mo hing-chui san-ching ngoh dei ge XXX card a?*

T: Miss Lo, already helped you to put five thousand dollars into your account. *(The teller returns the passbook to the customer.)* Miss Lo, are you interested

in getting our XXX card?

C: *ng sai la.*

C: No, not necessary.

T: *ng gan yiu a, nei yau sui-yiu joh wan ngoh dei a.*

T: Doesn't matter. Contact us anytime if you need it later.

C: *ho a.*

C: O.K.

T: *doh-je saai, bye bye.*

T: Thank you, bye.

(Customer leaves without giving a reply.)

The participants' use of politeness strategies in the above interaction is the reverse of the previously documented encounter. In this interaction, the server, the bank teller uses deference strategies, whereas the client does not take any face-redressing strategies, instead making direct requests ("Put into this account.") and giving short replies, or none at all. The politeness strategies are reversed because the power difference is reversed: the client has the power advantage over the server and she does not expect the relationship with the teller will last long. Although the server also knows that their relationship will be a short-term one, he still has to be polite because of the institutionalized power difference.

Another example of this particular type of interactions can be found in ticket buying and selling for the MTR (Mass Transit Railway, underground train system in Hong Kong) and KCR (Kowloon-Canton Railway). In Hong Kong, when a person wants to buy a common value ticket for MTR, he or she simply goes to the MTR service counter and states the value of desired ticket. Then the buyer will be given the ticket and can leave without saying anything. The ticket officer does not expect the buyer to say "thank you" or "bye." Similarly, if a buyer finds that his ticket does not work, he simply goes to the counter andhands his ticket to the ticket officer, who then gets the buyer a new ticket. No greeting or facework is needed. Westerners may be surprised, not only by how little facework is needed, but also by the intelligence of the ticket officer in working out exactly what his client needs.

A Hong Kong Chinese traveler's experience in London provides a cross-cultural

perspective. On her first day there, she took the London underground but found that her ticket did not work. She decided to go to the service counter to ask for help. As she would do in Hong Kong, she simply gave the ticket to the ticket officer without saying anything, expecting that the officer "knew" she had a problem with the ticket. The result, as Westerners would expect, was the officer's complete bafflement about what she wanted.

5.3. *Solidarity encounters*

The next type of service encounter is marked by high expectations of relationship continuity on the part of both participants. Examples can be found in privately owned shops. There is power difference: the customer has a higher power difference over the shopkeeper, but it is less significant than the factor of mutual expectations of relationship continuity. In this category of interaction, both participants will use politeness strategies of involvement because both can benefit from the long-term relationship they want to develop.

(Shopkeeper (S): male, around 40 years old; Customer (C): female in her late thirties; Customer's daughter (D): 7-year-old female)

Shopkeeper: *wai, leng nui, maai mat a? gam yat d saang-choi ho leng a.*

S: Hey, beautiful lady, what do you want to buy? Today's lettuce is very fresh.

Customer: *ho chi gei leng woh. seung sing kei a, hai goh bin maai a, do ng leng ge.*

C: It looks quite good. Last week, I bought some from there and it's not very fresh.

S: *gang hai la, ng dei jing hai maai leng ye ka ja, nei gam leng, gang hai maai leng choi la.*

S: Of course, we only sell fresh vegetables. You are so beautiful, should buy "beautiful" vegetables

(Both of them laugh.)

C: ngoh ho siu lai yi do ga, gam ng fong min. ngoh lai chan gaai-si do tong goh sai nui lai, ho faan ga.

C: I seldom come to this corner. It's not convenient. I usually come to market with my little daughter (pointing at her 7-year-old daughter standing next to her). It's troublesome.

S: *kui gei doh sui a? ho dak yo woh, duk sue yat ding ho ho la?*

S: How old is she? *(Looking at C's daughter)* She's very cute. She must study very well!

C: *po po tung tung la. kui chat sui. sing yat do faat pei hei ga.*

C: Average only. She is 7 years old. But she always loses her temper. *(To her daughter)* Say uncle.

D: suk suk.

D: Uncle

S: *ho gwaai woh. nei yiu gei doh gan saang-choi a?*

S: *(To C's daughter)* You are so amenable. *(To C)* How many canties of lettuce do you want?

C: *bei yat gan ngoh la, gau yat chaan ga la.*

C: Give me one canty. It should be enough for one meal.

(S puts some lettuce on his scale.)

S: *chat man la, gai nei ping d la, ngoh dei gam friend.*

S: Seven dollars. Give you a discount. We are so friendly.

(C hands a 20-dollar note to S and gets back the change.)

S: *dak haan doh d nei bong chan la.*

S: If you are free, patronise more.

C: *dak la, bye bye. tong suk suk bye bye la.*

C: Alright. Bye Bye. (*To her daughter*) Say bye bye to uncle.

D: *Bye Bye.*

D: Bye Bye.

S: *Bye Bye.*

S: Bye Bye.

In the above interaction, although the customer has a power advantage over the shopkeeper, she employs a certain number of positive face strategies, such as introducing some personal topics, and asking her daughter to call the shopkeeper "uncle." Of course, it is the shopkeeper who initiates this "friendly" talk, in which he uses an extremely friendly tone (lively and fast-paced) and expressions (calling the woman "beautiful" and explicitly claiming that they are friends).

The customer's cooperation in constructing this friendly talk is far from idiosyncratic, but underlined by her intention of building a good rapport with the shopkeeper so that she will benefit in the long term. As a result, in this type of sales encounter in which both parties will benefit from a better rapport the politeness strategies are rather reciprocal, as the power difference has been downplayed in favor of the mutual expectation of relationship continuity.

5.4. *Network marketing encounters between friends*

The last category of encounter is found in network marketing interactions. Network marketing is an increasingly popular form of marketing strategy in which distributors are the customers themselves. In order to earn commissions, the distributors have to sell products to their "network," that is, their friends and relatives. It is estimated that between 50% and 56% of all goods and services will be sold through network marketing methods by the end of 1990 (Nadler 1984). In hindsight these figures were obviously overestimated; still, the impact of network marketing can be felt by almost everyone in postmodern society. In network marketing interactions, power differences are not important, since both participants are friends. The important factor is the different mutual expectations of relationship continuity:

Mei (a network marketing agent) and Kenneth (her former classmate) are talking about their jobs and friends:

Mei:	*Kui dei jui gan ho mong a. nei ji ng ji Michelle kit joh fan le?*
M:	They have been so busy, recently. Did you know Michelle has gotten married?

Kenneth:	*hai a? Kui mo tung ngoh gong a. Ah, hai a, ngoh gei dak la, kui gei goh yuet ji chin wan gwoh ngoh wa seung gin ha ngoh dei wo, nei ji la, je hai jing hai ngoh dei. Waak je kui seung wa bei ngoh ting la.*
K:	Really? She didn't tell me. Yes, I remembered. She phoned me several months ago, saying she wants to meet some of us, you know, just some of us. Perhaps she wanted to tell me about it.
M:	*kui lo-kung do hai XXX ge chuen-siu-seung lei ga, kui chung fei gwoh ngoh a. nei gei ng gei dak ngoh seung chi gong gwoh d ye? Ngoh ho doh pang-yau doh faat joh le.*
M:	Her husband is also the distributor of XXX. He is even more obsessed than me. Do you remember what I said last time? Many of my friends have made huge profits…

K:	*ngoh ji, daan hai ngoh ng ngaam ge.*
K:	I know, but they are not for me.

M:	*si ha le, ng hai nei dim ji je?*
M:	Try, otherwise, how do you know?

K:	*ngoh ng ji a.*
K:	I don't know.

M:	*O.K.*
M:	O.K.

K:	*uhhh…kui yau giu gwoh ngoh, kui yau mo…*
K:	Uhhh…She invited you, didn't she…

One participant, the network marketing agent, wants to continue the selling/buying

relationship, but the other participant does not. Their desires are evidenced by the politeness strategies they use. The network marketing agent uses strategies of involvement (positive face strategies) to emphasize commonality between them in order to persuade more easily. Her friend, not wanting to continue the existing buyer and seller relationship, may use blunt direct strategies in order to signal her unwillingness, and her intention to go back to the ordinary relationship between friends. Of course, in a similar encounter two different participants might both be willing to continue the relationship. In this case, they will both use involvement strategies as in Section 5.3 above.

In conclusion, the two significant factors that determine appropriate politeness strategies in service encounters in Hong Kong are (a) power difference and (b) mutual expectation of relationship continuity. From the customer's perspective, the expectation that the relationship will continue is the prime factor; the existence of this factor will motivate him to use involvement strategies even if he has power advantage. For service providers, however, power is an important factor in institutionalized contexts. In situations in which power is conferred from above (for example, the government), the gatekeepers are not motivated to be very polite, whereas in service industries (for example, banks), the customers have the power; politeness is an important factor to attract and retain customers. In privately owned shops or shops with a commission system and network marketing, power is, of course, still significant, but what motivates salespeople most to use the maximum amount of involvement strategies is their desire to keep their customers.

The following is the diagrammatic illustration of the four systems. Note that the divisions are not meant to be arbitrary; a shift from one system to another is always possible. For example, after a number of encounters between a ticket officer and a client, they may want to establish a long-term relationship with each other. Consequently, their politeness strategies will shift from those of casual encounters to those of solidarity encounters (although the motivation to develop a relationship differs from that of a customer and the keeper of a privately owned shop).

(A) Gatekeeping encounters:

E- P+ (Gatekeepers)

Bald-on-record

Deference

E+ P- (Citizens)
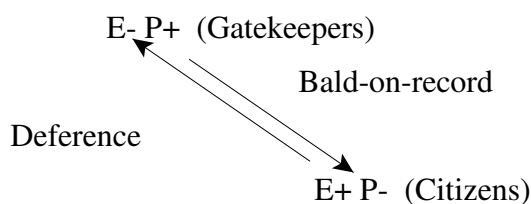
Examples: Gatekeeping situations, such as bureaucratic service encounters.

(B) Casual Service Encounters

E- P+ (Customers)

Bald-on-record

Deference

E- P- (Service Providers)
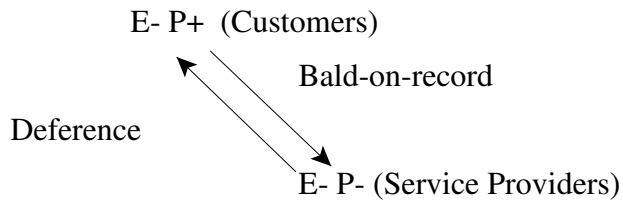
Examples: casual sales interactions in which customers have the power advantage, but a long-term relationship is not expected.

(C)   Solidarity Encounters

Solidarity

(Service   E+ ————————— E+

Providers)   P- ————————— P+ (Customers)

Solidarity
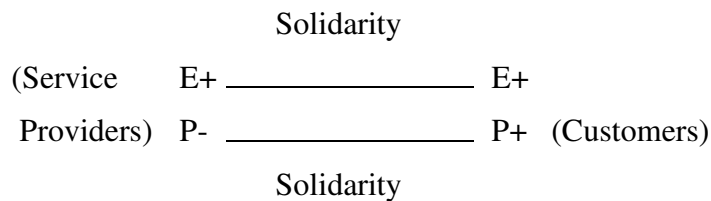
Examples: sales interactions in which a long-term relationship is expected by both participants.

(D)   Network Marketing Encounters marked by incompatible participants' goals

E- P- (Customers)

Bald-on-record

Solidarity

E+ P- (Network Marketing Agents)
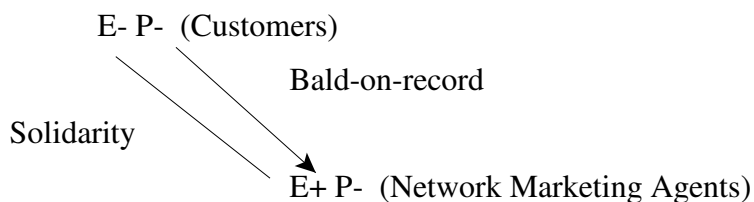
Examples: sales interactions in which one of the participants does not expect to continue the existing selling/buying relationship; for example, in network marketing interactions marked by incompatible goals but the interactants may adopt a solidarity system in (C) if both of them expect that their seller/buyer relationship will last.

Abbreviations used in above diagrams:

E = Expectations of relationship continuity (E+ = High, E- = Low)

P = Power Difference (P+ = High, P = Low)

6. Conclusion

Despite the built-in universality claimed by Brown and Levinson, the two factors (social distance and power) in their politeness model are unsatisfactory in understanding the politeness phenomenon in a Chinese society (Hong Kong in the present study) since, with the same variables, different politeness patterns are still discernable. The major reason, as pointed out in various sources (see Kong 1998), is the failure of their model to take into account the socio-cultural factors in politeness behaviour. Power and social distance are entities that can be manipulated for our social goals, not just fixed and pre-ordained properties of interlocutors (though this is not to say there may not be variations in this manipulation practice across different cultures).

Further, the usefulness and validity of distinguishing between in-group and out-group is doubtful in understanding politeness behaviour in service encounters, since the distinction has become increasingly blurred in post-modern Chinese societies. It is always possible for individuals to shift from in-group to out-group, and vice versa. The only exception is, perhaps, the membership of family. Kinship is relatively more resistant to change and internal shifts.

What is significant in determining appropriate politeness strategies in service encounters in Chinese societies is not the distinction between in-group and out-group behaviour, but the participants' mutual expectations of continuity in the selling/buying relationship, and the power differences existing between them. To expand the findings in this study further, it can be argued that modern Chinese, particularly those of Hong Kong, are undergoing profound changes in their relationship orientations, from more collectivistic to more individualistic, as seen in the mixing and crossing of in-group and out-group domains. The common notion of in-group versus out-group orientation in dictating Chinese interactions is, to certain extent, overstated. However, more cross-cultural study seems necessary between Hong Kong and other non-Chinese cultures, and even between Hong Kong and other Chinese-dominated cultures in order to confirm the findings.

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