

# Politeness Theory applied to small-gift offering and receiving

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the strategies of Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory and the purposes of the strategies; what positive politeness is as compared with negative politeness, the importance of face, and how the Politeness Theory is applied to giving and receiving of small gifts. It also examines Chinese gift-giving behaviour, and looks into whether difference in ethnicity may impact the manifestation of politeness, with examples from personal experience.

**Keywords:** Politeness Theory, small gift, positive face, negative face

## 1 Introduction

Brown and Levinson (1978)'s Politeness Theory includes four highest-level strategies that they refer to as super-strategies. These strategies are: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. Among the positive politeness strategies, there is one that aims to fulfil the hearer's want by giving gifts to him or her. Gifts can be tangible goods, or to satisfy human-relation wants of the hearer: to be liked, admired, understood, and so on (Brown & Levinson 1978:129). This paper explores how the Politeness Theory is applied to the giving and getting of small gifts, and whether difference in ethnicity may impact the manifestation of politeness.

Section 2 looks into the two faces — positive and negative — in the Politeness Theory. Section 3 lists the strategies in respect of face-threatening acts, from the highest level to lower ones, citing examples from the Brown and Levinson book of 1978. Section 4 examines how Chinese gift-giving behaviours are affected by power, social distance, and ranking of imposition. Section 5 looks into politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. Then, in Section 6, cases from my personal experience in small-gift offering and receiving are portrayed and analyzed. The cases confirm that, even though the interlocutors all use only one language — English, their ethnicity does influence how politeness is expressed and perceived. Section 7 is the conclusion.

## 2 Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1978)

I am a member of a Yuanji dance class. Yuanji is a kind of dance that incorporates Taichi, Qigong, and Chinese martial art. Each class lasts two hours, with two breaks. The instructor is a septuagenarian volunteer. He, and all students, are ethnic Chinese from China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. On the first class at a new location, several first-time students joined in. The instructor very patiently explained the concepts behind the movements and forgot about the breaks. But many of the 'old' members became a bit bored because they had heard it all, and tired because they had been standing for a long time. A student suggested to continue the explanation later. The instructor was not pleased to be interrupted and went on. A little while later, another student requested to have a short break because her legs could no longer support her. The instructor happily agreed. The instructor had his face, and we got our much-needed break.

This is a powerful example of the importance of face. And face is at the heart of the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1978).

Face is the public self-image that every person wants to claim for himself. As explained in Brown and Levinson (hereafter referred to as B&L 1978), in general, people cooperate in maintaining face in interactions (B&L 1978:61). There are two types of face. The positive face is

the desire for interaction and solidarity with others; the negative face is the desire to be autonomous, respected, and left alone (Birner 2013:201). Consequently, positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of the hearer (B&L 1978:70). With positive politeness, the speaker and the hearer have at least some common wants; they are in the same group. On the other hand, negative politeness aims to redress the hearer's negative face, to satisfy his basic want to maintain his territory. Negative politeness is more formal and restrained, the speaker is trying to not make the hearer feel his freedom interfered with.

### 3 Strategies in respect of face-threatening acts

An act that may be seen as a challenge to the hearer's self-image is a face-threatening act (FTA). A rational person will try either to avoid or to minimize such threats. B&L (1978) list four super-strategies aimed to save the hearer's face when FTAs happen. All the examples cited in this section are from the B&L book, with the page number italicized and shown in parentheses at the end of each example; any bold-and-italic in the examples is added by me.

#### 3.1 Bald-on-record strategy

This strategy means doing an act in the most direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise way (B&L 1978:69). It is used in close relationships, and when information needs to be shared quickly. The aim is to conform with Grice's Maxims, which are:

Maxim of Quality — Speak the truth, be sincere.

Maxim of Quantity — Don't say less than is required, and don't say more than is required.

Maxim of Relevance — Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner — Be perspicuous; avoid ambiguity and obscurity. (B&L 1978:95)

This strategy is commonly used in, for example, task-oriented interactions such as in recipes:

- (1) Add three cups of flour and stir vigorously. (B&L 1978:97)

#### 3.2 Strategies for positive politeness

Positive politeness is directed to the hearer's positive face, and Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest a total of 15 strategies in three groups. The strategies are employed to make the hearer feel a sense of closeness and belonging.

##### 3.2.1 Claim common ground between the speaker and the hearer

This is the biggest group, including eight strategies. One popular strategy is to notice and attend to the hearer's interests, needs, etc. For example:

- (2) You must be *hungry*, it's a long time since breakfast. How about some lunch?  
(B&L 1978:103)

Another popular strategy is to use jokes, to put the hearer at ease, because jokes are based on mutual shared background knowledge and values. An example is:

- (3) OK if I *tackle* those cookies now? (B&L 1978:124)

The other six strategies in this group are: exaggerate interest, approval and sympathy with hearer; intensify interest to hearer; use in-group identity markers, often turning imperatives into requests; seek agreement; avoid disagreement; and presuppose, raise, or assert common ground.

### 3.2.2 Convey that the speaker and the hearer are cooperative

This group includes six strategies. The first is: assert or presuppose speaker's knowledge of, and concern for, the hearer's wants. For example:

- (4) I *know* you can't bear parties, but this one will really be good — do come! (B&L 1978:125)

Another strategy is to give (or ask for) reasons, such as:

- (5) *Why not* lend me your cottage for the weekend? (B&L 1978:128)

The other four strategies are: offer and promise; be optimistic; include both the speaker and the hearer in the activity; and assume or assert reciprocity.

### 3.2.3 Fulfil hearer's want

The only strategy in this group is to give gifts to the hearer. Gifts can be tangible goods, or to satisfy human-relation wants of the hearer: to be liked, admired, understood, and so on (B&L 1978:129). This strategy is the focus of the current paper.

## 3.3 Strategies for negative politeness

Negative politeness is directed to the hearer's negative face, and Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest a total of 10 strategies in five groups. They are used as means to interact with the hearer in a non-imposing way.

### 3.3.1 Be direct

This group consists of one strategy: be conventionally indirect, that is, use phrases and sentences different from their literal meaning. Though we do not want to coerce the hearer, sometimes we do need to minimize any imposition by coming quickly to the point (B&L 1978:130), i.e. be direct. For example:

- (6) Can you please pass the salt? (B&L 1978:133)

Here, the speaker is making a request, and not asking about the hearer's ability to pass the salt.

### 3.3.2 Do not presume or assume

We should not presume or assume that the hearer is able or willing to do a certain act. The only strategy in this group is to use question or hedge in order to avoid commitment to the hearer. An example of question is:

- (7) Do me a favour, *will you*? (B&L 1978:147)

An example of hedge is:

- (8) You're not exactly thrifty, *if you see what I mean*. (B&L 1978:171)

### 3.3.3 Do not coerce the hearer

There are three strategies in this group. The first involves the speaker expecting that the hearer is unlikely to do a certain act, by making it easy for the latter to opt out. For example,

- (9) *Perhaps* you'd care to help me. (B&L 1978:175)

The second strategy is to minimize the imposition, such as:

- (10) I *just* want to ask you if I can borrow a little paper. (B&L 1978:177)

The other strategy in this group is to give deference, by humbling the speaker himself, or by raising the hearer, as in:

- (11) We *look forward very much* to dining with you. (B&L 1978:181)

### 3.3.4 Communicate the speaker's want to not impinge on the hearer

There are four strategies in this group. We can apologize, for example:

- (12) I'm *sorry* to bother you ... (B&L 1978:189)

We can impersonalize the speaker and the hearer by avoiding the pronouns 'I' and 'you', as in:

- (13) *One* shouldn't do things like that. (B&L 1978:197)

We can also state the face-threatening act as a general rule, and that the speaker is forced to impinge by circumstances, not by the speaker, as in:

- (14) *International regulations require* that fuselage be sprayed with DDT. (B&L 1978:206)

In addition, we can nominalize, because formality is associated with nouns. Therefore,

- (15) *Your good performance* on the examinations impressed us favourably. (B&L 1978:207)

is more formal than

- (16) *You* performed well on the examinations and we were favourably impressed. (B&L 1978:207)

### 3.3.5 Redress other wants of the hearer

The only strategy in this group is to go on record as incurring a debt by the speaker, or as not indebting the hearer, for example, in this offer to give a ride:

- (17) It wouldn't be any trouble; *I have to go right by there anyway*. (B&L 1978:210)

### 3.4 Off-record strategies

This set of 14 strategies, in two groups, is in effect indirect use of language, employed to remove the speaker from any potential of imposing on the hearer. However, the latter has to infer the intention of the utterance.

#### 3.4.1 Invite conversational implicatures

This group comprises ten strategies, which allow the speaker to do a face-threatening act indirectly. But the speaker has to help the hearer interpret what he (the speaker) really wants. One strategy is to give hints, like:

(18) It's *cold* in here. [with a possible implicature to shut the window] (B&L 1978:215)

Another strategy is to give association clues, as with a speaker who borrows the hearer's swimming suit to swim off his (the speaker's) headache. When this speaker says,

(19) Oh God, I've got a headache again. (B&L 1978:215)

he conveys a request to borrow the hearer's swimming suit.

The other eight strategies in this group are: presuppose; understate; overstate; use tautology; use contradictions; be ironic; use metaphors; and use rhetorical questions. The collective function of these strategies is to make the implicatures understandable.

#### 3.4.2 Be vague or ambiguous

In this group of five strategies, the speaker's communicated intent remains ill-defined. He can choose to be ambiguous, as in

(20) John's a pretty *sharp cookie*. (B&L 1978:225)

because the utterance can be either a compliment or an insult. The speaker can also choose to be vague, as in:

(21) Perhaps *someone* did *something* naughty. (B&L 1978:226)

Besides, the speaker can elect to over-generalize, to displace the hearer (i.e. pretending to address the face-threatening act to someone but hoping the real target will see that the act is aimed at him), or to be incomplete, using ellipsis to leave the implicature hanging in the air.

### 3.5 Not performing any FTA

Finally, there is always the option of not doing any face-threatening act at all. The payoff for this choice is that the speaker avoids offending the hearer. There are benefits for all discussed strategies as well. Efficiency is the payoff for the bald-on-record strategy; the speaker can justify the use of such strategy because there are other things more important than face, or that his act is simply not an FTA (B&L 1978:72). In respect of the strategies for positive or negative politeness, the payoffs are clarity and demonstrable non-manipulativeness. In addition, the speaker has the opportunity to give face to the hearer. As for the off-record strategies, they can cater to negative face better than

the negative politeness strategies. And, being off record, the speaker cannot be held accountable for his actions (B&L 1978:73).

Furthermore, the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA involves three factors, all dependent on context:

- D — the social distance between the speaker and the hearer,
- P — the relative power of the speaker and the hearer, and
- R — the absolute ranking of impositions defined by culture and situation.

The following examples illustrate the context-dependence of D, P, and R (B&L 1978:78–79). A bank manager may be given a high P while his worker a low P; but if the worker represents his (the worker's) union, the power may be reversed. Two American strangers who would treat one another with formality in the streets of New York might embrace each other if they met in Hindu Kush, thus much lowering the D value. As for R, asking for a dime just outside of a telephone booth is less imposing than asking for a dime for no apparent reason in the middle of a street. These social dimensions can indeed be perceived from more than one viewpoint.

A study conducted about P, D, and R factors is included in the following section.

#### **4 Examining Chinese gift-giving behaviour from the Politeness Theory perspective**

Feng et al., in their 2011 study, examine how the factors power (P), social distance (D), and ranking of imposition (R) influence positive and negative politeness strategies used in Chinese gift-giving.

While gifting happens in most societies, it differs from culture to culture. In China, social relations are built mainly on “fluid, person-centered social networks” (Feng et al. 2011:301); gifting therefore is important in building business relations, getting personal gains, or showing goodwill.

*Gift* in Chinese is a two-character word: 禮物 (*li wu* in Mandarin, and *lai mat* in Cantonese). The first character 禮 (*li*) refers to social order and behavioural norms (302); the second character 物 (*wu*) means material or stuff. In ancient times, gifts 禮物<sup>1</sup> were offered to the Heaven or the Emperor and presenting 禮物 was an important ritual. Nowadays, 禮貌 (*li mao* in Mandarin, *lai mao* in Cantonese) is understood as *politeness*. 貌 (*mao*) literally means *appearance*; the two-character combination 禮貌 (*li mao*) means the appearance of having 禮, and is extended to include polite behaviours. Gifting is always a notable part of the daily life of Chinese.

Feng et al. (2011) conducted a study with 152 college students from two universities in Beijing. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires (with P, D, and R as variables) to respond to eight gift-giving scenarios. The results of the study conclude that power has more impact on negative politeness strategies than on positive ones. This is because China is a hierarchical society where people are conscious of the power relations of self and other. Anyone with less power uses deferential communication style, that is, negative politeness. On the other hand, social distance has the strongest effect among the three factors, and significantly influences both positive and negative strategies. The explanation lies in the importance of social relationship to the Chinese, who emphasize harmony and solidarity. Gifting to a close person is warm and fuzzy, a positive politeness; but it takes a reason to offer a gift to someone not as close, and the gifter behaves respectfully, a negative politeness. In between the P and D factors is R, ranking of imposition, which varies proportionally with the value of the gift. The receiver is more reluctant to accept an expensive gift; therefore, the giver needs to be tactful and to offer the gift at an appropriate moment

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<sup>1</sup> One of the many differences between the Chinese and English languages is that nouns in Chinese do not inflect for plurals.

during the conversation, using negative politeness. The authors suggest that future research would benefit with a larger sample of more various ages and backgrounds.

## 5 Politeness phenomena in Modern China

禮 (*li*) ‘ceremony’ or ‘ritual’, meant something very different in the olden days. The classical notion of 禮 was formulated by Confucius (551 B.C. – 479 B.C.) at a time when the slavery system had declined, but there was constant war between feudal states, and chaos reigned over the land (Gu 1990:238). Confucius advocated for the restoration of 禮, i.e. the social hierarchy and order of the slavery system, so as to put everyone in the proper place according to social position. Politeness was considered the backbone of a harmonious society.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the long-standing feudal system is abolished, and “a new order of social structure and social relations among people has been introduced” (Gu 1990:239). However, the essential elements of politeness remain intact, with the core belief resting in denigrating self and respecting other. The Yuanji dance incident described at the beginning of this paper illustrates the effectiveness of denigrating self: the student requested for a short break because of her personal weakness: her legs could not support her.

Gu lists four notions of Chinese 禮貌 (*li mao*) ‘politeness’:

- Respectfulness: self’s positive appreciation or admiration of other, concerning the latter’s face, social status, and so on.
- Modesty: another way of saying ‘self-denigration’.
- Attitudinal warmth: self’s demonstration of kindness, consideration, and hospitality to other.
- Refinement: self’s behaviour to other which meets certain standards.

(Gu 1990:239)

To the Chinese, these rules for politeness are also moral maxims. And it is possible to be polite in manner but not polite in content, as when one criticizes someone in a polite way.

Furthermore, under the concept of politeness, there are two cardinal principles: sincerity and balance. Polite behaviours should be carried out sincerely by one person, and returned with similar behaviours by the other. By balance, it means that politeness needs to be returned, if not immediately, then in the future.

While Brown and Levinson (1978)’s Politeness Theory has become influential, Gu finds some of their views “unsuitable to account for Chinese data” (1990:240). For example, consider a scenario where a Chinese speaker insists on inviting the hearer to dinner (and by the Chinese custom, the speaker will pay the entire bill) even though the hearer has already turned down the invitation (Gu 1990:242). A European will feel the invitation impeding, but a Chinese will find the insistent speaker sincere with his invitation. The Politeness Theory is constructed with two rational and face-caring model persons in mind, whereas, to the Chinese, politeness belongs to the level of society, the normative constrains are then expected of each individual. Moreover, the boundary of the ‘self’ in Chinese culture is wider than that in Western ones and includes close relatives and intimate friends (St. André 2011:68). Besides, St. André is of the opinion that in translating face from a popular to a scientific concept, Brown and Levinson do not consider the distinction made by Chinese scholars, but focus more on a Western bias towards individualism (2011:82).

In Gu (1990), the author also discusses four politeness maxims. The first is the Self-denigration Maxim: one not only denigrates self, but also elevates other. The introducing-each-other interaction is an example of how this maxim is applied. The Chinese way is to ask for the hearer’s name, to

take the first chance to elevate other. An English would tend to start by introducing self, probably to avoid potential face threat posed with asking for the hearer's name.

The second maxim is the Address Maxim: address your interlocutor with an appropriate address term, based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth. In encounters unequal in terms of profession, knowledge, age, kinship status, etc., the one lower in status usually initiates talk exchanges by addressing the superior first (Gu 1990:249). And, a Chinese proper name begins with the surname, which can be used alone by people outside the family; the given name is used within family or close friends. Proper names in Western countries start with the given name(s), followed by the family name. This practice is another indication of the preference towards individualism. As to addressing between interlocutors, Gu tells about an actual talk exchange of a Chinese student and an English lecturer (1990:250).

- (22) Student:           Teacher, how do you do?  
Instructor:         How do you do? Where do you teach?  
Student:             No, I'm not a teacher, I'm a student.

The lecturer felt puzzled that the student had told her that he was a teacher, but denied it almost right afterwards. The confusion arose because, in Chinese, most occupational titles can be used as address terms. The student addressed the instructor as 'teacher', but the instructor took 'teacher' as a self introduction.

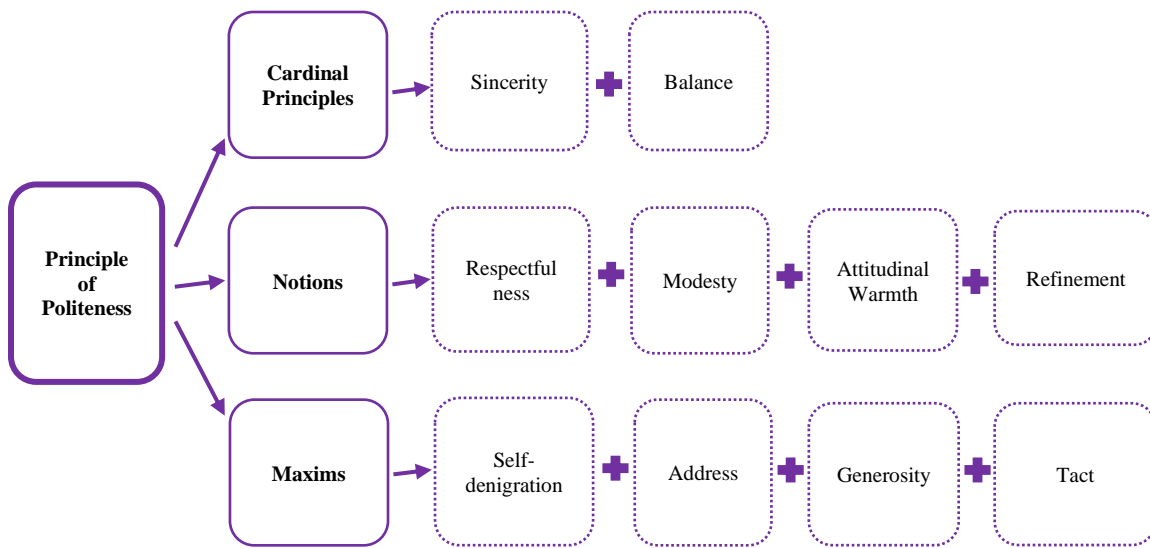
The next two maxims are the Generosity Maxim and the Tact Maxim, which are supported by the notions of attitudinal warmth and refinement (Gu 1990:252) and are complementary. It is easier to illustrate with a case that took place between a prospective mother-in-law (M) and a prospective son-in-law (S).

- (23) M:     Tomorrow come eat dinner.  
S:     No, too much trouble.  
M:     What trouble? Dishes are all ready-made.  
S:     Still takes cooking.  
M:     We have to eat anyway without you. Must come, or I feel offended.  
S:     All right, but make it simple. (Gu 1990:252)

In Chinese culture, issuing an invitation shows observance of the Generosity Maxim because the benefit to the other is maximized. However, accepting an invitation indebts the invitee to the inviter, therefore does not follow the Tact Maxim which entails that the invitee minimize cost to the other (Gu 1990:254). To a non-Chinese, it seems to be a waste of time, even hypocritical, for S to make fake excuses, and M is considered too imposing in insisting with the invitation. But to a Chinese, it is not good manner for the invitee to readily accept an offer, and not sincere enough on the part of the inviter to give up on the invitation when it is turned down only once. With our prospective in-laws, their invitation marathon will likely become shorter when the marriage proceeds successfully because, then, "there can be no issue of face between close relatives, for example husband and wife, ... as distance increases face concerns also increase" (St. André 2013:74). This can perhaps explain why some married couples choose to do without courtesy.

Compared with Brown and Levinson (1978)'s elaborate FTA strategies, Gu (1990)'s politeness principle is simpler, as depicted graphically below:





**Figure 1:** Principle of Politeness

## 6 Personal experience in offering and receiving small gifts

I sing in a community choir, which holds weekly rehearsals. I also go to a college, and generally have classes every weekday. Though there are ethnic Chinese in both organizations (any person of Chinese descent is indicated with a superscript C in the following cases), the common language is English. All the conversations listed below were conducted in this lingua franca. From their appearances, those who are not ethnic Chinese are of European ancestry.

Gifts can be used to build business relations, get personal gains, or show goodwill. All gifts I offer are small in value, but are genuine gestures to thank others for their kindness.

### 6.1 Case 1

**Context:** Our choir practices on Tuesday nights at a church. A fellow member picks me up and drops me off. From time to time, I offer her gift cards to thank her for the rides. After the practice, *Member 1* also drops off another member, *Member 2*, who goes directly to the choir from work. Therefore, I make sure that I give *Member 1* the cards on the way to the church, when we are alone in the car. This is what she said the first time she received a gift card.

(24) *Member 1*<sup>C</sup>: Oh! Thank you so much! But I enjoy your company during the rides. It makes me feel better than driving alone when it's dark.

**Analysis:** By offering *Member 1* gift cards so that she can choose what she likes at her favourite supermarket, I try to fulfil a tiny part of her want, a positive politeness strategy. And by doing this when we are alone is an attempt not to impede on her negative face. On the other hand, *Member 1* sought to tone down her help by countering with the benefit to *her* of giving me rides, and to make me feel less indebted to her help. This is a negative politeness strategy to redress my wants, i.e. my need for the rides.

**Context:** Once, when I offered her a gift card for the spring break, she said:

(25) Member 1<sup>C</sup>: You always find some excuse to give me stuff.

Analysis: I really like *Member 1*, not only because of the rides, but also because she has perfect pitch and a very beautiful voice. Over the years, we have become close friends. Still, giving her gifts impinges on her negative face; I do need reasons to do so.

## 6.2 Case 2

Context: It was the beginning of a new term. I went to see an instructor of a course of the previous term to see how I could improve on my paper. I brought a box of cookies from a country that the instructor had lived in.

(26) Instructor 1<sup>C</sup>: I know this brand. Thank you.  
Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: You're most welcome.

Analysis: My intention was to thank *Instructor 1* for his time and advice. The fact that he knew the brand of the cookies suggested that he had tried it, and it could imply quality. But he did not further comment about the brand or its products.  
To the Chinese, in particular adults, appearing too excited and / or accepting a gift very readily may be seen as ill-mannered, or even worse, greedy. I think this is why *Instructor 1* appeared reserved.

## 6.3 Case 3

Context: I went to pick up an assignment from another instructor from a course that ended in December. It was in January. I offered the instructor chocolates.

(27) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: I hope you don't get tired of chocolates after Christmas.  
Instructor 2: Oh, no! I'll take them!

Analysis: While my small gift was a kind of positive politeness, I was apologetic that the offer was done shortly after Christmas, when most people have had lots of chocolates. This is a kind of negative politeness.  
The instructor's exclamation (meaning she did not get tired of chocolates) positively indicated that she was delighted with the tiny gift. This enhanced my positive face, and made me happy too. This case also shows some contrast with Case 2.

## 6.4 Case 4

Context: I noticed that *Student 1*, sitting next to me in class, had a backpack in the shape of a tortoise, in green colour. I used to collect turtle and tortoise ornaments, and found the backpack very cute. Once home, I took a small green stone tortoise from my collection, and offered it to *Student 1* on the next class.

(28) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: This is not brand new. I hope you don't mind.  
Student 1: Oh, no! Thank you so much!

Analysis: I apologized that the ornament was not brand new, showing negative politeness, because we are not supposed to re-gift. But *Student 1* did not mind, and was happy with the gift.

In fact, she was so happy that, the following class, she gave me a box of exquisite cookies. What she did was an act of positive politeness, which also followed the principle of balance, i.e. returning politeness.

- (29) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: Wow! You shouldn't have!  
Student 1: Thanks for the tortoise. I like it very much.

Analysis: Though pleasantly surprised, I felt bad that *Student 1* had spent money on me. To the Chinese, it is important to appreciate kindness from others, and to return it. In addition, we strive to maximize benefits, while minimizing costs to others.

Context: On the last class of this semester, I gave *Student 1* some chocolates.

- (30) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: This is for you. Good luck!  
Student 1: Oh! Thank you!

Analysis: *Student 1* was very surprised and did not manage to say anything else. I said goodbye quickly because I was fighting a flu and did not want to share it, especially not when exams were just around the corner. This is another example of minimizing costs to others.

## 6.5 Case 5

Context: In a classroom, seats were arranged in a u-shape, and there were the same several students who sat at the first row. On the first two classes, *Student 2* was seated at the right tip of the U, and I, the left tip. On the third class, when I arrived at the classroom, *Student 2* was not there yet. I tried the seat at the right tip, and found that it did work better for me. But I did not tell *Student 2* about this. Still, in all future classes, *Student 2* always left the seat at the right tip for me. He is such an observant and considerate person. On the last day of class, I tried to catch up with him on our way to the bus exchange, and handed him some chocolates.

- (31) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: I hope you like chocolates. Thank you so much for leaving me your favourite spot in the classroom.  
Student 2<sup>C</sup>: Oh! Thanks.

Analysis: Like *Student 1*, *Student 2* seemed too surprised to say anything else about the chocolates. And I said goodbye, good luck, and hurried away. But I did feel happy to let *Student 2* know that his consideration was indeed appreciated, and that I showed him positive politeness.

## 6.6 Case 6

Context: A fellow choir member kept bringing homemade cookies and brownies to practices, complete with plates and napkins. The goodies were delicious. Once, I brought her some chocolates and a Chinese dessert. Thinking that she might not have tried this kind of dessert, I wrote and attached some brief descriptions about it.

- (32) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: There is a Chinese dessert in the bag. Hope you like it.  
 Member 3: You are spoiling me!  
 Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: *You* are spoiling *us*!

Context: On our next practice, *Member 3* came over and told me:

- (33) Member 3: I had the Chinese dessert for breakfast this morning. It's really good.  
 Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: It's my favourite too.

Analysis: In addition to chocolates, a can't-go-wrong gift, I offered something Chinese, a good-will gesture for *Member 3* to taste our culture. She used humour upon the offer, a positive politeness strategy, and showed her appreciation by telling me that she did enjoy the Chinese dessert, something I had hoped for. She made me feel some sense of closeness and belonging.  
 In saying *It's my favourite too*, I showed my friendliness and common ground with *Member 3*.

## 6.7 Case 7

Context: We recently had a special choir practice in Vancouver (our usual venue is in Richmond). *Member 1* (the one who drives me to regular choir practices) does not feel comfortable driving outside of Richmond, therefore another choir member gave me rides to Vancouver and back to Richmond. I brought her chocolates and the same Chinese dessert as in Case 6, with written brief descriptions.

- (34) Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: There is a Chinese dessert in the bag. Hope you like it.  
 Member 4: You know how I love chocolates!  
 Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: Me too!

Analysis: Unlike *Member 3*, *Member 4* did not let me know later whether she liked the Chinese dessert. She was genuine in saying that she loved chocolates; this fact was widely known in the choir. But she was not as excited as *Member 4*, likely because she is used to getting chocolates whenever she gives me rides. It is also possible that as *Member 4* and I become more familiar with each other, face loses some standing, and we care less about being polite.  
 By answering *Me too!*, I was claiming common ground, another positive politeness strategy, with *Member 4*.

## 6.8 Case 8

Context: *Member 1* went to her hometown, and returned to Canada with snacks for *Member 2* and me, her car-mates. Naturally both recipients thanked the gifter.  
 The next week, in the car:

- (35) Member 2<sup>C</sup>: My Mom said thank-you for the goodies.  
 Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: And my husband enjoyed the sweets very much.

Analysis: In addition to festivals, birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions, some people like to bring gifts from other countries to share with families and friends.

Mentioning the appreciation from the family adds weight to the thanks, and the positive face of *Member 1*. This also confirms that the boundary of the ‘self’ in Chinese culture is wider, and includes close relatives and intimate friends.

## 6.9 Case 9

Context: One afternoon I went to school to attend a colloquium. The large room was packed, I went to the very front, hoping to find an empty spot. But there was none, so I went back to the door, ready to stand there with some other students. Then I noticed *Student 3* near the front wave at me. She moved to sit on a coffee table next to her chair, so that I could take her seat. She really made my day!

The next class, I brought her some chocolates, and explained to her neighbour the reason.

(36) Student 3: You didn’t have to bring me chocolates! But thank you!  
Bernadette<sup>C</sup>: *You didn’t have* to give me your seat!

Analysis: This is another example of the balance principle. Polite behaviours by one person should be returned with similar behaviours by the other. Simply put, it is tit-for-tat, but in a good way.

## 6.10 Summary

All the cases in this section are my personal experience. I am therefore aware of the circumstances leading to the conversations, hence there is no assumption or guess work. My conclusion from these cases is that people of Chinese ethnicity are more reserved in expressing their joy when presented with gifts. At the same time, they tend to return polite behaviours and offer gifts. It seems that the principles of sincerity and balance are ingrained in them.

From their appearances, those in the cases described — and who are not ethnic Chinese — are all of European ancestry. In fact, I do not have much contact with people of other ethnicities. I believe that, when it comes to politeness and gifting, there are other cultures where behaviours are similar to the Chinese. It would be helpful to have the resources to observe and study varied cultures in more settings.

## 7 Conclusion

Foreign visitors are often amazed at what they see as a seesaw Chinese battle of gift plying and declining (Feng et al. 2011:314). I believe that they would likely be amused or worried to see Chinese fight for the bill in restaurants at the end of a meal. Chances are that the foreigners do not speak the language either, and may think that the diners are engaged in a quarrel. Such misunderstanding stems from the different ways people of various cultures manifest their politeness.

In his 1990 paper “Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese”, Gu tells about a talk exchange between a Chinese student and an English lecturer, during which the address term caused some puzzle. In fact, I had a similar experience. One year, I went with the director and some members of my previous choir to Qing Dao, a city near Beijing, to take part in a concert there. We had a bus that took us from the hotel to the concert hall. Besides the driver, there was a guide. The guide said to us: “Good morning, Teachers.” I thought to myself: he mistook us to be a group of teachers. I

soon found out that, in China, it is a respectful way to address someone as 老師 (*lao shi* in Mandarin, *lou xi* in Cantonese, denoting ‘teacher’), irrespective of the hearer’s occupation and age.<sup>2</sup>

I, a fellow Chinese — though not living in China proper — do not fully comprehend the customs in an unfamiliar part of the country. It is therefore not the least unusual to have misunderstanding among different cultures and races. This is especially true with cross-cultural interactions because, unlike interactions among interlocutors using the same first language, there is much less contextual support in intercultural conversations (Kecskes 2015:45). If only we could be less judgmental, reduce ethnocentrism, and try to go beyond words to see the intention of the speaker. As Kecskes says in his 2015 paper: “... it is the speaker rather than the utterance that is impolite or polite” (ibid). While we already have some lingua francas to facilitate communications among people with different tongues, it is not as easy to have linguistic universals to indicate our politeness. The key is to have an open mind, and to respect differences.

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<sup>2</sup> The character 師 by itself already indicates ‘teacher’. The character 老 literally means ‘old’, however it is used here not as an adjective, but as a prefix to make the word disyllabic; most Chinese content words consist of two characters each. Such use is similar to 老外 (*lao wai*), a nickname Mandarin speaking Chinese give to foreigners. 外 literally means ‘outside’. 老外 is anyone from a country outside of China, not necessarily old.