

Request Strategies Across Societal Structures in S.E. Asia

Lee-Wong Song Mei

Department of Linguistics, Monash University

PAN--ASIATIC LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

This paper compares request strategies used by two broad groups of speakers of Putonghua /Standard Chinese in (a) the People's Republic of China and (b) other Southeast Asian countries - Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan. The basic tenet underlying this comparison is the belief that despite a shared common tradition there are entrenched cultural differences owing to different socio-economic and historical developments.

'Culture' as defined by Sapir (1949: 162) refers to the 'real world' that is 'to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality.'

To examine that 'social reality' as reflected in the realizations of requests, three main socio-cultural factors are explored - perceptions of relative social distance, relative power and the ranking of imposition.

Data collected from field work in these countries - the PRC and the non-PRC are analysed with a view to determine how perceptions of these social parameters affect request strategies. Results show parallels and differences in the repertoire of request strategies used by speakers from China (PRC) and those from the other countries (NPRC). For instance, in the use of main request strategy types both PRC and NPRC shared a preference for directness.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

The basic tenet underlying the attempt to examine parallel data i.e. linguistic realizations of requests across societies is the belief that different socio-historical developments of PRC and NPRC societies have a significant bearing on the speech behaviour of request strategies.

The NPRC countries in this survey: Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have been exposed to British education and Western values for a considerable period of time. Taiwan has been similarly influenced by America. Yet as speech communities of Chinese, speakers from these countries share certain traditional cultural values with PRC speakers. More than anything else 'the authority of a venerated past ... came to exercise a dominant role in Chinese culture. *The authority of tradition* came thus to have a more convincing effect than even direct observation and personal experience...' (Oliver, 1971:89). [Italics mine]. One fine example of this tradition is enshrined in Confucian rhetoric: 'that through decorum, propriety and politeness, feelings would be protected, dignity preserved, and harmony enhanced' (Oliver, 1971:143). The stress on social harmony explains the Chinese emphasis on placing social needs before individual needs. Yet, one must also expect such values to be influenced by exposure to Western culture which tends to emphasize individuality and de-emphasise collectivity or commonality. One is also aware of the vast differences that divide the PRC with its turbulent political past from NPRC, which by comparison is marked by an absence of such turbulence. The 1949 Revolution not only established China as a socialist country but also virtually closed China to the outside world for the next two decades. The anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution of 1966 was a period of political chaos and confusion, a period when cultural beliefs and values like filial piety and polite speech came under severe attack. In contrast, the cultural value system of NPRC speakers, beyond that of Westernisation, has been relatively untouched. Further, Singaporeans and Malaysians, have a different sociolinguistic background to that of China. Where

the PRC has a population that is predominantly Han, the overseas Chinese in these two countries interact with Malays and Tamils. In these two multilingual countries, then, Chinese speakers are influenced by a variety of co-existing languages - Chinese dialects, Bahasa Melayu, English and Tamil. For the Hong Kong Chinese, Putonghua, is not as widely spoken as Cantonese is in the community, so here again we may expect some differences in the way Putonghua is used by Hong Kong Chinese. The Taiwan Chinese speech community, like the Hong Kong Chinese, interact mainly with other Chinese, but in Taiwan the predominant local dialect is *Minnan hua* (a Fujian dialect). Chinese speakers in these four societies though distinguished by such social differences nevertheless share a common Chinese tradition. However, one must hasten to add that the term 'culture' considered in this paper does not refer only to a common inherited tradition, but also the social reality described by Sapir:

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. *The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.*

(1949:162).[Italics mine].

The worlds of PRC and NPRC are distinct worlds indeed in many aspects; for instance; it is difficult to believe that kinship is emphasized to the same degree in Singapore as in Nanjing. The word 'culture' then has two distinct meanings:

- (1) a culture based on tradition which is essentially Confucianistic;
- (2) a culture that is tied to local institutional practices and beliefs, the byproduct of socio-historical developments and existing local ethnic groups.

Two main questions are addressed here:

- (1) To what extent different societal structures impact on requestive behaviour?
- (2) To what extent a common traditional past and a common language system act as constraints on the pragmalinguistic repertoires of speakers?

2.0. METHODOLOGY

It should be noted from the outset that this is not an in-depth study of language use vis a vis requestives across societies. Rather, because of the difference in sample size between the PRC and the NPRC, it is to be approached from the perspective of a preliminary or exploratory study. The findings and conclusions drawn are to be considered as indicators for further investigation.

Data for the NPRC survey (interviews and written questionnaires) were collected from 24 interviewees and 38 respondents, all of whom were competent speakers of Putonghua. For interviews, a total of 320 tokens of utterances were gathered and for questionnaires the tokens of utterances totalled 1127. NPRC data are examined and analysed within the framework used for PRC data.

Data from the PRC were generated by 56 interviewees and 114 respondents to the questionnaire survey. Oral elicitations from interviewees and written responses to a modified form of Discourse Completion Test (DCT), along the lines of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project (CCSARP) group (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), form the corpus of data used for analysis. Situations posed in both types of survey were common face-to-face requests. Altogether 32 situations were used in interviews and questionnaires. For each interviewee, a total of 16 situations were used. These situations represent a broad section of common daily events which occur in a variety of settings involving interactants who are marked by varying degrees of familiarity or social distance. These requests range from routine types (e.g. requesting information at the post office counter) to personal ones (e.g. requesting for a loan). These situations are described and categorised along Brown & Levinson's (1967, 1987) framework of social determinants:

- (1) relative social distance [D]
- (2) relative power [P]
- (3) relative ranking/weighting of the degree of imposition [R]

In this paper we will consider these factors and determine to what extent they

affect request strategies in different societal structures.

Table 1. A Description of Situations Along the Dimensions of Social Distance, Relative Power and Ranking of Imposition

Situation	Social Distance	Power	Ranking
1 Restaurant	Large	Equal	Low
2 Public Phone	Large	Equal	High
3 Post Office	Large	Equal	Low
4 Test Result	Mid	Low	Mid
5 Market	Large	Equal	High
6 Dinner	Small	Equal	Low
7 Lunch	Mid	Low	High
8 Dating	Mid	Equal	Low
9 Library	Large	Low	Low
10 Direction	Large	Equal	Mid
11 Home-Call	Small	High	Low
12 Train	Large	Equal	High
13 Sch. Office	Large	Equal	Low
14 Office-	Mid	High	Low
International Call			
15 Bike	Small	Equal	High
16 Footpath	Large	High	Low
17 Hospital	Small	High	Low
18 Smoking	Mid	Equal	Mid
19 Stud Cafe	Large	Equal	Low
20 Spouse	Small	Equal	Low
21 Present	Small	Low	Mid
22 Money	Small	Equal	High
23 Refer.	Mid	Low	Mid
24 Tacks	Mid	Equal	Low
25 Salt	Small	Equal	Mid
26 Customs	Large	High	Low

27 Change

Appointment	Mid	High	Mid
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28 Buy a Toy	Small	Low	Low
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29 Friend from

Station	Mid	High	High
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30 Departmental

Store	Large	Equal	Low
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31 Small Food

Cafe	Large	Equal	Low
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32 Homework	Small	Equal	Mid
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2.1. Strategy Types

Altogether four main strategy types are identified in this study, three single strategies and one multiple strategy. These strategy types relate to the categorisation of the core request or head act of an utterance. A head act, as defined in the CCSARP, is identified by means of its propositional content, that which asks something of H or which expresses the desire of S that H do something. The main strategy types are as follows:

M1 (Main strategy type 1) Impositives - on record, non-negotiable

M2 (Main strategy type 2) Conventionally Indirect - on record, H given an out

M3 (Main strategy type 3) Hints - off record

M4 (Main strategy type 4) Combined strategies - on record (combination of M1 and M2)

In an on-record, non-negotiable request (M1), H is not invited or consulted about the feasibility of carrying out the request; S says what s/he wants H to do. In contrast, in an on-record conventionally indirect request (M2), H is given an option of refusal; S may query H as to whether s/he can do A. In both M1 and M2 request strategies, S makes explicit his/her intent - that H do A or whether H can do A. In an off-record request S does not make explicit his/her intent what s/he wants H to

do, it is left to H to read S's intent. Because S is not making an on-record request it allows S to deny making the request and H to ignore it if s/he chooses. This opacity is in direct contrast to on-record requests such as M1 and M2.

The classification of main request strategy types presented in Table 2 is broadly similar to Blum-Kulka and House's (1989). Finer distinctions are to be found in the class of M1 which has a large category of interrogatives subdivided into various types. Interrogatives do not only interrogate but also direct - that H tell S about A. 'The interrogative frames questions and requestives, the two sub-classes of directives not covered by the imperative. Both are really kinds of requests: in a requestive S asks H to do A (i.e. perform some act); and in a question S asks H to tell S something. Thus the difference is only that a question solicits a verbal response, and a requestive solicits a nonverbal response' (Allan, 1986:207).

Table 2. Descriptive Categories of Main Request Strategy Type
M1: Categories of Impositives

1. *Mood Derivable: IMP*

1.1. *Ba* construction

e.g. *Ba che jie wo*/ Car, lend to me.

1.2. Action verb: Lend, give, get, change, etc.

e.g. *Huan shuang kuaizi*/Change a pair of chopsticks.

Bu yao qi lai/Don't get up.

1.3. Reduplicated verb - similar to 1.2. but the verb is modified by hedging the expression through the use of reduplication with or without *yi*:

e.g. *Changchang* or *Chang yi chang*/Try, try. [Inviting guests to try the dish].

2. *Direct Questions:*

2.1. Interrogatives (wh-question)

e.g. *Xianzai ji dian le*/ What's the time now?

2.2. Particle question i.e. question ending with an interrogative particle.

e.g. *Piao ne*/ Ticket?

- 2.3. 'Do you know' question
e.g. *Ni zhidao huochezhan zai na?*
/Do you know where the station is?
- 2.4. 'Have you got' question?
e.g. *Ni you meiyou lingqian?*
/Have you got any change?

3. *Want/ Need Statement*

- 3.1. Bold want (... *yao/dasuan/* want/plan ...)
e.g. *Wo yao yi jin juzi*/I want 1/2 kilo mandarins.
- 3.2. Mild want (... *xiang/xiwang/* think/was wondering/hope ...)
e.g. *Wo xiang qing ni gei wo xie yi feng jieshaoshu.*
/I was thinking of asking you, [if you could] please write me a reference.

4. *Presumptive Statement*

- 4.1. Bold presumption
e.g. *Wo qi nide che*/I ride your bike [I'm borrowing your bike])
- 4.2. Hedged presumption: e.g. *ba* particle
e.g. *Wo chou yan ni bu fangdui ba.*
/[I presume] You wouldn't object to my smoking?

M2: Categories: Conventionally Indirect

5. *Query-Preparatory*

- 5.1. Reference to H's ability: *neng ma/neng bu neng?/can /can or not?*
e.g. *Ni neng bu neng ba chuanghu dakai ?*
/Can you open the window?
- 5.2. Reference to H's willingness: *keyi ma/keyi bu keyi?/will you/would you?*
e.g. *Mama, ni keyi bang wo mai yi jian liwu ma?*
/Mum, will/would you help me to get a present?
- 5.3. Non-obviousness of compliance: *shi bu shi neng/BE not BE able to*
e.g. *Nin shi bu shi neng bang wo xie yi feng jieshaoxin?*
/Is it possible for you to write me a reference?

6. *Suggestory Formula*

e.g. *Jin wan women yiqi qu kan dianying hao ma?*

/Shall we go to the movie tonight?

M3: Strategy Categories: Hints

7. *Strong Hint*

a. raising topic, be informative - state the problem but making no reference to a loan:

e.g. *Ni zhidao, wode erzi yao dao Aodaliya qu, danshi qian hai que shao yidian.*

/You know, my son is going to Australia, but [we're] still short of a little money.

OR

b. using an incomplete request:

e.g. *Bu zhi ruhe ban ...* /don't know how to go about it (a request for assistance)

8. *Weak Hint*

not mentioning the problem but vaguely referring to the subject related to it: e.g.

Aozhou de daxue yijing lai xin jieshou womende haizi le.

/Australia's university has written [to inform us] that our child has been accepted.

M4: Categories: Combined Strategies

Any combination of M1 and M2 categories. This is basically a multiple strategy comprising impositives or impositives and query-preparatory.

3.0. FINDINGS: STRATEGY TYPES

3.1. Main Strategy: The PRC

Data from the questionnaire survey and interviews show an overwhelming preference for a more *direct* main strategy type:

questionnaire: M1 75.8%, M2 18.8%, M3 1.2%, M4 4.2%;

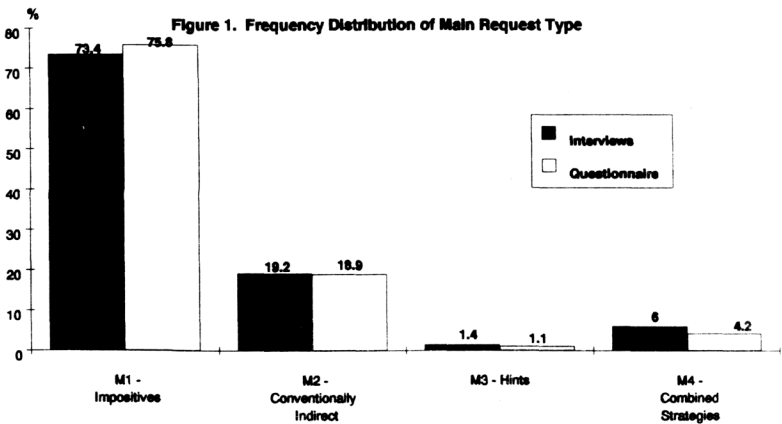
interviews: M1 73.4%, M2 19.2%, M3 1.4%, M4 6.0% (see Figure 1).

The pattern of main request strategy type is similar in both types of survey. The

overall preference is in this order where '>' means 'greater than' and '>>' means 'very much greater than':

Impositives >> Conventionally Indirect > Combined Strategies > Hints.

Hints as the non-conventional indirect strategy type were the least preferred by Chinese native speakers. Their preference is for the other extreme - conventionally direct type of strategy. More than 70% of interviewees and questionnaire respondents chose this strategy against a much lower occurrence of about 19% for the conventionally indirect. It is noteworthy to mention that the M1 category, as opposed to the M2 category subsumes the largest number of different grammatical



constructions. The conventionally direct strategy type (M1) is basically *impositives* which are made up of four different categories:

(a) imperatives

- (b) questions
- (c) want/need statements
- (d) presumptive statements.

Is there any preference for any one particular category or are these categories widely used? Table 3. shows a trend favouring the use of imperatives as a request substrategy. The order of preference is as follows:

IMPs > Direct questions > Want/need statements > Presumptive statements.

The trend points to a choice of the relatively more direct type of categories - the use of imperatives led by 50.4%, and presumptive statements trailing far behind at 4.7%. The dominance of IMPs as a substrategy of request realization suggests that imperatives, unlike English and most other European languages are not regarded as impolite.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Types of Impositives

Method	Imperatives	Direct Questions	Want/Need Statement	Presumptive Statement
Questionnaire				
%	49.5	16.3	5.3	4.7
Number	2480	819	263	236
Interviews				
%	54.4	10.2	4.3	4.5
Number	641	119	50	53
Total				
%	50.4	15.2	5.1	4.7
Number	3121	938	318	289

3.2. Main Strategy: NPRC

The results of interviews and questionnaire survey show a strong preference for direct on-record requests:

questionnaire: M1: 68.2%; M2: 26.4%; M3: 1.0%; M4: 4.4 %
interviews M1: 66.2%; M2: 27.2%; M3: 1.9%; M4: 4.7 %

Impositives

A breakdown of frequency distribution of impositives shows a trend similar to that of the PRC users: the use of IMPS in both surveys recorded the highest percentage: 44.0% followed by use of direct questions: 14.1%. The other categories of IMPS, 'Want/Need statement' and 'Presumptive statement' were not used by most respondents, a mere 6.3% and 3.3%. The preference order is as follows:

Imps > Direct Questions > Want/Need statement > Presumptive statement

3.3. Conventionally Indirect [M2]

Most respondents preferred the use of query-preparatory as a form of indirect request. In the questionnaire survey, out of the total number of respondents who used query-preparatory as a main request strategy, 81 preferred the substrategy of querying H's ability, using the conventional forms of *neng bu neng/neng ma* equivalent to English *can/could (I/you)?*

NPRC respondents who showed a strong similar preference for the choice of conventionally indirect requests, in contrast, preferred the substrategy of querying H's willingness, using the conventional forms of *keyi ... ma?* or *keyi bu keyi* rather than *neng bu neng* or *neng ... ma?* querying H's ability to do so.

Example: S12 (in a train between passengers)

Singapore interviewee:

Xiaojie, mafan ni keyi bu keyi

miss trouble you can NEG can

kai ge chuankou?

open CI window

Zhe kongqi bu tai hao.

this air NEG too good

Miss, can I trouble you to open the window. It's quite stuffy (here).

Beijing interviewee:

Tongzhi, chuanghu, ni neng bu neng kai yixia?

tongzhi window you can NEG can open a while

kongqi hen bu hao

the air very NEG good

Tongzhi, can you please open the window for a while, the air is not very good.

3.4. Hints

Both PRC and NPRC speakers showed a reluctance to use hints in requests. Only 1.1% of questionnaire respondents and 1.8% of interviewees from the PRC used hints. Less than 2% of NPRC respondents used hints in their speech act of requesting.

3.5. Combined Strategies

Both PRC and NPRC respondents showed a minimal use of combined strategies: about 4% by speakers from PRC and NPRC. This strategy often takes the form of M1 combined with M2. The combination of the type of substrategy is often dictated by the request situation. For instance, in situations of transactions or counter queries, NPRC speakers tend to use the following forms: e.g. 'I want A done. Can you/Will you do A? There are also combinations of two substrategies of M1 - a presumptive statement plus a direct question e.g. this request from a PRC interviewee:

We'll change our appointment to day after tomorrow. Is it okay with you?

Zanmen tan hua gai hou tian. Ni kan, xing ma?

As a combined strategy, it is seen to convey a degree of assertiveness by S(peaker). The choice of combined strategies has shown limited use by all respondents probably because as a strategy it can be seen to be too imposing. Directness does not necessarily have to include Speaker assertion.

4.0. DISCUSSION

Overall, NPRC and PRC speakers prefer request strategies that are direct and explicit. This communicative style could be explained by factors relating to culture and language. The preference for a level of directness violates Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness (the desire to be unimposed upon). At the same time it reflects S's emphasis on the goal-oriented nature of the speech act of requesting rather than the face threatening act (FTA) - the imposition on H. Using the conventionally indirect form - e.g. the classic indirect request - *Can you/Could you* is not necessarily the main form of conveying politeness, as reflected by the relatively smaller percentage of use by PRC and NPRC speakers. The distinctive preference for explicitness and clarity has been consistent. Hints have not been shown to be used in a very limited way. For the Chinese, one of the purposes of speaking listed in the *Analects*, was to 'communicate ideas clearly' (XV,39 cf. Oliver: 1971:136). Cultural expectations appear to have considerable influence on strategy choice of speakers across different societal structures. Conventionally indirect requests - querying H's ability or willingness to do A has been used with restraint. 'Can you pass the salt?' as pointed out by Horn (1984:14) is quite 'pointless' as a yes-no question if 'I know for a fact that you can pass the salt.' The Gricean Maxim of Quantity (Grice, 1975: 45): 'Make your information as informative as is required' is an echo of Confucian advice on rhetoric:

If the speeches are too long, they sound artificial. If they are too short, they fail to convey the speaker's meaning. The perfection of the speaking art is to make speeches that convey the speaker's meaning and no more.

(Oliver, 1971: 92)

A second influencing factor could be the very nature of the Chinese language itself. Chinese is characterized by a large lexicon of basic action verbs which facilitate explicitness - that H do A. Chinese has long been described as a verbal language: 'although Chinese is an isolating or relatively uninflected language, nonetheless it is basically a "verbal" or "verboid" language' (Astor, 1977:20). In a requestive this is clearly exemplified by S saying to H: 'Please + Verb + /Complement/ Object'.

(*Qing huan shuang ganjing de kuaizi*/Please change(replace) a pair of clean chopsticks)

A third influencing factor could be considered - that the selection of request situations posed in this study could well influence a more direct level of requesting. However, the extensive repertoire of request situations, thirty two in all, is sufficiently persuasive to ensure that biasness in the selection of request situations is minimal.

5.0. MODIFICATION AND POLITENESS

Given the level of directness in main request strategy expressed in the form of impositives, what kind of mitigation or downgrading is appropriate so that direct requests do not appear to be face-threatening or intrusive? We will examine some of the forms which were frequently used by speakers in this study.

5.1. Polite Expressions

The preference is overwhelmingly in favour of markers whose pragmatic meanings serve the dual functions of: (1) conveying politeness and (2) implicating that H do something. As requestive markers, the most obvious one being the expression(s) *qing* /please or *qing bang*/please help or *mafan ni*/trouble you, which also serve as polite markers (Lee-Wong, 1994a). Both PRC and NPRC speakers used these markers frequently in their requests:

PRC:	NPRC:
Questionnaire: 43.1 %	42.8 %
Interviews: 44.1 %	41.4 %

These polite expressions are saliently structured at the beginning of the request thus permitting the speaker to exercise politeness from the outset. At the same time, these polite markers, because of the very transparency of their meaning serve as alerters to the addressee. Their pragmatic value is perhaps more significant than the

English alerter 'excuse me'.

5.2. Terms of Address

The frequency and the form of terms of address show a marked difference between the PRC and the NPRC, a reflection of differences in socio-political developments. NPRC data show a minimal use of in-group markers (e.g. *Lao*+FN: *Lao Zhang/Old Zhang*) and kin terms (e.g. *Daye*: a term of respect for an elderly man e.g. a vendor). Terms of address such as *tongzhi* (Comrade) and *Shifu* (master craftsman) have significant political connotations; *tongzhi* was introduced by Dr Sun Yat Sen in his campaign for republicanism, and *shifu* - popularized as a term of respect during the Cultural Revolution in 1967 (Fang, 1983). These terms were only used by PRC speakers in China to strangers. Terms of address such as *Xiaojie*/Miss, *Xiansheng*/Mr were used with restraint. These terms were in common use prior to 1949 (Lee-Wong, 1994b). In Hong Kong and Taiwan, these are common terms of address. In Singapore and Malaysia, they are equivalent to the English forms of *Sir/Mr* and *Miss* functioning as polite distance markers.

However, in NPRC countries, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, terms of address are generally not used to the extent they are used in the PRC. Thus in the NPRC data, (questionnaire and interviews) less than 3% of respondents used a term of address in contrast to the figure of 33.4% by PRC respondents in the questionnaire survey and 44.1% PRC by interviewees. Evidently, address forms do not play a dominant role as devices in contracting social and psychological distance for NPRC speakers. That is, they are not shown to be used to contract social distance and emphasize in-groupness. However, one must note that with modernization and economic reforms in the PRC in recent years, *tongzhi* as a term of address is fast becoming redundant on the streets of Beijing. This survey was conducted in 1991. Today, I am told that terms of address such as *Xiansheng*/Sir/Mr and *Xiaojie*/Miss are commonly used in public.

6.0. STRATEGY TYPES AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

The choice of main request strategy types by both PRC and NPRC respondents shows the influence of contextual factors, i.e. perceptions of relative power, relative social distance of speaker and the degree of imposition or weightiness of the request affected respondents' request strategy. Cross-tabulations were used to assess the significance of correlations between main request strategy type and each of the contextual factors. Table 4 and Table 5 show significant positive and negative correlations between strategies and P, D, and R.

Table 4. PRC: Correlations of Main Strategy Type with Relative Power, Social Distance and Ranking of Imposition

	Significance Level	
	Questionnaire	Interviews
Positive Correlations		
1. Impositives (M1): Relative Power	0.0491**	0.1471**
2. Conventionally Indirect (M2): Distance	0.1424**	
Negative Correlations		
2. Conventionally Indirect (M2): Power	**-.1961	
3. Combined Strategies (M4): Distance	**-.02274	
4. Impositives (M1): Ranking of Imposition	**-.0485	**-.1061

*Notes: **=0.001 ($p < 0.001$)*

**Table 5. NPRC: Correlations of Main Strategy Type with
Relative Power, Social Distance and Ranking of Imposition**

	Significance Level	
	Interviews	Questionnaire
Positive Correlations		
1 Impositives (M1) : Power	*0.1443	
2 Combined Strategies (M4) : Power	*0.6528	
Negative Correlations		
1 Impositives (M1) : Distance	*-0.1323	
2 Impositives (M1) : Ranking	*-0.1455	** -0.1051

Notes : * means $p = < 0.01$; ** means $p = < 0.001$

6.1. Relative Power

In the PRC data as well as the NPRC data, relative power is positively correlated with M1 request strategy (direct requests) and negatively correlated with M2 (conventionally indirect request) i.e. (1) as power of speaker increases so does the use of impositives; and (2) as power of speaker increases, do does the use of conventionally indirect requests (query-preparatory) decreases. In other words, speaker tends to talk down in a request when s/he is in a relatively superior position.

Examples:

S26: (Customs officer to passenger)

Singapore interviewee: *Qing ba xiangzi dakai.*
please CV suitcase open
Please open your suitcase.

S14: (Manager to secretary)

Taiwan interviewee: *Xu Xiaojie, wo deng changtu dianhua, ni jie dao*
Xu miss I wait longdistance call you receive

mashang zhuan gei wo.

immediately pass to me.

Miss Xu, I'm waiting for an international call, the moment you receive pass it to me.

S11 (Grandpa to grandchild)

Shanghai interviewee: *Ah Yan, ni jie xia dianhua.*

Ah Yan you pick up phone

Ah Yan, go and answer the phone.

6.2. Relative Social Distance

Statistical evidence shows positive correlations of M2 (conventionally indirect) with social distance i.e. as relative social distance increases, the use of conventionally indirect requests increases. For instance, in the PRC data - S12, in which SD (social distance) is described as large, the occurrence of conventionally indirect requests numbered 72 as opposed to the occurrence of only one M2 in S11 in which SD is categorised as small. NPRC data show a similar trend - there is negative correlation of relative social distance with the use of impositives:

Percentage distribution of impositives by social distance

<i>Social Distance</i>	<i>Percentage occurrence</i>
Small or nil:	60.8%
Large	39.2%

The use of impositives is generally seen as inappropriate in a request situation where interactants are not socially close.

6.3. Ranking of imposition

Statistical evidence from the PRC data shows the relationship between M1 (impositives) and ranking is negatively significant, that is to say as Wx (weighting) of R (ranking) increases, the use of impositives decreases. This is clearly exemplified in the following frequency distribution of impositives:

Situation: borrowing salt from a neighbour: 89.3%

Situation: borrowing bike from a friend: 76.1%

Situation: borrowing money from a friend: 7.6%

In the NPRC data, the ranking of imposition similarly affects the use of impositives, in particular the use of Imperatives as a sub-strategy of M1. Situations marked by a mid to high R show a much lower percentage use of IMPS than those characterised by a low R:

Percentage distribution of IMPS by ranking of imposition

Situations of low R	76.3%
Situations of mid to high R	23.7%

There are however cultural differences in the perception of weighting given to ranking of imposition between NPRC and PRC respondents. A very clear example is S18: the request asking H if s/he would mind S smoking in an open construction site. In the PRC this request was considered irrelevant by a significant number of respondents because passive smoking is a non-issue whereas in the NPRC questionnaire survey, there were 24 occurrences of M2 strategy (querying H whether S could smoke) - Is it okay? Do you mind? and so on.

6.4. Discussion

Statistical evidence shows both PRC and NPRC respondents shared perceptions of relative power, social distance and ranking of imposition. The strategy choice of M1 - bold on record direct requests is shown to be affected by social determinants - the relative power of speakers and the degree of imposition. The usage of imperatives though not perceived to be impolite (Lee-Wong, 1994c) nevertheless has been shown to be used with restraint by speakers in an asymmetrical role-relationship and in request situations where the degree of imposition is ranked high. A conventionally indirect form or request is preferred where both interactants are marked by a degree of social distance or between peers i.e a symmetrical role-relationship. That the M2 strategy is preferred as a form of request strategy in situations marked by an equal P suggests that respondents perceive a greater need for face-maintenance at the interactional level where the rights and obligations of interactants are negotiable. In an equal P situation both S and H have to be seen to accord each other the all important aspect of 'positive face' - that H is not seen to

be in an unequal social position relative to S, and the equally important aspect of 'negative' face - that S is seen to consult H as to 'whether A can be done' so that H is not given to conclude that S is imposing on H. Therefore, in an equal P situation face-maintenance increases in significance. In contrast, in a context of low or high P where the rights and obligations of both S and H are clearly delineated, there is less room to renegotiate.

Statistical evidence shows differences in societal structures to have minimal impact on main request strategy choice and on perceptions of relative power, social distance and imposition. The restraint in use of impositives in situations where the addressee is in a superior position or where there is social distance, shows that speakers share a similar cultural code despite living in different societies.

7.0. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Data show a trend of convergence in requestive behaviour between NPRC and PRC respondents despite differences in societal structures. The convergence indicates the impact of shared common traditional cultural values. The final picture which emerges is one of distinct preference for clarity, explicitness and directness in request strategies. Such results are not surprising given the linguistic and cultural constraints, that is, the linguistic constraints of Putonghua (characteristically a verboid language) and the constraints of cultural belief and value in the observation of *li* - observation of relative social distance and relative power. In the final analysis of request strategies, it appears that institutional rules rather than personal rules have greater bearing on requestive behaviour. This indirectly confirms Oliver's description of the Chinese culture:

China was more a culture than a nation. The strength of the people in their unbreakable stability - in their family life, in their devotion to tradition, in their disciplined decorum.

(1971:91) [*Italics mine*]

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