

"DOING DEFERENCE": IDENTITIES AND RELATIONAL PRACTICES IN CHINESE ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS

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Abstract

In this paper we examine a key relational practice found in interactions in online discussion boards in Mainland China and Taiwan: 'doing deference'. In drawing attention to a relational practice that has received attention in quite different research traditions, namely, linguistic pragmatics and conversation analysis (CA), we mean to highlight the possible advantages of an approach to analysis that draws from both in analysing relational work in CMC. We claim in the course of our analysis that the participants are orienting not only to relationships but also to identities through this practice. In this way, we suggest that online discussion boards afford both meaningful interaction and relational work. We further claim that this analysis provides support for the theoretical position that while relational practices may intersect with the emergence of identities, they remain distinct analytical concerns.

Keywords: Deference; Face; Politeness; Impoliteness; Computer-mediated communication; Conversation analysis; Chinese; Fora.

1. Introduction

The multitude of different forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be broadly divided into interactive modes, involving ongoing contact between specific individuals, and self-presentational modes, where the individuals or groups attract attention to their own opinions or other information (Thimm 2008). Increasingly, however, both modes are found to co-occur, including in online discussion boards. While online discussion boards contrast somewhat with face-to-face conversation in terms of their underlying system of turn-taking (due to their asynchronicity), and in regards to their overall sequence organisation (due to being primarily topic-oriented, at least in terms of the overall thread structure), they nevertheless allow for conversational interaction. As Herring (2010: 3) argues, conversation at its most basic involves "exchange of messages between two or more participants, where the messages that follow bear at least minimal relevance to those that preceded or are otherwise intended as responses". Much of the activity that goes on in online discussion boards involves just that.

Another reason for regarding online discussion boards as open to treatment as instances of conversational interaction is that not only synchronous forms of CMC such as IM exchanges and multi-participant chat, but also many asynchronous forms of CMC such as email and social network sites are now clearly recognised as potential sites for various types of relational work (including politeness, impoliteness, and the like) (Davies, Merrison & Goddard 2007; Graham 2007; Harrison 2000; Herring 1994,

2004b; Locher 2006, 2010; Merrison, Davies, Wilson & Haugh 2012). Relational work, defined by us as encompassing the various ways in which interpretations and evaluations of persons and relationships are occasioned, ultimately presupposes interaction between two or more participants, even if only imagined rather than actually occurring, because without interaction persons (i.e. socially constituted individuals) and relationships cannot come into being. Moreover, without interaction there are no grounds on which evaluations of persons or relationships can arise or be displayed. For this reason investigations of relational work in CMC environments naturally presuppose some level of interaction amongst participants, in the context of which relationships are established, maintained and challenged. Such relationships range from dyads to relatively closed social groupings through to large, diffuse social networks. Online discussion boards where localised social or interpersonal networks emerge are consequently environments where high degrees of interactivity are supported.

Yet despite the importance of interactive modes of CMC in our daily lives, work on their interpersonal import has been restricted to a relatively limited number of languages (although see Danet & Herring 2003, 2007). There have thus been calls for more studies of relational and identity work in other cultural settings (Herring 2010: 5). Following pioneering analyses across a small number of Asian languages, including Thai (Hongladaroum & Hongladaroum 2005), Japanese (Nishimura 2008, 2010), and Chinese (Su 2003, 2007, 2009; Wang 2009), we aim in this paper to further contribute to this emerging body of work through an examination of relational and identity work in interactions facilitated via online discussion boards in Mainland China.

We begin this paper by briefly reviewing previous studies of identity and relational work in CMC, highlighting some of the main themes to have emerged from these (section 2). We then outline the interactional approach to the analysis of identities and relational practices employed in this paper, which is broadly discursive in its orientation, but is grounded in a form of pragmatics that is informed by findings and methodology in conversation analysis (CA) (section 3). After giving a brief introduction to the sources of the data used in our analysis (section 4), we then proceed to explicate a relational practice where there is a clear intersection with identity work, namely, 'doing deference' (section 5). This relational practice has long been considered an important way in which politeness arises in pragmatics (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987; Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983), but the ways in which it can be receipted by participants, and its intersection with identity work, has been surprisingly neglected. Our analysis of such displays of deference, and critically from a CA perspective, responses to them, also draws in part from prior work in CA on '(dis)preferred responses to apologies' (Robinson 2004) and 'doing empathy and sympathy' (e.g. Jefferson 1988; Pudlinski 2005). Being rooted in CA, however, such analyses have treated these as primarily social actions, with only passing attention paid to their relational import and their intersection with identity work. In drawing attention to a relational practice that has received attention in quite different research traditions, we mean to highlight the possible advantages of an approach to analysis that draws from both. We conclude our discussion in section 6 by outlining some of the implications of our analysis for broader theoretical issues in the context of the growing field of im/politeness research in CMC.

2. Identity and relational work in CMC

While CMC was initially seen as an impersonal and impoverished form of communication (Daft & Lengel 1984, 1986; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire 1984), and issues of politeness and identity were subsequently largely ignored by analysts, following Herring's (1993, 1994) seminal work there has been an increasing number of studies examining politeness (Bunz & Campbell 2004; Davies, Merrison & Goddard 2007; de Oliveira 2003; Harrison 2000; Hatipoğlu 2007; Herring 2004b; Su 2009; Vinagre 2008), and identity, particularly gendered identities (Herring 2000, 2003; Herring & Paolillo 2006; Wang 2009) in various forms of CMC. While laying important groundwork for the study of politeness and identity in CMC, however, much of this earlier work is rooted in either Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory or in the Lakoffian tradition of gender studies (and sometimes in both), approaches that have been increasingly challenged in the past decade.¹ In recent years, therefore, there has been an important shift towards a discursive perspective on interpersonal dimensions of CMC, where identities are treated by analysts as performed and transient (Georgakopoulou 2006), and politeness is seen as arising locally in interactions within the context of communities of practice (Graham 2007), or latent/emergent networks (Locher 2006). There has also been greater focus on other forms of relational work, including, for instance, politic behaviour, impoliteness and over-politeness (Graham 2008; Locher 2006, 2010). Such relational and identity work is also increasingly studied in the context of social aggregations across space and time, or what is termed "virtual community" or "virtual sociability" (Herring 2004a; Thimm 2008). Such social aggregations can be characterised by the following features: "regular interaction around a shared interest or purpose; the development of social roles, hierarchies and shared norms; a sense of common history; and an awareness of difference from other groups" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 422; cf. Herring 2004a). It is these characteristics that make interactions via different forms of CMC an increasingly interpersonal form of communication with very real relational and emotive import.

A discursive approach to politeness avoids the analyst coding forms and strategies of politeness (or differential use of these according to gender) according to pre-conceived theoretical categories, but favours instead an analytical focus on "expectations and norms about what is licensed, encouraged or prohibited", on the one hand, and what "social actions and practices [participants] are engaged in and their own evaluations of them", on the other (Georgakopoulou 2006: 552). While there was early work that took a broadly discursive perspective on politeness as situated in interaction (de Oliveira 2003), there has been in recent years an increasing number of studies of im/politeness that focus explicitly on the analysis of *participants'* understandings. These include analyses of disputes over im/politeness norms in a church email discussion list (Graham 2007, 2008), variability in evaluations of im/politeness in a controversial email sent by a lecturer to a university student (Haugh 2010a), and metapragmatic disputes over im/politeness evaluations in a technical advice discussion board (Locher 2011). The latter have also figured in recent im/politeness studies, including analyses of practices open to evaluation as polite on bulletin boards in Japan (Nishimura 2008,

¹ For comprehensive critiques of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness see Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003). For an overview of the move away from the Lakoffian tradition in studies of gender and identity see Mullany (2010).

2010), and advice websites in the U.S. (Locher 2006). And while not strictly discursive, Su's (2009) analysis of plays on sociolinguistic stereotypes of Taiwanese-accented Mandarin in online forums in Taiwan provides interesting insights into the ways in which humour can be deployed to simultaneously create a sense of in-group identity as well as to mitigate potentially face-threatening acts. The advantage of discursive approaches to im/politeness is that analyses are more tightly bound to the understandings of participants themselves, and thus to the ultimate object of analysis (Eelen 2001).

Online practices have also been examined from a broadly discursive perspective in studies of identities in CMC forums, both situated identities such as 'newbie' versus 'expert' participant (Lamerichs & Te Molder 2003; Locher 2006, 2011; Stommel 2008; Weber 2011), and categorical identities such as gender (de Oliveira 2003; Planchenault 2010; Wang 2009). Weber (2011), for instance, analyses a dispute where a 'newbie' is censored for not behaving according to the established norms of an online group for sexual abuse survivors, while Wang (2009: 188) has investigated the use of "internet self-portraiture" by Taiwanese girls through which they "play with facial expressions, gestures, and the technical representation methods" in attempting to cast themselves with the categorical "cute feminine girl ideal" identity. However, as Lamerichs and Te Molder (2003) argue in relation to an analysis of identities in web-based interactions on depression, categorical identities are ultimately only relevant when they are oriented to by the participants, and so, in practice, have much in common with local, situated identities. Studies of identity and relational work in CMC have thus moved to a greater focus on how participants' interpretations and evaluations of identities emerge in-situ in the course of interaction against the background of normative expectations and social practices, albeit a shift that was anticipated to some degree in earlier work (Herring 1999; Jones 1997).

Yet while there are evidently an increasing number of studies that take a broadly discursive perspective on identities and politeness as situated in interaction, these two phenomena have generally been analysed somewhat independently of the other. In recent years, however, there has been broader recognition that identity work and relational work are, at times, closely inter-related (Haugh 2007a, 2010a; Locher 2008, 2011; cf. Spencer-Oatey 2007, 2009; see also Weber 2011). Locher (2008: 517), for instance, argues that "an important aspect of identity construction is whether or not we want to project an image of ourselves as someone who is aware of the social norms of behaviour that are relevant in a particular social practice". She suggests that the use of language that is perceived as "polite", "impolite", "over-polite" and so on can occasion the casting of persons as "polite", "impolite", "over-polite" and so on. In other words, we can talk of polite and impolite identities (see also Haugh 2007a for a similar claim in relation to L2 speakers of Japanese). Locher (2008, 2011) goes further, however, in arguing that research on relational work and identity can be merged within "a broader postmodern constructionist framework" (Locher 2011: 187), both for the analysis of face-to-face and CMC interactions. This move by Locher to integrate research on relational work and identity stems from her definition of relational work as "the process of defining *relationships* in interaction", and the definition of identity as "the active negotiation of an individual's *relationship* with larger social constructs" (Locher 2008: 510, emphasis added). Locher (2008: 511) further suggests that relational work and identity are closely interconnected as "relational work refers to the ways in which the

construction of identity is achieved in interaction, while identity refers to the 'product' of these linguistic and non-linguistic processes".

However, while there is considerable insight to be gained from exploring the inter-relationship between identity and relational work, we suggest here that therein also lies potential for conflating what we argue to be two quite distinct analytical concerns. In the following section, we therefore outline an interactional approach to the analysis of identities and relationships that is broadly discursive in its orientation, but draws a clear line between the analysis of identities and the analysis of relationships. We propose, however, that while analytically distinct, identities and relationships are nevertheless dialectically related, such that interpretations and evaluations of identities are ultimately relationship-implicative (i.e. may be treated as consequential for the participants' relationships) and vice versa.

3. An interactional approach to identity and relationships

The interactional approach outlined here focuses on participants' interpretations and evaluations of persons and relationships in locally-situated discourse (Arundale 1999, 2006, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Chang & Haugh 2011, 2013; Haugh 2007b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012, 2014). Interactional pragmatics can be broadly characterised as "research in language pragmatics informed by findings and methodology in CA" (Arundale 2010a: 2094; see also Arundale 2005: 56–69; cf. Schegloff 2005: 474–475), although the scope of phenomena is broadened to include not only the analysis of actions, but also meanings and interpersonal stances and evaluations in face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions (Haugh 2012; cf. Arundale 2010a: 2079, 2095). It is thus broadly discursive in its orientation, as it shares a number of key analytical commitments with other discursive approaches to politeness, and relational work more generally, which are summarised by Kádár and Mills (2011: 7–8) as follows: (1) it is discourse-based in that researchers analyse relational phenomena in "longer fragments of authentic interactions" with a focus "on the contextual variation of interpretation"; (2) there is a focus "not only on the speaker's production of certain utterances but also on the hearer's evaluation of them" at the interactional level; (3) a range of different relational phenomena are examined, not only politeness but also impoliteness, over-politeness, and so on; (4) a distinction is made between first-order (participants/emic) interpretations and second-order (researcher/theoretical) interpretations (see also Kádár & Haugh 2013).

Similar to CA, then, interactional pragmatics has as its primary focus the explication of participant understandings and orientations to interactional and relational practices, although it goes beyond the scope of CA in attempting to "reach theoretical second-order conclusions by means of analysis of data" (Kádár & Mills 2011: 8) that are consonant with participant understandings displayed in the course of particular interactions (Arundale 2010a: 2094–2096, 2010b: 155–159; Haugh 2007b: 310–312). The requirement that any theoretical second-order conclusions be tied to the analysis of data means that the analyst is required to not only demonstrate how participants are oriented to or engaged in achieving the meaning, action or stance/evaluation in question (participant orientations), but also that the achievement of these meanings, actions or stances/evaluations is consequential for the design and sequential organisation of subsequent turns (procedural consequentiality). CA methodology is arguably well

placed to offer insights into both (Drew 1995; Piirainen-Marsh 2005; Stubbe et al. 2003). The utility of CA in analysing CMC interactions has also been noted in work on impoliteness and flaming in email discussions (Harrison 2007), and identity in online discussion forums (Stommel 2008).

However, interactional pragmatics goes beyond the scope of CA in offering more specific, theoretically motivated formulations of meanings, actions, and attitudes towards/evaluations of persons and relationships. These formulations are conceptualised in contrast to other alternative approaches to meaning and action (e.g. Gricean speaker meaning, speech act theory), and operationalised through examining their manifestation within the specific interactions being analysed (Arundale 2010b: 156). Such formulations are theoretical (or second-order) constructs, but are informed by emic (first-order) understandings of meanings, actions, and evaluations (of persons and relationships). On this view, it is incumbent upon the analyst to demonstrate that the meaning, action or evaluation not only has validity within the theoretical framework being utilised (Haugh 2007b: 310, 2009: 10–12; cf. Arundale 2010a: 2094–2096, 2010b: 155–159), but is also consistent with the first-order understandings of the participants in the interaction being analysed.

Identities and relational work are conceptualised in interactional pragmatics as interdependently related through the individual-social dialectic. This encompasses the view that "from an epistemological perspective, identifying any human event as a *social* phenomenon rests on identifying two or more individuals linked in some relational state", while "from an ontological perspective there is no point in the developmental span from procreation onwards that *individuals* exist as human agents apart from the agency of other humans" (Arundale 2009: 40, 2010a: 2085, emphasis added). Thus, "what is individual in nature and what is social in nature are fully interdependent, while at the same time, individual phenomena and social phenomena are distinct and functionally contradictory poles of human experience" (Arundale 2009: 40, 2010a: 2085). The individual-social dialectic has implications for the way in which we conceptualise identities and relationships. According to Arundale (2010a: 2091), relationships should be conceptualized in terms of social systems, while identities should be conceptualized in terms of individual systems. For this reason, while evaluations of persons and relationships are dialectically inter-related in interaction, they are also distinct phenomena, both epistemologically and ontologically.

Identities are defined here as arising through interpretations and evaluations of persons (or summative aggregations of persons in the case of collective identities).² Such evaluations work to "cast" a person (or group of persons) into "a category with associated characteristics or features" (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998: 3; see also Schegloff 2007). Such identities can be broadly divided into categorical and situational identities, with gender (e.g., female versus male) and nationality/ethnicity (e.g., Mainland Chinese versus Taiwanese) being examples of the former as they can be oriented to across multiple situations and populations (Schegloff 2007: 467), and expert/experienced user versus new/inexperienced user (often glossed "newbies") being instances of the latter in that they only "come into play in a particular situation" (Zimmermann 1998, cited in Stommel 2008: 3).

² Following the individual-social dialectic, a person is conceptualised as an individual in a social environment, a usage that goes back at least to Mead (1934: 138) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 194). In other words, "a person refers to the individual as construed by a cultural group, with whom she/he is linked in social interaction" (Arundale, personal communication).

A relationship refers to a non-summative system of two or more persons. It broadly involves "establishing and maintaining of connection between two otherwise separate individuals" (Arundale 2010b: 138), in systems ranging from dyads to relatively closed social groupings through to large, diffuse social networks. In characterising relationships as non-summative systems, we are emphasising, following Arundale (2010b: 140), the "reciprocal conditionality or systemic interdependence" of the persons that constitute that relationship. This means that relationships cannot be fully explicated in terms of the identities of persons in interaction (cf. Locher 2008, 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2007, 2009). Nevertheless, since identities implicate relationships and relationships implicate identities, "excluding either level in conceptualizing or in analyzing human interaction is problematic" (Arundale 2010b: 137–138). Thus, while the move to analysing identities and relationships in CMC in a coordinated, systematic way is a welcome one, particular care needs to be taken not to conflate the two.

Finally, the focus here is on practices, namely, recurrent and recognisable ways of constructing (sequences of) utterances that afford particular meanings, actions and stances/evaluations. These practices are described as discursive, so as to emphasize that such practices do not exist in isolation (Foucault 1972), but rather are always defined in relation to other practices, drawing upon them in complex ways. In this approach, then, it is argued that as interpretations of meanings and actions are interactionally achieved, interpretations and evaluations of persons and/or relationships may also co-ordinately arise.³ When such interpretations and evaluations arise in recurrent and recognisable ways, we suggest that this coordinate set of interpretations and evaluations constitutes a 'relational practice.'⁴

4. Data

The following analysis draws on interactional threads arising in an asynchronous discussion forum called *Dongman tieba* ('animation notice bar'), which is hosted by *Baidu Teiba* (<http://tieba.baidu.com/index.html>) in Mainland China. *Baidu* is a search engine and information providing website similar to *Yahoo*, and it is currently the most popular search engine website in Mainland China.

Following Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme for different types of CMC, we now discuss the medium and situation factors underpinning this discussion board. The messages are generally one-way, asynchronous and only text-based with no particular limit on the size of messages, although photos and videos can also be uploaded. The threads are persistent as they are saved under their own specific URL. Messages within threads are posted anonymously in public view, although users need to sign-up in order to post messages. The users also have public profiles, where basic information such as age, gender, personal interests and so on are displayed (although

³ While the approach to identity and relationships outlined in this section clearly intersects with social constructionist approaches to im/politeness at the interactional level (e.g., Arundale 2006; Cook 2006; Haugh 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Locher 2008, 2011; Locher & Watts 2005), and evaluations of im/politeness at the societal level (Mills 2009, 2011; Mills & Kádár 2011), further discussion of these issues lies outside the scope of the current study.

⁴ Cf. Holmes and Schnurr (2005) who conceptualise relational practices relative to persons/identities only.

not verified), and further personal information is publicly available on linked personal profile pages.⁵

The set-up of this discussion board both affords and constrains a number of situational factors underlying its usage. The participation structure involves messages posted in settings which are public, fairly anonymous, and involve potentially large groups. The messages are posted in threads which are organised by topics. In most cases, a thread on a particular topic is started within a larger thematic grouping, and subsequent messages are oriented either to the initial message or subsequent postings. The thematic groupings include a wide variety of themes, such as 'horoscopes', 'television', 'music', 'sports', 'relationships', 'animation', and so on. These broad thematic groupings are further broken down into more specific themes. For instance, under 'animation', there are a number of discussion boards, organised around either the names of specific manga ('comics') and anime (animation films/television series), or specific characters in those manga and anime. The discussion board (and discussion threads within those boards) are thus organised around specific interests of the users, with threads normally being initiated by one user asking questions or sharing experiences. The overall purpose of participants in *Dongman tieba* ('animation notice bar'), then, is to exchange information and establish online relationships with other users who have similar interests or concerns. In this way, multiple social networks or 'virtual groupings' involving users who are more or less experienced, and more or less familiar with each other, emerge over time. These 'virtual groupings' in turn form part of a larger, loosely aggregated virtual community, which is bound through common interests. The tone of postings is mostly informal and friendly (although not always, as we will see in the subsequent analysis). There are explicit warnings that users will be banned from posting messages if they use abusive language towards other participants, but other norms of social appropriateness and language remain largely implicit. This means that participants are largely socialized into such interactional norms through reading and participating in threads, although the postings of new users may attract explicit, metapragmatic comments from other users in some cases, as we shall see. Most of the messages are posted in Mandarin Chinese, although Cantonese sometimes appears in the messages.

We examined 15 threads appearing under the various themes of *Dongman tieba* ('animation notice bar'). In analysing these threads, a number of relational practices emerged as salient in regards to the co-construction of identities by the respective participants. In the following section, we discuss one of these relational practices and its intersection with identity work in further detail.

⁵ Since these threads are available publicly and can be added to simply by creating an account through email, they cannot be considered communications of a closed or private group (Ess & AoIR 2002: 5; Esysenbach & Till 2001: 1104). They are also anonymous, as the information available on profiles in *Baidu Tieba* is not sufficiently detailed to trace individual users, particular in light of the large population of users from which it draws (Esysenbach & Till 2001: 1105). For these reasons, the threads have been regarded as part of the public domain, and thus the ethical considerations that apply to communications between identified individuals in a closed or private group are not regarded as applicable in the case of these threads (Ess & AoIR 2002).

5. Doing deference

In this analysis we consider a single thread consisting of 16 messages, where participants were orienting not only to relationships but also to identities. The relational practice examined here involves displays of deference, which arose in situations where participants were attempting to compensate for past offences (and thus such deferential displays were open to evaluation as 'polite'), but which were also implicated in co-constructing newbie identities positioned relative to expert user identities (cf. Weber 2011). The responses to these deferential displays varied from affirmations of themselves by some participants as expert users relative to the offending newbie, while other participants offered affiliative responses, which we argue is a form of 'solidarity empathy', as it involves a display of support or endorsement of another user's stance by claiming to have had similar experiences or feelings (Haugh & Chang 2015; cf. Jefferson 1988; Pudlinski 2005).

Deference is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "submission to the acknowledged superior claims, skill, judgement, or other qualities, of another" or "courteous regard such as is rendered to a superior, or to one whom respect is due" (*OED Online*, 2015). In other words, deference is broadly conceptualised as either submitting to or showing regard to a superior or someone else deserving of respect. Those to whom deference is displayed can respond by accepting or rejecting this display (or alternatively give an equivocal response). The preference (in the CA sense) for acceptance or rejection of displays of deference is locally determined according to the situation. For instance, the preferred response to displays of deference in Chinese which are accomplished through honorific pronouns (e.g. *nin*, 'you-HON') directed by a younger person to an elderly person is generally to tacitly accept it. The preferred response to displays of deference in Chinese through apology IFIDs (illocutionary force indicating devices) such as *duibuqi* ('sorry'), on the other hand, is generally to reject the need for an apology (e.g. *buhuila*, 'no'), or reassure the person apologising that no offence was taken through an expression of absolution (e.g. *meiguanxi*, 'that's okay') (cf. Robinson 2004: 305–306).

As Haugh (2010c) points out, then, a key presumption underlying the commonsense notion of *deference* is that some individuals or groups are more highly ranked on various types of hierarchical scales than others. This hierarchical scale underpins the link between the relational practice of displaying deference and identity claims/attributions. A hierarchical scale that is commonly presumed in online discussion boards is that between expert/experienced users and new/inexperienced users (Locher 2006, 2011; Stommel 2008). Participants can be cast into the categories of expert versus new users, which makes relevant (temporarily at least) particular associated attributes (i.e. situational identities). In the case of modern Mandarin Chinese, where there are just a few morpho-syntactic means for expressing deference (e.g., honorific personal pronouns), deference is generally displayed through interactional moves that are interpreted as "acts of appreciation" towards others or "acts of derogation" towards self (cf. Shils 1982: 143). Such acts of appreciation or derogation only count as displays of deference when participants presume differential deference entitlements (Haugh 2010b, pp. 279–280), such as those assumed to be associated with expert versus new users, for instance.

However, it is important to note that while a particular response to a display of deference might be notionally preferred, this is not to say that all responses to displays

of deference will necessarily be either aligning (i.e. contribute to the progressivity of this action sequence as one of displaying deference), or affiliative (i.e. supportive of the affective stance indicated through this display of deference) (see Lindström & Sorjonen 2012 on the distinction between aligning and affiliative responses). Indeed, disaligning or disaffiliative responses to displays of deference constitute a key means by which particular relational and identity work can be accomplished, as we shall see in the following analysis.

In the following thread, we suggest that the repeated apology sequences constitute a display of deference on the part of one user, who also casts herself and is cast by other participants as a newbie. While apologies are not necessarily always interpretable as displaying deference per se (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987: 178–190), in the case of modern Chinese, there is a strong case to be made for regarding apology IFIDs such as *duibuqi* ('sorry'), as indexing self-derogation, since their use involves acknowledging one's mistake, thereby leading to possible loss of face (*mianzi*). While apologies were historically more frequent in Chinese (Chun & Yun 2010; Kádár 2007), Pan and Kádár (2011: 99) argue that in modern China apologies are more often achieved "by means other than linguistic expressions, such as taking redressive action or doing something for the person offended to mend the relationship". This reflects the so-called 'no apologising culture' (*bu daoqian wenhua*) that is said to be developing in (Mainland) China. In light of this, then, repetition of an apology IFID such as *duibuqi* ('sorry') is interpretable as a relationally marked act in interactions in Mainland China (cf. Tsai 2007 in the case of Taiwan).⁶ It is marked in the sense that it is interpretable as polite, but it also has implications for co-constituting the relationship between participants, as well as, in a number of instances, for constituting evaluations of their persons (i.e., their identities).

The following thread was initiated by Angēle, a 17 year old female from Hangzhou city in Mainland China (at least according to her public profile). The thread begins with Angēle apologising to everyone in a group of net-friends (*wangyou*)⁷ who contribute to jointly constructed threads on *Dongman tieba* ('animation notice bar') (Post 1, excerpt 1). She apologises specifically for re-posting pictures that others had previously posted, as illustrated in excerpt (1) below. Symbols used in the morphological gloss can be found at the end of this paper.

(1) *Dongman tieba: Duibuqi gewei, qing yuanliang wo....* ('Animation notice bar: Sorry everyone, please forgive me....'): Post 1, 16:16

<i>duibuqi</i>	<i>gewei,</i>	<i>qing</i>	<i>yuanliang</i>	<i>wo....</i>	<i>natian</i>	<i>wo</i>
sorry	everyone,	please	forgive	me....	the other day	I
<i>zhaole</i>	<i>yidadui</i>	<i>tietu</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>gaoxing</i>	<i>de</i>	
found	many	pictures	very	happy	ASSC	
<i>fa-le</i>	<i>shangqu</i>					
posted-PRV	CP					

⁶ The same claim does not appear to apply to interactions in Taiwan, however, at least according to the views of Taiwanese informants expressed in study of intercultural apology between Taiwanese and Australians (Chang & Haugh 2011).

⁷ Net-friends (*wangyou*) refers to friendships which are established and maintained entirely online.

<i>jiieguo</i> result	<i>beiren</i> others	<i>gaozhi</i> tell	<i>shi</i> be	" <i>xiaobai</i> " little white	555555 ((crying sound))
<i>qing</i> please	<i>gewei</i> everyone	<i>yuanliang</i> forgive	<i>wo</i> I	<i>de</i> ASSC	<i>wuzhi</i> ... ignorance
<i>xiang</i> towards	<i>gewei</i> everyone	<i>daoqian</i> apologise	<i>duibuqi</i> sorry		
<i>zhenshi</i> really	<i>duibuqi</i> sorry	<i>a</i> PRT	<i>A-jun</i> A-Mr	<i>na</i> then	<i>yuanliang</i> forgive

wo.
me

'Sorry everyone, please forgive me...I was happy that [I] had found some pictures the other day...[I] posted [them] online. As a result, I was told [I am a] "little idiot"...((crying sound)) Everyone please forgive my ignorance...[I] apologise to everyone....sorry.....[I'm] really sorry....Mr A then...forgive me.....'

The way in which this apology is formulated in this post is markedly deferential. Angēle repeats *duibuqi* ('sorry') three times, as well as asking for forgiveness (*qing yuanliang wo*) from everyone twice and once from user 'A'. She also repeats the negative assessment others had previously made of her as a 'little idiot' (*xiaobai*), thereby further denigrating herself.⁸ A form of onomatopoeia achieved through repetition of the letter five (which is pronounced *wu* in Chinese) to mimic the sound of crying is also deployed by Angēle to display a particular emotive stance (Vandergriff 2013). This crying represents her claim to feeling sad, potentially both about her offence and for being blamed by others in the group. More importantly, it concurrently indexes her sincerity (*chengyi*) in making this apology, thereby increasing its illocutionary force. In framing her apology as sincere through repetition of the IFID and crying, Angēle's first post is thus open to evaluation as 'polite', because repetition is regarded as means of expressing sincerity and thus politeness (*limao*) in Chinese (Gu 1990).

One of the other members in the group, Alicē, responds almost immediately in Post 2 with an accusation that the apology is not appropriate (excerpt 2).

(2) Post 2, 16:17

wei....
hey

ni de geshi ne - -#
you ASSC format PRT((closed eyes with popping out vein))
'Hey....Where is your format ((angry))'

Here Alicē does not accept Angēle's apology, but rather launches a simultaneously disaligning and disaffiliative complaint about the format of her apology, although she

⁸ While *xiaobao* is literally translated as 'little idiot', its illocutionary force is more akin to a description of oneself as being 'a bit silly'. In this sense, it is arguably a form of self-denigration (cf. *yu*, 'this foolish person' in historical Chinese) (Kádár 2010: 119).

does not specify what this correct format involves (notably it is not until post 13 that Angēle formulates her apology according to the 'correct' format). The complaint is framed with an accusatory and angry stance, but notably, little in the way of any justification for making such a complaint in the first place (Drew 1998). The former is projected through the deployment of an attention-getter (*wei*, 'hey') through which Alīcē performs the act of noticing inappropriate behaviour (in this case the format of the apology, not the original offence per se). The latter is indexed through an emoticon which is generally understood to mean the poster is angry. It is notable that while Angēle's apology is markedly deferential and thus could be evaluated as polite, Alīcē is critical of the apology (a dispreferred response) (Robinson 2004), and the disaffiliative stance indexed through her critical response is thus arguably open to evaluation as impolite in this particular sequential context.

Angēle responds in the next post by repeating her apology with an even greater level of self-denigration as illustrated in excerpt (3).

(3) Post 3, 16:18

zhengshi duibuqi
really sorry

xiwang yuanliang wo de pengyou cai
hope forgive I ASSC friend step

yixia zhengde duibuqi
a little really sorry

qing gewei yuanliang wo 555555
please everyone forgive I ((crying out))

'[I'm] really sorry....I hope my friends who forgive me step on me....[I'm] really sorry...Everyone please forgive me...((crying sound))'

Angēle formulates her apology in this post with an emphatic IFID (*zhengshi duibuqi*, 'really sorry') repeated twice, as well as asking for forgiveness twice. This post is even more markedly deferential as she invites the others to 'step on' her, implying that she is not deserving of their respect. She also indexes an emotive stance of sadness through repetition of the crying onomatopoeia, thereby displaying sincerity in making the apology, and thus increasing its illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring 2010).⁹ Once again, then, Angēle's apology is open to evaluation as polite.

Alīcē does not accept this second apology either, however, instead qualifying her previous criticism about the format of Angēle's apology as seen below.

(4) Post 4, 16:18

haiyou
also

⁹ Emoticons used by the participants in this thread are described in the gloss and their conventional meaning(s) indicated in the double-brackets. As Dresner and Herring (2010) have argued, however, emoticons do more than simply indexing emotions. They can also modulate the illocutionary force of speech acts and even provide an interpretive frame in some instances (e.g., serious versus joking frame).

%ou% *yuanliang* *ni* *ye* *meiyong*
 I forgive you also useless

na *tu* *you* *bushi* *%ou%* *de*
 that picture also N I ASSC

'Also it's useless I forgive [you]. That picture's not mine'

Alīcē claims here that there is no point in her offering absolution in response to Angēle's apology as the original offence was not directed at Alīcē, thereby once again disaffiliating with Angēle's appeal for forgiveness from the group. In this way, Alīcē alludes to a tacit norm of appropriate behaviour on the discussion board (or at least amongst their group), namely, that one does not re-post pictures that other users have previously posted (cf. Graham 2007). In this way, then, Alīcē is pursuing a response from Angēle (Pomerantz 1984), namely, a formal apology in the 'correct' format which specifies the offence and is directed at the persons who were offended, rather than a general apology to everyone participating in the thread, thereby treating the apology made in her prior turn as inadequate in its formulation.

In the next three posts two other members of this group (Xiao xinxin and Yantangjanyoucu) join the thread claiming they do not know what has happened. This occasions a further apology, and explanation, by Angēle in Post 8 (excerpt 5).

(5) Post 8, 16:21

teci *daoqian*:
 especially apology

benren *zai*: "*xiao* *dian* *A-jun* *yu* *A* *jiang* *de*
 others at little shop A-Mr and A DIM ASSC

tianxin *xiao* *dian* (*xinshou* > <)" *tie* *le* *yixie*
 sweetheart little shop newbie ((closed eyes)) post PRV some

tu *zhende* *bu* *zhidao* *wo* *de* *xingwei*
 picture really N know I ASSC behaviour

rang *wo* *biancheng* *le* *xiao* *bai* *a* *zaici*
 let I become PRV little white PRT again

xiang *gewei* *daoqian*, *xiwang* *nimen* *nenggou*
 towards everyone apologise hope you able

yuanliang *wo* *yihou* *zai* *ye* *bu* *hui* *le*....
 forgive I afterwards again also N can PRT

duibuqi *gewei* *a*
 sorry everyone PRT

'[I] apologise for this: I posted some pictures on "Mr A and Ms A's sweetheart little shop" (newbie ((dammit))). I really don't know my behaviour [of posting pictures] makes me an idiot~~~) [I] here apologise to everyone. [I] hope you can forgive me....[I] will never do this again....[I am] sorry everyone....'

Here Angēle structures her apology somewhat differently by starting with an announcement that explicitly indexes her current post as constituting an apology through a performative verb (*teci daoqian*, '[I] apologise for this'). She then describes the offence, namely, posting some pictures on an area belonging to Mr A and Ms A, as well as casting herself as a newbie (*xinshou*). She goes on to offer an account for this offence, namely, that she was not aware of the norm Alīcē alluded to in post 4, and so by infringing upon this norm she had made a fool of herself. She then repeats an apology IFID twice, asks for forgiveness, and also promises forbearance (i.e., that it will not happen again) (Owen 1983). Angēle thus continues her markedly deferential line in formulating her apology, and her post is subsequently also open to evaluation as polite.

However, another participant (Juziheng) intervenes in the subsequent post (excerpt 6), and once again complains that Angēle's apology does not follow the correct format expected by members of their group, and so it also constitutes a disaligning and disaffiliative response.

(6) Post 9, 16:22

nage sa A jiang ni daoqian mei geshi
that PRT A DIM you apologise N format

a >////< kongpa yao zai
PRT ((eyes closed very tightly)) afraid need again

daoqian yici >////<
apologise again ((eyes closed very tightly))

'That...Miss A...your apology has no format ((blushing, embarrassed)). [I am] afraid you have to apologise one more time ((blushing, embarrassed))'

Juziheng here demands yet another apology from Angēle, and thereby attacks Angēle's relational connection with others in the group. However, the illocutionary force of this complaint and directive is softened somewhat by the emotive stance of embarrassment that Juziheng displays through the emoticons (Dresner & Herring 2010). In other words, Juziheng displays a stance of embarrassment about having to repeat this complaint and direct Angēle to repeat her apology in the proper format (as was originally demanded by Alīcē in post 2 - see excerpt 2). In compensating for the negative relational implications arising from this complaint and directive through a stance of embarrassment, Juziheng appears to be mitigating potential evaluations of her post as impolite.

At this point, however, Alīcē intervenes to defend Angēle (excerpt 7).

(7) Post 11, 16:23

ai...
sigh

A jiang shi xinshou
A DIM be newbie

qian ji tian ta de hao shi
ago few day she ASSC membership be

wo bang ta chuang de
I help she create PRT

ta shi yi ge shengme dou bu dong
she be one C what all N know

xiao pi hai yi mei
little fart child one C

Wanbi~!
over

'Sigh...Miss A is a newbie...Her membership was created by me a few days ago. She is a little fart kid who doesn't know anything. Over!'

She begins by expressing her frustration with an interjection (*ai*), and then casts Angēle as a newbie who has just joined their group at Alīcē's invitation. She further characterises a newbie as equivalent to a *xiaopihai* ('little fart kid') who does not know anything (specifically about the rules on re-posting prior posts and the correct format for apologies), and thus implies that Angēle cannot be expected to know everything. Yet in casting Angēle in this way (as a 'little fart kid'), Alīcē also implies that an appropriate apology is still outstanding. While Alīcē denigrates Angēle in this post, this denigration actually highlights her relational connection with Angēle, thereby backgrounding any potential evaluation of this denigration as threatening to Angēle's identity as a competent user. Alīcē concludes her post by telling everyone that her own input into the thread is finished. In responding in this way subsequent to Juziheng's call for Angēle to apologise in the correct format, Alīcē also implies an evaluation of Juziheng's prior post as inappropriate (i.e., too harsh).¹⁰ In this way, then, while Juziheng's post was affiliative with Alīcē's prior stance in relation to Angēle's apology, here Alīcē takes a somewhat more affiliative stance vis-à-vis Angēle through her disaffiliative response to Juziheng's pursuit of a reformulated apology from Angēle.

This occasions encouragement and an expression of empathy from Juziheng for Angēle about her current predicament as a newbie in her next post.

(8) Post 12, 16:25

Ouou~~A jiang.... women gong jintui
PRT A DIM we together back and forth

ba~ Wo dai le ting jiu.... ye shengme dou
PRT I stay PRV quite long also what all

bu dong >/////<
N know ((closed eyes with blush))

'Oh Miss A...we encourage each other to go through things. I've been here for a long time...[I] also don't understand anything either ((blushing, embarrassed))'

¹⁰ At least the demands are evaluated as inappropriate for Juziheng to be making, since Alīcē herself actually made similar demands in prior posts.

Here Juziheng begins her post with a change of state particle (*ouou*), whereby she acknowledges Alǐcē's defence of Angēle in the prior post, and her subsequent change in her understanding of what can be expected from Angēle (Wu 2004). She then displays a form of what we term 'solidarity empathy' for Angēle, namely, offering emotional support through claiming to have had similar experiences or feelings (Haugh & Chang 2015; cf. Jefferson 1988; Pudlinski 2005). In this case, Juziheng claims to be going through the same process as a newbie, and in this way encourages Angēle. This post is also somewhat deferential in that Juziheng admits to not understanding all these norms of posting behaviour by displaying embarrassment through an emoticon. Juziheng also indicates that she evaluates her prior post as somewhat inappropriate in two ways. First, she shifts from complaining about and criticising Angēle's apology to displaying solidarity empathy with Angēle. Second, she displays deference towards others in the group, primarily Alǐcē, through the sequential placement of this post (i.e. immediately following Alǐcē's indirect response to Juziheng's prior post). In this way, Juziheng simultaneously shifts from indicating a disaffiliative to an affiliative stance vis-à-vis Angēle's apology, as well as indexing an affiliative stance with Alǐcē's defence of Angēle in the prior post, and thus with the implicit criticism of Juziheng's stance.

Angēle for the fourth time posts an extended apology sequence, but this time with an even more formal structure as seen in Post 13 (excerpt 9).

(9) Post 13, 16:27

e wo chongxin daoqian yi ci a
um I again apologise one C PRT

TAT

((tears falling from eyes))

gewei bei wo qinfan le banquan de
everyone PASS I infringe PRV copyright ASSC

pengyou men
friend PL

duibuqi!!! duibuqi! duibuqi!!!
sorry sorry sorry

wo shengke de renshi dao le
I deeply ADV recognise CP PRV

wo ziji de cuowu.. duibuqi
I self ASSC mistake sorry

fanren: wo....
offender I

shijian: 2008-9-12 wanshang
time 2008-9-12 evening

didian: 【xiao dian】 A jun yu A jiang
location little shop A-Mr and A DIM

de *tianxin* *xiao* *dian* (*xinshou* > <)
ASSC sweetheart little shop newbie ((closed eyes))

suo *fan* *cuowu:* *suibian* *tie* *bieren*
PRT make mistake casually post others

P *guo* *de* *tu*
post PRV ASSC picture

duibuqi *a~~~~~*
sorry PRT

'Er....I apologise one more time again...((crying))
Everyone, to the friends whom I have infringed upon your board copyright:
Sorry!!! Sorry! Sorry!!!
I deeply realise my mistake..Sorry
Offender: me....
Time: 2008-9-12 evening
Location: "small shop" Mr A and A-DIM's sweetheart little shop (newbie ((dammit)))
Mistake that [I've] made: [I] casually posted pictures others posted
Sorry ((echoing))'

The apology sequence this time is both markedly deferential and formal in structure. Angèle begins with an apology performative (*wo chongxin daoqian yici a*, 'I apologise again one more time'), which is followed by a 'crying' emoticon that displays a stance of sadness, thereby indexing a greater degree of sincerity in making this apology, and increasing its illocutionary force. She directs her apology to those participants, whom she characterises as friends, for breaking this norm with repetition of the apology IFID *duibuqi* three times. She then expresses an acknowledgment of her sense of responsibility (*wo shengke de renshi dao le wo ziji de cuowu*, 'I deeply realise my mistake') (Tsai 2007), followed by another apology IFID. This deferential display is followed by a more formally structured apology sequence which is organised into four parts: The offender, the time, the location, and the offence. This is then followed by yet another apology IFID. Once again, then, Angèle's post is also open to evaluation as polite, as she arguably goes beyond what is considered a politic apology in this group through this marked display of deference (Kádár 2010: 124).

It appears that, at last, this apology is tacitly accepted by the group. Yet this is not evidenced by means of an expression of absolution or rejection of the need to apologise (Robinson 2004), but rather by the fact that the apology response is no longer pursued by any of the members (Pomerantz 1984). The only explicit indication that the apology is accepted is the posting of an emoticon meaning "understood" by yet another participant (Wangmeng) in the next post. This emoticon arguably ratifies the apology through its sequential placement, although it is not a standard way of accepting an apology.

Thus far we have discussed a particular interactional practice, doing deference through apology, and responses to those apologies and noted that a number of posts were open to evaluation as polite or impolite. We now also argue that in the unfolding of posts in this thread, the interactional achievement of deference occasioned particular interpretations and evaluations of the relationships between the various participants, including relational connection between Angèle and the whole group, as well as

between Angēle and Alīcē, and Angēle and Juziheng. In this sense, this interactional practice (i.e. displaying deference) can also be characterised as a relational practice.

We can see across this thread, first of all, that Angēle attempts to re-establish relational connection with the group (having been previously reprimanded in another thread) through doing deference (posts 1, 3, 5). This is initially rejected, first by Alīcē (posts 2, 4), and then by Juziheng (post 9), on the grounds that Angēle's apology does not adhere to the correct format. Alīcē and Juziheng display evaluations of Angēle's relationship with themselves and across the group more broadly as threatened, by rebuffing Angēle's attempts to project greater relational connection. There is, however, a subsequent display of an evaluation of support for relational connection with Angēle by Alīcē in post 11, when she identifies Angēle as having entered the group on her invitation. She also defends Angēle's behaviour, albeit through denigrating her as a newbie. This occasions a further evaluation of support for relational connection between Juziheng and Angēle in the form of a display of solidarity empathy (post 12). The acceptance of Angēle's subsequent apology in post 13 allows Angēle to finally re-establish (tacit) relational connection with the group. However, it is her subsequent expression of thanks and the claim she was touched by Juziheng's prior display of solidarity empathy in post 15 (data not shown), which provides evidence that she has receipted Juziheng's display of solidarity empathy as relationship implicative (i.e. potentially consequential for their ongoing relationships). We thus have evidence that evaluations of support for relational connection have been interactionally achieved, at least between Angēle and Juziheng. Evaluations of support for relational connection between Angēle and Alīcē, and between Angēle and the group more broadly, on the other hand, remain tacit. Relational connection is also implicated across this social network, as a sense of in-group is projected through the collective and public socialisation of Angēle into group norms through sanction, and Angēle's pursuit of acceptance by members of this social network. This is achieved through a number of relational practices including, doing deference and responses to deference (i.e., rejection or tacit acceptance), as well as through a display of solidarity empathy.

We conclude our analysis by suggesting that intersecting with this relational practice and concurrent emergence of evaluations of threat and support for relational connection are identity claims/attributions initiated by a number of these members. Alīcē casts herself as an expert user through asserting what Angēle should do (thereby implicitly making claims to knowledge of group norms) (posts 2, 4, excerpts 2 and 4), implicitly sanctioning Juziheng's initial post (post 11, excerpt 7), and through explicitly casting others as newbies (post 11). Angēle is cast as a newbie, both by Alīcē (post 11) and by herself (posts 8, 13, excerpts 5 and 9), while Juziheng also casts herself as a newbie (post 12, excerpt 8) in claiming to have the characteristics of a newbie, namely, a lack of understanding of group norms. Crucially, it is these repeated orientations to expert versus newbie identities that allows us to characterise Angēle's interactional work as doing deference, as we have evidence that the participants are orienting to a hierarchical scale of varying degrees of user expertise in this online discussion board. In this way, we can characterise this interactional practice as consequential for their relationships, and open to evaluation as polite, in other words, a relational practice.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have examined a key relational practice that emerged from an analysis of threads in a popular Mainland Chinese online discussion board. We employed a broadly discursive approach in our analysis, although in focusing on participant evaluations of persons and relationships, we have specifically drawn from an interpretive approach grounded in a pragmatics informed by methods and research in CA. In this way, we have suggested that online discussion boards afford both meaningful interaction and relational work. However, we have maintained an analytical distinction between evaluations of identities and relationships. We believe the analysis of this thread provides support for our theoretical position that while relational practices may intersect with the emergence of identities, they remain distinct analytical concerns. We also suggest that the complexity of this analysis belies straightforward coding of forms and strategies, in that relational practices are interactionally achieved across sequences. As ever increasing numbers of interactions occur via different forms of CMC in a multitude of settings, however, considerable work remains to be done for scholars to better characterise the range of identities and relational practices that arise in different forms of CMC across cultures. This paper is offered as a modest contribution towards that endeavour.

Symbols used in morphological gloss

ADV	Adverbial
ASSC	Associative (-de)
C	Classifier
CP	Complement
CRS	Current relevant state
DIM	Diminutive
N	Negation
PASS	Passive
PL	Plural
PRT	Particle
PRV	Perfective
Q	Question marker

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