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RECONSIDERING CHINESE MODESTY:
HONG KONG AND MAINLAND CHINESE EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENTS OF COMPLIMENT RESPONSES

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Abstract

Compliments are usually intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations, yet for the outcome actually to be positive, both the compliment and the compliment response need to be handled appropriately. This paper focuses on different types of compliment responses, and explores Chinese people's evaluative judgements of these different types. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) argue that modesty is an important component of Chinese politeness, and that to blatantly accept a compliment is considered impolite. Several studies (e.g. Chen 1993, Yuan 1996 and Loh 1993) have indeed found that compliments are rejected more frequently in Chinese than in English, yet other evidence suggests that acceptance responses are also relatively common in Chinese. This paper explores a number of hypotheses associated with these issues. It reports a study carried out in Mainland China and Hong Kong, and discusses the notion of Chinese modesty in relation to the findings.

INTRODUCTION

Compliments are usually intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations, yet for the outcome actually to be positive, both the compliment and the compliment response need to be handled appropriately. This paper focuses on different types of compliment responses, and explores Chinese people's evaluative judgements of these different types. (See Spencer-Oatey, Ng and Dong 2000 for a comparison of British and Chinese judgements.) It pays particular attention to the notion of modesty, which is widely accepted as an important Chinese social value.

COMPLIMENT RESPONSE STRATEGIES

2.1 Taxonomies of Compliment Response Strategies

Researchers have found that there are many types of strategies available for responding to compliments. Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995) both suggest that for English they can be usefully divided into three broad categories, and Ye (1995) suggests the same for Chinese. The broad categories are listed below, along with a few examples (equivalent Chinese and English examples are given, except for 'Idiomatic rejection' which does not occur in English):

Acceptance

Appreciation e.g. *Thanks,* 谢谢 (*Xiexie)*

Agreement e.g. *I like it too,* 我也挺喜欢的 (*Wo ye ting xihuan de*)

Rejection/Non-acceptance

Denial e.g. *No, I didn't do it well.* 不，做的不好 (*Bu, zuode bu hao)*

Idiomatic rejection (an idiomatic phrase that is routinely used to refuse a compliment) e.g. 你过奖了 (*ni guo jiang le;* lit. 'you praise me too much')

Self-Praise Avoidance/Acceptance with Amendment

Explanatory comment e.g. *A friend gave it to me,* 朋友送的 (*Pengyou songde)*

Switch of focus e.g. *Have some more since you like it* 你喜欢吃就多吃点儿 (*Ni xihuan chi jiu duo chi yidiar*)

(See Spencer-Oatey, Ng and Dong 2000 for a comparison of the three different taxonomies and a more comprehensive list of examples.)

Pomerantz (1978), in her classic study of compliment responses, drew attention to the dilemma faced by complimentees: on the one hand, there is pressure to agree with the compliment; on the other hand, there is pressure to avoid self-praise. Leech (1983) proposes two politeness maxims that help draw attention to this dilemma: the *Modesty Maxim* and the *Agreement Maxim.* The Modesty Maxim states that modesty helps to

maintain friendly relations, and that there are two ways of being modest: (a) minimize praise of self (i.e. avoid boasting) and (b) maximize dispraise of self (i.e. denigrate oneself). The Agreement Maxim states that agreement helps to maintain friendly relations, and that there are two ways of doing this: a) minimize disagreement with others and b) maximize agreement with them. So recipients of compliments face the following conflicting constraints: if they uphold the maxim of agreement (e.g. by agreeing with the compliment), they may flout the maxim of modesty; yet if they uphold the maxim of modesty (e.g. by denying the compliment), they may flout the maxim of agreement. It is possible, therefore, that different languages/cultural groups may develop different conventions for managing this conflict; in other words, that certain groups may develop preferences (in terms of frequency of use and of evaluative reaction) for certain types of strategies in given situations in comparison with others.

2.2 Modesty and Compliment Responses

Although Leech (1983) identifies two ways of being modest, he seems to take the second option (maximization of dispraise of self) as conveying greater modesty than simple minimization of self-praise. This is a perspective that is also taken by Gu (1990) in his extended discussion of politeness phenomenon in modern Chinese. Gu proposes the *Self-denigration Maxim* to describe and explain Chinese modesty, and suggests that it consists of two parts: (a) denigrate self and (b) elevate other. He gives an authentic example of an interchange between a Mainland Chinese (M) and a Singaporean Chinese (S) to illustrate how Chinese speakers tend to denigrate themselves and elevate their addressees in order to be modest and hence 'polite' (translation is literal):

M:	nin guixing? 您*贵姓?*	M:	Your precious surname?
S:	xiao di xing Li. 小弟姓郦	S:	Little brother's surname is Li.
	nin zunxing? 您尊姓?		Your respectable surname?
M:	jianxing Zhang. 贱姓章	M:	My worthless surname is Zhang

Gu 1990: 246

Gu does not explicitly discuss compliments and compliment responses, but his self-denigration maxim clearly implies that to give a modest response involves self-denigration.

Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) take a very similar perspective and argue as follows:

> To understate one's ability, expertise, strength, or competence and to engage in self-effacing talk are an integral part of the Chinese socialization process. ... When receiving a compliment, for example, a Chinese would employ the ritual of *keqi* ['politeness'] and automatically say the phrase *bu hao bu hao* (不好 不好; 'not good') or *nali nali?* (那里那里; 'where?' meaning 'not really') and be apologetic. To blatantly accept a compliment is considered impolite.
>
> Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998:47

In other words, according to Gao and Ting-Toomey, to be modest (and hence 'polite') in Chinese involves rejection or non-acceptance of the compliment, and if a compliment is explicitly accepted (such as by an appreciation comment like *thank you* or by an agreement comment like *I like it too*) this is considered immodest and hence impolite.

Chen (1993) explains that rejection of a compliment in Chinese is not necessarily substantive, but rather is primarily ritualistic:

> The norm of Chinese society ... is to be modest. This does not mean that the Chinese do not care about the positive needs of the complimenter; rather, the social norm is such that the complimenter does not expect an agreement. Nor does it mean that the Chinese do not think positively of themselves. All they need to do is to *appear* humble, not necessarily to *think* humbly of themselves.
>
> Chen 1993: 67

In other words, these various authors argue that modesty in Chinese is associated with surface-level/routinized self-deprecation, and for compliment responses this typically means ritualistically refusing the compliment in some way. The implied corollary of this argument is that failure to do this is likely to result in negative evaluations. And the implication is that social groups that do not routinely do this (e.g. English

speaking societies such as the U.S.A. and Britain) are less modest than Chinese people.

2.3 Studies of Compliment Responses in Chinese

A number of people have carried out empirical studies of compliment responses in Chinese, including Chen (1993), Loh (1993), Ye (1995) and Yuan (1996). What, then, did they find about people's use of acceptance/agreement responses and ritualistic rejection/non-acceptance responses? Did the patterns of use in their data support the generalized claims described in the last section? Table 1 shows the percentage frequencies that these researchers found. [2]

Table 1 Frequencies of selected types of Compliment Responses in Chinese

	Acceptance/Agreement	**Rejection/Non-Acceptance**
Chen (1993) PRC students in China	1.03%	50.70%
Loh (1993) HK students in Britain	41.00%	22.00%
Ye (1995) PRC students in China	20.20%	8.20%
Yuan (1996) PRC students in China[3]	59.72%	27.68%

In addition, a recent study by Rose and Ng (1999) asked respondents to rank order compliment responses belonging to the three broad categories 'accept', 'deflect', 'reject' (along with a fourth one, 'say nothing at all'). The Cantonese respondents, who were university students in Hong Kong (henceforth HK), gave the following mean rank orderings: accept = 1.79, deflect = 2.24, reject = 2.25, no response = 3.72 (1 = most preferred strategy; 4 = least preferred strategy).

These figures show a number of things. Firstly, except for Chen's study, they suggest that acceptance/agreement responses are by no means uncommon in Chinese, and that such types of responses are thus presumably not necessarily judged to be too immodest. Secondly, they indicate that 'other' types of responses to compliments (i.e. 'self-praise avoidance'/ 'acceptance with amendment') are common in Chinese. Ye (1995) found, for example, that 'acceptance with amendment' was the most common broad type of response (47.2%), of which downgrading (e.g. 马马虎虎 mama huhu; 'just so so') was the most frequent strategy (17.3%). Loh (1993) also found that downgrading was quite a common response (16.5%), and Chen (1993) found that expression of embarrassment (e.g. 不好意思 (bu hao yisi, 'I'm embarrassed') was quite frequent (26.10%). Presumably, therefore, this category of responses is thought to be appropriate on many occasions, and hence sufficiently modest. Thirdly, the figures show a fair amount of variation across the studies as to the relative frequencies of the broad types of compliment responses, perhaps because of variations in sample size, research design factors and/or sampling differences.

So it seems that these empirical findings are somewhat in contrast with the generalized claims described in the previous section. Clearly more research is needed, and it would be particularly valuable to gather authentic data in a variety of contexts in order to gain further insights into the ways in which Chinese people really respond to compliments. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored how people evaluate or react to different types of compliment responses. As quoted above, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) maintain that it is considered impolite to blatantly accept a compliment, yet the empirical studies suggest that Chinese people do use this response strategy. So how do Chinese people evaluate the acceptance/agreement responses compared with rejection/denial responses? This study focuses on this issue, and explores the following hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1: Acceptance/agreement responses to compliments will be evaluated negatively by Chinese respondents, because such types of response flout the Modesty/Self-Denigration Maxim.
>
> Hypothesis 2: Rejection/non-acceptance responses to compliments will be evaluated positively by Chinese respondents, because such types of response uphold the Modesty/Self-Denigration Maxim.

We decided to explore these hypotheses using Chinese respondents in Mainland China. However, we were curious to know whether the findings would be the same in other Chinese communities, since as Bond *et al.* (2000: 52) point out, several studies have found differences in the cultural values of different Chinese

communities. So we also collected data in HK, and we are currently planning further data collection in Taiwan and Singapore. Since English is an official language in HK, and since HK people may therefore have been influenced by English language conventions for responding to compliments (Holmes 1986; Herbert 1989; Chen 1993, Loh 1993, Ylanne-McEwen 1993), we formulated the following two hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 3: HK Chinese respondents will evaluate acceptance/agreement responses to compliments less negatively than Mainland Chinese respondents, because they are more influenced by the supposed English language norm of accepting compliments.
>
> Hypothesis 4: HK Chinese respondents will evaluate rejection/non-acceptance responses to compliments less positively than Mainland Chinese respondents, because they are more influenced by the supposed English language norm of dispreferring rejection responses to compliments.

3. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

A questionnaire (see the Appendix) was used to explore these hypotheses, so that comparable data could be obtained in HK and Mainland China. Naturally, people's evaluations of compliment responses in real life are influenced by many non-verbal and vocalization features, which a written questionnaire cannot begin to probe. Nevertheless, a questionnaire of this kind can provide a useful starting point for further more authentic research.

3.1 Design of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised five scenarios, all of which contained a compliment on someone's successful performance/achievement, such as coming top in an examination. In all cases, the person who was complimented had clearly done well, so all of the compliments that were paid appeared to be sincere. The relationship between the complimenter and complimentee varied in power and distance (teacher - student, close friends, mother - son, strangers, unfamiliar peers) across the five scenarios, in order to check for the influence of these variables.

For each scenario, five different responses were listed: two acceptance responses, two rejection responses, and one deflection response. For the acceptance responses, one was the British stereotypical rejoinder *thank you*, and the other was an explicit agreement with the compliment, such as *Yes, I'm really pleased with the mark.* For the rejection responses, one was the Chinese stereotypical idiomatic rejoinder *bu, ni guo jiang le* 不你过奖了 ('no you're flattering me'), and the other was an explicit denial of the compliment, such as *no, I did badly.* Each scenario also included one other type of response, which seemed more like a deflection or self-praise avoidance response. This was included primarily to add variety. The order in which the different types of responses were presented in each scenario was randomized.

Respondents were asked to evaluate each of the responses in terms of appropriateness, conceit, and impression conveyed (favourable/bad). Three 5-point Likert-type rating scales were listed under each compliment response, and respondents were asked to circle the numbers on these scales that corresponded to their reactions to that response. For each scenario, respondents were also asked to add some explanatory comments, if they had rated any of the responses negatively (circling numbers 1 or 2) in terms of the impression it conveyed.

The questionnaire used in Mainland China was printed in simplified characters and the one used in HK was printed in traditional characters.

3.2 The Respondents

The questionnaires were completed by university students in HK and Mainland China. They were distributed during breaks in class, and filled in immediately. In HK, only students who had been brought up in HK and were ethnic Chinese were included in the sample. The numbers of students who completed the questionnaires were as follows: 168 Mainland Chinese (67 in Guilin and 101 in Shanghai), and 158 HK Chinese. There were slightly more female respondents than male in both regions (ranging from 54% in Mainland China to 63% in HK).

4. EVALUATIONS OF ACCEPTANCE RESPONSES

4.1 Quantitative Results

As explained in section 3, respondents from the two regions, Mainland China and Hong Kong, evaluated each of the compliment responses for appropriateness, conceit, and impression conveyed (favourable/bad). The mean judgements (and standard deviations) on each of these scales for the acceptance responses, averaged across the five situations, are given in Table 2, along with analysis of variance results showing the effect of region on the ratings of the acceptance responses.

Table 2 Mean evaluations (and standard deviations) of Acceptance Compliment Responses, and Analysis of Variance results, according to Region

	Mainland Chinese	**HK Chinese**	**F**	**df**	***p***	**beta²**
'Agree': appropriateness	3.60 (.62)	3.55 (.61)	.48	1,316	.49	.00
'Agree': conceit	3.23 (.72)	3.24 (.63)	.02	1,317	.88	.00
'Agree': impression	3.53 (.66)	3.47 (.59)	.80	1,316	.37	.00
Acceptance rejoinder: appropriateness	4.15 (.56)	4.05 (.64)	2.30	1,316	.13	.01
Acceptance rejoinder: conceit	3.76 (.69)	3.94 (.70)	5.45	1,316	.02*	.02
Acceptance rejoinder: impression	4.09 (.58)	4.03 (.63)	.86	1,317	.35	.00

* Significant at the 95% level

Note: Ratings based on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all appropriate/very conceited/gives a very bad impression*) to 5 (*very appropriate/not at all*

As can be seen from the figures in Table 2, Mainland and HK Chinese respondents' evaluations of the acceptance responses were very similar. The acceptance rejoinder (henceforth, AR) *thank you* was evaluated quite positively by both groups, and the agreement responses were evaluated fairly neutrally. Neither of the acceptance responses was evaluated as sounding conceited. The analysis of variance results show that region did not have a significant effect on any of the judgements apart from the level of conceit associated with the AR, and with that only 2% of the variance was attributed to region, indicating that the difference is not at all meaningful.

So hypothesis 1, which predicted that acceptance/agreement responses to compliments would be evaluated negatively, was clearly contradicted. Similarly, Hypothesis 3, which predicted that Hong Kong respondents would evaluate such responses less negatively than Mainland Chinese respondents, was not supported.

4.2 Qualitative Results

213 Chinese respondents (138 Mainland Chinese and 75 HK Chinese) added explanatory comments on their questionnaires. Of these, 80 people (56 Mainland Chinese and 24 HK Chinese) made comments on one or more of the agreement responses, and 18 people (15 Mainland Chinese and 3 HK Chinese) made comments on one or more of the AR responses.

In keeping with the positive ratings of the AR responses, there were only 24 comments (20 Mainland Chinese and 4 HK) on the negative aspects of saying *thank you*. A few people (from both groups) commented that *thank you* showed conceit, and/or that it showed a lack of involvement because of the brevity of the response.

There were 132 comments altogether (88 Mainland Chinese and 44 HK Chinese) on the agreement responses, which suggests that agreement responses are somewhat more problematic than AR responses. As expected, the most frequent criticism was that they conveyed too much conceit or boasting; for example:

Mainland Chinese: (1) 太锋芒毕露 (showing off one's abilities too much)

HK Chinese: (2) 太自大 (too arrogant)

There were 87 comments like this (56 Mainland Chinese and 31 HK Chinese), suggesting that both groups of respondents have some concerns over the link between 'agreement' and 'conceit'.

For the agreement responses, the other main concern, which again was shown by respondents from both groups, was about complacency/over-confidence, sometimes with a suggestion that it was unfounded. For example, there were 24 comments (16 Mainland Chinese and 8 HK Chinese) as follows:

Mainland Chinese: (3) 过于骄傲，给人感到有声势，长期看来不可能做常胜将军
(too conceited, sounds like bluffing; in the long run it's impossible always to be number one)

HK Chinese: (4) 过分自满 (too complacent)

It seems, therefore, that although a minority of respondents found acceptance and/or agreement responses conceited, the majority

5. EVALUATIONS OF REJECTION RESPONSES

5.1 Quantitative Results

Respondents from the two regions also evaluated each of the 'rejection' compliment responses for appropriateness, conceit, and impression conveyed (favourable/bad). The mean judgements (and standard deviations) of these responses, averaged across the five situations, for each of the scales, are given in Table 3, along with analysis of variance results showing the effect of region on the ratings of the rejection responses.

Table 3 Mean evaluations (and standard deviations) of 'Rejection' Compliment Responses, and Analysis of Variance results, according to Region

	Mainland Chinese	**HK Chinese**	**F**	**df**	***p***	**beta²**
'Disagree': appropriateness	2.17 (.63)	2.97 (.70)	118.42	1,318	<.001*	.27
'Disagree': conceit	3.21 (.87)	3.50 (.64)	11.23	1,313	.001*	.04
'Disagree': impression	2.36 (.63)	3.04 (.64)	89.75	1,313	<.001*	.22
Rejection rejoinder: appropriateness	3.09 (.73)	3.98 (.66)	128.66	1,316	<.001*	.29
Rejection rejoinder: conceit	3.47 (.69)	3.99 (.68)	44.04	1,314	<.001*	.12
Rejection rejoinder: impression	3.18 (.71)	3.94 (.67)	93.16	1,303	<.001*	.24

* Significant at the 95% level

As can be seen from Table 3, region had a much greater effect on people's evaluations of the 'rejection' compliment responses than the 'acceptance' compliment responses.

For the 'disagreement' responses, Mainland Chinese respondents judged them to be somewhat inappropriate and as conveying a somewhat negative impression, whereas the HK respondents had more neutral opinions. Both groups evaluated them neutrally in terms of conceit. The analysis of variance results show that these regional differences are statistically very significant, and the beta square figures suggest that the variable had a meaningful effect on the respondents' evaluations. For appropriateness, 27% of the variance is attributable to region, and for impression, the figure is 22%.

For the 'rejection rejoinder' (henceforth, RR) responses, the HK respondents rated them fairly positively in terms of appropriateness, conceit and impression conveyed, whereas the Mainland Chinese respondents evaluated them more neutrally. The analysis of variance results show that these regional differences are again statistically very significant, and the beta square figures indicate that the differences are meaningful, especially for appropriateness and impression conveyed. For appropriateness, 29% of the variance is attributable to region, and for impression, the figure is 24%.

These results thus offer only limited support for Hypothesis 2, which predicted that rejection/non-acceptance responses would be evaluated positively. It is partially upheld for the HK respondents, in that they evaluated the RR responses positively. But it is not upheld for the HK respondents' evaluations of disagreement responses, which were neutral. Nor is it upheld for the Mainland Chinese evaluations, which were negative for the disagreement responses and neutral for the RR responses. These results also contradict Hypothesis 4, which predicted that HK evaluations would be less positive than Mainland Chinese evaluations.

5.2 Qualitative Results

183 Chinese respondents (129 Mainland Chinese and 54 HK Chinese) made comments on one or more of the 'disagreement' responses, and 59 Chinese respondents (49 Mainland Chinese and 10 HK Chinese) made comments on one or more of the RR responses.

For both groups of respondents, the 'disagreement' responses attracted the largest number of comments. There were 459 comments altogether: 349 made by the Mainland Chinese and 110 made by the HK Chinese. This suggests that, in line with the quantitative data, the 'disagreement' responses were rather more problematic than the RR responses, and that they were also more problematic for the Mainland Chinese than for the HK Chinese. A number of respondents (74 Mainland Chinese and 27 HK Chinese) commented on the inaccuracy or untruthfulness of the 'disagreement' responses, and for many of the Mainland Chinese, this led them to describe the 'disagreement' responses as 'too modest'. There were 120 Mainland Chinese comments like this, whereas there were only 29 HK Chinese comments that made this point. The Mainland Chinese also associated excessive modesty with falseness/insincerity and with conceit; for example:

Mainland Chinese: (5) 过分的谦虚等于骄傲 (Excessive modesty equals conceit)

(6) 在老师面前表现得过分谦虚有虚伪感 (Behaving too modestly in front of the teacher seems insincere)

There were 117 Mainland Chinese comments (compared with 35 HK Chinese comments) that the 'disagreement' responses were insincere or false, and there were 48 Mainland and 4 HK Chinese comments that they showed conceit.

The importance of superficially appearing modest is also very dependent on participant relations, especially in Mainland China. There were 64 Mainland and 18 HK Chinese comments that referred to role relations in evaluating the 'disagreement' responses. Some people commented that 'disagreement' responses were too formal or polite for the context (there were 15 Mainland Chinese comments like this), or that they seemed too cold or distant (there were 29 Mainland and 10 HK Chinese comments like this); for example:

HK Chinese: (7) 无需在亲人前自谦
(There's no need to denigrate yourself in front of people who are close to you)

Mainland Chinese: (8) 对好友的恭维过于谦虚有生疏感
(If one's too modest about a good friend's compliment, it seems too distant)

HK Chinese: (9) 我认为面对自己的母亲 答案应该忠肯和直率，不需太客气
(I think one should be honest and straightforward in replying to one's mother; there's no need to sound too polite)

A very small number of the Chinese respondents (especially compared with the British respondents; see Spencer-Oatey, Ng and Dong 2000) linked a 'disagreement' response with confidence issues. 14 Mainland Chinese and 2 HK Chinese comments referred to lack of confidence or low self-esteem.

In terms of the negative implications of a 'disagreement' response for the person giving the compliment and/or for related others, both the Mainland Chinese and HK Chinese made a few comments. 17 Mainland Chinese and 8 HK Chinese comments argued that a 'disagreement' response could suggest poor judgement, could put others down, could make others feel uncomfortable, or could imply disrespect; for example:

Mainland Chinese: (10) 这个回答会打击祝贺他的人的兴致和好意 (This response could attack the kind intent and interest of the person paying the compliment)

(11) 看似李明的回答很谦虚，但在他的回答中隐含了我的足球踢得不好，你说我踢得 好，你的眼光可不怎么样。 (It seems as though Li Ming's response is very modest, but his response implies "I played badly, but you said I played well, so your judgement can't be very good")

HK Chinese: (12) 令老师尴尬 (makes the teacher embarrassed)

For the RR responses, the number of comments made by the two groups of respondents again reflected the differences in the mean evaluations shown in Table 4: the Mainland Chinese made 75 comments and the HK Chinese made 12. It seems that for the HK respondents, the only slight reservations they had about it was its appropriateness for the context. Three comments said that the RR response was too distant or 'polite' for the context, and one evaluated it as too modest and four as insincere or false. The Mainland Chinese, on the other hand, were much more concerned about these contextual factors. 23 comments mentioned that the RR response was too distant or 'polite' for the context, 10 comments that it was too modest, and 21 comments that it therefore sounded insincere or false.

None of the HK respondents interpreted RR responses as having any kind of negative implications for the person giving the compliment or for related others, and there were only 3 Mainland Chinese comments about this.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that modesty in Chinese is managed in complex ways. Firstly, acceptance/agreement responses are by no means necessarily unacceptable, and this is particularly true of the acceptance rejoinder '*thank you'*. Loh (1993), Ye (1995), Yuan (1996) and Rose and Ng (1999) all found that acceptance/agreement responses were used more frequently or ranked more positively than rejection/non-acceptance responses, and the results of this study are in line with this. It seems, therefore, that Gao and Ting-Toomey's (1998:47) claim that a Chinese will automatically reject a compliment, and that 'to blatantly accept a compliment is considered impolite' (1998:47) is a misleading over-simplification. Although the qualitative comments suggest that some people were concerned about such responses sounding conceited, the same concerns were expressed by British respondents (see Spencer-Oatey, Ng and Dong 2000). So they are obviously not a particularly 'Chinese' concern. The results suggest that both Mainland Chinese and HK Chinese respondents feel that acceptance/agreement responses can often be appropriate, even though they also have the potential to sound conceited (e.g. if spoken with an arrogant tone of voice).

Secondly, the results suggest that rejection/non-acceptance responses are not necessarily positively evaluated, especially disagreement/denial responses. Loh (1993), Ye (1995) and Yuan (1996) all found that other types of responses were more frequent, and the results of this study are in line with this. It seems that some people (especially in Mainland China) feel that such responses convey excessive modesty, and thus conversely convey conceit. So once again, Gao and Ting-Toomey's (1998:47) claim seems to be very over-simplified.

It seems, therefore, that appropriate modesty in Chinese is not automatically associated with self-denigration. Acceptance responses can be judged to be appropriately modest (i.e. not conceited), and conversely, rejection/non-acceptance responses can be judged to be too modest and hence conceited.

An unexpected result that emerged from the study was the difference between Mainland Chinese and HK Chinese evaluations of the rejection/non-acceptance responses. Contrary to our hypothesis (Hypothesis 4), the rejection/non-acceptance responses were less acceptable to Mainland Chinese than to HK Chinese, and in fact many Mainland Chinese respondents judged them to be too modest and hence conceited. This finding is in than Loh's study of HK Chinese, and Rose and Ng, in their study involving HK Chinese, found that rejection and deflection responses were rank ordered virtually identically in terms of preferred strategy. It seems, therefore, HK and Mainland Chinese differ somewhat in their conventions of use of rejection/non-acceptance responses, and that people's judgements of conceit/modesty relate to these conventions of use rather than to 'absolute' statements such as 'self-effacing talk is modest talk'.

But how might we explain the difference in Mainland and HK Chinese conventions of use? Gu (1990)

points out that, in terms of the use of denigrative and elevative expressions, neutral expressions have become more common in Mainland China, especially among younger generations. And Chen (1996) notes that traditional Chinese politeness strategies that are still widely used in Xi'an were judged to be 'old-fashioned' or even 'hypocritical' by informants in Shenzhen (a city very close to HK). So perhaps reactions to compliment responses are similarly changing. Both Gu (personal communication in 2000) and Chen (1996) suggest that these changes in conventions of use in Mainland China are due to Western influences, and that they are likely to be particularly noticeable in major cities, especially those on the coast. Our data were collected in Shanghai (a very large coastal city) and Guilin (a much smaller inland city), and further tests show that there were indeed significant differences in several of the ratings given by the two sets of respondents for the non-rejection responses (although the amount of variance attributable to place was 7.6% or less). Interestingly, though, for the mean ratings with significant differences, the ratings given by the Guilin respondents were significantly more negative than those given by the Shanghai respondents![4] Furthermore, most of the Guilin respondents were students of Chinese, whereas many of the Shanghai respondents were students of international business! So obviously it is not easy to predict which places and which types of respondents are likely to be more 'Westernized'.

This problem also applies to the HK results. Clearly, HK is a city that has been influenced by the West for a considerable period of time. Yet Ma and Fung (1999) found that HK respondents rated themselves more positively on traditional values such as *ethical* and *self-disciplined*, than they rated Mainland Chinese (although there was no significant difference in their ratings of *humble*). Gu (personal communication in 2000) suggests that HK Chinese could be concerned to protect their Chinese identity, because of their colonial past, whereas Mainland Chinese do not feel the same need to maintain their cultural identity through upholding traditional Chinese politeness norms. This argument makes intuitive sense to us.

So perhaps Mainland Chinese are moving towards a preference for more 'neutral' responses (as compared with rejection responses) faster than HK Chinese. Clearly, more empirical research is needed to explore such a claim. The research procedure used in the present study is obviously limited in various ways. It gathered questionnaire data rather than examples of authentic language use; the questionnaire itself only used a small selection of compliment response strategies from the full Chinese taxonomy, and even more importantly, combinations of strategies were not included. In future research, it would be useful to sample different generational groups in Mainland China and Hong Kong to explore the possibility of changing attitudes both within and across regional and generational groups. And while doing this, attention will need to be paid to the influence of contextual variables (such as relationship between the participants), as well as to the specific compliment response strategies used. If possible, it would be valuable to gather authentic data, and to check people's reactions to responses by collecting post-event feedback comments. In the meantime, however, caution needs to be exercised over predicting too simplistically how Chinese modesty will be reflected in language use.

Notes

[1] The authors would like to thank Liu Shaozhong, Xing Jianyu and Harry Wang for helping in the development of the questionnaire; Kang Qing and Liao Fengrong for administering the questionnaires in China; and Dong Li for inputting the questionnaire data onto the computer.

[2] Since each study uses slightly different categorizations of sub-categories, we have made some classification adjustments for comparative purposes. 'Acceptance' includes only the strategies of *appreciation token* and *agreement*; 'Rejection' includes only clear non-acceptances, such as *denial* and *idiomatic rejection*.

[3] Unlike the other studies, Yuan's (1996) figures do not reflect mutually exclusive categories, but rather show the percentage of responses that included this semantic component. Also, 'downgraders' were included within the category 'denial/rejection' and no information is provided on the frequency of these sub-components. So the 'denial/rejection' percentage given here is inflated to an unknown extent compared with the other studies.

[4] **Table 4** Mean evaluations (and standard deviations) of 'Rejection' Compliment Responses, and Analysis of Variance results, according to Location within Mainland China

	Guilin	**Shanghai**	**F**	**df**	***p***	**beta²**
'Disagree': appropriateness	2.00 (.60)	2.27 (.62)	7.801	1,161	.006*	.046

'Disagree': conceit	3.21 (.95)	3.21 (.83)	.000	1,159	.997	.000
'Disagree': impression	2.24 (.60)	2.44 (.63)	4.110	1,160	.044	.025
Rejection rejoinder: appropriateness	2.84 (.68)	3.26 (.71)	13.153	1,159	<.001*	.076
Rejection rejoinder: conceit	3.36 (.73)	3.55 (.65)	2.901	1,159	.09	.018
Rejection rejoinder: impression	2.98 (.73)	3.32 (.69))	8.869	1,147	.003*	.057

* Significant at the 95% level

Note: Ratings based on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all appropriate/very conceited/gives a very bad impression*) to 5 (*very appropriate/not at all conceited/gives a favourable impression*)

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APPENDIX

THE SCENARIOS

1. John has just found out that he came top in an examination, after working really hard for it. After class, his teacher calls him over:

Teacher:	Congratulations, John! You did very well.	John:	No, no, I did badly.
		John:	I was lucky with the questions, I guess.
		John:	Yes, I'm really pleased with the mark.
		John:	Thank you.
		John:	No, you're flattering me!

2. John has just given a presentation to his class, which he feels went quite well. As he is leaving, one of his close friends, Peter, comes up:

Friend:	That was great, John. Your talk was really interesting!	John:	Thanks. Your presentation was excellent too.

John: Yes, I thought it went quite well myself.
John: No, you're flattering me!
John: No, no, it was no good.
John: Thanks.

3. John has just cooked an elaborate dinner for some family friends, and is pleased with how the dishes tasted. After they have gone, his mother says:

Mother: Well done, John! The food tasted lovely.

John: No, no, it was no good.
John: Thanks.
John: Do you really think so, mum?
John: No, you're flattering me!
John: Yes, the dishes turned out well, didn't they.

4. John is studying for a degree in French. One day as he is walking through the town, a French tourist asks him for directions. He answers him fluently, and afterwards the tourist comments:

Tourist: You speak excellent French!

John: No, far from it. I'm just a beginner.
John: I'm studying it at university actually.
John: Thank you.
John: No, you're flattering me!
John: I'm glad you think so!

5. John has just played in a university football match and scored a winning goal. Afterwards, a fellow student whom he knows slightly says:

Fellow student: Congratulations! You played brilliantly!

John: Thanks. I felt in good form today.
John: No, you're flattering me!
John: Thanks.
John: Not really, it was a team effort.
John: No, no I didn't play well.

For each scenario, respondents rated each of John's responses on the following Likert-type 5-point scales:

Not at all Appropriate (1)	Very Appropriate (5)
Very Conceited (1)	Not at all Conceited (5)
Gives a very bad Impression (1)	Gives a favourable Impression (5)

For each scenario, respondents were also asked to explain some of their ratings:

If you think any of John's responses give a bad impression (i.e. you have circled 1 or 2 on any of the 'impression' scales), please explain why.

'恭维'与应对

情景

1. 李明刚知道，经过刻苦学习，他在考试中考得第一名。下课后，老师叫他

。

老 师: 李明，恭喜您! 您考得很好!

1. 李 明: 不,不,考得不好。

2. 李 明: 我想这回我是走运罢了

3. 李 明: 是的，我对这次的分数很满意。

4. 李 明: 谢 谢。

5. 李 明: 不，您过奖了。

2. 李 明 刚向同学们做了一次演讲，他自我感觉还不错。临走时，他的好友王洪走过来:

王洪: 太棒了，李明!你讲得很有趣!

1. 李 明: 你的演说也很成功呀。

2. 李明: 对,我也感到效果不错。

3. 李明: 不，你过奖了。

4. 李明: 不,不,讲得不好。

5. 李明: 谢谢。

3. 李明为来他家里的朋友做了一顿精致的晚餐,自己也感到每道菜都色香味美。等客人走后，他的母亲说:

母亲: 干得好，明明。今天的菜很好吃!

1. 李明: 不，不，不太好。

2. 李明: 谢谢。

3. 李明: 妈，真的吗?

4. 李明: 不，你过奖了。

5. 李明: 对，味道还不错，是不是?

4. 李明在攻读英语专业。 一天，他上街时，一位英国旅客向他问路。 李明很流利地回答了他的问题，于是，那位英国旅客说:

旅客: 您的英语好极了!

1. 李明: 不，还差远咧。 我刚开始学。

2. 李明: 我在大学念的就是英语。

3. 李明: 谢谢。

4. 李明: 不，您过奖了。

5. 李明: 您这么看我很高兴。

5. 李明刚参加了一场学生足球赛, 而且比赛中踢进了致胜的一球。 一位不很熟悉的同学向他说:

同学: 恭贺您, 踢得真好!

1. 李明: 谢谢, 我今天状态不错。

2. 李明: 不 , 您过奖了。

3. 李明: 谢谢。

4. 李明: 不是嘛, 是全队的功劳。

5. 李明: 不,不, 踢得不好。

答卷人对 李明在每一情景中的各种回答按 Likert 式5分级制进行打分:

很不得体 (1) 很得体 (5)

很骄傲 (1) 毫不骄傲 (5)

给以很不好的印象 (1) 给以良好的印象 (5)

问卷同时要求答卷人对每一情景中的某些打分情况加以解释/进行说明:

如果您认为李明的某回答给以不好的印象 (譬如您在任何一组印象级别号中圈了 1 或 2), 请您说明