Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between politeness behaviour and rhetoric by examining the case of the historical Chinese pragmatic act of refusal in epistolary discourse. The analysis presented is based on the hypothesis that it is possible to identify culture-specific choices of rhetorical patterns in certain pragmatic and relational acts. Such patterns, in particular in written genres, originate in culturally-situated rhetorical traditions.

Keywords: politeness, rhetorical patterns, Chinese, refusals

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore historical Chinese politeness, with special focus on the relationship between politeness behaviour and rhetoric. The topic is not only relevant to Chinese/East Asian socio-pragmatic research but also to the theorization of linguistic politeness. This is because the exploration of the relationship between politeness and rhetoric fills an important knowledge gap in politeness research, since rhetoric is regretfully neglected in the field. Although some scholars — notably Cherry (1988), Magnusson (1992) and Klein (1994) — applied rhetoric to approach linguistic politeness, and also some works on contrastive rhetoric touched on politeness issues (e.g., Kaplan 1966; Kennedy 1998; Zhu 2005), in discursive politeness research rhetorical inquiries have been marginal.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on a hypothesis that in certain forms of historical Chinese written discourse — and, supposedly, in written discourse in other cultural settings — the polite message in a given pragmatic act was often transmitted by means of certain predetermined rhetorical patterns. While such patterns are not necessarily
intrinsically culture-specific, the frequency with which they are applied may reflect certain culturally-situated practices (see more details in section 3).

This paper explores the pragmatic act of refusal and the rhetorical pattern assigned to it. Examining historical Chinese refusals fills a knowledge gap because, while some studies — such as Liao (1994); Chen et al. (1995); Chen (1996); Yang (2008); and Pan and Kádár (2011a) — have examined refusals in Chinese, no pragmatic study has explored this pragmatic act from a diachronic perspective, except (as far as I am aware) Knechtges’ (2004) noteworthy, modern rhetoric theory-based work on ritual refusals. This lack is surprising because refusal was regarded as a pivotal act in historical Chinese rhetoric: as Knechtges (2004: 11) shows, there is intensive metapragmatic discourse on the act of refusal in historical Chinese documents. This significance allocated to refusals is definitely not surprising, considering that ‘face’-threatening acts received much attention in proto-scientific Chinese discourse on interactional behaviour (see, for example, references in Zhai 1994, 2006).

The discursive function of historical Chinese refusals will be illustrated with the aid of a renowned Chinese text, which has so far been neglected in linguistic inquiries in spite of its various merits.

1.1. Terminology

Technically, this paper differentiates two labels, namely: a) ‘rhetorical pattern’, a technical term loosely borrowed here from rhetorical works such as Fucilla (1956), and b) ‘politeness tool(s)’. Here, the former refers to the rhetorical chain of arguments applied to mitigate a refusal, and the latter refers to deferential expressions and ‘politeness strategies’ in a Brown and Levinsonian (1987) sense. In fact, the ‘border’ between the mitigating rhetorical patterns and politeness strategies is rather blurred because both are tools of relational work, and it can be claimed that a rhetorical pattern that mitigates a face-threatening act is a ‘macro’ politeness strategy (Kádár 2010). Yet, it is not fortunate to differentiate politeness strategy and rhetorical strategy in terms of size because politeness evaluations can also arise at the more macro (dis- course) level1. Therefore, the present paper makes a technical distinction between ‘rhetorical pattern’ and ‘politeness strategy’ from a different perspective: I argue that rhetorical patterns and politeness strategies accomplish different discursive work. That is, politeness strategies are utterance- and discourse-level phenomena that focus on relational, face, identity, etc. concerns, while rhetorical patterns are discourse-level phenomena that predominantly focus on persuasion, even if they ac-
accomplish this function by the means of politeness. This definition accords with the use of ‘rhetorical pattern’ (or ‘rhetorical strategy’) in rhetorical studies (see, for example, Holloway 2001), although it is limited to linguistic politeness. According to this paper’s hypothesis, performing a pragmatic act often necessitates using the same rhetorical pattern. The constancy of rhetorical patterns does not imply that politeness in Chinese ‘culture’ — or in any other cultural setting where this phenomenon can be observed — is homogenous. I believe that it is problematic to define ‘Chinese politeness’ as a bulk entity, and research of historical Chinese data indicates that manifestations of politeness differ according to various factors such as the interactants’ social class, the purpose of the interaction, gender, and age (see more in Pan and Kádár 2011a, b). Yet, as was shown by the historical Chinese data-based research (see section 2) leading to the authoring of this paper, while rhetorical strategies are adjusted to contextual factors, their conceptual ‘skeleton’ — the way in which one applies to the other’s ethos, pathos, or logos — is relatively constant. Importantly, the constancy of rhetorical argumentation does not mean that rhetorical patterns of politeness are ‘higher-order’ than other manifestations of politeness or that they have ‘universal’ value. Arguably, the relative constancy of rhetorical tools in the texts studied is partly due to a set of underlying forces and rhetorical exigencies — such as the traditional preference to follow rhetorical ‘models’ over individual creation when writing Classical Chinese prose (see, for example, Lu 1998) — the exploration of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, this constancy is also due to the fact that rhetorical patterns are bound with the act performed by a text or a part of a text. As Kasper (1990: 3) notes, speech acts can be successfully performed only by following certain culturally predetermined realization patterns, and it can be argued that in written prose the application of proper rhetorical pattern is part of the realization pattern of a given act (i.e., the purpose of a section or the whole text).

1.2. Scope

This research is of limited scope in two respects. Firstly, the present paper focuses on the speech act of ‘real’ refusal instead of the ‘ritual’ ones. As Gu (1990) and Chen et al. (1995) argue, refusal often becomes a ritual act in Chinese, and this is perhaps even more valid to historical Chinese communication in which the “rhetoric of [ritual] refusal” (Knechtges 2004: 6) was a preferred act (in a similar way to various historical ‘Western’ cultures, see, for example, Richards 2003: 27). Consequently, one should theoretically differentiate these two manifesta-
tions of refusal, even though it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear border between them.

A ‘ritual refusal’ here means an iconic act of refusal performed for its symbolic value (Bax 2010a), in order to attain relational goals (Kádár 2012 forthcoming). Because of this relational function, ritual refusals (and other ritualized pragmatic acts, by the way) are usually bound with lexical items such as tai mafan 太麻煩 (lit. ‘too troublesome’, i.e., ‘something causes you too much trouble’); when such a lexical item is used in the proper context it signals that the given pragmatic act is symbolical. Yet, in a larger body of cases rituality manifests itself on the discourse level. While discursive ritual acts also follow conventions — and so the evaluation of an act as ‘non-/ritual’ is influenced by felicity conditions, and in unmarked cases both the speaker and the hearer know whether an utterance is ritual or not — in some cases the interactants need to discursively ‘clarify’ whether a refusal is truly ritual. Such a case is shown by the following extract, which also illustrates that ‘clarifying’ the rituality of an utterance is usually a relatively simple process because rituality in historical Chinese (and also in the communicative norms of other cultures, see, for example, Taylor 1994) is often bound to repetition:

(1) 這個酒厚不過的。請一杯吃乾了。
    學生量淺。吃不去了。
    再請兩鐘無妨事。
    學生不敢做假。委實酒力不勝。
    真個不吃了。不敢勸了。

This wine is stronger. Please empty a cup.
This student of yours has a limited capacity, he cannot drink more. Let us empty two more cups, it will do no harm. This student of yours would never dare to lie to you: it is the truth that his drinking capacity is weak. If you truly cannot drink, I dare not beg you.

(cited in Kádár 2011: 60, 61)

This interaction, cited from a late imperial Chinese textbook, takes place between a host and a guest. The interactants here co-construct the interpretation of the given refusal as a non-ritual one. When the guest refuses first to drink more, the host ritually urges the other to drink. According to Chinese etiquette it is a must for the host to offer food and drink several times to the guest, and for the guest it is usually not sufficient to refuse an offer only once because a single refusal is often interpreted as ritual rather than real. Thus, in response the guest makes it clear that his refusal is sincere.
Secondly, since this paper pursues an interest in the relationship between politeness behaviour and rhetoric, its data only relies on cases of refusal where politeness clearly applies, that is interactions in which the refusing party is less powerful than their interactant.

2. Data

The research that led to the writing of this paper is based on a historical Chinese Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasty epistolary corpus of approximately 2230 letters, which contain 41 refusals. These materials were imputed and translated into English by the author. Letters provide a corpus pertinent for the expert of historical Chinese pragmatics — or, to more precisely describe the present research, pragmaphilology (Jacobs and Jucker 1995) — for two reasons. Firstly, letters belong to the class of the so-called Classical Chinese (wenyan 文言, 'refined language') genres, which are non-colloquial. The formality of historical Chinese letters does not negatively influence their relevance to historical politeness research. In Chinese thinking letter writing is a practical (yingyong 應用) activity, which primarily serves the conveyance of information. Its task-oriented character makes Chinese epistolary discourse relevant to the exploration of pragmatic acts and their relationship with rhetoric. On the other hand, due to their relative formality epistolary genres contain a wide variety of honorifics and/or other formal forms, and so they provide a noteworthy corpus to observe the role of these forms in the performance of pragmatic acts.

Secondly, the epistolary corpus studied provides a large amount of contextual information, that is, it is possible not only to track personal information of the interactants but also to reconstruct important discursive factors such as the receipt of a certain document. Consequently, these monologic texts can be studied as utterances in a wider discourse (see Culpeper and Kytö 2010, and also Voloshinov’s 1986 definition that monologues are dialogues in the larger context).

3. Politeness patterns: A rhetorical hypothesis

Historical Chinese rhetoric — a rhetorical tradition which is different in certain respects from the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition (see Qu 2009) — has a long written history (see an overview, for example, in Yuan and Zong 1995). Not only is there a large number of works that commemorate historical rhetoric in Chinese, but also many proto-scientific studies devoted to the art of persuasion.

From the perspective of critical politeness research it is an intriguing question to consider how this rhetorical tradition has influenced Chi-
nese politeness behaviour (in particular, written behaviour). Importantly, when setting out to answer this question the goal of the present research is rather modest. That is, I pursue an interest in illustrating that there are several patterns that are permanently present in certain pragmatic acts in historical Chinese written interactions, without making claims that such patterns are, as such, ‘exotically’ Chinese culture-specific. While various researchers involved in contrastive rhetoric, such as Hatim (1997) and Zhu (2005), claim that there are clear East vs. West rhetorical differences, this notion is somewhat problematic from the perspective of the discursive politeness researcher. As argued by Mills (2003) and Mills and Kádár (2011), it is problematic to make generalized claims about politeness practices in culture, not only because various social classes of a ‘culture’ make use of different practices of politeness, but also because intercultural and cross-cultural differences of politeness often fade after some in-depth examination. The problematic nature of making clear-cut intercultural comparisons is also confirmed by researchers of intercultural rhetoric such as Kirkpatrick (2007) and Mao (2009). In the exploration of Chinese, rhetoric stereotyping is particularly problematic because, as argued by Mao (2009: 45):

when Chinese rhetorical practices are characterized, without sufficient or nuanced analysis, as embodying or favoring patterns of communication that are indirect, inductive, analogical, or speaking through the voice of others, reification or abstracting from particularizing occasions of use is likely to occur, inevitably giving rise to misrepresentations and stereotypes. Under such paradigms of polarity, Chinese rhetoric easily becomes, or is seen as, the antithesis of Western rhetoric.

Accordingly, I do not share the view that ‘Eastern vs. Western’ rhetorical styles exist in terms of politeness. Yet, I believe it is possible to identify some culture-specific preferences for certain politeness rhetorical patterns. Such patterns may or may not be culture-specific per se but the frequency in which they are applied — that is their un/markedness (Watts 2003) — represents certain cultural values, and in this sense they are definitely culture-specific.

4. Historical Chinese politeness in written refusals

4.1. The rhetorical origin of historical Chinese epistolary refusal

Historical Chinese refusals seem to follow an ancient negative rhetorical pattern in which the aim is to convince the interlocutor to avoid
doing something. For a technical reason, this pattern will be referred to as ‘other advantage-oriented’ argumentation.

This pattern occurs already in ancient Chinese literature, and some of its most illustrative representations can be found in the early historical work *Zhan Guo Ce* (Strategies of the Warring States), a collection of anecdotes compiled between the 3rd and the 1st centuries B.C. Most of these anecdotes are interactions between rulers and philosophers on the matters of strategies and governance.

In order to illustrate this approach in practice, let us cite the following anecdote from the *Zhan Guo Ce*:

(2) 靖郭君將城薛，客多以諫。靖郭君謂謁者曰：「無為客通。」
齊人有請者曰：「臣請三言而已矣。益一言，臣請烹！」
靖郭君因見之。
客趨而進曰：「海大魚！」因反走。
君曰：「客有於此！」
客曰：「鄙臣不敢以死為戲！」
君曰：「亡，更言之！」
對曰：「君不聞大魚乎？網不能止，鉤不能牽，蕩而失水，則螻蟻得意焉。今夫齊， 亦君之水也。君長有齊陰， 奚以薛為？君失齊，
雖隆薛之城於天，猶之無益也。」
君曰：「善！」 轅城薛。

Jingguo Lord of Qi wanted to erect walls at the conquered land of Xue, and the wise all warned him against acting thus. Then Lord Jingguo told his official in charge of receptions:

− No wandering philosopher [i.e. potential advisor] should be allowed to audience.

Amongst the men of Qi Kingdom there was one who begged the official:

− This humble official begs to tell three words to the Lord. Telling one more word, this humble official prays to be cooked alive!

Then Lord Jingguo gave him an audience.

The wise men entered in an appropriate way, with respectful small steps, and said:

− Ocean’s Great Fish!
Then he prepared to leave.

The Lord said:

− Halt, philosopher!

The wise man said:

− This humble official would not dare to play with death by saying more than three words.

The Lord said:
— Enough, say more!
He responded:
— Have not you, Lord, heard about the Great Fish? No net can halt it, no hook can catch it. However, if it looses water and dehydrates, even mole crickets and ants can play with it as they like. Now, the Kingdom of Qi is your water, Lord. If you possess Qi forever, why do you need the land of Xue? If you, Lord, loose Qi by occupying Xue, you can erect the walls of Xue as high as Heaven but it shall be no use.
The Lord said:
— Wisely you spoke.
Then he stopped building walls in Xue.

Extract (2) takes place between an unknown philosopher and the Lord of the ancient state Qi 齊. It is a noteworthy piece as it illustrates the way in which a seemingly insolent utterance (“ocean’s great fish”) transforms into face-enhancing in historical Chinese persuasion.

As this interaction demonstrates, this form of historical Chinese rhetorical argumentation is based on the claim that acting in accordance with the persuader’s suggestion will serve the other’s interest even if this seems to contradict the recipient’s temporary interest/wish. An alternative of this argument is that acting in a certain way is without usefulness. This ‘other advantage-oriented’ argumentation is often connected with an appeal to the recipient’s emotions (pathos), i.e., the strategy of dong-zhi-yi-qing 動之以情 (lit. ‘move somebody with emotions’). Yet, the emotive aspect is relatively marginal: the most important part of this rhetorical pattern, by means of which facework/politeness is conveyed, is the indirect message that the speaker/writer undertakes persuasion because they are concerned about the other’s interest.

This type of argumentation is the basic pattern for refusals, as the following section will illustrate. The reason why this phenomenon is Chinese culture-specific is simple: in many other cultural contexts, such as the ‘Western’ (Hellenic-Roman) rhetorical tradition, it would be a somewhat ‘marked’ rhetorical approach to associate refusal, a conflictive act that inherently injures the recipient’s interest (Brown and Levinson 1987; Cameron 2001), with the claim that it brings long term advantage to the other. More precisely, while the other’s interest can become a point of argument in other cultures, it is definitely not a constant issue in refusal rhetoric, as shown by my cross-cultural investigation of medieval Hungarian and Chinese letters (Kádár, forthcoming). On the other hand, exploration of the historical Chinese epistolary corpus reveals that the ‘other advantage-oriented’ pattern is present in nearly every refusal (see quantitative research below).
While the constant use of this rhetorical pattern in refusals demonstrates that there are Chinese preferences for certain politeness rhetorical patterns, it does not support the notion that Eastern and Western rhetorical styles are different *per se*. Although this pattern is indirect, and indirectness is a feature typically associated with East Asian communication in contrastive rhetoric, research of historical European data, for instance, reveals that diachronical indirectness existed, for example, in medieval European writing style, even though it was arguably less the norm than in Chinese (see Bax 2010b: 67). Apart from preferences for the aforementioned rhetorical patterns, as the following section demonstrates, the uniqueness of Chinese politeness rhetoric also manifests itself in the use of some culture-specific politeness and rhetorical tools in refusals.

4.2. Historical Chinese refusals

While this research is basically qualitative, in order to illustrate the constancy of the rhetorical pattern it is worth first making a brief quantitative summary of the database. In the corpus of 230 letters, among the 41 refusals 38 apply the rhetorical pattern that I define as ‘long term advantage-oriented’ argumentation, which means a very high (93 %) occurrence rate. What makes this rate even more significant is that the 41 refusals take place in different contexts – even though in all of them interactional power difference applies – including political, familial and other settings.

Due to space limitations, this paper examines just one case study, a letter by Xu Miaojin 徐妙錦 (her exact dates are unknown) daughter of the famous general Xu Da 徐達 (1332–1385), written to the Emperor Yongle (永樂帝, r. 1403–1425).

(3) 【答永樂帝書】

臣女生長華門，性甘淡泊。不羨禁苑深宮，鐘鳴鼎食，願去荒庵小院，青聲紅魚。不學園裏天桃，邀人欣賞，願作山中小草，獨自榮枯。聽牆外秋蟲，人嫌淒切，睹窗前冷月，自覺清輝。蓋人生境遇各殊，因之觀賞異趣。矧臣女素耽寂靜，處此幽曠清寂之境，隔絕榮華富貴之場，心胸頗覺朗然。

乃日昨阿兄遣使捧上諭來，臣女跪讀之下，深感陛下哀憐女之至意，臣女誠萬死莫贖也。伏思陛下以萬乘之尊，宵旰勤勞，自宜求愉快身心之樂。幸外有台閣諸臣，袍笏躋蹌，內有六宮嬪御，粉黛如雲。

而臣女一弱女子耳，才不足以輔佐萬歲，德不足以母儀天下。既得失無裨於陛下，而實違臣女之素志。臣女之所未願者，謹陛下亦未必強願之也。
臣女願為世外閒人，不作繁華之想。前經面奏，陛下猶能憶之也。伏乞陛下俯充所求，並乞從此弗再以臣女為念，则尤為萬幸耳。臣願天桃穠李，我愛翠竹丹楓。從此貝葉蒲園，青燈古佛，長參寂靜，了此餘生。
臣女前曾荷沐聖恩，萬千眷注。伏懇再哀而憐之，以全臣女之志願，則不勝銜感待命之至。

Response to Emperor Yongle
This maidservant of yours grew up in a wealthy family but by nature she loves tranquility without wealth and fame. She does not envy the majesty of the imperial palace and the extravagancy of life but instead she wishes to retreat to a small and desolate nunnery and listen to the sound of the bell and the wooden fish. She has never learnt the ways as to becoming a beautiful peach in a flower garden that attracts the admiration of men and only wishes to be a small weed in the mountains that flourishes and withers alone. Whilst others are grieved when they hear the voice of the autumn insects outside the wall, when she watches the cold light of the moon in front of her window she is filled with clear and bright light. Since the circumstances of people are different, they find joy in different things. This maidservant of yours indulges in tranquility and wishes to be in a secluded and solitary place far from wealth and rank — acting thus she is likely to feel bright and clean.

Yesterday the courier of this person’s elder brother respectfully gave her the High Imperial Edict. This maidservant of yours prostrated while reading it, she was deeply moved by the fact that Your Majesty condescended to her with the most beautiful and sincere intention. This maidservant of yours can truly not redeem Your Majesty’s goodwill even if she lives ten thousand lives. She humbly believes that Your Majesty, a ruler of ten thousand chariots at his command, labour incessantly on his duties, and so you ought to seek things that bring joy to your body and spirit. Fortunately, outside his halls there are countless high officials who rush to obey the order of Your Majesty with great respect, and inside your halls is the Imperial Harem with an army of beautiful ladies. Now, this maidservant of yours is a weak young woman, her abilities are weak to assist Your Majesty in ruling, her merits are insufficient to be a model mother of the nation. Thus, marrying her would not only be a disadvantage for Your Majesty but would also ruin the long-cherished intention of this maidservant of yours. This maidservant of yours believes that Your Majesty will not want to force her to act against her will.
This maidservant of yours would like to be free without chains to this mundane world, and no pompous wishes does she have. When previously giving her an audience Your Majesty might have noticed this. This maidservant of yours humbly begs Your Majesty to grant her the grace [of being free], and also beg you not to miss her; this would make her a fortunate person. The people love the sweet sight of the beautiful peach and the blossoming plum, but she loves green bamboo and red maple. She thereupon only wishes to read sutras whilst sitting on her meditation cushion, burn oil lamps before the statue of Buddha and sit in deep meditation, in her entire life.

This maidservant of yours was previously granted with all forms of Your Majesty’s magnificent grace. Now, she humbly begs you to sympathize with her again and feel compassion for her, hence realizing the wish of this maidservant of yours – if so, she shall not be able to suppress her great gratitude to you and will respectfully await your orders.

This letter is perhaps the best known historical Chinese decline of a marriage proposal: Xu Miaojin, daughter of General Xu Da, bravely declined the proposal of the Emperor Yongle who was respected as a great but tyrannical ruler. Prior to this letter the Emperor had married Xu Miaojin’s elder sister and after her death he decided to marry Xu Miaojin who was considerably more attractive and talented than her sister. Xu Miaojin decided to decline this marriage proposal, which was not without risk. Although her father was an old ally of the Emperor and she also followed the socially accepted way for females to escape unwanted marriage by becoming a Buddhist nun, offending the emperor could have resulted in the Xu family losing the Emperor’s support or even being prosecuted. However, after reading Xu Miaojin’s letter, the Emperor Yongle not only supported her to be ordinated as a nun but also decided not to marry another Empress.

Arguably, this letter mitigates a strongly face-threatening situation: it was highly unusual to decline an emperor’s marriage proposal and thus offend him. The stake was higher than offending the Emperor’s personal masculinity; in historical China there was no epistolary privacy in the modern sense, i.e., private letters were read by a wider audience (Kádár 2010), and this was especially the case with imperial correspondence. Consequently, declining this proposal inherently meant a threat to the Emperor’s ‘power face’ (Hudson 1996: 114). In order to cope with this situation, Xu follows the long term advantage-oriented rhetorical pattern by claiming that marrying her would be a “disadvantage” (wubi 無裨, lit. ‘does not help’) to the Emperor as she
would be unsuitable to be his Empress. The importance of this notion in her argument is demonstrated by the fact that it determines the first three ‘paragraphs’ (roughly the two thirds) of the letter, that is, it is the key topic in the argument. In paragraph 1 the author describes herself and in paragraph 2, along with outlining the occasion of her letter, she describes the Emperor, in parallel, in order to emphasize the difference between them. Through this structure she gives weight to the argument in paragraph 3, i.e., that the proposed marriage would not be advantageous for the Emperor in the long term.

Along with long term advantage-oriented argument, Xu discusses the reasons that lead her to decide to become a nun, due to which she refuses the Emperor, and appeals to the Emperor’s sympathy for this decision. This emotive rhetorical approach, which is a regular concomitant of the other advantage-oriented pattern, already noted in 4.1 above, not only mitigates the given face-threatening situation (Xu declines the Emperor due to a previous moral decision and not on any evaluative ground) but also supports the basic approach, i.e., that the Emperor would not gain any advantage from marrying Xu as her character differs from that of ordinary females.

However, as noted above, this personal emotive approach is of secondary importance compared with the argumentative pattern. What makes the ‘other advantage-oriented’ approach sit at a higher level of importance is not merely the fact that it is introduced earlier in the text. Due to the face-threat caused by the aforementioned lack of privacy in historical Chinese epistolary interactions, the discussion between Xu and the Emperor is definitely not ‘personal’ in a modern sense, and so while reference to Xu’s personal feelings might have boosted the effect of the rhetoric applied here, this in itself could have not resolved the critical situation. In other words, it is only skilful persuasion that could provide a way out of this situation, by boosting the Emperor’s ‘power face’ (also towards others) instead of simply decreasing the impact of Xu’s refusal.

Quite understandably, considering the relative unfamiliarity and large power difference between the correspondents, the mitigating rhetorical pattern is accompanied by various deferential expressions and politeness strategies, such as:

- Different honorifics such as forms of address like chennü 臣女 (‘this maidservant of yours’) and bixia 陛下 (‘Your Majesty), verbal honorific forms like peng 捧 (lit. ‘to carry respectfully with two hands’) and fusi 伏思 (lit. ‘to humbly think’), as well as other honorific formulaic expressions such as sheng’en 聖恩 (lit. ‘the sage person’s kindness’, i.e., ‘imperial grace’) (see more on these forms in Kádár
2007); the use of such forms to build up both ethos and pathos, by confirming the power relationship between the interactants, is quite common in Chinese rhetoric (You and Liu 2009: 60).

- Emphasis of the Emperor’s greatness via the denigration of the author and the elevation of the Emperor; Xu elevates the Emperor several times, for example, she applies the idiomatic expression wan-sheng-zhi-zun 萬乘之尊 (‘lord of ten thousand chariots at his command’); also, she denigrates herself in several ways such as de bu-zu yi muyi tianxia 德不足以母儀天下 (‘her merits are insufficient to be a model mother of the nation’) and ruo-nüzi 弱女子 (‘weak young woman').

- Grammatical expressions or ‘hedges’ that downtone certain utterances such as expressions of uncertainty, like liang 諒 (‘assume’).

- Emphasis of the Emperor’s goodwill and his previous kindness towards Xu, like “This maidservant of yours was previously granted with all forms of Your Majesty’s magnificent grace”.

- Expression of Xu’s concern for the Emperor’s wellbeing, like “Your Majesty … ought to seek things that bring joy to your body and spirit”.

Many of these forms and strategies directly interact with the author’s rhetoric. For example, along with expressing her concern for the Emperor’s wellbeing the author also claims that she would not be able to act as an ideal empress who could provide the background necessary for this state, and by denigrating herself and elevating the Emperor she emphasizes that she is unworthy to become an empress. In this sense the last two of the above strategies could be also categorized as part of the rhetorical pattern.

Interestingly, along with the aforementioned expressions of politeness the author also makes use of some traditional Chinese rhetorical tools:

- Parallel prose (pianwen 駢文): this way of writing, i.e., using words in a rhythmical way, is often applied in face-threatening settings because it boosts the argumentative force of certain utterances. For example, the parallel nature of the lines ting qiang-wai qiu-chong, ren xian qiqie, duchuang-qian leng-yue, zi jue qinghui 聽牆外秋蟲, 人嫌淒切, 睹窗前冷月, 自覺清輝 (‘Whilst others are grieved when they hear the voice of the autumn insects outside the wall, when she watches the cold light of the moon in front of her window she is filled with clear and bright light’) boosts the emphasis of the difference between the author and ordinary people.
Allegories of nature: this is a traditional emotive tool, also popular in ‘Western’ rhetoric, which aids the author in appealing to the recipient’s sympathy; a typical manifestation of this tool can be found in the parallel lines *Bu xue yuan-li tian-tao, yao ren xinshang, yuan zuo shan-zhong xiao-cao, duzi tongku* 不學園裏天桃，邀人欣賞，願作山中小草，獨自榮枯 (“She has never learnt the ways as to becoming a beautiful peach in a flower garden that attracts the admiration of men and only wishes to be a small weed in the mountains that flourishes and withers alone”).

While not strictly being ‘politeness strategies’, in a Brown and Levinsonian (1987) sense, these rhetorical tools arguably play role in historical Chinese politeness behaviour. This is not only because they boost the intellectual impact of the argumentation as they raise the text to the level of ‘high literature’, but also – to return to the ‘collaboration’ of rhetoric and emotions – these textual features are designed to evoke positive emotions (Kádár 2010).

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between Chinese politeness and rhetoric by focusing on the pragmatic act of refusals. The research has set out to examine the hypothesis that it is possible to observe culture-specific preferences in the choice of rhetorical patterns; in the case of refusals this is the emphasis of the other’s long term interest. Since the paper could only analyze a single case, its findings remain hypothetical to some extent. However, numbers (93 % occurrence rate) show that the pattern studied was highly popular (i. e., normative) in Chinese epistolary discourse, while it might count as ‘marked’ in other rhetorical traditions, even though a comparative research is beyond the scope of the present work. This suggests that some cultural-specificity can be observed in politeness rhetoric.

It has been also shown that rhetorical patterns of politeness ‘collaborate’ with emotive expressions, tools of politeness, as well as rhetorical tools such as allegories of nature. The latter are rarely mentioned in relation to politeness.

It is hoped that in spite of its limited scope the present paper has successfully demonstrated the importance of rhetoric in historical Chinese politeness, hence contributing to politeness theorization and Chinese politeness studies.
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Bionotes

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Notes

1. This is a basic claim of Usami’s (2002, 2006a, 2006b) Discourse Politeness Theory, and it is also a point reiterated in Chang and Haugh (2011) in regards to an intercultural apology case study.
2. The database includes 8 short letter fragments and it is uncertain whether they should be treated as independent works.
3. 97 pieces of this corpus are available in a published form in Kádár (2009, 2010).
4. Pragmaphilology refers to historical pragmatic research, which studies the language use of a certain period and pays attention to “the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used” (Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 5).
5. This is all the more because the present research is limited as it only relies on a single written genre.
6. Usually, historical Chinese letters are not separated into paragraphs; the layout of the present text was made by the author.
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