Written Openings and Phaticity:  
A Study of Chinese Personal Letters*  

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The current study provides some insights into the linguistic and pragmatic features of openings in Chinese personal letters. Specifically, this research investigates how written openings in Chinese unfold, and which linguistic forms are employed and which pragmatic functions these forms serve in particular social contexts. The opening sequences of 259 actual personal letters were analyzed, and the choices of opening strategies among Chinese in the family and the non-family contexts were compared. Findings reveal that Chinese writers use a variety of phatic expressions to achieve openings in personal letters, and these phatic expressions are primarily oriented to help the writer establish or maintain a relationship with the recipient, thus making a smooth transition into the main body of the written interaction. The study also finds that the phatic expressions used in the formation of openings are sequentially organized, which may generate the effect of increasing the degree of relevance and clarity of the opening strategies as well as politeness. It also suggests that the selection of opening strategies and linguistic forms of particular strategies is clearly determined by the social roles of the writer and recipient and their personal relationship between each other.

Keywords: phatic language, opening, Chinese written communication

Introduction

Personal letter writing is regarded as “one of the most widespread uses of writing among different social classes and cultural groups” (Kalman, 1996: 193), despite the use of advanced technologies of communication becoming more widespread nowadays. In China, personal letter writing has had a particularly long and significant history (Chen, 1999), and still retains its essential status in modern times. Personal letter writing in China is an important communicative activity for four major reasons. First, it is seen as an economically interactive practice that has been readily adopted by many people in their communicative repertoires. Second, it is an effective way of exchanging information, thoughts, feelings and attitudes, of educating younger persons and of showing respect to older people (Nin & Liu 1993). Third, letter writing is also viewed as a kind of activity in which a great deal of attention is paid to politeness, conveying a high degree of respect and solidarity (Maier, 1992). The fourth feature of personal letters is its demonstration of a scale of social hierarchy, thus reflecting personal relationships between writers and recipients (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg, 1995)). Considering their economic, social, emotional, politeness and interpersonal functions, personal letters have thus become one of the most useful sources of material for studying sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

Researchers are interested in how sections of letters are realized and in how letters can be discussed and explained in pragmatic terms. This study has attempted to explore these characteristics in one act of modern Chinese personal letters: openings used at the

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beginning of a letter. There are two main reasons to conduct such research. First, there are strict rules covering the composition of openings, which have been central to the production of personal letters. Second, the opening behaviour in personal letters is a crucial step of opening up the communicative channel (Hopper 1992), of identifying and affirming the membership of writer and recipient in a social group, and of establishing and negotiating the relationships between them (Laver 1975, 1981; Yahya-Othman 1995). Taken together, it is believed that studying this speech behaviour in Chinese personal letters will provide some information about the linguistic and pragmatic features of openings in written interaction in the Chinese context, which will shed light on the study of certain routine speech behaviours in various types of communications.

**Phatic Communion and Conversational Openings**

Openings have been viewed for many years as “being centrally symbolic of phatic communion and their significance in human interaction has been greatly emphasized” (Yahya-Othman, 1995:211). Phatic communion is defined as “a conventionalized and peripheral mode of talk” (Coupland, 2000: 1) and it refers to the use of language primarily for interpersonal meaning rather than information transmission. Basically it functions by “helping to smooth interaction and connecting people” (Tracy & Naughton, 2000: 63). The phrase ‘phatic communion’ was first introduced by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923, 1972), who treats phatic communion as “a type of speech in which the ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words”(1972: 151), that is, the whole purpose of speech is to establish and maintain the social bonds of the interactants, rather than to convey referential information. Inspired by Malinowski’s work, a number of studies have appeared which discuss phatic communion or small talk. For example, Laver (1981) examines the functions of the linguistic routines of phatic communion in the initial and end phases, and specifies how speakers claim solidarity, intimacy and status relationship through particular choices of formulaic expressions. He argues that these formulaic phrases of greetings or partings can signal a speaker’s perception of the formality of a situation and his/her relationship with the hearer. Another example of this paradigm was Coupland, Coupland and Robinson’s study (1992) of the phatic process in elderly people’s responses to the phrase ‘how are you’ in interviews about their medical experience. The authors conclude that phatic communion is a style of interaction which fulfils the function of ‘phaticity’, and that the level of ‘phaticity’ of small talk varies based on the current needs of the addressers to manage their interpersonal relationship with the addressees. Coupland and et al’s study offers an important demonstration that phatic talk does not exist in discrete frames only – all talk can be characterized by varying levels of phaticity.

Conversational openings are generally referred to “a place where the type of conversation being opened can be preferred, displayed, accepted, rejected, modified – in short, incipiently constituted by the parties to it” (Schegloff, 1968: 25). They can be seen as “a section of talk between two people at the beginning of an interaction” (Omar, 1992: 15). The study of openings in human interaction has attracted researchers’ attention since the 1960s (Goffman, 1971; Goody, 1972; Hopper, 1992; Hutchby, 1999; Irvine, 1974; Kasper, 1989; Kendon & Ferber, 1973; Omar, 1992; Pavlidou, 2000;
In Western society, Goffman (1971: 75-76) highlights the importance of rituals in his examination of the opening sequence. He introduces the notion of access rituals, namely the ritual display that signals a change in degree of access. Within the openings, Goffman notes that greetings act as access rituals marking a transition to a level of increased access. He also argues that a question about someone’s state of health, posed at the very outset of an encounter, may thus be interpreted not as a question but as a greeting. Schiffrin (1977) holds a similar opinion that greetings in openings are seen as a way of establishing contact between participants who are about to become involved in a longer interaction, or simply of maintaining contact between those who have no intention of undertaking further interaction. Coupland et al. (1992: 217) treat greetings such as ‘How are you’ as “a genuine effort to elicit an appraisal of health or well-being”, which serves to “achieve some minimal threshold of relational engagement…”

The sequential organization of conversational openings was explored in Schegloff’s (1968) detailed analysis of the different kinds of sequences that occur within American telephone openings. He finds that the majority of openings could be described in terms of an ordered set of four core opening sequences. These sequences include a summon/answer sequence, an identification sequence, a greeting sequence and one or more how-are-you sequences. Influenced by Schegloff’s analysis of American telephone conversational openings, a number of scholars have investigated how the opening sequences work in different languages and cultures. For example, while examining openings and closings in English and German conversations, House (1982) proposes the notion of ‘interactional moves’ in terms of functional units and sequential structures. She identifies several moves such as greeting, territorial breach apology, identification, question-after-you, remarks and topic introduction in the opening phrase. Compared with Schegloff’s model for opening sequences, House’s identification of opening moves provides a broader framework that enables scholars to offer an accurate description of openings in different cultures.

Compared to Western countries, studies of openings in the Chinese context seem to be rare. Hopper and Chen (1996) specify linguistic resources within telephone openings in Taiwan, which are more varied than openings in European languages. According to the authors, telephone partners in Taiwan deploy a variety of greeting phrases to show the state of their interpersonal relationship. For example, between family members the callers may indicate intimacy by a recognitional naming of the answerer according to the voice sample. The answerer may show intimacy by identifying the caller by using only the given name (for a non-family member) or by showing certainty of identification by using no name (for family members). Hopper and Chen (1996) attribute such performances of openings between intimates and strangers to the influence of the Confucian virtue of Li (propriety), which requires members of a society to adapt their talk to a speaker’s age, status and intimacy of connection.

An even more explicit identification of the opening sequential organization in Chinese is provided in Sun’s analysis (2004) of informal Chinese telephone conversations between female friends. The author notes that Chinese telephone conversational openings manifest a variety of patterns under two semantic categories: other-oriented inquiries and relation-oriented comments. Sun suggests that the way in which the opening moves may “accomplish propitiatory, initiatory, and exploratory functions
simultaneously in Chinese telephone conversation” (2004: 1463). He goes on to suggest that multiple contextual factors such as role and relations would determine the selection of interactional routine or non-routine opening strategies by Chinese people.

Studies of openings have uncovered a wealth of linguistic and pragmatic features that are quite relevant for cross-cultural studies of human interaction. However, linguists and sociolinguists seem to have restricted themselves to the analysis of openings in oral language, and have paid little attention to opening practices in written communication, especially in personal letters. Dittmer (1991) observes that personal letters are potentially an important resource for understanding how social role relationships, emotions and societal conditions figure in written language. It is thus the intent of the present study to examine the forms and functions of openings in Chinese personal letters. Such an analysis could render an overall picture of how the occurrences of linguistic and pragmatic phenomena are subject to social factors and to the larger cultural constraint of a given situation. In particular, this study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What opening strategies are used by Chinese people in personal letters?
2. What functions do these strategies accomplish in various situations?
3. How do the factors of social roles and the personal relationship between writer and recipient effect the choice of opening strategies by the Chinese?

First, I identify and describe various linguistic forms and pragmatic functions in Chinese personal letters according to family and non-family contexts. I then present the interaction of social variables with the choice of opening strategies in Chinese.

Method

Letters and Writers

The data for this study consists of 259 actual letters written in Mandarin by native speakers of Chinese. They were part of the writers’ normal personal correspondence and were addressed to 201 named Chinese recipients (some of them were written by different writers to the same recipient). The letters include two types: family letters (N=108) and non-family letters (N=151), which were selected from a total database of 318 letters, on the basis of a closer examination (e.g. date, name, personal background, readability of the letter). The letters were written by 259 individual native speakers of Chinese (26 parents, 18 children, 48 siblings, 16 relatives, 115 friends, 10 teachers and 26 students). All writers were urban residents of different districts of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Among the writers there were 124 females and 135 males. They were aged between 18 and 60, and most of them had a post-secondary education. The recipients were drawn from university classes where the researcher worked, or were friends or acquaintances of the researcher.

Data Collection
Data collection was conducted by the author in Xinjiang from May 1998 to September 2000. In data collection, first the general objective of the study, the part to be investigated in the letter (i.e. opening section only) and the criteria of the role (superiors and juniors in both family and non-family settings) and age (18-60) were explained to the subjects. When the potential subjects agreed to lend their letters for this study they were given cover sheets to fill in, so as to collect background information about the subjects. After that the letters were categorised according to the information about the writers and recipients cited in the cover sheets. Then those letters which met the criteria were selected. Considering the ethical issues, this study uses pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of informants.

Results and Discussion

Opening Strategies

Table 1 below provides an overview of the opening strategies that occurred in the initial phrase of Chinese personal letters. A total of twelve strategies have been identified in the Chinese letters (1) greetings; (2) inquiries; (3) acknowledgements of receipt of a previous letter; (4) apologies; (5) relation-reaffirmed expressions. It should be noted that the strategies are not mutually exclusive, as they may co-occur in an opening. Some strategies are often combined to formulate a sequential opening, which explains why 558 instances of strategies are included, far more than the total number of 259 letter samples in this study.

Table 1. Opening strategies used in Chinese personal letters (558 instances)

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Forms and functions

Greetings

Greetings are the first linguistic indication in the opening section. They are intended “merely to signal acknowledgement of the other” (Berger & Bradac, 1982: 82). This strategy serves to reveal the writer and recipient’s social status in age or rank, to express the writer’s attitude towards the recipient (e.g. respect, familiarity) (Chen, 1999) and to convey desire for establishing or maintaining a relationship between them (Coupland et al., 1992; Goody, 1972; Omar, 1992). As is evident from the data, greetings in Chinese personal letters consist of two patterns: the ‘How-are-you’ phrase and the conventional formulae. The phrase of ‘你好’ phrase can be translated as ‘How are you?’ in English. However, unlike ‘how are you?’ in English, it is a statement, which serves to give regards to the recipient rather to make an inquiry, emphasizing the writer’s recognition of the recipient. There are four variations for the ‘How are you?’ phrase in the data, distinguished by the use of different second person pronouns: ‘你’ ni (familiar, singular), ‘您’ nin (honorific, singular), ‘你们’ nimen (familiar/honorific, plural), and ‘您们’ ninmen (honorific, plural). ‘你好’ nihao (familiar, singular) is the most commonly used pattern among the four. It is often used by parents to children, older relatives to younger relatives, teachers to students, or among siblings and friends. It can be seen as the basic unmarked greeting form. When it is used by Chinese people, the interpretations of its meanings may depend on the context. For example, when used downwards to juniors, this term appears to indicate an in-group membership, age hierarchy and a level of intimacy. When used among siblings and friends, it indicates in-group membership and intimacy as well. When used by teachers to students, it may emphasize familiarity. The second most widely used term is a respectful form of ‘How-are-you’. In Chinese, the form ‘nin’ (honorific, singular) is used to reflect respect
when people are speaking upwards to seniors (e.g. parents, older relatives, teachers). Similar to the form ‘ni’, this honorific singular pronoun is also relationship-oriented. For example, when used to seniors in the family, ‘nin’ conveys not only the writer’s respect, but also a level of intimacy. However, when used to seniors of the non-family (i.e. teacher), it indicates deference and distance as well.

‘Nimen’ (familiar/honorific, plural), an infrequently used term, is the plural form of the ‘ni’, where ‘men’ is the plural-meaning marker added to ‘ni.’ This form is normally used to refer to double addressees (e.g. father and mother, aunt and uncle), and it often occurs among members of families or between friends. Like other patterns of the same class, the form ‘nimen’ is also clearly associated with the status and relationship. For example, when used upwards to the seniors, it emphasizes not only respect, but also intimacy as well. When used within the same generation or downwards to the younger generation, it signals in-group membership and intimacy. The phrase of ‘ninmen’ is the plural form of the honorific singular term ‘nin.’ In Chinese, this form is often found in written language, particularly in letters, and usually used upwards to double seniors in the family, indicating deference and closeness.

The other type is the conventional formula greeting. This type can be understood as a formal-traditional style of greeting. It is often composed of an idiom, such as ‘近好!’ Jin hao (Hope you are well!); ‘见信好!’ jianxin hao (Greeting to you when you are reading this letter); ‘见信如面!’ jianxin rumian (It is as if we were face to face when you are reading this letter.); ‘见信愉快!’ Jianxin yukuai (May you be happy to read my letter.), or ‘见信知情!’ jianxin zhiqing (Here is some information when you are reading this letter). In comparison with the greeting of ‘How are you?’, this type appears to be more personal, as it carries specific personal feelings and is addressed to recipients with the primary intention to convey affection and emotion. For example, while a writer constructs greetings with the phrase ‘May you be happy to read my letter’, he or she may reveal the emotion towards the recipient by referring to the recipient’s good feelings with reading of the letter, conveying a familiarity and in-group membership. From a non-Chinese view, it might be difficult to perceive and understand ‘见信知情!’ jianxin zhiqing (Here is some information when you are reading this letter) as a phatic expression, since it seems to bear more factual information. However, in the Chinese context, ‘知情’ may not refer to the literal meaning of ‘knowing some factual things,’ rather, to the writer’s affection and attitude towards the recipient. The whole pattern can be interpreted like this: ‘You may know my good feelings to you when you are reading this letter.’ A greeting given to the recipient by referring to the writer’s own personal feelings may produce an impression on the recipient, thus enhancing the relationship. In addition, this traditional style greeting seems not to focus on signalling the status difference between the writer and recipient, whereas the phrase of ‘你好’ nihao always does. The main concern in using this kind of greeting is to strengthen the emotional bond with the recipient, rather than emphasize the hierarchical differences between the writer and recipient. However, these conventional greetings are certainly more limited
in use: they are appropriate only for family members or among friends, indicating in-group membership and familiarity.

Not surprisingly, greetings in the opening of Chinese personal letters seem to function as “central examples of phatic communion” (Coupland et al., 1992: 217). As noted above, greetings between family members, acquaintances and friends in Chinese society are not considered as optional (238 out of 259 in the data) unless there is some other strategy which is used for ‘greetings’ (e.g. inquiry). That is because greetings convey the writers’ recognition of the recipients and their desires to maintain or begin a relationship with the recipients. The manifestation of the recognition of the recipients and the expression of well-wishing (e.g. 近好！Jin hao: Hope you are well!) that greetings entail are a contribution by writers in building up or reaffirming personal bonds with the recipients. On the other hand, greetings are also a good device for writers to conform to the social norms of the group. In Chinese culture, to give greetings in an interaction is to be seen as polite and not to do so is to be taken as impolite. That is why Chinese children are taught to greet their elders in the respectful way from a very early age.

**Inquiries**

Inquiries refer to expressions which ask about the recipient’s current state in terms of health, well-being, or feelings. Many sociolinguists treat inquiries as “phatic inquiry” (e.g. House, 1982; Omar, 1992), as they are expressed not to ask the recipient to give a truthful or detained answer (Shih, 1986), but to show the writer’s concern about the recipient in terms of some personal aspects, serving to mark “involvement and consideration” (Tannen, 1984: 27). In the current analysis, inquiries take on a variety of patterns. Some inquiries are used to refer to the recipient’s general state of well-being, such as ‘你还好吗?’ Ni hai hao ma? (Are you still well?), while other inquiries refer to the recipient’s specific situation in health, feelings or other issues, such as ‘近来身体学习好吧？生活等一切都如意吧!’ Jinlai shenti xuexi hao ba? Shenghuo deng yiqie dou ruyi ba? (Have things been going well in health, studying, life and other things recently?). In Chinese culture, it is common for the writer to ask about the recipient’s concrete state, such as ‘health’, ‘life’ or ‘happiness.’ Normally such inquiries are given not to get a real answer to the question, but rather to show the writer’s concern about the recipient, in order to “establish bonds of personal union” (Malinowski, 1972: 151). This pattern is often used by family members (e.g. siblings, children, parents) or by friends. The first pattern, however, is constructed as a minimal version with an emphasis on the general state of the recipient. Interestingly, it appears to be a more personal pattern since the writer asks about the recipient’s current state by referring directly to the recipient as in ‘你还好吗？’ Ni hai hao ma? (Are you still well?). The ‘你’ ni (you) here can be seen as an ‘in-group identity marker’ (Brown & Levinson 1987: 107), by which the writer tends to emphasize a strong consideration for the recipient, to assume a certain level of intimacy, and thus to maintain an emotional bond with the recipient.

It is interesting to note that Chinese writers sometimes employ a compound structure
where the core inquiry is preceded by a precondition, such as "好久没给你写信了，现在身体健康吧。" Haojiu mei gei ni xiexin le, xianzai shenti jiankang ba? (I haven’t written to you for a long time. Have you been in good health?). Linguistically, the preceded precondition seems to be factual information, suggesting that previously there were few efforts at contact by the writer. Pragmatically, it might convey pragmatic meaning, emphasizing a close connection between the writer and recipient. Such a precondition which indicates ‘long time no write’ appears to serve as an initiator of the following inquiries, functioning as a typical way of showing the writer’s “involvement and consideration” (Tannen, 1984: 27). With such a precondition, the inquiries may produce a “dramatized” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 105) emotional atmosphere, from which the relationship with the recipient can be affirmed. The data show that siblings and friends are inclined to use these two patterns.

Acknowledgements of Receipt of a Previous Letter

The acknowledgement of receipt of a previous letter is a common expression used in the reply letters in both family and non-family contexts. Linguistically, this strategy is achieved through three patterns: (1) ‘Bald acknowledgement’- ‘来信已收到。’ Lai xin yi shoudao. (The letter has been received.), or ‘你的来信我已收到。’ Nide lai xin wo yi shoudao. (I have received your letter.); (2) ‘Expressing feelings with acknowledgement’- ‘很高兴收到你的来信。’ Hen gaoxing shoudao nide lai xin. (I’m very happy to receive your letter.); (3) ‘Expressing gratitude with acknowledgement’- ‘谢谢你在百忙之中给我写信。’ Xiexie ni zai bai mang zhizhong gei wo xie xin. (Thank you very much for writing me even though you’re busy.); and (4) ‘Acknowledgement + expressing feelings’, such as ‘来信收到。知道你情况都很好，家里都很高兴。’ Lai xin shoudao. Zhidao ni qingkuang dou hen hao, jiali dou hen gaoxing. (The letter has been received. Knowing you are OK, all the members in the family are very happy.). On the surface, this strategy might be used to convey the factual message regarding the receipt of the previous letter from the recipient, (received or not). But on the pragmatic level, it may signal the phatic meaning, which has minimal commitment to ‘factuality’ (Pavlidou, 2000: 126). For example, the utterances in the ‘Bald acknowledgement’ strategy seem to be a mere statement about the fact that the writer has received the previous letter from the recipient. As a matter of fact, they are conventional or routine expressions that cannot be used in other places of the text. By acknowledging the receipt of the previous letter, the writers imply their recognition of and attention to the recipient, suggesting “only close relationships or frequent contact may achieve such success” (Sun, 2004: 1437). Such an acknowledgement thus attends to the positive face of the two parties, achieving rapport-building (Sun, 2000). There are also other patterns that mark the writer’s display and reaffirmation of a personal bond with the recipient. The expression ‘很高兴收到你的来信。’ Hen gaoxing shoudao nide lai xin. (I’m very happy to receive your letter.) provides a good example of such indication. By framing the
acknowledgement of receiving the letter within an expression of happiness, the writer shows interest in the letter, claiming “a common ground” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 103). Involving thanks with the acknowledgement of receiving the letter also shows the writer’s attention and respect for the recipient.

Apologies

In this study, apologies refer to a writer’s admission of delay in writing back and a request for forgiveness for the delay. Pragmatically, they function as ‘face-supportive acts’ (Holmes, 1990: 155) and a ‘remedy’ (Goffman, 1971: 140) for the delay, serving to restore social equilibrium or harmony (Edmondson, 1981; Leech, 1983). They are appropriate for juniors in family letters (e.g. younger siblings, younger relatives), and for both seniors and juniors in non-family letters (e.g. teachers, students). This strategy may take three forms: (1) ‘An explicit expression of apology’ such as ‘很抱歉没有及时给你写信.’ *Hen baoqian mei you ni jishi xie xin.* (Sincere apologies for not having written to you earlier.); (2) ‘Admitting offence + requesting forgiveness’, such as ‘未及时给你回信，请见谅.’ *Wei jishi ni hui xin, qing jianliang.* (Please forgive me not having written back to you on time.); and (3) An explanation + admitting offence + requesting forgiveness’, such as ‘由于我很忙,所以一直没有给你写信,请原谅.’ *Youyu wo hen mang, suoyi yizhi mei you ni xie xin, qing yuanliang.* (Because I have been very busy all the time, I haven’t written to you on time, please forgive me.). The examples above clearly demonstrate the phatic feature of apologies in the Chinese data, as they may “convey little referential content but express a message high in affect or social meaning.” (Holmes, 1990: 159).

It is important to note that in the data the elaborate apologies are used more than the simple explicit apologies. According to Holmes (1990: 157), a combination of an explanation with an acknowledgement of the offence and a request of forgiveness would result a “weightier” apology, by which the writers may achieve “social and affective goals” in the initial stage of writing a letter. This strategy is often used by juniors in the family letters (e.g. children, young siblings) and both seniors and juniors in the non-family letters (e.g. teachers, students).

Relation-reaffirmed Expressions

In addition to the four common opening strategies examined above, there are seven other opening strategies identified from the data. These strategies are classified in the current study as ‘relation-reaffirmed expressions’, as they primarily convey the writers’ specific affection and emotions to the recipients with an attempt to reaffirm personal bonds with the recipients. These substrategies include (1) ‘Expressions of good wishes’, such as ‘首先祝你身体健康，天天有个好心情．’ *Shouxian zhu ni shengti jiankang, tiantian youge hao xinqing!* (At first, I wish you good health and good feelings every day!); (2) ‘Expressions of missing’, such as ‘非常想念你!’ *Feichang xiang nimen!* (I miss you very
much!); (3) ‘Expressions of concern’, such as ‘希望你多注意身体,注意安全.’  

Xiwang ni duo zhuyi ziji shenti, zhuyi anquan. (I hope you are looking after yourself and keeping safe.); (4) ‘Expressions of thanks’, such as ‘谢谢你对我的问候和关心.’ Xiexie ni dui wode wenhou he guanxin.(Thank you for your greetings and concern.); (5) ‘Reassurances about oneself’, such as ‘我一切都好,勿念。’ Wo yiqie dou hen hao, wu nian. (Everything is all right with me.  Don’t worry.); (6) ‘Expressions of congratulations’ ‘祝贺你取得好成绩!’ Zhuhe ni qude hao chengji. (Congratulations on your good results in study); (7) Sending regard to others include expressions such as ‘请代我向姑姑和姑父问好.’ (Please give my regards to aunt and uncle.).

What renders these strategies different from the other phatic expressions in the opening, such as greetings, acknowledgment and inquiries, is that they are self-oriented phatic expressions, focusing on factors personal to the recipients. These substrategies make specific reference to the writer’s personal feelings and emotions towards the recipients with the primary intention to further or strengthen personal bonds between the writer and the recipient. Take the expression ‘Congratulations on your success in finding a job’ as another example. Here the writer’s verbal congratulation functions as a compliment on the recipient’s success in finding a job. More importantly, it suggests the strong bond between the two parties. Such a comment may reveal this message: only people with a close relationship may share such happiness and success.

Expressing personal feelings and attitudes toward the recipient can be seen as another distinctive feature of openings in Chinese personal letters. Since the writer and the recipient do not have frequent face-to-face encounters, such self-oriented and relation-oriented expressions are significant in helping the writer to maintain or further the relationship with the recipient, along with those phatic expressions such as greeting, inquiries and so on. According to Laver (1981: 304), these substrategies can be understood as important strategies for the “negotiation and control of social identity and social relationships between participants in conversation”. By showing concern, sending wishes and making positive comments on the recipient’s behaviour, the writers tend to promote relationships between themselves and the recipients.

**Openings, and Social Roles and the Personal Relationship**

As discussed above, openings in Chinese personal letters are realized through a variety of strategies. The occurrence of particular strategies and particular linguistic forms, however, are not random. Rather, which strategy is adopted and which linguistic forms are chosen are determined by a range of social factors, such as the role of the writer and the relationship with the recipient in a given context. The following section will analyze how the choice of opening strategy is subject to the social roles of the writer and recipient.

**Greetings**

As mentioned before, there are two major variations under the term of greetings in this
current study. The first one is the ‘How-are-you’ 你好 phrase, which takes four variations distinguished by the use of different second personal pronouns. Normally Chinese writers are very sensitive to the use of these pronouns. It is not possible for the writer to leave out the pronoun while giving the greeting to the recipient, as the pronoun is an important term to display the role and status of the writer and recipient. For example, seniors (parents, old relatives, teachers) receive the respectful form ‘您好’ and return the common form ‘你好’. In the case of a greeting to equals (siblings, friends), the common form ‘你好’ is often used to suggest in-group membership and a level of intimacy. Differentiations in the use of the ‘How-are-you’ phrase across social roles reflect the influence of the Confucian principle that people should treat each other according to the distinctions set up in the hierarchy of the society (Shih, 1986).

The use of the conventional formulae of greetings also varies according to different social roles. Conventional formulae, such as ‘近好!’ (Hope you are well!); ‘见信如面!’ (It is as if we were face to face when you are reading this letter.); and ‘见信愉快!’ (May you be happy to read my letter.) often occur in the letters written to friends who are equal in status and with whom there is frequent contact. Such a relationship warrants the “appropriateness and acceptability” of the use of the emotion-oriented routine expression as greetings (Sun, 2004: 1247). The display of emotion itself presumes and foregrounds the writer’s familiarity with the writer. ‘见信好!’ (Greeting to you when you are reading this letter) often occurs in the letters written by children to their parents. Pragmatically, this formula is similar to the respectful ‘How-are-you’ 您好, where the writer tends to convey his recognition of and attention to the recipient. ‘见信知情!’ (Here is some information when you are reading this letter) is normally used as a greeting by parents toward their children, since a certain degree of intimacy is assumed.

It is worth noting that the selection of a conventional greeting is also constrained by the relationship between the writer and recipient. For example, the phrase ‘见信如面!’ (It is as if we were face to face when you are reading this letter) often occurs in letters written to a close friend or sometimes to parents due to issues of closeness or seniority.

Inquiries

Inquiries are a common opening strategy for many Chinese people. Although the inquiry is commonly used by Chinese, there are certain social factors that constrain its use. In this current study, for example, the inquiries often occur in the letters between family members (siblings, children, parents) and friends. This phenomenon might be explained by the fact that in Chinese culture, individuals tend to belong to a few select in-groups determined by membership in groups such as families and friendship circles. The relationship of individuals to their in-groups tends to be relatively permanent and stable over time, and “it can render an individual’s feelings of affection, warmth, safety and attachment” (Hwang, 1987: 949). It is thus common for Chinese writers with
frequent contact to ask about the recipient’s concrete state, such as ‘health’, ‘life’ or ‘happiness.’ In addition, the selection of inquiring patterns differs between people of different roles. For example, the direct inquiries involving two or three parallel sentences often occur in the letters of seniors (parents) writing to juniors (children), emphasizing consideration and a level of seniority. The inquiries with the complex structure often occur in the letters between siblings and close friends, suggesting a high level of “involvement and consideration” (Tannen, 1984: 27).

**Acknowledgements of Receipt of a Previous Letter**

Acknowledgement of the receipt of a previous letter is indicative of the relationship between the writer and the recipient. The elderly in both family and non-family letters (parent, uncle, teacher) are inclined to acknowledge the arrival of the letters with the pattern of ‘Bold acknowledgment’ (either passive or active voice), such as ‘你的来信我已经收到.’ (I have received your letter.). For family seniors, such a direct and plain acknowledgment may convey informality and hierarchical status. For seniors outside family, this pattern may indicate formality and a level of distance. However, the young of the family (children, niece) may often start their acknowledgement with the pattern ‘Expressing feelings within acknowledgement’: ‘收到您的来信，感到很温暖.’ Shou dao ni de lai xin, gan dao hen wenmuan. (I feel warm when I received your letter.), while the young outside the family (university students) may use the pattern ‘Expressing gratitude with acknowledgement’: ‘谢谢你百忙之中写信给我.’ (Thank you very much for writing me even though you’re busy.). The employment of the emotion-oriented acknowledgement by family juniors can be seen as their effort in displaying respect and intimate feeling to seniors, hence implying a strong personal bond. Involving thanks within acknowledgement by non-family juniors, on the other hand, may indicate respect and distance in relation as well. The choice of the pattern acknowledging the arrival of the letter for the equals seems to be a bit complicated. The equals of a family (siblings) may often construct their acknowledgement in a rhetorical pattern such as ‘来信收到。知道你一切情况都很好，家里都很高兴。’ (The letter has been received. Knowing you are OK, all the members in the family are very happy.). The preference for this pattern reflects the family equals’ perception of the need to increase the phatic function of the acknowledgement by a separate expression of feelings, claiming in-group membership and a level of intimacy. For non-family equals (friends), on the other hand, acknowledgement within an expression of happiness or gratitude is quite preferable. Choosing such patterns, the non-family equals tend to reflect their interest in and attention to the recipient, claiming a strong in-group membership.

The different orientations of acknowledgement of receipt of a letter by writers of different roles could be interpreted as a reflection of the differentiations of authority in Confucian social philosophy. According to Confucius, authority is created through the hierarchical structuring of relationships between father-son, elder brother-younger brother; teacher-student; and elder friend-younger friend (Ebrey, 1991). For example, the father-son relationship is a strict and unambiguous source of authority. This
relationship strongly stipulates the behavioural inclinations of both sides. Thus, a father often acknowledges the arrival of a letter directly and briefly, while a son hardly informs his father of the receipt by such a phrase, rather by an emotion-oriented one. The favour of the rhetorical pattern by family equals may reflect a fact that there can exist a feeling of true friendship from the younger to the elder, and a warm-hearted attitude from the elder to the younger (Ebrey, 1991). And the observed phenomenon of a strong social bond between non-family equals – friends – can be seen as a reflection of a traditional Chinese saying: “Dependence on your parents while at home yet reliance on your friend while away from home” (Sun, 2004: 1449).

Apology

As an opening strategy, apologies are appropriate for juniors in family letters and for both equals and juniors in non-family letters. There are three variations of apologies adopted by the Chinese in the opening section. First, the explicit verbalization of apology, such as ‘很抱歉没有及时给你写信.’ (Sincere apologies for not having written to you earlier.) often occurs in the letters between non-family equals (friends). The reason for the use of such an explicit expression of apology by friends was that these two parties are equal in social status, and there was little distance between them. In addition, those familiar friends maintained frequent contact with each other, and felt at ease to acknowledge their lack of effort in contacting their friends. Given this situation, those friends thus sustained such a straightforward way of expressing apology without “incurring any undesirable effect on their interaction or relationship” (Sun, 2004: 1452). Secondly, the pattern of ‘admitting offence plus requesting forgiveness’, such as ‘没有及时给你回信，请原谅.’ (Please forgive me for not having written back to you on time.), often occur in the letters by juniors toward seniors in the family setting (children to parents; younger siblings to elder siblings). This pattern seems to encode family juniors’ greater attention to family seniors’ face-needs, that is, to be noticed or valued (Brown & Levinson, 1987), suggesting respect as well as their effort to keep close relations with family members. Thirdly, the most elaborate pattern consisting of explanation, an admission of delay and then a request for forgiveness, such as ‘由于我很忙，所以一直没有给你写信，请原谅.’ (Because I have been very busy all the time, I haven’t written to you on time, please forgive me.), is often used by juniors in both family and non-family letters, and occasionally by seniors in non-family setting. This result supports Holmes’s view (1990) that more elaborate apology strategies are more likely to be used toward those with more power, even when the offence is not great. Holmes (1990) explains this phenomenon by the fact that since more powerful recipients would increase the weight of an offence, they thus require higher ranked politeness. For the juniors, apologies with an explanation in the initial position would enable them to claim a compelling reason for the delay, trying to remedy a hurt to the recipient’s ‘positive face’ (Holmes, 1990). This could be thus seen as an effective way of restoring social harmony in personal written interaction between juniors and seniors.

Relation-reaffirmed Expressions
As mentioned before, relation-oriented expressions constitute an important part of openings in Chinese personal letters. It might be of interest to the readers to examine how Chinese use such expressions in the opening section. First, expressions of good wishes are used frequently by juniors toward seniors in both family and non-family letters (child to parent; student to teacher). Such hierarchical relationships seem to have a much higher degree of understanding of luck talk. In Chinese culture, ‘luck talk’ is seen as an effective means to show respect and rapport among people (Fong, 2000). Secondly, expressions of missing often occur among parents, children, siblings, sometimes among close friends. In China, these expressions are supposed to entail a high level of intimacy, and only intimate relationships such as those between mother and daughter, and between younger sister and elder brother are assumed to use such expressions. Thirdly, expressions of concern often occur among parents and friends, and occasionally among children and siblings, whereas no case is found among non-intimate relations (teacher and student). Hwang (1987) classifies three key Chinese interpersonal relationships: the expressive tie, the instrumental tie and the mixed tie. Hwang suggests that the expressive tie mostly occurs among members of family, close friends and other congenial groups, and “it can render an individual’s feelings of affection, warmth, safety and attachment.” (p.949). Thus the expressions of personal feelings like ‘missing’ or ‘caring’ among intimate relations here are an obvious indication of Chinese culture, where people’s verbalization is determined by membership in groups such as families and friendship circles. Expression of thanks is a strategy of expressing indebtedness for what the recipient did for the writer. The act of thanking does not imply the factual, but rather conveys warm and friendly feelings, and confirms the relationship with the recipient (Coulmas, 1981). This strategy appears most appropriate for friends in the data. Thanking the recipient for a particular favour (e.g. mental help, comfort) may serve the affective function of signalling the writer’s attention to his or her friend, and it is also a way of strengthening the friendship. Following Hwang’s (1987) interpretation of the concept of ‘renqing’, we may say that in the Chinese friendship circle, which is an association bound by an “expressive tie” (Hwang, 1987: 949), friends’ social interaction seems to be based not only on the necessary rules (friendliness) but also on the norm of reciprocity. In the proverb “滴水之恩，以涌泉相报.” Di shui zhi,en, yi yong quan xiang bao.(A drop of water must be rewarded by shooting fountains), we can see that friends are expected to show much attention to the favours they give each other.

Fifthly, the ‘reassurances about oneself’ appear to be most appropriate for children, serving to emphasize an emotional bond with their parents. Describing the writer’s own current state and expressing willingness to comfort the recipient, children tend to convey respect to parents by paying homage to the recipient’s face need, that is, to be noticed, or cared about (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Sixthly, the expression of congratulations is used more by friends. As with some other routines, this strategy is related to the indication and enhancement of the relationship by showing the writer’s positive attitudes or emotions towards the recipient. It is worth noting that this strategy sometimes can be extended to parents, siblings or relatives, but is never used by children or students. This
suggests that ‘congratulations’ in the Chinese context is a typical opening strategy used only between the equal and the equal, or between the senior and the junior. An explicit expression of congratulations from a junior to a senior in Chinese would sound impolite, as this verbalization may convey this message: ‘I’m happy with your achievement’, implying the equality to the senior. The seventh substrategy ‘Expressions of hope’ is often used by parents, serving to convey affection to the children, and implying the parent’s higher status as well. Such expressions of hope can be seen as parents’ “rich affective display” in the Chinese context (Blum-Kulka, 1990: 265). With this characteristic, therefore, it would be likely for parents to emphasize consideration (personalized) and involvement (authoritative), rather than emphasize their children’s social identity. The last substrategy is ‘Sending regards to others’, which refers to a request of passing a writer’s salutation to a third party. As an opening strategy, it is used the least commonly in the data, and it occurs more in seniors’ letters within the family (e.g. parents, elder siblings) and among friends. For family seniors, it serves to highlight the attention that the family seniors typically apply to the care of their relationship with other family members. For friends, this strategy can be seen as a ‘consolidatory’ remark, which is used to confirm and reinforce a wide network of common acquaintances (Laver, 1981).

**Summary and Conclusion**

Several points can be summarized and discussed based on the analysis of the linguistic and pragmatic features of opening strategies used in Chinese personal letters. First, the current analysis suggests that Chinese writers use a variety of phatic expressions to achieve openings in personal letters. Those phatic expressions are primarily oriented to supporting the relationship between the writer and the recipient rather than to the indication of referential information or propositional meaning. Following Malinowski’s (1972) analysis of phatic communion, these acts are “not serving any purpose of communicating ideas”, but are establishing “bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship” (p.150-151). Therefore, we can say that openings in Chinese personal letters can be seen as the management of a range of expressions reflecting the phatic function. Why then do Chinese writers use these phatic expressions to achieve openings in personal letters? In answering this question, one needs to look at the feature of openings in written interaction, particularly in personal letters. Using Laver’s functional approaches to openings in conversation (i.e. propitiatory, exploratory, initiatory), it is assumed that openings in written interaction act to help the writer establish or maintain the relationship with the recipient, thus making a smooth transition into the main body of the written interaction (1975, 1981), and since openings are more readily deployed when participants initiate communication primarily for social purposes, Chinese writers achieve openings through the use of a range of expressive acts with phatic functions.

Another explanation for the use of phatic expressions in openings is related to manifestations of politeness. Generally, openings in written interaction can be seen as an event which might be face-threatening and hence “sensitive to strategic manipulation” (Blum-Kulka, 1990: 265). Thus, writers need to pay tribute to the mutual face wants,
that is, to “claim common ground”, to show respect (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 103), and to convey involvement and consideration (Tannen, 1984). It is with such face work (positive and negative politeness) that writers can be “building up their esteem” (Yahya-Othman, 1995: 211) in the eyes of the recipients, and thus keeping their interaction moving successfully. Thus, politeness becomes one of the major considerations in Chinese people’s opening behaviour.

In addition, the analysis also demonstrates that many opening strategies of this kind of written interaction are framed in an elaborate manner. While formulating an opening strategy either in the way of setting the scene or in reasoning, the writers may make the discourse more logical and clear. Such a performance may generate the effect of increasing the degree of “Relevance and Clarity” (Grice 1975) of the opening strategy, although the writers’ goal of communicating openings with the recipients has an interpersonal function. From the rhetorical point of view, such usage also reflects the Confucian influence on people’s speech style in their opening behavior. Confucius states that “rhetoric is for the purpose of expressing sincerity” (Shih, 1986: 62).

In the analysis of the relationship between openings and social variables, findings reveal that the selection of opening strategies and linguistic forms of particular strategies is clearly determined by the roles of the writer and recipient and their personal relationship. As discussed above, written openings are a phatic activity, in which writers aim to establish and strengthen bonds of personal relationship with the recipients. For the sake of achieving phatic functions, the writers are required to show recognition of the recipient’s status and the relationship between the two people, and even to show an effort to reinforce the relationship through the use of particular opening strategies.

Previous studies on openings have provided a variety of valuable pieces of information about linguistic and pragmatic patterns in spoken English and non-English languages. The current study provides some insights into the linguistic and pragmatic features in written openings in Chinese personal letters. Specifically, this study examines how written openings in Chinese unfold, which linguistic forms are employed and which pragmatic functions these forms serve in particular social contexts. Such a study should provide us with deeper insights into the function of speech acts as phatic communion in human social interaction, and into a better understanding of Chinese ritual discourse and Chinese culture in general.

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