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FROM CONFUCIAN COURTESY TO WESTERN CANDOUR: A FILM-BASED ANALYSIS OF GENDERED POLITENESS IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

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Abstract:

Politeness is vital to sustaining harmonious communication, yet its expression and interpretation are shaped by both cultural norms and gender roles. While prior research has examined politeness through either a cultural or gender lens, little is known about how these factors interact within the same cross-cultural context, particularly in everyday family settings. Moreover, studies rarely integrate Western and Chinese politeness frameworks to explore how cultural and gendered norms intersect in real-time, informal interactions. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates gendered politeness strategies in Chinese–Western communication, drawing on the film *When a Beijing Family Meets an Au Pair* as its primary data source. Using qualitative content analysis of 201 utterances, the findings reveal that both Chinese and Western characters frequently employed positive politeness to reduce social distance and build rapport. Wenjuan and Natalie (female characters) favoured indirect strategies such as off-record and negative politeness to maintain relationships, while Youzhi (male) used fewer politeness strategies and preferred direct speech, reflecting traditional Chinese male communication norms. The Chinese characters displayed modesty, harmony, and indirectness, characteristic of a collectivist style, whereas the Western character emphasised assertiveness and equality, reflecting an individualist style. Overall, the results suggest that women are generally more relationship-oriented, while men tend toward directness and efficiency. These findings highlight the need to consider both cultural and gender dimensions in cross-cultural pragmatics, offering practical insights for intercultural competence development and language education.

Introduction

Effective communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, allowing individuals to convey thoughts, emotions, and intentions while fostering meaningful social relationships (Cahyaningrum, et al, 2022; Mujiono & Ula, 2020). For communication to be successful, it must not only transmit messages clearly but also align with prevailing social and cultural expectations. In this regard, politeness functions as a key mechanism in maintaining interpersonal harmony and mitigating potential conflict. It supports mutual understanding by safeguarding the interlocutor's "face", a concept rooted in the theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to their framework, "face" refers to a person's public self-image. It consists of two aspects: positive face, which is the desire to be liked and accepted; and negative face, which is the desire to act freely and without any constraints.

Politeness, however, is not a fixed construct. It varies across cultures and is shaped by real-life interactions, context, speaker intentions, power relations, and prevailing social norms (Ernovilinda, 2020). Cross-cultural interactions often bring to light varying interpretations of what constitutes polite or appropriate behaviour. For instance, addressing elders by their first names may be acceptable in many Western cultures, yet it is considered disrespectful in many Eastern cultures (Effendi, 2021), such as in China. Chinese politeness practices are deeply embedded in Confucian philosophical traditions, which emphasise social hierarchy, moral conduct, and collective harmony, which are features that contrast sharply with the Western ideals of individualism and autonomy (Lee, 2019; Kádár & Pan, 2011). Gu Yueguo is the first scholar to systematically explore the phenomenon of politeness from the perspective of Confucian culture in the Chinese context (Cui &Li, 2021). In his research, Gu (1992) proposed five politeness maxims: self-denigration, address, tact, accord, and generosity, which together constitute a systematic theoretical framework for understanding and interpreting politeness in Chinese culture from the perspective of cultural values.

While cultural norms provide the broader framework for interpreting politeness, individual factors, particularly gender, further shape how these strategies are selected and perceived. Gender is another key variable influencing the deployment of politeness strategies. Studies have consistently shown that female speakers tend to use more polite, indirect, and euphemistic expressions than men (Elyas et al., 2022; Hoang, 2023). Whereas male speakers often prefer direct forms, particularly in making requests, female speakers are more likely to employ indirectness and softening devices to mitigate the force of their speech (Aracelly & Sutrisno, 2024). These gender-based differences can further complicate cross-cultural communication, where mismatched expectations can result in pragmatic misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

Understanding how gender and cultural norms interact in shaping politeness creates the need for data sources that capture authentic, context-rich interactions. In this context, film has increasingly been recognised as a valuable medium for analysing language use in authentic social situations. As a form of authentic material, films portray natural utterances and social

interactions that reflect real-life communicative practices (Hutauruk, 2018; Setyawati & Rahayu, 2020). Manurip and Katemba (2023) suggest that films not only support language learning but also offer meaningful opportunities for cultural comparison and analysis. This study draws on the Chinese film *When a Peking Family Meets Au Pair*, which depicts the interactions of a middle-class family in Beijing−consisting of the mother Wenjuan, the father Youzhi, and their daughter Pipi−and their Colombian au pair, Natalie. The film features a wide range of everyday conversations, providing rich data for investigating linguistic strategies and intercultural adjustments.

This study analyses the spoken interactions between Wenjuan (the wife) and Natalie (the au pair), as well as between Youzhi (the husband) and Natalie, with a focus on how politeness is expressed across cultural and gendered lines. The research addresses three core objectives:

- To identify the politeness strategies employed by the Chinese male and female characters (Youzhi and Wenjuan), as well as the Western female character (Natalie), using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy framework.
- To investigate how gender roles influence the selection and use of politeness strategies across the aforementioned characters.
- To explain the use of politeness strategies from the perspective of Gu Yueguo's Politeness Principle, with particular attention to culturally embedded norms.

In summary, this study investigates how politeness strategies differ across Chinese and Western cultures, focusing on gendered language use in the film *When a Peking Family Meets Au Pair*. Examining the interactions of the main characters highlights how cultural values and gender roles influence communication styles. The findings offer practical insights into cross-cultural pragmatics and contribute to more effective language teaching practices to enhance cross-cultural understanding.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework
As a core component of verbal communication, politeness expression has long received extensive attention from scholars. Early studies by Goffman (1967) introduced the concept of faces, emphasising how individuals seek to maintain a social image of themselves and others in interactions. Grice (1975) on the Cooperative Principle and Austin (1962) on Speech Act Theory laid the foundation for the systematic study of polite language. Leech (1983) proposed the Politeness Principle, which includes the Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim. These became an important framework for politeness research. However, as Ahmed (2022) observed, Leech's principles are overly general and lack operational clarity. Moreover, the model may have limitations when used in different languages and cultural backgrounds. Viewing politeness as a social norm, Lakoff (1973) proposed three guiding rules: do not impose, give options, and be friendly, emphasising respect for the listener's autonomy, preferences, and emotional comfort. In contrast, Lakoff sought to minimise conflict by framing communication in terms of mutual benefit. Fattah (2020) further argued that politeness is neither simple nor fixed but shaped by the speaker's intentions and the listener's interpretations.

Subsequently, Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced the Face Theory, which significantly advanced the study of politeness. They outlined a structure of politeness strategies that are common in verbal communication. They defined "face" as the public self-image that a person wants to be respected and not disturbed during communication. To minimise or avoid face-threatening acts (FTAs), speakers select appropriate strategies depending on the communicative context. Brown and Levinson proposed four primary strategies. First, Bald on Record, which involves direct, clear, and straightforward language. It is often used in close relationships, urgent situations, or when clarity is more important than politeness. Second, Positive Politeness is designed to promote unity through devices such as praise, humour, and fascinating language. This strategy minimizes social distancing between interlocutors. Third, Negative Politeness respects the listener's autonomy by mitigating imposition through indirect apology and noble expression. It tries to reduce pressure through indirectness, apology, and respectful expressions. Fourth, Off-record relies on indirect language devices such as cues, sarcasm, or understatement, which enable the speaker to convey meaning without taking direct responsibility for the act of communication.

According to their model, the choice of strategy is not arbitrary but influenced by three key sociocultural variables, including social distance, social power, and the rank of imposition caused by the speech. Social power (P) refers to the relative social roles or status of the speaker and the listener; Social distance (D) refers to the degree of intimacy or group affiliation between two people; Rank of imposition (R) refers to the demands or burdens that the speech itself places on the listener. The three factors together form the comprehensive face threat weight.

In China, pragmatics research started later. Pragmatics became a formal discipline in the 1970s and has since attracted widespread attention from Chinese scholars, especially in the study of politeness speech. Most scholars base their research on Leech's (1983) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) theories. Liu (1987) provided a detailed discussion of Leech's politeness principles, emphasising their core position in pragmatics. Based on this, Xu (1992) proposed new ideas to reinterpret politeness strategies, distinguishing between positive and negative strategies. Positive strategies involve moderately polite or respectful speech that promotes harmonious relationships. Negative strategies involve using moderate and neutral language to avoid direct offence and maintain the other person's face.

Gu Yueguo (1992) introduced five politeness principles rooted in the Chinese cultural tradition. The first, the Self-denigration Maxim, reflects through self-lowering and other-elevating expressions, embodying modesty and respect. For example, when someone gives a compliment, one may respond modestly, "No, no, I am still far from doing well. You did much better." The second, the Address Maxim, emphasises the appropriate use of forms of address. In formal contexts or when speaking with elders, it is common to use titles such as "teacher," "principal," or "director" rather than addressing the person by name. The third, the Tact Maxim, reflects refinement in speech. It requires speakers to employ polite and appropriate expressions while avoiding language that could be perceived as rude or offensive. For instance, one should avoid saying, "You are so stupid, you don't pay attention at all." One might opt for a more tactful phrasing, such as, "Maybe there was a little carelessness this time, you can check it more carefully next time." The fourth, the Agreement Maxim, promotes consensus-building and discourages overt confrontation. In group settings, dissatisfaction is often expressed indirectly. A typical comment might be: "We all want the project to go well; perhaps a slight adjustment in the plan could help us work more efficiently." Lastly, the Virtues-Words-Deeds

Maxim underscores the harmony between one's moral values, speech, and behaviour. For example, someone who expresses concern about social issues may actively participate in volunteer work or charitable donations. Together, the five politeness maxims show the value of politeness in traditional Chinese culture. They focus on maintaining good relationships, modesty, and respecting others through polite language and behaviour.

While previous studies have demonstrated the value of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory for examining politeness in Western contexts, this framework does not fully capture the cultural differences present in all societies. In many non-Western settings, including China, the concept and expression of "face" diverge significantly from Western norms, limiting the universal applicability of their model (Dong, 2020). Gu Yueguo's (1992) politeness principles, grounded in Chinese linguistic and cultural traditions, offer a more context-specific lens, yet they have rarely been applied alongside Western models in a single, integrated analysis. Existing research often examines either cultural or gender differences in isolation, with limited attention to how these dimensions intersect in real-time, cross-cultural interactions, particularly in informal, family-based settings. This study addresses this gap by combining Brown and Levinson's framework with Gu's principles to analyse Chinese–Western politeness strategies as they unfold in authentic, conversational contexts. Through this comparative approach, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural and gendered norms jointly shape politeness in cross-cultural communication.

Related Studies on Politeness Strategies in Cross-Cultural Communication
Politeness shows different groups' cultural values and language traditions and becomes an important way to understand the speaker's pragmatic intentions and thinking process. People from different cultural backgrounds have different lifestyles, values, and ways of thinking. These differences can influence how they understand politeness strategies and may cause problems in cross-cultural communication (Jin, 2023). Nurlaila et al (2020) also pointed out that comparing pragmatic behaviours in different cultural contexts is a valuable field under the framework of intercultural pragmatics. By comparing the similarities and differences in politeness strategies between Chinese and Western cultures, it is possible to reduce misunderstandings caused by cultural differences and improve appropriateness in cross-cultural communication (Zhang, 2020).

Regarding cross-cultural communication strategies based on Chinese and Western views of face, scholars believe Chinese culture emphasises collectivism. The face is related to social group awareness. It values the recognition of social status and reputation. Western culture emphasises individualism. Face is related to personal achievement and self-realisation. It focuses on the protection of personal rights and freedom. This view is in line with Gu (2023), who believes that cultural background strongly influences the choice of politeness strategies. Chinese people tend to use indirect and modest expressions in communication. They avoid direct conflicts to keep harmonious relationships. In Western culture, especially in American culture, people tend to express their ideas directly and clearly (Adewale, 2025).

This difference is apparent in business negotiations. Effective cross-cultural business negotiations must build trust, use good communication skills, respect cultural differences, and stay flexible (Liu, 2024). Chinese negotiators often focus on building long-term partnerships and maintaining strong social connections. American negotiators care more about contract terms and the details of short-term cooperation (Gu, 2023). Liu and Zhang (2023) point out

that in corporate politeness language, such as apology strategies, Chinese companies often use formal and collective expressions like "the company" and "customers" to show a sense of group responsibility. American companies focus more on individual responsibility and use direct and sincere apologetic methods. This difference shows the different views on individual and group responsibility in Chinese and Western cultures. Batool et al (2024) compare speeches by Chinese and American presidents at the United Nations General Assembly. The study found that the American president used more politeness strategies. They explain this difference because of cultural factors. High-context cultures often use indirect communication and nonverbal hints. Low-context cultures prefer direct and clear expression (Nkirote, 2024). Power distance also affects politeness. Cultures with high power distance show more respect for authority (Nkirote, 2024). Yang (2024) thinks learning a foreign language well requires developing students' cross-cultural awareness and pragmatic ability. Yang (2024) also pointed out that in foreign language teaching, teachers should teach language knowledge and help students learn the culture of the target language country.

In general, the study of Chinese and Western cross-cultural politeness strategies shows the close connection between politeness and culture. Collectivism in Chinese culture and individualism in Western culture deeply influence the choice and use of politeness strategies. These differences appear not only in business communication but also in daily interaction and social activities. These findings show the importance of cultural sensitivity in international communication. They suggest that people should develop adaptive skills for better mutual understanding in business, education, diplomacy, and other contexts (Liu, 2024).

Research on Politeness Strategies Related to Gender
Politeness is reflected not only in the choice of language but also in gender differences. For example, Lakoff (1975) believes that women are more likely than men to employ politeness strategies in speech, such as using more tag questions and modal words and preferring more conventional and elegant polite expressions. This proposition has prompted numerous studies seeking to explain the underlying causes of such differences. For example, Saritza and Natsir (2023) studied the politeness strategies used by males and females on WhatsApp, drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Their findings indicate that male students were more likely to use Bald-on record, with no use Off-record. While female students varied in the use of politeness strategies. They tended to use negative politeness and off-record. Males are more direct when requesting, while women also use indirect expressions to maintain politeness and unity.

The same result was found for Ayesha (2022), who explored the politeness strategies used by male and female teachers in university English departments. She found that female teachers were more likely to use politeness strategies, which helped enhance interaction and closeness with students. In contrast, male teachers tended to maintain an authoritative position and used fewer politeness strategies, which may result in lower student engagement in the classroom. Saritza and Natsir (2023) noted that traditionally, women are more eager to be recognised and helped, so they expect better social connections. On the other hand, men focus more on factual information, as they are usually better at placing themselves in confrontational contexts (Edwards, 2009).

Although women are generally considered to be more inclined to show polite behaviour in verbal communication, such gender differences may stem from socially constructed stereotypes regarding women's roles. That is, women are seen as more cooperative and more conflict-avoidant. However, this stereotype varies in different social groups and cultural backgrounds (Karlić, 2024). While many studies have highlighted the influence of gender on politeness, research remains insufficient in exploring how gender differences affect politeness strategies in diverse cultural contexts and how these strategies are manifested in specific situations.

Research on Politeness Strategies Based on a Movie

Movies, as a medium that reflects real-life communication, can serve as valuable resources for understanding the use of various politeness strategies (Hutauruk, 2018; Probosini, 2020; Setyawati & Rahayu, 2020). Previous research has investigated this phenomenon by analysing how politeness strategies are portrayed in film dialogue and how they reflect cultural norms. Using Brown and Levinson's theoretical framework, these studies provide valuable insights into people's communication styles. Positive politeness is the most common strategy in many movies, including *Joy* (51%) and *The Greatest Showman* (42%), reflecting the characters' efforts to maintain harmonious relationships and express respect (Moorthi et al., 2023; Mujahidah & Sumiati, 2022; Tagugurad & Rosita, 2023). Similarly, Salsabila and Rahayu (2023), in *Stranger Things* movie, found that teenage characters mainly use positive politeness (25 times), and in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the main characters use positive politeness strategies 49 times in the workplace (Barat, 2020). Politeness is largely influenced by social distance (Probosini, 2020).

In addition, recent research has gradually shifted towards exploring how cultural background significantly influences the choice and effectiveness of strategies. Studies emphasize the mutual influence of language and culture, and how people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds communicate also differ (Ernovilinda, 2020; Nurilaila, Ricahyono, Setyadi, & Arifin, 2020). Wang (2020) and Li (2021) studied the movies *Mulan* and *The Farewell*, revealing the different concepts of face in Chinese and American cultures. Chinese culture emphasises the collective face and positive face, while Western culture focuses on the individual face and negative face. A similar study by Ernovilinda (2020) in *Shanghai Knights* shows that Chinese characters are likelier to use positive politeness strategies, such as praise and concern, to maintain close relationships with others. In contrast, American characters are more likely to use negative politeness strategies, such as apologising and requesting permission, to respect others' autonomy. These studies highlight the interaction between language, culture, and politeness in different contexts, promoting cross-cultural understanding and language teaching (Musyafa'ah, Yuliasri, & Pratama, 2022; Nurilaila et al., 2020; Wang, 2024).

In studying gender-based polite strategies, Muhammad and Diannurdianti, 2024 analyzed strategies used by male and female characters in the *Harry Potter series and Azkaban*. Their findings differ between male and female roles in using polite strategies, especially in directness and indirectness. Similarly, Wati and Puspani (2020) studied the film *The Patriot* found that women tend to use neutral styles when talking to men. They believe this trend reflects women's psychological tendencies, interacting with and supporting others without competing. In contrast, male characters have more tone variations, such as using formal, informal, and neutral tones, where males tend to control the conversation and try to dominate the audience. When

making a request, men are more direct. In contrast, female characters are more likely to use off-record strategies to express demands, and they also tend to use mitigation language in polite strategies (Aracelly & Sutrisno, 2024).

Some studies indicate that females often employ negative politeness strategies. At the same time, males are more likely to use positive politeness strategies to establish common ground and cooperation (Elyas et al., 2022). This difference may be related to gender roles and cultural social expectations. Male characters are often observed to use more impolite strategies, which are frequently associated with the power dynamics of male speakers. Therefore, those who use impolite language strategies are often in positions of higher power (Suhandoko, Lyatin, & Ningrum, 2021). While Chinese and Southeast Asian perspectives provide critical insight into contextually grounded politeness patterns, Classical studies in Western contexts have also provided an important theoretical foundation and analytical framework for understanding the differences in politeness across gender and culture. For instance, works by Holmes (1995), Mills (2003), and Spencer-Oatey (2008) provide nuanced discussions on the interplay between gender, power, and cultural norms in communication. Integrating such perspectives enhances the cross-cultural depth of this study. In conclusion, existing studies reveal significant differences in the use of politeness strategies by different genders in movie corpora and highlight the important influence of cultural background on the forms of politeness expression.

Nevertheless, current research mainly focuses on gender differences within a single cultural or linguistic context, with less attention given to the interactive behaviours between Chinese and Western cultures in the same communication context. Most studies remain theoretical, and there is a limited empirical analysis based on corpora, especially a lack of in-depth analysis of gender differences in cross-cultural politeness strategies in family contexts. In addition, previous studies often examine gender or cultural factors separately, with few exploring the multidimensional generation mechanisms of politeness strategies from the intersectional perspective of "gender and culture."

Research Methods

Research Design
This study employs qualitative content analysis. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state, content analysis allows researchers to systematically code and interpret textual data in detail, identifying categories and themes. This method examines the dialogues and contextual elements in the selected movies, identifying, classifying, and coding the conversations between Wenjuan (the wife), Youzhi (the husband), and the au pair, Natalie, in a Chinese family. The research aims to deepen the understanding of the differences in politeness strategies under the intersection of gender and cultural backgrounds between China and the West and to provide practical suggestions for promoting mutual understanding and harmonious communication between people from both cultures.

Sample of Research
This study used film as a research medium and employed purposive sampling to select the Chinese film *When a Beijing Family Meets an Au Pair* (2014) as the research corpus. Selection criteria included various conflicting politeness strategies (Chinese and Western); standard Mandarin with English subtitles; and the film's publication and ease of online access. The film

covers common, relatable themes suitable for audiences of all ages, and contains no depictions of violence, religious content, or other sensitive issues.

The film tells the story of a typical Beijing family that hires an au pair from Spain, leading to various cross-cultural conflicts and integrations. The characters' language is realistic and natural, reflecting everyday interactions and cultural contrasts, making the film suitable for studying politeness strategies.

Data Collection Procedures
The study focuses on the utterances involving the three main characters in the movie: Wenjuan, the mother from a Chinese family; Youzhi, the father; and Natalie, the au pair from Colombia. Their spoken interactions are carefully transcribed. Repeated cross-checking and verification are done to ensure that the dialogue's completeness and the conversational context's accuracy are maintained throughout the analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures
In the data analysis phase, the study uses Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy theory to classify and code the data into four categories: Bald on Record (BOR), Positive Politeness (PP), Negative Politeness (NP), and Off-record (OR). The coding results are then compared based on gender identity and communication context, including social roles, power dynamics, and interactional goals. To deepen cultural interpretation, the analysis also refers to the politeness principles proposed by Gu Yueguo (1992) to provide better insights into how the cultural context influences the strategies. The data is coded manually and compared based on factors such as communication context, speaker identity, and tone to reveal the differences in the choices of politeness strategy adopted by the male and female characters in Chinese and Western cultural settings.

Validity and Reliability
To ensure internal consistency, the researchers independently conducted preliminary coding, strictly adhering to the coding manual (based on the theoretical frameworks of Brown and Levinson, 1987, and Gu, 1992). To ensure coding accuracy, the researchers first selected 50 trial coding utterances and conducted two iterations of coding over two weeks, comparing and self-correcting the results. Ambiguous or unclear expressions were recorded in a dedicated memo and adjusted as needed by referring to relevant theoretical literature. Subsequently, the researchers engaged experts with extensive experience in cross-cultural pragmatics research and applied linguistics to discuss and validate the coding system to enhance its clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness.

Limitations of the Study
While this study possesses considerable innovation, it also has some limitations. First, the analysis was based on a single film and cannot encompass all politeness strategies and cross-cultural contexts. However, the researchers conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis and detailed discussion using this case study as a representative example, hoping to provide a reference analytical framework and scalable research path for future cross-cultural pragmatics and Chinese language teaching research. Secondly, the coding and analysis process relies on the researcher's subjective judgment, which may affect the objectivity and generalizability of the results. Future research should consider expanding the corpus to explore how factors such as age, education level, social role, gender, and cultural background jointly influence the choice

of language strategies, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the social construction of linguistic politeness.

Research Ethics

All dialogue data from this study was sourced from a commercially released, publicly available film. It was used for academic analysis and non-commercial research under fair use principles. No personal privacy, defamatory content, or commercial use was involved in the analysis. Because this study did not involve real human subjects or sensitive data, it presented no ethical risks and fully complied with institutional ethical review requirements.

Findings and Discussion

This study analyses 201 utterances between Youzhi and Wenjuan (a Chinese couple) and Natalie (an au pair) in the movie *When a Peking Family Meets Au Pair*. Among them, there are 161 utterances between Natalie and their wife (Wenjuan), and 40 utterances between Natalie and husband (Youzhi). Each sentence is coded and classified based on the politeness strategy framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Table 1 shows the number of utterances between Chinese couples and Natalie.

Table 1: Conversation between the Chinese Couples and Natalie

Conversation Partners	No. of utterances
Natalie and Wenjuan (wife)	161
Natalie and Youzhi (husband)	40
Total	201

The results, as displayed in Table 2, reveal notable differences in the use of politeness strategies across characters. Positive politeness was the most frequently employed strategy among the three characters, accounting for 37% of all instances (74 out of 201 utterances). Wenjuan used positive politeness 29 times and Youzhi 13 times, totalling 42 instances (35%) among the Chinese characters. Natalie, the Western au pair, used positive politeness slightly more often, with 32 occurrences (40%). It shows that people from both Chinese and Western backgrounds focus on building relationships, expressing friendliness, and reducing social distance during communication.

Table 2: The Distribution of Politeness Strategies Used by Main Characters

Politeness Strategies	Youzhi (Husband)	Wenjuan (Wife)	Total		Western (Natalie)		Total	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Bald On Record	4	28	32	27%	4	5%	36	18%
Positive Politeness	13	29	42	35%	32	40%	74	37%
Negative Politeness	4	19	23	19%	25	30%	48	24%
Off-Record	2	21	23	19%	20	25%	43	21%
Total	23	97	120	100%	81	100%	201	100%

Negative politeness was the second most common strategy, appearing 48 times (24%). Natalie used negative politeness more frequently (25 times, 30%) than the Chinese couple (23 times, 19%), suggesting that Natalie prioritised maintaining respect and social distance in cross-cultural interactions. These data suggest that Natalie used expressions such as apologies to express disrespect and offence towards the other person's personal space, favouring explicit politeness. The Chinese characters were more accustomed to expressing their intentions directly or using implicit strategies, emphasising implicit politeness (such as modesty and authoritative expressions in collectivist contexts) (Batool, Noreen, & Sultan, 2024).

Off-record strategies were used third most frequently, totalling 43 times (21%). Wenjuan used indirect strategies 21 times, while Youzhi only used them twice. Natalie used indirect strategies 20 times (25%), demonstrating a tendency to be roundabout, especially in sensitive or face-threatening situations. This suggests that, in family and cross-cultural interactions, women are more adept at transforming potential face threats into emotional bonds and identity assertions within the female group (Ambarwati et al., 2019). In contrast, male characters may be more confident and direct when dealing with foreign cultures. However, the frequency of use of these strategies was not as significant as that of positive or negative politeness strategies (Muhammad & Diannurdianti, 2024).

Bald on record strategies were the least used overall, with 36 instances (18%). Wenjuan was the primary user among the Chinese characters, employing this direct strategy 28 times, while Youzhi and Natalie each used it 4 times (5% of Natalie's total strategies). This result suggests that Wenjuan, as a wife and mother, may use direct expressions more to show concern and responsibility. In Chinese culture, direct expression is often seen as sincere in intimate relationships, especially in communication between elders and juniors, parents and children, or spouses to build intimacy and maintain family relationships (Lutfiah et al, 2025; Saritza & Natsir, 2023). Pointing out issues or making requests directly is considered a sign of responsibility and care. The male character uses politeness strategies less frequently (Mohd et al., 2023). Youzhi mentions traditional virtues such as "gentle, kind, respectful, frugal, and modest." Although polite, the frequency and emotional colour of using politeness strategies are not as rich as those of female characters.

As a Western au pair, Natalie is in a position of greater social distance and lower power when facing Chinese culture and family settings. She often uses negative politeness and off-record expressions to show respect and caution, while avoiding offence. In contrast, Wenjuan and Youzhi, as family leaders in a familiar context, especially in their interactions with Natalie, often use positive politeness to strengthen relationships and ease cultural conflicts, showing the host's hospitality. Although politeness is universal, significant differences exist in how it is understood and practised across cultures. All in all, using politeness strategies is also the result of the interaction between social distance, power relations, and specific contexts.

In sum, the findings suggest that females (Wenjuan and Natalie) generally preferred more polite and indirect strategies (positive, negative, and off record), while Youzhi (male) demonstrated a greater tendency toward direct speech (bald on record) but used fewer politeness strategies overall. Natalie's strategic choice of positive and negative politeness indicates a strong awareness of intercultural sensitivity and power distance within the Chinese family setting.

For Research Objective 2, "To explore how gender roles influence the selection and application of politeness strategies used by the Chinese male and female characters and the Western female character," the study looks at three areas: the total number of strategies used, the types of strategies preferred, and how strategy choice changes in sensitive situations.

First, for total strategy use and gender, the coding shows that Wenjuan (Chinese female) used 97 politeness strategies, Natalie (Western female) used 81, and Youzhi (Chinese male) used only 23. Women used many more strategies than men. This means women take on more "emotional work" and "face management" in family talk. Men use fewer strategies to send information and make decisions. Their style is simple and efficient.

Second, for strategy type and gender features, women favour positive politeness (PP) and off-record (OR). Both women show 30–40% PP and about 22–25% OR. The man also prefers PP (57%), but he uses bald on record (BOR) and negative politeness (NP) each 17%, and only 9% OR. This difference shows that in close or persuasive talk, women use PP to build closeness and OR to leave room for doubt. Men rely more on BOR and NP to show authority and efficiency.

Third, in terms of situational sensitivity and gender-based adjustment, Brown and Levinson (1987) note that speakers assess three social factors when encountering face-threatening acts: power, social distance, and rank of imposition. As the combined weight of these factors increases, speakers tend to shift from bald-on-record (BOR) or positive politeness (PP) strategies toward negative politeness (NP) or off-record (OR) strategies.

For the female characters, Wenjuan and Natalie, an increase in the other person's power, social distance, or the rank of imposition prompts a quick shift from bald-on-record (BOR) or positive politeness (PP) to negative politeness (NP) or off-record (OR) strategies. For example, when Wenjuan instructs Natalie not to take Pipi (the couple's daughter) out, the rank of imposition is high (child safety), social distance is moderate (host–guest), and power is high (mother's moral authority). In response, Wenjuan softens the command by using a metaphor, "there are big wolves outside", and adding, "your Chinese is not good," to reduce the perceived threat.

In contrast, Youzhi employs relatively few politeness strategies. Even in high-threat situations, he remains with BOR or PP, relying on authority to deliver direct advice. For instance, upon discovering that Natalie lied about taking Pipi out (claiming she took a taxi but actually using the subway), he simply says, "Natalie, come out here," without mitigation, reflecting a preference for direct, authoritative speech in high-stakes contexts.

As a Western woman engaged in cross-cultural communication, Natalie demonstrates a dual adaptation. She maintains her Western confidence and directness (low use of BOR) within a high-context Mandarin environment, while also adopting off-record (OR) and negative politeness (NP) strategies in high-stakes situations to align with Chinese preferences for indirectness and respect. For instance, when Wenjuan discourages her from taking Pipi out, Natalie avoids asserting her freedom directly. Instead, she says, "I want to go out and see my old friend," followed by a polite "please" to soften potential conflict. This balance between self-expression and cultural accommodation illustrates the interplay of gender and cultural norms. The findings indicate that gender roles can moderate face-threatening behaviours by influencing how speakers assess power, social distance, and rank of imposition, which in turn

shapes the quantity, type, and adaptability of politeness strategies used (Raesky & Novitri, 2023).

The third objective is to explain politeness strategies from the perspective of Gu Yueguo's Politeness Principle. Tables 3-7 compare how the Chinese couple and the Western character Natalie reflect different politeness principles in their speech, based on Gu Yueguo's (1992) framework. Each politeness principle highlights a distinct cultural orientation toward communication.

The Self-denigration Principle emphasises modesty and respect for others. Politeness is shown by lowering oneself and raising others. Chinese culture emphasises humility as a virtue, maintaining a modest image by belittling oneself. Western culture encourages confidence and self-expression (Handriani et al, 2025). This can be seen in the examples in Table 3, where Wenjuan downplays her efforts ("No, no, I just casually tidied up"), demonstrating humility and modesty, key values in Chinese culture. At the same time, Natalie confidently states, "I have always been sexy," reflecting the Western cultural emphasis on self-expression and individual pride rather than modesty.

Table 3: Example of Gu Yueguo's Self-denigration Principle

Politeness Principle	Wenjuan's utterances	Natalie's utterances
Self-denigration Principle	"No, no, I just casually tidied up."	"I've always been sexy."

Address Maxim stresses the use of proper forms of address during communication. The examples displayed in Table 4 show that Wenjuan is correcting Natalie's pronunciation ("Not Pee Dad, it is Pi Dad"), showing that titles and correct naming are important for respect and kinship in Chinese culture. Natalie's mistake ("Pee Dad") shows her unfamiliarity and attempt to adopt cultural forms of address, indicating efforts at cultural adaptation and building closeness.

Table 4: Example of Gu Yueguo's Address Principle

Politeness Principle	Wenjuan's utterances	Natalie's utterances
Address Maxim	"Not Pee Dad, it's Pi Dad."	"Pee Dad." (mispronounced)

Tact Maxim reflects refinement in speech. It requires the speaker to use polite and appropriate language and to avoid rude expressions. From the example in Table 5, while eating, Natalie saw a few dumplings left from dinner and asked if she could finish them. She asked directly, "Can I finish them?" This sentence reflects that Westerners tend to be direct and honest and place little value on indirectness. Wenjuan did not directly reject Natalie, but gave a clue by saying "Pipi also likes dumplings," to imply that Natalie should leave some for Pipi, which reflects that the Chinese communication style tends to use indirect and euphemistic expressions to reduce face-threatening behaviour.

Table 5: Example of Gu Yueguo's Tact Principle

Politeness Principle	Natalie's utterances	Wenjuan's utterances
Tact Maxim	"Can I eat all of it?"	"Pipi loves dumplings too."

Agreement Maxim stresses finding common ground during communication. It avoids strong arguments and helps keep a harmonious relationship. In the example displayed in Table 6, that Wenjuan hopes to reach a consensus with Natalie on Pipi's daily care, emphasising the shared interests and views of both parties (the common goal of "giving Pipi exclusive, safe and hygienic use" has potentially established a consensus between the two), and then start a dialogue or action proposal, which is more implicit in the form of "do first, talk later". Natalie directly questioned "Does she need this?" and did not first affirm the standard value of "We all hope that Pipi can use it safely and healthily" but instead skipped the step of consensus building. The Western way of seeking common ground is "talk first, then do", publicly soliciting and confirming everyone's position, and then acting according to the plan that everyone agrees on.

On the other hand, the Chinese way of seeking common ground often takes agreement as a prerequisite and then uses implicit collective expression. The Western way of seeking common ground is to first publicly consult and confirm everyone's position, then act according to the plan everyone agrees on. Although politeness is universal, there are significant differences in the understanding and practice of politeness among different cultures (Li, 2023).

Table 6: Example of Gu Yueguo's Agreement Principle

Politeness Principle	Wenjuan's utterances	Natalie's utterances
Agreement Maxim	"These stuff are for Pipi only.these are Pipi's chopsticks, rinse them with hot water after use. This filter......"	"Pipi? Does she really need this stuff?"

Virtues-Words-Deeds Maxim stresses the unity of a person's moral character, speech, and actions. From the example in Table 7, it was about Pipi fighting with Natalie for the dumplings. Youzhi taught Pipi the story of "Kong Rong giving away the pear" (a child named Kong Rong gave the big pear to others and ate the small pear himself), hoping that the child would learn self-restraint and be humble and polite. They believed that "Kong Rong giving away the pear is a virtue of the Chinese people." This reflects the Chinese collectivist values and the culture of focusing on moral education and self-restraint. At this time, Natalie had a different view. When she believed that "No, the best should be left for yourself, eat well, look pretty, be smart, get opportunities.", she advocated self-centeredness, which reflected the Western ideal of pursuing self-realisation, personal achievement and personal value (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

Table 7: Example of Gu Yueguo's Virtue-Words-Deeds Principles

Politeness Principle	Chinese couple's utterances	Natalie's utterances
Virtues-Words-Deeds Maxim	"Kong Rong giving up his pears is a virtue of the Chinese people."	"No, the best should be left for yourself—eat well, look pretty, be smart, get opportunities."

These findings highlight the Chinese couple's language, which is consistently shaped by values of modesty, respect, indirectness, and harmony, aligning with Confucian cultural traditions. On the other hand, Natalie's utterances reflect Western cultural traits such as confidence, directness, individualism, and equality, even when navigating a culturally different

environment. These differences demonstrate that while both parties aim to be polite, their understanding and enactment of politeness are deeply rooted in different cultural ideologies.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study explores the cross-cultural use of politeness strategies in the movie *Beijing Family Meets the Au Pair*. The research subjects are the language interactions between a Chinese couple (Youzhi and Wenjuan) and a Western au pair, Natalie. Using the politeness framework of Brown and Levinson (1987) and the politeness principle of Gu Yueguo (1992), the analysis shows that both Chinese and Western characters use positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, which are frequently employed by the Chinese female character. Both parties use positive politeness strategies in the family environment to maintain a harmonious relationship.

Wenjuan and Natalie used more negative politeness and non-disclosure strategies. This study suggests that women are more inclined to express empathy and build consensus, such as encouraging, comforting, and emphasising common goals, while men use fewer politeness strategies. In contrast, men tend to employ fewer politeness strategies. Chinese communication focuses on restraint, respect, and collectivism, while Western communication focuses more on self-expression, equality, and individualism. However, in cross-cultural communication, the choice of politeness strategies will also be affected by differences in social distance, power relations, and specific contexts.

Future research can further explore the differences in politeness strategies in interpersonal communication between people of different cultural backgrounds, genders, and ages. The research results will be helpful for language education, cross-cultural communication training, and improving cultural awareness and communication efficiency in a global environment.

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