A conversation analysis of self-praising in everyday Mandarin interaction

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

As part of a larger effort to explore how the Chinese substantiate their concept of modesty in interpersonal communication, this article reports the results of a conversation-analytic study of the self-praising behavior of the Chinese in everyday social encounters. Drawing on a corpus of approximately 35 hours of audio- and videotaped face-to-face conversations collected in Beijing and Hebei, China during 2001–2010, I examine three previously undescribed or under-described practices that are observed in my data to be used in the service of self-praising in Mandarin conversation. These practices are what I call 'the designedly bipartite [self-praise plus modification] turn format,' 'disclaiming an extreme case situation,' and 'treating the matter ostensibly as complainable.' In addition to their turn design, I also discuss and provide a possible account for the interactional contingencies that give rise to the use of these practices.

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1. Introduction

Modesty has long been thought of as one of the core values of Chinese culture that guides Chinese communication behavior. Scholars exploring Chinese politeness phenomena have repeatedly claimed that Chinese cherish modesty and humbleness, and tend to be more willing to elevate others and denigrate themselves, in a large part because of the long-instilled belief that doing so can help enhance positive self-images and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bond et al., 1982; Gu, 1990; Chen, 1993; Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998).

Despite the general consensus on the centrality of modesty and the role it plays in interpersonal relationships in Chinese societies, there have been very few empirical studies exploring or touching on this topic. The majority of the literature in this area has been presented as part of a larger attempt to describe or theorize about the overarching models or principles which govern the norms of Chinese social behavior; and its claims are based primarily on ancient Chinese philosophy, such as Confucianism or the well-known etiquette-prescribing book *Li Ji* ("On Politeness"), as well as on analysts' intuitions and common folk wisdom as expressed in well-known Chinese sayings (e.g., Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976; Hwang, 1987; Mao, 1994; Gao, 1998).

While this literature has contributed to raising our awareness of the importance of modesty and its relevance to the norms of Chinese social behavior, one risk of relying completely on ancient philosophy or the analysts' intuitions in explicating Chinese modesty is that such claims, though seemingly intuitively sensible, may not always be borne out when tested against authentic data. In a questionnaire study of Chinese and American English speakers' responses to compliments,

for example, Chen (1993) concluded that even though the norm of Chinese society is to be modest, this does not mean that the Chinese do not think positively of themselves. "All they need to do," he argued, "is to *appear* humble, not necessarily *think* humbly of themselves" (Chen, 1993:67). In a related study, Spencer-Oatey and Ng (2001) examined Chinese evaluative judgments of compliment responses based on questionnaires. They showed that modesty in Chinese is managed in more complex ways than had been previously claimed. They argued, for instance, that acceptance/agreement responses are by no means necessarily unacceptable, and, hence, that the previous claim in the literature such as "to blatantly accept a compliment is considered impolite" (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998:47) is a "misleading over-simplification" (Spencer-Oatey and Ng, 2001:193). Likewise, Wu (2010), based on her analysis of a corpus of naturally occurring conversation collected in China, also observed that despite the long-held view of the modesty constraints in Chinese culture, Mandarin speakers can and do promote themselves while interacting with each other. She found that two practices of reporting past events – reporting another's words and reporting just the facts – are often used strategically by the speakers to tacitly achieve a positive presentation of themselves in the current interaction.

This project is part of a larger effort to explore how the Chinese substantiate their concept of modesty in interpersonal communication and how such a conceptualization of modesty and related strategies compare with those noted in the literature. Unlike much of the existing research on this subject, whose main analytic focus has been on self-praise avoidance in the context of compliment responses (Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Spencer-Oatey and Ng, 2001; Yuan, 2002), the present project investigates the self-praising behavior of the Chinese in everyday social encounters. Specifically, in this article I describe three previously undescribed or under-described practices that are observed in my data to be used in the service of self-praising in Mandarin conversation. In addition to their turn design, I also discuss and provide a possible account for the discourse motivations for the use of these three practices.

Diverging from the body of the existing empirical research on Chinese modesty, which is based largely on data collected through questionnaires or discourse completion tasks (Bond et al., 1982; Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Spencer-Oatey and Ng, 2001; Yuan, 2002), this article is conversation-analytic in orientation and bases its analysis exclusively on naturally occurring conversations. The data for this article are drawn from a corpus of approximately 35 hours of audio- and videotaped face-to-face conversations collected in Beijing and Hebei, China, during 2001–2002 and 2006–2010. All of the participants spoke what is considered the standard variety of spoken Mandarin, *Putonghua*, though they were not all from Beijing or Hebei originally. Some participants were from places such as Dongbei, Shandong, Shanghai, Sichuan, Tianjin, and Yunan. Most participants came from middle-class backgrounds and their ages ranged from the early twenties to the late sixties. Participants in each conversation were family members, friends and acquaintances, and they were recorded during activities such as lunches, dinners, visits to relatives, Mahjong games or simple get-togethers for chitchat. No participants were provided with any topic to talk about in the conversation.

One caveat is that the non-solicited nature of the conversations makes the occurrence and non-occurrence of self-praise subject, for the most part, to the interactional tasks and topics that the participants engage in as a result of the moment-by-moment unfolding of the conversation. Attributing the occurrence and the lack thereof to particular social attributes of the participants, such as age, class, gender, geographic background or relationship, may prove analytically unwarranted. Thus, although a potentially interesting topic for future research, the present project makes no attempt to draw solid conclusions on the effects of the sociolinguistic factors on the self-praising behavior of Mandarin speakers.

In the following, I will discuss three practices used as resources for self-praise in Mandarin conversation and examine the interactional contingencies which may give rise to their occurrences. However, to understand how these practices prefigure in everyday interaction in relation to the long-upheld notion of modesty, a brief discussion of how the participants in Mandarin conversation orient to one's self-praise is in order.

2. Constraints against self-praise in Mandarin conversation

Self-elevating behavior in interaction, such as bragging or self-praise, has long been considered as a potentially problematic social action (e.g., Pomerantz, 1978a; Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Golato, 2005). In a seminal paper on compliment responses in American English, for example, Pomerantz (1978a) discusses the self-praise constraints and describes how the violation of such constraints can be treated as an interactionally noticeable and consequential event. In his account of polite behavior, Leech (1983), too, proposes the Modesty Maxim. He claims that while self-dispraise can be considered as interactionally quite benign, breaking the Modesty Maxim can be seen as "committing the social transgression of boasting" (Leech, 1983:136). In a similar spirit, Brown and Levinson (1987) have claimed that "just as to raise the other is to imply a lowering of the self, so a raising of the self may imply a lowering of the other" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:39). Self-praise, accordingly, is treated in their framework as a face-threatening act damaging the addressee's positive face.

A cursory examination of my data quickly reveals that the constraints against straightforward, unmitigated self-praise appear to be closely observed among Mandarin speakers in everyday interaction. As my data suggest, giving an outright favorable evaluation of oneself is uncommon, and when it does occur, it often is moderated by the speaker him- or herself. Example (1), from a conversation of a man and a woman in their late twenties who are meeting for the first time through the arrangement of a mutual friend, is a typical example.

(1)   (CMC5_8; video 03:09; B064)

1M: *quan shijie na ge, (.)   hui chang ma*=
               entire world that C   can sing   Q
               '"The whole world" one, (.) can you sing that?'=

2M: =[*lai   yi   ge*
                 come one C
               =['Sing it.'

3W: =[*hui chang*
                 can sing
               =['(I) can.'

4M: [[*na   chang chang chang*=
                 then sing   sing   sing
               [['Then sing it, sing it, sing it.'=

5W: [[*nei   ge-*
                 that C
               [['That-'

6W: = >*ei   zamen-* <u>*dai:huir-*</u> <u>*zhen*</u> *keyi qu chang*=
                   PRT we   later   really can go sing
               = >'Ack, we- <u>re</u>ally can go sing (songs) <u>la</u>ter.'=

7W:->   =*wo nei   ge chang tebie   hao*
                 I   that C sing   especially good
               ='I sing that song really well.'

8W: *wo-* [*(wo-)*
               I   I
               'I- [(I-)'

9M: [*(shi ma)*
                  be Q
                ['(Yeah?)'

10W:->   .hh <u>*bu*</u> *shi wo nei   ge chang de   hao*=
                    N be I   that C   sing   CSC good
               '.hh <u>Not</u> that I sing that song well.'=

11W:->   = >*er   shi shuo* .hhh *wo   chang nei   ge ger*=
                   but be say   I   sing   that C song
               = >'I mean .hhh I can sing that song'=

12W:->   =*bi   wo chang bie* hh *de* hh *ger hao* hh
                 compare I   sing   other   song good
               ='better than other songs.' (infiltrated with laughs)

13M: *(bie)/(nar)   name qian::xu:: ei*
               N   where that modest   PRT
               '(Don't be so mo:dest)/(Why so mo:dest?)'

14M: *ni   zenme-*
               you how
               'How come you-'

15M: *zenme turanjian bian   de zheme qianxu le*=
               how   suddenly become CSC that modest ASP
               'How come you've suddenly become so modest?'=

Here, in response to M's invitation and prodding (lines 2 and 4) to sing the song that W has claimed to know how to sing, W produces an emphatic, positive self-assessment of her capability to sing the song (*wo nei ge chang tebie hao* 'I sing that song really well'; line 7). Note, however, that immediately after this self-assessment – and what can be perceived as bragging – W

first exhibits a bit of disfluency (*wo- (wo-)* 'I- (I-)'; line 8) and then quickly moves to revise and qualify her prior remark (lines 10–12). Here, she initiates a repair and claims that what she meant by her previous assessment was not that she could sing the referenced song exceptionally well but that she could sing it better than other songs. By redefining the quality of her singing in reference to the new scale, W can be seen to qualify and downgrade the force of her prior self-praise. Interestingly, this downgrading effort by W is subsequently half-jokingly characterized by her recipient as an attempt to be acting modestly (lines 13–15).

As further evidence of the self-praise constraints in Mandarin conversation, Example (2) provides a case in which the speaker's breach of such constraints turns out to be interactionally eventful and accountable. This excerpt comes from the same conversation as Example (1). Here, M is inquiring about why W, who is a local Beijinese but who had obtained her BA degree from a university in another province (Sichuan University), has now chosen to study at a graduate institute in Beijing. In response, W offers several self-praising remarks (lines 5–6, 11–12). Our main focus here will be on the one produced in line 11.

(2)	(CMC05_02; video/digital audio 01:52; A72)
1M:	*ni shi bu shi jiu wei- hui jia-*
	you be N be just because return home
	'Was it because you wanted to- come home- that you'
2M:	*cai kao hui beijing*
	then test return (city)
	'applied (and were admitted) to (a school) in Beijing?'
3	(0.7)
4W:	*ye: suan shi ba*
	also count be PRT
	'More:: or less so.'
5W:	*>wo hui baosong=*
	I ASP test:exemption
	>'I could have gotten a test exemption.'=
6W:	*=you keneng hui baosong*
	have possibility ASP test:exemption
	='Had a chance of getting a test exemption.'
7	(.)
8M:	*baosong: dao- (.) chuanda. (shi ma)*
	test:exemption to Sichuan:University be Q
	'Test exemption:: (.) for Sichuan University, (right)?'
9W:	*uh. you keneng. wo (mei) baoming*
	PRT have possibility I N apply
	'Yeah. Probably. I didn't apply for it.'
10	(.)
11W:->	*wo dang chengji hen hao=*
	I then/of course grades very good
	'My grades were really good (then)/(of course).'=
12W:	*=zai- zai- da[xue shi*
	at at college when
	='At- at- colle [ge.'
13M:	[*bi huangjun dou hao a*
	compare (person) all good PRT
	['Even better than Huang Jun's?'
14	(1.5) (W smiles at the camera)
15W:	*jiu suan shi lou::*
	just count be PRT
	'You could say that.' (smile voice)

16M: *shi* ma
         be Q
         'Yeah?'
17W: *bu qianxu   ou::*
         N   modest PRT
         'Can't be mode:st.' (smile voice)
18M: *huangjun:: (.) chengji hao   ma*
         (person)   grades good Q
         'Are Huang Jun's:: (.) grades good?'

Here, as noted, W volunteers a piece of information about herself in lines 5–6, namely, that her grades in college were good enough to qualify her for admission to the graduate school without having to take the usual graduate school entrance exam. Following M's repair initiation in line 8, W confirms the place reference but then clarifies that her previous claim was based not on the facts, but on her estimate only (*uh. you keneng. wo (mei) baoming* 'Yeah. Probably. I didn't apply for it'; line 9). In turn, this clarification, which can potentially undermine the validity of W's prior claim about her academic record, is met with a brief pause. Apparently taking that pause as the recipient's withholding his endorsement of the information in question, W follows up with another self-assessment – this time, an outright brag about herself (*wo dang chengji hen hao* 'my grades were really good (then)/(of course)'; line 11).

As it happens, the production of this self-praise by W turns out to be sequentially eventful, leading to a momentary tension in interaction. In the ensuing talk, M continues to display a stance of unwillingness to straightforwardly accept and endorse W's self-bragging remarks; and this stance, in turn, is paralleled by W's displayed resistance to do a backdown: In line 13, instead of registering a receipt or endorsement of W's self-praise in line 11, M challenges W by half-jokingly compelling her to give a comparative assessment of her academic performance and that of a college classmate who is recording the conversation. Note here that even faced with this interactionally delicate task, W chooses to stay with her positive self-assessment, rather than to back down from it (*jiu suan shi lou* 'you could say that'; line 15). In the next turn, M receipts W's response with *shi ma* 'yeah?', potentially providing yet another opportunity for W to revise her stand. Nevertheless, W declines to alter or lower the level of her self-praise by claiming that this is something that she cannot be modest about (*bu qianxu ou::* 'can't be mode:st'; line 17).

Of particular relevance to our discussion here is that despite her continued withholding of a backdown from her self-praising remarks, W nevertheless registers her awareness of the self-praise constraints and in fact transgresses such constraints by justifying a need to do so (line 17). In other words, she treats her self-praise as an interactionally accountable action and in effect acts under these constraints in spite of her apparent transgression. Example (2) thus allows us to see how the participants in Mandarin conversation operate under the effects of the self-praise constraints and display an orientation to them even in scenarios when the constraints are breached.

Thus, although like other social actions, self-praise may not be publicly noticed or registered on any given occasion, there is evidence of the constraints on self-praise, which moderate everyday social interaction among Mandarin speakers. As we have seen in this section, the constraints may be enforced by the speaker him- or herself, or may be collaboratively oriented to by the speaker and the co-participants in cases when the constraints are not satisfied.

If, as argued, self-praise is a socially marked and even an interactally censored action in Mandarin conversation, the question then arises: How, then, does a Mandarin speaker achieve the presentation of a positive assessment of him- or herself, truthfully or motivated by the contingencies of the sequential moment? In the following, we will examine three recurrent practices strategically employed to resolve such a dilemma.

3. Practices for accomplishing self-praise

In this section, I discuss three practices in Mandarin interaction for doing self-praise and examine the interactional contingencies which give rise to these practices.

3.1. The designedly bipartite [self-praise plus modification] turn format

One of the most frequent patterns for carrying out self-praise in Mandarin conversation observed in my data is a bipartite turn-constructional format (cf. Lerner, 1996; Couper-Kuhlen and Thomson, 2005). With it, upon the production of self-praise, the speaker follows up immediately with a retraction or some sort of modification about the matter that the speaker has just praised him- or herself for. What is unique about this pattern is that the follow-up retraction or modification is latched onto the prior praise without a gap, i.e., it is not produced as a repair by the self-praise speaker, or by virtue of some recipient response (or a lack thereof) to the self-praise. The bipartite pattern, I would argue, is not an incidental result, but appears rather to be the product of a strategically pre-planned turn design for accomplishing self-praise while at the same time attending to some other interactional contingency at the moment.

A comparison between the previously examined Example (1), partially reproduced below, and Example (3) gives us a glimpse of the difference between self-praise which is subsequently retracted and repaired by the speaker and self-praise which has a designedly two-part turn-construction format:

(1)   (CMC5_8; video 03:09; B064)
6W: = >ei   zamen- <u>dai</u>:huir- <u>zhen</u> keyi qu chang=
                 PRT we   later   really can go sing
            = >'Ack, we- <u>re</u>ally can go sing (songs) <u>la</u>ter.'=
7W:->   =wo nei ge chang tebie   hao
               I   that C sing   especially good
            ='I sing that song really well.'
8W:->   wo- [(wo-)
             I   I
            'I- [(I-)'
9M: [(shi ma)
                  be Q
                 ['(Yeah?)'
10W:->   .hh <u>bu</u> shi wo nei   ge chang de   hao=
                  N be I   that C sing   CSC good
            '.hh <u>Not</u> that I sing that song well.'=
11W:->   = >er   shi shuo .hhh wo chang nei   ge ger=
                 but be say   I   sing   that C song
            = >'I mean .hhh I can sing that song'=
12W:->   =bi   wo chang bie hh de hh ger   hao hh
             compare I   sing   other   song good
            ='better than other songs.' (infiltrated with laughs)

As may be recalled, in Example (1) W first produces a remark which can be heard as self-praise (line 7) and subsequently proceeds to retract that remark (lines 10–12). Note here that W's retracting part does not immediately follow her prior self-praise but is prefaced with some disfluencies (*wo-* [(*wo-*) 'I- (I-)'; line 8) – a common pre-indication of a repair (Schegloff et al., 1977). This turn feature, together with the position of the retracting part, suggests that the latter does not seem to have been designed as part of the prior remark but is rather produced as a repair after the speaker has come to realize the possible implication of her prior remark.

By contrast, consider the designedly bipartite self-praise format in Example (3) (lines 14–15). This example comes from a conversation among three women in their fifties who have known each other for more than 20 years. In this excerpt, F has been talking about her son's interest in reading, and, as an illustration, how much he enjoyed reading an English phrase book he picked up at a cafeteria after taking the exhausting national college entrance exam.

(3)   (Cao_6_12_06; audio a44; d-audio 04:06; video 4:31:11)
1F: [nei- nei hai shenme waiyu   shu   a=
            that that still what   foreign:language book PRT
            ['That- that was even a foreign language book.'=
2C: [(laughs)
3R: =<u>mm</u>:
             PRT
            ='<u>Ye</u>ah:?'
4F: hai shi cihui   shu=
             still be vocabulary book
             'Was a <u>vo</u>cabulary book.'=
5F: =jiu [<u>du</u>anyu de   shu
             just phrase ASSC book
            ='like [a <u>ph</u>rase book.'

6R: [ou::
             PRT
             ['Oh:.'
7F: ta jiu gan xingqu jiu kan
         3sg just feel interest just read
         'He was interested so he started to read.'
8F: wo shuo ni-
         I   say   you
         'I said, "You-"'
9C: na   ting   [hao
         that pretty good
         'That's [good'
10F: [wo shuo ni   bu lei   a=
                       I   say   you N tired PRT
                    ['I said, "Aren't you tired?"'=
11F: =ta mei- ta shuo-
          3sg N   3sg say
         ='He wasn't- He said-'
12F: [zhe ting   you yisi-
          this pretty have interest
         ['"This is pretty interesting-"'
13R: [shou   ni   yingxiang ba=
         receive you affect   PRT
         ['Probably your influence.'=
14F:->   =*ai! tch! >wo jiu- shou bu shi   juan=
                     I   just hand N   relieve volume
         =*'arh! tch! > I just- always have a book in my hands,'=
15F:->   =suiran bu du   shenme ba* hahaha [hhhh
           though N   read what   PRT
         ='though don't read much.* hhahaha[haha'
16   [(people laugh)
17   (*to* accompanied by exaggerated hand gestures)
18C: uh:
         PRT
         'Yeah.'
19F: erqie   xianzai-
         in:addition now
         'Also now-'
20F: (story about how much her son is interested in reading)

Although the upshot of the story F is projecting appears to be praise of her son, in line 13 R interrupts the story with a comment that the son's reading is because of the mother, a comment which is hearably a compliment on F. To this, F first appears to go along with it by delivering a seemingly aligning, self-praising response (*wo jiu- shou bu shi juan* 'I just- always have a book in my hands'; line 14) but then immediately retracts it by adding an ironic twist, *suiran bu du shenme ba* 'though don't read much' (line 15).

Note here that unlike Example (1), the retracting part produced by the speaker is latched onto her prior self-praise (indicated by the equal signs in the transcript) – without a gap or any disfluencies on the part of the speaker. There is a sense that the speaker seems to have designed the retracting part as "part of the package" so as to keep the self-praise from being interpreted on its own.

In fact, a closer look shows that the ironic twist delivered in the retracting part is in tune with the exaggerated manner in which the speaker delivers the utterances (line 17) as well as the laughter accompanying her utterances; all seem to indicate

and reinforce a joke-intended implication. With such a turn design, then, the speaker is thus able to align with her interlocutor's praise of her while at the same time maintaining a posture of modesty.

As Example (3) also shows, a key feature of this practice observed in the data has to do with its sequential role and sequential implicativeness. Commonly, with this turn format, what gets addressed in subsequent talk is not the material in the first part, which conveys a positive attribute or state of affairs about the speaker and which is subsequently retracted. In this excerpt, for example, this bipartite practice is used to address the contingency of the sequential moment, i.e., an intervening and potentially digressing comment by a story recipient (line 13). Notice that once the sequential contingency is taken up, and the momentary suspension of the sequential progressivity lifted, the storyline pursued by the self-praise speaker resumes (lines 19–20).

Example (4), from a conversation among a group of middle-aged women who have known each other since their teenage years and who have kept in occasional contact, contains a similar instance of the designedly bipartite self-praise format. Prior to this excerpt, the participants had been talking about L, who apparently is known for not staying in one job for long.

(4)   (Cao_6_11_06; audio b236; r-audio b67; video 51:34:15)

1R: _ta   na   ge yihuir   shi _zheyang   de_=
               3sg that C   a:while be this:manner NOM
               '<u>H</u>ers was like at times it was <u>this</u>,'=

2R: =_yihuir   dang laoshi_
               a:while serve teacher
               ='at times (she) was a teacher.'

3   (.)

4R: _yihuir you   shenme shenme wenyi_
               a:while again what   what   literature
               'and at times it was about something like writing.'

5R: _yihuir-_=
               a:while
               'At times-'=

6R: =_ta na jiu   deng(yu-) (.) _bianhua_
               3sg that then equal   change
               ='Hers is like- (.) <u>all</u> <u>ov</u>er the place.'

7R: _ta na   bu yiyang de   ↑_gongzuo_
               3sg that N same   ASSC job
               'Hers have (all) been different kinds of ↑<u>jo</u>bs,'

8R: [_(ta na…)_
                3sg that
               ['Hers…')

9L: [_bu. wo lao   xiang- (.)_
               no   I   always want
               ['No. I have always wanted to-' (.)

10L: _jiu   shi- gao yi   ge-_
               just be   do   one C
               'I mean- do one-'

11L: _gao- gao dao- gao dao   di._=
               do   do   until do until bottom
               'do- do to- do (something) to the end.'=

12L: = >_dan shijishang genben bu keneng_=
                 but in:fact   at:all   N   possible
               = >'But in fact, it was not possible at all.'=

13L: =_wo jiu- wo zhe ge ren   jiu _yunqi-_
                I   just I   this C person just luck
               ='I just- all my life my <u>l</u>uck has just been-'

14L: [te   bu hao. renjia dou shuo wo yunqi tebie=
            especial N   good others all say I   luck special
            ['really bad. People all say/said that I have/had really']=

15M: [ei, ni bu shi gao fanyi   ma=
            PRT you N be do   translate Q
            ['Hey, didn't you do translation?']=

16L: =[[bu hao
               N good
            =[['bad luck.']

17M: =[[ni   bu shi ying-
               you N   be English
            =[['Didn't you Eng-']

18M: yingwen fanyi   ting   bang de   ma=
            English   translate pretty good NOM Q
            'translate English pretty well?'=

19L:->   =↑ni kan wo yuanlai fan   de   dou tebie   hao=
            you see I   original translate NOM all especial good
            =↑'You see I used to translate really well.'=

20M: =[un
            PRT
            =['Yeah.']

21L:->   =[erqie wo zher hai-
            further I   here also
            =['And also I also-']

22L:->   hai chu le   hao duo za[zhi   a=
            also out ASP good many magazine PRT
            'also published many maga[zines.'=

23M: [uh.
                                        PRT
                                        ['Yeah.']

24L:->   =dan xianzai dou bu xing   le
            but   now   all N work ASP
            ='But not any more now.'

25   (.)

26L: .hh yinwei shenme ne
               because what PRT
            '.hh You know why?'

27L: renjia bu-
            others N
            'Other people wouldn't-'

28L: e- renjia   genben bu-
               others at:all   N
            'uh- other people wouldn't at all-'

29L: bu rang ni   gan
            N let   you do
            'let you do (it).'

30L: (discussion about how the current translation industry
            hires people)

In response to R's accusation that she had changed jobs all the time (lines 1–8), L comes to defend herself by attributing her constant career change to bad luck (lines 9–14, 16). Before her self-defense comes to a possible completion, however, another participant, M, interrupts with a query about L's translation career, suggesting that this is something that L had done well in the past (lines 15, 17, 18). This piece of information can be heard as double-edged here, praising L while at the same time questioning her blame of bad luck. And it is to both hearings that L's next moves appear to address.

In the ensuing talk, L first aligns with M by emphatically confirming L's information (*ni kan wo yuanlai fan de dou tebie hao* 'you see I used to translate really well'; line 19) while offering an additional piece of information as proof of her talents, i.e., that she had published several magazines (lines 21–22). Immediately thereafter, though, she works to qualify her previous self-praising remarks by claiming the lack of current relevance of those remarks (*dan xianzai dou bu xing le* 'but not any more now' (line 24). By dismissing the current relevance of the praiseworthy status of the events just mentioned, L manages not only to mitigate a potentially negatively-perceived social transgression of self-praise but also to justify her earlier claim of misery. Here, as with Example (3), the speaker latches the follow-up modification (line 24) onto the self-praise and appears to have designed them as a pre-packaged, two-part construction which, again, needs to be understood and appreciated as a whole in its sequential context.

As with Example (3), too, with this turn format, what gets addressed in subsequent talk is not the self-praise. Here, following L's boast of her record (lines 19, 21, 22) and the subsequent modification that it's all glory of the past (line 24), L continues to offer an account for the difficulty in her getting involved in the current field of translation (lines 26–30).

Example (5), from the same conversation as Example (3), offers another instance of the self-praise plus modification bipartite turn construction. Prior to this excerpt, the conversation has been focused on the participants' children. This excerpt begins with an inquiry by F about R's daughter, Baobao.

(5)	(Cao_6_12_06; video 25:11)
1F:	*baobao gan zhe shenme huo (a). xianzai*
	(name) do ASP what work PRT now
	'What does Baobao do? Now.'
2	(1.0)
3R:	*ta jiu- (.) uh: zai na ge shenme*
	3sg just at that C what
	'She just- (.) uh: at what's-that-called,'
4R:	*ye- dengyu shi:::: (.)*
	also equal be
	'also- can be said:::' (.)
5R:	*jiu meiguo de nei ge shenme=*
	just US ASSC that C what
	'Just an American what's-that-called,'
6R:	*=gongguan gongsi ba.=*
	public:relations company PRT
	='public relations firm.'=
7R:	*=wo bu zhidao ta yingwen- shenme=*
	I N know 3sg English what
	='I don't know what it's called- in English.'=
8R:	*=[jiu-*
	just
	='Just-'
9C:	*[um::*
	PRT
	['Yeah.'
10R:	*fanyi jiu boya*
	translate just (name)
	'Its (Chinese) translation is Boya.'
11	(.) (F displays a thinking face while C nods.)

12R:->   *ta haoxiang shi shuo*
           it seem   be say
           'It seems to be' (swallows)
13R:->   *keneng ye suan quan-*
           maybe also count whole
           'may be the world's-'
14R:->   *quanqiu   shenme shu yi shu   er=*
           whole:world what   count one count two
           'the world's top one or top two'=
15R:->   *=na zhong gongguan   gon[gsi*
           that kind public:relations company
           ='public relations fi[rm.'
16F: *[↑um:. um*
                                            PRT
                              [↑'Mm: Mm.' (nods)
17R:->   *[keshi te: lei*
           but   especial tiring
           ['But (it's) really exhausting.'
18C: *[ou, na   ting   bang*
           PRT that pretty good
           ['Oh, that's great then.'
19   (.)
20C: *uh::*
           PRT
           'Yeah:.'
21R: *guanjian shi tai lei   le*
           key:point be too tiring ASP
           'The main thing is that (it's) too exhausting.'
22R: *ta ji   ci   dou [xiang bu gan le*
           3sg several times all   want N do ASP
           'She has wanted to [quit the job several times.'
23C: *[uh. zhende a*
                                        PRT really PRT
                              ['Oh. Really.'
24   (1.0)
25C: *[waiguo   gongsi- (.) (shi-)*
           foreign:country company   be
           ['Foreign companies- (.) (are-)'
26F: *[na- (.) gen zhuoxin shi-*
           then   with (name) be
           ['Then- (.) like Zhuoxin-'
27F: *zhuoxin jiu lei   dao (zuihou)=*
           (name) then tired to   finally
           'Zhuoxin too was so tired (in the end)'=
28F: *=jiu bu xiang gan*
           then N want do
           ='that he didn't want to do (the job).'

In response to F's inquiry about her daughter's job, R exhibits some difficulty in naming the company her daughter works for (lines 2–8). When R finally comes up with the name of this American-based company (line 10), her two interlocutors either display a lack of knowledge about the company in question or simply provide a minimal receipt (line 11). Apparently treating the participants' reactions as less than satisfactory, R proceeds to specify that this public relations company is considered to be among the top in the world (lines 12–15).

It might be relevant to note here that as several studies of Chinese interpersonal relationships have claimed (e.g., Bond, 1991; Li and Li, 1996), the Chinese concept of "self" has a much broader scope, including not only oneself but also immediate family and intimate friends. Such a broader understanding of "self" makes praising one's daughter in front of people who are more distantly related a potentially problematic social action. With this understanding, we can see that what R adopts here is a similar strategy as those observed in the two examples we have seen: Upon the production of the self-praise, R moves immediately to qualify it, here by highlighting the problematic side of the job (lines 17, 21).[1]

What is additionally interesting here is that despite R's immediate attempt to qualify the self-praise (*keshi te: lei* 'but (it's) really exhausting'; line 17), this attempt turns out to be produced in overlap with the interlocutor C's aligning response (line 18) and risks being obscured. Arguably to remedy this problem, R recycles the information in the clear, with an upgraded version (*guanjian shi tai lei le* 'the main thing is that (it's) too exhausting'; line 21). Here, by maintaining that the demanding nature of the job is a paramount issue, R can be heard to reiterate and emphasize that this problem takes away from the high status of the job, and can thereby further tone down her prior self-praise. Example (5), then, offers us an instance in which the speaker's use of the [self-praise plus modification] pattern does not prevail on the first try, in the sense that the modification part turns out to collide with, rather than preempts, a recipient response which treats the self-praise in its own right. Still, in this example, the speaker's subsequent reaction reinforces and retroactively suggests that what she had intended to bring to the fore was her qualifying comment about the problem of the job rather than the remark about its status, which is hearably a piece of self-praise. Indeed, after R's reiteration of the negative side of the job in line 21, the conversation goes on about the problem, rather than the value of the job (lines 22–28).

What we have seen so far, then, is one common practice of doing self-praise in Mandarin conversation, namely, a two-part turn-constructional format in which the second part is launched to retract or qualify the self-praise the speaker has just offered in an immediately prior turn. As the examples have shown, this practice allows the speaker to bring some praiseworthy aspect about him- or herself out in the open while at the same time mitigating the accountability of engagement in such an activity. Additionally, coming as the retracting or qualifying part does right after the self-praise, this practice may (though not always successfully) avoid an awkward readjustment in interaction after the recipient has treated the self-praise in its own right and produced a response accordingly. As the examples have also shown, a major feature of this practice has to do with its sequential role and sequential implicativeness. Commonly, with this turn format, what gets addressed in subsequent talk is not the material in the first part, the positive attribute about the speaker; rather, it is often the second part, that which is produced to counteract the self-praise, that gets picked up by the speaker or the co-participant. This feature appears to set this practice apart from the other self-praising practices that will be discussed in this article, to which we'll turn next.

3.2. Disclaiming an extreme case situation

A second turn design for self-praising with which we're concerned in this article is what I shall call disclaiming an extreme case situation (cf. Pomerantz, 1984b, 1986), or a disclaimer for short. With this format, the speaker invokes the relevance of an extreme case situation to the matter under discussion concerning the speaker, and at the same time denies its applicability in this case. By doing so, the speaker invites the recipient to consider and appreciate the matter being discussed as second best or second-to-the-worst against the extreme case situation, and hence as praiseworthy and laudable from this perspective.

Example (6), from a conversation among four old female friends in their fifties, offers a case in point. Immediately prior to this excerpt, M had talked about her late mother, a distinguished middle-school teacher who had continuously attended the Chinese calligraphy classes offered by the College for Older Adults (COA) for ten years after retirement. Shortly into this excerpt, the topic is temporarily abandoned in the face of a disruption in the setting (lines 6 and 10). While our focus here is on M's turn design in lines 26, 28, and 30, an introduction and explication of the sequential context that has led to the use of this turn design is in order.

```
(6)        (Cao_6_11_06; audioB180; regularB027; video 47:39:10)
1M:        danshi yi  shufa      wei zhu
           but    use calligraphy as   major
           'But (she) focused on calligraphy.'
2          (.)
3M:        houlai ta   jiu-
           later  3sg  then
           'And later she then-'
```

---

[1] That R's utterance, *keshi te: lei* 'but (it's) really exhausting,' here is intended to be latched onto her prior analyzably self-praising remark (lines 12–15) can be supported by the fact that this utterance is produced so quickly that it collides with the recipient response (line 18).

4M: .hhh ta jiu- suo- suoyou de-
                3sg then   all   ASSC
           '.hhh she then- al- all-'
5M: suoyou de-
           all   ASSC
           'all-'
6L: [caiyun ni   zuo zher lai
           (name) you sit   here come
           ['Caiyun, why don't you come sit here?'
7R: [°(laoren daxue)°
             elders college
           ['°(The College for Older Adults.)°'
8   (.)
9M: [ah
           PRT
           ['Yeah.'
10C: [(laughs)
11R: wo dou mei xiang guo=
           I   all   N   think ASP
           'I have never thought about'=
12R: =shang laoren daxue de   shir (…)
             attend elders college ASSC thing
           ='things like attending the College for Older Adults (…).'
13C: [ah
           PRT
           ['Yeah.'
14M: [houlai ta [fanzheng shenme-
           later   3sg anyways what
           ['Later she [anyways like-'
15R: [(qishi)   wo ye   keyi shang=
                   actually I   also can attend
                   ['(Actually) I can also attend'=
16R: =[laoren daxue=
             elders college
           =['the College for Older Adults.'=
17M: [shenme zhuan[[shu a, lishu   a,
             what   Seal:Script PRT Clerical:Script PRT
           ['like the Seal [[Script, the Clerical Script,'
18C: [[uh
                         PRT
                         [['Yeah.'
19M: caoshu   a,   suoyou de- zhe:xie
           Grass:Script PRT all   ASSC these
           'the Grass Script, all of- these: (styles),'
20R: [ou
           PRT
           ['Oh.'

21M: *[ta- ta   dou neng-*
           3sg 3sg all   can
           ['she- she can all-'
22M: *fanzheng qima   xie   de-*
           anyways at:least write CSC
           'anyways at least writes to the extent that-'
23M: *xie   de wo-*
           write CSC I
           'writes to the extent that I-'
24M: *wo juede kan shangqu <u>bu</u> <u>cuo</u>*
           I feel see up   N wrong
           'I feel that they look <u>not</u> <u>bad</u>.'
25R: *[ao*
           PRT
           ['Oh.'
26M:->   *[(ni dangran) bu keneng shuo: chengwei::*
             you of:course N possible say   become
           ['(Of course you) cannot become:: say:'
27L: *neng gua   de   [chulai. (°yinggai shi.°)*
           can hang CSC out   should be
           'Can be publicly [displayed. (°Should be.°)'
28M:->   *[<u>shufajia</u> si   de.   a=*
                             caligrapher seem NOM PRT
                               ['like a <u>calli</u>grapher. Right?'
29R: *=[ao.=*
           PRT
           =['Yeah.'=
30M:->   *=[danshi ta keyi canjia   nei ge- <u>zhan</u>lan=*
             but   3sg can participate that C   exhibition
           =['But she can take part in an <u>ex</u>hibition.'=
31L: *=zhanlan. dui.*
             exhibition right
           ='An exhibition. Right.'
32   (.)
33M: *[a. shenme xicheng qu*
           PRT what   (name) district
           ['Right? (At places) like the Xicheng District.'
34R: *[ou, na   dangran bu cuo   le=*
           PRT that of:course N   wrong ASP
           ['Oh, then of course (her work) is not bad.'=
35M: *=ei. shenme shenme de=*
            PRT what   what   ASSC
           ='Yeah. And all that.'=
36M: ↑*a. ni   xiang [(ta-)*
           PRT you think   3sg
           [↑'Yeah. Consider that [(she-)'
37R: *[ni xiang=*
                            you think
                                   ['Consider that'=

38R: =*ta dou [shi: nian*=
             3sg all   ten year
             ='she had (done this) [for <u>ten</u>: years.'=
39M: [*ah*
                         PRT
                                       ['Yeah.'
40R: =*kending ta <u>lian</u>jiu   de*=
              definite 3sg practice CSC
             ='She'd definitely <u>ach</u>ieved-'=
41R: =*jiu suan   shufa   de   shi nian*=
              just count calligraphy ASSC ten year
             ='Even with calligraphy, with ten years,'=
42R: =*ken[ding dei <u>lian</u>   chu dianr [mingtang lai le.*
              definite must practice out some something out ASP
             ='(she's) de[finitely gotta have <u>ach</u>ieved [something.'
43M: [*dui.*   [*uh uh*
                   right   PRT PRT
                   ['Right'.   ['Uh huh.'

Note first that maintaining a no-absence record over a period of ten years while attending the COA requires and demonstrates strong self-discipline and commitment. M's talk about her mother's COA-attending history therefore arguably involves praising a close family member, a perceivable act of self-praise. This topic and its sequential import, however, do not seem to be well received by the co-participant R. Instead of offering an aligning response, she initiates a unilateral topic shift by introducing the relevance of the COA to herself (lines 7, 11–12, 15–16). This move by R initially clashes with M's attempt to resume the topic (lines 14, 17) after the disruption in the setting, whereupon R appears to yield to M by use of *oh* (line 20) to receipt the new information provided by M in lines 17 and 19.

As it turns out, what M attempts to resume and continue with is another commendable matter about her mother, namely, the calligraphy skills she had acquired over the ten-year period. In initiating the praise of her mother, though, M appears to exhibit great caution and restraint. In line 21, for example, upon production of *ta dou neng* 'she can all-', and just where a possible predicate *xie de bu cuo* 'write not bad' would go,[2] there is first the insertion of the words *fanzheng* 'anyways' and *qima* 'at least,' indicating that what is to be projected is the lowest possible assessment (line 22). Then, as M continues, she cuts off mid-course again (*fanzheng qima xie de-* 'anyways at least writes to the extent that-'; line 22); and upon resumption of the utterance, she partially repeats the prior frame and inserts *wo* 'I' (*xie de wo-* 'writes to the extent that I-'; line 23) but cuts off yet again before delivering the final product *wo juede kan shangqu <u>bu</u> <u>cuo</u>* 'I feel that they look <u>notbad</u>' (line 24). In and through these painstaking repairs with cuts-off and restarts, what analyzably gets added in the final version of M's assessment of her mother is a side note that this assessment is according to M's own perspective. By emphasizing that such an assessment is her personal opinion, M avoids conveying the assessment as objective truth. As such, she can be heard to further downgrade the praise.

Of particular relevance to our discussion here is M's subsequent talk (lines 26, 28, 30, 33, 35). Upon finally delivering the praise of her mother in line 24, M continues with her assessment. Here, she appeals to the strategy of disclaiming an extreme case situation. As noted, with this strategy, the speaker brings in a possible extreme case scenario relevant to the matter or state of affairs being assessed while at the same time denying its applicability in the current situation. In doing so, the speaker implicitly or explicitly raises the possibility of the matter or state of affairs being assessed as the next-better case scenario, thereby justifying the praiseworthiness of the matter or state of affairs.

Returning to M's utterances in lines 26, 28, and 30, we can note that this appears to be just what M is doing. Here, she introduces an extreme case scenario of practicing calligraphy (i.e., becoming a calligrapher) while at the same time emphasizing that it's an unattainable goal (lines 26, 28). Thereafter, she immediately follows up with an utterance prefaced with *danshi* 'but,' naming the next-better case scenario, i.e., having an exhibition, which her mother had indeed accomplished (line 30). By use of this turn design, then, while M never explicitly comments on her mother's calligraphy as laudable, she nevertheless manages to invite her recipients to appreciate her mother's calligraphy skills.

Note that while throughout this entire excerpt M has gazed directly at R and has apparently treated her as the prime recipient, R has given nothing but minimal responses up to this point (lines 25 and 29). But then, following M's use of disclaiming an extreme case situation and in overlap with her follow-up elaboration with further details (*shenme xicheng qu* '(at places) like the Xicheng District'; line 33),[3] R finally responds to M's long-winded and carefully-crafted praise of her

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[2] Note that *xie de bu cuo* eventually figures in M's final version of the praise of her mom (lines 23–24) after the many mid-course adjustments and repairs.
[3] Xicheng District is one of the prime commercial, political, and art districts in Beijing.

mother with an aligning response (*ou na dangran bu cuo le* 'oh, then of course (her work) is not bad'; line 34). Example (6) thus provides us with an instance in which the speaker's use of a disclaimer not only allows her to balance the interactionally conflicting tasks of doing self-praise while maintaining humility, but also successfully elicits an aligning response from a recipient who has otherwise exhibited resistance to the matter at hand.[4]

While in Example (6) the speaker makes relevant a *favorable* extreme case situation in order to suggest the matter under discussion as the next best and hence commendable, an examination of my data shows that a disclaimer can also be used in an opposite but similar way. That is, instead of invoking a favorable extreme case situation, the speaker can invoke an *unfavorable* extreme case situation. Here, by denying its applicability to the matter under discussion, the speaker can mark the matter as better-than-the-worst-case-scenario and thereby justify the praiseworthiness of the matter. The next excerpt provides one such instance.

Example (7) is taken from a conversation between two old friends who have not seen each other for a long while. Here, participant A has been talking about her son, who had started learning playing the clarinet not long before. The use of disclaiming an unfavorable extreme case situation occurs in lines 32–33.

(7)   (Cao_5_24_06; video 4:01:00; audio a001)

1A: *.hh ranhou nei ge- (.)*
           then   that C
         '.hh Then the uh- (.)'

2A: *women- >women danwei bu shi*=
          we   we   unit   N be
         'We- >Didn't our department'=

3A: =*(yuan   you yi ge ren)*=
           original have one C person
         ='(have a person who-)'=

4A: =*bu shi ye shi mei xingqi dou fudao fudao ta ma*
           N be also be every week all   tutor tutor 3sg Q
         ='Didn't (that person) also tutor him every week?'

5A: *.hhh shuo de   nei ge::*
                say   ASSC that C
         '.hhh (That person) said that uh:'

6   (0.2)

7A: <u>*shipu*</u>   *nengli hai ting   qiang de*
         read:notes ability still pretty strong ASSC
         '(his) ability to <u>read</u> sheet music is actually pretty good.'

8C: <u>*ah:*</u>
         PRT
         '<u>Yeah</u>:.'

9A: *jiu shi- > <u>jiu mei</u> xue*=
          just be   just N learn
         'That is- ><u>Even</u> if (he) <u>hasn</u>'t learned (a song),'=

10A: =*(dou) na   qilai*=
            all   take up
         ='(when) picking up (the sheet music),'=

11A: =*ta fanzheng neng <u>chui</u>*
           3sg anyways can blow
         ='he can <u>play</u> (it) anyways.'

12C: *ah:*
         PRT
         '<u>Yeah</u>:.'

[4] R's unwillingness to straightforwardly align with M, as indicated by her minimal responses in lines 25 and 29, can also be seen in her subsequent comments in lines 37, 38, 40–42, in which she appears to downgrade M's mother's accomplishment by implying that this outcome is less than remarkable considering the timeline in which it was achieved.

13C: ↑*ou,* ↑*zhende a*=
           PRT   really   PRT
           '↑Oh, ↑Really?!'=

14A: =<u>*a*</u>*h*
           PRT
           ='<u>Y</u>eah.'

15A: <u>*n*</u>*a   qilai jiu [neng chui*
           take up   then can   blow
           '(When) <u>pic</u>king (it) up, [(he) can then play.'

16C: *[ou*=
                        PRT
                              ['Oh,'=

17C: =*ta zhiyao, yi   kan na   wuxianpu*=
           3sg only   one see that music:notes
           ='once he reads- the music notes,'=

18A: =<u>*A*</u>*H:*
            PRT
           ='<u>YE</u>AH:.'

19   (.)

20C: *[jiu   hui le*
           then can ASP
           ['(he) then knows how (to play it).'

21A: *[yi   bian. [[ah. jiu   neng-* (.)
           one time   PRT then can
           ['One time. [[Yeah. And then (he) can- (.)'

22C: *[[(°uh°)*
                   PRT
                  [[(°'Yeah.'°)

23A: <u>*li*</u>*ang bian   jiu   neng chui xialai   le.= jiu-*
           two   times then can   blow continue ASP just
           '<u>Tw</u>o times and then (he) can play on.=(It's) just-'

24C: *uh:*=
           PRT
           'Yeah:.'=

25A: =<u>*zhe*</u> *fangmian dao   hai:* (0.2)
            this aspect   actually still
           ='In <u>thi</u>s aspect, (he's) actually: (0.2)'

26C: =*dui*=
           right
           ='Right.'=

27A: =*fanzheng hai* <u>*xing*</u> *ma*
           anyways still ok   PRT
           ='anyways, (is) actually ok<u>ay</u>.'

28C: *[>ta zhe fangmian hai ting   you [[tianfen de   ma*=
           he this aspect   still quite have talent   ASSC PRT
           [>'He actually in this aspect has quite [[good talents.'=

29A: *[(°ta jiu-°)*
           3sg just
           [(°'He's just-'°)

```
30A:->                        [[ah, jiu bu shuo shi-
                            PRT just N say be
                               [['Yeah, not like-'
31              (.)
32A:->          =eng. jiu bu shuo yi te        ben=
                 PRT just N say  one particularly stupid
                ='Yeah. Not like a really stupid,'=
33A:->          =zenme   xue  ye  xue  bu hui=
                 however learn also learn N  can
                ='can't learn no matter how hard (he tries).'=
34A:            =ta  jiu  juede hai [xing
                 3sg just feel    still ok
                ='He just feels (it's/he's) [OK.'
35C:                               [um:
                                    PRT
                                      ['Yeah:.'
36              (.)
37A:            ranhou nei ge:: (1.0)
                then    N  C
                'Then the uh::' (1.0)
38A:            y- ye  ting  ai   shang ke    de
                    also pretty love attend class ASSC
                '(He) al- also quite likes going to class.'
39A:            (story about how her son attends classes)
```

Here, in talking about her son's gift for playing the clarinet, speaker A first adopts the approach of what has been referred to as "reporting just the facts" in the CA literature (e.g., Pomerantz, 1978b, 1980, 1984a; Schegloff, 1996; Wu, 2010). That is, she highlights her son's talent by reporting a former colleague's assessment of his ability to read sheet music without, however, offering her own assessment (lines 1–7). Although implicit, A's report is apparently designed as indirect praise of her son.

To this, however, instead of giving a strong aligning response and appreciating A's son's talent, the interlocutor only receipts the information with *ah:* 'yeah' (line 8). As if to treat the interlocutor's response as not having displayed an adequate understanding of her report, A initiates a repair in her next move (line 9). Here, she clarifies and elaborates on what a strong capability to read sheet music implies in her son's case – namely that once he picks up sheet music, he can play the tune even though he hasn't been taught it (lines 9–11). In response, C initially still gives the same minimal response, *ah:* 'yeah:' (line 12), whereupon, however, she appears to suddenly come to realize the newsworthiness of the matter being reported and offers emphatic newsmark (↑*ou,* ↑*zhende a* '↑Oh, ↑Really?!'; line 13).

While A has remained implicit in praising her son up until now, she starts to display a clearer stance thereafter. Her several subsequent moves show her eagerness to have the recipient understand, align with, and perhaps openly acknowledge the praiseworthiness of her son's talent for the clarinet, which she herself appears to refrain from articulating directly. Without going into too much detail, we can note first that in response to C's newsmark, A does not simply confirm it with a confirmation token, *ah* 'yeah.' Instead, she follows it up with a partial repeat (*na qilai jiu neng chui* '(when) picking (it) up, (he) can then play'; line 15) and can be heard to underscore the matter again. Likewise, in line 17, before C's understanding check comes to a possible completion, A rushes in with an upgraded confirmation (*AH:* 'YEAH:'; line 18), arguably displaying a stance that the matter at hand (along with its praiseworthiness) has been overly clear. And finally, when C subsequently comes to project the second half of her understanding check (line 20), A proceeds to recycle the matter yet again (lines 21 and 23), a move arguably intended to reemphasize the newsworthiness (and praiseworthiness) of the matter.

Despite all these attempts by A, a relevant, more explicit enthusiastic display of recipient alignment does not seem immediately forthcoming. At this point, A starts to offer a summary assessment (lines 25, 27). Here, her restraint on openly articulating praise of her son is clearly evident: In delivering the assessment, she cuts off mid-course before producing the key predicate (line 25), as if to leave it for the recipient to fill in. While the recipient initially only produces a simple, less-than-enthusiastic display of understanding (line 26), following A's production of a downgraded assessment of her son (i.e., that he is "OK"; line 27), C finally supplies the long-awaited aligning response, praise of A's son (*ta zhe fangmian hai ting you tianfen de ma* 'he actually in this aspect has quite good talents'; line 28).

It is in response to this praise that A appeals to the strategy of disclaiming an extreme case situation. Here, A first agrees with C's assessment and praise of her son (*ah* 'yeah' in line 30 and *eng* 'yeah' in line 32) and then goes on to elaborate by

invoking an unfavorable extreme case situation pertinent to clarinet-learning, namely, being so slow as to fail to acquire the skill no matter how hard he tries (lines 32–33). Here by raising this potential worst-case scenario and categorically rejecting its applicability to her son's case, A is able to justify her pride in her son, thereby justifying her prior socially accountable behavior, i.e., agreeing and aligning with the praise of self by others. Additionally, by justifying the praiseworthiness of her son by reference to a comparison of his case and a worst-case scenario, A can be seen to downgrade the praise and maintain a modest profile. Example (7), then, allows us to see how disclaiming an unfavorable case situation can work to accomplish and justify self-praise in the face of a strenuous interaction with a co-participant who has shown less than full alignment.

Before concluding this section, it may be relevant to discuss the possible discourse motivations for the use of the two different yet similarly designed practices of disclaiming an extreme case situation that we have seen in this section. In both Examples (6) and (7), the use of this turn design apparently is prompted by the speaker's attempt to accomplish the interactionally delicate task of doing self-praise in front of a non-aligning recipient. And yet, the decision to choose one design over the other, I would suggest, has to do with how the practice figures in the sequential context. Specifically, in Example (6), the speaker elects to invoke a favorable extreme case situation by reference to which the matter she says next (i.e., her mother's having participated in a calligraphy exhibition) can be considered second best. Although suggesting something as second best marks it as not as good as can be, it nonetheless puts it at the upper end of the scale, underscoring its value. This design thus seems fitting in a sequential context in which the speaker has not yet secured alignment from the recipient, as in Example (6). On the other hand, invoking an unfavorable extreme case situation and marking the matter under discussion as better-than-the-worst-case-scenario puts it at the lower end of the scale. Even though the matter as a whole is marked as positive, its praiseworthiness is downgraded. This may explain the speaker's selection of such a turn design in Example (7), in which, as may be recalled, the recipient had just offered an upgraded praise of the speaker's son prior to the speaker's use of a disclaimer (line 28). In this sequential context, then, aligning with the recipient's praise by marking the matter as better-than-the-worst could help alleviate a display of arrogance as could have been conveyed had the matter been marked as second best. Invoking an unfavorable, rather than a favorable, extreme case situation as a reference point here thus seems more appropriate and justified.

What we have seen in this section, then, is another practice for doing self-praise, one that I've called disclaiming an extreme case situation. With this practice, the speaker invites the recipient to appreciate the matter being discussed as commendable by virtue of the fact that it can be considered as second best or second-to-the-worst against an extreme case situation that the speaker has just invoked. In some respects, this practice is similar to the one that we have seen in section 3.1 in that this practice can also be seen to essentially involve two parts. Here, they include the potential praiseworthiness of the matter under discussion and the background against which this praiseworthiness is conveyed. However, unlike the bipartite turn format in section 3.1, what gets highlighted and becomes centrally sequentially implicative in both Examples (6) and (7) is the praiseworthiness of the matter, not the background. There is a sense, then, that such a turn design is used primarily in the service of self-praising, especially in interactionally delicate sequential contexts.

3.3. Treating the matter ostensibly as complainable

In this section, we discuss the use of a self-praising practice in my collection which at first glance does not even remotely resemble anything close to self-praising. In fact, on the face of it, what the speaker appears ostensibly to do is to invoke the possibility of complainability[5] about a matter concerning him- or herself or a family member (cf. Jacoby and Gonzales, 2002; Schegloff, 1988, 2005). On closer inspection, however, what the speaker has arguably meant to achieve here is praise of him- or herself or the family member, for what is being conveyed as complainable can in fact be understood as something positive when appreciated in a different light.

Consider, for instance, Example (8). This excerpt is an immediate continuation of the excerpt presented in Example (7). Here, the focus continues to be on A's seventh-grade son.

```
(8)        (Cao_5_24_06; video 4:31:03; audio a001)
1A:->      erqie     ta  xianzai shang-
           in:addition 3sg now     attend
           'In addition, now (when) he attends-'
2A:->      .hh jiu shang nar   shang  ke
               just attend there attend class
           '.hh I mean goes there to attend classes.'
3A:->      ta   dou bu rang wo pei        ta
           3sg  all  N allow I   accompany 3sg
           'He doesn't let me accompany him.'
```

---

[5] Following Schegloff (2005), here I use "complainability" or "a complainable" over "a complaint" or "complaints." As Schegloff points out, complainability can result in the non-surfacing of the actual complaint. This distinction thus seems fitting here, as even though the possibility of complaining is recognizable through the described practice, the actual complaint is often not made manifest in interaction.

4		(.)

```
4           (.)
5C:         ou:=
            PRT
            'Oh:.'=
6A:         =ziji
             self
            ='(goes) by himself.'
7           (.)
8C:         ou,  jiu  shang nei   heiguanr ke
            PRR just attend that clarinet   class
            'Oh. You mean the clarinet class?'
9A:         ah:.  ta   ziji  ta
            PRT 3sg self 3sg
            'Ah:. He (goes) by himself.'
10C:        ↑na     ta xianzai da  le=
             then  he now     old ASP
            ↑'He's older now.'=
11C:        =dangran   bu yong pei
              of:course N  use   accompany
            ='Of course (he) doesn't need company.'
12          (.)
13A:        ↑keshi ye   ting    yuan de=
             but    also pretty far     NOM
            ↑ 'But it's also pretty far.'=
14A:        =name lao yuan de
              that   old far    NOM
            ='Really far (place).'
15A:        ziji- [qiche     lai
            self  ride:bike come
            'He himself-[rides a bike there.'
16C:              [uh
                   PRT
                          ['Yeah.'
17C:        na    ta ting    duli          de    bei=
            then 3sg pretty independent NOM PRT
            'He's pretty independent then.'=
18A:        =[ah:
              PRT
            =['Yeah:.'
19C:        =[na  ting    hao de    ia
              Then pretty good ASSC PRT
            =['That's pretty good then.'
20          (.)
21A:        ranhou zhei ci-
            then    this time
            'Then this time-'
22A:        (another story about her son's striving for independence)
```

In this excerpt, A is reporting on her son's clarinet lessons. In the report, she describes how her son insists on attending the lessons alone (lines 1–3), declining her offer of company. Note that the report of her son's refusing to take her offer can be heard as invoking the possibility of complainability – complainability, for example, about a rebellious teenage son defying parental control. And this is apparently how it is initially oriented to by the recipient C. Here, after a brief repair sequence clarifying the scenario in question (lines 8–9), C acts in accord with what participants in conversation often do when their interlocutor complains against a family member: She speaks in defense of A's son and justifies his conduct (*na ta xianzai da le. dangran bu yong pei* 'He's <u>old</u>er now. Of course (he) doesn't need company'; lines 10–11).

Note, however, that although A's report appears initially to register a complaint and seems to be understood as such by her recipient, the ensuing talk suggests that this is not what she has designed the telling to convey.

In lines 13–15, following a brief pause (line 12), A offers more details to justify the need for company – the long distance between home and the destination. In turn, C continues to align with the complained-against party, this time by re-characterizing the information provided by A in a new light, i.e., as proof of her son's independence (*na ta ting duli de bei* 'he's pretty independent then'; line 17). Here, the son's conduct is understood as something that is to be praised, rather than frowned upon.

What is particularly noteworthy is A's response to this re-formulated understanding by C. Ordinarily, in a sequential position like this, a recipient's display of agreement or disagreement with the proffered understanding is relevant next. And if in disagreement, the recipient may move next to rebut the re-characterization by C, and if she agrees, a display of a change in position in light of this new characterization – for example, by use of newsmark or agreement tokens (e.g., *shi ba* 'yeah?', *shi ma* 'is that so?', *yexu ba* 'maybe so') – may be in order. Interestingly here, A does not proceed to rebut the re-characterization nor display a change in position in line with C's offered understanding. Instead, she produces an approving *ah:* 'yeah; that's right' with a slight sound stretch and stress (line 18), which exhibits not a state of sudden realization or simple change of state on A's part,[6] but rather an implied claim of "there you go." Here, the endorsement by A of C's proffered understanding comes with a tacit display that what is being agreed with is something that A has known all along and perhaps something that C should have grasped earlier. Notably, this ratification by A is produced in overlap and in sync with C's summary assessment of the matter being reported, *na ting hao de ia* 'that's pretty good then' (line 19) – an assessment which A does not disagree with.[7] In view of all these subsequent moves by A and the revised understanding displayed by C, then, there are good grounds for arguing that A's prior telling about her son was not complaint-implicated, as was initially taken by the recipient, but was instead offered to praise her son's independence. Here then we are offered an instance in which the report speaker's and the recipient's subsequent orientations suggest that what has initially come off as complainable could be more adequately understood as disguised (self-)praise.

Example (9) provides a similar case of the use of an ostensible complaint in the service of self-praising. This excerpt comes from a conversation of four involving a retired couple (husband G and wife S) and two friends of their son's in their late twenties. G had been working for his younger brother as a part-time proofreader after retirement. Prior to this excerpt, G had shown the visitor W how he needed to handle a manuscript in a way to facilitate proofreading. As G's demonstration comes to a possible completion, G's wife, S, initiates an assessment about him (*meiyou bi ta renzhen de le* 'no one is more conscientious than he is'; line 5), which turns out to be produced in overlap with an apparent attempt by W to continue with the topic about the manuscript (line 4).

(9)   (CMC_04_03; video 01:21; A150)
1G: *zhe <u>jiao</u>dui*
             this proofread
             'This is for <u>pro</u>ofreading.'

2   (.)

3G: *jiaodui   de:shihou- (.) ta zheme-*
             proofread   when   3sg this:way
             'When (you) proofread- (.) it this way-'

4W: [*zhe-*
              this
             ['This-'

5S: [*<u>m</u>eiyou bi   ta renzhen de   le*
             N   compare 3sg diligent NOM ASP
             ['<u>N</u>o one is more conscientious than he is.'

6   (.)

---

[6] A Mandarin *ou* or *ao*, equivalent to the English *oh* (Heritage, 1984), would be used for a display of sudden realization.

[7] There appear to be grounds for A's not proceeding to straightforwardly agree with C's summary assessment in line 19 after the overlap. Here, by avoiding an explicit agreement with C's extracted upshot of the report, A could avoid or at least mitigate the appearance of having herself built into her telling praise of her son.

```
7S:        ↓jiu
           just
           ↓'Really.'
8          (0.2)
9S:->      ta  didi     lao    shuo
           3sg brother always say
           'His younger brother always says,'
10S:->     ↑ni bu yong kan name zixi
            you N use   read that thorough
           '"↑You don't need to read so carefully."'
11         (.)
12S:->     youde biao[dian    a,    shenme de,   ha.
           some  punctuation PRT  what    NOM PRT
           '"Some punc[tuation, and stuff like that, right?"'
13W:                 [fu:ze::     me. (↓°ta°) hh
                     responsible PRT   3sg  (laugh)
                        ['(He's) being re:spon:sible, (↓°he.°) hhh'
14W:       ↑zhe haoxiang shi xinlixue   fangmian de   ba
           this seem     be psychology aspect    NOM PRT
           ↑'This seems to be something about psychology?'
15G:       dui
           right
           '(That's) right.'
16         (1.0)
17W:       jiaocai            ba
           teaching:material PRT
           'Teaching materials?'
18         (discussion about the manuscript)
```

Here, S's assessment in line 5 can be heard to underscore G's unparalleled work attitude. Nonetheless, a favorable recipient alignment treating this assessment as a piece of praise of G is not forthcoming after the overlap retrieval (line 6). Immediately thereafter, S furnishes a "turn increment" (line 7) (Ford et al., 2002), arguably providing another opportunity for W to respond. To this, however, again no response is forthcoming (line 8). It is in this sequential context that S proceeds with a further elaboration, in the form of an ostensible complaint (lines 9–10).

    Note in this elaboration that S describes what G's younger brother, the chief editor, reportedly has often advised him, *ni bu yong kan name zixi* 'you don't need to read so carefully' (line 10). Here, the advice is negatively formulated, which can be heard as (ostensibly) highlighting a possible complainable view – i.e., G's meticulousness and possible nitpicking. However, as with Example (8), what is being complained about here can in fact be understood as something positive when appreciated in a different light. In this case, a positive spin on the reported chief editor's complaint can serve to lend support to S's earlier assessment of her husband's exceptional work ethics, to wit, that he is not only so detail-oriented that even the chief editor has to advise him to relax his proofreading criteria, but also so insistent on the quality of his work that the editor needs to repeat this advice over and over again (cf. the use of *lao* 'always' in line 9).

    Though the ensuing pause (line 11) may suggest a momentary difficulty on the recipient's part in processing and understanding the information and/or its interactional import, she appears to quickly pick up the implication and act accordingly. In the next turn, just as S proceeds to add more details about the matter (line 12), the recipient offers an aligning response, *fu:ze:: me* '(He's) being re:spon:sible' (line 13), which defends G against the reported complaint while at the same time aligning with the positive undertone of S's assessment of G's work attitude. Here, as with Example (8), the proffered understanding puts a favorable spin on what was arguably conveyed by the report speaker as a complainable matter, and yet the report speaker does not appear to object to or disagree with the understanding. In this regard, the possibility can be entertained that the favorable understanding of the matter is indeed the designed outcome from the outset – something that the prior ostensible complaint is employed to achieve. Here again, even though it is the recipient who eventually openly acknowledges the praiseworthy aspect of the reported matter, there is evidence that this upshot of the report could well have been pre-planted in the previous ostensible complaint by the report speaker.

It may be relevant to note here that although the recipient "cooperates" with the self-praise speaker in what the speaker analyzably maneuvers to achieve through an ostensible complaint, such cooperation often does not come without a tacit stance display on the part of the recipient. For instance, in Example (8), after realizing what in fact her interlocutor appears to have tried to accomplish through the ostensible complaint, recipient C appears to mark the problematicity of the matter by attaching the claim of her realization (*na ting hao de ia* 'that's pretty good then'; line 19) with a final particle *ia*, which has been shown to serve to mark the matter being addressed as problematic or counter to expectation (Wu, 2004). And in Example (9), aside from the brief laugh, recipient W attaches a final particle *me* to her formulation of the upshot of the ostensible complaint (*fu:ze:: me* '(he's) being res<u>pon</u>sible'; line 13) – a particle which has been suggested to mark the stance of "'you should know'" (Chao, 1968: 810) and the assertion of obviousness in the face of a contrary move by the recipient (e.g., Chappell, 1991). Here, through the use of this particle, W appears to mark that which she has just articulated ('(He's) being re:<u>spon:</u>sible') as something that has been self-evident to her interlocutor S, and something that S has arguably been insinuatingly making evident to W all along.

In both Examples (8) and (9), then, there is evidence that even though what the speaker appears ostensibly to do is to invoke the possibility of complainability against a family member, what in effect is meant to be accomplished by the speaker is tacit praise of him instead. Despite the initial apparent confusion about or difficulty in recognizing this twist, the recipient in each case eventually comes to grasp it and align with the interactional import, albeit not without a stance display.

An interesting similarity shared by these two excerpts is the sequential context in which this practice pre-figures: In both instances, this practice is used as a "second" – for example, as second praise in a series of self-praises launched by the same speaker, as in Example (8); here, the use of an ostensible complaint to elicit praise of her son is done on the heels of a sequence of praise of him on another matter, i.e., his talent for playing the clarinet (see Example (7)).[8] Or this practice can be used for (self-)praise on the same matter for the second time, as in Example (9). In this instance, as already discussed, S's use of an ostensible complaint comes after her prior praise (line 5) of G fails to receive proper recipient alignment. One plausible account for the fit between the practice and this sequential context is that by ostensibly portraying some praiseworthy matter as complainable and having the recipient put a positive spin on it, the speaker is less liable, prima facie at least, for this self-praise, and hence, can reduce the risk of being perceived as overdoing self-praise. This practice thus allows the speaker to transgress the social bounds of modesty and accomplish the action of self-praise in a muted though not unnoticed way.

What we have seen in this section, then, is how an ostensible complaint can be used in the service of self-praising. As we have seen, for this self-praising practice to achieve its intended goal, the participants in conversation need to put a positive spin on what has otherwise been conveyed by the speaker as complainable. In my data, this practice commonly occurs in the sequential context of a "second," be it the second praise in a series of self-praises launched by the same speaker or self-praise that is initiated on the same matter for the second time. I have suggested that the use of this practice in this sequential context has the potential benefit of reducing the risk of the speaker's being perceived as overdoing self-praise. This practice thus allows the speaker to accomplish the action of self-praise in a relatively muted and modest way.

3.4. Summary

In section 3, we considered three practices in conversation whereby Mandarin speakers carry out the interactionally delicate task of praising themselves or a close family member: the designedly bipartite [self-praise plus modification] turn format, disclaiming an extreme case situation, and treating the matter ostensibly as complainable. These practices were presented in the order of their apparent resemblance to what would normally be thought of as a practice for doing self-praise, with the bipartite [self-praise plus modification] turn format at the top and invoking a potential complainable at the bottom.

While not intending to suggest a strictly one-to-one practice/action pairing,[9] I have examined and discussed the interactional contingencies that give rise to the practices observed in my data. As we have seen, with the use of the seemingly more "apparent" self-praise practice, the designedly bipartite turn format, what often gets sequentially implicative is not the praise that the speaker has just launched of him- or herself; rather, it is often that which gets mentioned in the modification or the suspended interactional task that gets picked up or resumed by the speaker or a co-participant in the subsequent interaction. On the other hand, the two less apparent self-praise practices, disclaiming an extreme case situation and treating the matter ostensibly as complainable, appear to serve primarily to secure or reinforce recipient alignment with the speaker's attempt for self-praise. Additionally, depending on the recipient's already displayed stance, the speaker may select the practice in a rather fine-tuned manner when engaged in self-praise. For example, we have observed that the speaker may choose to invoke a favorable extreme case situation and mark the matter at hand as second best when recipient alignment is yet to be secured, but may choose to invoke an unfavorable extreme case situation and mark the matter as better-than-the-worst when the recipient has already offered an upgraded aligning response. We have also seen that the selection of a self-praise practice may have to do with the sequential context. For instance, the practice of invoking the matter ostensibly as complainable is observed to often occur in the sequential context of a "second." A plausible account for this fit, as discussed, is that for this practice to be used successfully, the recipient needs to put a positive spin on what has otherwise been

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[8] Note A's use of *erqie* 'in addition' (line 1 in Example (8)) appears to mark what is to be projected as a 'second.'
[9] See Schegloff (1997) for his view of one-to-one practice/action pairing.

portrayed as a negative by the speaker. An added benefit for the use of this practice, then, is that it may reduce the risk of the speaker's being seen as overdoing self-praise.

Despite the differences in their sequential implicativeness, we have seen that in various ways, all three practices help alleviate the accountability for doing self-praise and allow the speaker to accomplish the action of self-praise in a relatively modest, if not muted, way.

4. Concluding discussion

Modesty has long been thought of as one of the core values of Chinese culture that guides Chinese communication behavior. However, despite the general consensus on the centrality of modesty and the role it plays in interpersonal relationships in Chinese societies, there have been very few studies exploring or touching on this topic based on naturally occurring conversational data. As part of a larger effort to fill this gap and to explore how the Chinese substantiate their concept of modesty in interpersonal communication, this article reports the results of a conversation-analytic study of the self-praising behavior of the Chinese in everyday social encounters.

Drawing on a body of audio- and videotaped face-to-face conversations recently collected in Beijing and Hebei, China, I have shown first that there is indeed evidence of the constraints on self-praise, which moderate everyday social interaction among Mandarin speakers. However, despite the self-praise constraints, the data also suggest that Mandarin speakers are able and willing to strive to achieve the presentation of a positive assessment of themselves or their close family members when motivated by the contingencies of the sequential moment. In this article, we have considered three previously undescribed or under-described practices that are observed in my data to accomplish just that: the designedly bipartite [self-praise plus modification] turn format, disclaiming an extreme case situation, and treating the matter ostensibly as complainable. I have further examined the interactional contingencies that give rise to the practices observed in my data, and argued that the design features of these practices in various ways afford the speaker the possibility of softening or otherwise camouflaging the action of self-praise, thereby alleviating the accountability for transgressing the social norm of modesty.

Before concluding this article, a few remarks on the bearing of the findings to the literature of Chinese communication styles in general may be relevant. Over the years, Chinese communication styles have often been perceived or described as indirect, ambiguous and even somewhat deceptive, in the sense that Mandarin speakers are said to often express themselves in a way contrary to their true wishes (e.g., Gu, 1990; Bond, 1991; Ma, 1996; Chang, 1999, 2001). Such perceptions corroborate, and may have led to, a prevailing western view of Chinese interactional behavior being "inscrutable" (e.g., Chang, 1999). The findings of this study suggest that there may be grounds for such perceptions. In this article, for example, we have seen that when it comes to interactional delicate tasks, such as self-praise, Mandarin speakers, in my data at least, indeed appear to approach it in a rather indirect, allusive and gingerly manner. Furthermore, the use of some practices, such as portraying a praiseworthy matter ostensibly as complainable, can be reasonably seen as mystifying and deceptive, too. However, indirect and seemingly deceptive as these practices may appear to a cultural outsider, the study nonetheless shows that these practices appear to be used and understood in a systematic and orderly fashion in Mandarin interaction. And it appears to be just such systematicity and orderliness which enable intersubjectivity among the Chinese in interaction exhibiting seemingly heavy allusiveness. As Schegloff (1998) once remarked, "...there is no magic here... Once one uncovers the practices employed to 'encode' [the action], it can be relatively straightforward – though not necessarily simply – to decode it" (Schegloff, 1998:252).

Clearly, Chinese communication and politeness phenomena, self-praising behavior included, are not easy matters; they are not as clear-cut as they have been assumed. More work based on detailed investigations of natural conversation is needed if we are to debunk the myth of these phenomena and uncover the practices employed to encode them. It is nonetheless hoped that the work presented here, albeit only the tip of the iceberg, has contributed to our understanding of the orderliness involved in the Chinese interactional style of self-praising.

Acknowledgements

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