

Criticizing as a Measurement of the Power Relations within Chinese Working Couples

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Abstract

This study inquires into Chinese working couples' (both the husband and the wife have a paid job) marital power relations manifested in their use of face-threatening utterances in family situations. A quantitative approach is adopted and the data come from 4 commonly-accepted "realistic" Chinese TV dramas committed to contemporary Chinese working couple's family life. First, we identify the strategies character couples utilize to criticize their spouse and also those they use to respond to spousal criticisms, and categorize them into different types according to their face-threatening intensity. Then the differences between husbands and wives in their use of these different types of strategies (in both making and responding to criticisms) are compared quantitatively. An analysis of these differences indicates that while no significant power differences are found in their ways to criticize their spouse, working wives demonstrate more power than working husbands in responding to the criticisms from their spouse. Overall, Chinese working wives have the same or even more marital power in conjugal relationship. This finding mirrors what has been proved in other research fields, that is, women's marital power has been generally enhanced since the foundation of New China in 1949. In addition, we also find that working husbands are more inclined to avoid the criticisms from their wife and thus the involvement into marital confrontation, which reflects and verifies traditional Chinese stereotypes and expectations on men that they should be more generous and tolerant than women.

Keywords

Criticism, Criticism Response, Face, Marital Power, Chinese Working Couples

1. Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that Chinese conjugal relationship has undergone great changes since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and many stu-

dies in the field of marriage and family have verified this point and demonstrated that although patriarchy still functions in Chinese family system (Cong & Silverstein, 2008; Zuo, 2009), Chinese women's marital power (the core component of conjugal relationship) has been enhanced (Lin, 2005; Xu, 2006; Chu & Yu, 2010; Chien & Yi, 2014), especially for women with higher education and income (Pimentel & Liu, 2004; Xie & Zhu, 2009). In these studies, conjugal power relationship is mainly measured in terms of social elements such as household labor division, family decision making, co-residence with whose family, women's ability to support financially their own family and so on. Rarely has any study taken into account the dimension of couples' use of language, especially their use of face-threatening utterances in family situations when measuring their marital power relations. This paper attempts to fill this gap by investigating Chinese working couples' power relationship manifested in their criticizing their spouse and responding to spousal criticisms in daily interaction.

2. Criticizing as a Measurement of Marital Power Relationship

For the purposes of this study, criticism is defined as the speaker's expression of disapproval of or dissatisfaction with the incorrectness, inappropriateness, unsuitability or injustice s/he perceives in the recipient's acts or behaviors¹. Here, the recipient is deemed as responsible for the problem caused and criticisms targeted at the third party (Drew, 1998) are excluded. The acts criticized may not necessarily cause harm or hindrance to the speaker, as in the case of complaint, but rather turn out to be inconsistent with the expectations of the speaker on how to behave properly in a given situation. Besides, the term of "criticism", rather than that of "accusation" is adopted, because the former covers a wider range from mild dissatisfaction, through mediocre to the intense one, while the latter generally refers to that of high intensity. Another point that needs to be noted is that since the intention of the speaker is beyond the grasp of the recipient, it is likely that some intentional criticisms may be too implicit to be detected by the recipient, or what the speaker intends as assertions may be perceived by the recipient as criticisms. When this inconsistency occurs, a hearer-oriented perspective is adopted and any utterance that is taken by the recipient as offensive is counted as a criticism. However, there are also cases in which the speaker's criticism is quite explicit (explicit in verbal embodiment or accompanying strong prosodic features such as rising volume and high pitch), but the recipient does not respond to it verbally (silence), or gives a response unrelated to the criticism. In these cases, the speaker's utterances are treated as a criticism and the recipient's response is avoidance.

The employment of the speech act of criticism as a measurement of marital power relations is justified in that criticism is an essentially face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and are normally legitimately made by one exercising higher power to the other one exercising lower power in a relationship and not the vice versa. Even if the lower one does make a criticism to the higher one, the criticism is supposed to be miti-

¹In the remaining part of the paper, "the speaker" refers to the one who makes a criticism, while "the recipient" refers to the one who is criticized.

gated and downgraded so as to reduce its face-threatening impacts to the minimum. When confronted with a criticism, the hierarchically higher one is entitled to contradict or even counterattack the hierarchically inferior one, while the lower one is only ideally allowed to accept or deny the criticism. In ancient China, especially in Ming and Qing Dynasties, women were deprived of domestic power and were supposed to “completely obey their father before marriage, their husband during married life and even their sons in widowhood” (Tao & Ming, 1994; Du & Wang, 2004). One manifestation of their lack of power in marital relationship is that they had no equal right to speak to their husband. At that time, women were not allowed to participate into eventful conversations, let alone to refute when criticized by their husband or even initiate a criticism to their husband. After New China was founded, with the promotion and increasing prevalence of feminism, Chinese women are provided more and more opportunities to get education and paid employment. This transformation, in turn, brings about changes in their relationship with their husband. These changes are demonstrated not only in the above-mentioned aspects such as household labor division, family decision making and so on, but also in their daily verbal communication, especially their entitlement to attack their spouse’ face and to maintain their own face when threatened by verbal means. Therefore, by examining how married men and women from Chinese working class make criticisms to their partner and how they respond to the criticisms from their partner, we are able to get some access into their marital power relations.

3. Previous Research on Criticism

Existing studies of complaint, blaming, criticism or accusation mainly focus on the how the speaker performs these acts and respond to them, as well as their evolution into conflict talk. Pomerantz (1978) identifies the two components of blaming sequence, which are the announcement of the “unhappy incident” and the attribution of the responsibility. Paul (1998) explicates that complaining is achieved through the ways the speaker chooses to report the complainees’ behavior, rather than the behavior *per se*. Some specific strategies family members utilize to complain their spouse or siblings in Québec community are identified as follows: 1) allusion to an offensive act/behavior; 2) justification of discontent; 3) request that the complainees justify his or her act/behavior; 4) mentioning the offensive act; 5) requesting a change in behavior; 6) adverse criticism of the hearer (Laforest, 2002). In addition to these verbal strategies, non-verbal ones such as silence (Saunders, 1985; Tannen, 1990; Oduro-Frimpong, 2007, 2011) and violent visual signals (Lee, 2008) are also employed to make complaints and accusations. Concerning the ways to respond to these acts, various strategies are also identified by researchers (Garcia, 1991; Bilmes, 1988; Kotthoff, 1993; Lee, 2008; Laforest, 2002; Dersley & Wootton, 2000), which are generally classified into five categories: 1) acceptance; 2) denial; 3) justification; 4) counterattack; 5) shifting the responsibility to the third party. Then in what ways will a criticism/response sequence develop into conflict talk of greater acrimony? It is agreed that an argument usually breaks out when the complainer rejects or ignores in the third position the complainees’ response, or responds to it

sarcastically (Laforest, 2002; Dersley & Wootton, 2000).

These studies present a clear picture of the linguistic resources and structural features of these acts. However, the underlying interpersonal issues have rarely been explored by researchers, except Boxer (2002) and Laforest (2002), to my knowledge. Boxer analyzes the variables conditioning the speech act of nagging and reveals that nagging occurs between intimates in most cases, if not exclusively, and often from women to men, which, in Boxer's opinion, is attributed to women's lower power in seeking men's compliance. Laforest attributes family members' preference for unmitigated complaint patterns to the intimacy of their relationship. In both studies, social factors such as social distance and power/status are resorted to explain the linguistic patterns detected by the researcher. This explanation is actually speculative and awaits verification. In the present study, we reverse the course and investigate the participants' interpersonal relationship manifested in their linguistic practice. To illustrate, we aim to find out the marital power relations within Chinese working couples by examining their linguistic practice of managing the speech act of criticism.

4. Data and Methodology

As hostile verbal interactions between husband and wife usually take place in private domains and in an unpredictable way, to collect naturally-occurring data is, on the one hand, quite hard to be achieved, and, on the other hand, may infringe the privacy of the participants and lead to a violation of morality. As the Chinese proverb goes, domestic shame should never be made public. For Chinese couples, nothing else is more embarrassing or frustrating than the disclosing of their family skeleton, even for academic purposes. Taking these into consideration, we decide to resort to non-naturally occurring yet "realistic" conflict episodes featured in TV dramas.

4.1. TV Dramas and Their Relevance to Interaction Reality

TV dramas, as a form of popular culture, are devoted to the interplay between reality and fantasy and are characterized by productivity and relevance (Fiske, 1989, 2005). Their productivity lies in that people are able to take in the popular texts and, more importantly, to insert them into their everyday culture. In other words, people must be enabled to make sense of the social and cultural meanings imbedded in the popular texts. The key to productivity, then, in turn, exists in producing meanings that are "relevant" to the everyday lives of ordinary people (Fiske, 1989, 2005). Concerning the feature of relevance, Fiske (2005: p. 6) claims that "Relevance is central to pop culture, for it minimizes the difference between text and life... Relevance can only be produced by the people, for only they can know which texts enable them to make the meanings that will function in their everyday lives". Therefore, the popularity of a TV drama depends on its success in relating the screenplay to the everyday life of its audience, as "the more 'realistic' a program is thought to be, the more trusted, enjoyable-and therefore the more popular-it becomes" (Fiske & Hartley, 2003: p. 128).

However, the achievement of relevance in TV shows is no easy task, "for relevances

are dispersed, and as divergent as the social situations of the people; the popular text, therefore, has to work against its differences to find a commonality between divergent social groups in order to maximize its consumption and profitability” (Fiske, 2005: p. 6). For “realistic” TV dramas committed to marital issues, they are unlikely to cover all the aspects and details of the character couple’s life, but the episodes selected are those that can embody the commonality of the group of couples of whom the characters are a representative. These episodes are able to reflect the life reality of the couples living in the same period of time and from the same social class of a society as the characters do. Also, they reflect and reinforce the social and cultural norms and expectations about these couples.

Likewise, the verbal interactions presented in TV dramas, while not equivalent to spontaneous interactions that occur naturally, do represent the “realistic” verbal interaction that is presumed in the given situation in a given speech community. The utterances of the characters are designed in line with the general linguistic styles and features of the speech community they live in and in accordance with their identity (age, gender, educational background, social status and so on) and their relationship with their interactional recipient, for otherwise, they will not be deemed as “realistic”. As [Lakoff and Tannen \(1984\)](#) point out, literally constructed or artificial dialogue represents an internalized schema or competence model for the production of interaction that speakers have access to. “It is not equivalent to the dialogue spontaneously produced in interaction. Paradoxically, however, the dialogue in drama or fiction often strikes audiences as extremely realistic” ([Tannen, 1990: p. 261](#)).

In this study, we aim to investigate the power relationship within Chinese working couples manifested in their management of criticisms and we choose “realistic” Chinese TV dramas committed to contemporary Chinese working couples’ daily life as the sources of data collection. “Realistic” TV dramas are hardly a substitute for couples’ real life, but the TV couples’ characteristics, dialogues and also their interpersonal relations portrayed in them are normally in accordance with and thus a reflection of the reality of the group of couples of whom they are representative. Otherwise, they will not be accepted by the audience as “realistic” TV dramas. Therefore, a study based on commonly-accepted “realistic” Chinese TV dramas is able to provide us access into the reality of the power relations within Chinese couples. In some sense, TV dramas, when used to inspect the general and prevalent power relations within couples of a certain social class in a certain society, are not without advantages. Besides their easy availability, they show us the most typical and representative life state of a certain group of couples and, therefore, provide a good representation of their general life reality.

4.2. Data Collection

The data used in the present study come from four commonly-accepted Chinese “realistic” TV dramas committed to contemporary couples’ daily life and all the character couples are working couples. They are namely *Jinhun* (*Golden Wedding*, Drama 1 hereafter), *Wanggui and Anna* (“Wanggui” is the name of the male protagonist and “An-

na” the name of the female protagonist, Drama 2 hereafter), *Ren Dao Sishi* (*The Forties Destiny*, Drama 3 hereafter), and *Xiao Bieli* (*A Love for Separation*, Drama 4 hereafter).

Both Drama 1 and Drama 2 are chronicle TV series. Drama 1 tells the stories of the protagonists in a time period of 50 years (from 1956 to 2006) since they get married. It consists of 50 episodes, and the stories of each year are told in each episode. Besides, this drama is grounded in the historical development and changes of Chinese society and some significant events in Chinese history (such as the Great Famine and the Reform and Opening-up) are not only displayed, but also integrated into the life experience of the protagonists. This drama, therefore, is a great reflection of the actual life of Chinese couples from 1950s to the 21st century. Likewise, Drama 2, consisting of 32 episodes, also tells the life stories of a married couple from their young ages to old ages in a chronological order. The transformations of Chinese society in almost the same period of time are also incorporated in its story telling. It is different from Drama 1 in that the events are not presented in an exact year-by-year order, but all the stories are integrated together.

These two dramas have been spoken highly of by the audience since they were aired. They are evaluated as “staying quite true and faithful” to the actual lives of Chinese couples. Many prizes have been awarded to *Golden Wedding* since it was first aired in 2007 on BTV, among which are Golden Eagle Award, Magnolia Award and Flying Goddess Award. They are the top three awards for TV programs in China and embody the recognition from the audience, the TV industry and the government respectively. The drama *Wanggui and Anna* was also awarded the Golden Eagle Award and the Magnolia Award and it was originally aired in 2009 on BTV.

The other two dramas, while not chronicles, are also typical Chinese style. Drama 3, consisting of 38 episodes, presents the various problems a couple may confront in their forties. It reveals traditional Chinese family values, especially Chinese women’s views of family and marriage, that is, the wife’s adornment lies in her ranked husband. It was first aired on BTV in 2011. Drama 4 is composed of 45 episodes and mainly reflects the confusion and problems Chinese parents are facing in choosing appropriate senior-high school education for their child (whether staying at home or going abroad to get education). Three couples are depicted in this drama, but only two of them are chosen because the third one is not a working couple. It was first aired on BTV in 2016.

These four TV dramas are chosen mainly for the following three reasons:

- 1) The four dramas all aim to address the marital issues concerning Chinese working couples. They cover almost all the possible conflict sources in Chinese couples’ marital life, like different living habits, financial burden, disciplining and educating children, extramarital affairs, as well as the in-law issues.

- 2) The marriages of different generations since the foundation of P. R. China (in 1949) are covered. Drama 1 and Drama 2 tell the stories of those born around the 1940s, or in the period from 1930s to 1950s, Drama 3 displays the life of couples born in between 1960s and 1970s and Drama 4 is about the post-1975 generation.

- 3) The conflicts presented in these dramas range from mild, through moderated to

acrimonious ones. The verbal embodiment of these conflicts, as a result, is diversified in their content and intensity. The richness of the data (especially the acrimonious conflict episodes) collected in these TV dramas is otherwise far from available when naturally-occurring data are resorted to.

The profiles of the characters in the four TV shows are presented in **Table 1**. The husband in Drama 1 (H1) is an engineer and his wife (W1) a primary school teacher. They have three daughters and a son. They argue due to their different living habits, divergent opinions on raising and educating children as well as the way to treat H1's mother. Their relation comes to a deadlock when W1 mistakenly assumes that H1 has an affair with one of his female colleagues. Wanggui, the husband in Drama 2 (H2), is a college English teacher and was born in a poor village. He is the eldest child in his original family and has to aid his family financially. In contrast, his wife (W2) Anna, a workwoman in a state-owned factory, comes from Shanghai, one of the metropolitan cities in China. The large gap in their family background and upbringing leads to their incompatible lifestyles and then verbal discords and argument. They are also caught into the trouble of extramarital issues and in-law issues. The husband in Drama 3 (H3) is a psychiatrist in a psychiatric hospital and his wife (H3) the head of Emergency Department in a state-owned hospital. They have divergent expectations on life. While the husband is quite satisfied with their status quo, his wife is discontent and expects him to earn more money. They also hold divergent attitudes towards how to educate their son. These incompatibilities and H3's extramarital affairs catch them into frequent quarrels. In Drama 4, both couples' disputes come from their divergence in whether their child should be sent abroad to get higher-school education. H4 is an ophthalmologist and W4 is a manager in a cosmetics company. H5 is a taxi driver and W5 a community doctor.

From these four TV dramas (165 episodes in all), a total of 402 pairs of criticism and criticism response are collected. All of these pairs occur at the initial position of a sequence of talk. Some of them develop into conflict talk in later stages while others do not. Only the criticism/response pairs appearing at the beginning position are chosen because the turns after them or in the subsequent part of a conflict talk may

Table 1. Profiles of the TV characters.

	Characters	Sex	Occupation	Children
Drama 1	H1	M	Engineer	Three daughters
	W1	F	Primary school teacher	One son
Drama 2	H2	M	College teacher	One daughter
	W2	F	Workwoman	One son
Drama 3	H3	M	Psychiatrist	One son
	W3	F	Emergency Department Head	
	H4	M	Ophthalmologist	
Drama 4	W4	F	Company manager	One daughter
	H5	M	Taxi driver	One daughter
	W5	F	Community doctor	

simultaneously function as a response to the prior criticism and also as a criticism that triggers a response in the next turn. This is due to that conflict talk are sequentially characterized by strings of utterances that oppose, counter or reject prior utterances, thereby forming chains of oppositional exchanges (Maynard, 1985; Hutchby, 1996; Gruber, 1998). Another reason lies in that with the increase of the acrimony and rancor, other factors, especially the participants' intense negative emotions will exert impacts on their ways to make or respond to criticisms.

4.3. Research Methods

A quantitative and comparative approach is adopted in this study. Firstly, the various strategies character couples use to criticize their spouse and respond to spousal criticisms are identified. Then the prototypes of these strategies are abstracted and then categorized in terms of their face-threatening intensity. At last, the gender differences in their ways to make and respond to criticisms are analyzed based on which their marital power relations are evaluated. The investigation of their gender differences is carried out by means of quantitative analyses. First of all, the distributional patterns of the wives' strategies to criticize their husband are compared with those of the husbands to criticize their wife. Then, the distributional patterns of their respective strategies to respond to spousal criticisms are compared.

5. Discussion

These character couples employ a variety of strategies in making and responding to criticisms. In this section, the prototypes of their strategies to make criticisms are first introduced in order of increasing face-threatening intensity, followed by a presentation of those used for responding to criticisms, also in the same order. At last, the marital power relationship within Chinese working couples are judged based on a quantitative analysis of the gender differences in their employment of different strategies.

5.1. Strategies of Making Criticisms

The various strategies couples use to express dissatisfaction with their spouse (showed in Table 2) mainly fall into three categories in order of growing degree to which they are face-threatening for the recipient: implicit criticisms, explicit criticisms and severe criticisms. The explicit type of strategies are those in which the faulty or misconduct of the recipient is directly displayed or pointed out. The implicit type refers to those in which the impropriety of the recipient's acts is indirectly hinted or implied rather than being stated plainly and some inferences are required for the recipient to perceive the speaker's criticizing intention. Severe criticisms are negative evaluations of or even intensified attacks on the recipient's character and personality. For face-threatening speech acts, the more direct they are, the more face-threatening they are (Brown & Levinson, 1987), so explicit criticisms are more face-threatening than implicit ones. As severe criticisms move from a disapproval of the recipient's acts to an abuse of the recipient's personality, they are more face-threatening than explicit ones. Therefore,

Table 2. Classification of strategies to make criticisms.

Types	Prototypes of strategies
Implicit criticisms	Stating the harm the recipient causes to the speaker
	Request the recipient to justify his/her act
	Innuendo
	Irony
Explicit criticisms	Self-criticizing
	Pointing out the recipient's fault
	Stating the adverse consequences of the recipient's act
Severe criticisms	Directing the recipient to change his/her acts
	Abusing the recipient's personality or identity

theoretically, severe criticisms are more face-threatening than explicit ones, which are more face-threatening than implicit ones.

In the following part, the prototypes of these strategies, of which there are in total nine, are defined and/or illustrated with the examples from the data we collect. Concerning the transcription of these examples, transcription in Chinese *Pinyin* is first presented, followed by its English equivalent.

(1) Stating the harm the recipient causes to the speaker

By this strategy, the speaker justifies his/her dissatisfaction by highlighting the harm s/he suffers without mentioning the agent of the misconduct.

Ex. (1): H1 is discontent with W1's devoting all her attention to their son and neglecting his wellness and feelings.

H1: *nǐ shuō zhè gè jiā yǒu wǒ méi wǒ hái yǒu shénmē liǎngyāng, lián gè shuǐjiào de dìfāng wǒ dōu méiyǒu.*

I'm not important to the family at all. I even have no place to sleep in.

(2) Request justification from the recipient

To belong to this category, the speaker provides the recipient with an opportunity to explain why s/he did or will do the criticized act. It is implicit in that some room is left to the recipient to justify his/her act before it is defined as incorrect or improper.

Ex. (2): H3 fell ill and went to the doctor by himself without informing W3 of that.

W3: *fāshāo le wèishénme bù gào sù wǒ ā?*

Why didn't you tell me that you had a temperature?

(3) Innuendo

By innuendo, we mean that the criticism is literally targeted at a third party (while actually intended at the recipient) or something else that is superficially unrelated to the criticized act.

Ex. (3): H2 and W2 had so bitter a quarrel that H2 threatened to divorce her at the daytime. At night, W2 was soothing their daughter to sleep.

W2: *(To their daughter) biyǎn, shuǐjiào, míngtiān nǐ jiù méi bàba le.*

(To their daughter) *Keep your eyes closed. You will have no Dad tomorrow.*

Ex. (4): H4 accepted his young female student's offer to tutor his daughter without negotiating with W4, while W4 was quite discontent with H's close relationship with his student. W4 said the following utterances while H4 was kneading dough.

W4: *xīn huó de miàn jiùshì bù yīyàng, báibái de, huáhuá de, tántán de, jiùshì xǐ huān.*

The newly-kneaded dough is indeed much better, so white, smooth, elastic and lovable.

(4) Irony

Irony, in its narrow sense, is a typical type of mock politeness in which superficially polite, but ultimately insincere utterances are used to convey impolite beliefs and meanings (Leech, 1983). Here, this strategy is adopted when what the speaker expresses on the surface is exactly the opposite of what s/he intends to be the actual case.

Ex. (5): The daughter of Couple 4 has applied for an American senior high school and was being interviewed online at midnight by the interviewer from that school. W4 was anxious about their daughter's performance and was waiting outside her room, when H4 asked her to change into pajamas and go back to sleep.

W4: *wǒ huàn shénmē shuìyī, nǐ xīn kě zhēn gòu dà de.*

What do I change (into pajamas) for? You are really generous and broad-minded.

Ex. (6): In order to get financial support for her daughter to study abroad, W5 consented to her elder sister's request to adopt her daughter, which irritated H5.

H5: *nà búshì wài rén, shì zán jiě, féi shuǐ méi liú wài rén tián.*

It is our elder-sister who adopts our daughter, not others. After all, every miller draws water to his own mill.

(5) Self-criticizing

To belong to this category, the speaker superficially attributes the blame and responsibility to him/herself and leaves the recipient to recognize his/her true intention.

Ex. (7): W5 wanted to sell her apartment to raise tuition for her daughter, but was prevented by H5.

W5: *nǐ shì fáng zhǔ, nǐ shì yījiāzhǔ, wǒ yǒu quánlì mài ma? wǒ duìbùqǐ nǐ, nà fángzi xìng jīn, shì bú shì? nà shì nǐmen lǎo jīn jiā chāiqián déláí de, gēn wǒ yǒu bàn máoqián guān xi ma? wǒ kě zhēn gòu méi liǎn de.*

You are the owner of the apartment and the head of our family. What right do I have to sell the department? It's my fault. That's your apartment. It was acquired at the cost of pulling down your old house, so does it have anything to do with me? I am really shameless.

(6) Pointing out the recipient's fault

The incorrect, improper or unreasonable aspects of the recipient's behavior are highlighted, which can be expressed as that the recipient did something that should not have been done or failed to do something that should have been done.

Ex. (8) W2 had an argument with H2's mother and H2 had no choice but to send his mom back hometown.

H2: *ǎnniáng zài de shíhòu, nǐ yīshēng mā dōu bù jiào, ǎnniáng zǒu le, nǐ dào jiào*

shàng mā le.

When my mother was here, you never addressed her mom. She is now back home and you are addressing her mom.

(7) Stating the adverse consequences of the recipient's act

The negative impacts of the recipient's act are emphasized in this strategy. These impacts may either have already been caused or be potential to be caused. In addition, the negative impacts may be exerted on the speaker, the recipient or the third party.

Ex. (9) W1 was meant to repair their eldest daughter's shoes with iron wires.

H1: *nǐ jiù bù pà bǎ háizi jiǎo gěi zhā le zhèyàng, nǐ zhēn xiǎng de chūlái nǐ.*
Haven't you ever thought this will hurt her feet? What a silly idea.

(8) Directing the recipient to change his/her acts

The faulty nature of the recipient's act is presupposed as a fact when the speaker requests or orders the recipient to change his/her acts.

Ex. (10) W2 told her mother about H2's bad living habits, for which H2 feels annoyed and humiliated.

H2: *zánmen zhījiān de shìqíng, nǐ bié dònggùdòng jiù jiǎng gěi nǐniáng tīng, hǎo bùhǎo yā?*

Don't always tell your mother things between us, will you?

(9) Abusing the recipient's personality or identity

By means of abusing personality, the target of the criticism is expanded from the recipient's wrong behavior to his/her personal or social attributes.

Ex. (11) H3 objected to W3's plan to send their son to a key senior high school.

W3: *nǐ zhè huà wǒ tèbié bù ài tīng, jiùshì bù fùzérèn.*
I hate to hear that. You are irresponsible (for our son).

5.2. Strategies of Responding to Spousal Criticisms

Table 3 presents the classification of the strategies character couples utilize to respond to spousal criticisms. By means of acceptance, the recipient admits that the fault and responsibility rests on him/herself. This can be done either verbally by making an apology or non-verbally by abandoning or changing the criticized act, or in a combination of both. It has no face-threatening implication to the speaker. When defensive strategies are employed, the recipient tries to restore and maintain his/her own face by either exempting him/herself from the blame, or by reducing the extent to which s/he is to blame. Responses of this type are more face-threatening to the speaker than acceptance, for they at least render the speaker's judgment untenable or incompletely correct. Offensive responses are those in which the recipient attempts to offset his/her loss of face by attacking the speaker's face by either counter-attributing the blame to the speaker or deliberately acting against the speaker's will. They are more face-threatening than defensive ones because they are intended mainly to attack the speaker's face while defensive ones are mainly used to defend the recipient's own face (rather than attacking the speaker's). In a word, the face-threatening intensity of offensive responses is stronger than that of defensive ones, which is, in turn, stronger than that of the acceptance type.

Table 3. Classification of the strategies to respond to criticisms.

Types	Prototypes of strategies
Acceptance	Verbal apology
	Non-verbal abandoning or changes of criticized acts
Defensive responses	Denying having done the criticized act
	Providing justification
	Understating the fault
Offensive responses	Countercriticizing the speaker
	Going against the speaker's will
Avoidance	Silence
	Distorting the criticism
	Shifting or ending the topic

In addition to these three types, the recipient may also respond to a criticism by avoiding it. In cases of this type, the recipient neither accepts the criticism nor gives an antagonistic (either defensive or offensive) response, but rather ignores the criticism in one way or another. The criticism either meets a silence from the recipient or is distorted, or the current topic is shifted or ended. The face-threatening nature of avoiding responses is hard to be determined. Whether the speaker feels offended and to what extent s/he is offended is beyond easy evaluation.

Likewise, these various prototypes of strategies are illustrated with specific examples in the following part.

(1) Apology

Ex. (12): W1 came back home late the day H1' mother came to visit them.

H1: *nǐ zěn me cái huílái a?*

Why do you come back so late?

→W1: *zhēn bùhǎoyìsī, wǒ gēn nǐshuō ā, chǎnglǐ tūrán lái jiǎnchá wǒmen de jiào xué, wǒ zǒu bù kāi, yòu méifǎtōngzhī nǐ, nǐmen děng jí le ba?*

I'm really sorry. The leaders came to inspect our work and I couldn't leave earlier.

Nor could I inform you of that. You must have been very upset, weren't you?

(2) Abandoning or changing the criticized act

Ex. (13): W3 saw H3 lying on their bed with his outer garment on when she came back home from work.

W3: *wǒ dōu gēn nǐ shuō guò duōshǎo biàn le, bié chuān zhe wài biān de yī fú jiù wǎng chuáng shàng tǎng.*

How many times I have told you not to lie on the bed with your garment on.

→H3: *zhī dào zhī dào zhī dào (sitting up immediately).*

I got it, got it, got it (sitting up immediately).

(3) Denying having done the criticized act

Ex. (14): W1 had an argument with H1 a night and ran away from home. H1 went to

look for her but failed to find her, so he went back home to wait for her.

W1: *méi xiǎngdào nǐ huì shì zhè zhǒng rén, wǒ zhēn shì xiā le yǎn le gēn nǐ zhè zhǒng rén jiéhūn, nǐ zhēn shì hèn xīn, wǒ yīgè nǐde zài wàimiàn bànyèsāngēng de wǒ yào yùdào huàirén zěn me bàn, nǐ lián zhǎo dōu bù zhǎo wǒ.*

I didn't expect you are such a person. I was so blind to have married you. You are cruelhearted. What if I meet some bad guys? You didn't even look for me.

→H1: *wǒ zhǎo nǐ qù le, wǒ mǎn shìjiè zhǎo nǐ.*

I did go to look for you. I looked for you everywhere.

(4) Providing justification

When this strategy is utilized, the recipient admits having performed the act criticized, but insists on that there are well-grounded reasons for him/her to do that.

Ex. (15): H4 found W4 checking their daughter's cellphone when she was sleeping.

H4: *nǐ bùnéng zhèyàng, nǐ zhème gàn bù héshì.*

You shouldn't do this. It's inappropriate.

→W4: *zěnme bù héshì, wǒ shì tā mā.*

Why not inappropriate? I'm her mother.

(5) Understating the fault

By understating the fault, we mean that the recipient admits that he/she has committed the behavior accused and also that his/her act is reprehensible, but still tries to represent the fault in a less significant way.

Ex. (16): W2 was discontent with the green vegetables H2 cooked.

W2: *nǎer qīng ā?*

It's green?

→H2: *ā, zǎ biànchéng zhègè sè le nē? bùguò méi guānxi, bù yǐngxiǎng chī.*

Oh, how can it become such? But it does not matter, it doesn't affect the savor.

(6) Countercriticizing the speaker

By countercriticizing the speaker, the recipient counterattributes the fault, blame or negative personal qualities to the speaker. Almost all the strategies for advancing criticisms concluded in the prior part can be employed by the recipient to counterattack the speaker.

Ex. (17): W3 had an argument with her son over his performance at school, who, as a result, ran away from home.

H3: *Zhèng Jié, wǒ gēn nǐ shuō, wǒmen děi yǒu shíhòu yào zìxǐng yīxià ā, yóuqí shì duì háizi de jiàoyù de fāngshì fāngfǒ.*

Zheng Jie (the name of W3), let me tell you, sometimes we have to inspect ourselves, especially our ways to educate our son.

→W3: *shénmē fāngshì fāngfǒ, wǒ gào sù nǐ, nǐ jiùshì guānzhe Liáng Sīyǔ, yàobùrán tā gǎn gēn wǒ zhème jiào xiāo ā. hái shuō wǒ yào fǎnsī yīxià, wǒ kàn yīnggāi fǎnsī de shì nǐ, nǐ guǎn guò érzi de jiàoyù ma? nǐ zěnme dāng bàbà de nǐ shì, shuō wǒ.*

No way. It's you who have spoiled Liang Siyu (the name of their son). Otherwise he would not have dared to shout at me. It's you rather than me to have self-inspection. Have you ever paid any attention to his education? You're really irresponsible.

(7) Going against the speaker's will

In making the criticism, the speaker demonstrates his/her adverse attitude towards the recipient's behavior, so it is what the speaker expects the recipient not to do any more. Based on this assumption, running counter to the speaker's willingness and doing the very things he or she hates is an efficient way to revenge the speaker.

Ex. (18): H1 happened to see that W1 came back home with the company of a young man.

H1: *zěnme zhāo, zhǎo nà xiǎo qīngnián sùkǔ qù le? nǐ yào sùkǔ nǐ zhǎo zhǔn le duì xiàng, bié zhǎo zhèzhǒng xiǎo máohái zi, zhǎo wǒmen zhèzhǒng suishu de, zhǎo wǒmen zhè zhǒng, ā, lǎo tóngzhì, shànjiěrényì ā.*

So you went to that guy to air your grievance? If you want to do that, you should find a right listener. Don't go to young guys like him. You'd better come to men of my age. They are more understanding and considerate, huh?

→W1: *zěnme zhāo, chícù le? Hēng, wǒ gào sù nǐ, wǒ jiù ài gēn nà xiǎo nián qīng jiāo liú, nǐ kàn bù shùn yǎn shì ba? wǒ jiùshì xiǎng ràng nǐ kàn bù shùn yǎn.*

So you are jealous? Huh, I'm telling you, I just want to talk with young guys. You are unhappy, aren't you? I just want you to be unhappy.

(8) Silence

Ex. (19): H4 spent too much time playing computer games.

W4: *nǐ wán er, chíǎo zìjǐ gěi zìjǐ zuò shǒu shù.*

Keep playing it and you will have to operate on yourself.

→H4: *(no response).*

(9) Distorting the criticism

By distorting the criticism, the recipient deliberately avoids the default or intended meaning of the speaker's utterance, but rather interprets it in a literal and thus deviate way.

Ex. (20): H5 stayed out for several days after he had had a quarrel with W5. During this period of time, their daughter was hostile to her.

W5: *dōu lài nǐ, nǐ yàoshì bù gēn wǒ jiàojìn nǐ yàoshì zài jiā, tā néng zhème qifù wǒ ā. liǎng gè bái yǎn er láng, yīgè dà yīgè xiǎo.*

It's all your fault. If you had not argued with me and stayed at home, she would not have walked over me. You are two white-eye wolves (in Chinese conventionally referring to persons who are ungrateful and return a favor with an injury).

→H5: *wǒmen dōu bái yǎn er láng nǐ xǐ yáng yang*

Yes, we are white-eye wolves and you are the Happy Lamb (a Chinese cartoon character who is smart and diligent).

(10) Shifting or ending the topic

Ex. (21): H4 gave his daughter a bottle of milk during a meal.

W4: *wǒ zuò le tāng nǐ ràng tā hē nǎi.*

I cooked soup, but you gave her milk to drink.

→H4: *wǒ chī bǎo le, wǒ xǐ zǎo qù le.*

I'm full and goanna have a shower.

5.3. Analysis of Marital Power Relations within Working Couples

Up to now, we have categorized and ordered the strategies character couples utilize to make and respond to criticisms according to their face-threatening intensity. In order of increasing face-threatening intensity (to the recipient), the prototypes of strategies to make criticisms are classified into three types: implicit type, explicit type and severe type. In the same order (to the speaker), strategies for responding to criticisms are categorized as acceptance type, defensive type and offensive type (the avoidance type is not ordered because its intensity is hard to evaluate). Based on the assumption that the more power one exercises in a relationship, the more s/he is entitled to use strategies of higher face-threatening intensity, we compare the distributional patterns of husbands' strategies with wives' in both making and responding to criticisms.

5.3.1. Marital Power Relations in Criticism Making

When analyzing their distribution, only cases in which no third party is present are counted. Besides, the topics of criticisms are limited to trivial affairs within family life (like living habits, raising children and the like) and those about eventful issues such as serious extramarital affairs, transferring child custody or mistakes that caused severe harm and injuries are excluded. In this way, the impacts of the presence of the third party and those of the topics on the strategies used can be controlled. In total, 312 out of 402 cases are counted, as is indicated in **Table 4**.

As is noted in **Table 4**, among the total of 312 cases of criticism, 48.1% (150 cases) are made by husbands to their wife, and 51.9% (162 ones) are made by wives to their husband. There exists little difference in their frequency of initiating criticisms. Actually, the criticisms initiated by wives (51.9%) are a little more than those initiated by husbands (48.1%). According to the assumption that criticisms are normally made by the hierarchically higher party to the hierarchically lower party, it can be concluded that, concerning the frequency of criticisms initiation, Chinese working wives display almost the same power as working husbands.

Table 5 demonstrates a comparison of the distributional patterns of strategies husbands use to criticize their wife with those wives use to criticize their husband. In Section 5.1, we present every individual strategy, but in some cases, these strategies are not used individually, but rather in combination with each other (to constitute a criticism).

Table 4. The frequency of husbands' and wives' initiation of criticisms in each drama.

	Initiated by husbands	Initiated by wives	Total
Drama 1 (Couple 1)	55	44	99
Drama 2 (Couple 2)	35	42	77
Drama 3 (Couple 3)	20	20	40
Drama 4 (Couple 4)	21	36	57
Drama 4 (Couple 5)	19	20	39
Total	150 (48.1%)	162 (51.9%)	312 (100%)

Table 5. The comparison between husbands' and wives' strategies in making criticisms.

	Implicit type	Explicit type	Severe type	Total
Husbands	27 (18%)	107 (71.3%)	16 (10.7%)	150 (100%)
Wives	37 (22.8%)	97 (59.9%)	28 (17.3%)	162 (100%)

In this case, the face-threatening level of the criticism is measured according to that of the most face-threatening component. For instance, if a criticism is performed by means of an explicit strategy in combination with a severe strategy, it will be classified into the severe type. Besides, the possible mitigation or intensification of the strategies is also taken into account when determining their level of threat. Mitigated explicit strategies are considered as implicit ones; intensified implicit strategies are considered as explicit ones and intensified explicit ones as severe ones.

As is shown in **Table 5**, working husbands and working wives demonstrate a similar pattern in the distribution of their strategies to criticize their spouse. To illustrate, working husbands most frequently use explicit strategies (71.3%) when expressing discontent with their wives, followed by implicit ones (18%), and the severe ones (10.7%) are the least frequently used. For working wives, they also utilize explicit strategies (59.9%) the most and severe ones (17.3%) the least. Comparatively, the frequency with which husbands resort to explicit ones is a little higher than that of wives, while the frequencies with which wives use implicit ones and severe ones are a little higher than those of husbands. As it is assumed that explicit strategies are more face-threatening than implicit ones, husbands' higher frequency in using explicit ones and lower frequency in using implicit ones indicate their superiority to wives in power position. However, this superiority is offset by their less use of severe strategies than wives' (as severe strategies are more face-threatening than explicit ones). Therefore, in terms of the distribution of different strategies in making criticisms, no significant differences are found in working husbands' and working wives' marital power.

In summary, in criticism-making, no matter measured by the frequency of initiating criticisms or by the face-threatening intensity of the strategies chosen, Chinese working wives demonstrate almost the same hierarchical power as working husbands.

5.3.2. Marital Power Relations in Criticism Response

Besides an analysis of the gender differences in making criticisms, we also probe into the gender differences in working couples' responses to spousal criticisms. In determining the face-threatening intensity of each case, likewise, the responses composed of more than one strategy are measured according to the intensity of the component with the highest level of threat. The general distributions of husbands' and wives' responsive strategies are shown in **Table 6**.

From **Table 6**, we can see that, for working husbands, the most frequently used responsive strategies are defensive ones (53.1%), followed by offensive ones (22.2%), avoidance (17.3%) and acceptance (7.4%). In contrast, for working wives, the most frequently used are offensives strategies (52.7%), followed by offensive ones (38.0%),

Table 6. The comparison between husbands' and wives' responsive strategies.

	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Husbands	12 (7.4%)	86 (53.1%)	36 (22.2%)	28 (17.3%)	162 (100%)
Wives	8 (5.3%)	57 (38.0%)	79 (52.7%)	6 (4.0%)	150 (100%)

acceptance (5.3%) and avoidance (4.0%). For both husbands and wives, the total of defensive and offensive strategies constitutes the vast majority of their responses (with husbands being 75.3% and wives being 90.7%), so we can mainly compare the distributions of these two types when measuring their marital power relationship.

As offensive strategies are more face-threatening than defensive ones, as is assumed in Section 5.2, working wives' higher frequency in using offensive ones than husbands' (52.7% vs. 22.2%) and lower frequency in using defensive ones than husbands' (38.0% vs. 53.1%) (on the condition that the criticisms to which they respond are of similar distributional patterns, as is clear in the analysis of **Table 5**) manifest that wives are hierarchically superior to husbands in marital relationship. In terms of acceptance, working wives accept less spousal criticisms than working husbands (5.3% vs. 7.4%). This adds some more evidence to wives' higher power position in conjugal relations. Concerning the avoidance of criticisms, it seems that husbands are more inclined to ignore spousal criticisms than wives (17.3% vs. 4.0%), which, to some extent, can be regarded as an indicator that working husbands are more inclined to avoid getting into conjugal antagonism.

In addition to the gender differences in the general distributions of working couples' responsive strategies, we also examine their differences in responding to each individual type of criticisms. Their responses to implicit type of criticisms, explicit type and severe type are respectively shown in **Table 7**, **Table 8** and **Table 9**.

Table 7 shows that when responding to implicit criticism, working husband resort more to defensive strategies (67.6%) than to offensive ones (13.5%), while working wives are just the reverse (44.5% offensive vs. 37.0% defensive). Working wives display a higher frequency of accepting implicit criticisms (14.8%) than husbands (2.7%), while working husbands are more likely to avoid them (16.2%) than wives (3.7%).

Working couples' responses to explicit criticisms (**Table 8**) demonstrate a similar pattern to their responses to implicit ones, with the only difference lying in that explicit criticisms are more accepted by husbands (9.3%) than by wives (3.7%) (while implicit ones are more accepted by wives). To illustrate, when responding to explicit criticisms, husbands utilize more defensive strategies (49.5%) than offensive ones (23.7%), but wives use more offensive strategies (53.2%) than defensive ones (40.2%). Likewise, explicit criticisms are more frequently avoided by husbands (18.6%) than wives (3.8%).

Concerning their responses to severe criticisms, the pattern is exactly identical with their responses to explicit ones. Specifically speaking, while severe criticisms are more offensively responded to by wives (62.5%), they are more frequently accepted (7.1%), avoided (14.3%) and responded to defensively (50%) by husbands.

Table 7. The comparison between husbands' and wives' responses to implicit criticisms.

	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Husbands	1 (2.7%)	25 (67.6%)	5 (13.5%)	6 (16.2%)	37 (100%)
Wives	4 (14.8%)	10 (37.0%)	12 (44.5%)	1 (3.7%)	27 (100%)

Table 8. The comparison between husbands' and wives' responses to explicit criticisms.

	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Husbands	9 (9.3%)	47 (49.5%)	23 (23.7%)	18 (18.6%)	97 (100%)
Wives	4 (3.7%)	43 (40.2%)	57 (53.2%)	3 (3.8%)	107 (100%)

Table 9. The comparison between husbands' and wives' responses to severe criticisms.

	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Husbands	2 (7.1%)	14 (50%)	8 (28.6%)	4 (14.3%)	28 (100%)
Wives	0 (0%)	4 (25.0%)	10 (62.5%)	2 (12.5)	16 (100%)

In addition, an intra-comparison of husbands' responses to three different types of criticisms (**Table 10**) reveals that the more face-threatening their wife's criticisms, the more frequently they resort to offensive responsive strategies (13.5% to implicit type, 23.7% to explicit type while 28.6% to severe type), and the less frequently they employ defensive responses (67.6% to implicit type, while 49.5% to explicit type and 50% to severe type). This leads us to conclude that the more face-threatening their wife's criticisms, the more face-threatening their responses.

This regularity is also found in wives' responses to their husband's criticisms (**Table 11**). Likewise, the more face-threatening their husband's criticisms are, the more they resort to offensive type of responses (44.5% to implicit type, 53.2% to explicit type while 62.5% to severe type) and the less to defensive type (37.0% to implicit type, 40.2% to explicit type while 25.0% to severe type). Besides, it is also clear that wives' acceptance of spousal criticisms decreases as their face-threatening level increases (14.8% to implicit type, 3.7% to explicit type while 0% to severe type), which means that working wives are more inclined to accept criticisms with lower face-threatening intensity.

To sum up, no matter in responding to implicit criticisms, explicit ones or severe ones, defensive strategies are more frequently used by husbands while offensive ones by wives. While implicit criticisms are more likely to be accepted by wives, explicit and severe ones are more likely to be accepted by husbands. All three types of criticisms are more often avoided by husbands than by wives. In addition, for both husbands and wives, the more face-threatening the criticism is, the more face-threatening their response is. From these results, it can be concluded that working wives manifest more marital power than husbands in the aspect of responding to spousal criticisms and also that working husbands are more inclined (than wives) to avoid possible involvement into conjugal confrontation.

Table 10. Husbands' responses to three different types of criticisms.

Husbands	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Implicit type	1 (2.7%)	25 (67.6%)	5 (13.5%)	6 (16.2%)	37 (100%)
Explicit type	9 (9.3%)	47 (49.5%)	23 (23.7%)	18 (18.6%)	97 (100%)
Severe type	2 (7.1%)	14 (50%)	8 (28.6%)	4 (14.3%)	28 (100%)

Table 11. Wives' responses to three different types of criticisms.

Wives	Acceptance	Defensive type	Offensive type	Avoidance	Total
Implicit type	4 (14.8%)	10 (37.0%)	12 (44.5%)	1 (3.7%)	27 (100%)
Explicit type	4 (3.7%)	43 (40.2%)	57 (53.2%)	3 (3.8%)	107 (100%)
Severe type	0 (0%)	4 (25.0%)	10 (62.5%)	2 (12.5%)	16 (100%)

6. Concluding Remarks

This study measures Chinese working couples' power relationship from the dimension of their use of face-threatening utterances to each other in daily verbal communication. It concludes that while they display no significant power differences in making criticisms, working wives demonstrate more power than working husbands in responding to the criticisms from their spouse. Overall, working wives' power position is almost the same or even higher than that of working husbands in conjugal relationship. This conclusion mirrors the findings from other research fields that women's marital power has been generally enhanced in the past years. In addition, the finding that working husbands are more inclined to avoid their wife's criticisms and thus the involvement into marital confrontation validates traditional Chinese stereotypes and expectations on husbands that they should be more generous and tolerant than their wife.

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