

A CHINESE AMERICAN WAY OF SPEAKING: THE PERSUASIVE FUNCTION

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the persuasive strategies used by Chinese immigrant parents toward their adult children regarding marriage and caring for the elderly. Four primary categories of persuasive strategies were found: Indirect Linguistic strategies, Intermediary, Unspoken Action, and Direct Communication. It was also found that Chinese immigrant parents will have a cultural preference to use Indirect persuasive strategies first. However, if the desired effect is not reached through indirectness, then the parent will use the Direct Communication strategy to reach the desired goal.

Introduction

Interactants' use of language on one hand is a creative and inventive mechanism to influence the thoughts, feelings, or actions of another. This influence has been referred to in various ways in the literature as the conative, persuasive, or rhetorical function of language (Jakobson, 1960). On the other hand, it is assumed that how language is creatively and inventively mastered to persuade another is subject to cultural influences.

Harmony is one primary cultural value that influences the Chinese to strive to maintain in their daily social interactions. For the Chinese, communications with one another is to develop and maintain harmonious relationships in a continuously dynamic process of mutual dependency among interactants (Chen, 1997). Therefore, establishing conflict free relationships is the ultimate goal for Chinese in interpersonal interactions (Chen & Chung, 1994).

To reach a state of harmony in human interaction and to avoid confrontation and conflict, the Chinese strive to establish kuan-hsi (relational connection) and mientze (giving face) to others (Chen, 1997). Kuan-hsi is defined as "the manner in

which the Chinese implies a special connection between people, a connection which brings along with it interactants' special rights and obligations, resulting from including the interactants as ingroup members" (Chang & Holt, 1991, p. 256). through a network of particularistic relationships (e.g. family, extended family, friends, boss, co-workers, etc.) communicate appropriately according to rules and patterns in order to avoid conflict (Chen & Chung, 1994; Hwang, 1988; Jacobs, 1978). Particularistic relationships have been noted to be potentially powerful in persuasion, influence and control, and its employment can help avoid conflicts and to resolve conflicts (Chang & Holt, 1991; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987).

The establishment of "face" is understood in two dimensions: *mientze* and *lian*. *Mientze* refers to a person's performance in terms of prestige and having a good reputation. *Lian* is related to one's moral conduct (Hwang, 1997). In contrast, "losing face or *mientze*" means that a person loses prestige, has been insulted, or is made to feel embarrassed before a group (Yang, 1945). A person's public image of face is accorded by others (Chang & Holt, 1994a; Hwang, 1997; Yang, 1945).

As an important goal in interaction, harmony, invites Chinese interactants to perform an indirect style of persuasive communication for its success and prevention of conflict. Indirect communication also facilitates the prevention of embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among interactants. Thus, leaving the relationship and the face of each interactant intact (Yum, 1988). Moreover, Chinese indirect communications has been associated with the Confucian principle of harmony (Ma, 1996; Yum, 1988).

The scant studies on types of persuasive modes in mainstream American culture have been inconsistent. White and Roufail (1989) found that both American women and men reported direct strategies as first preference and indirect strategies as a last resort in persuasion. Steil and Hillman (1993), however, reported that regardless of ethnicity and sex (eg. Caucasian American, Korean, Japanese), they found that direct influence strategies were first preference and indirect persuasive strategies were least preferred. The Steil and Hillman (1993) study contradicts a number of research that indicate that there is a major difference between East Asian cultures and North American cultures to have an indirect and direct style of communication, respectively (Chen, 1997; Fong, 1998; Hsu, 1981; Ma, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988; Yum, 1988). Although both modes of communication are practiced in both cultures, the indirect style is normative and often intentional in East Asia, whereas the direct style is pervasive in North America (Yum, 1988).

People who use the direct communication style have a propensity to persuade others to accept their perspective by directly presenting their opinions (Hall, 1975). Moreover, people with a direct communication style, as opposed to the indirect communication style, have more of a tendency to have a confrontational style that engages and manages conflicts. On the contrary, people who communicate

indirectly, tend to be more silent and use ambiguous language in their social interactions (Chen, 1997).

With this conceptual foundation, the purpose of this study is to investigate what persuasive strategies are used by Chinese immigrant parents in America toward their children, and if these persuasive strategies characterize an indirect mode of communications in order to avoid potential conflict and to maintain interpersonal harmony. The findings in this study will add to the sparing research on Chinese persuasive communication strategies used in interpersonal and family contexts. These findings may provide further insights on Chinese conflict prevention and resolution, especially since it differs in approach from mainstream America.

A synopsis of the film will help contextualize the findings of this study in regards to the persuasive strategies and relevant cultural values. *Dim Sum* is about a middle-class Chinese American family in contemporary San Francisco in which a Chinese immigrant widowed mother uses a variety of persuasive strategies to communicate to her adult daughter, Geraldine, to marry so that she can fulfill her responsibility as a mother before she dies as predicted by a fortuneteller.

Geraldine struggles with a dilemma involving two competing Chinese cultural values: filial piety and marrying. Filial piety is referred to as a cardinal virtue of the Chinese culture in which it is an act(s) of repayment of the debt that children owe to their parents (Yang, 1957; Hsu, 1971; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987). According to Hwang (1987), parents have a responsibility in raising their children, and children have the filial piety responsibility to reciprocate by taking care of their parents in their elder years. Chinese parents as the mercy-givers do not normatively ask for a return because their children as mercy-takers are culturally obligated to return their care. A common saying is known in the Chinese culture, "If you help others, don't ask for return; if you get help from others, don't forget to return" (King, 1989, p. 90 cited in Chang & Holt, 1994b, p. 357).

From the cultural value of parents being mercy-givers toward their children and not asking for reciprocation, it would seem reasonable that parents would encourage filial piety from their children through indirect persuasive messages, rather than direct persuasive messages. Indirectly reminding others of their obligations may seem to be an effective way of manipulating human emotional debt (Chang & Holt, 1994b).

Method

We proceeded in six steps. First, we viewed the film and used the Hymes (1962) ethnography of communication framework to describe the scenes, participants, and dialogue. Of particular interest to us was that a central motif in the film is the apparent tension expressed by the daughter regarding her mother's desires that she, the daughter, marry, and on the other hand, Geraldine having the sense of duty to care for her elderly parent. Her mother appeared to want Geraldine

to marry so that she, the mother, can fulfill her responsibility as a mother before she dies. How the mother and other characters attempted to influence Geraldine's feelings and actions toward her mother became the object of interest to us.

Second, in order to have insight into the native's point of view, the film was shown to two Chinese American participants who were able to identify familiar scenes in the film that were similar to their communications with their family. Then we viewed the film again and analyzed the scenes that were identified by the participants and by us. We came up with nine communication scenes which were the particular stimuli for participants to talk about their family communications. We believed the persuasive function was being performed, i.e., in which one or more persons attempted to influence Geraldine's thoughts or actions.

Fourth, eight participants were asked to view the entire film and were interviewed, initially, as to their interpretations of the actions portrayed in the film. After eliciting general reactions to the film, we focused on interviewees' comments about (a) persuasive communication in the film and (b) the particular scenes that were selected as portraying events in which the persuasive function was performed. Participants were also asked, in general and in relation to specific persuasive actions, whether Dim Sum's portrayals matched their own personal experiences of Chinese American family life. After viewing the film, two participants voluntarily commented that it was like a documentary film because of it was realistic to their life experiences. Importantly, all the participants were able to identify familiar scenes and provide examples of similar experiences from their own lives as valid evidence that the persuasive communication scenes in the film were meaningful practiced in their Chinese American daily lives.

Fifth, having completed interviews of the participants, a preliminary formulation was made from the *Dim Sum* scenes, the participants' responses to the scenes, and participants' unprompted reports of persuasive communication in their own Chinese American families that demonstrated a cultural pattern. This analysis yielded a way of speaking which consists of four different but mutually reinforcing act sequences for performing the persuasive function. These were labelled, by us, as Indirect Linguistic Strategies, Communication through Intermediaries, Indirect Unspoken Action, and Direct Communication.

Finally, follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant in order to assess whether each aspect of the way of speaking as formulated was judged to be recognizable by participants as a significant aspect of their experience of growing up in a Chinese American family. These follow-up interviews helped to refine, develop, and test the way of speaking which we had formulated.

Participants

Eight Chinese American¹ participants were each interviewed a minimum of three hours over two separate meetings. Among the eight were four female

university students ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-two years and four male university students with an age range of twenty-seven to thirty-six years. All are fluent speakers of English and all have a listening and/or speaking competence of Cantonese. Their parents were born and raised in Hong Kong or Mainland China and immigrated to the United States. Seven of the eight participants were born in Asia and one participant is American-born. Four of the participants have lived in America for more than three-fourths of their lives and three participants have lived in the U.S. almost half of their lives. The most important common factor of these immigrants and first generation Chinese American participants is that they are exposed to the cultural way of communication of their immigrant parents, relatives, and extended family.

The present ethnography explored the persuasive communication function in the family and interpersonal context, with particular reference to such themes as marriage, caring for senior parents, death and proper conduct. Four different persuasive strategies were identified.

Indirect Linguistic Strategies

Four indirect linguistic strategies were observed which fall under the conative function. These include third party, questions, comparisons, and implied statements. In each of these, a speaker produces a linguistic message which has a conative intent but which does not directly express the speaker's goal. These Indirect Linguistic Strategies are used by parents and by an Intermediary. Relatives, extended family, and siblings can act as intermediaries.

Third Party

In the Third Party Strategy, one person (e.g. a parent) directs a comment (e.g. advice) to a second person, in earshot of a third person (e.g. the parent's child). The parent intends the comment to be heard by his or her child.

In the following scene from *Dim Sum*, the young woman Geraldine is in the background, overhearing her friend Julia converse with Geraldine's mother. Italicized comments include the use of the strategy we are identifying in a given passage.

Geraldine's Mother:	How is your mother? Is she better?
Julia:	Her blood, you know. She's old. Supposedly there's no problem.
Geraldine's Mother:	You should go home to Hong Kong and visit her more often. It makes parents feel better.
Julia:	Oh. (agreeing) (pause) We have to go.

All participants made similar interpretations of this scene, that in effect Geraldine's mother was "hitting two birds with one stone." As one participant said, Geraldine's mom was telling Julia that she should see her mom more often because her mom is sick. She's telling Julia, but actually she is telling Geraldine who is behind her. Even though mom didn't turn around, she knew Geraldine was listening. You know it's very important that elderly get attention from their children. Mom doesn't want to be left alone in her old age.

In reference to another scene in *Dim Sum*, a participant reported that when they were talking in the garden, Auntie Mary said to the mother, "the younger kids today, they are so wild and they have no respect . . ." Our participant said, "I can also listen to the same conversation between my Mom and Aunt. They always talk about the kids, us in how we are so different, and that we have no respect. It's so identical to so much conversations that I've heard in my own life."

All of our participants reported that their parents employ the Third Party Strategy by expressing their wants, dissatisfaction, or advice in a particularistic relationship such as a relative, extended family member, or an ingroup friend who can then convey indirectly a message to the adult child. The persuasive communications in the particularistic relationship between the parent and an ingroup member is made possible through *Kuan-Hsi* (relational connector). As the third party, the ingroup member is used by the parent to indirectly send a persuasive message in a face-saving approach to one's child who overhears the conversation.

In the scene as reported above, Geraldine's mother communicated her message to Geraldine by inquiring about Julia's mother and providing advice to Julia. As one participant said in a statement echoed by others "Oh the phone they talk to their relatives, and talk about the kids' similarities and what they are doing. They talk loud enough in the background so you can hear it. They convey a message of, get your career and get marry."

Questions

Questions are widely considered to be a linguistic device which can be used not only for eliciting information but also for regulating the form and substance of a speech episode. Several of our participants volunteered the information that, in their families, the question form is prominently used for conative ends. The following participant comments illustrate this strategy,

We would be washing dishes, something together. She (mom) would come up and ask me "How old are you this year?" I would come home on the weekends and then she (mom) would ask me, "Did you meet anybody at school?" I just shrugged it off (laughs). Then she drops it. That's a pretty subtle hint. "You want to be like Uncle X in a few years?" I just smiled. My uncle lives a pretty good life. He gets to do a lot of things. He's an electrical engineer. He's single and 60. He got his Ph.D. I get compared to him. They are trying to say, "You want to be a

bachelor? You want to be unmarried?" They are saying, You should get married, and not be like Uncle X.

The utterances above and many others we elicited refer indirectly to the participants' dating and marriage situation. The recipients of the questions report that they understood these questions to be persuasive messages directed to them, with the intent being to persuade them to increase their efforts to find a suitable marriage partner.

Comparisons

Chinese immigrant parents employ a strategic method which involves comparing their sons and daughters to one another or comparing their children to other families' children. A participant reported that parents use a comparison strategy "to tell you that you should do something more. But also to stay within the norm." Another participant reported that parents "don't just come out and compare- 'You're not doing that and they are doing that' -- but they keep on mentioning about other people and what they are doing." Another participant said that she feels that her parents are "trying to shame me into motivation. I think that is similar with other Chinese families, because I've talked a lot with my other friends. And there's a lot of comparison, to try to get your kid to work harder and better." Still another participant said, "It's done out of love, also because they know what's best for you, success stories of others, they want that for you. Glory and honor for the family is secondary, the main objective is to have a good job and a good life. Provide opportunities for me with a college degree, get a good job, live a fairly comfortable life versus struggling and laboring."

The following are instances of comparison as reported by the participants,

1. They keep on mentioning about other people. My parents talked to me about a cruise. *"Mrs. Ma came to visit us, she's retired. It's so wonderful that they travel all around the world. Look at my aunt's children, four or five Thanksgiving dinners, so every night they would go to the children's house and have Thanksgiving dinner. We only had one."*
2. They [parents] start talking about your own faults as a person and then they'll bring up someone's child who's really perfect or bring up your sisters or your brothers and say, *"they never did this, I never had any trouble with Elizabeth."*

In the Comparison Strategy, the speaker expresses an opinion or desire by implying a standard which is met by other people who are successful or which is not met by someone who is disapproved. For example, in the two instances quoted above, participants were presented an ideal person or situation -- e.g. Mrs. Ma who is traveling, an aunt who had four or five Thanksgiving feasts with her married

children, or Elizabeth who does not cause problems. In other reported instances, a parent pointed out or criticized someone's adult children who neglected their parent. Thus, the parents' use of such comparisons expresses indirectly a persuasive message to their own children. A study found that Chinese pay greater attention to social comparison information and others status characteristics than European Americans (Gudykunst, Gao, & Franklyn-Stokes, 1996).

Implied Statements

In the Implied Statement Strategy, the parent makes a comment that is either positive or negative in order to elicit a response from the adult child, that is, in order to gain information or to elicit a verbalized commitment from the adult child. Participants provided the following examples that they have experienced:

1. She (mom) does pressure me about marriage or dating. She'll say something if she doesn't like [boyfriend X], she would say all these good things about [another date Z]. *'Date Z is so handsome. He's going to be this model one of these days. He likes you so much.'*
2. I got an invitation to a wedding somewhere and she [mom] said, 'Gee pretty soon you're going to send them one. They'll be responding to your card.' [The participant replied], Yea, I'll probably send them one, hopefully they won't move by then.
3. *"When I get old and can't walk anymore, nobody would want to take care of me."*
4. *"Everyone is going to move out and I'll be here all by myself. Nobody will come and see me and won't take care of me."*

The first two instances are worded in a positive manner. The parent asked for information and encouraged the child to move in the direction of dating or marriage. The third and fourth instances involve negative statements that invite the adult child to respond by negating the parent's implied statement. By disagreeing openly with a statement like: "When you move out, you won't even invite us to your wedding dinner" or "When I get old and can't walk anymore, nobody would want to take care of me," a child states a commitment to the parents. These implied statements suggest that parents use this strategy in order to receive reassurance that their children will fulfill their family obligations of filial piety and marriage. A participant reported, "In the Chinese culture, when you want something you don't have direct confrontation like 'Why aren't you getting married?' or 'You take care of

me.' Parents do not feel it is appropriate to ask directly for their children to care for them in their senior years."

The mentioned indirect linguistic strategies (e.g. third party, questions, comparisons) have varying degrees of implications in which the persuader is implying a particular meaning that is understood by the persuadee. However, the persuader's use of an implied statement strategy differs from the mentioned indirect linguistic strategies, in the respect, that the intent is to elicit a response of commitment from the persuadee.

Communication through Intermediaries

Communication through an intermediary is established through *kuan-hsi* which involves an ingroup member such as a relative, sibling, or close friend conveying to the adult child a message which expresses the parents' wishes or desires. In Chang and Holt's study (1991), they found that in the Chinese culture, "going through another" (e.g. third party and intermediaries) to establish *kuan-hsi* is seen as a useful strategy to achieve personal goals. Intermediaries are also widely employed for social relational construction in order to overcome difficulties in relationship development (King & Bond, 1985).

Intermediaries are associated with either a conflict or a potential conflict (Ma, 1991). From the *Dim Sum* scenes displayed below and participants' explanations, this study found that intermediaries are a useful means for conflict prevention. Intermediaries fulfill an essential role of communicating messages from one person to another to create a persuasive desired effect.

However, as the film evolves, both Geraldine and her mother's opposing desires intensify. In one scene, the uncle fulfills the role as intermediary between Geraldine and her mom by relaying persuasive messages concerning marriage. In another scene, the uncle talks with the mother to help resolve the tension with Geraldine and her dilemma. Young (1972) identified four functions in which an intermediary may perform any or a combination of the following: (a) S/he transmit additional information to the parties in conflict, (b) S/he can reduce the impact of tactical rigidities or suggest plans for decommitment of mutually incompatible positions for the parties in conflict, (c) S/he can serve as an impartial mediator in handling any agreement made between the opposing parties, and (d) S/he can make opposing parties reconceptualize underlying features of their relationship.

In each of the four *Dim Sum* scenes which we selected to focus attention, there was an instance of Geraldine's aunt, uncle, or extended family member making direct statements, asking questions designed to make a point, making comparisons, or making hints. The parent may or may not be present during the event.

For example, in *Dim Sum*, Auntie Mary, an extended family member, confronted Geraldine with questions and direct statements indicating Geraldine's

mother's desires, while the mother silently observed the interaction. Those present are celebrating, with a special cake, that Geraldine's mother has just become a U.S. citizen.

Extended family member: Geraldine, when we eat your cake?
 Geraldine: Don't you like this cake?
 Auntie Mary: No, Geraldine. We want your wedding cake.
 Geraldine's Mother: [looks and smiles at Geraldine]

In a subsequent episode, Auntie Mary made implied statements and comparisons directed to Geraldine, while the mother sat quietly during this exchange.

Auntie Mary: Geraldine, I just told your mother that Mimi and her boyfriend have decided to get married right after the New Year. It's going to be the leap year, next year. It's a good time for marriages. It's the best.
 Geraldine: Well that's good. So what is it now. Twelve down and three to go?
 Auntie Mary: I have six married children out of my house. And that's enough. I have been a good mother. They're going to move to New York.

Immediately following the preceding scene, Geraldine walked Auntie Mary home. Auntie Mary made implied statements and compared herself to Geraldine's mother. This was another persuasive message that transmits the mother's unspoken desire to be cared for in her elderly years.

The final episode of Intermediary communication reported here involves a small family gathering eating dim sum (brunch delicacies), with an Uncle, Geraldine, her boyfriend, and the mother, who listened attentively to the conversation. The Uncle made implied statements and direct questions to create a persuasive effect.

Uncle: Here's a little bit of dim sum. And here's a little bit of heart for the both of you. You get the hint?
 Geraldine: Mmhh. [smiles]
 Uncle: Oh, you know what the name of this dim sum is? Ling Yung bao. Ling san qui zhi. You know what that means? Several precious sons.
 Richard: Several. [smiles]
 Geraldine: Being subtle, ha Mom?

- Mom: [looks and smiles]
 Uncle: You're lucky that you have me here to decode for you. Or otherwise you won't get the message. So when are you guys going to get married?
 Geraldine: When are you going to get married?

In each of these episodes, the intermediary expresses a persuasive message that invites Geraldine to think about marriage and to take care of her mother. One of our participants said, as reflected in this statement that an intermediary understands the role.

We know what your parents want, so we'll interpret for you and we'll tell you. Maybe your parents don't tell you, but the role of the aunt and uncle or extended family or sibling is, this is what your mom and dad wants you to do. In the Chinese family a lot of things are assumed, like being an intermediary. A lot of Chinese families think that things are assumed, therefore they need that translator for the family so to interpret what the mom is saying. Geraldine's mother was present but remained silent in three of the four

Dim Sum scenes we have reported here. In each of these scenes the mother actively observed the situation and provided nonverbal responses like smiling, eye contact, and attentiveness. In each of these scenes, although she is silent, the mother allowed others to convey her message. A participant reported that, "the mother has talked to her friends, and when her friends are together, she talks about it so much, and the ladies know. She probably said something like, 'It would be nice if there was someone else that would tell her this.'"

In these scenes, the intermediaries used direct questions and direct statements. Based on these scenes and our informants' validation, we conclude that that intermediaries can express directness on personal matters because they are only the "in-betweeners" who are not expressing their own wants, but another's desires. Although the intermediary may choose to speak in a direct communication mode, the parent has chosen to communicate indirectly through the help of an intermediary. In this way, *mientze* or "giving face" are maintain for all three parties involved in the transaction. In reciprocal fashion, the receiver of these direct questions and statements is entitled to be direct or blunt in reply toward the intermediary, since it is not the intermediary's desires expressed.

The following instance is a representative participant report of the use of the intermediary strategy. All the time at social functions, my relatives would say things similar to what they did to Geraldine. They would ask me "*When are we going to drink your wine? When will we have our dinner? The wedding dinner. The wedding banquet.*" They would like to attend my wedding banquet. [The informant responded to his relatives' questions by saying] "I'm too poor to get

marry." They said, "You don't need money to get married. Poor people always get marry." My mom is over there smiling.

This instance (and several others which we elicited shows the various intermediaries, such as an aunt, uncle, sister, relative, or friend, who have used such conative strategies as direct questions, indirect questions, direct statements, and implied statements. Ma (1992) suggests that there is a tendency to use more intermediaries in East Asian cultures than in North American cultures because East Asians are considered more indirect or implicit in their communications. Moreover, Ma (1992) explained that intermediaries eliminate face-to-face confrontation. Thus, reducing the risk of mutual attack and losing face; and upholding the principle of social harmony and face maintenance. Chen (1997) also states that social actors avoid showing aggressive behaviors and use indirect communications to be courteous before forceful strategies are used.

Unspoken Action Strategy

In the Unspoken Action strategy no verbal message is conveyed from one interlocutor to another. Instead, the emphasis is on a particular nonverbal act which is interpreted as meaningful to the recipients of the message.

Participants identified four Unspoken Action scenes in *Dim Sum*. In one, Geraldine noticed her mother hanging up both white and dark gowns outside to air them out. The white gown is Geraldine's wedding gown and the dark gown is the mother's funeral dress. It was revealed in the film that a fortuneteller had told the mother that she would die at sixty-two years of age (she was sixty-one years at the time). All the participants interpreted the mother to be preparing for her death. A participant said the mother's action was a way to say, "I'm going to be dying, so get married." Another participant reported that "my grandmother told me that she would pick out certain gowns to wear when she dies. She mentioned the one with whatever color. She has already put them aside before she died. When she wasn't feeling well, she used to tell me."

A variation of this strategy is revealed in participants' reactions to a *Dim Sum* scene in which the characters talk about the death of a young woman's mother. The young woman is Geraldine's friend, Julia, who had just returned from Hong Kong, where she had visited her ailing mother.

Julia:	Turned out to be more of a family reunion. You know, my brother flew back from Canada. My sister came back from Paris. We hadn't seen each other for years. It was nice. We sat around. And we talked. We played cards and ate.
Geraldine:	How fun.

Julia: Then we figured our mother wasn't going to die after all.
 So we left.

Arriving home, Julia received a letter informing her of her mother's death. Geraldine was with Julia, who said tearfully:

My mother died. She should have died when we were there. She was stubborn. She always did as she pleased. Now that she's dead. She was alone when she died.

Seven of the eight participants made a similar interpretation of Julia's grief and her mother's death. The death of Julia's mother conveyed the idea, as a participant said, "you moved out in the first place. Yes, I pushed you to come see me, but it's too little and too late." Another participant added, "Julia's mom died to induce guilt in the kids and show disapproval that the kids were not good kids." Another participant reported, "I'm sure the mother wants her kids to feel guilty because all these years they have been having their own life and forgetting about their mother."

This strategy is also revealed in a *Dim Sum* scene which occurs after Geraldine's long-time boyfriend comes for a weekend visit and returns home. When Geraldine arrived home after taking her boyfriend to the airport, the following scene occurred

Geraldine: Hi Mom.
Mom: (Silence, no eye contact, walks past Geraldine)
Geraldine: Was a nice weekend wasn't it?
Mom: (Silence, no eye contact, continues walking)

Although participants construed the mother's silence as revealing that she was "very upset and showing disapproval," interpretations of the meaning of her unspoken action varied. Three participants felt that the mother was very upset at Geraldine because, "they didn't talk about getting married. A nice weekend was a waste of time. See, you wasted your opportunity again and you guys got together and didn't talk about a wedding." Another participant said, "she was expecting Richard to propose to Geraldine." Also, one other participant reported that, "the mother invested a great deal by getting up early to work in the yard. You see there is plenty of time and opportunity to talk and they didn't use it." Three other participants believed that the mother was showing disapproval about Geraldine having premarital sex. The other two participants saw both possibilities.

Another Unspoken Action in the film concerns Geraldine's mother's trip to the hospital. A participant described the scene, "(mom ends up in the hospital and

you're not sure why she's in the hospital, why she got out, then the daughter came back (home to live)." Six of the eight participants interpreted the mother entering the hospital as a "drastic" way to "create guilt in Geraldine to immediately come home to care for her mom." The other participants said the scene was confusing and that it required discussion to decipher its meaning.

Although participants had not experienced a situation equivalent in degree to Julia's situation or to Geraldine's mother being in the hospital, they described events that exemplified the Unspoken Action Strategy. One such report is the following,

Our family rarely talks. The way we communicate is by action, other than verbally. My mother was always helping my grandmother. She always goes out of her way to do things. Like, in the restaurant, we would be closed on Mondays. We would take food to my grandmother, take her shopping or take her out to dinner.

All participants reported that the parent's use of the Unspoken Action Strategy produced a persuasive effect in which the child either felt a compunction to act, and/or physically enacted what the parent desired.

Direct Communication

In a Direct Communication strategy, the parent utters a direct statement to one's own adult child, expressing one's desire as to what the child should do. A participant reported, "I think when it is important enough, they use direct communication."

In the following scene, Geraldine's mother told her daughter what she should do in order to fulfill the mother's wants.

Mom: Geraldine. You should get marry with Richard.
 Geraldine: How come? I'm not ready yet.
 Mom: Well, you've been seeing each other for a while.
 And you're at that age that you should. You have to help me put my mind to ease. So I'll know that my responsibility is over with you.
 Geraldine: It's really hard. I don't know who's going to take care of you. I don't want you to be alone. Kevin is married and has his own family. And you know Amy. I don't know about Amy.
 Mom: I'll be lonely in the beginning. But now your life comes first.

A participant said about this episode "Mom has given up being subtle. Just came back from paying respects to her husband, this brought her closer to the idea of death. I'm just going to tell her and be direct."

Participants volunteered their own reports of their parents employing the Direct Communication strategy to them, for example, "*How old are you this year? You're getting pretty old. I think it's about time you start a family*" and "*You should look for another person, he doesn't even give you an answer of "yes" or "no."*"

All participants reported that the Direct Communication Strategy is employed only after all the other strategies (e.g. Indirect Communications, Intermediary, and Unspoken Action) have been attempted by Chinese immigrant parents and time have elapsed in which no change in behavior has occurred to the parent's satisfaction. If conflict occurs, harmony is still the goal for reducing the tension by searching for any possible kuan-hsi or face-saving strategies between the two parties (Chen, 1997).

Discussion

Our analysis to this point has revealed several aspects of a Chinese American way of speaking, with reference to persuasive communication. The analysis has been generated from an interpretation of scenes in the film *Dim Sum*, from participants comments about the film, and from statements which participants volunteered about persuasive communication in their own families. We have, based on these data, formulated four strategies which, at least in part, comprise a Chinese-American way of speaking in the context of persuasive communication from parents (or their surrogates) to their adult children. Although our data do not permit us to claim that our formulation of the way of speaking is exhaustive, we can claim the following each of the strategies we identified is employed in the film, our participants verified that these strategies are recognizable to them as a significant aspect of Chinese American life, and most of our participants reported significant personal experience of each of these strategies in their own family life.

Are these four persuasive strategies--indirect communication, the use of an intermediary, unspoken action, and direct communication-- simply a series of four unrelated strategies or do they fit together somehow in a culture pattern? In what follows we formulate such a thematic pattern.

Three of the strategies, it will be noted, can be classified as relatively indirect. Participants emphasized to us that the fourth strategy, direct communication, is typically used when the others have failed to have the desired effect. With regard to this emphasis on indirection in conative communication, we turned to the filmmaker for an insight into the pattern, specifically to the title of the film, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*, and to an interpretation of the theme suggested therein. We also asked our consultants to comment on the overall meaning of these strategies, with special reference to the film's title. "Dim" is a Chinese term which has been glossed in English as a speck, a dot, or a spot. "Sum" is a Chinese term

glossed variously as heart, mind intention (Liu, 1978; Matthews, 1979); will, sense, desire, the center (Liu, 1978); and the moral nature of the affections (Matthews, 1979). Taken together, in the form "dim sum," there is the sense, as the film's subtitle formulates it, of "a little bit of heart," with "heart" here encompassing will, desire, intention, and so forth.

Participants gave voice to the notion of "dim sum," as formulated above, by referring not only to the generalized theme but also by making reference to the use of "dim sum" to refer to a Chinese brunch. The participant said:

The server comes around with the cart and you pick out what you want. Dim sum could be a choice of the heart. Geraldine was in great difficulty in picking what she wanted, what desired her with respect to her life. The word, dim, is little dot. The action verb is dim, pick. You're picking a little heart (*sum*), pieces of things, a little one. It's duo. It could either mean, dim choosing of the heart or dim like a little dot which means a piece of the heart.

Seven of the eight participants agreed with the following statement by a participant that the theme "dim sum" refers to a kind of caring, a caring in the present study which is expressed in a way of speaking. For example:

I think the underlying theme is to care for one another, to have a little bit of heart for the family members. Geraldine at first did not want to marry, but decided to give a little bit of her heart to her mom by marrying. Also, mom decided to give a little bit of heart to Geraldine by accepting the new [fortuneteller's] interpretation and not pushing her to marry.

Chinese relationships, whether they be social, romantic, familial, or marital relationships, involves people who mutually help and care for one another which establishes good feelings, harmony, and love between them. Rather than expressing love in words, the Chinese express their love through actions of caring and helping another which also affirms and symbolizes relationships (Potter, 1988). In addition to the theme of caring, "dim sum" also suggests a kind of measuring out of concessions or agreements. As a participant suggested:

It's like a little bit of heart. It's like you want to manipulate someone by giving someone a little bit of information, a little bit of heart and you just don't open up all the way, completely. You show a little bit of yourself, a little bit more, and you show a little bit more.

Thus, the strategies we have formulated here can be seen to comprise a culture pattern in conative communication. This pattern prioritizes indirect communication designed to influence the heart or will of another through face-saving persuasive strategies in order to maintain harmony. It reveals a culturally way to manifest caring for another in an essentially strategic way. Although our formulation of this way of speaking is not proposed as exhaustive, definitive, or culturally unique-- the present data, and the interpretations advanced here, provide a useful starting point for describing and understanding it.

Further research on the persuasive function of various ethnic groups will enable a cross-cultural analysis of the similarities and differences among them. This in turn will enable researchers of this enterprise to determine the shared commonalities, and to further investigate and resolve areas of intercultural communication conflicts between speech communities that are culturally distinctive from one another.

¹Informants varied in usage and meanings of ethnic identity terms such as Chinese and Chinese American. In order to achieve some common ground of reference in this paper, "Chinese American" is used here to refer to Chinese people who were either born in America or are naturalized U.S. citizens, rather than an ethnic identity term representing one's self concept.

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