

## A Tentative Analysis of “Face” in the Chinese Request

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It is often observed that in the Chinese culture, a successful performance of asking for another’s favor usually can not be realized in a single talk exchange of one’s asking and the other’s granting or rejecting of the request. People prefer to steadily unravel and build up information before arriving at the important message, in which a deliberate maneuvering is made to satisfy each other’s wants of face and build up a close and harmonious relationship. This paper is, therefore, devoted to a tentative exploration in applying the Politeness Principle and “Face” (called *mianzi* in Chinese) phenomenon in analyzing the Chinese request. The research methodologies include the sample recording in combination with interview surveys. Clearly, cultural traits are embodied in the formation of this structuring. The Confucian-based notion of harmony is one of the factors, which emphasizes cooperation, prudence and the collective ideal (cf. Brick, 1990; Hsu, 1972). Politeness will therefore have to be studied not only as a dependent variable but as a product of different cultures and as a force in shaping human relationships.

It is interesting to compare and contrast Chinese and English understanding of politeness in requests because it is often observed that the Chinese way of raising a request, considered normal and polite by most Chinese native speakers, is quite different from that of the Anglo-Americans. The present paper is an attempt in exploring and examining politeness and “Face” (called *mianzi* in Chinese) phenomenon in the Chinese request. The paper will start by going over some of the important accounts and theories relevant to the present study before it goes onto the detailed analysis and discussions of the data collected.

### Politeness

“Politeness,” in its broad sense, contrasts with rudeness. It is best expressed as the practical application of good manners or etiquette. Politeness is “ubiquitous in language use” (Asher, et al., 1994, p. 3207) and important in communication. Human beings are not designed to live in isolation; rather, they are in essence “at once biological, psychological, and cultural/social beings” (Asher, et al., 1994, p. 3208) and need to interact constantly with other people. Politeness is one of the things people should bear in mind to ensure smooth and successful interactions.

### *“Politeness” in English and “Limao” in Chinese*

In English, “politeness” dates back to the fifteenth century; in the seventeenth century, a polite person was of “refined courteous manners” (c.f. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 1981, p. 689-693). Politeness was thus associated with the norms of social conduct extant in the upper classes, and this sense of the term has survived in collocations

such as “polite society.”

In Chinese, the lexical element *li* in *limao* (“polite appearance”<sup>1</sup>) underwent important semantic changes which reflect an historic sensitivity: in Confucius’s writings (551-479 BC), *li* referred to the slavery-based social hierarchy of the Zhou Dynasty, which Confucius advocated to be restored. The modern concept of *li* was first documented in the book *Li Ji* (attributed to Dai Sheng, ca. 200-100 BC), where *li* was equated with demonstration of self-denigration and respect for the other person, especially in vertical relationships (Gu, 1990).

### *Politeness Theories*

Robin Tolmach Lakoff, Geoffrey N. Leech, and Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson are generally recognized as pioneers who greatly contributed to politeness studies. The Politeness Principle addresses relational goals, serving primarily “to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff, 1989, p. 64). The most comprehensive proposal of a Politeness Principle was formulated by Leech. The global statement “Minimize the expression of impolite beliefs” is elaborated into six interpersonal maxims, as follows:

- Tact maxim: minimize cost to other. Maximize benefit to other.
  - Generosity maxim: minimize benefit to self. Maximize cost to self.
  - Approbation maxim: minimize dispraise of other. Maximize praise of other.
  - Modesty maxim: minimize praise of self. Maximize dispraise of self.
  - Agreement maxim: minimize disagreement between self and other.  
Maximize agreement between self and other.
  - Sympathy maxim: minimize antipathy between self and other.  
Maximize sympathy between self and other.
- (Leech, 1983, p. 81)

Based on Erving Goffman's concept of face, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson identified positive and negative politeness. Politeness consists of attempting to save face for another. Brown and Levinson began with the idea of “model persons,” rational agents who think strategically and are conscious of their language choices. This influenced Brown and Levinson when examining Goffman’s version of face, where they agreed that rational agents have both positive and negative face. Simply put, they believe that model persons want to maintain others’ face, but nevertheless are often forced to commit face threatening acts. Thus, politeness strategies are developed in order to formulate messages in order to save the hearer’s face when face threatening acts are inevitable or desired. This means that the speaker avoids embarrassing the listener or making him feel uncomfortable.

The most important tenet of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is that we change our language based on the hearer and thus our strategies for compliance - gaining change depending on the audience. In everyday life, we design messages that protect face and achieve other goals as well. Politeness is the expression of the speaker’s intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

*“Face” in English and “Mianzi” in Chinese*

In 1963, Erving Goffman published the article “On Face Work” where he first created the term “face.” He discusses face in reference to how people present themselves in social situations and that our entire reality is constructed through our social interactions. Brown and Levinson (1987) later expound face as “the kernel element in folk” (p. 62) and “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (p. 66). All competent adult members of a society have “face,” which can be seen as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for him or herself. “Face” is something that is emotionally invested and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to during interactions. Though “maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective” (Goffman, 1974, p. 323), preserving everyone’s face makes orderly and smooth communication possible. Brown and Levinson define “face” as a basic “want” of individuals, and analyze it into “negative face” (the want of self-determination, i.e. the want that one’s freedom of action should not be impeded by others) and “positive face” (the want of approval, i.e. the want that one’s own wants should also be desirable to others).

Goffman (1971) claims that “face” is constantly at risk (p. 138). Consequently, any kind of linguistic act which has a relational dimension is seen as inherently face-threatening, and needs to be counterbalanced by appropriate doses of politeness. Brown and Levinson distinguish a number of major politeness strategies, ranging from avoiding the face threatening act (FTA) altogether, to carrying it out in different guises. According to their research, off-record FTA acts are performed indirectly, due to their inherent ambiguity, and they have the greatest potential for negotiation. On-record performance of FTAs can be achieved without redressive action, or by adopting either or both of two kinds of redress: positive politeness, addressing the hearer’s positive face wants, or negative politeness, addressing the hearer’s negative face wants. Positive politeness strategies emphasize closeness between speaker and hearer by confirming or establishing the common ground, or by referring to desirable attributes in the hearer (hence the term “solidarity strategy,” Scollon & Scollon, 1983); negative politeness strategies suggest distance by accentuating the hearer’s right to territorial claims and freedom from imposition (referred to as “deference strategy,” Scollon & Scollon, 1983).

Face is also a concept of central importance in the Chinese culture because of its pervasive influence in interpersonal relations. Chinese face can be classified into two types, “lian” and “mianzi.” “Lian” represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego’s moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community, while “mianzi” stands for the kind of prestige that emphasizes a person’s reputation achieved through getting on in life (Ho, 1976). The concept of face in the Chinese culture was first introduced by the Chinese anthropologist Hu in 1944 (though the term had been used for at least several centuries before that), and examinations were conducted on the historical and then-current notion of face in Chinese culture. One of Confucius’ virtues is to respect authority and the elderly. Someone with authority, often elderly and with a good reputation, can ask favors of others. Favors can also be asked between friends. It is an accepted norm that as “old friends” one should give face to the other when a favor is requested. It is the worst thing for a Chinese individual to lose face. An insult, embarrassment,

shame, or even a refusal would risk putting a Chinese in a situation in which he might lose face.

### Research Methods

The research methodologies include the sample recording in combination with interview surveys. The author recorded the data conversation (see the Appendix) which took place at her home on the evening of May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The script was written and translated by the author based on the audio material collected. Two ways of translating Chinese into English have been adopted: (a) word-for word translation (abbreviated as WT), and (b) literal translation (LT). And the real names of the main characters were replaced with pseudonyms. In the following two months, interview surveys were conducted with ten adult Chinese (four males, six females) with various professional backgrounds (school teachers, nurses, factory workers, engineers, company employees, and police officers). Interviewees were asked to listen to the recorded conversation and give their comments.

### Data Analysis and Research Results

The following analysis of the recorded sample may serve to illustrate how the concept of “face” (*mianzi*) works in Chinese request<sup>2</sup>; and the research focus will be on the request-raising process (i.e. Yin’s utterance in the following conversation).

#### *Introduction of the main characters in the following sample:*

Yin Yiao (尹晓; ‘Yin’ for short): a young female nurse in a hospital.

Chen (陈; called “Lao Chen” <老陈> in the sample): Yin’s husband.

Xiao Fang (小芳): Yin’s daughter, 12 years old.

Li Hui (李慧; ‘Li’ for short): a colleague and good friend of Yin, three years elder than Yin.

Li Wen (李文, called “Lao Li” <老李> in the sample) Li Hui’s husband.

Xiao Min (小敏): Li’s daughter, 10 years old.

#### *Background*

Yin and Li are colleagues and also good friends. Recently Yin is busy with her coming exams given by the hospital (where she works as a nurse). But one of the reference books for the exam cannot be found in Beijing (where Yin and Li now are); and it is only available in Shanghai. Coincidentally, Li is leaving for Shanghai tomorrow on a business trip; therefore, Yin decides to ask Li to buy the book for her in Shanghai.

*The Sample Analysis*

Presentation of the sample (see the appendix)  
Analysis (Part by part)

*T1-6*

- T1 尹：李姐，吃过了吗？  
(Yin: Have you had your meal, Sister Li?)
- T2 李：吃过了。你呢？  
(Li: Yes, I have. How about you?)
- T3 尹：我也刚吃过。没事过来看看你。  
(Yin: I've just had it. I find nothing to do so I just come over to visit you.)  
老陈出差上山东，回来给姐夫带来两瓶玉米油，对高血压病有好处。  
(Lao Chen has brought two bottles of corn oil for the sister-in-law <Lao Li> from Shandong, which will be beneficial to cure hypertension.)  
(取油放桌上。) 姐夫近来身体可好？  
(She puts the bottles on the table.) How's my sister-in-law?
- T4 李：还行。你们这样惦记着，我真有些过意不去。  
(Li: Not bad. You care so much about us and we are flattered <a little apologetic> by this.)
- T5 尹：李姐，你就是有福气：老李工作好，  
(Yin: Sister Li, you do have a happy lot: Lao Li does a good job in his work.  
小敏听话，学习又好，比我们家小芳强多了。  
Xiao Min is well behaved and does well in her studies.  
She is much better than our Xiao Fang.)
- T6 李：你们家小芳也不错嘛。  
(Li: Your Xiao Fang is good too.)

In T1, asking each other whether they have already had meal is a way of exchanging greetings in the Chinese culture, and the title term “李姐” (sister Li) is a way of emphasizing closeness between speaker and hearer.

Yin comes over really with some intentions; however, she does not speak it out directly in the beginning. Instead, she says she has nothing to do and only came to have a visit. Here, a relaxed and intimate atmosphere is built up. In the latter part of T3, Yin says that her husband has just brought back corn oil and she gives it to Lao Li because it is good in curing hypertension. Yin uses kinship-addressing terms (e.g. she calls Li as ‘sister’ and calls Li’s husband as ‘brother-in-law’) in order to show intimate relationships between her and Li. What’s more, the gifts she brings over express her kindness and considerations to Li and her husband. All this proves that Yin is tactful in dealing with interpersonal relationships and is good at creating a close relationship with Li.

In T5, Yin tries to please Li by complimenting Lao Li’s (Li’s husband) excellent work and Xiao Min’s (Li’s daughter) good performance in school. Then Yin makes a comparison between Xiao Min, Li’s daughter with Fang, her own daughter, pointing out that Xiao Min is

better than her own daughter. In fact, in complimenting Li's husband and daughter, Yin is complimenting Li herself.

Obviously, from T6 we know that Yin's remarks have achieved expected results. Li is pleased though she tries to make a balance by saying that Yin's daughter Fang is also good.

Reviewing this section, we notice that there is a distance between what is said by Yin and her real intention. Yin comes to ask a favor of Li, but the explicit request is not raised on outset; instead, she begins to negotiate a closer or more intimate relationship with Li. The conversation between T1 to T6 appears to be exchanges of small talk<sup>3</sup>; however, when such a closeness is achieved, Yin is likely to feel it is safer to risk asking for the favor than if their negotiations result in more distance between them.

#### T7-8

T7 尹：听说李姐明天去上海，去几天啊？东西多不多？

(Yin: It is said that sister Li is leaving for Shanghai tomorrow.

How many days do you plan to stay? How about your luggage?)

T8 李：大概四天吧。时间挺充裕，也不用带什么东西。

(Li: Probably for four days. We have plenty of time and need not carry many things.)

Gradually Yin comes to the point. She diverts the topic to Li's trip for Shanghai. Yin inquires how long Li is going to stay in Shanghai and whether Li has much luggage, in order to find out whether Li has the possibility to do her the favor (i.e. buying the book for her). And Li's response in T8 promises her the possibility, which makes it easier for Yin to further raise her request.

#### T9

T9 尹：嗨，你也不是不知道，下个月院（医院）里的考试弄得我焦头烂额的。

(Yin: Well, you know well that <because> there'll be an exam in the hospital next month, for which I've suffered a lot.

参考书找来找去就差一本，是上海出的“医药手册”；

All the reference books can be found except one published in Shanghai with the name “Medical Handbook”.

只有上海才有，北京根本买不到。

It cannot be found in Beijing; and it is only available in Shanghai.

你们开会的地儿附近就有书店，帮我看一眼，行吧？

There is a bookstore just near the conference site.

<So> look for the book for me, will you?

回来我给你钱。

I'll be sure to give you the money when you come back.)

Now let's look into the request and examine the resulting effects on both Yin and Li. Yin is asking Li to buy a book for her in Shanghai, and it will certainly bring benefits to her, which include at least the following ones:

1. Yin does not have to find the book by herself, and it will certainly save her time and energy.
2. Yin will pay for the book only after she receives the book from Li.
3. Yin will get the book she needs.
4. Getting the book is essential (regarded by Yin) to her success in the exam, and her success in the exam may possibly bring about other potential opportunities and benefits for her.

Let's turn to Li. Doing this favor for Yin indicates that Li not only buys the book for Yin but also brings it back for her:

1. She will take the trouble to look for the book, which would cost her time and energy.
2. She will pay the book first and cannot get the money back until Yin repays her.
3. The book will add additional weight to the luggage and cause an inconvenience for her to carry it back.

Therefore, the request, a favor for Yin, is actually a cost to Li. So it is possible for Li to turn down Yin's request, which will put Yin's face at risk (while it is also no good to Li's face). So strategies should be employed by Yin to reduce the risk of this face-threatening act to the minimum. The following analysis looks at strategies Yin deploys to achieve her goal in the face negotiation.

Yin tries to strike a balance between face-saving and getting her message across. In T1-8, Yin satisfies Li's face want by complimenting her husband and her daughter; Li feels the constraint to satisfy her face by expressing her willingness to help Yin in return (which happens in T9 and T10). At the same time, Yin defends her own face by not putting her request directly, thus avoiding the danger of being turned down directly.

Now let's look at the strategies or "volitional" politeness used by Yin in making her request. First, in the beginning of T9, Yin says "你也不是不知道" which simply means "as you know/ you know it well" to make the toughness of the exam a shared knowledge, and Yin's complaints on how she suffers from it is to arouse Li's sympathy for her. And, to further minimize her request, Yin claims that she has overwhelming reasons for making it. The reasons or justifications for her request can be summarized as follows:

1. She lacks only one book and the book is necessary for the exam.
2. It's impossible to get it in Beijing; and it is only available in Shanghai.
3. Li is the person who has the chance to go to Shanghai at this very moment. And Li also has the possibility and capacity to buy the book (T9).

It should be noted that here the reasons or justifications for the request appear initially, representing old information and establishing the situational framework for the request so that the listener is given a build-up before the punchline is delivered. If we translate T9 into English we'll find that the subordinate marker "because" initiates the listing of reasons while the conjunction "so" signifies the shift from the reasons to the request. And the several independent clauses may be connected by the conjunction "and," itemizing the reasons. (The

same structure is often employed in the Chinese discourse or writing style; and this will be discussed later.)

The real request comes late, and moreover, it is in a “disguise”: “帮我看一眼，行吧？” (Help me and have a look for it, will you?) The request minimizes Li’s potential efforts in the whole process of looking for the book, buying the book and carrying the book to a single action of “have a look.” What Yin is doing here is to “minimize cost to other.” Moreover, Yin makes it appear that the request involves no sacrifice (i.e. 回来我给你钱。LT: I’ll be sure to give you the money when you come back.), so that in turn it becomes impolite for Li to reject it. What’s more, here, the request is in the question form“(行吧？”; LT: ‘Ok?’), and the question intonation is employed here to downgrade the imposition.

And Li, the hearer, has to coordinate linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to interpret Yin’s intended meaning. To be polite in Chinese social interaction is to be face caring. Therefore, Li cooperates in maintaining “face” in interaction, and such cooperation is based on the mutual vulnerability of “face.”

### T10

T10 李: 瞧你客气的, 我肯定替你想着这事儿, 放心吧。

(Li: Don’t stand on ceremony. I will surely remember this.  
Please rest assured.)

T10 indicates that Li agrees to buy the book for Yin, and Yin’s interactional intention (her request) has achieved success. By saying so, Li shows caring for Yin’s face want<sup>4</sup>. Conversely, if Li rejects Yin’s request by saying “no” or just pretends not to catch Yin’s intention since the explicit request is not uttered, Yin will lose her face<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, the issue of “face” is the key and goal of the conversation.

## Discussion

Yin’s case may be treated as typical, yet the problem of “face” is a psychological reality for millions of Chinese people. As in what has been above mentioned, Chinese people intend to first establish a shared context with which to judge their requests. Only after carefully prefacing the request with an avalanche of relevant details, as if to nullify any opposition, do they present the requests. Why does Yin in the sample not speak her request directly instead of going through a lengthy procedure? To find out the answer, I interviewed several people, who provided some illuminating reasons and comments<sup>6</sup>.

According to them, the request raised in the beginning will make a person seem modest, pushy, and inconsiderate. And it would hurt people by claiming something for oneself. And moreover, it is very risky to start out with a statement that strongly hinted at a request for something, with eventual elaboration of the rationale behind it, because if the explicit uttered request is rejected, the speaker will lose face, i.e. “没面子” (LT: lose one’s face; his self-respect will be diminished). Therefore, it would be a foolhardy approach to hint about or mention one’s desires at the outset.

Therefore, Yin’s act is considered to be polite in the Chinese culture, while to westerners, she might appear conniving or using a roundabout way.

### The Underlying Cultural and Social Implications

It should be noted that there are remarkable similarities in the presentation of requests in Chinese writings. Like the preferred style of Chinese discourse, in Chinese writings the reasons or justifications for the request also appear initially, representing old information and establishing the situational framework for the main part, whose style is often referred to as the Oriental rhetorical form.

Clearly, cultural traits are embodied in the formation of this structuring. The Confucian-based notion of harmony is one of the factors, which emphasizes cooperation, prudence and collective ideal (cf. Brick, 1991; Hsu, 1972).

Most significantly, the social implications lie behind, which sheds light on the discussion of the issue. The native English speakers may think that the Chinese arguments lack sufficient aggressive and persuasive power; the absence of a preview statement and the mere item-by-item listing of justifications, block the development of a positive tone. However, from a Chinese viewpoint, this is just the manifestation that Chinese tend to minimize confrontation in formal social relationships. In our interviews, one individual neatly summarizes his sentiments with the following statements<sup>7</sup>.

I don't find the American style, where the topic sentence appears first, to be effective, It's not necessarily more persuasive nor convincing than the Chinese style, where the speaker, at the same time as he is speaking, is reasoning with the listener to allow the listener to see whether what he says makes sense or not. This Chinese speech style is more open-minded, less biased, not constrictive as the American style, where it immediately sets you up to a particular frame of mind. You see, with the American style, you can react immediately to what the speaker says without listening to the rest of his explanations.

While the statement merits further investigation, nonetheless, from the cultural and social perspective, it sheds considerable light on the divergent premises underlying Chinese and English discourse construction (esp. within social acts such as making requests). That is, in the Chinese discourse, respect for the listener is insinuated by the "laying out" of information and revealing the manner of one's thinking. The speaker and listener become bonded in a cooperative endeavor. In view of this, the high Chinese premium placed on the avoidance of an immediate stance becomes inevitable.

### Conclusion

It is risky to be as ethnocentric as to presume that politeness is enacted similarly in all cultures. Each society agrees that certain forms of behavior are accepted and appropriate, and thus particular patterns of politeness are successful and appropriate in the environment that supports them. Nwoye (1992) believes that participants are required to act within the dictates of the socially required norm of behavior. The goal of politeness is to make all of the parties relaxed and comfortable with one another. Politeness is a culturally defined phenomenon, and what is considered polite in one culture can often be quite rude or simply strange in another.

In German and Hebrew languages, directness which connotes sincerity, straightforwardness, and cordiality (Katriel, 1986; Wierzbicka, 1991) is highly valued; while indirectness is preferred in the Chinese culture (which can be observed in the above analysis). Politeness will therefore have to be studied not only as a dependent variable but as a product of different cultures and as a force in shaping human relationships.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, two ways of translating Chinese into English have been adopted: (a) word-for word translation (abbreviated as WT), and (b) literal translation (LT).

<sup>2</sup> This is often called 求人办事 (WT: ask somebody to do something; LT: entreat a favor of somebody) in Chinese.

<sup>3</sup> It is called the 'peripheral' discourse style in Clyne (1994).

<sup>4</sup> It is called 给面子 in Chinese (WT: giving face; LT: caring other's face by doing him the favor).

<sup>5</sup> I.e. “没面子” ( WT: no face; LT: lose one's face; his self-respect will be diminished).

<sup>6</sup> Further researches should be conducted as to find out the reasons for this.

<sup>7</sup> The comments are translated by the author.

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Appendix: Script of the Recorded Conversation

(*T=turn—the conversational utterance; and the turns are numbered.*)

T1 尹: 李姐, 吃过了吗?

(Yin: Have you had your meal, Sister Li?)

T2 李: 吃过了。你呢?

(Li: Yes, I have. How about you?)

T3 尹: 我也刚吃过。没事过来看看你。

(Yin: I've just had it too. I find nothing to do so I just came over to see you.)

老陈出差上山东, 回来给姐夫带来两瓶玉米油, 对高血压病有好处。

(Lao Chen has brought two bottles of corn oil for the sister-in-law <Lao Li> from Shandong, which will be beneficial to cure hypertension.)

(取油放桌上。) 姐夫近来身体可好?

(She puts the bottles on the table. How's my sister-in-law?)

T4 李: 还行。你们这样惦记着, 我真有些过意不去。

(Li: Not bad. You care so much about us and we are flattered <a little apologetic> by this.)

T5 尹: 李姐, 你就是有福气: 老李工作好,

(Yin: Sister Li, you do have a happy lot: Lao Li does a good job in his work.

小敏听话, 学习又好, 比我们家小芳强多了。

Xiao Min is well behaved and does well in her studies. She is much better than our Xiao Fang.)

T6 李: 你们家小芳也不错嘛。

(Li: Your Xiao Fang is good too.)

T7 尹: 听说李姐明天去上海, 去几天啊? 东西多不多?

(Yin: It is said that sister Li is for Shanghai tomorrow. How many days do you plan to stay? How about your luggage?)

T8 李: 大概四天吧。时间挺充裕, 也不用带什么东西。

(Li: Probably for four days. We have plenty of time and need not carry many things.)

T9 尹: 嗨, 你也不是不知道, 下个月院(医院)里的考试弄得我焦头烂额的。

(Yin: Well, you know well that <because> there'll be an exam in the hospital next month, for which I've suffered a lot.

参考书找来找去就差一本, 是上海出的“医药手册”;

All the reference books can be found except one published in Shanghai with the name “Medical Handbook”.

只有上海才有, 北京根本买不到。

It cannot be found in Beijing; and it is only available in Shanghai.

你们开会的地儿附近就有书店，帮我看一眼，行吧？

There is a bookstore just near the conference site. <So> look for the book for me, will you?

回来我给你钱。

I'll be sure to give you the money when you come back.)

T10 李：瞧你客气的，我肯定替你想着这事儿，放心吧。

(Li: Don't stand on ceremony. I will surely remember this.

Please rest assured.)