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Fighting COVID-19 in East Asia: The role of classical Chinese poetry

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Abstract: In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, new global challenges have been presented to all affected countries, underlining the importance of international communication and co-operation. This study examines a particular linguistic means, classical Chinese poetry, used successfully by China, Japan and South Korea to facilitate their intercultural relationships. Specifically, poetic texts were pasted onto boxes of COVID-19 prevention supplies. An analysis of these texts in the context of the pandemic points to their role in establishing an 'expressive tie' between the countries (Hwang, Kwang-kuo. 1987. Face and favor: the Chinese power game. *American Journal of Sociology*. University of Chicago Press 92(4). 944–974) and demonstrating emotional resonance in the midst of mixed-tied intercultural relationships. The texts also helped to conceal the requirement of reciprocity, while highlighting morality of a country for its favour-giving behaviour. Through practicing reciprocity in a culturally appropriate way, the three countries were able to promote their national image (i.e. national face). The findings provide insights into East Asian ways of managing intercultural relationships, that can be applied to navigate international co-operation for future challenges.

Keywords: poem, pandemic, reciprocity, Japanese, Korean, intercultural relationship

1 Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new global challenges for all affected countries, underlining the importance of international communication and cooperation. This study examines the use of a particular linguistic resource, classical Chinese poetry, by three East Asian countries – China, Japan and South Korea – as a means of facilitating intercultural communication during the first wave of the pandemic.

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Classical Chinese poetry, termed *jiutishi* in Chinese, *kanshi* in Japanese and *Hansi* in Korean, has served as a lingua franca among literati of the three countries over several millennia (Li 2016). This genre includes work not only from Chinese poets, but also from poets of other countries in the Sino-sphere. Its popularity derives from the shared written medium, classical Chinese, used by several modern-day countries until the 1950s (Chang 1996; Iwasaki 2013). Nowadays, classical Chinese poems and their translations go beyond the literati and enjoy a wide readership in China, Japan and South Korea, as a result of literacy education in these countries.

The classical Chinese poems shown as (1) to (5) below were selected during the pandemic and pasted onto boxes of COVID-19 prevention supplies (hereafter C-supplies) from donor to recipient countries. These donations took place at a time when the WHO warned of disruptions in the global supply chain and called for rational use of C-supplies (WHO 2020). As countries experiencing COVID-19 peaks at staggered intervals, China, Japan and South Korea cooperated over the allocation of C-supplies and helped each other to overcome the crisis. For example, the poem (1) arrived in China with Japanese C-supplies one day after the WHO's announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak. Thirty days later, when China had flattened its epidemic curve, poem (2) was sent with Chinese C-supplies to Japan, which was experiencing its first outbreak of domestic cases.

(1) From Japan to China on 31 January 2020:
山川異域，風月同天 (Ōmi no Mifune 779 CE)
While mountains and rivers separate us, we enjoy the same moonlight under the same sky[1].

(2) From China to Japan on 3 March 2020:
青山一道，同擔風雨 (Wang Changling 748 CE)
Like the mountain range stretches before you and me, let us share common trials and hardships together.

(3) From South Korea to China on 16 February 2020:
兄弟同心，其利斷金 (Confucius 480–497 BCE)
If brothers are of the same mind, their sharpness can cut through metal..

(4) From China to South Korea on 27 February 2020:
道不遠人，人無異國 (Choe Chiwon 887 CE)
Great distance cannot separate us, we all live in a united world.

1 Poems (1), (2) and (4) were translated by the Translator Association of China while Poems (3) and (5) by the author.

(5) From China to South Korea on 11 March 2020:
肝膽每相照，冰壺映寒月 (Heo Gyun 1597–1598 CE)
Friends always treat each other sincerely, just as moonlight is reflected clearly on a jade pot.

This international co-operation attracted a great deal of positive attention from the public. Poems (1) and (2) entered the daily list of 'most searched' on Weibo, one of the biggest social media networks in China, with over 200,000 searches from Chinese netizens. In the meantime, the appearance of Poem (2) was reported enthusiastically by *Yahoo News, Japan* ("新型ウイルス支援でマスク*100*万枚寄贈" '1 million masks donated for new virus', 2020). Poems (3) to (5) were similarly noted by influential press in both donor and recipient countries with Poem (5) jointly reported by *Xinhua Daily*, the first public newspaper in China, and *JoongAng Ilbo*, one of the three biggest newspapers in South Korea.

This study focuses on these acclaimed poems and explores their role in navigating intercultural relationships in the context of COVID-19. Specifically, it aims to understand how this practice enabled East Asian countries to manage their relationship, exhibit the principle of reciprocity and shape their national image.

I begin by introducing a framework of relationships developed indigenously in the East Asian context in connection with Chinese, Japanese and Korean concepts of reciprocity and national face (Section 2). I then analyse the five poems in their multi-layered contexts to illustrate their role in light of the relationship framework (Section 3). In Section 4, I discuss the specific way that the East Asian countries practice reciprocity and enhance national face, after which the concluding remarks highlight the findings and significant of this study.

2 Relationships, reciprocity and face in Chinese, Japanese and Korean

Managing a rapport relationship is closely linked to people's desire for face (Spencer-Oatey 2002), and facework is inherently reciprocal (Ho 1976). However, conceptualisations of relationship, reciprocity and face have culturally specific characteristics. In the Chinese context, Hwang (1987) developed a widely accepted framework of relationships, which can help us to understand the role of the poems in East Asian countries' exchange of C-supplies. Its key components correspond well to Japanese and Korean conceptualisations of reciprocity, as I specify below. The ensuring framework serves as an explanatory tool for the function of classical

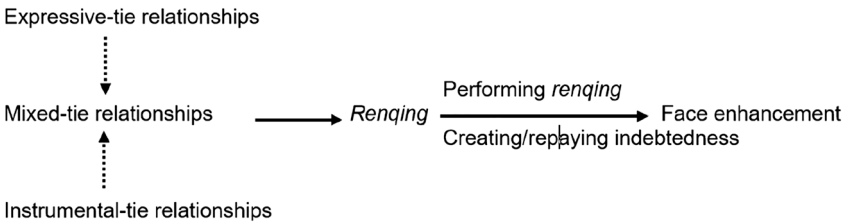

Figure 1: Outline of Hwang's (1987) framework of relationships.

Chinese poems in intercultural communication (see Section 3). Figure 1 reproduces a basic construction of the framework[2].

According to Hwang (1987), people's relationships can be categorised according to their psychological tie as expressive tie, instrumental tie and mixed tie. An expressive tie refers to family or family-like relationships that tend to be permanent and stable. By contrast, an instrumental tie is goal-driven, formulating an unstable and temporary relationship. People with an instrumental tie negotiate their costs and benefits for equality, such as in a trade-off between the interests of two companies. A mixed tie has elements of both expressive and instrumental ties and seeks the continuation of a relationship for certain purposes. The relationships of relatives and neighbours, for example, are typical mixed ties. People with mixed-tie relationships often display their interactions for observers to know. In other words, they expect the public to note the terms of their relationship.

Intercultural relationships, as in the current case, are often mixed-tied. They are characterised by purposeful activities built on the mutual interests of countries, reflecting features of instrumental ties (e.g. the Constitutional Treaty of EU, cf. Magistro 2013). They also pursue stability and persistence as required by expressive ties. Maintaining a mixed-tie intercultural relationship therefore raises the question of what constituted its instrumental and expressive components. The current study contends that classical Chinese poems made an expressive contribution, which is further discussed in Section 3.

In mixed-tie relationships, people use *renqing* as social capital to influence others and follow its rule of reciprocity to regulate their social interactions (Hwang 1987). Hwang's threefold interpretation for *renqing* in Chinese comprises emotional resonance, favours and the social norms of doing and repaying a favour. Paying *renqing* thus involves affective values (i.e. emotional resonance) and/or

2 Hwang's (1987) framework also includes behavioural principles for people with expressive ties or instrumental ties, i.e. need rule and equality rule respectively. The instance of not performing *renqing* results in face loss and face-saving behaviours according to Hwang (1987), which is beyond the current discussion.

substantial benefits (i.e. favours), that needs to be repaid in accordance with social norms. In the present case, classical Chinese poems which accompanied the favour-giving behaviour of providing C-supplies are thus expected to play a role in demonstrating emotional resonance and highlighting reciprocity.

The emotional resonance of *renqing* overlaps with indigenous notions of empathy in Japanese (Fukushima and Haugh 2014) and *ceng* in Korean (Lim and Choi 1996). The latter originated from the same Chinese character *qing* as in *renqing*. Sharing *ceng* in Korean "usually eradicates the individual differences and emphasises similarities and shared fates" (Lim and Choi 1996: 134). The sharedness is also emphasised by Japanese empathy as "tuning one's feeling" and "standing in the place of the other party" (Fukushima and Haugh 2014: 167). In the three cultures, being evaluated as having *renqing*, empathy or *ceng* promotes one's reputation.

On the other hand, the reciprocity of *renqing* is an assumed universal principle derived from the psychological obligation to repay a benefit (Gouldner 1960; Uehara 1995). The way of practicing reciprocity, however, is rather culture-dependent and relationship-specific (Gouldner 1960). Paying *renqing* creates material and/or emotional indebtedness (Greenberg 1980; Yau et al. 1999). This indebtedness is linguistically encoded in *en* in Chinese, *on* in Japanese and *un(hyey)* in Korean (Lebra 1976), all of which originate from the same Chinese character, 恩, despite the different romanisations used here for each language. *En* needs to be reciprocated.

Performing the threefold *renqing* – and the equivalents in Korean and Japanese – enhances interpersonal face (Hwang 1987), which in the current instance extends to national face as well. National face was defined by Magistro (2007, 2013) as a public national image that people "attribute to their country and that they want others to appreciate and respect" (2013: 234), in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) division of positive and negative face. The face is "presented to other nations", and hence is relational and observer-based (Chen and Hwang 2016: 2).

Comparing to interpersonal face in Chinese, Japanese and Korean (Haugh 2005; Haugh and Hinze 2003; Hwang 2006; Hu 1944; Lim and Choi 1996), shows that national face is similarly realised via observers, has emotional and instrumental motivations (Gries 1999), namely, the different types of psychological ties, and can be lost and (re)gained (Chen and Hwang 2016; Kádár et al. 2013). National face is consisted of moral face ('ethics face' in Kim and Yang 2011) and performance face (Chen and Hwang 2016), and, most importantly, also requires reciprocity. Therefore, the role of the classical Chinese poems in managing intercultural relationships should also concern gains or loss of national face.

In light of the indigenous framework of relationships presented above, it is expected that the classical Chinese poems (i) establish an expressive tie in mixed-tie intercultural relationships; (ii) demonstrate emotional resonance and indicate

the reciprocal rule; and (iii) occasion gains in national face. Below, I scrutinise how these roles were realised or reinforced by the selection and use of classical Chinese poems.

3 Strategic selection and use of classical Chinese poems

In this section, the five poems are analysed in multi-layered contexts constituted by both their historical background and immediate co-text. Here, co-text refers to linguistic and non-linguistic signs, such as video messages and letters, that were generated concurrently in the context when each poem was used (Agha 2004: 25). The findings clearly reveal that classical Chinese poems were not used randomly and coincidentally, but rather purposely and strategically. The careful selection and use enabled the poems to play the expected role in intercultural communication.

First of all, authors of the poems are found to have historic connections to the recipient country. Poem (1) was selected from the work of Ōmi no Mifune who recorded a Chinese Buddhist monk's visit to Japan in the time of China's Tang dynasty. Choe Chiwon, the author of Poem (4), was a Korean scholar who became a high-ranking official in China, while Heo Gyun, another Korean scholar, wrote Poem (5) as a farewell to his Chinese friend. The only exception was Poem (2) written by a Tang scholar with no known historic connection to Japan. However, the verses had previously been used by Japanese on their C-supplies to China. Poem (2) re-edited the original verses to match the four-character rhythm of Poem (1). The re-edition of Poem (2) formed an antithetical response to Poem (2), evidencing the exchanging practice between China and Japan.

These historic interactions between the poets and the receiving countries are a reminder for the audience at the time of the pandemic of the long-lasting relationship between donor and recipient countries. Such enduring relationships are characterised in an expressive tie as specified in Section 2. This relational feature, carefully embedded in the poem selection, shows how the poems contributed components of an expressive tie to the mixed-tie intercultural relationships concerned.

The mixed tie is also signified by the relational terms used in the poems, such as *xiongdi* 'brotherhood' in Poem (3) and *gandan* 'liver and gall' in Poem (5). In addition, the donor of Poem (3), mayor of Seoul City in South Korea, addressed China as *chinku* 'friend' in his supporting video message ("Park Wonsoon 'China fighting! Support you'", 2020). Meanwhile, Jack Ma, the donor of Poem (2),

regarded Japan as *linju* 'neighbour' in the letter of gratitude that he exchanged with his Japanese correspondent, Toshihiro Nikai. With Japanese donations to China Nikai described China as *shinseki* 'relatives' ("马云向日本捐赠*100*万只口罩" 'Jack Ma donates 1 million masks to Japan', 2020). It is worth reiterating that relatives and neighbours are typical networks that a mixed tie addresses.

The poems also emphasise common ground shared by different countries in the face of the pandemic. The sameness of humanity's fate and sharedness of people's emotions were encoded in the reference to 'the same moonlight under the same sky' (Poem 1), 'sharing the wind and rain' (Poem 2), being 'of the same mind' (Poem 3), and 'living in an united world' in (Poem 4). The notion of common ground is consistent with conceptualisations of emotional resonance in Chinese (Hwang 1987), empathy in Japanese (Fukushima and Haugh 2014) and *ceng* in Korean (Lim and Choi 1996). It formulates an important constituent of *renqing*, and was reinforced by a statement from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regarding the three countries as "命运共同体" 'a community with a shared future' in the face of the pandemic ("*2020*年*2*月*27*日外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会" 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on February 27, 2020').

The "shared future" referred to by the Chinese Foreign Ministry seems to frame the pandemic as an opportunity for the three countries to move beyond their existing economic connections (e.g. RCEP), to a 'sharedness' in the area of public health and wellbeing (Kimura et al. 2020). The huge pressures on medical systems and supplies generated by the pandemic have already encouraged further regional cooperation. The importance of sharedness also applies to future measures to control the ongoing wave and post-pandemic recovery. This helps to explain why different donors consistently chose poems that speak of a common ground.

In contrast to the carefully encoded emotional resonance of *renqing* in these verses, the reciprocal rule of *renqing* is seemingly contradicted by the use of the poems. That is, none of the poems or their co-texts indicated any expectation of requitals from recipient countries. Moreover, both benefactors and beneficiaries claimed their own indebtedness to each other. Beneficiaries expressed gratitude and acknowledged their indebtedness to the benefactors, while benefactors, who conceivably owned the credit, also made reference to their past indebtedness to the beneficiaries. For example, the mayor of Seoul City referred back to support from the Chinese in dealing with the MERS crisis in 2015, framing the Korean donation as "*wuli-ka taphal chalyey*" [time for us to pay back] ("박원순 '중국 화이팅, 지지한다' "Park Wonsoon 'China fighting! Support you'", 2020). However, instead of taking the donation as a payback for past indebtedness, beneficiaries considered it to be their own indebtedness newly generated. In other words, both benefactor and beneficiary insisted on their self-indebtedness. Therefore, the exchange of

classical Chinese poems seemed not to align with the rule of reciprocity in performing *renqing*.

Indeed, the apparent inconsistency between the use of the poems and the rule of performing *renqing* reflects a distinctive regional adaptation to the functioning of reciprocity, which is explained in the next section. The specific functioning mechanism is crucial to understanding how national face is gained in East Asia.

4 Practicing reciprocity and enhancing national face in East Asia

As found above, in contrast to other roles that the classical Chinese poems played, reciprocity, the rule of performing *renqing*, was left unstated via the poem use. None of the countries overtly requested a payback for their favour-giving behaviour, as if reciprocity was not required. Failing to practice reciprocity would nevertheless result in a loss of national face, rather than a gain.

This section provides insights into the reasons that reciprocal rule was not overtly exhibited and the specific way that the East Asian group practices reciprocity to enhance their national face.

The first reason seems to lie with the donors' intention of using the poems to establish an expressive tie, as found in Section 3. Requiring an equal payback for one's costs (i.e. donations) would then highlight the feature of an instrumental tie, and consequently counteract such an intention. Secondly, behaving in a way that is motivated by instant benefit is considered unethical and hurts one's moral face in East Asia (Kim and Yang 2011: 63). Moral face is a constituent of national face as well (Chen and Hwang 2016). The current practice of the three countries, namely, paying *renqing* without hinting at requital, is evaluated as polite (Fukushima and Haugh 2014), and underscores their morality while raising a country's profile in the eyes of observers. This is consistent with previous findings in South Korea, that gift-giving (i.e. donating) behaviour is motivated by saving self-face and improving one's own reputation (Park 1998). Furthermore, moral face is found to play a significant role in facilitating cooperation psychologically (Kim and Yang 2011). This corresponds nicely to the cooperative practice observed in the C-supplies donations between China, Japan and South Korea.

In addition to avoiding overt statements of requital, the specific way that East Asian countries practice reciprocity is also manifested in claims of self-indebtedness. In constantly referring back to their own indebtedness and incidentally creating new indebtedness for the other, *renqing* between China, Japan and South Korea seems to become a resource destined never to be paid off. As a

result, the reciprocal relationship necessarily continues (Hwang 1987: 954). As Ohashi (2008) argues, it is precisely the unclearable *renqing* that maintains a relational tie in intercultural communication. This continuous paying and repaying behaviour enhanced national faces of both the donor and recipient. For recipients, their needs have been attended to and granted, which is inherently face-enhancing (Hwang 1987: 948). Their verbal gratitude, which served as "symbolic face work" (Ohashi 2008: 2063), together with material payback, highlighted the position of donors whose performance was approbated and appreciated. This in turn enhanced the donor's positive face (see positive national face in Magistro 2007).

5 Conclusion

In summary, classical Chinese poems played a role in the context of COVID-19 by establishing an expressive tie in mixed-tie intercultural relationships, demonstrating emotional resonance and gaining mutual national face between countries. They helped to conceal the requirement of reciprocity, while highlighting the morality of a country's favour-giving behaviour. The distinctive mechanisms underlying the poem exchange revealed how relationships are interrelated to reciprocity and face and how reciprocity is practiced in East Asia. They provide a dedicated reference for countries in other parts of the world to understand East Asian countries' communicative practice.

The use of poetry has now been extended by China to its relations with countries beyond East Asia. Poetic texts written in the recipients' languages have been pasted onto boxes of C-supplies sent to India and countries in Europe and Africa ("中国援外物资标语" 'posters for Chinese foreign-aid supplies' 2020). The texts remark not only the benefactor's help, but more importantly, the support previously received from the recipient countries. It is precisely this way of reciprocity that guides humans to cooperate and helps us to overcome unprepared disasters. Also, realising we are on the shared ground in addressing global challenges generates profound meanings for multiple aspects of human futures such as fostering intercultural connectivity, diminishing racial antagonism and improving the wellbeing of all mankind. Poetry, which helps encapsulating such ethics of reciprocity and caring in communication, is thus expected to contribute beyond enhancing intercultural relationships to other forms of human cooperation.

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