

Face and (im)politeness in Chinese fandom: A case study of the ‘227 Incident’

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Abstract:

In this paper I investigate Chinese fandom from the perspective of face and (im)politeness. I analyse the contentious ‘227 Incident’ pertaining to a Chinese pop star Xiao Zhan, star of a TV drama adapted from a BL (Boys’ Love) novel, and the blocking of Archive of Our Own (AO3) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) due to his fans’ mass-reporting. Through an analysis of posts and comments on Weibo, a popular social media platform in the PRC, I argue that Xiao and his supporters adopt linguistic avoidance, which neglects or even challenges their rapport with non-fans and the wider public. Linguistic avoidance includes the valence strategy that shifts negative connotations to positive ones, the correction strategy that introduces new intended positions, as well as the non-committal strategy that avoids binding commitments. In-group requests urging Xiao’s leading devotees to purchase products threaten the face of co-fans as discourse participants, where requests impinge upon interactants’ individual, relational and collective identity which is inextricably intertwined with face. Furthermore, requests from passionate admirers may additionally demonstrate moral coercion, manipulating their co-fans as well as impoliteness triggered by employment of inappropriate fandom neologisms.

Keywords: Fandom, face, (im)politeness, linguistic avoidance, in-group requests, identity, moral coercion

1. Introduction

The discussion in this paper pertains to a 28-year-old Chinese singer-actor named Xiao Zhan, who expeditiously rose to mega-stardom in 2019 after starring in a hit TV period drama *The Untamed* adapted from a popular Internet BL (Boys’ Love) novel. On 24 February 2020, Xiao’s fans became aware of a piece of fanfic entitled 下坠 *Xiazhui* portraying their idol as a prostitute with gender dysphoria who pursued a relationship with a protagonist named after Xiao’s co-star from *The Untamed*. In response, these overzealous fans, or ‘stans’ (Lang

2017, Whitehead 2017), filed large-scale, systematic and well-planned complaints against Archive of Our Own (AO3). The non-commercial and non-profit open-source repository for transformative works contributed by users was reported to government authorities for its publishing of pornographic contents (Cai 2020). Fans' slander on AO3 eventually caused it to become blocked in the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 29 February 2020 (Romano 2020).

Although Xiao's followers claimed that their 'whistle-blowing' act was to protect their idol's reputation, AO3's inaccessibility (given its extreme popularity in PRC) provoked intense protest among AO3 users, including widespread censure of the fans' accusations against AO3, disparagement of AO3 users and depredation of artistic freedom (Jiang 2020, Yu 2020). Enraged by the crackdown of an online space where a range of subculture groups had been uploading content since 2009, AO3 users and members of other LGBT communities began an online campaign, or a cyber war, to tarnish Xiao's image. Their actions included boycotting products and brands Xiao endorsed such as Piaget and Estée Lauder (Hall 2020, South China Morning Post 2020), and giving low ratings to TV dramas Xiao participated in. Nonetheless, compared with Xiao's supporters, his opponents were less structured and identifiable. Given the fact that the incident triggered fierce controversy on 27 February 2020, it is referred to as the '227 Incident' by netizens (China Comment 2020a, 2020b, Gong 2020).

The 227 Incident attracted attention from all eight official newspapers of the Communist Party of China, namely *People's Daily*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Economics Daily*, *Jiefang Daily*, *Xinhua Daily*, *People's Liberation Army Daily* and *Workers' Daily*, along with China Central Television, Dragon TV, *Nanfang Daily*, *Culture Monthly*, among others. The 227 Incident has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon of societal, ideological, cultural and economic impact, and provoked other events. For instance, on 10 May 2020, a video was widely circulated on Weibo and subsequently went viral: it recorded a primary school teacher directing her class to chant slogans supporting Xiao. This video sparked public outcry and heated debate. A number of netizens and official organisations such as the Chinese Academy of History and the Communist Youth League of China condemned the teacher for breaking professional standards and neglecting appropriate education (Global Times 2020, Lu 2020, Pu 2020, Zhang 2020). Four days later, a middle school teacher was chastised by parents and netizens for leading young students to support Xiao publicly in the classroom, with similar events occurring in other schools (C. Liu 2020, H. Liu 2020, The Economist 2020, Zhu 2020).

In response to comments and/or reprimands from media and the public sphere, Xiao's fans have prodigiously purchased products endorsed by Xiao. For fans, this commercial activity 'atones' for the catastrophe brought to their idol by proving his ability to encourage sales and thus his value. Furthermore, Xiao's fans have launched cyber operations on Weibo to defend their idol, by means of posting positive content, berating critics and insulting rival stars and their fanbases.

In this paper, I explore Chinese fandom from the perspective of face and (im)politeness, by discussing the 227 Incident. Using the concepts of face and linguistic avoidance as an analytical framework, I examine fan responses through hermeneutic interpretation of social media posts on Weibo. I argue that two main strategies were adopted: linguistic avoidance which neglects or challenges rapport, and in-group purchase requests which threaten interlocutors' face and imposes moral coercion.

2. Notions of face and linguistic avoidance

Face is 'a concept which attempts to denote a phenomenon of crucial relevance to many aspects of interactive behaviour and which therefore offers a means of exploring and understanding this behaviour' (O'Driscoll 2017: 107). Construed as a core component of the language of universal politeness, and a multifaceted phenomenon entailing cognitive foundations, face conceptualisation and analysis involve a range of concepts. For instance, face is regarded as being correlated with the public self-image (Brown and Levinson 1987) due recognition to other's social status and achievement (Mao 1994). Face is also implicated in the interpersonal identity of individuals during communication (Scollon and Scollon 1995), in pride and dignity as a consequence of one's social achievement (Leung and Chan 2001), in identity respect and other-identity considerations (Ting-Toomey and Chung 2005: 73, Ting-Toomey and Dorjee 2015), as well as prestige, relational face and moral face (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010, 2011). As an identity-boundary issue, face is inextricably intertwined with identity (Ting-Toomey 1994, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou 2017). Face and identity equally contribute to constructions of self-image that are derived from, and situated in, individual, relational and collective contexts (Arundale 2005). Both face and identity are comprised of multiple self-aspects or attributes (Spencer-Oatey 2007, 2009), with face considered a social attribute and identity an enduring phenomenon and individual attribute (Arundale 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b).

The threat, loss or gaining of face can be perceived only if there is a discrepancy between an attribute being claimed or denied (for positively or negatively evaluated traits respectively), and an attribute being ascribed by others explicitly or implicitly (Spencer-Oatey 2007, 2009). Saving face entails avoiding or reducing face threats by means of verbal and behavioural strategies. Similarly, face enhancement is a politeness strategy targeted at reducing face threat. Face attack and face loss, however, are associated with failure to engage in face-saving behaviour (Culpeper 1996, 2008, 2011, 2012, Bravo 2008). Deliberate offence or face attack is regarded as linguistic impoliteness or rudeness, causing social conflict and disharmony (Culpeper et al 2003: 1545, Culpeper 2011: 19-20, Culpeper and Hardaker 2017). Strategic management of face can be linked to a rapport management framework suggesting four categories of rapport orientation (Wang and Spencer-Oatey 2015):

1. *Rapport enhancement orientation*: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between the interlocutors.

2. *Rapport maintenance orientation*: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors.
3. *Rapport neglect orientation*: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self).
4. *Rapport challenge orientation*: a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors. (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 32)

Embedded in the Confucian ethos of shame and social harmony (Fang 1999, Dong and Lee 2007), the notion of face in a Chinese context manifests as a concept with three tiers: individual, relational and group face. All three face-sensitive factors contribute to the interpretation of Chinese face (Yabuuchi 2004, Haugh 2005, Gao 2009, Chang and Haugh 2013). Furthermore, Li (2017) articulates three distinctive facets in the Chinese concept of face: 1) power/favour/relation face, which denotes social power and connection; 2) moral/honour face, which refers to dignity and integrity; and 3) mask/image face, which indicates facades to impress others.

As a consequence of a collectivistic cultural background, it is theorised that Chinese people are more other-face oriented than their counterparts in individualistic cultures who focus more on self-face (Ting-Toomey 2005, 2017, Spencer-Oatey and Wang 2019). Chinese people therefore tend to conduct more indirect and other-face concern conflict behaviours and display avoiding, obliging and passive aggressive facework tactics. This is due to the fact that Chinese people value integrating, non-confrontational styles of interaction and obliging and avoidance conflict management approaches (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001, Ting-Toomey 2005, 2009, 2012).

Linguistic avoidance is defined as ‘the conscious or unconscious non-use of a problematic language expression and/or the substitution of another’ (MacQueen 2016). Linguistic avoidance is a complex, systematic, pragmatic skill that modifies meanings at various levels of linguistic organisation. Linguistic avoidance allows one to move away from threatening topics and preserve one’s face and to shift the responsibility to the other who might be involved in the exchange or be the key element of reference (Janney 1999). Linguistic avoidance is deployed by politicians to re-contextualise and redefine negative concepts that may threaten their public political face. There are six face-saving strategies: 1) valence strategy: from a negative connotation to a less negative or positive one; 2) generalisation strategy: from a clear concept or reference to a vague one; 3) specificity strategy: from a general concept to a specific one; 4) correction strategy: from an earlier (misunderstood) position to a new (intended) one; 5) non-committal strategy: avoiding making binding commitments; and 6) evidentiality strategy: shifting authorship to a third party (Anchimbe 2009).

The concept of face and its related concepts are applied in this paper to analyse fans’ interaction with their co-fans and other online interlocutors. During communication, especially when making in-group requests boosting Xiao’s reputation, fans tend to demonstrate behaviours that fall into the category of neglecting/challenging others’ face.

Moreover, in fan discussions in general, linguistic avoidance is also incorporated to talk around, distance and remake concepts and topics that are potentially threatening to the face of (nonspecific) fans and their idols. The linguistic approach in this paper is applied to fandom studies, in that the focus and methods used by Xiao's supporters entail linguistic strategies.

3. Chinese fandom

Fandom is defined as 'an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more "normal" popular audiences (Fiske 1992: 30), and is regarded as 'a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialized world' (Sandvoss 2005: 3). Fandom has multiple meanings and functions, and it is related to the construction, communication and assessment of people's identity (Sandvoss 2005: 48).

China's idol market is currently dominated by a ranking-focused fandom culture that has been skyrocketing since its advent in 2005. The acceleration of this market has been enabled by technological advancements of digital social media platforms and the adoption of idol industry models from Japan and South Korea (Chen 2017). As an integral and indispensable component of the highly profitable entertainment industry in China, the structure and operation of fandom are organised, disciplined and hierarchical. Fandom is governed by rational business logics and processes, and led by well-paid professional fans hired by talent management companies (Liang and Shen 2016, Zhang 2016, Wu 2019, Zheng 2019).

A common method for fans to support idols in the competitive entertainment industry is to spend capital on music and photo albums, film and concert tickets, products and service idols endorse. This strategy of financial investment is recently enriched by the popularisation of crowdfunding of campaigns and activities. More recently, a ranking-focused culture has resulted in the emerged of a strategy of data intervention conducted by so-called 数据粉 *shuju fen* 'data fans', a term initially associated with followers of K-pop stars from South Korea. Data fandom is an integral part of the entertainment industry reconfigured by digital social media platforms, due to the digitalisation of fandom and fan culture (Negus 2019, Zhang and Negus 2020). 'Data' here refers to the virtual traffic data produced by platform users, which is regarded as transitional fan objects with affective power. Social media such as Weibo allow and encourage fans to contribute immaterial labour in exchange for data, and promise that the immaterial data might bring actual benefits to their idols (Yin 2020).

Apart from core senior fans who direct co-fans, a mature *fanquan*, aka fan circle, is constituted of a range of sub-teams (Ju 2019a, 2019b), the most preponderant of which is the data team responsible for online traffic and data. To be more specific, 'data fans' increase traffic by producing positive posts and comments that keep idols at the top of social media rankings. These campaigns are achieved through data-generation software

and/or sockpuppetry, the use of multiple subsidiary accounts by a single controlling person. 'Data fans' intervene in data generated about an idol by working independently and in collaboration to impinge upon the statistical, sonic and semantic data collected by and reported on digital platforms and social media (Negus 2019, Zhang and Negus 2020).

In close cooperation with other sub-teams such as poll teams, copywriting teams, art and design teams and market outreach teams, powerful data teams, along with the entire fan circle, are capable of swinging public discourse, driving social media traffic and influencing the quantity and quality of data about celebrities (Liang and Shen 2016, Negus 2019, Zhang and Negus 2020). The manipulation and intervention from fandom on public opinion and social media are particularly conspicuous when idols face scandals. Mobilised by senior or professional fans, an army of well-trained followers respond expeditiously when scandals are exposed, counteracting scandal-related news with positive contents about their idols and obscuring negative views (Zhang 2016, Han and Jia 2019).

It is notable that fandom is intertwined with anti-fandom, and these two concepts are not necessarily opposite (Gray 2005), in that fandom may lead to a form of anti-fandom in some instances (Theodoropoulou 2007). It is equally important to investigate 'a spectrum of dislike, distaste, and hate' in fan and anti-fan cultures (Gray et al 2007: 15), by means of analysing non-fans and anti-fans who are defined as 'those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel' (Gray 2003: 70). Anti-fandom is constituted of various types, including monitorial, cynical and visceral hatewatching (Gray 2019). The study of anti-fandom is increasingly indispensable in the digital age, in that online communication tools facilitate the scope and speed of participatory cultures (Click 2019: 6). Anti-fans take pleasure not only in celebrity-bashing but also in the experience of doing so with fellow anti-fans, which indicates that anti-fan communities can be formed online around target celebrities (Claessens and Van den Bulck 2014). In Chinese online fandom, anti-fans are sometimes faked by paid professionals, and real and paid anti-fans may pretend to be non-fans in order to swing public opinion (China Comment 2020b, 2020c).

In anti-fandom, fan antagonism may develop into toxic fan practices (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, Proctor 2017). Like other fan practices, toxic fan activities have entered the digital mainstream (Proctor 2017, Geraghty 2018). As a result of producer-fan power dynamics and proximity, as well as the changing possibilities for fans to act as quasi-producers, toxicity may be construed as an inherent component of fan experience (Jones 2018, Scott 2018). Such toxicity has been discussed in relation to performances of fannish identity due to indeterminacy and fan boundaries and borders (Hills 2018), and it might be attributed to fans' self-narratives and trajectories of the self (Hills 2012a, Proctor 2017), or be regarded as a calibrated combination of cynicism, appreciation and awareness (Proctor and Kies 2018, Zolides 2018). Moreover, certain toxic behaviours might be comprehended more profoundly in their corresponding cultural contexts (Meimardis and Oliveira 2018). In China, apart from quarrels, conflicts and trolling, toxic fan practices also include cyber manhunt, social media account hacking, Intellectual Property theft and online harassment

and abuse (China Comment 2020a, Li 2020, Zhao and Qin 2020), with fandom toxicity is referred to as 'a new type of Internet violence' (China Comment 2020b, China Daily 2020, Workers' Daily 2020). Fans' self-regulation and self-management mechanisms are needed to control toxic fan practices (Guerrero-Pico et al 2018).

In the fan world, social media enables two-way communication between fans and celebrities, so fans can police other fans (Zubernis and Larsen 2012) and celebrities (Chin 2015). Meanwhile, celebrities deploy social media to police fans, conducting so-called 'fanagement' (Hills 2012b, Jones 2018). In China, idols are expected to assume the social responsibility of guiding their fanbases (Beijing News 2020, Global Times 2020, Wu 2020, Zhao and Qin 2020).

4. Methodology

Linguistic strategies are deployed both theoretically and methodologically in this paper. Data was collected manually from Weibo, with a representative example analysed using hermeneutic analysis.

Posts and comments on Weibo provide a prodigious record of collective language and discourse occurring in the context of online networked communities in China. Weibo, a Twitter-like microblogging application, is one of the most popular social media platforms functioning as an interest-based social network, an ideological arena, a collective witness, a strategic tool for empowerment of grassroots advocacy, and a mediator facilitating symbolic reconfiguration and constant (re)construction of public life (Han 2016, 2019). The multifaceted-ness of Weibo also lies in its role in tracking sentiment, investigating affective states, as well as analysing online behaviours and communications in the Chinese socio-cultural context, owing to its robust properties of spreadability, persistence, connectivity and civic engagement (Han 2020, Han and Jia 2019). Consequently, Weibo makes an unparalleled contribution to the Chinese social media landscape and the public life of Chinese people, illuminating the ubiquitous interplay between political and commercial interests across social media.

Data retrieval has been conducted through three channels. The primary channel is the Weibo 'super topic', a feature predominantly used by/for celebrities, to collate related posts and comments shared by other users (predominantly their fanbases). A 'super topic' is a virtual community developed around a given hashtag. However, it contains more information than a standard hashtag, as 'super topic' has its own page and a team of dedicated, and sometimes professional, moderators who actively manage it by manually selecting content and tagging high-quality posts as 'essential content'. Another significant channel through which data was collected is the 'discover' function, a comprehensive search engine embedded in Weibo. This function enables users to conduct keyword searches; terms used for this study include 肖战 (Xiao Zhan), 227, AO3, 下坠 ('*Xiazhu*'), 光点 (*Guangdian* 'Spotlight', see below), 买一咬三 (*mai yi yao san* 'buy one clench three', see below), 教师追星 (*jiaoshi zhuixing* 'teachers' star worship'), 哥哥 (*gege* 'older brother', see

below), 陈情令 (*Chengqingling* 'The Untamed'), etc. Third, data has also been collected from Weibo's lists of 'hot searches' and 'hot topics' which showcase real-time updates on the top trending topics attracting interest and discussion.

Data on Weibo is publicly available. Taking privacy in the digital era into consideration, in this paper I only quote texts extracted from posts and comments, excluding links to the original contents. In addition to avoiding privacy violations, I also take into account two facts. For one thing, according to the 44th Statistical Report on Internet Development, 16.9% of Chinese netizens were aged between 10 and 19 in 2019 (China Internet Network Information Centre 2019). For another, active online fans aged under 18 were estimated to amount to 1.225 million in 2019 (Workers' Daily 2020). Since a certain proportion of data in this research might be attributed to fans who are under 18 years old, not including original posts and comments is also for ethical purposes. Ethics approval from Lancaster University has been obtained for this study.

The data collection covers a five-month period since 27 February 2020, and the source of data is the fanbase of the Chinese pop star Xiao Zhan. In total, 435 posts and comments have been reviewed, and representative examples have been hermeneutically analysed.

Unless specified otherwise, fans henceforth refer to Xiao's fanbase in particular. As for netizens who are averse to Xiao and his admirers and boycott relevant products and shows, since they refer to themselves as '227', in the following texts they are called '227-ers'.

5. Analysis

5.1. Linguistic avoidance

Apart from being a means of face-saving, as advocated by Anchimbe (2009), I suggest that when deployed by Xiao's fans in their interaction with non-fans and 227-ers, the linguistic avoidance exhibits a salient quality of neglecting or even challenging rapport and hence constitutes a face-threatening feature.

5.1.1. Valence strategy

First, fans adopt the valence strategy of the linguistic avoidance. For instance, to avoid negative connotations implied by the terms such as 演技差 *yanji cha* 'terrible acting' and 唱功差 *changgong cha* 'terrible singing,' fans adopt the term 努力 *nuli* 'hardworking' in their responses, transforming the negative connotations into a positive one. They also accuse critics for judging a celebrity they do not know, as highlighted in example (1) below. In order to distance themselves and their idol from the negative consequences of being directly link to a certain topic, fans transform clearly stated issues to general, vague ones that are less personal, enabling them to maintain a positive face. Moreover, in order not to confront the direct issues of acting and singing skills, fans adeptly switch the focus to critics'

qualification via a frequently used Internet expression 你行你上 *ni xing ni shang* ‘put up or shut up’ which literally means ‘if you can do better, you go ahead’. This expression denies the justification of the criticism and hence counteracts negative connotations, yet it undeniably threatens the face of online discourse participants and damages the rapport between interactants.

(1) 你知道他有多努力吗? 你根本不了解他, 凭什么这么说他?

Ni zhidao ta you duo nuli ma? Ni genben bu liaojie ta, ping shenme zheme shuo ta?

‘Do you know how hardworking he is? You don’t know him at all; what makes you think you can comment on him?’

Another example is when Xiao was defined as a ‘失格的偶像’ *shigede oushiang* (‘unqualified idol’) who ‘漠视自身社会责任’ *moshi zishen shehui zeren* (‘ignores his own social responsibility’) by *Procuratorate Daily* (Wu 2020), the newspaper issued by the Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the PRC. His supporters defended him as a ‘娱乐圈打工仔/社畜’ *yulequan dagongzai/shechu* (‘showbiz gig boy/slave’) to extenuate Xiao’s identity and to mitigate negative connotations (2). The valence approach adopted here is similar to the specificity approach (Anchimbe 2009) that sifts through a set of concepts to find a specific one by means of contextualising remarks. Note that *shechu* ‘corporate slave’, with a literal meaning ‘corporate livestock’, is borrowed from Japanese to denote subjugated staff. The use of *shechu* and *dagongzai* ‘gig boy’ is to embody Xiao’s innocence in the entertainment industry and incapability to assume responsibilities. In example (2), the verb 黑 *hei* that is originally a noun/adjective ‘black’ is widely employed as a fandom neologism to describe the act of smearing celebrities; *hei* serves as the antonym of 粉 *fen* ‘fan; to be a fan of’, because *fen* literally means ‘pink’, whereas the black colour is the opposite (Chen 2017). Regarding the familial title 哥哥 *gege* ‘older brother’ in (2), currently it is prevailing in Chinese fandom to call young male stars ‘older brother’, though fans are not necessarily younger than them. Pronouns of other-address are regarded as an embodiment of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). Chinese linguistic politeness is not only instrumental in the sense of mitigating face threat, but also normative, as embodied by the use of Chinese address terms. The employment of address terms can be pinpointed based on socially sanctioned ascription in and expectations for respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement (Gu 1990, 1992, Chen 2013). In this context, *gege* is not used to convey a sense of familial bonds, but to express affection and imply a sexual connotation, analogous to the Korean word ‘oppa’.¹

(2) 我们哥哥只是娱乐圈清清爽爽的打工仔, 有人故意在黑他。

Women gege zhi shi yulequan qingqingbaibaide dagongzai, you ren guyi zai hei ta.

‘Our older brother is just an innocent showbiz gig boy; there’re people smearing him deliberately.’

5.1.2. Correction strategy

Second, Xiao and his fans withdraw or redress previously-made statements or keep a distance from earlier-held positions that are potentially negative under current circumstance. For instance, following a caution issued by the Chinese Academy of History on celebrity worship on 10 May 2020, Xiao responded on his Weibo account that ‘我不需要应援’ *wo bu xuyao yingyuan* ‘I don’t need support’. However, this claim contradicts what he has indicated in his previous Weibo post that seeing fans’ support is satisfactory, as in (3), and fans also echo Xiao’s denial of his previous word provoking support (4). By means of declining authorship of sensitive information, Xiao and his supporters do not stand accused of prior remarks, thereby refraining from taking responsibilities for controversy. Framing in discourse decides the meaning the audience is permitted to perceive, with a purpose to evade, persuade, misinform or distort (Anchimbe 2009). Therefore, such self-contradictory statements threaten the face of online anti-fans and non-fans. Note that in (3) the fandom neologism 爆肝 *baogan* ‘to explode liver’ actually means ‘to stay up (increasing idols’ social media traffic and/or creating data)’: the reason is that according to traditional Chinese medicine, staying up late is detrimental to human liver, so staying up late for idols and hurting one’s own liver are linked together as cause and consequence in a comic, exaggerated fashion.

(3) 当我看到你们为我熬夜爆肝, 为我应援 ... 我觉得吧, 这就是满足。

Dang wo kandao nimen wei wo aoyebaogan, wei wo yingyuan ... wo jue de ba, zhe jiu shi manzu.

‘When I see you staying up for me and supporting me ... I think this is exactly satisfaction.’

(4) 我们哥哥从来没说过需要应援, 你哪只眼看到他说了?

Women gege conglaimi shuo guo xuyao yingyuan, ni na zhi yan kandao ta shuo le?

‘Our older brother has never said he needs support; through which eye did you see him saying?’

5.1.3. Non-committal strategy

Third, Xiao and fans also resort to non-committal strategy by avoiding making binding commitments, so as to maintain a position that is construed as positive. In other words, expressions they use do not commit or bind them to future actions. When asked in an interview whether idols were supposed to manage fans, Xiao expressed his disagreement and emphasised that idols and fans were equal (Zhang 2020). Immediately afterwards, Xiao’s remarks were condemned by 227-ers, yet his fans stuck to his non-committal strategy on Weibo by pointing out the lack of feasibility and obligation for stars to manage an enormous number of fans whom they did not know, as in (5-6). It is notable that apart from

lexical choice, (6) demonstrates an additional element of impoliteness via its employment of a rhetorical question with sarcasm.

(5) 这么多粉丝怎么可能管好每一个人?

Zheme duo fensi zenme keneng guan hao meiyige ren?

'There're so many fans; how can it be possible to manage every single one of them?'

(6) 爸妈老师都管不了的人还指望一个陌生人去管吗?

Bama laoshi dou guan buliao de ren hai zhiwang yi ge moshengren qu guan ma?

'For those who can't even be managed by parents and teachers, do you count on a stranger to manage them?'

5.2. Face-threatening acts

A contentious 227-related controversy involves the release of Xiao's single *Spotlight*, release on 25 April 2020. The single attracted over 33 million purchased downloads, earning more than 112 million RMB in total sales (Bi and Wen 2020, Mahyuni 2020). Xiao's fans reportedly helped this sales record by buying an average of 66 repeated copies (of the same song) per head. Moreover, the high ratings were also believed to be attributed to Xiao's fans, with the vast majority of comments praising the song on music and entertainment platforms explicitly emotional and irrelevant to the artistic value of the song itself (Li 2020, The Economist 2020). Additionally, a number of senior fans issued Weibo posts instructing every fan to purchase at least 105 (and up to 300) downloads. Fans were required to post electric receipts as proof, causing some underage fans to resort to online microlending services in order to support Xiao (He 2020).

After the release of *Spotlight*, fans, especially senior and professional ones, urged fellow fans to purchase multiple downloads of the single. In example (7), the poster first rejects the advice of 'doing what you can' proposed by other fans, and then redefines the idiom *liangliexing* 'to do what you can' as 'to make your biggest effort' and even going beyond one's ability. In this statement, the poster neglects the rapport with co-fans who have made the suggestion, by introducing a new perspective/opinion. Since the request 'if you can buy 100 copies, clench your teeth to make it 300' in (7) is so widespread on the Internet, it even becomes a gag and idiomised neologism 买一咬三 *mai yi yao san* 'buy one clench three'. In example (8), another fan directly challenges the rapport with other fans by accusing them of being anti-fans. In (9), the poster threatens the face of other fans by questioning their interactants' willingness to spend money on their idol. These face-threatening acts are interactional breaches that are frank, rude or selfish in specific social and interactional contexts (Brown and Levinson 1987). They cause facework collision in the form of communication clashes (Ting-Toomey 2012).

(7) 量力而行不等于买十张八张意思意思,量力而行是让你尽最大努力!

Liangliexing bu dengyu mai shi zhang ba zhang yisiyisi, liangliexing shi rang ni jin zuida nuli!

能买100张就咬咬牙买300张!

Neng mai 100 zhang jiu yaoyao ya mai 300 zhang!

“Doing what you can” doesn’t mean you buy eight or ten copies casually; “doing what you can” means you make your biggest effort! If you can buy 100 copies, then clench your teeth to make it 300!’

(8) 劝大家少买的, 一定是黑粉!

Quan dajia shao mai de, yiding shi heifen!

‘Those who persuade everyone to buy less must be anti-fans!’

(9) 人手105张很难吗? 一支口红钱你都不愿意吗?

Renshou 105 zhang hen nan ma? Yi zhi kouhong qian ni dou bu yuanyi ma?

‘It’s hard to buy 105 copies per head? You aren’t even willing to spend the money of a lipstick?’

In example (10) below, the poster’s comparison of fans who only purchase a couple of downloads with non-fans challenges those fans’ identity in three aspects: the individual self-perception as Xiao’s fan, the self-presentation and impression in interaction with fellow fans, as well as the collective identity shared by the whole cohort. As a consequence, this face-threatening act neglects or even challenges the rapport between the poster and their readers. Compared to example (9), which only questions co-fans’ loyalty, example (10) further challenges their identity: group membership has value and significance to fans (Tajfel 1972), and group identification is correlated with fans’ self-esteem (Lee 1985).

(10) 买一两张? 你和路人有什么区别?

Mai yi liang zhang? Ni he luren you shenme qubie?

‘Buying one or two copies? What’s the difference between you and a non-fan?’

5.3. Moral coercion

Even though some fans might be reluctant to waste money on repeated purchase of the same single, or doubt or even disapprove of the phenomenon of underage fans borrowing money or using their parents’ money to purchase the song, they feel obliged to support Xiao, encouraged by statements such as (11-13) from their online interlocutors. Example (11) links Xiao’s popularity and commercial value with the song’s sales and implicitly with fans’ loyalty and efforts. The first sentence in (12) further indicates that the amount of money one is willing to spend on the idol is in direct proportion to their devotion to the idol; it overcomes the issue of meaningless repeated purchase and even glorifies such waste in the name of love. The following sentence motivate Xiao’s fans through comparison to fans

of other idols, additionally echoing the notion in the preceding sentence that one's love is embodied by the money they spend. Example (13), further enhances interlocutors' moral pressure, as it attributes the criticism Xiao has received to his fanbase's misconduct, so the sales volume should be naturally regarded as repayment of Xiao's damaged career, income and public image. Although statements in (11-13) are not persuasive linguistically or in terms of face, they are effective in terms of moral coercion.

(11) 业内对待哥哥的态度, 全看专辑的销量!

Yenei duidai gege de taidu, quan kan zhuanji de xiaoliang!

'The way the showbiz treats our older brother entirely depends on the song's sales!'

(12) 不要按需购买, 要按爱购买。看看别家粉有多努力!

Buyao an xu goumai, yao an ai goumai. Kankan biejia fen you duo nuli!

'Don't buy based on need, but on love. Look at how much effort other fanbases have made!'

(13) 这是我们欠他的! 他为你承受的恶意, 你要拿这次销量来还!

Zhe shi women qian ta de! Ta wei ni chengshou de eyi, ni yao na zheci xiaoliang lai huan!

'This is what we owe him! You must use the sales to repay the malice he suffers because of you!'

It is noteworthy that example (14) below entails not only moral coercion, but also impoliteness. 白嫖 *baipiao* in (14) is a neologism frequently used in Chinese *fanquan* ('fan circle') which literally means 'to solicit a prostitute for free' and describes the act of not spending money or time on idols. *Baipiao* is notorious for its incitement of irrational spending on celebrities realised via peer pressure and humiliation. Moreover, the employment of this derogatory neologism of vulgarity and sexism displays impoliteness and hence the poster's neglect or challenge of the rapport with their interlocutors. Similarly, (15) is another example showing impoliteness. In addition to sarcastic rhetorical questions, the post features an insulting adjective 蠢 *chun* 'stupid' and an Internet neologism 艹尼玛 *caonima* which is the homophone of a very offensive expression 肏你妈 *caonima* 'f**k your mum'.

(14) 不要给自己白嫖找借口还带偏其他人!

Buyao gei ziji baipiao zhao jiekou hai daipian qita ren!

'Don't find any excuse for soliciting a prostitute for free and also mislead others!'

(15) 有些人是真蠢啊还是真蠢啊? ... 艹尼玛的,

Youxie ren shi zhen chun a haishi zhen chun a? Caonima de,

这就是你们说的买爆? 我看你还是粉别人吧!

zhe jiu shi nimen shuo de mai bao? Wo kan ni haishi fen bieren ba!

'Are some people stupid or really stupid? ... F**k, is this just what you call "explosive buying"? I think you better still idolise others!'

As can be seen from the total sales of *Spotlight* and fans' average purchase, despite its impoliteness, the linguistic strategy used in requests is indeed effective. Moreover, by 31 October 2020, eight months after the 227 Incident, Xiao still appears in TV series and programmes, which means the linguistic strategies fans have been using to defend Xiao's reputation work to some extent.

Xiao's fans offer mutual support and motivational boost within their virtual community, thereby maintaining and enhancing fanbase integration and cohesion. Nevertheless, when engaging in out-group interaction with anti-fans and non-fans, Xiao and his fan base employ linguistic avoidance in a manner that is less other-face oriented by directly challenging interlocutors' face. Since the concept of face-threatening acts is established as the key element of politeness, some self-contradictory statements also violate politeness norms, and the rapport in interactional dynamics is consequently neglected or even challenged.

In terms of the purchase requests imposed on co-fans to boost Xiao's sales volume, a salient characteristic fans exhibit pertains to identity. Spending money to support the idol is linked to fans' individual and collective identity, so one's self-perception and self-presentation are denied if they fail to meet the requests of boosting sales. That is to say, these face-threatening requests neglect or challenge the identity of readers.

Another conspicuous property of fans' purchase requests concerns moral coercion that manipulates their interactants' commitment to morality. The requests capture the moral high ground and simultaneously exert psychological pressure on fans through establishing a claimed and exaggerated correlation between supporting the idol and ethical practice.

6. Discussion

In their online interactions with each other, Xiao's fans display rapport enhancement and rapport maintenance. It is worth mentioning that prior to the 227 Incident, fans mainly interacted with each other within their 'super topic' space for Xiao. However, after the 227 Incident, Xiao's fans also communicated via a new 'super topic' created specifically to target Xiao's antagonists. Through fighting collaboratively against their common enemies who are accused to be 'paid smear campaigners,' Xiao's fan base further strengthens internal rapport.

The correction strategy of linguistic avoidance discussed by Anchimbe (2009) is a means of face-saving concerning reassessment or reanalysis of statements on grounds that they were misunderstood, taken out of context, over-applied to incompatible situations, or

analysed with bias. However, the linguistic avoidance strategy used by Xiao and his fans sometimes involves denial of earlier statements that are analysed in an unbiased manner without misunderstanding, such as those in examples (3-4). In doing so, they fail to maintain their integrity and reasonable face. Since one's character can be inferred from one's behaviour, the quality of integrity pertains to the inner states of mind steering one's external self-presentation, so the image of being trustworthy cannot be sustained if one appears to be inconsistent, irresponsible and unfaithful. If presented to be self-opinionated and ostentatious, one would betray others' confidence and damage one's own 'discreet' face (Lim 2009). Schlenker and Pontari (2000: 201) regard self-presentation concerns as pervasive in all social interactions. They note that to some people, self-presentation is inherently pretentious and duplicitous, because information can be manipulated to exert an intended impact, and hence can be disingenuous and insincere. As a consequence, the correction strategy of linguistic avoidance used by Xiao and his fans is prone to neglecting or even challenging rapport with their online co-participants.

The purchase requests made by Xiao's fans exhibited distinctive features of online communication. Social media demonstrate a salient attribute: information recipients on social platforms are entitled to freedom to create, disseminate and transfer information in a one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many fashion. However, social media impose less peer pressure and formal forms of enforcement on people, and thus weaker moral awareness and self-regulation (Shao and Wang 2017).

Furthermore, some statements successfully invoke fans' sense of guilt and hence compensation mentality, and some requests display obvious impoliteness. 227-ers, therefore, refer to this phenomenon as 赎罪式追星 *shuzui shi zhuixing* 'atonement-style star worship' or 邪教式追星 *xiejiao shi zhuixing* 'heresy-style star worship'. Fundamentally, moral coercion, as reflected in requests made by fans online, results from confusion within the range of moral judgement, and it functions as an excuse for public dispute and a tool for interest negotiation.

7. Conclusion

Since its outbreak on 27 February 2020, the 227 Incident has triggered a plethora of related posts and comments on Weibo, contributed by netizens of a wide social spectrum. It can be observed that in their posts and comments, Xiao and his fans adopt the approach of linguistic avoidance, including the valence strategy that alters negative connotations to positive ones, the correction strategy that generates a new intended statement, as well as the non-committal strategy that avoids making binding commitments. Nevertheless, such linguistic avoidance strategies fail to maintain or enhance rapport, but neglect or even challenge rapport between online interactants.

I also explore in-group requests made by senior and professional fans, which urge the rest of the fan base to purchase Xiao's single. In their interaction, posters damage the identity of readers in individual, relational and collective aspects. Some requests also show

impoliteness owing to the employment of derogatory or vulgar *fanquan* neologisms, rhetorical questions with sarcasm and offensive slang. Moreover, when making requests, some fans deploy moral coercion to manipulate their online interlocutors.

As an ongoing topical issue, the 227 Incident has provoked discussions from a range of disciplinary perspectives including sociology, economy, psychology, criminology, ideology and cultural studies. Further research could be conducted on the 227 Incident from different angles, analysing both Xiao's fan base and 227-ers. For instance, areas of exploration include the way neutral and negative opinions about Xiao are utilised by fans, the linguistic techniques of lead fans; the strategies fans adopt to divert public attention away from Xiao's and their own mistakes; methods 'data fans' use to increase online traffic and promote rankings; and the debate between Xiao's fans and 227-ers about real person slash. Both linguistic and non-linguistic elements can be investigated in a more comprehensive and in-depth fashion.

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Note:

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