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Contextual variations of internal and external modifications in Chinese requests: Effects of Power and Imposition

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This study investigates contextual variations in mitigation production (consisting of internal and external modifications) in idealistic Chinese request-making (i.e., what native Chinese speakers consider appropriate to say in hypothetical scenarios). The participants were 22 native Chinese speakers recruited from a university in China. They completed a 20-item Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT) tapping two contextual variables: power and imposition. The results show that: (1) both power and imposition exerted significant influence on the frequency of producing internal and external modifications, (2) the various internal and external modifiers were differentially associated with the two contextual variables, and (3) the preferred sequential organization of external modifications differed according to context types.

Keywords: Request, modifications, Chinese, contextual variation, power, imposition, sequential organization

1. Introduction

One important consideration in daily speech communication is to convey politeness through the use of linguistic devices that can modify the tone of speech. Such linguistic devices are called mitigations (Caffi 1999, 2007; Fraser 2010; Thaler 2012). In spite of their importance in daily communication, when and how mitigations are used in Chinese remain under-researched topics within the field of linguistic politeness. Specifically in discussing the speech act of request-making, the mitigating effects are realized through the use of internal and external modifications. Yet, only a handful of studies (e.g., Dong 2008; Jia & Huang 2008; Kirkpatrick 1991; Rue & Zhang, 2008; Zhang 1995; Zhu, 2017) have empirically investigated internal and external modifications involved in Chinese requests, and few have examined whether and how key contextual factors such as those outlined in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory affect the use of request modifications (e.g., Hong 2002; Rue & Zhang, 2008). Investigating contextual variations of request modifications is a meaningful topic because it is the appropriate match between linguistic forms and contexts that give rise to linguistic politeness. This study aims to contribute to the development of research on Chinese mitigations in general by examining whether and how internal and external modifications used in request-making are influenced by two contextual variables (i.e., power and imposition).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Request modifications and contextual variations

According to Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989), a request sequence can be segmented into three main components: alerter(s), head act(s), and external modification(s), as shown in the following example:

(1) 陈	老师,	我	没有	收到	您的	邮件。	您	看
<i>Chén</i>	<i>lǎoshī,</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>méiyǒu</i>	<i>hōudào</i>	<i>nín de</i>	<i>yóujiàn .</i>	<i>Nín</i>	<i>kàn</i>
Chen	Professor,	I	have not	receive	your	e-mail.	You	see
	您	能	再	给	我			
	<i>nín</i>	<i>néng</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>gěi</i>	<i>wǒ</i>			
	you	can	again	to	me			
	发	一下	邮件	吗?		谢谢!		
	<i>fā</i>	<i>yīxià</i>	<i>yóujiàn</i>	<i>ma?</i>		<i>Xièxie!</i>		
	send	a little	e-mail	PARTICL?		Thanks		

‘Professor Chen, I have not received your e-mail. Do you think you could resend it to me? Thanks!’

In the above example, 陈老师 (*Chén lǎoshī*, Professor Chen) is the alerter, which functions to catch the interlocutor’s attention. 您看您能再给我发一下邮件吗 (*Nín kàn nín néng zài gěi wǒ fā yīxià yóujiàn ma*, Do you think you could resend the e-mail to me) is the head act, because it most explicitly realizes the intended request, and also because it is independent of other components of the request sequence. Outside the boundary of the head act, 我没有收到您的邮件 (*Wǒ méiyǒu shōudào nín de yóujiàn*, I have not received your e-mail) (i.e., providing a reason for the request) and 谢谢 (i.e., *xièxiè*, thanks) are both external modifications that function to moderate the tone of the request. In addition to the external modifications, the use of 您 (*nín*, an honorific pronoun), 您看 (*nín kàn*, a consultative term), and 一下 (*yīxià*, an understater) within the boundary of the head act also serves the purpose of mitigating the tone of speech. Linguistic devices that provide mitigating effects within a request head act are known as internal modifications.

As the above examples can show, internal modifications in Chinese are typically lexical and phrasal structures with a mitigating function. External modifications, on the other hand, are semantic formulae (i.e., meaning-based strategies) that are not associated with fixed linguistic forms. Both internal and external modifications contain sub-categories. For example, internal modifications include sub-categories such as understater (e.g., 一下, *yīxià*, a little bit), downtoner (e.g., sentence-final particles such as 吧 *ba*, 嘛 *ma*, and 呢 *ne*), consultative terms (e.g., 你看, *nǐ kàn*, in your view), and politeness markers (e.g., 请, *qǐng*, please), etc. External modifications include sub-categories such as grounders (e.g., providing justification/reason for a request), thanking (i.e., thanking one’s interlocutor for performing a request), and sweeteners (i.e., flattering one’s interlocutor), etc.

Whether and how internal and external modifications are used in making requests is contingent upon the influences of contextual factors. Request modifications are specific types of politeness strategies, which, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), are employed to address people’s face needs. Face refers to one’s public self-image consisting of positive and negative

aspects (Brown & Levinson 1987): the positive face means one's desire to be liked by other members of a society, and the negative face refers to one's desire to be free of imposition. In asking people to do things, a request maker threatens his/her interlocutor's negative face. The degree of the face being threatened by an act (including requests) can be assessed based on three key contextual factors: Power (P), Social distance (D), and Rank of imposition (R). While the three contextual factors can determine together the amount of face being threatened, each factor can also exert its own influence independently. Specifically, power refers to the status difference between interlocutors; social distance, on the other hand, reflects the frequency of interaction between interlocutors. Finally, rank of imposition indicates the extent to which an act affects one's desire for public approval (i.e., positive face) or of self-determination (i.e., negative face). Generally, a greater amount of face being threatened entails more efforts to address face needs. In terms of requests, this means more frequent use of modifications and/or employing various types of modifications. For example, asking for a small favor from one's good friends (e.g., borrowing a pen for temporary use) may not involve any modification, whereas asking for a big favor from one's professor (e.g., extending the deadline of a term paper) will likely lead to the use of multiple internal (e.g., using language-specific honorifics such as 您 *nín* in Chinese) and external modifiers (e.g., apologizing, and explaining the reason/justification for the extension). Based on the above understanding, contextual variation of request modifications in this study is understood as the variation in frequency and type of internal and external modifications as a result of the influence of contextual variables.

2.2 Internal and External Modifications in Chinese Requests

To date, research on internal and external modifications in Chinese requests remains limited in that most studies have focused on describing the linguistic forms and/or strategies that can serve mitigating functions (e.g., Dong 2008; Jia & Huang 2008; Jiang 2012; Kirkpatrick 1991; Lu & Wu 2005; Zhan 1992; Zhang 1995); very few studies have investigated contextual variations of using modifications, that is, whether and how the distribution of modifications is influenced by contextual variables such as power and imposition (Hong 1996; Rue & Zhang, 2008; Zhang & Wang 1997). In the following, existing studies on internal and external modifications will be reviewed first, followed by a review of the literature regarding the effects of contextual variables on the use of internal and external modifications.

With respect to research on internal modifications in Chinese requests, Zhan's (1992) study was pioneering. While her book mainly focuses on demonstrating how Brown & Levinson's (1987) various politeness strategies (e.g., positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies) are realized in Chinese by citing examples selected from modern Chinese novels, Zhan identified several linguistic forms as tone softeners, including verb reduplication (e.g., 开开门, *kāikāi mén*, open the door), 一下 (*yīxià*, a little bit), and sentence-final particles (e.g., 啊 *a*). Zhan did not, however, provide a categorization of internal modifications, nor did she compile a list of internal modifiers.

As another significant step, Zhang (1995) adopted the framework set by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) to compile a list of Chinese internal modifications with sub-categories and ample examples. She collected data through a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) with 12 request-making scenarios that varied in contextual variables such as power, social distance, and imposition (e.g., a policeman asking a driver to move a car; borrowing a large sum of cash from one's friend). Thirty native

Chinese speakers from China completed the WDCT. Based on the data collected, Zhang proposed a coding system for internal modifications, including syntactic downgraders (e.g., conditional clause such as 要是...; *yàoshì* ..., If...) and various lexical downgraders (e.g., downtoners like 吧, *ba*). Zhang did not, however, investigate contextual variations in the use of internal modifications.

Recent research on Chinese internal modifications appears to focus on delineating the pragmatic functions of specific linguistic forms. For example, Lu & Wu (2005) compared the functions of three mitigators in Chinese requests, namely, *verb*, *verb* + 一下 (*verb* + *yīxià*), and *verb reduplication*. Relying on several sample request utterances, the researchers argued that these three forms conveyed descending degrees of imposition in terms of how much freedom a requestee enjoys in not complying with a request. In another study, Jiang (2012) discussed the multiple pragmatic functions of the construction *verb* + 一下 (*verb* + *yīxià*), including its role in request making. Jiang's data consisted of a selection of utterances containing targeted construction gleaned from two Chinese TV series. Her analyses showed, among other things, the mitigating effect of 一下 (*yīxià*, a little bit) in Chinese requests.

As the aforementioned review of research on internal modifications in Chinese requests can show, researchers have generally focused on identifying and compiling linguistic forms that can be used as internal modifications (e.g., Zhan 1992; Zhang 1995) or on detailing the pragmatic function of specific internal modifiers (Lu & Wu 2005; Jiang 2012). While it is important to know which forms can function as internal modifiers in Chinese requests, it is equally desirable to examine the contextual distribution of internal modifications, because findings in this regard can reveal the conditions under which one may or may not use internal modifications in order to be appropriate and polite. Empirical research in this regard is clearly needed.

Turning to research on external modifications in Chinese requests, while compiling a list of possible external modifiers has received attention in the field (e.g., Zhan 1992; Zhang 1995), the main scholarly focus has been on investigating the preferred sequential organizations of external modifications in relation to request head acts. In theory, external modifiers can occur before, after, and both before and after request head acts. Several researchers have reported that native Chinese speakers prefer to place external modifications prior to request head acts (e.g., Dong 2008; Kirkpatrick 1991; Jia & Huang 2008; Zhu, 2017). For example, Kirkpatrick analyzed 40 letters written by native Chinese speakers to a radio station to request information, service, and products. Thirty-seven of the 40 letters were organized in such a way that a request(s) was put forward following facework (e.g., praising the service of the radio station) and grounder (i.e., justification/reason for a request). The three letters that neglected facework and placed requests before grounder(s) were generally considered impolite by a group of native speakers, even though the requests involved in the three letters were less imposing in terms of content. Also drawing on authentic data (i.e., e-mails with requests), Zhu (2017) examined, among other things, the cross-cultural difference in rhetorical structure of request-making between Chinese and British graduate students. He found that the inductive strategy (i.e., presenting background information and/or grounders before request head acts) dominated the Chinese students' e-mail requests, accounting for 95.40% of the data; by contrast, the inductive and deductive (i.e., presenting background information and/or grounders after request head acts) strategies were more or less equally preferred by the British students. Because facework strategies, providing background information, and grounders are sub-categories of external modifications within the framework mentioned earlier (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), findings by Kirkpatrick (1991) and Zhu

(2017) suggest that, in Chinese requests that are considered to be appropriate, external modifications typically occur before head acts.

Several studies seem to lend further support to the aforementioned conclusions (e.g., Dong 2008; Hong 2002; Jia & Huang 2008). For example, Dong (2008) designed a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) with 14 request-making situations involving various roles (e.g., friends, classmates, professors, and service providers). The WDCT was completed by 25 native Chinese speakers. Out of the 220 request utterances that included external modifications, 133 (or 60.45%) contained external modifications before head acts. In contrast, 56 (or 25.45%) request utterances showed external modifications after head acts, and only 31 (or 14.09%) exhibited external modifications both before and after head acts. Similar patterns were found for the sequential organization of grounders (i.e., the most frequently occurring sub-category of external modification): out of the 164 grounders found in the data set, 122 (or 74.39%) came before head acts, and 42 (or 26.61%) were after head acts. These results corroborated Kirkpatrick's findings in showing that placing external modifications (including grounders) before head acts is a preferred discourse structure of Chinese requests.

As a further support to the above observations from a cross-cultural perspective, Jia & Huang (2008) compared English requests made by two groups of participants: native Chinese speakers and native English speakers who were professionals working in the academia. Qualitative analyses of field notes and e-mail exchanges in professional contexts revealed that native Chinese speakers typically placed external modifiers before request head acts, a discourse structure that contrasted sharply with the head act-first structure preferred by native English speakers (as the results of the study showed). These results showed that the non-native-like discourse structure exhibited in English requests produced by native Chinese speakers was due to the influence of the Chinese way of sequencing requests.

While the aforementioned studies on external modifications all point to a tempting generalization that the preferred sequential organization of Chinese requests is to place external modifications before head acts, a closer review of these studies indicates more refined works are needed to examine the validity of such a generalization. In particular, because the studies discussed above (e.g., Dong 2008; Kirkpatrick 1991; Jia & Huang 2008, Zhu, 2017) lumped all request-making situations together for analysis, they tended to overlook potential contextual variations in preferred sequential organization(s) of Chinese requests (e.g., see Hong's study reviewed below).

In fact, there has been empirical evidence suggesting that native Chinese speakers' preferred structure of organizing requests may be different according to certain contextual variables. In this regard, Hong's (2002) study is the only one that the researcher knows of that explored this issue. Hong designed a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) with three request-making scenarios that varied along the power continuum. One scenario involved a professor asking students to turn in a term paper by a certain date (higher power), one scenario was about borrowing lecture notes from one's classmates (equal power), and one scenario involved a patient asking a doctor to refill a prescription (lower power). The WDCT was administered to 46 native Chinese speakers of various dialects. Of particular relevance to the present study are the findings regarding the sequential organization of grounders (a sub-category of external modification) in relation to request head acts. While the higher power scenarios did not generate grounders, the other two scenarios were associated with different preferred sequential structures of grounders. In the equal power scenario, there were more post-grounders (i.e., providing reasons/justifications after request head acts, 40%) than pre-grounders (i.e.,

reasons/justifications followed by request head acts, 28%). In the lower power scenarios, however, pre-grounders (i.e., 58%) outnumbered post-grounders (i.e., 24%). Hong's findings suggest that the preferred sequential organization of Chinese requests may be contingent upon certain contextual variables such as power differences between interlocutors.

Hong's findings need to be complemented with additional empirical efforts to gain a more fine-grained understanding of contextual variations in the preference for sequential organizations of external modifications (including grounders). For example, it is legitimate to ask whether and how other contextual variables in addition to power would influence the choice of preferred sequential structure(s) of external modifications. To answer this question would involve a study that incorporates multiple contextual variables into its research design. Moreover, because all previously discussed studies have been either qualitative in nature or have relied only upon descriptive statistics (e.g., raw frequency, percentage), it is not possible to tell whether the observed differences bear any statistical significance. Studies with appropriate inferential statistical procedures can help advance this line of research. Finally, although grounder is typically the most frequently produced sub-category of external modifications in Chinese requests (Lee-Wong, 2000; Zhang, 1995; Zhu, 2017) and therefore merits focused research attention (like in Hong's study), one needs to be cautious in overgeneralizing Hong's findings because her study only concentrated on grounders, rather than on external modifications as a whole category (see Dong 2008; Kirkpatrick 1991; Jia & Huang 2008; Zhu, 2017). In other words, it remains an empirical question whether the observed effects of power on preferred sequential organization of Chinese requests are restricted to grounders only, or are applicable to external modifications as a whole category. Hence, both grounders and external modifications (as a whole category) should be examined in future research to answer this empirical question.

The review of the literature on internal and external modifications in Chinese requests shows scant research on contextual variations in using internal and external modifications. Studies investigating the role of various contextual variables in influencing the production of both categories of modifications are needed. Methodologically, studies with more sophisticated design (e.g., targeting more than one contextual variable) using inferential statistics, as well as studies examining both grounders and external modifications as a whole category, are needed to better evaluate the generalizability of existing research findings. This study aims to address these gaps in the literature. It proposes to examine whether and how oral productions of internal and external modifications are affected by two contextual variables (i.e., power and imposition) in terms of frequency and preferred sequential structure of Chinese requests. The two research questions are:

RQ1: How does the frequency of producing internal and external modifications vary according to power and imposition?

RQ2: How does the preferred sequential organization of external modifications and grounders vary according to power and imposition?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

Participants were 22 Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in a university in Beijing, China. There were 11 males and 12 females. They aged between 19 and 24 years with a mean of 21.75 years ($SD = 1.07$). The students majored in various academic fields, such as English, computer

science, information system management, finance, Spanish, and Chinese language and literature, etc.

3.2 Instrument

A 20-item Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT) was developed to collect the participants' oral productions of requests. The ODCT scenarios specifically tapped two contextual variables discussed in Brown & Levinson (1987), namely, power (P) and imposition (I). Power (P) was operationalized in terms of role relations (Spencer-Oatey 2000) and reflected status difference between two interlocutors. Power was a targeted contextual variable. Given the fact that the participants of this study were all university students living on campus, they should presumably have very frequent contact with two groups of people: friends/classmates and professors. As a result, the power variable of this study included two levels: equal power status (P1, interactions between two friends, 10 situations) and hearer higher power status (P2, student-professor interactions, 10 situations).

Imposition was the other targeted contextual variable in this study, because it was identified as a contextual variable that exerted great influence on Chinese requests, particularly on request strategies (Lee-Wong 2000; Yeung 1997), but few empirical results are available regarding whether it has a similar influence on request modifications. Imposition in this study was operationalized as the psychological difficulty of making requests (Takahashi 1998) with two levels: low imposition requests (i.e., small favors) and high imposition requests (i.e., big favors). Following Spencer-Oatey (1993), the researcher developed a metapragmatic assessment questionnaire as a pilot study to verify the two levels of imposition. The questionnaire included 47 request-making scenarios. Each scenario was followed by a six-point scale for measuring the psychological difficulty involved in putting forward the request, with the score of one representing the least difficult and the score of six the most difficult. The questionnaire was administered to 15 native Chinese speakers who did not participate in the main study. To qualify for a low imposition request scenario (R1), at least 80% of the native speakers needed to choose 1, 2, or 3 on the six-point scale; to qualify for a high-imposition scenario (R2), at least 80% of the native speakers needed to choose 4, 5, or 6 on the same scale. Twenty scenarios met these criteria. There were 10 low-imposition and 10 high-imposition scenarios.

As previously mentioned the ODCT included 20 items (i.e., scenarios) and tapped two contextual variables: power and imposition. Because power and imposition each included two levels, there were four context types, namely, equal power status and low imposition (P1R1), equal power status and high imposition (P1R2), hearer higher power status and low imposition (P2R1), and hearer higher power status and high imposition (P2R2). The 20 ODCT items were evenly divided into the four context types (See Appendix A for the 20 scenarios).

Finally, social distance, the third contextual variable included in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, was included as a controlled variable: participants were told explicitly that the persons involved in each request scenario knew each other very well.

3.3 Procedures

Participants completed the ODCT individually with the researcher in a quiet room on campus. In completing each item, they listened to a scenario description (in Chinese) played by a tape recorder while reading the same description printed in the questionnaire. Afterwards, they

responded orally with what they would say in that scenario. Their oral productions were recorded for analysis. Participants generally took 15-20 minutes to complete the ODCT.

3.4 Data analysis

Participants' oral productions, a total of 440 request utterances (20 utterances per person x 22 participants), were transcribed for analysis. To answer the First Research Question (RQ1), each request utterance was coded for internal and external modifications. The coding scheme was developed based on the existing literature (e.g., Lee-Wong 2000; Li 2014; Rue & Zhang, 2008; Wen 2014; Zhang 1995) to fit the context of this study. Two separate 2 (power) x 2 (imposition) repeated measures ANOVAs were performed to examine whether and how the frequency of producing internal and external modifications was influenced by the two contextual variables. The alpha level was set as .05.

To answer the Second Research Question (RQ2), external modifications and grounders (a sub-category of external modification) were first categorized in terms of sequential organizations: before (hereafter "prior"), after (hereafter "subsequent"), and both before and after head acts (hereafter "both"). These three types were compared in terms of frequency of occurrence in each of the four context types mentioned earlier (i.e., P1R1, P1R2, P2R1, and P2R2). Due to the violation of the normality assumption required for parametric statistical procedures, non-parametric procedures were used to answer RQ2: *Friedman* tests were performed first to examine whether there was any significant overall difference among the three types of sequential organizations. In the case of statistically significant results, *Wilcoxon* tests were conducted for follow-up pairwise comparisons. The alpha level was set as .05 for the *Friedman* tests and .017 for the *Wilcoxon* tests (for three comparisons).

4 Results

Research Question One (RQ1) asks about contextual variations in producing internal and external modifications. Table 1 displays the raw frequencies of specific internal modifiers that occurred at least once in the dataset. Some interesting patterns emerged from the frequency distributions. One internal modifier, the understater 一下 (*yīxià*, a little bit) appeared to be influenced by both power and imposition: it was produced 87 times (46 + 41) in P1 scenarios (equal power scenarios) compared to 50 times (32 + 18) in P2 scenarios (hearer higher power scenarios). On the other hand, this understater occurred 78 times (46 + 32) in R1 (low imposition) scenarios as opposed to 59 times (41 + 18) in R2 (high imposition) scenarios. These results indicate that 一下 (*yīxià*, a little bit) as an understater is more likely to be associated with low imposition and/or equal power request scenarios.

Several other internal modifiers appeared to be mainly influenced by either power or imposition. Concerning the effects of the power variable, the following internal modifiers were produced substantially more frequently in P1 (equal power) scenarios than in P2 (hearer higher power) scenarios: downtoners 吧 *ba*, 呗 *bei*, and verb reduplication forms such as 看看 (*kànkàn*, take a look); in contrast, politeness markers 麻烦 (*máfan*, to trouble) and 请 (*qǐng*, please), and the honorific pronoun 您 (*nín*) were used exclusively in P2 scenarios. Regarding the influence of the imposition variable, several internal modifiers were mostly produced in R2 (high imposition) scenarios than in R1 (low imposition) scenarios, including the downtoners 先 (*xiān*, first) and 顺

便 (*shùnbìan*, conveniently), the understater 一点儿 (*yī diǎr*), the consultative terms 您/你看 (*nín /nǐ kàn*, in your view), and conditional clauses such as 要是/如果... (*yàoshi /rúguǒ*, if...). The remaining internal modifiers not discussed here did not seem to be affected by either contextual variable, and this was primarily because of their low frequency of production.

Table 1. Raw frequency of internal modifiers across context types

Sub-types of internal modifications	P1R1	P1R2	P2R1	P2R2
Verb reduplication	12	6	1	1
Politeness marker				
麻烦 <i>máfan</i> to trouble	0	0	2	5
请 <i>qǐng</i> please	0	0	1	2
请问 <i>qǐngwèn</i> may I ask	0	0	0	1
Downtoner				
可能 <i>kěnéng</i> possible/probable	0	0	0	1
顺便 <i>shùnbìan</i> conveniently	0	1	0	5
稍微 <i>shāowēi</i> a little	0	0	0	2
先 <i>xiān</i> first	1	6	0	8
吧 <i>ba</i> sentence final particle	17	15	2	1
呢 <i>ne</i> sentence final particle	0	0	1	4
呀 <i>ya</i> sentence final particle	0	2	1	3
呗 <i>bei</i> sentence final particle	5	1	0	0
啊 <i>a</i> sentence final particle	1	0	2	5
Appealer				
行不行/行吗 <i>xíng bu xíng /xíng ma</i>	5	9	3	5
OK?				
好不好/好吗 <i>hǎo bu hǎo /hǎo ma</i>	3	2	0	0
OK?				
可以不可以/可以吗 <i>kěyǐ bù shì ba /kěyǐ ma</i> May I?	1	4	4	2
怎么样 <i>zěnmeyang</i> How is that?	0	1	0	0
成吗 <i>chéng ma</i> OK?	0	2	1	0
Subjectiviser				
(我)想 (<i>wǒ</i>) <i>xiǎng</i> I think	0	0	1	3
(我)觉得 (<i>wǒ</i>) <i>juéde</i> I feel	0	1	1	0
Understater				
一下 <i>yíxià</i> a little bit	46	41	32	18
(一)点(儿) (<i>yī diǎn (ér)</i>) a little bit	2	14	0	15
(一)些 (<i>yíxiē</i>) some	2	3	0	4
Other	1	2	0	0
Honorific				
您 <i>nín</i> honorific pronoun	0	0	65	53
Consultative term				
您/你看 <i>nín /nǐ kàn</i> in your view	0	4	1	14

你是不是 <i>nǐ shì bù shì</i> how about...	0	0	1	1
Hesitation marker				
(我)不知道 (<i>wǒ</i>) <i>bù zhīdào</i> (I) don't know	0	0	0	4
那个 <i>nà ge</i> that	1	2	4	7
就是 <i>jiùshì</i> just	0	1	1	4
Conditional clause				
	1	8	0	7

Note. P1: equal status; P2: hearer higher status; R1: low imposition; R2: high imposition

To complement the aforementioned results, Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of the frequency of occurrence of internal modifiers per request scenario. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of power on the frequency of producing internal modifications, $F(1, 21) = 13.80, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$, and a significant main effect of imposition, $F(1, 21) = 17.21, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .45$. The power x imposition interaction effect, however, was not significant, $F(1, 21) = 2.33, p = .14$. Due to a lack of significant interaction effect, two separate paired samples *t* tests were performed to further examine the observed main effects. The results showed that significantly more internal modifications were produced in hearer higher power status (P2) scenarios than in equal power status (P1) scenarios, $t(21) = -3.72, p = .001$. Moreover, significantly more internal modifications were used in high imposition (R2) scenarios than in low imposition (R1) scenarios, $t(21) = -4.15, p < .001$. The main effects of power and imposition on the frequency of producing internal modifications are summarized in Table 3.

Table 2. Frequency of producing internal and external modifications per scenario

	P1R1		P1R2		P2R1		P2R2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Internal	0.89	0.46	1.14	0.50	1.12	0.46	1.59	0.70
External	0.47	0.43	1.68	0.93	1.02	0.54	2.15	0.82

Table 3. Main effects of power and imposition on frequency of producing internal and external modifications

	Main effect of power	Main effect of imposition
Internal	P2 > P1	R2 > R1
External	P2 > P1	R2 > R1

Turning to the production of external modifications, Table 4 displays the raw frequencies of the external modifiers that were produced at least once in the data set. Grounder (i.e., providing reasons/justifications of requests) was the most frequently produced external modifier, and its occurrence appeared to be affected by both power and imposition: it was used 97 times in P1 (equal power) scenarios in comparison with 217 times in P2 (hearer higher power) scenarios; moreover, it occurred 115 times in R1 (low imposition) scenarios as opposed to 199 times in R2 (high imposition) scenarios. Most external modifiers were affected by either power or imposition. For example, *promise of reward* and *direct appeal* were exclusively used in P1 scenarios, whereas *thanking* was mainly associated with P2 scenarios. Concerning the role of imposition, eight external modifiers were mostly or even exclusively associated with R2 (high imposition) scenarios. These were *preparator*, *acknowledging difficulty in carrying out requests*, *getting a*

pre-commitment, cost minimizer, promise, apologizing, double checking compliance, and offering opting out. The remaining external modifiers occurred infrequently, which makes it difficult to investigate their contextual variations.

Table 4. Raw frequency of external modifiers across context types

Sub-types of external modifications	P1	P1	P2	P2
	R1	R2	R1	R2
Acknowledging a problem e.g., 我知道这是学期论文上交的最后期限... <i>Wǒ zhīdào zhè shì xuéqī lùnwén shàngjiāo de zuìhòu qīxiàn</i> ... I know this is the deadline for turning in the term paper...	0	0	0	1
Admitting difficulty in performing requests e.g., 我知道你很忙，然后那个地方比较远。 <i>Wǒ zhīdào nǐ hěn máng, ránhòu nà ge dìfang bǐjiào yuǎn</i> . I know that you are very busy, and that place is a bit far...	0	10	0	7
Apologizing e.g., 真是对不住了啊。 <i>Zhēnshì duìbuzhù le ā</i> . I am really sorry...	1	8	5	18
Cost minimizer e.g., 打车去吧，钱我报销。 <i>Dǎ chē qù ba, qián wǒ bàoxiāo</i> . You can get a Taxi, and I will reimburse you.	2	14	0	12
Direct appeal e.g., 拜托了。 <i>Bàituō le</i> . Please.	1	5	0	0
Disarmer e.g., (可能数目有点儿多)，你不要害怕啊。 <i>(Kěnéng shù mù yǒu diǎnr duō), nǐ bù yào hàipà ā</i> . (It might be a big amount of money), don't be scared.	0	1	0	0
Double checking compliance e.g., 没问题吧？ <i>Méiwèntí ba?</i> No problem, right?	0	5	0	5
Getting a pre-commitment e.g., 能不能帮我一下忙？ <i>Néngbùnéng bāng wǒ yīxià máng?</i> Can you help me?	0	5	0	1
Grounder e.g., 我实在是没有时间。 <i>Wǒ shízài shì méiyǒu shíjiān</i> . I really don't have time.	33	64	82	13 5
Moralizing statement e.g., 哥们之间帮一下忙，没问题吧？ <i>Gēmen zhījiān bāng yīxià máng, méiwèntí ba?</i> Brothers help each other. No problem, right?	0	1	0	0
Offering alternative	0	0	1	0

e.g., 或者我再给您一个别的邮箱。 <i>Huòzhě wǒ zài gěinín yī gè bié de yóuxiāng.</i> Or I can give you a different e-mail address.	0	0	1	2
Offering assistance	0	0	1	2
e.g., 这是我的 e-mail 地址。 <i>Zhè shì wǒ de e-mail dìzhǐ.</i> This is my e-mail address.				
Offering opting out	0	4	0	4
e.g., 不过如果你忙的话就算了。 <i>Búguò rúguǒ nǐ máng dehuà jiùsuàn le.</i> But if you are busy, don't worry about it.				
Preparator	8	24	5	17
e.g., 有件事要拜托你。 <i>Yǒu jiàn shì yào bàituō nǐ.</i> I have something to ask you for help.				
Promise	1	22	1	13
e.g., 我明天肯定还你。 <i>Wǒ míngtiān kěndìng huán nǐ.</i> I will make sure to return it back to you tomorrow.				
Promise of reward	1	5	0	0
e.g., 回来请你吃饭。 <i>Huílai qǐng nǐ chīfàn.</i> I will treat you a meal after you come back.				
Self-criticism	0	2	1	0
e.g., 我那个笔记特别不全。 <i>Wǒ nà ge bǐjì tèbié bù quán.</i> My notes are really not complete.				
Sweetener	0	8	3	5
e.g., 您这 ppt 做得太精彩了。 <i>Nín zhè ppt zuò de tài jīngcǎi le.</i> Your PowerPoint slides are so wonderful.				
Thanking	5	7	13	17
e.g., 谢谢你啦。 <i>Xièxie nǐ la.</i> Thank you!				

To supplement the aforementioned observations, Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of the frequency of occurrence of external modifiers per request scenario. Again, there was a significant main effect of power, $F(1, 21) = 37.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .64$, a significant main effect of imposition, $F(1, 21) = 81.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .80$, but the power x imposition interaction effect did not reach a significant level, $F(1, 21) = 0.25, p = .62$. Since there was no significant interaction effect, the researcher performed two separate paired samples t tests to examine the effects of power and imposition on the production of external modifications. Significantly more external modifications were used in P2 (hearer higher power) scenarios than in P1 (equal power) scenarios $t(21) = -6.14, p < .001$. In addition, more external modifications were produced in R2 (high imposition) scenarios than in R1 (low imposition) scenarios, $t(21) = -9.01, p < .001$. The main effects of power and imposition on the frequency of producing internal modifications are summarized in Table 3.

Research Question Two (RQ2) asks whether there is any contextual variation in the preferred sequence organization(s) of external modifications and grounders. Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics showing the frequency of three types of sequential organizations of external

modifications: “prior”, “subsequent”, and “both”. In P1R1 scenarios, a *Friedman* test revealed a significant overall difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 12.67, p = .001$. Follow-up *Wilcoxon* tests showed a significant difference between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -2.54, p = .004$), but not between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -1.27, p = .23$) or between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -2.14, p = .04$). In P1R2 scenarios, there was no significant difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 1.62, p = .45$. In P2R1 scenarios, a significant overall difference was found between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 18.71, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses showed significant differences between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -3.43, p < .001$), between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -3.31, p < .001$), but not between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -1.29, p = .27$). Finally, in P2R2 scenarios, again there was a significant overall difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 14.83, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses revealed significant differences between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -3.68, p < .001$), between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -2.75, p = .004$), but not between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -1.42, p = .16$). The results of the statistical analyses are summarized in the column under the heading “external modifications” in Table 6.

Table 5. Occurrence of external modifications in relation to request head acts

	P1R1		P1R2		P2R1		P2R2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Prior	0.14	0.19	0.30	0.22	0.48	0.22	0.51	0.28
Subsequent	0.19	0.21	0.25	0.24	0.15	0.13	0.09	0.15
Both	0.04	0.13	0.32	0.29	0.11	0.19	0.35	0.31

Table 6. Summary of contextual variations for external modifications and grounders

	External modifications	Grounders
P1R1	Prior = Subsequent; Prior = Both; Subsequent > Both	Prior = Subsequent > Both
P1R2	Prior = Subsequent = Both	Prior > Subsequent > Both
P2R1	Prior > Subsequent = Both	Prior > Subsequent > Both
P2R2	Prior = Both > Subsequent	Prior > Subsequent > Both

Note. = denotes no statistically significant difference; > denotes statistically significant difference with the category on the left side of the symbol having a larger frequency of production than the category on the right side.

Turning to contextual variations in the occurrence of grounders in relation to request head acts, Table 7 displays the descriptive statistics showing the mean frequency of three types of sequential organizations of grounders: “prior”, “subsequent”, and “both”. Concerning P1R1 scenarios, a significant overall difference in production frequency was found between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 13.79, p = .001$. Follow-up tests revealed significant differences between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -3.07, p = .001$), between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -2.89, p = .002$), but not between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -0.81, p = .99$). In P1R2 scenarios, there was a significant overall difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 27.91, p < .001$. Subsequent tests revealed significant differences between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -2.83, p = .003$), between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -3.88, p < .001$), and between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -2.72, p = .004$). In P2R1 scenarios, there was also an overall significant difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 38.00, p < .001$. Follow-up tests showed significant differences

between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -3.94, p < .001$), between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -4.18, p < .001$), and between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -3.49, p < .001$). Finally, concerning P2R2 scenarios, there was again an overall significant difference between the three types, $\chi^2(2, n = 22) = 31.68, p < .001$. Subsequent tests showed significant differences between “prior” and “subsequent” ($Z = -3.32, p < .001$), between “prior” and “both” ($Z = -3.96, p < .001$), and between “subsequent” and “both” ($Z = -2.81, p = .005$). The column under the heading “grounders” in Table 6 summarizes the findings of these statistical analyses.

Table 7. Occurrence of grounders in relation to request head acts

	P1R1		P1R2		P2R1		P2R2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Prior	0.14	0.17	0.43	0.25	0.53	0.17	0.68	0.28
Subsequent	0.13	0.16	0.15	0.20	0.15	0.13	0.15	0.20
Both	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.06

5 Discussion

RQ1 asks whether and how the frequency of producing internal and external modifications varies according to power and imposition. Statistical analyses revealed that both contextual variables significantly affected the production of both internal and external modifications. Generally, high imposition requests and higher hearer power status led to more frequent use of internal or external modifications. These findings make sense from the perspective of politeness theory proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). According to them, request-making is a face-threatening act (FTA), and the severity of an FTA is dependent upon contingent contextual variables such as power, social distance, and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 76). Hence, high imposition requests and asking for favors from someone of higher power status can lead to a higher degree of the severity of FTA, which requires more extensive mitigating efforts to convey politeness. In comparison, low imposition requests and asking for favors from someone of equal power status result in a lower degree of the severity of FTA; consequently, fewer modifications are needed to balance out the degree of face threat.

Other than the general patterns of modification production depicted above, perhaps more revealing are the results regarding how power and imposition affected the distribution of specific mitigators – these findings can indicate specific associations between particular mitigators and contextual variables. For both internal and external modifications, there were two types of associations with contextual variables: those primarily or exclusively affected by either power or imposition (e.g., the honorific pronoun 您 (*nín*) occurred exclusively in the P2 scenarios; *promise* as an external modifier was mainly used in R2 scenarios), and those influenced by both power and imposition (e.g., *grounder* as an external mitigator, and the understater 一下, *yīxià*, a little bit). While discussing the reasons underlying each of those associations is beyond the scope of this study, the findings reported here can enrich our understanding of the usage of certain modifiers. For example, although the mitigating function of 一下 (*yīxià*, a little bit) has been noted in the literature (e.g., Jiang 2012; Lu & Wang 2005; Zhang 1995), our findings further show that this function is more likely to be used in low imposition than in high imposition requests, and that it is more frequently produced in equal status scenarios than in hearer higher status scenarios. Among such instances, the linguistic structures containing 一下 (*yīxià*) include

verb + 一下 (*verb* + *yīxià*) and *verb* + *object* + 一下 (*verb* + *yīxià*), as shown in the following examples: 报纸借我看一下 (*Bàozhǐ jiè wǒ kàn yīxià*. Let me read your newspaper.), and 你能不能帮我一下? (*Nǐ néngbùnéng bāng wǒ yīxià?* Could you help me?). However, the two contextual variables did not appear to influence which of the two structures would be used in specific requests.

RQ2 investigates contextual variations in the preferred sequential organization(s) of external modifications in general and grounders in particular. The focus of this research question is twofold: the first is to investigate whether there is a predominant sequential organization(s) in each of the four context types (i.e., P1R1, P1R2, P2R1, and P2R2), and the second is to examine whether the predominant sequential organization(s) varies across the four context types. The results showed a complex picture for external modifications. As Table 6 shows, the predominant sequential organization(s) differed across the four context types. In P1R1 scenario, both “prior” and “subsequent” were equally dominating; in P1R2 scenarios, there was no dominating sequential organization; in P2R1 scenarios, “prior” was the only dominating sequential organization; and in P2R2 scenarios, “prior” and “both” were equally dominating. In spite of the variations, “prior” was the only recurring sequential organization across all four context types. In terms of the preferred sequential organization of grounders across the four context types, the patterns are more straightforward. On the one hand, the occurrence of “both” was almost negligible; on the other hand, between “prior” and “subsequent”, except in P1R1 scenarios where “prior” and “subsequent” were equally dominating, “prior” was the only dominating sequential organization in all three remaining context types (P1R2, P2R1, and P2R2). Overall, the only recurring sequential organization across all four context types was “prior”.

The aforementioned results partially confirmed previous findings in the literature. Regarding the preferred sequential organization of external modifications, the fact that “prior” was the sole dominating discourse structure or one of the dominating discourse structures across all four context types does seem to reaffirm the prevalent argument that the preferred discourse structure of Chinese requests is to place external modifications before head acts (Dong 2008; Jia & Huang 2008; Kirkpatrick 1991; Zhu, 2017). However, our findings clearly suggest a need for qualification of such an argument, because the other two sequential organizations (i.e., “subsequent” and “both”) were as dominating as “prior” in three of the four context types. In other words, it may be an overgeneralization to say that native Chinese speakers prefer to put forward their requests after external modifications regardless of contextual constraints.

With respect to the sequential organization of grounders, the results both confirmed and enriched those reported by Hong (2002). As in Hong’s study, “prior” was the only dominating sequential organization in hearer higher power scenarios (i.e., combining P2R1 and P2R2 scenarios together). In equal power scenarios, Hong reported more post-grounders than pre-grounders. However, our findings suggest that the situation may be less straightforward depending on the level of imposition involved in a request. Specifically, in equal power and low imposition scenarios, both “prior” and “subsequent” were equally dominating; in equal power and high imposition scenarios, “prior” was the sole dominating sequential organization. The discrepancy between Hong (2002) and this study could have two possible explanations. First, Hong was interested in the effects of power only, and she did not intend to examine the role of other contextual variables. In contrast, this study included both power and imposition variables by design, and therefore was able to obtain a nuanced picture regarding the effects of both contextual variables. Second, Hong’s study included only three scenarios, whereas this study

contained 20 scenarios. Hence, from a sampling perspective, this study is likely to yield more balanced and reliable results.

6 Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

In summary, this study investigated native Chinese speakers' contextual variations in producing modifications in request-making. The overall frequency of using internal and external modifications was significantly affected by both power and imposition; however, specific internal and external modifiers were found to be mainly associated with one or the other contextual variable. Concerning the preferred sequential organization(s) of external modifications in general and grounders in particular, it was found that the preferred (i.e., dominating) discourse structure(s) differed depending on context type. All of these findings point to the necessity of considering contextual constraints in researching request-making in Chinese. Request-making is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and its appropriateness in social communication is often contingent upon whether a speaker is able to utilize adequate linguistic resources (e.g., a specific internal modification device, a specific sequential organization of request-making) to address a hearer's negative face needs in specific contexts. In revealing the connections between specific forms of modifications for request-making and specific combinations of contextual variables, this study can contribute to a refined understanding of the complex form-function-context mappings in Chinese pragmatics.

This study is limited in three ways and future research is needed to further contribute to the development of this line of research. The first limitation is the relatively small sample size of 22 participants. The findings reported here are thus tentative and studies with a larger sample size are needed to check the generalizability of the findings. The second limitation is that only two contextual variables were included as independent variables in the design, while additional contextual variables such as social distance should also be explicitly examined for the effects on their use in request-making. Similarly, more levels within each contextual variable can also be included to enable a more fine-grained understanding of the effects of a specific contextual variable on request modifications. For example, in addition to equal power and hearer higher power scenarios, one can add hearer lower power scenarios to better investigate whether and how the three different levels of power difference can influence the use of request modification. Finally, although ODCI as a data collection instrument is widely used in pragmatics research, it is limited in terms of the authenticity of the data collected through it (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Hence, the findings reported in this study should be validated through naturalistic data.

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Appendix A Request Scenarios in the Oral Discourse Completion Test

P1R1 Scenarios (equal power status & low imposition)

1. During class break, LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow and read WANG, Ning's newspaper, which is on WANG, Ning's desk. LI, Xiaochen says:
2. There will be a talent show in the evening, and students are decorating the classroom. LI, Xiaochen wants to ask WANG, Ning, who is standing nearby, to get some thumbtacks. The thumbtacks are on a nearby desk. LI, Xiaochen says:
3. During class break, LI, Xiaochen's cell phone runs out of power. So LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow WANG, Ning's cell phone to send a text message. WANG, Ning is sitting next to LI, Xiaochen. LI, Xiaochen says:
4. In the classroom, LI, Xiaochen feels a bit stuffy, so he/she wants to ask WANG, Ning, who is sitting next to the window, to open the window. LI, Xiaochen says:
5. During class break, LI, Xiaochen's pencil does not work. So LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow one from WANG, Ning. LI, Xiaochen says:

P1R2 Scenarios (equal power status & high imposition)

6. There will be a concert on Sunday. LI, Xiaochen wants to go very much but does not have time to buy a ticket. So LI, Xiaochen wants to ask WANG, Ning to buy a ticket for him/her. LI, Xiaochen knows that WANG, Ning is very busy and the ticket box is a bit far from their university. LI, Xiaochen meets WANG, Ning. LI, Xiaochen says:
7. The final examination is coming within two days. LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow WANG, Ning's notes for one day and to give it back the next day. LI, Xiaochen knows that WANG, Ning will also need the notes to prepare for the exam. LI, Xiaochen meets WANG, Ning during class break. LI, Xiaochen says:
8. LI, Xiaochen has an internship next week and needs a laptop. LI, Xiaochen does not have a laptop but knows that WANG, Ning has just purchased a very expensive one a few days ago. So LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow WANG, Ning's laptop for one week. LI, Xiaochen meets WANG, Ning during class break. LI, Xiaochen says:
9. LI, Xiaochen wants to buy a laptop, which is a bit expensive, so he/she wants to borrow a comparatively large sum of money from WANG, Ning. LI, Xiaochen meets WANG, Ning. LI, Xiaochen says:
10. LI, Xiaochen's friend is coming to Beijing to visit him/her today. LI, Xiaochen cannot meet the friend at the airport as he/she has got some things to do today. So LI, Xiaochen wants to

ask WANG, Ning to help meet the friend at the airport. The airport is very far from their university and LI, Xiaochen knows that WANG, Ning is very busy. LI, Xiaochen says:

P2R1 Scenarios (hearer higher power status & low imposition)

11. Yesterday, Professor Chen gave out some handouts for his/her class. LI, Xiaochen didn't come to the class due to illness. So LI, Xiaochen wants to get a copy of the handout from Professor Chen. LI, Xiaochen comes to Professor Chen's office. LI, Xiaochen says:
12. LI, Xiaochen didn't quite understand one point during Professor Chen's lecture. So during class break, LI, Xiaochen wants Professor Chen to explain that point for him/her. LI, Xiaochen says:
13. At Professor Chen's office, LI, Xiaochen is discussing some questions with Professor Chen. LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow a pencil from Professor Chen so as to take down what they are talking about. LI, Xiaochen says:
14. Professor Chen used a PowerPoint file in his/her lecture. LI, Xiaochen wants to have a copy of the file. LI, Xiaochen meets Professor Chen after the class. LI, Xiaochen says:
15. Professor Chen said that he/she had sent the individualized assignments to each student's email box. But LI, Xiaochen hasn't got his/her e-mail and therefore wants to ask Professor Chen to send it again. LI, Xiaochen meets Professor Chen during class break. LI, Xiaochen says:

P2R2 Scenarios (Hearer higher power status & high imposition)

16. The final examination will be held the day after tomorrow. LI, Xiaochen cannot attend the exam on that day because he has got something to do, so he/she wants to ask Professor Chen to agree to let him/her take the exam one day after the test date. LI, Xiaochen says:
17. A term paper is due today but LI, Xiaochen hasn't finished it yet. So he/she wants to ask Professor Chen to agree to extend the due date for him/her. LI, Xiaochen comes to Professor Chen's office. LI, Xiaochen says:
18. In the school bookstore, LI, Xiaochen wants to buy a book, which is a bit expensive. But LI, Xiaochen finds that he/she didn't bring money. Just then, LI, Xiaochen sees Professor Chen, so he/she wants to borrow money from Professor Chen. LI, Xiaochen says:
19. Professor Chen is going to attend a conference in America. LI, Xiaochen wants to ask Professor Chen to help buy several books. LI, Xiaochen knows that the conference has a very tight schedule. LI, Xiaochen comes to Professor Chen's office. LI, Xiaochen says:
20. LI, Xiaochen wants to borrow a book from The Beijing Library but doesn't have a library card. LI, Xiaochen knows that Professor Chen has the card. So LI, Xiaochen wants to ask Professor Chen to go to The Beijing Library and help borrow the book. The Beijing Library is a bit far from their university. LI, Xiaochen comes to Professor Chen's office. LI, Xiaochen says: