The nature and consequences of topic avoidance in Chinese and Taiwanese close relationships

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Two studies examined topic avoidance in Chinese and Taiwanese opposite-sex friendships and romantic relationships. Five areas of topic avoidance emerged through analytic induction and cluster analysis: negative appraisal, relational issues, sexual issues, politics, and personal experience. Partner protection, negative relational impact, and self inefficacy emerged as the most common reasons for avoidance. Results revealed that friends, relative to romantic partners, engaged in higher levels of topic avoidance. Taiwanese participants, moreover, avoided discussing politics to a greater extent than did mainland Chinese participants. Lacking closeness was the main reason behind avoidance of political discussion. Topic avoidance was also linked to relationship quality, as relational satisfaction negatively predicted relational issue avoidance and topic avoidance breadth (i.e. the number of topics regularly avoided in the relationship). The authors explain these and other findings based on Chinese cultural codes and historically-embedded concepts that shape interpersonal interaction.

Key words: China, close friendship, politics, romantic relationship, Taiwan, topic avoidance.

Although openness and self disclosure are essential for building and maintaining personal relationships, partners must carefully choose how and when to disclose sensitive topics (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). As a result, topic avoidance – the purposeful aversion of particular topics – is common in relationships. Researchers have examined the tensions characterizing topic avoidance from multiple theoretical frameworks. Among the most prominent are privacy management (Petronio, 1991) and dialectical (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) theories. These theories help researchers conceptualize how relational partners balance competing needs for openness and closedness and communicatively construct rigid or permeable privacy boundaries in their relationship. We argue that topic avoidance can also be investigated from cultural perspectives, which, to date, have not been widely applied in the topic avoidance literature. In the current study, we investigate topic avoidance in China and Taiwan, and reframe the concept in light of cultural codes influencing relational communication.

This study utilizes a two-stage data collection. Stage one identifies the topics that are most commonly avoided in Chinese relationships, as well as the motivations underlying topic avoidance. Stage two explores the primary clusters of topic avoidance in Chinese relationships, and tests the interrelationships between topic avoidance, reasons for avoidance, relational satisfaction, and communication competence. We also test for differences between relational types and between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese individuals. Although many commonalities exist between mainland China and Taiwan, they have grown increasingly isolated over the past 100 years and have important political differences (Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004). These features could be relevant to interpersonal processes, such as topic avoidance.

Topic avoidance in Chinese relationships

The Chinese, more so than people from other cultures, emphasize sharing resources, self presentation and face concerns, and adaptation to others' opinions (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). These factors stem in part from the fact that Chinese society is composed of 'overlapping networks of people linked together through differentially categorized social relationships' (Fei, 1992, p. 20). Since as early as the 1940s, Chinese philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists have emphasized the importance of relational context and obligations in Chinese individuals' everyday social interaction (Fei, 1992; Fung, 2007). In the socialization process, Chinese children are taught early on to position themselves appropriately in a complicated social world, and to learn how to behave according to normative expectations within their networks (Hwang, 2008). To understand this process, one must appreciate several historically-embedded concepts characterizing the norms and implicit

rules guiding Chinese social interaction (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Yum, 1988). Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst (1996), for example, identified five unique features that shape Chinese communication practices: *hanxu*, *zijiren*, *mianzi*, *tinghua*, and *keqi (or limao)*, the first three of which are especially relevant to the current research and are elaborated below.

First, the concept of *hanxu* concerns the importance of indirect and non-verbal communication styles when interacting with others. *Hanxu* speaks to the necessity of equivocal and avoiding communication styles. In fact, to be direct in relational communication can violate expectations and cause problems. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) discussed the importance of indirectness, stating, 'A hesitant and indirect approach serves to grant the listener an equal footing with the speaker in a conversation' (p. 38). By not being direct, moreover, the speaker allows the listener to 'take an active role in deciphering messages' and constructing meaning (p. 38). The second concept, *zijiren*, highlights the distinctiveness of communication between in-group and out-goup members. Insider status plays an important role in shaping the nature of individuals' talk. Typically, individuals reserve personal talk and self disclosure for close friends and family members. Additionally, Gao and Ting-Toomey suggest that conflict can be more common with out-group than in-group members. Thus, to maintain harmony within in-group relationships, topic avoidance is essential, as it allows for relational partners to maintain preferred relational harmony and uphold politeness norms.

Finally, *mianzi* (face) is critical in Chinese interpersonal encounters, such that relational partners should interact in a way that maintains each others' self image. Maintaining one's own face and giving the other person face is vital in Chinese social interactions. Common face-saving practices, said Hwang (1987), include 'avoiding criticizing anyone, especially supervisors, in public; using circumlocution and equivocation in any criticism of another's performance' (p. 962). Similarly, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) suggest that people use non-confrontational, non-assertive, and indirect communication to show face concerns. Topic avoidance can therefore be a strategy for people to maintain face in social interactions.

In sum, the aforementioned concepts are highly relevant to topic avoidance, and cast light on how culture contextualizes this key feature of relational communication. Indeed, these concepts likely interrelate in their influence on topic avoidance. Depending, for instance, on whether the other person is a *zijiren* (insider) or *wairen* (outsider), an individual might perform *hanxu*, to avoid or reveal information in a manner that upholds each other's *mianzi* (face) needs. By delineating the topics most commonly avoided in Chinese relationships, as well as the motivations underlying avoidance, we can extend the study of topic avoidance into

the cultural realm and offer new ways to theorize about topic avoidance.

Stage one

Stage one seeks to uncover the specific topics most commonly avoided, and the underlying reasons for topic avoidance, in Chinese and Taiwanese relationships. Consistent with many previous investigations of topic avoidance (e.g. Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), we examine opposite-sex friendships and romantic relationships. Moreover, based on Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) initial analysis of topic avoidance in relationships, we also examine the reasons that partners avoid topics in their relationships. As Golish and Caughlin (2002) described, there is practical importance to considering both the content and reasons for topic avoidance. Determining the reasons for topic avoidance, the authors noted, helps determine if the avoidance is motivated by positive (e.g. avoiding serial arguments) or negative (e.g. undermining parental authority) intentions. Consistent with a dialectical perspective on topic avoidance, Golish and Caughlin showed that topic avoidance can simultaneously help and hurt relationships. It is thus essential to identify the specific topics of, and underlying reasons for, avoidance in mainland China and Taiwan.

RQ1: What topics are avoided in Chinese and Taiwanese relationships?

RQ2: What are the reasons for topic avoidance in Chinese and Taiwanese relationships?

Method

Participants and procedures. A total of 93 students from a major university in Beijing and 160 students from a national university in Taiwan responded to open-ended questions regarding topic avoidance and reasons underlying topic avoidance in a close opposite-sex friendship or romantic relationship. We based this approach on the one used by Baxter and Wilmot (1985). Participants were given space to list the topics they avoid and their reasons for avoidance. English to Chinese translations (when necessary) were completed by the first author who is a native Chinese speaker and a professor at a US university. A second researcher, also bilingual in Chinese and English, checked all translations word-by-word. When the translations were completed, two Chinese undergraduate students from a Chinese university carefully read the survey for unclear terms or phrases. The principal researcher and students convened to discuss appropriate word choice.

Overall, 68.2% ($n = 64$) of mainland Chinese students and 59% ($n = 94$) of Taiwanese students reported at least

one avoided topic. Of the total 158 participants, 65.2% (*n* = 103) reported on an opposite-sex friendship, and 32.3% (*n* = 51) reported on a romantic relationship. There were four participants with missing data. The average age of all participants was 23.79 (*SD* = 4.47; *range* = 18–48). Fifty three participants were male, and 105 were female.

Results

Data on topics were first coded by the first author using the category systems of Baxter and Wilmot (1985) and Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004). The categories were *state of the relationship* (13.3% of the total, e.g. 'How we feel about each other'), *extra-relationship activities* (18%, e.g. 'Partner's parents'), *relationship norms* (12.9%, e.g. 'Whether he is a virgin'), *prior relationships* (13.6%, 'My ex'), *conflict inducing topics* (9.2%, 'Politics'), and *negative self disclosure* (7.8%, 'My weight'). The data not captured by the first six existing categories (approximately 25%) were classified using analytic induction methods (Bulmer, 1979), whereby semantically-similar idea units were examined and combined. Categories were not pre-established, but rather emerged as each narrative was read and compared to other narratives. In this analysis, three additional categories emerged: *money-related issues* (8.8%, e.g. 'His income'), *private issues* (8.2%, e.g. 'Privacy'), and *negative discussion about the other* (3.7%, e.g. 'The way she dresses'). Data that remained uncodeable (4.1%) were coded as *other*. Coding reliability was calculated twice, once for the initial round of coding into the six categories, and once for the new categories. The coding for the reliability checks was conducted by two Chinese undergraduate assistants who were blind to the purposes of this study; note, these were different students from those who assisted in the translation process. Coding reliability was acceptable, with Scott's pi values of 0.84 and 0.89 for the initial six categories and the new categories. The first author made the final decision regarding any coding discrepancies. Though not a research question, exploratory analysis showed romantic partners, relative to friends, were more likely to list the topic of *prior relationships*. Friends, however, were more likely to list *private issues*.

In addition to the topics, participants provided 255 reasons for avoidance, which we initially coded using Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) categories. Four of their categories were present: *protection of the relationship* (18.4%, e.g. 'It will affect our relationship in a negative way'), which reflects partners' intention not to strain the relationship; *self vulnerability* (34.5%, e.g. 'Damage my self image'), which refers to the speakers' concern of hurting self image; *futility of discussion* (11.8%, e.g. 'There is no use talking about it'), which indicates the uselessness of

talking about the topic; and *not close enough* (7.1%, e.g. 'We are not that close yet'), which represents respondents' perception that they do not know their partners well enough. Two new categories also emerged in the data: *protection of the other person* (23.1%, e.g. 'Do not want to the other person to feel bad') and *traditional beliefs* (1.2%, e.g. 'Restricted by traditional moral values'). The latter category reflects topic avoidance due to moral values, as shown in the following comment: 'We are bonded by traditional ideology. Sex is a taboo topic'. Approximately 4% of the data (*n* = 10) were uncodeable in the categories. Coding reliability was conducted by the two Chinese undergraduate students who performed the topic reliability coding, and was found to be acceptable, with Scott's pi values of 0.82 and 0.86 for existing and new categories. Once again, any coding discrepancies were resolved by the first author. Exploratory analysis indicated that friends, compared to romantic partners, were more likely to list *futility of discussion* and *not close enough* as reasons for avoidance.

Discussion

Approximately 75% of the topics (*n* = 215) could be coded using Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) six categories of topic avoidance. Although the existing categories could capture most of the data in the Chinese samples, there are subtle differences in the content of the categories. For example, if one examines the specific content of the responses, it could be seen that for both the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese samples, over half of the responses coded into the category of extra-relationship activity were about family background. This study also yielded new categories of topic avoidance and reasons for avoidance not identified in the literature using North American samples. For both mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants, potential topics that damage one's own self image were avoided. Similarly, protecting the other person's feelings was the second most frequently listed reason for topic avoidance. These findings might reflect the influence of values, such as *mianzi* (face) and *hanxu*, in that taking the other's perspective is critical in interpersonal communication.

In general, mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants displayed much similarity in the topics they avoided and their reasons for avoidance. One of the few clear differences in the results between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants is that more than half of the conflict-inducing topics (*n* = 13) for Taiwanese participants concerned politics. This finding is not completely surprising, given the historical and current political situation in Taiwan. In stage two, then, we will further explore how political differences between China and Taiwan potentially relate to topic avoidance.

Stage two

Stage two builds upon the exploratory analyses in stage one. It aims to further decipher the primary forms of, and reasons for, topic avoidance in Chinese relationships. In addition, stage two tests how the key variables of relational satisfaction and communication competence, as well as relationship type and cultural group, influence depth and breadth of topic avoidance.

Primary clusters of topic avoidance

In the extant topic avoidance literature, researchers typically quantify participants' degree of topic avoidance in one of two ways. First, as is most common, researchers create composite scores, whereby participants' avoidance ratings of various topics are summed to create a single avoidance score (e.g. Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Second, researchers create summed scores of topic avoidance along categories that are coded by the researchers (e.g. Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Much less common are attempts by researchers to empirically derive categories, or clusters, of avoided topics through methods such as hierarchical cluster analysis (cf. Goodwin & Lee, 1994). Empirically-based categories from cluster analysis, however, seem preferable to single summed scores or scores created based on researcher-coded categories. A cluster analytic approach would appear to, in Dailey and Palomares' words, help 'preserve the dynamics of topics and their unique level' (p. 477). Thus, we set out to identify the primary clusters of topic avoidance in Chinese relationships.

RQ1: What are the primary clusters of topic avoidance in Chinese relationships?

Reasons for avoidance

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found that the most frequent reason for topic avoidance is the perceived negative relational implications of open discussion. Caughlin and Afifi (2004) also found that, across different relational forms, the most common reason for avoidance was relational protection. Afifi and Guerrero (1998), in contrast, found that in the context of same-sex and opposite-sex friendships, self protection was the most common reason for topic avoidance. Results from study one of this investigation indicated the most common reasons for topic avoidance were self vulnerability and partner protection. If we examine these results through the prism of culture, it can be argued that the primacy of self vulnerability and partner protection in Chinese partners' topic avoidance speaks to the salience of face concerns. Indeed, preserving one's own face and saving the other's face are essential features of the non-

confrontational conflict management styles common in collectivistic and high-context communication cultures (Gao *et al*., 1996). To determine the motivations underlying topic avoidance, we ask the following research question.

RQ2: In what ways, if any, do the reasons for topic avoidance predict the various forms of topic avoidance?

Relational satisfaction

Numerous studies have found a negative correlation between topic avoidance and relational satisfaction (e.g. Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Caughlin and Golish, for example, reported that dating participants' perceptions of their own topic avoidance and their partner's avoidance were negatively associated with satisfaction. Thus, given that existing research has consistently found a negative relationship between avoidance and satisfaction, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Satisfaction will be negatively associated with the degree of topic avoidance.

Communication competence

Influencing relational partners' decision to communicate about potentially conflict-inducing topics is the efficacy with which they believe they can do so (Makoul & Roloff, 1998). Makoul and Roloff reported that the higher individuals' self efficacy, the fewer relational complaints they withhold from their partner. Moreover, partner non-responsiveness has been found to be a reason for topic avoidance in relationships (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). These findings regarding perceptions of efficacy and partner responsiveness suggest the importance of perceived communication competence to individuals' propensity for topic avoidance. In short, if partners do not perceive sufficient self and other communication competence to manage difficult conversations, it could make the discussion of sensitive topics less feasible, thus increasing the amount of topic avoidance.

H2: Perceived self communication competence will be negatively associated with the degree of topic avoidance.

H3: Perceived partner communication competence will be negatively associated with the degree of topic avoidance.

Cultural differences

Although both mainland China and Taiwan are considered collectivistic and share a common cultural heritage – and despite that they are likely more similar than different with regard to interpersonal communication and psychological processes (Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu, & Jin, 2008) – it is

plausible that differences exist between them with regard to topic avoidance. This is particularly true concerning topics related to political viewpoints (Huang *et al*., 2004). Public opinion researchers have shown that individuals sometimes choose to self censor and intentionally avoid discussion of political issues depending in part on the views of those around them (e.g. Hayes, 2007). Avoidance of political discussion may be more common for Taiwanese than mainland Chinese individuals given Taiwan's political system and climate. During recent presidential elections in Taiwan, for instance, the relationship between outside-province Taiwanese (*waishengren*) and native-province Taiwanese (known as Mingnan, or *minnanren*), was polarized (Huang *et al*., 2004).

Mainland China, by comparison, is a single-party socialist republic, where people are often less vocal about politics, especially in public (He, 2009). In private, however, Chinese people tend to openly share political views. As He stated, 'In the private discourse universe . . . Chinese can and do express any thought – from free discussion of moral taboos to political criticism. In fact, 'their criticism of the government and political system is as severe as some of the radical voices in the West' (p. 46). To examine differences in politics (or any other topics), we propose the following hypothesis and research question.

H4: Taiwanese participants avoid discussion of politics to a greater extent than do mainland Chinese participants.

RQ3: Do Taiwanese and mainland Chinese participants differ in their degree of avoidance of non-political topics?

Relationship type differences

Researchers have reported that romantic partners can be more topic avoidant than opposite-sex friends when it comes to the issue of prior relationships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Yet it also appears that opposite-sex friends, compared to romantic partners, can be more avoidant about relationship status and norms (Afifi & Burgoon). Opposite-sex friends may be especially prone to avoidance given the relational uncertainty and sexual tension that can pervade these relationships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). If it is true that uncertainty is higher amongst opposite-sex friends than romantic partners, friends should be less likely than romantic partners to discuss intimate and relationally-threatening topics (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004).

Cross-cultural work by Goodwin and Lee (1994), moreover, indicates that Chinese friends, in general, may be relatively high in their topic avoidance. Goodwin and Lee reported that Chinese, compared to British, friends were less willing to disclose two of five factors of taboo information/behaviour to one another. Still, as Goodwin

and Lee noted, to conclude that Chinese friends are inherently low in self disclosure is tenuous. Perhaps a better way to frame potential differences between friends and romantic partners regarding topic avoidance lies in Chinese individuals' differing conceptualizations of these relational forms. Goodwin and Tang (1996) argue that the degree of disclosure in Chinese relationships is largely based on the level of closeness between interactants, which can be conceptualized in terms of insider and outsider status (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Although both romantic partners and close opposite-sex friends are typically considered insiders (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988), the communication patterns occurring in these relationships can be different. As a result, the amount of topic avoidance occurring across relational forms might differ.

RQ4: Do romantic partners and opposite sex friends report similar degrees of topic avoidance?

Breadth of avoidance

Finally, we examine how satisfaction, competence, relational type, and culture predict the breadth of topics individuals avoid. The primary clusters of topic avoidance (see RQ1) capture the depth of avoidance, or the degree to which a given topic area is avoided. Breadth, in contrast, estimates the number of topics partners consistently avoid in a relationship. Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) illustrated the benefits of considering breadth of avoidance (which they termed 'number of avoided topics'), as breadth was positively associated with relational uncertainty. Therefore, although breadth of avoidance has not often been examined in the topic avoidance literature, this variable appears relevant to individuals' relational evaluations.

Further, if we consider the larger research domain of self disclosure, and its key theories such as Social Penetration Theory (SPT; Altman & Taylor, 1973), there is solid precedent to explore breadth of avoidance. SPT posits that there are two dimensions of self disclosure: depth and breadth. Whereas depth can be conceptualized as the intimacy level of partners' disclosure, breadth reflects the number of disclosures made by partners and the time spent disclosing (Collins & Miller, 1994). In line with various relational scholars (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), we argue that to sufficiently conceptualize such variables as self disclosure or topic avoidance it is beneficial to consider the amount of avoidance for a topic (depth) and the number of topics avoided in a relationship (breadth).

RQ5: Is breadth of topic avoidance related to satisfaction, communication competence, culture, or relational type?

Method

Participants and procedures. Participants were 404 college students from a major university in Eastern China and a medium-sized university in Taiwan. Of the 404, 194 were from mainland China (122 friend, 72 romantic), and 210 were from Taiwan (152 friend, 57 romantic, and one non-report). The average age of the participants was 21.34 (SD = 1.20) for mainland Chinese and 20.67 (SD = 1.93) for Taiwanese. Participants received extra course credit for completing the survey.

Measures

Topic avoidance. Twelve items were created based on the nine categories of avoided topics in stage one. The 12 items covered the following topics: relationship norms, state of relationship, different views, relational problems, prior relationships, sex, money, politics, family, negative self disclosure, negative discussion about the other, and privacy issues. Participants were asked to indicate how often they avoided each topic on a 7-point scale (1 = *never avoid*; 7 = *always avoid*).

Reasons for topic avoidance. A list of 38 items was created based on the extant literature and the six categories of reasons for topic avoidance identified in stage one (i.e. relationship protection, self vulnerability, protection of the other, lack of closeness, traditional beliefs, and futility of discussion). To explore the factor structure of these items, we conducted principal components factor analysis with promax rotation. Results, based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and the scree plot, indicated the appropriateness of an eight-factor solution, which accounted for 55.80% variance. The eight factors were *partner protection* (e.g. 'I do not want to hurt his/her self esteem'), *negative relational impact* (e.g. 'It may hurt the relationship'), *positive relational impact* (e.g. 'It makes the relationship better'), *self protection* (e.g. 'It is threatening to me'), *self inefficacy* (e.g. 'I do not know how to bring up the topic'), *traditional values* (e.g. 'It is a shame to talk about this because of restraints of traditions'), *self vulnerability* (e.g. 'It damages my image'), and *lacking closeness* (e.g. 'Our relationship is not close enough').

Relational satisfaction. A modified version of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) *Marital Opinion Questionnaire* measured satisfaction. Though originally developed for marital partners, the modified *Marital Opinion Questionnaire* has been used extensively in the research of friendships and dating relationships (e.g. Merolla & Zhang, 2011; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). As Vangelisti and Young suggest, this measure is useful because it 'provides a global assessment of respondents' feelings and does not include items

that tap qualities of interpersonal communication' (p. 402). In the measure, 10 of the 11 items use a semantic differential scale with adjectives, such as 'miserable' versus 'enjoyable', and 'rewarding' versus 'disappointing'. The final item asks participants about their general perception of relationship quality (1 = *not satisfied at all* to 7 = *very satisfied*).

Communication competence. Perceived self and partner communication competence were assessed with Guerrero's (1994) six-item measures (e.g. 'I am a good communicator'; 'My partner has a wide variety of social skills'). We used a 7-point agreement scale (1 = *completely disagree*; 7 = *completely agree*) for these measures.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 shows the pattern of means is quite similar between the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese groups. Based on the satisfaction means (all Ms > 5.0), the relationships in this study tended to be generally satisfying. The reliability coefficients were sufficiently high for most of the variables; two of the reasons measures (i.e. self vulnerability and lacking closeness), however, had low reliabilities (αs = 0.53 and 0.56). Such low reliabilities raise doubts about the quality of these measures.

RQ1. Hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted to examine the links among the topics avoided. The dendrogram produced in the analysis showed an interpretable five-cluster solution. The first cluster, which we termed relational issues, consisted of five items including relationship rules, feelings toward one another, things that highlight potential differences between partners, relationship problems, and past/present romantic relationships. The second cluster, personal experiences, consisted of three items, including drinking problems or smoking, family-related issues, and negative self disclosure. The third cluster, politics, was comprised of one item concerning political views. The fourth cluster, negative appraisal, consisted of two items including negative topics about the partner and privacy issues. The fifth cluster, sexual issues, was comprised of one item pertaining to sex-related topics. We used scaled distance to assess how the topics join into clusters. Because determining the number of clusters is a somewhat arbitrary process in cluster analysis (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 1990), researchers should take into account both the scaled distance and practical interpretation. The results suggest that sex is a topic that differs most, as indicated by the scaled distance, from the other clusters. Politics is conceptually different, though it was not especially distant from the personal experience cluster. Overall, we retained a total of five clusters: sexual issues, negative appraisal, relational issues, politics, and personal experience.

Table 1 Variable means, standard deviations, T-tests, and reliabilities

	Taiwan			Mainland China			
Variable	Friend M (SD)	Romantic M (SD)	t	Friend M (SD)	Romantic M (SD)	t	α
Satisfaction	5.19 (0.85)	5.40 (0.86)	1.59	5.08 (1.21)	5.63 (1.05)	3.21**	0.89
Comm. Comp. – Self	4.33 (0.92)	4.41 (0.96)	0.55	4.52 (1.10)	4.84 (1.11)	1.95	0.63
Comm. Comp. – Partner	4.76 (0.90)	4.55 (1.11)	1.41	4.98 (1.25)	5.28 (1.29)	1.60	0.72
Topic avoidance clusters							
Relational Issues	3.14 (1.04)	2.47 (0.96)	4.23***	3.43 (1.34)	2.41 (1.04)	5.55***	0.76
Personal Experience	2.87 (1.16)	2.33 (0.87)	3.19**	3.16 (1.46)	2.24 (1.23)	4.49***	0.65
Politics	3.49 (1.85)	3.00 (1.81)	1.71	2.48 (1.77)	1.76 (1.33)	2.99**	–
Negative Appraisal	3.39 (1.42)	2.77 (1.05)	3.00**	4.21 (1.62)	2.91 (1.42)	5.65***	0.65
Sexual Issues	4.72 (1.75)	3.25 (1.84)	5.33***	5.07 (2.01)	3.56 (2.15)	4.93***	–
Reasons for avoidance							
Partner Protection	4.97 (1.24)	5.39 (1.16)	2.22*	5.13 (1.55)	5.59 (1.28)	2.13*	0.78
Negative Rel. Impact	4.63 (1.40)	4.88 (1.29)	1.17	4.57 (1.67)	4.81 (1.34)	1.04	0.83
Positive Rel. Impact	3.96 (1.49)	3.83 (1.65)	0.55	4.63 (1.67)	4.50 (1.78)	0.51	0.92
Self Protection	3.83 (1.44)	3.75 (1.44)	0.36	3.60 (1.87)	3.55 (1.67)	0.19	0.81
Self Inefficacy	5.02 (1.35)	5.04 (1.36)	0.10	4.60 (1.51)	4.35 (1.36)	1.16	0.76
Traditional Values	3.56 (1.50)	3.46 (1.48)	0.43	4.10 (1.66)	3.74 (1.68)	1.45	0.70
Self Vulnerability	4.52 (1.36)	4.16 (1.31)	1.72	4.41 (1.71)	4.06 (1.60)	1.41	0.53
Lacking Closeness	3.67 (1.47)	2.24 (1.34)	6.41***	3.60 (1.73)	2.53 (1.58)	4.30***	0.56
Topic Avoidance Breadth	2.03 (2.08)	0.93 (1.22)	3.75***	3.07 (2.57)	1.38 (1.58)	5.04***	–

Note. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$. Reliabilities are not provided for topic clusters 3 and 5 or topic avoidance breadth, as these are single-item measures.

Table 2 Multivariate regression of topics on reasons and other predictor variables

Predictors\DV	Relational Issues	Personal Experience	Politics	Negative Appraisal	Sexual Issues
Partner Protection	−0.11** (0.04)	−0.13* (0.05)	−0.05 (0.07)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.09 (0.08)
Negative Rel. Impact	0.08* (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.06)	0.05 (0.07)
Positive Rel. Impact	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.06)	−0.04 (0.05)	0.09 (0.06)
Self Protection	0.12*** (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.06)	0.05 (0.05)	0.01 (0.07)
Self Inefficacy	0.01 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.02 (0.05)	0.07 (0.07)
Traditional Values	−0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.04 (0.07)
Self Vulnerability	0.06 (0.04)	0.10* (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.05)	0.04 (0.07)
Lacking Closeness	0.13 (0.03)	0.10* (0.04)	0.13* (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	0.11 (0.07)
Self Comm. Competence	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.10 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.10)
Partner Comm. Competence	−0.06 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.09)
Satisfaction	−0.32*** (0.05)	−0.08 (0.07)	0.06 (0.10)	−0.04 (0.08)	0.10 (0.11)
Culture	−0.33** (0.11)	−0.22 (0.13)	1.12*** (0.19)	−0.70*** (0.16)	−0.40 (0.21)
Relational type	−0.54*** (0.12)	−0.47*** (0.14)	−0.42* (0.21)	−0.82*** (0.17)	−1.35*** (0.22)
R^2	0.357	0.150	0.137	0.145	0.152
F (13,384)	16.42***	5.24***	4.72***	5.04***	5.32***

Note. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$. Coefficients in the table are standardized betas. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

RQ2-RQ4 and H1-H4. To examine these research questions and hypotheses, we conducted a multivariate regression (see Table 2 for complete results). RQ2 asked in what ways the reasons for avoidance predict degree of topic avoidance. Results indicated seven significant findings. The

significant findings involved three of the five topic avoidance clusters. First, relational issue avoidance was negatively predicted by partner protection, and positively predicted by negative relational impact and self protection. Second, personal experience avoidance was negatively

predicted by partner protection and positively predicted by self vulnerability and lacking closeness. Third, political issue avoidance was positively predicted by lacking closeness.

H1 predicted that relational satisfaction would be negatively associated with the degree of topic avoidance. The regression analysis indicated one significant finding for the avoidance clusters – satisfaction negatively predicted relational issue avoidance. H2 and H3 predicted perceived self and partner communication competence would be negatively associated with the degree of topic avoidance. These predictions, however, were not supported as self and partner communication competence were non-significantly related to the topic avoidance clusters.

H4, which predicted Taiwanese participants avoid discussion of politics to a greater extent than do mainland Chinese participants, was supported, $t(402) = -6.52$, $p < 0.001$. RQ3 asked whether Taiwanese and mainland Chinese participants would differ with regard to other types of avoided topics. Results indicated that mainland Chinese, relative to Taiwanese, participants avoided negative appraisals to a greater extent, $t(400) = 3.29$, $p = 0.001$. RQ4 asked if romantic partners and opposite sex friends report similar degrees of topic avoidance. Results revealed that opposite-sex friends, relative to romantic partners, reported higher avoidance levels for all five avoidance clusters for mainland Chinese and four out of the five clusters for Taiwanese (see Table 1).

RQ5. RQ5 asked if breadth of topic avoidance is related to satisfaction, communication competence, culture, or relational type. To test this question we had to first create an index of the number of topics that each respondent avoided. A composite index was created by counting the number of responses that scored one standard deviation above the mean on the 1–7 Likert-type scale (7 = always avoid). Response scores one standard deviation above the mean were coded as 1; all other responses were coded as 0. To create this variable, we used the original 12 topics from the first study, thus making 12 the highest score participants could receive. The average score across the sample was approximately 2.0 ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 2.20$), indicating that, on average, partners avoided two topics in their relationship. See Table 1 for the group specific means and standard deviations for the breadth variable.

To address RQ5, we conducted a tobit regression to examine the relationships between topic breadth and the variables of relational satisfaction, communication competence, culture, and relationship type. Tobit regression is appropriate for use because the breadth variable is censored (e.g. a number of cases have 0 as the lowest possible value) (Roncek, 1992). Relational satisfaction ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$), culture ($\beta = -0.93$, $p < 0.001$), and relationship type ($\beta = -1.31$, $p < 0.001$) were statistically significant

predictors of topic breadth. In addition, other communication competence ($\beta = -0.18$, $p = 0.05$) approached statistical significance. The squared correlation between the observed and predicted topic breadth values was 0.14, indicating that these four predictors accounted for 14% of the variability in topic avoidance breadth.

Discussion

Stage two built upon stage one by examining the primary clusters of topic avoidance in Chinese friendships and dating relationships. Stage two also tested how relational and communicative factors influence topic avoidance. In order from most to least avoided (based on the overall means), the five topic avoidance clusters were *sexual issues*, *negative appraisal*, *relational issues*, *politics*, and *personal experience*. Unlike the first three clusters, the *personal experiences* and *politics* clusters were below the midpoint of the likert-type scale, suggesting these were not highly avoided topics for many partners. Results then revealed the most salient motives underlying topic avoidance. Partners were most likely to engage in relational issue avoidance when they feared negative relational and personal consequences of the disclosure. Relational issue avoidance, however, was inversely related to partner protection, suggesting that when concern for partners is high, relational issue avoidance is less likely. This inverse relationship with partner protection was also found for personal experience avoidance, indicating that as partner concern increases, avoidance of topics related to personal experience decreases. Personal experience avoidance increased, however, as a function of greater self vulnerability and lacking closeness between partners.

Political issue avoidance was positively related to one factor, lacking closeness. This suggests that political discussion is perceived as most appropriate with in-group members, which is in line with the work of He (2009). According to He, Chinese individuals have 'dualistic discourse universes' comprised of public and private spaces. It is in the private discourse universe that individuals talk openly about otherwise controversial or risky topics which might be viewed as inappropriate in public discourse spaces.

Existing topic avoidance research indicates avoidance can be risky (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), most notably because it can detract from relational quality. This is especially true when avoidance is not motivated by prosocial factors (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). The current study indicated only one statistically significant relationship between satisfaction and topic avoidance, such that more satisfied partners were less likely to engage in relational issue avoidance. This finding indicates that open discussion can benefit relationships and corresponds with the idea that relational quality affects (and is affected by) relational partners' communication practices (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Zhang &

Stafford, 2009). Still, satisfaction was non-significantly related to four of five topic avoidance clusters, suggesting the need to consider additional factors affecting topic avoidance, such as commitment, trust, and attachment style.

While satisfaction shared one significant relationship with topic avoidance, self and partner communication competence shared no significant relationships with topic avoidance, even though previous research has shown that communication competence is relevant to topic avoidance (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Perceived partner (but not self) communication competence did, however, negatively relate to topic avoidance breadth (though this finding only approached significance at $p = 0.05$).

In terms of culture and relationship type differences in topic avoidance, results revealed that, consistent with predictions, Taiwanese participants avoid politics to a greater extent than do mainland Chinese participants. This suggests the political climate of Taiwan potentially complicates political discussion, perhaps due to the various viewpoints that exist regarding Taiwanese politics, and the identity issues involved in political issues (Huang *et al.*, 2004). Further tests indicated that mainland Chinese, relative to Taiwanese, participants reported greater avoidance of relational issues and negative appraisal. A clear pattern also emerged for relational type differences, as friends reported significantly higher avoidance of all five avoidance clusters than did romantic partners. This potentially speaks to the differing rules for communication stemming from the in-group statuses of friends and romantic partners in Chinese culture, which will be further considered in the General Discussion.

Finally, stage two demonstrated the benefits of exploring topic avoidance breadth, as breadth was significantly related to three variables, and approached significance with a fourth. Across the sample, participants avoided approximately two topics in their relationships (but see Table 1 for group mean differences). Specifically, participants' avoidance breadth increased when their relationship was less satisfying, when they were from mainland China (as opposed to Taiwan), and when they reported on a friendship (as opposed to a romantic relationship). That partners avoid fewer topics in satisfying relationships demonstrates the potential negative consequences of avoiding a large number of topics in relationships. Further, it was found that the number of topics avoided, not just the degree of avoidance in any one given area, can lead to relational dissatisfaction. More difficult to explain is why mainland Chinese participants reported greater avoidance breadth. Future work is needed to identify the reasons underlying this distinction. The finding that approached significance – that avoidance breadth increased when individuals perceived their partners as having low communication competence – speaks to the difficulty of broaching sensitive topics when partners do not

believe they can successfully manage the conversation with their partner (Makoul & Roloff, 1998).

General discussion

As noted at the outset, the fundamental tension between openness and closedness in close relationships is of great interest to social scientists. This study examined topic avoidance in the context of mainland China and Taiwan, in an effort to understand topic avoidance from cultural perspectives. The findings suggest topic avoidance can be interpreted through traditional Chinese relational rules and norms for social interaction. The findings also indicate the relevance of geo-political differences to social interaction in Chinese and Taiwanese close relationships.

First, in studies one and two, partner protection was found to be one of the most important reasons for topic avoidance in friendships and romantic relationships. Although this motive is likely salient to many Western relational partners, the extant literature does not identify this as a common avoidance motive. We can interpret this as being reflective of the pervasiveness of other-orientation among Chinese both on and beyond the mainland. Concepts, such as *hanxu*, *mianzi*, and *keqi*, which together indicate the necessity of thinking from the others' perspective when communicating (Gao *et al.*, 1996), might play an important role in partners' relational communication. In Chinese society, according to Fei (1992), people learn about themselves through the roles they play in their relationships. To serve one's roles well, one must learn to take other people's perspectives.

Second, and closely related to the notion of perspective taking, is Fei's (1992) concept, *chaxugeju*, which Hamilton and Wang (1992) translated as a 'differential mode of association' (p. 19). The distinction of *wairen* (outsiders) and *zijiren* (insiders) is a good example of the non-equivalent relationships in Chinese society. Using Fei's (1992) metaphor, Chinese social relationships are like 'ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake', whereby 'each circle spreading from the center becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant' (p. 65). Although both close friends and romantic partners are generally considered one's insiders (Goodwin & Tang, 1996), the concept of 'insiders' can be understood as different levels of 'ripples'. The perception of 'yuan jin qin shu' (远近亲疏, distant-close and intimate-estranged) describes how individuals either consciously or unconsciously determine how close or distant their conversational partner is to them, which affects the degree of avoidance or disclosure in interpersonal communication. A romantic partner is typically considered a closer or more intimate insider than a friend (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996). This could explain why friends avoided almost all topics to a greater extent than did romantic partners.

Third, our results indicated some interesting differences between participants from mainland China and Taiwan. The primary difference, though, between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants in this study was that Taiwanese participants avoided political discussion to a greater extent. Although Taiwan and mainland China have a shared cultural heritage, they have experienced a long political separation (Huang *et al.*, 2004). Compared with mainland Chinese, moreover, many Taiwanese (91% of Huang *et al.*'s participants) experience 'double identities', in that they perceive themselves, to some extent, as both Chinese and Taiwanese (Huang *et al.*). Only a small percentage of Huang *et al.*'s participants, for instance, identified as Taiwanese only (7.3%) or Chinese only (1.3%). These factors might help explain why political topics were avoided to a greater degree in Taiwan. When considering this result, though, one must keep in mind that the data collection for both studies occurred shortly before and after the 2008 presidential election in Taiwan. Political views, according to Huang *et al.*, can be 'polarized around election time' (p. 150). In general, we must be careful not to over-amplify the amount of difference between the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants, as the results were largely compatible.

Several limitations existed in this study that should also be considered. First, this study was based on cross-sectional data; thus, causality cannot be inferred. Second, this study's design could not capture the rapid economic and social changes occurring in China that might influence relational life; this weakness is, unfortunately, pervasive in relational research (Goodwin & Pillay, 2006). Third, our sample was comprised of college students. Non-student populations and other relational forms, such as family members, should be investigated. The hierarchy characterizing Chinese family relationships makes topic avoidance in that context particularly interesting. These ideas for future research can further demonstrate how Chinese relational partners manage openness and closedness.

Acknowledgements

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