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Weiwanyu and Euphemism in Chinese Linguistics: The Problem of Definition and Conceptual Boundaries

Ana Gogvadze

Chinese Language Lecturer

Far East, Sinology,

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

PhD Candidate in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics,

Doctoral Program in Philology, Faculty of Humanities,

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

1 Chavchavadze Avenue, 0179, Georgia

+995 599 056 622. ana.gogvadze@tsu.ge

ORCID: 0000-0002-2936-9851

Abstract

This article examines the history of research on euphemisms—委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ* as well as terminological difficulties and the cultural context of the phenomenon within Chinese linguistics. The Chinese euphemism is viewed not only as a linguistic trope but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon connected with taboos, social harmony, and the Confucian concept of 面子 *miànzi* (“face”).

The study demonstrates that in Western linguistics, euphemism is generally understood as the softened expression of a coarse or taboo

subject, whereas in Chinese linguistics *wěiwǎnyǔ* is a considerably broader concept. It includes not only lexical substitution but also metaphor, metonymy, allusion, symbolism, homonymy, homophony, and other stylistic strategies.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of the historical and definitional aspects of euphemism in Chinese. The paper analyzes the evolution of theoretical thought from Chen Wangdao's rhetorical definitions of 婉曲 *wǎnqǔ* to Chen Yuan's sociolinguistic approach, outlining the conceptual expansion of *wěiwǎnyǔ* as a linguistic and cultural category.

Keywords: euphemism, *wěiwǎnyǔ*, Chinese language, linguistics, pragmatics, culture.

Introduction

The term *euphemism* (from Greek *eu* “well” and *phémi* “to speak”) refers to a delicate or softened expression used to avoid the direct mention of a concept, object, or event that may be considered taboo, vulgar, unpleasant, or politically inappropriate. Euphemism is therefore understood not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a social and cultural one (Allan & Burridge, 1991).

In Chinese, the corresponding term is 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ*, meaning “indirect, tactful, or euphemistic speech.” The component characters 委婉 *wěiwǎn* literally convey the sense of “curved, winding, indirect, or pleasingly tactful.”

The study of euphemisms in the Chinese language has a long historical tradition and remains highly relevant today, rooted in the cultural value placed on social harmony and tactful communication.

During China's feudal period, particularly in the Han dynasty, the use of euphemistic expressions served as a linguistic safeguard, since the use of inappropriate words could lead to severe consequences or punishment.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the understanding, definition, and historical development of euphemisms in Chinese, with particular attention to the views of Chinese linguists and the terminological nuances that define the concept of *wěiwǎnyǔ*. The study aims to provide a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of euphemism as a multifaceted linguistic phenomenon.

From a methodological perspective, the article applies theoretical analysis and synthesis, combining historical review with conceptual examination to trace the evolution of euphemism in Chinese linguistics—from its role as a rhetorical ornament to its recognition as a socio-cultural and pragmatic construct.

Methodology

The research methodology is based on the analysis and synthesis of theoretical materials. A content analysis approach was employed to examine in detail the definitions of euphemism, classification principles, and cultural characteristics presented in the works of Chinese linguists.

The study also applies a diachronic analysis that traces the development of the understanding of euphemism from a rhetorical figure, 婉曲辞 *wǎnqǔcí*, to a sociolinguistic and pragmatic phenomenon. Furthermore, a conceptual analysis is used to clarify the relationship between the terms 委婉 *wěiwǎn* and 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ*, determining their interrelation in meaning and usage.

The research combines linguistic theory, historical examination, and cultural interpretation to build a comprehensive framework

for analyzing the phenomenon of euphemism in the Chinese language.

Results

The analysis of the theoretical material demonstrates that the study of euphemism in Chinese linguistics has gradually evolved from rhetorical description toward sociolinguistic and pragmatic interpretation.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Chinese euphemisms combine linguistic, cultural, and social functions in unique ways. Both historical and modern examples show that 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ* represents a category that is broader than the Western concept of euphemism. Its study therefore requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions.

This evolution highlights how euphemisms in Chinese reflect not only stylistic choices but also broader social values, particularly those related to politeness, respect, and harmony in interpersonal communication.

Discussion

The concept of 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ* in the Chinese language has very ancient roots. One of the earliest examples of Chinese euphemistic expression can be found in the classical anthology 《诗经》 *Shījīng* (Book of Songs, 11th–6th centuries BCE). For example, in the poem 《谷风》 *Gǔfēng* (“Mountain Winds”), the metaphorical euphemism 习习谷风，以阴以雨 (“The mountain wind blows; again there is mist and rain”) represents one of the earliest forms of indirect expression. Functionally, this verse is softened yet poetically metaphorical: the author hints at an emotional conflict through the depiction of cloudy weather and rain. Within context, the female speaker laments her lover’s fading affection, and the imagery of 风雨 (“wind and

rain”) serves as a metaphor for emotional coldness, hardship, or alienation in human relationships.

By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), euphemisms had also become mechanisms of socio-political security. In ancient China, it was dangerous to speak too directly, especially regarding emperors and high-ranking officials. The direct use of the word 死 *sǐ* (“to die”) for an emperor was avoided, replaced with euphemistic expressions such as 驾崩 *jiàbēng* (“the emperor’s carriage collapsed”) or 薨 *hōng* (“passed away”) for high-ranking nobles. Classical historical works such as 《汉书》 *Hànshū* (Book of Han) and 《史记》 *Shǐjì* (Records of the Grand Historian) frequently employ such expressions as 升天 *shēngtiān* (“ascend to heaven”) or 走了 *zǒule* (“continued on the journey”) instead of directly stating death. Although these euphemisms remain intelligible to modern Chinese speakers, their usage today is primarily confined to historical or literary contexts.

In Chinese political and administrative language, euphemism functioned not only as a matter of politeness but also as a means of survival. Directly pronouncing the emperor’s name could be deemed arrogant or even treasonous. Hence, euphemism in Chinese culture was not merely a linguistic device but also a social strategy for self-preservation. Over time, such indirect and concealed forms of speech became standard practice in society.

The term 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ*, literally “delicate and courteous speech,” is central to understanding this phenomenon. In Western linguistics, euphemism is typically defined as a softened substitute for a harsh or taboo term. In contrast, *wěiwǎnyǔ* encompasses a much broader system that includes not only lexical substitution but also metaphor, metonymy, allusion, homonymy, homophony, and various other stylistic techniques. In Western linguistics, metaphor and eup-

hemism are treated as separate categories, while in Chinese thought they belong to a single conceptual domain.

A particularly significant feature is the role of metaphorical euphemism. In Western linguistics, metaphor may occasionally serve a euphemistic function but is usually considered a distinct rhetorical figure. In Chinese, however, metaphor is one of the foundational mechanisms of euphemism. For example, 下岗 xiàgǎng (“to step down from a post”) is used euphemistically for unemployment, and 有喜 yǒu xǐ (“to have joy”) for pregnancy. These examples illustrate how metaphor operates as a central and systematic process within the Chinese euphemistic framework.

Another essential concept is 面子 miànzi (“face”). Chinese euphemisms are deeply embedded in Confucian values that emphasize harmony, respect, and indirect communication. The preservation of miànzi plays a vital role in using euphemisms to avoid causing embarrassment or discomfort. Historically, social hierarchy determined the acceptable forms of euphemistic expression.

In this regard, Erving Goffman’s (1955) theory of face-work is particularly relevant. Goffman argues that individuals attempt to maintain a positive social image and avoid face-loss (丢脸 diūliǎn). In Chinese culture, this aligns with the Confucian ideal of maintaining miànzi. Euphemistic speech thus serves as a linguistic strategy to prevent awkwardness or shame in interpersonal communication.

For instance, to avoid direct disagreement, Chinese speakers often use subtle expressions such as:

- 这个想法挺有意思的 zhège xiǎngfǎ tǐng yǒu yìsi de (“This idea is quite interesting”), which may imply disagreement or reservation.

- 可能有些不妥 kěnéng yǒu xiē bù tuǒ (“There may be something not quite right”), which functions as a polite alternative to open

criticism

Similarly, when refusing a gift, one might say 不用了, 太客气了 bú yòng le, tài kèqì le (“No need, you are too kind”), even if the person actually intends to accept. This ritual refusal serves to preserve the social balance and avoid appearing greedy or impolite.

In delivering unpleasant news, indirect hints, passive constructions, or vague expressions are preferred to minimize the listener’s potential embarrassment. Such strategies demonstrate the cultural logic of maintaining harmony through language.

Consequently, euphemism in Chinese should not be viewed merely as lexical substitution but as a social mechanism for preserving personal dignity within culturally ingrained behavioral models. It reflects the Confucian pursuit of hé (和), meaning harmony and balance, in both speech and social relations.

Pioneering Research on Chinese Euphemism

Chen Wangdao (陈望道) was a pioneer in the study of Chinese euphemisms. He was the first to provide a systematic rhetorical definition of 婉曲 wǎnqǔ and 讳饰 huìshì, both of which he considered subcategories of euphemistic expression. In his foundational work *Introduction to Rhetoric* (修辞学发凡 Xiūcíxué fāfán, 1932), Chen Wangdao defined euphemism (婉曲辞 wǎnqǔcí) as a stylistic figure that involves expressing meaning indirectly through circumlocutory, concealed, or metaphorical words. According to Chen (2000), euphemisms serve to mitigate taboo or sensitive topics through indirect and figurative expressions. This rhetorical approach viewed euphemism

primarily as a tropic device, emphasizing its aesthetic and stylistic value within discourse.

A significant transformation occurred during the 1980s when Chen Yuan introduced a sociolinguistic and cultural perspective to the study of euphemisms. Chen established a direct relationship between euphemism and linguistic taboo. According to his definition, “Euphemism largely derives from taboo; it is the use of pleasant, concealed words instead of offensive ones, to replace taboo expressions” (Chen, 1983). This interpretation shifted the focus from rhetoric to function, portraying euphemism as a tool for avoiding social conflict and protecting cultural taboos. Chinese linguists generally agree that Chen Yuan’s formulation clarified the connection between euphemism and tabooed speech and expanded the analytical scope of the term beyond its rhetorical boundaries.

The question of defining euphemism has remained one of the most complex issues in Chinese linguistics. Despite numerous studies, a precise and unified definition has been difficult to achieve. Scholars such as Shu Tingfang and Xu Qinniu highlighted this problem in the mid-1990s, emphasizing that the absence of a clear conceptual framework impedes theoretical progress. Nearly a decade later, however, no significant breakthroughs had been made. As Li Junhua (李俊华, 2004) observed, “The crucial task for contemporary euphemism research is the continued clarification and refinement of its definition. Only through precise delineation of connotation and extension can in-depth analysis be achieved.”

Scholars identify several recurring issues in euphemism definitions:

- Conceptual conflation between stylistic and linguistic phenomena. Although stylistic figures and linguistic processes are

closely related, they are not identical. Many definitions of euphemism blur this distinction, creating analytical ambiguity.

- Circular definitions. Some definitions rely on terms that themselves require clarification, undermining their effectiveness and clarity.
- Overly narrow extension. Certain definitions restrict the term's scope so tightly that they fail to encompass the full range of euphemistic phenomena, limiting both classification and theoretical understanding.

Terminological Distinction: *wěiwǎn* and *wěiwǎnyǔ*

In Chinese linguistics, a fundamental terminological distinction exists between 委婉 *wěiwǎn* and 委婉语 *wěiwǎnyǔ*, and this distinction is crucial to understanding euphemism in its full linguistic and cultural dimensions.

The term 委婉 *wěiwǎn* functions grammatically as an adjective and means “delicate” or “tactful.” It describes a manner of expression, a style, or a communicative intention characterized by indirectness and politeness. It is often used to qualify actions or speech that employ subtle or roundabout methods to achieve social harmony or mitigate tension.

Both characters that compose the word 委 *wěi* and 婉 *wǎn* carry the sense of 曲 *qū* (“curved,” “bent,” or “indirect”). In Classical Chinese, *wěi* and *wǎn* often appeared separately or in combination with other monosyllabic words, producing expressions such as 委曲 *wěiqū* (“grievance; injustice”), 委顺 *wěishùn* (“submission; yielding”), 婉转 *wǎnzhuǎn* (“melodious; graceful; indirect”), and 婉静 *wǎnjìng* (“gentle; calm; refined”). These terms convey nuances of flexibility, politeness, and restrained expression, all of which are conceptually related to euphemistic discourse.

In modern Chinese lexicography, 婉转 wǎnzhuǎn is used both to describe melodious sounds such as singing or birdsong and refined human communication that avoids bluntness. The two-character combination 委婉 wěiwǎn, however, emerged relatively late in the language. Its earliest recorded appearance dates back to the Qing dynasty, in the novel *Unofficial History of the Confucians* (儒林外史 *Rúlín wàishǐ*) by Wu Jingzi, where it was used to describe speech that was indirect or winding, even extending metaphorically to the movement of music. Similarly, in Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦 *Hónglóu mèng*), the expression 委婉解劝 wěiwǎn jiěquàn (“to persuade delicately”) illustrates this meaning of refined indirection.

In practical use, two major applications of wěiwǎn can be identified. First, it can describe behavioral subtlety, in which actions are carried out indirectly to achieve a desired outcome. Second, it can denote stylistic delicacy in verbal expression, in which emotion or intention is conveyed through refined rhetorical strategies rather than direct statements. As described in *The Modern Chinese Dictionary* (现代汉语词典 *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn*), wěiwǎn implies both emotional restraint and the use of graceful linguistic techniques to soften potentially harsh meanings.

By contrast, 委婉语 wěiwǎnyǔ is a noun that specifically denotes the linguistic phenomenon of euphemism. It refers to the actual linguistic instruments through which *wěiwǎn* the stylistic quality of delicacy—is realized. In other words, wěiwǎnyǔ is the tangible linguistic expression of the communicative goal represented by wěiwǎn.

The earliest references to euphemistic behavior as a social act appear in *Lunyu* (论语, *The Analects*), while the *Mengzi* (孟子) explicitly employs the term to denote polite or refined verbal exchange. These classical texts show that the notion of tactful speech was

embedded in Chinese communicative ethics long before the term wěiwǎnyǔ was formalized.

Thus, the relationship between wěiwǎn and wěiwǎnyǔ can be understood as one of quality and realization. The former represents the style or purpose of expression, while the latter refers to the linguistic manifestation of that style. Wěiwǎn is the intention, and wěiwǎnyǔ is the method through which that intention is communicated.

This distinction is vital for defining euphemism in Chinese linguistics, since it clarifies that euphemism is not only a stylistic phenomenon but also a linguistic one. It functions simultaneously as a social strategy and a rhetorical device, shaped by the pragmatic and cultural norms of communication in Chinese society.

Classification of Euphemisms

Research on euphemisms by Chinese scholars, considering their ancient origins, can be divided into two main aspects: first, the study of various forms and types of taboo; and second, the examination of folk customs and social norms. Both areas of study trace their origins back to the Zhou Dynasty.

Contemporary studies of euphemisms can be categorized into two primary groups:

1. The first category focuses on tabooed phenomena with long historical traditions. A representative example of this approach is Chen Peizhao's 1988 publication *A Study of Chinese Linguistic Taboos*.
2. The second category encompasses stylistic studies of euphemisms with long-standing historical use, emphasizing their stylistic manifestations. An example is Wu Liciu's *Stylistic Study of Chinese Euphemisms*. Additionally, several scholars approach euphe-

misms from cultural, socio-psychological, and pragmatic perspectives.

Many researchers also conduct comparative studies of Chinese and English euphemisms. Some scholars have contributed to lexicography, such as Zhang Konggui, who edited the *Chinese Euphemism Dictionary*, and Liu Chunbao, compiler of the *English Euphemism Dictionary* (Liu, 2004). Notably, Zhang Yuping and others authored the monograph *Euphemisms*, which is part of the *Contemporary Culture Lexicon Series* edited by Wang Liting.

Zhang Konggui classifies euphemisms (both as individual lexemes and phrases) into three main categories:

1. **Old and contemporary euphemisms** – includes historically established euphemisms that are still actively used, covering both classical and modern forms.
2. **Temporary, context-dependent euphemisms** – includes individual lexemes, phrases, sentences, or even entire texts created for specific situations. These are short-lived and context-specific, and may be improvisational, humorous, or intended to circumvent sensitive topics at a given moment. Zhang Yuping (1998) notes that this category also includes linguistic complexities that function as euphemisms only in particular contexts, potentially increasing the overall count of euphemisms. Some scholars argue that the primary criterion is the clear performance of the euphemistic function by the linguistic unit.
3. **Fixed, lexicalized euphemisms** – covers euphemisms firmly established in the language, perceived as neutral or softened substitutes for specific concepts. These are frequently listed in

dictionaries and understood by most speakers, often related to taboo or socially sensitive topics. For example, in Chinese, “passed away” serves as a fixed euphemism for “died,” and other examples include “person with disabilities” and “elderly” to replace less tactful terms.

As Shu Tingfang and others note, stylistic approaches to euphemism research “have certain shortcomings. Specifically, definitions of euphemism remain unclear, the social causes of euphemism are neglected, and the essential characteristics of euphemisms are not thoroughly revealed” (Shu Tingfang, 1995). Furthermore, neither Chinese nor English definitions adequately account for the most critical determinant of euphemisms: the linguistic situation, or context.

According to Li Junhua, a scientific definition of euphemism must consider the following factors: the specific communicative environment, including social and cultural context; traditional customs and habits; the atmosphere of the specific occasion; the psychological states of the communicative subjects (speaker, writer, and listener); specific communicative goals; linguistic and rhetorical means employed (synonymous lexicon, sentence structures, and synonymous expressions); semantic characteristics of euphemisms; and their direct connection to language. Based on these criteria, Li defines euphemism as follows: “Euphemism is used due to taboos, to avoid irritation or offense, and to express respect or protection” (Li Junhua, 2010). This definition attempts to approach euphemism from the perspectives of pragmatics, semantics, and expressive techniques.

First and foremost, Li distinguishes between *weiwan* (a delicate method, delicately) and *weiwanyu* (euphemism). Prior to a speech act, *weiwan* can be considered the speaker’s communicative goal, ach-

ieved through specific methods, which constitute the relevant linguistic mechanism.

In Chinese, *weiwan* and *weiwanyu* are two closely related but distinct concepts. Accordingly, it is important to define *weiwanyu*, or euphemism, as a linguistic phenomenon that encompasses the stylistic aspects of *weiwan*. This phenomenon is universal: if language remains an essential and often irreplaceable tool for humans, *weiwan* as a stylistic phenomenon will exist. Consequently, if language remains the primary instrument of communication, *weiwanyu*—euphemisms—will continue to emerge and be used, marking it as a linguistic phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

Secondly, euphemisms are products of deep and extensive social, historical, and cultural contexts, shaped by the constraints and influences of specific linguistic and communicative environments. In *Introduction to Linguistic Logic*, Wang Weixian and others suggest that in pragmatic definitions applied to real-life contexts, the full significance of context is the semiotic state that expresses thoughts and feelings regarding a communicative act within society. The so-called semiotic situation, from the perspective of the lifeworld, encompasses multiple factors: it has specific temporal and spatial parameters, at least two interacting participants, a communicative object, signs, and the process of expressing meaning through these signs. The other party perceives and interprets these signs, resulting in the establishment of the semiotic state (Wang Weixian, 1989).

Characteristics of Euphemisms. Li Junhua, when discussing the characteristics of euphemisms, notes that a euphemism is a form of pleasant expression capable of creating a positive emotional tone. Euphemisms replace linguistic forms that carry unpleasant or disrespectful meanings. Chinese euphemisms are widely used in everyday com-

munication, and their main characteristics can be summarized as follows:

- **Indirectness:** Language functions as a tool for interpersonal relationships and emotional communication. To avoid the emotional impact caused by harsh or tactless expressions, over centuries, various methods of conveying ideas delicately and softly have developed, including euphemisms. Thus, indirectness is a defining feature of euphemisms, expressing ideas in refined and non-offensive forms.
- **Nationality:** Language is a social phenomenon and an inseparable part of culture. Different countries have distinct natural conditions, social environments, cultures, lifestyles, and values. Consequently, euphemisms also differ across nations.
- **Epochality:** Language is a product of society, and societal development or change is reflected in it. Different historical periods and events leave their imprint on the language. Therefore, some euphemisms have persisted over time, while new euphemisms continue to emerge.
- **Regionality:** China is a vast country with a large population and significant dialectal variation. Accordingly, euphemisms exhibit regional, or dialect-specific, characteristics in their usage.
- **Sociality:** In feudal China, diverse euphemisms emerged, shaped by different social strata creating their own euphemistic forms. Nevertheless, many shared features existed due to the common political and economic framework. Therefore, social differentiation is also reflected in the formation and use of euphemisms.

Analysis of theoretical materials shows that the study of euphemisms in Chinese has gradually evolved from rhetorical description to sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis.

Historical Development of Chinese Euphemisms. The semantic evolution of euphemisms in modern Chinese illustrates how words acquire new meanings over time under social influence. For example, the term 小姐 *xiǎojiě*, which traditionally meant “young lady” or “Miss” as a polite form of address, has undergone significant semantic shift. In contemporary spoken Chinese, especially in certain contexts, *xiǎojiě* functions euphemistically to refer to a prostitute. This semantic change demonstrates the dynamic interaction between euphemism and social attitudes.

Another example is 同志 *tóngzhì*, which originally denoted “comrade” or “fellow,” used widely among members of the Chinese Communist Party to express ideological solidarity. In modern Chinese, however, *tóngzhì* has acquired a new euphemistic meaning within the LGBTQ+ community, where it refers to gay men or, more broadly, to individuals of non-heteronormative sexual orientation. Although *tóngzhì* continues to be used in official and political contexts in its original sense, its modern colloquial meaning reflects the language’s adaptability and its sensitivity to evolving social identities.

A further example of semantic transformation is 绿茶 *lǜchá*, which literally means “green tea.” In contemporary urban slang, however, it euphemistically describes a manipulative woman who presents herself as innocent and pure while concealing self-serving or deceptive intentions. The term exemplifies the role of euphemism in modern popular discourse, where irony and metaphor merge with social commentary.

These examples demonstrate that euphemisms in Chinese are not merely instruments for softening or concealing reality. They also embody the dynamic evolution of social perception. Over time, euphemisms may lose their original function, gain new connotations, or shift from polite to pejorative usage. This process reflects the flexibility of Chinese as a living language and the deep interconnection between linguistic form, cultural context, and social change.

Through these evolving meanings, euphemisms function as cultural barometers, revealing shifts in moral values, social hierarchies, and interpersonal norms. Their study thus provides valuable insight into the broader interaction between language, thought, and society in both historical and contemporary China.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to systematize the research history, definitions, terminological challenges, and cultural context of Chinese euphemisms, known as 委婉语 *wěi wǎnyǔ*. Through the application of theoretical analysis and synthesis, the study demonstrated that *wěi wǎnyǔ* constitutes not merely a linguistic trope but a multifaceted socio-cultural phenomenon intricately linked to the notions of taboo, social harmony, and the Confucian concept of 面子 *miànzi*, or “face.”

The discussion section explored the historical trajectory of euphemism research in China, the terminological distinction between 委婉 *wěi wǎn* and 委婉语 *wěi wǎnyǔ*, the role of metaphorical euphemism within the Chinese cultural framework, and the impact of the *miànzi* concept on euphemistic discourse.

The analysis revealed that Chinese euphemism exhibits a broader and more intricate structure than its Western counterpart. It encompasses a wide range of rhetorical and stylistic mechanisms, including lexical substitution, metaphor, metonymy, allusion, symbolism,

homonymy, and homophony. This diversity underscores the multifaceted character of euphemistic expression and its centrality within Chinese communicative practice.

The historical examination further confirmed that *wěi wǎn yǔ* has evolved from a rhetorical device into a sociolinguistic and pragmatic construct. This development underscores its essential role in mediating social relations, shaping communicative behavior, and addressing psychological dimensions of interaction. Euphemism functions as an instrument for tactful expression, the mitigation of communicative discomfort, and the preservation of social equilibrium, thereby establishing itself as an integral component of Chinese linguistic and cultural identity.

In conclusion, the study highlights the necessity of further research on *wěi wǎn yǔ* through systematic, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural perspectives. Such an approach would enable a deeper understanding of its complex nature, stylistic manifestations, and sociopragmatic functions within the dynamics of modern Chinese discourse.

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