When I say it's fine, it is fine: Functions of Meishi-er (*It's fine*) by Mandarin-speakers in conversations

Cuando digo que está bien, está bien: Funciones de Meishi-er (Está bien) por los hablantes de mandarín en las conversaciones

我说没事，就是没事：汉语会话中"没事儿"的功能研究

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the Mandarin-speaker's use of a frequently occurring responsive marker — *Meishi-er* (It's fine) — when interacting in ordinary Chinese scenarios to examine how the use of this marker reflects the speaker's communicative skills and the characteristics of the interaction. The data consisted of 261 segments of Mandarin conversations which were retrieved from Chinese TV dramas. The results show that *Meishi-er* is primarily used as a head act and occasionally as a supportive move in the speech act sequence. These uses indicate the collaborative or supportive stance adopted by the speaker, which can help him/her to establish and maintain relationships with his/her counterparts. Second, *Meishi-er* is primarily used in response to an expression of thanks or an apology, as an expression of consolation, as refusal and self-disclosure avoidance strategies, and a tool for terminating arguments in interpersonal communication, which reflect the speaker's communicative and social competence. As a rapport-oriented backchannel, *Meishi-er* has been shown to be one of the preferred responses in communication. In addition, the Mandarin-speaker's use of *Meishi-er* not only demonstrates the speaker's need to cater for facework, but also reflects the particular nature of harmony-driven interaction in ordinary Chinese contexts.

Key Words: Meishi-er; Sequential role; Interactional function; Chinese.

Resumen: Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar el uso que hace el hablante de mandarín de un marcador de respuesta frecuente, Meishi-er (está bien), al interactuar en escenarios de chino ordinario para examinar cómo el uso de este marcador refleja las habilidades comunicativas del hablante y las características de la interacción. Los datos consistieron en 261 segmentos de conversaciones en mandarín que se recopilaron de series chinas. Los resultados muestran que Meishi-er se usa principalmente como un lenguaje con sentido nuclear y ocasionalmente como lenguaje auxiliar en la secuencia del acto de habla. Estos usos indican la postura colaborativa o solidaria adoptada por el hablante, que puede ayudarlo a establecer y mantener relaciones con los demás. En segundo lugar, Meishi-er se usa principalmente en respuesta a un agradecimiento o una disculpa, como una expresión de consuelo, como estrategias para evitar el rechazo y la autorrevelación, y una herramienta para terminar los argumentos en la comunicación interpersonal, que reflejan la competencia comunicativa social del hablante. Como canal secundario orientanol a la comunicación, Meishi-er ha demostrado ser una de las respuestas preferidas en la comunicación. Además, el uso de Meishi-er por parte del hablante del mandarín no solo demuestra la necesidad del hablante de mostrar cortesía, sino que también refleja la naturaleza particular de la interacción impulsada por la armonía en contextos chinos comunes.

Palabras clave: Meishi-er; Rol de secuencia; Función interactiva; chino.

摘要：本研究旨在调查普通话使用者在日常汉语情境中频繁使用的应答标记语"没事儿"，考察该标记语的使用如何反映说话人的交际能力和互动特征。本研究以中国电视剧中的261段普通话会话为语料。结果表明，在言语行为序列中，"没事儿"主要用作核心行为语，偶尔作为辅助语使用。这些用法表明说话人借助"没事儿"所采取的合作或支持的立场，这有助于双方和谐人际关系的建立及维持。其次，在人际交往中，"没事儿"主要用于回应感谢或道歉，表达安慰，作为拒绝和自我表露的回避策略，也可以作为一种求和止争的手段来使用，这反映了说话人的人际话语能力。作为一种具有和谐取向的手段，"没事儿"是交际中的首选应答语。此外，汉语使用者使用"没事儿"不仅体现了说话人对面子的需求，也反映了普通汉语语境中和谐取向的特殊性。

[**关键词**] 没事儿；序列角色；互动功能；汉语

1. Introduction

This paper reports on an empirical study of a frequently used expression in daily Chinese conversation, 没事儿 (*Meishi-er*, literally '*It's nothing*'), whose communicative effect can be activated in various contexts. For example, this phrase may be uttered when accepting another person's words of thanks, or to decline an offer of help or an invitation. In some cases, it is also used to prevent the escalation of an argument or to console another person who is suffering from emotional turbulence or depression. In fact, the expression can be used in a wide range of contexts. Despite the prevalent use of *Meishi-er* in Chinese society, some scholars argue that the multi-functionality of the phrase appears to be culturally alien to many students of Chinese as a foreign language, in that they have great difficulty grasping the fact that *Meishi-er* has multiple uses (Liu *et al.*, 2014). From their point of view, they would rather adopt more familiar expressions when responding to an expression of thanks or an apology. The limited understanding of the sequential roles and interactional functions performed by this phrase might well explain this situation.

To some extent, the phrase displays various stereotypical characteristics of ritual communication: it is a) harmony oriented, b) anchored in rights and obligations, and c) includes many conventional pragmatic components whereby face threat is disarmed. However, the sequential roles of *Meishi-er* and the interactional functions of this phrase in Chinese-speaking settings have not been extensively discussed.

Against this backdrop, the current study has two main goals:

(1) to detail the sequential roles performed by *Meishi-er* in the speech act sequence;

(2) to investigate the interactional functions of *Meishi-er* in interactions.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review of *Meishi-er* in a number of disciplines. In Section 3, the data collection and analytical methods used in this investigation are explained. Section 4 provides an analysis of the sequential roles performed by *Meishi-er* and explores its interactional functions in specific contexts. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

2.1 The meaning of Meishi-er in Chinese

Grammatically speaking, *Meishi-er* (没事儿) is a negative phrase consisting of three elements: *Mei* (没) is a negative marker; as an objective,

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shi (事) means 'things' in general; *er* (儿) is a suffix attached to nouns, and thus has no actual meaning. Basically, the phrase *Meishi-er* has the following five meanings:

(1) there is nothing to do, which means there is free time;

(2) no job;

(3) no accidents;

(4) no relationship or responsibility;

(5) it doesn't matter (mainly used when the other party apologizes or expresses thanks)

As a result of its multiple meanings, the Chinese phrase *Meishi-er* has no exact equivalent in other language systems. For example, in English there are several specific expressions because the meaning of *Meishi-er* depends on the context. English expressions such as 'Never mind', 'It's okay' and 'You're welcome' are all approximate translations of *Meishi-er*, and this is largely attributable to the low-context characteristics of English and the high-context traits of Chinese. In Korean, *gwaenchanta* is a substitute for *Meishi-er* when it functions as a response to an apology or an expression of gratitude, which is similar to the fifth literal interpretation of *Meishi-er* as stated above. Broadly speaking, the Thai expression *mai pen rai* is closest to *Meishi-er*, because this Thai expression also acts to console others, or to reply to an expression of thanks or an apology in Thai culture (Panpothong & Phakdeephasook, 2014).

Several scholars have shown an interest in this expression and have contributed a significant amount of time and effort to the study of *Meishi-er* in Chinese from a number of different perspectives (Li, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2014; Wu, 2015; Yin, 2017). For instance, Li (2012) compares *Meishi-er* and *Bukeqi (不客气)* from the perspectives of syntax, semantics and pragmatics, and claims that the semantic orientation of *Meishi-er* differs from that of *Bukeqi*, because unlike *Bukeqi*, its syntactic position varies. The focus can be either the speaker or both parties in a conversation. For instance, when *Meishi-er* serves as a modifier, it assumes the first meaning noted above – 'there is nothing to do, which means there is free time' – but when it serves as an absolute phrase, it means 'there is no need to be afraid or panic'. Regarding the grammaticalization of the phrase *Meishi-er*, Yin (2017) argues that the extended meaning of *Meishi-er* is realized through abstraction, as the role played by *Meishi-er* can vary from a V-O structure bearing the meaning 'there is nothing to do', to a grammaticalized response marker which conveys emotions such as consolation and thoughtfulness. All these studies have one common theme: the fact that *Meishi-er* is fully

charged with interpersonal veins, which is also the main drive behind its grammaticalization towards pragmaticalization (Yin, 2017).

2.2 Meishi-er as an interactional marker in Chinese

When *Meishi-er* serves as an independent response marker for various purposes, its interactional meanings are far removed from its literal interpretations. For example, Liu *et al*. (2014) conclude that, as an independent response token, *Meishi-er* performs three functions in daily interactions, i.e., as a response to an expression of thanks or an apology and as a euphemistic way of expressing consolation. Wu (2015) further focuses on the various uses of *Meishi-er* in her investigation of the responses given to an apology, and she holds that both *Meishi-er* and *Meiguanxi* (没关系) indicate that 'it is not a big deal'. In this sense, *Meishi-er* also reveals the speaker's consoling intention when it is used to respond to an apology. From a social cognitive perspective, Yi (2015) pays due attention to the Korean speakers' cognition when using *gwaenchanta*, and finds that the reason why people feel awkward when uttering *gwaenchanta* lies in the unbalanced power relationship that is established between speakers in most situations. Similarly, Chaimanee (2003) analyzes the patterns of use and the functions of *mai pen rai* in Thai, and investigates how Thai culture influences this linguistic phenomenon. Chaimanee further comments that as a result of Thai cultural heritage, *mai pen rai* reflects the interactional orientation and intersubjectivity of its users. In addition, Panpothong & Phakdeephasook (2014) further explore the interactional functions of *mai pen rai* in interactional contexts, and constructively uncover the Thai Buddhist ideology behind this expression.

Notably, despite the growing attention being paid to *Meishi-er*, few studies to date have addressed its general sequential roles and interactional functions, particularly in ordinary Chinese conversations. In fact, the way in which *Meishi-er* is used can be further discussed by considering the context in which it is deployed. Thus, to bridge these gaps, this article aims to go beyond existing studies on the independent response token *Meishi-er*, by investigating its sequential roles and interactional functions in ordinary Chinese interactions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

The literature review has revealed that further research into the response token *Meishi-er* from a pragmatic perspective needs to be

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undertaken. Accordingly, this study intends to address the following questions:

(1) What sequential roles are performed by *Meishi-er* in Chinese?

(2) What interactional functions are performed by *Meishi-er* in Chinese?

3.2 Data collection

The data used in this study were collected from three modern Chinese TV dramas, *All is Well* (2019), *A Little Reunion* (2019) and *In the Name of the People* (2017), a total of 147 episodes with a combined running time of approximately 6,693 minutes. The first two dramas are family themed. *All is Well* tells the story of a family torn apart by internal conflict, while *A Little Reunion* focuses on family education by depicting the joys and sorrows in the lives of three families. *In the Name of the People* is politically themed, presenting the audience with real-life scenes of anti-corruption in the Chinese government. These TV dramas were chosen for two reasons. First, TV dramas featuring both family and working life more accurately represent the daily discourse of Mandarin-speakers. Second, taking into account the variability of speech and social features, the use of contemporary TV dramas ensures the data are representative of modern-day life in China.

All episodes of these TV dramas were viewed on iQIYI (www.iqiyi.com), one of the leading Chinese online movie and video streaming websites. First, we identified conversations in which *Meishi-er* occurs as a response. In the quest to find these conversations, 'standard' cases containing the response token *Meishi-er* were filtered out. We found *Meishi-er* in a wide variety of syntactically different expressions, whose pragmatic uses and meanings were identical to its stereotypical meaning, such as: *zhende Meishi-er* (真的没事儿 'It's really fine'), *wo Meishi-er* (我没事儿 'I'm fine') and *qishi Meishi-er* (其实没事儿 'Actually it's fine'), etc. As these variants of *Meishi-er* are syntactically simple and relatively standard, we decided to include them in our dataset for authenticity. Second, we recorded the conversations in time order by using iQIYI's 'pause' function. In total, 261 segments of interaction met our requirements and these were then transcribed in Chinese characters.

During the data transcription process, contextual information, such as the location and interactional background of each discourse, was presented at the start of each transcript to enable readers to fully understand the events taking place in each discourse, and this contextual information was then followed by the interactants' utterances. Both the contextual

information and the conversations were transcribed in Pinyin, the Chinese phonetic alphabet, followed by an English translation. In addition, the facial expressions, postures and even the actions of the interlocutors were also included, where necessary, in the conversation transcript. A word-for-word translation and a free translation were both provided because word-for-word translations often cause confusion and misunderstanding. It is worth noting that since each conversation included at least one turn between the interactants, it was inevitable that the phrase *Meishi-er* occurred on more than one occasion in each conversational extract.

3.3 Data analysis

In this paper, our intention is to adopt the speech act (SA) sequence as our primary framework for data analysis, which we will use to analyze the sequential roles and interactional functions of *Meishi-er* in a clear-cut manner. This framework is based on previous studies of the speech acts of request and apology, in which Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1989) propose that a SA sequence is comprised of three components: the alerter, the head act, and the supportive move (17). The head act is the nucleus of the SA sequence, while alerters are terms which attract the hearer's attention (Nodoushan & Allami, 2011; Halupka-Rešetar, 2014). In this sense, both the attention-getters and terms of address fall into the category of alerter. Supportive moves are adjuncts to the head act and are used to facilitate the realization of the speech act. In the current study, we generalize that the concept of SA sequence is applicable to other types of speech act. This generalization is also supported by Chinese scholars who have used this framework to study other speech acts, such as assertion (Zhang & Wang, 1997; Li, 1998). It should be noted that there is no fixed sequential order, which means that alerters and supportive moves can occur either before or after the head acts.

After a preparatory preview of the data and transcripts, preliminary observations were made on the sequential roles and interactional functions of *Meishi-er* in the interactions. Firstly, the data were rigorously analyzed in accordance with the research questions. According to the definition of a SA sequence advanced by Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1998:17), the frequency with which *Meishi-er* occurred in the different types of SA sequence was determined by quantitative analysis. Secondly, by conducting qualitative analysis, the interactional functions of *Meishi-er* were summarized. In this study, we marked each occurrence of *Meishi-er* in the corpus one at a time, and highlighted their pragmatic contexts by using differently colored fonts. On completion of the above analyses, the frequency of occurrence of

each function in the dataset was recorded. It should be noted that during this process, even though the response token *Meishi-er* on some occasions occurred multiple times in a single sentence, it was only recorded as occurring once in the results.

4. Results and discussion

This section focuses on the sequential roles and interactional functions of the phrase *Meishi-er* in ordinary Chinese interactions, and these roles and functions are detailed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, respectively.

4.1 The sequential roles of Meishi-er

In verbal communication, sentences or paragraphs form a sequence through semantic or pragmatic relations, while the coherence of the sequence reflects the kinship of the discourse at the micro level (Miao & Zhai, 2000). Therefore, in this section, *Meishi-er* will be analyzed and then classified according to the type of head act and supportive move it performs in each response. For the sake of convenience, alerter, head act (in bold) and supportive move in the following examples refer to A, H and S, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the frequencies and percentages with which *Meishi-er* serves as a head act or a supportive move in different types of SA sequence.

Table 1: Distribution of *Meishi-er* in different types of SA sequence

Roles of *Meishi-er*	Types of SA Sequence	Frequency		Percentage (%)
Head act	*Meishi-er* as a head act & S	115	220	65.28%
	Meishi-er as an independent head act	95		
	A & *Meishi-er* as a head act	6		
	A & *Meishi-er* as a head act & S	4		
Supportive move	H & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move	96	117	34.72%
	A & H & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move	21		

As shown in Table 1, *Meishi-er* is more often used as a head act than a supportive move. Overall, *Meishi-er* serves as a head act on 220 occasions (65.28% of the total number of occurrences), while it serves as a supportive move on 117 occasions (34.72% of the total number of occurrences).

Moreover, *Meishi-er* serves as a head act in four SA sequence subcategories: (1) *Meishi-er* as a head act & S (115 occurrences); (2) *Meishi-er* as an independent head act (95 occurrences); (3) A & *Meishi-er* as a head act (6 occurrences); and (4) A & *Meishi-er* as a head act & S (4 occurrences). A closer look at the positioning of *Meishi-er* shows that when *Meishi-er* serves as a head act, it is more often preposed in the speech act sequence, which challenges the communicative principle of 'end-focus' in Chinese, in which the focus of the information is believed to be placed at the end of a sentence (Gao, 1984; Zhao, 1985).

In addition, there are two situations in which *Meishi-er* serves as a supportive move: (1) H & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move (96 occurrences); and (2) A & H & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move (21 occurrences). This indicates that when *Meishi-er* serves as a supportive move, it is usually postposed in the sequence. Taking the previous finding into consideration, i.e., *Meishi-er* as a head act is often preposed, we can conclude that the head act in a Chinese speech act sequence is more likely to be preposed, a conclusion which is in accordance with previous studies on Thematic Preposing (Xiao, 2007; Zhu, 2013). This challenges the previous view that Chinese Mandarin-speakers are traditionally indirect when conveying their communicative intentions (Gao *et al.*, 1996).

4.1.1 Meishi-er serving as a head act

From the above results, it can be seen that *Meishi-er* generally serves as a head act in social interactions. As Table 1 reveals, *Meishi-er* is more often seen as an independent head act or occurring with a supportive move, and less often seen with an alerter or with an alerter and a supportive move at the same time when it serves as a head act.

As a head act in a SA sequence, *Meishi-er* can be used independently in the form of both single use (44 occurrences) and repeated use (51 occurrences), with more stress being on the tone in the latter situation. In single use, *Meishi-er* is more commonly used as a form of polite response to another person's expression of thanks or apology. Since *Meishi-er* can itself satisfy the speaker's communicative needs, no extra information needs to be provided. As for the repeated use of *Meishi-er*, in this case the addresser performs a series of self-repeats, i.e., a set of consecutive repeats without interference from the other party (Hsieh, 2009). As we observed, in addition to its emphasizing role, the repeated use of *Meishi-er* can also function as a filler to allow the speaker time to search for the correct word(s) for what he/she is about to say, particularly in an emergency situation. For example:

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Excerpt 1

[Context: In the living room. Su Daqiang and his old colleagues are having a gathering at his home. He, one of the colleagues, intends to leave. (*All is Well*, 26:29, episode 4)]

(1) Su Daqiang: haoburongyi lai   yici,
                 rarely   come   once
                 'This is a rare visit.
                 na   neng   shuo zou   jiu   zou   ne?
                 where   can   say   go   only   go   PRT
                 How can you leave so soon?'
                 lai   lai   lai,
                 come   come   come
                 'Here,
                 gei   nimen   daoshang   cha   lai.
                 give   you   pour   tea   come
                 drink some tea.'
                 [holding the teapot while looking at another colleague]
                 ni   shuo   laohe   ya...
                 you   say   He   PRT
                 'Hey, He...'
                 [suddenly the tea spills]

(2) He: **Meishi-er Meishi-er   Meishi-er.**
                 nothing   nothing   nothing
                 'It's fine. It's fine. It's fine.'
                 [wiping away the water]

(3) Su Daqiang: *laohe, kuai   kuai   kuai.*
                 He   quickly   quickly   quickly
                 'He, quickly, quickly, quickly.'
                 [passing He some tissues]

(4) Others: *laohe, zenme   le? zenme   le?*
                 He   how come   PRT how come   PRT
                 'He, what's wrong? What's wrong?'

(5) He: **Meishi-er   Meishi-er.**
                 nothing   nothing
                 'It's fine. It's fine.'

(6) Su Daqiang: *wo zhe   shou dou   le,   shou   dou   le.*
                 I   here hand shook ASP, hand   shook   ASP
                 'My hand shook. My hand shook.'

(7) He: ***Meishi-er   Meishi-er   Meishi-er.***
                   nothing   nothing   nothing
                   'It's fine. It's fine. It's fine.'

(8) Su Daqiang: *wo   kan   kan, wo   kan   kan.*
                   I   see   see   I   see   see
                   'Let me see, let me see.'

(9) He: ***Meishi-er   Meishi-er   Meishi-er.***
                   nothing   nothing   nothing
                   'I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.'

(10) Su Daqiang: *zenme le   zenme   le*
                   what PRT   what   PRT
                   'What's the matter? What's the matter?'

(11) He: ***Meishi-er   Meishi-er.***
                   nothing   nothing
                   'I'm fine. I'm fine.'

In excerpt 1, Su Daqiang has accidentally spilt tea on his old friend, He, and everyone present is in a state of panic. The five repeated sets of *Meishi-er* is the speaker's instant, emergency processing of the situation. On the one hand, the emphasizing function is activated by the repeated use of *Meishi-er*. This emphasizes the current state of the speaker and helps to ensure that the other interlocutors comprehend what he means (Bublitz, 1989). Consequently, the main message implied by *Meishi-er* - 'I am totally fine' - is successfully delivered and the concerns of the other interlocutors are addressed. On the other hand, the repetition of *Meishi-er* in this case is also a form of delaying tactic, which is aimed at maintaining the ongoing talk while also allowing the speaker time to search for the correct word(s) to say (Rabab'ah & Abuseileek, 2012).

In addition, our dataset shows that when *Meishi-er* serves as a head act, it occasionally co-occurs with the other two components of a SA sequence, namely an alerter and a supportive move, which are occasionally indispensable when performing speech acts. It can be seen that supportive moves help the speaker to accelerate the implementation of the head act (Li, 1998). When *Meishi-er* fails to achieve the effective transfer of information, the speaker tends to provide an explanation or make other supportive discourse moves. Excerpt 2 provides an example of Alerter & *Meishi-er* as a head act and a supportive move.

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Excerpt 2

[Context: In the living room. Tong Wenjie loses her temper, knowing that her nephew, Lin Leier, has been asked to tutor the neighbor's daughter. (*A Little Reunion*, 16:11, episode 27)]

(1) Tong Wenjie: *bu   qu,   mei   shijian.*
not go   no   time
'You are not allowed to go. There is no time (for tutoring).'
ta   ma   xiangde dao   ting zhoudao   de,
her mother think   actually very thoughtful PRT
'Her mother is so thoughtful,
zhe ruyisuanpan   da   de,
this wishful thinking play DE
so thoughtful!
ta   nver   liangtou   dou bu la,
her daughter both sides   all   not leave
Her daughter is keeping the two ends meet,
langfei nide shijian gei   ta   buke ganm   ya?
waste   your time   give she tutor what for PRT
wasting your time. What are you tutoring her for?'

(2) Lin Leier: *xiaoyi, **qishi   Meishi-er**,*
aunt   actually nothing
'Aunt, **actually it's okay**.
wo   gei   ta   buke shi yi   laoshi
I   give   her   tutor be from teacher
de   jiaodu   lai   bu,
DE   perspective come tutor
I'm tutoring her as a teacher.
silu   neng geng qingxi,
thinking can   more clear
(My) thinking will be even clearer.
wo   ye   neng zai   gonggu gonggu.
I   also can   again solidify solidify
I can also consolidate (the knowledge).
ting   hao   de.
very   good   PRT
It's good.'

In Excerpt 2, Lin's response is a typical comforting speech act. In the consoling process, *xiaoyi* ('*Aunt*') is a typical alerter, which reveals

the social relationship and emotional distance between the two parties, prompting the speaker to determine the degree of politeness required in his/her utterances and thus choose an appropriate communicative approach. *Meishi-er* clearly conveys the placating intention of the speaker, and is thus a form of comfort (Wen, 1999) that is used to disarm the concerns of his/her counterpart. The anticipated pragmatic effect of *Meishi-er*, as suggested above, is to comfort the aunt and thereby avoid the negative consequences of the aunt's accusation. Hence, in this case, *Meishi-er* is a head act; the next utterance, a supportive move, further explains why the speaker has agreed to tutor the girl.

4.1.2 Meishi-er serving as a supportive move

In some cases, the head speech act is not realized by uttering *Meishi-er*, which indicates that *Meishi-er* is simply serving as a supportive move to facilitate the central intention of the speaker. As Table 1 shows, there are two main types of SA sequence in which *Meishi-er* plays the role of a supportive move: (1) head act & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move; and (2) alerter & head act & *Meishi-er* as a supportive move. The following example illustrates how *Meishi-er* expedites the implementation of the central action in the SA sequence, which is organized as alerter, head act and *Meishi-er* as a supportive move.

Excerpt 3
[Context: In the canteen. Fang Yifan and his cousin, Lin Leier, are sitting together. (*A Little Reunion*, 26:38, episode 25)]
  (1) Lin Leier: *biaoge,　ni　haishi chi yidian　ba.*
               cousin　you still　eat a little PRT
               'Cousin, you must eat something.
               zhongwu　bu　chifan　　buxing.
               afternoon　not　eat　　　not okay
               Not having lunch is not good.'
               yaobu ni　ba　wode jitui　　jia qu?
               or　　you take my　　drumstick grab go
               'Or you can grab my drumstick.'
  (2) Fang Yifan: *bu　bu　bu　buyong, chi　nide, chi　nide,*
                no no no　needn't eat　yours eat　yours
                'No, no, no. I don't need it. You eat yours. You eat yours.
                buyong　guan　　　wo.

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> needn't care   me
> Don't worry about me.'
> [Lin Leier pushes his lunch towards Fang Yifan]
>
> (3) Fang Yifan: *ni   chi   ba，   ni   zhen   buyong   guan wo,*
> you eat PRT   you really needn't   care me
> **'You enjoy the food. Just leave me alone.**
> *Leier,   Meishi-er.*
> Leier   nothing
> Leier, it's fine.'

In this case, the central speech act of the second interlocutor is a refusal. As noted in previous studies on refusal strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wang, 2001), refusals are face threatening acts, and thus an indirect refusal is the preferred way to eliminate the threat. Instead of using the direct refusal *buyong*, the speaker puts forward the alternative utterances 'You eat' and 'Just leave me alone' to decline the offer of food, and these alternative expressions indicate that the speaker does not wish to trouble the other person. Thus, these statements are head acts in the refusal sequence (Wang, 2001). The following *Leier* is an alerter to attract the other party's attention (Li, 1998), while *Meishi-er* supports the head act by reassuring the other party that it is alright for the speaker not to have lunch, and is therefore a supportive move.

4.2 The interactional functions of Meishi-er

As revealed in the previous section, whether serving as a head act or a supportive move, *Meishi-er* makes an indispensable contribution to the realization of various types of speech act in ordinary Chinese interactions. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the data, we discovered that *Meishi-er* often functions as a response to an expression of thanks or an apology, an expression of reassurance, a self-disclosure avoidance or conflict resolution strategy, and a subtle way to refuse an offer. As the latter three functions have not yet been discussed in previous studies (Liu *et al.*, 2014; Wu, 2015), we decided to provide detailed examples to support our conclusions. The distribution of the interactional functions of *Meishi-er* in the interactions under investigation are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The interactional functions of Meishi-er in Chinese interactions
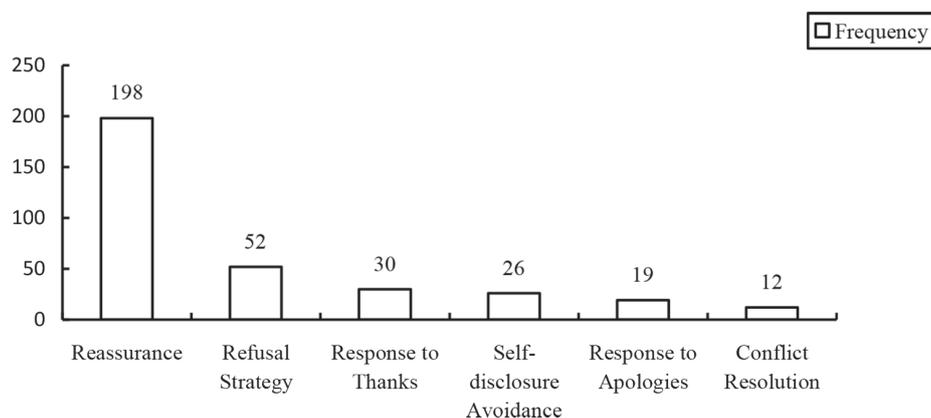
It can be seen in Figure 1 that there is a significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of the interactional functions of *Meishi-er*. Of the 261 examples that were transcribed, *Meishi-er* is overwhelmingly used as an expression of reassurance (198 occurrences), with its role as a refusal strategy rating second (52 occurrences). There is little difference in the frequency of occurrence of the other four functions: *Meishi-er* functions as a response to an expression of thanks on 30 occasions, a self-disclosure avoidance strategy on 26 occasions, a response to an apology on 19 occasions, and a conflict resolution strategy on only 12 occasions. Each of these six categories will be considered below by examining specific examples.

4.2.1 Meishi-er as a response to an apology

Formula (1): A: extending an apology

B: *Meishi-er*

In daily interactions, *Meishi-er* is frequently used in partnership with the speech act of apology. In general, as long as the offense does not cause significant harm, Chinese speakers tend to use *Meishi-er* to show that they have forgiven the person who is offering the apology. This use of *Meishi-er* has already become a ritualistic response to an apology. Like the use of the Thai expression *mai pen rai* 'It's not substantial', observed by Panpothong & Phakdeephasook (2014), the ritualistic use of *Meishi-er* also serves the function of re-establishing harmony. When used in response to the commonly adopted Chinese expressions of apology *duibuqi* (对不起)

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and *buhaoyisi* (不好意思), *Meishi-er* is expected to establish or maintain interpersonal harmony. Specifically, in comparison to another widely used expression *Meiguanxi*, *Meishi-er* is more cordial and it portrays the tolerant attitude of the speaker (Liu *et al.*, 2014). For example:

Excerpt 4
[Context: At a hospital entrance. Su Daqiang is going to buy breakfast for his friend who has been hospitalized. The moment he leaves the hospital he runs into a teenage girl. (*All is Well*, 12:17, episode 44)]

(1) Teenage girl:	*buhaoyisi*	*a.*	
	sorry	PRT	
	'I'm sorry.'		
(2) Su Daqiang:	***Meishi-er***	***Meishi-er***	***Meishi-er***
	nothing	nothing	nothing
	'It's fine. It's fine. It's fine.'		

This is one example where *Meishi-er* occurs in response to the ritualistic Chinese expression of apology *buhaoyisi* (不好意思). It is quite clear that the teenage girl's actions are not deliberate, therefore Su Daqiang does not take the situation seriously and pardons the girl by saying *Meishi-er*. As defined in Section 2.1, *shi* (事) means 'things' in general, while *Meishi-er* (没事儿) is the negation of *shi* (事). Hence, this phrase performs the function of reducing (or entirely negating) the perceived severity of a person's mistake (Wu, 2015). In the above situation, by using *Meishi-er*, the speaker's intention is to minimize the influence of the incident and reduce or eliminate the other person's guilt.

4.2.2 Meishi-er as a response to an expression of thanks
Formula (2): A: showing gratitude
                 B: *Meishi-er*

Meishi-er is also used as a response to the act of thanking in Chinese. Given that *Meishi-er* conveys the meaning 'the favor I give to you is nothing to speak of', it is actually related to the Chinese virtue of *Li* ('*politeness or courtesy*'). In Chinese culture, the principle of *Li* requires people to abide by rules and conventions so that they behave appropriately in social contexts (Chen & Starosta, 1997). On the basis of the Politeness Principle advanced by Leech (1983), Gu (1992) further develops the concept of politeness by incorporating Chinese culture. He recognizes that one needs to maximize the benefit to others in actions, to minimize the cost to oneself in speech. As a result, when it comes to making an appropriate response to an expression of thanks or gratitude, it is generally accepted that we

should minimize our favor to reduce the psychological burden on the other party. Otherwise, ignoring the expression of gratitude could be viewed as being impolite. It should be noted that irrespective of whether *Meishi-er* functions as the response to an apology or an expression of thanks, it can be adopted in various types of interpersonal relationship, ranging from stranger to family relationships. As previous researchers have highlighted, compared to other expressions such as *Bukeqi* (不客气) and *Buyongxie* (不用谢), *Meishi-er* brings both sides closer together and thus facilitates communication (Liu *et al.*, 2014). For example:

Excerpt 5
[Context: At Song Qian's apartment. Song Qian goes outside to see her daughter's teacher after a talk. (*A Little Reunion*, 10:31, episode 15)]

(1) Song Qian: *zhenshi mafan nin,   rang   nin   pao   yitang.*
  really   bother you   let   you   run   once
  'It was such a bother for you to have to go there.'

(2) Teacher: *yinggaide   yinggaide*
  should   should
  'I should do that. I should do that.'
  zhe   yingzi ya,
  this   yingzi PRT
  gongke shang juedui   mei   wenti   a,
  study   on   absolutely no   problem PRT
  'To Yingzi, these exercises will not be a problem.
  ye   shi yi yonggong   de haizi, dui ba?
  also be   a hard-working DE child right PRT
  (She) is also a hard-working child, right?
  zhe   yihou yaoshi you shenme shi   ne,
  this   future if   have what   thing PRT
  If she has any problem,
  buguan shi xuexi shang de ye hao a,
  despite be   study on   DE also good PRT
  shenghuo   shang de ye   hao   a,
  life   on   DE also good PRT
  whether in study or in her life,
  dou keyi zhao   wo jishi   goutong shibushi?
  all can find   me in time chat   A-not-A
  she can come and talk with me, right?'

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(3) Song Qian: *yijing   gei   nin   tian mafan   le.*
        already give you   add   trouble   PRT
        'I have already bothered you.'

(4) Teacher: **Meishi-er Meishi-er Meishi-er**, *nin keqi   le.*
        nothing   nothing   nothing   you polite PRT
        'It's fine. It's fine. It's fine. Don't be a stranger.'

Excerpt 5 is a teacher-parent interaction. It is worth noting that a high power distance exists between these two social identities in Chinese culture. Power, as discussed in Leech's (1983) study, is one of the factors that determines the degree of politeness. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), speakers tend to use more polite language when communicating with individuals of higher status. To date, the correlation between social power and politeness has been investigated in a number of studies on politeness and power (e.g., Holtgraves & Yang 1990, 1992). The power distance reflects "the range of answers found in the various countries to the basic question of how to handle the fact that people are unequal" (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010:55). Influenced by the concept of teacher doctrines, teachers, in a conventional sense, are respected as a symbol of authority and they enjoy the respect of both students and parents. In the above case, *Meishi-er* is a formula expressing politeness and maintaining interpersonal harmony within such social norms. The use of *Meishi-er* helps to reduce the potential power distance, and therefore contributes to the achievement of mutual trust and respect between both sides in the interaction.

4.2.3 Meishi-er as an expression of reassurance

Formula (3): A: expressing concern or discomfort
        B: *Meishi-er* as an expression of reassurance

In more than half of the examples elicited, *Meishi-er* performs the act of reassuring. Chinese speakers use *Meishi-er* as an expression of reassurance in various contexts, even if the event is a critical incident. As a common comforting formula (Zeng & Dou, 2012), *Meishi-er* often occurs with other supporting remarks about a specific issue, which often turn out to be negative, to enhance the comforting effect. By uttering *Meishi-er,* the speaker's intention is to reassure the interlocutor that 'there is nothing to worry about'.

Since there are different starting points to reassurance, two situations exist: (1) When A shows concern for B, who is in trouble, B is apt to say *Meishi-er* to reassure A that there is nothing seriously wrong; (2) When A is concerned about another person or issue, B's intention is to show care for

A by using *Meishi-er* to express consolation. No matter who is confronted by the difficult situation, the person using *Meishi-er* is trying to soothe the other party by suggesting that the situation is not really that serious. For example:

Excerpt 6
[Context: In a restaurant. Su Daqaing is worried about his daughter, Su Mingyu, after knowing that she has to drink at business lunches or dinners sometimes. (*All is Well*, 15:43, episode 43)]

(1) Su Daqiang: *Mingyu, ni   nianqing you piaoliang,*
              Mingyu you   young   also beautiful
              you   shi   ge   nvhaizi,
              also   be   a   girl
              'Mingyu, you are a young and beautiful woman.
              jizhu   le   a,
              remember PRT PRT
              zai   waibian yiding buyao he   duo   le,
              in   outside must   not   drink much PRT
              Remember not to drink too much outside.
              rongyi chushier,   hai   yao zhuyi   shenti.
              easy   have accident also   want watch out body
              Things could happen. Watch your health.'

(2) Su Mingyu: *Meishi-er, tamen dou ba   wo   dang   nande,*
              nothing they   all   take   me   as   man
              '**It's fine**. They all think of me as a man.
              tamen you zunzhong wo   you pa   wo.
              they   also respect   me   also fear me
              They respect and fear me.'

Faced with her father's exhortation, the daughter responds using *Meishi-er* to suggest that his worry is unfounded. Following this response, the daughter provides the unbiased fact that all her colleagues respect her to further strengthen the persuasive effect of her utterance. This type of reassurance is, according to Burleson (1994), a comforting strategy that meets the standard of 'person centeredness' in which person-centered messages are adopted during the process of comforting. Knowing that her father is concerned about her safety, the daughter comforts him by directly denying the precondition of her father's concern and challenging

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the rationale behind his utterance, 'things could happen'. Accordingly, the daughter's response is expected to enhance the comforting effect.

4.2.4 Meishi-er as a self-disclosure avoidance strategy

Formula (4): A: inquiring

        B: *Meishi-er* as a strategy to avoid self-disclosure

Meishi-er is sometimes used as a self-disclosure avoidance strategy. As Collins & Miller (1994) point out, self-disclosure is the revealing of one's personally relevant experiences, thoughts and feelings to other people. When self-awareness is over-stimulated, especially when it comes to intimate topics which can cause negative moods, the speaker attempts to avoid disclosure and instead may even make false statements. In this case, the meaning of the phrase *Meishi-er* is 'It's nothing, so let's just let it go'. See the following example:

Excerpt 7

[Context: At Su Mingcheng's house. Su Mingzhe and his younger brother, Su Mingcheng, are having a talk. (*All is Well*, 5:34, episode 31)]

(1) Su Mingzhe: *Mingcheng, ni zenmehuishi a?*
Mingcheng you what's the matter PRT
ganma yao da ren ne?
why want beat human PRT
'Mingcheng, what's wrong with you? Why did you hit her?'
Lili xianzai zenmeyang le?
Lili now how PRT
'How is Lili now?'

(2) Su Mingcheng: ***Meishi-er.***
nothing
'**It's fine.**'

(3) Su Mingzhe: *Meishi-er?*
nothing
Meishi-er bieren gen ni ti lihun a?
nothing others with you mention divorce PRT
'Fine? Then why does she want a divorce?'

(4) Su Mingcheng: [sighing]
li jiu li bei.
divorce only divorce PRT
'Give her one then.'

Su Mingcheng is depressed because of the issue of his divorce. Confronted by his brother's inquiry, he is unwilling to open his heart. Instead, he evades the issue by adopting *Meishi-er* in his response. The unspoken message behind this use of *Meishi-er* is that 'the issue you mention is nothing to speak of' and 'everything is fine with me'. On the one hand, the speaker does not want his family to worry about him. On the other hand, he is aware that the prospect of full self-disclosure is unpleasant because fully disclosing such intimate topics can only prolong or intensify his negative thoughts. Therefore, the revealer is motivated to withhold such a disclosure (Archer *et al.*, 1982) by uttering *Meishi-er*.

4.2.5 Meishi-er as a refusal strategy

Formula (5): A: offering help/ an invitation

B: *Meishi-er* as a refusal strategy

Meishi-er is also a marker of refusal in Chinese social interactions. As noted by Yang (2008) in her study of refusal strategies in Chinese, when receiving help or an invitation, which could potentially benefit the receiver, gratitude is required whether or not the receiver is interested in the offer. In this sense, indirect tactful expressions are preferred when one is determined not to accept what is being offered or proposed. As opposed to direct statements like *Buyong* (不用) and *Buyao* (不要), *Meishi-er* is a more considerate response. It conveys the information that the speaker is perfectly fine without the offer of help or the invitation. See the following example:

Excerpt 8

[Context: In a restaurant. Su Mingzhe invites his younger brother, Su Mingcheng, and sister, Su Mingyu, to celebrate their father's move into a new house. Su Mingyu is the last person to arrive. (*All is Well*, 3:58, episode 33)]

(1) Su Mingzhe: *Mingyu,   lai   le,*
                 Mingyu   come ASP
                 'Mingyu, there you are.
                 lai   lai   lai,   zuo zuo zuo.
                 come   come   come   sit sit sit
                 Come here, come here, come here. Sit, sit, sit.'
                 [pointing to the seat next to him]

(2) Su Mingyu: *Meishi-er, wo   zuo   zhe-er.*
                 nothing   I   sit   here
                 '**It's fine**. I'll sit here.'
                 [sitting opposite her brothers]

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It is worth mentioning that the speaker, Su Mingyu, has a poor relationship with her brothers. Regarding her brother's invitation, she uses *Meishi-er* in her response to refuse the offer. As noted by Gao & Ting-Toomey (1998:78), in Chinese speech, "the word 'no' is not only restrained but avoided at all costs". Instead of the straight rejection 'no', *Meishi-er* functions here as a refusal strategy, indicating that 'I'm perfectly fine without the offer'. Besides, in this case, given that the first interlocutor enjoys higher power and status in the family, the speaker tries to decline the invitation as gently as possible. The phrase *Meishi-er* makes the refusal act less aggressive and it demonstrates the speaker's respect for the negative face of the higher-power interlocutor, while the follow-up statement serves as an alternative to reinforce the subliminal meaning and persuasiveness of the refusal. Consequently, the harmonious state on both sides is successfully maintained.

4.2.6 Meishi-er as a conflict resolution strategy
Formula (6): A: expressing disagreement / reproaching
           B: *Meishi-er* as a conflict resolution strategy

Previous research has not investigated the way in which *Meishi-er* can be used as a strategy to manage or resolve conflict in verbal communication. Verbal conflict is defined by Jacquemet (2005) as an interactional dispute between two or more parties and it is triggered by the direct or indirect accusations that one party has done something infuriating. Under these circumstances, the adoption of *Meishi-er* is an effective way to terminate any conflict. For example:

Excerpt 9
[Context: At Su Mingzhe's home. Su Mingzhe is holding his daughter in his arms and coaxing her, while his wife, Wu Fei, sits next to him. (*All is Well*, 25:45, episode 12)]

(1) Su Mingzhe: *kankan   zhege   xiao   shou.*
               look   this   small hand
               'Look at your hands.'
(2) Wu Fei: [looking at her daughter]
               ni   zenme   ba   shou
               you   what for   make   hand
               huacheng zheyang   a?
               paint   this   PRT
               'How did you get them so dirty?'

(3) Su Mingzhe: *Meishi-er Meishi-er,*
                    nothing   nothing
                    'It's fine. It's fine.
                    wo   dai   ta   qu   xi   a.
                    I   take   her go   wash PRT
                    I'll walk with her to wash (her hands).'

The above conversation takes place between a husband and wife. Since the person being scolded is their daughter, the husband's response *Meishi-er* is clearly a form of third-party intervention (Zhang, 2017), implying that 'the disputed issue is nothing to speak of'. As previously mentioned, respect for another person's face is conducive to the establishment of a harmonious atmosphere (see Section 4.2.5). Likewise, *Guanxi* functions to keep the wheel of harmony turning (Chen & Starosta, 1997). In this case, as a husband and father, Su Mingzhe plays the role of peacemaker between his wife and daughter. Before the conflict gets a chance to escalate, the husband intervenes by saying *Meishi-er* to diffuse the negative emotions of his wife. The statement 'I'll walk her to wash her hands' is a remedial measure, which he adopts to persuade his wife to discontinue the act of complaining.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the sequential roles and interactional functions of the Chinese expression *Meishi-er* in ordinary interactions. From the preceding analysis and discussion, we now arrive at two main findings. First, in terms of the SA sequence, *Meishi-er* often occurs as the head act and occasionally as the supportive move in speech acts, and it helps to achieve the communicative intentions of the speaker and facilitates the conversation process. Besides, the use of *Meishi-er*, regardless of whether this use is dominating or supportive, imperceptibly contributes to the establishment, maintenance, and even enhancement of social relations. Second, in terms of interactional functions, *Meishi-er* can be used as a response to an expression of thanks or an apology, an expression of reassurance, an effective means of self-disclosure avoidance, and a refusal or conflict resolution strategy. These functions are the embodiments of the characteristics of Chinese culture, which places particular emphasis on the maintenance of harmony on all levels. In this sense, the current study goes beyond the boundaries of previous research on the use of *Meishi-er* in Mandarin by examining a broader context, that is, conversations elicited from TV dramas among familial and non-familial, equal-status and unequal-

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status Mandarin-speaking interactants. Moreover, the framework applied here contributes both to this study and the pragmatic research into other expressions in several respects. It is a meaningful attempt to study Chinese pragmatics in different social settings.

Nonetheless, this study has some limitations. The generalized results of this study were obtained from the analysis of a limited amount of data which was collected from modern Chinese TV dramas. Regarding the suitability of the corpus, naturally occurring discourse in face-to-face interactions is more rewarding to study than conversations taken from TV dramas. Therefore, further investigations are needed to study *Meishi-er* using a larger amount of naturally occurring data. Despite these limitations, this study still sheds some light on our decoding of interactional response tokens in Mandarin. Given that cultural factors were also taken into account in our discussions, this study can also be used as a reference by researchers who are interested in investigating other fields, such as psychology and culture intertwined with pragmatics. We believe that a multi-disciplinary investigation of this type could enrich empirical studies that use authentic data to explore various types of speech act in Chinese discourse.

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