

Cultural dynamics of metadiscourse in Chinese mediation: a pragmatic approach to rapport management and conflict resolution

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Abstract

This study explores Chinese mediators' strategic use of interactional metadiscourse for rapport management in family conflict resolution from a culturally localized pragmatic perspective. Drawing on five resolved family dispute cases from the Chinese television mediation program *Baixing Tiaojie*, the study integrates quantitative frequency counting of metadiscourse markers and qualitative pragmatic interpretation to unpack core linguistic patterns of Chinese mediation practice. The analysis reveals that Chinese mediators prioritize interactional metadiscourse to foster engagement over stance assertion, emphasizing active listening and participant orientation as central to effective communication and conflict resolution. The study verifies Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Model and extends it by integrating indigenous Chinese cultural constructs centered on composite interests, affective bonds and collective welfare, relational face, legal codes and traditional etiquette norms, which collectively govern dynamic relational regulation throughout mediation procedures. Chinese mediators flexibly enhance, maintain, or readjust ties shaped by these factors to balance cultural norms and resolution goals. Contextualizing mediation discourse within Chinese socio-cultural conventions, this study clarifies how native value systems shape conflict talk and refines the cross-cultural explanatory capacity of rapport management frameworks. The findings highlight the indispensable function of culture-specific linguistic tactics in domestic mediation. Theoretically, the study enriches pragmatic research on conflict discourse by elaborating the linkage between cultural norms and metadiscursive practice. Practically, it delivers targeted references for domestic mediator training and cultural sensitivity cultivation in cross-cultural mediation scenarios.

Introduction

Mediation, a cornerstone of China's alternative dispute resolution system, is deeply rooted in Confucian relational ethics and celebrated as an "Eastern Experience" for its harmony-oriented philosophy. This cultural and institutional practice is exemplified in public initiatives such as *Baixing Tiaojie*, where professional mediators resolve family and community disputes through reasoning, moral persuasion, and the activation of cultural ideals, prioritizing relational repair over adversarial adjudication. At the heart of this communicative process lies interactional metadiscourse, a set of linguistic resources (e.g., hedges, boosters, engagement markers) that enable speakers to negotiate social relationships, express attitudes, and align perspectives with interlocutors (Hyland, 2005a).

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In Chinese mediation, linguistic strategies are culturally adaptive rather than neutral tools. Their operation is shaped by five core Confucian constructs: *li* (composite interest encompassing material interests, relational/filial obligations, and reputational considerations), *qing* (affective bonds and collective welfare), *mianzi* (face dynamics negotiated through indirectness), *the rule of law* (formal legal norms governing disputes), and *the rule of etiquette* (traditional moral norms emphasizing social order and mutual respect) (Tu, 1987; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Zhai, 2009; Zhai, 2021). Centered on *he* (harmony), relational ethics, and contextual appropriateness, these constructs profoundly influence the selection and function of interactional metadiscourse (Gong et al., 2023).

Anchored in the Confucian ideal that “礼之用，和为贵” (the function of ritual propriety lies in harmony) (Confucius, 1971), Chinese mediation differs distinctly from Western dispute resolution models. While Western frameworks are rooted in individualistic ethics, legal principles, and individual rights (Goffman, 1955; Locher and Watts, 2008), the Chinese approach reflects collectivist values that view conflict as a threat to social cohesion (Huang, 2016), balancing substantive resolution with relational harmony. Mediators thus act as cultural brokers, bridging formal legal requirements with traditional relational ethics¹.

This cultural embeddedness of metadiscourse is particularly pronounced in family dispute mediation, where conflicts are intertwined with Confucian-derived filial piety, intergenerational obligations, and communal expectations (Fei, 1998). As China’s alternative dispute resolution system evolves amid social and legal modernization, culturally situated linguistic practices remain critical. Formal legal frameworks are strengthening alongside enduring Confucian ethics and cultural norms (Goh, 2016), creating dual demands for mediators to adapt metadiscourse to both institutional and cultural expectations. Understanding these dynamics enriches scholarly insights into discourse pragmatics and cross-cultural communication.

Notably, existing research on mediation discourse has either focused on Western individualistic contexts or treated Chinese mediation’s cultural constructs as background rather than core variables shaping metadiscourse use, failing to systematically unpack how Confucian values dynamically interact with metadiscourse strategies across mediation stages. This study aims to address this limitation by exploring the interplay between interactional metadiscourse, rapport management, and cultural constructs in Chinese family dispute mediation. To operationalize this aim and guide the analysis, three core research questions are addressed:

- (1) What are the core types and distribution patterns of interactional metadiscourse in Chinese family dispute mediation?
- (2) How do Chinese mediators dynamically deploy interactional metadiscourse resources to manage rapport across different mediation stages?
- (3) How do cultural constructs (*li*, *qing*, *mianzi*, *the rule of law*, *the rule of etiquette*) shape the pragmatic functions of interactional metadiscourse in rapport management and conflict resolution?

Literature review

Interactional metadiscourse in institutional discourse

Metadiscourse refers to non-propositional language that assists in organizing information and managing interpersonal relations (Crismore et al., 1993). Its core function is to regulate discourse logic, convey stance, and mediate interaction. Hyland (2005a) further classifies it into two dimensions: textual metadiscourse, which structures information through transitions and frame markers, and interactional metadiscourse, which expresses attitude, engages readers, and aligns perspectives, serving as a key pragmatic resource for interpersonal meaning.

Interactional metadiscourse is further subdivided into two markers (Hyland, 2005a): stance and engagement. Stance centers on the speaker/writer, conveying attitudes and evaluations toward propositional content through

¹ Raw frequency refers to the total number of tokens extracted from the five-case *Baixing Tiaojie* corpus;

linguistic features such as hedges (“may” “possibly”), boosters (“certainly” “undoubtedly”), attitude markers (“fortunately”), and self-mentions (“I think”). Engagement, by contrast, focuses on the addressee, strengthening interactions and alliances between speakers/writers, audiences, and other communication participants via engagement markers (“as we know” “consider”), inclusive pronouns (“we”), questions (don’t you agree?), shared knowledge (“as you know”) and directives (“look at this”), thereby facilitating collective meaning co-construction.

As a fundamental pragmatic resource for conveying interpersonal meaning, interactional metadiscourse has emerged as a central focus in discourse analysis. Scholarly attention has extensively explored its varied functions across institutional settings, with a predominant emphasis on written genres. These studies have elucidated its context-specific strategic uses while underscoring significant cross-cultural variations in its deployment.

Interactional metadiscourse operates as a vital tool for negotiating interpersonal meaning across distinct domains. In academic discourse, it facilitates knowledge construction and the negotiation of scholarly identity. Writers employ hedges and boosters to strategically balance claims with disciplinary conventions, while engagement markers position readers as co-participants in the argumentative process (Hyland, 1998, 2005a, 2005b; Ho and Li, 2018; Hyland and Zou, 2021). In political discourse, it is strategically deployed to shape public perception and legitimize authority. This is achieved through linguistic devices that foster in-group solidarity and carefully align policy positions with audiences’ shared values (Alghazo et al., 2024). Furthermore, in professional and institutional communication, interactional metadiscourse functions to mediate implicit power dynamics. It can mitigate the force of directives to maintain rapport in business negotiations or, conversely, reinforce institutional authority in legal texts, with its application sensitively adapting to cultural norms governing deference and directness (Al-Otaibi and Hussain, 2024).

Cross-cultural comparisons further underscore the interplay between metadiscourse and cultural norms. Recent empirical research confirms that speakers from collectivist-leaning contexts (e.g., East Asian societies) rely more on engagement markers to reinforce group harmony and relational cohesion, while those from individualist-oriented cultures prioritize stance devices to assert personal authority and individual perspectives (Jiang and Ma, 2018; Gong et al., 2023). Zhou and Zhang (2022) further demonstrate that cultural values of indirectness in Chinese interpersonal communication shape the strategic use of off-record metadiscourse, which serves not only politeness functions but also situational needs like balancing directness with face (*mianzi*) maintenance. Despite these insights, most cross-cultural and institutional research continues to focus on written discourse, with limited attention to spoken institutional interaction, particularly in culturally embedded settings where relational dynamics and real-time negotiation are central.

Mediation discourse and pragmatic strategies

Mediation discourse has become a significant area of pragmatics research, focusing on the linguistic strategies used to navigate conflicts and achieve mutually acceptable resolutions (Ke, 2023a). Mediation, characterized by high interpersonal stakes, inherent power asymmetries, and deep cultural embeddedness, relies on targeted pragmatic strategies to balance competing goals, including de-escalating tension, preserving relational harmony, guiding consensus, and maintaining mediator neutrality and authority. Consequently, scholarly attention has focused on how these strategies are dynamically employed and culturally shaped in actual interaction, examining their functional nuances across diverse institutional settings.

Key strategies identified in the literature encompass narrative techniques, questioning practices, discursive framing, and strategic (in)directness. Empirical studies demonstrate their application across mediation contexts. For instance, narrative reframing reduces polarization by highlighting shared goals like patient care in Taiwanese medical mediation (Chen et al., 2023); tailored questioning in Chinese televised mediation helps uncover interests, guide talk, and build an authoritative yet empathetic persona while maintaining harmony (Zhang and Dong, 2023); and research on intergenerational disputes shows how elders use filial piety and stories to assert authority, whereas mediators employ indirectness and emotional appeals to protect face (*mianzi*) and nurture affective bonds (*qing*) (Cai and Hu, 2025). Additionally, court-related mediation research illustrates how proximization leverages common interests to foster

agreement (Ke, 2023a). Together, these works underscore how linguistic framing clarifies positions and aligns parties.

The effectiveness of these strategies is deeply shaped by cultural norms, necessitating a dynamic, context-sensitive approach to rapport management. Recent developments in rapport and relational work emphasize two key dimensions: theoretical refinement, contextual expansion. Theoretically, scholars have critiqued the Western-centric bias of traditional rapport management frameworks, noting their insufficient explanation of dynamic cultural construct (Locher and Watts, 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2008a, 2008b, 2022). This critique has spurred calls for culturally adaptive models that account for the unique interplay of norms such as *mianzi*, *qing*, and legal authority in non-Western mediation settings. Contextually, relational work research has expanded beyond static text analysis to explore dynamic, phase-dependent rapport management. For example, how mediators adjust linguistic strategies across tension de-escalation, negotiation, and resolution phases to align with shifting cultural priorities (Ke, 2023b).

In Chinese mediation, rapport management is guided by the dynamic interplay of *qing* and *mianzi*, reflecting an emic model of relationship management centered on affection-based face co-construction (Ran and Zhao, 2018). However, existing studies have not fully explored how specific cultural norms are individually operationalized through interactional metadiscourse. They also lack systematic analysis of how metadiscourse subtypes (e.g., inclusive pronouns, boosters) dynamically realize these cultural constructs across mediation phases. This gap highlights the need to examine how metadiscourse strategies fulfill distinct pragmatic functions in Chinese mediation.

Methodology

Analytical framework

This study adopts an integrated analytical framework to explore the role of interactional metadiscourse in Chinese mediation. It draws on Hyland's (2005a) definition and classification of interactional metadiscourse to identify and categorize relevant linguistic phenomena, while employing Spencer-Oatey's (2008b) Rapport Management Model (RMM) as the overarching analytic lens to interpret how these metadiscursive elements function in managing interpersonal relationships during mediation. This integration enables a comprehensive examination of the culturally specific ways in which Chinese mediators utilize linguistic resources to navigate conflicts and foster harmony.

Operationalization of interactional metadiscourse and its mapping to cultural dynamics

This study focuses exclusively on interactional metadiscourse, operationalizing two mutually exclusive categories (self-oriented stance devices and other-oriented engagement devices) with spoken Mandarin-specific operational definitions and realizations (characters+ gloss) to address the adaptation of Hyland's (2005a) framework to oral Chinese mediation discourse. For details on the operationalization of interactional metadiscourse, please refer to the appendix, which includes three parts: (1) Classification and Spoken Mandarin Realizations of Interactional Metadiscourse; (2) Tokenization Rules for Spoken Mandarin; (3) Inclusion/Exclusion Rules and Disambiguation Criteria.

Each metadiscursive sub-type derived from the above operationalization is linked to one dominant cultural dynamic based on its core function in mediation practice. To address potential functional overlap between the two categories (self-oriented stance devices and other-oriented engagement devices) when linking them to cultural dynamics (*li*, *qing*, *mianzi*, the rule of law, the rule of etiquette), a “core function priority” coding principle is established (detailed in the coding manual in appendix) to ensure analytical rigor and avoid duplicate classification.

Operationalization of core cultural constructs in rapport management

Spencer-Oatey's (2008b) Rapport Management Model (RMM) establishes interactional goals as the foundation of discourse, achieved through managing face sensitivities and sociality rights/obligations. When paired with the analysis of interactional metadiscourse, this model illuminates how linguistic choices shape rapport dynamics.

Within this framework, face management is realized through stance markers. Hedges and self-mentions help mitigate potential face threats, while inclusive pronouns work to reinforce collective identity. Sociality management employs engagement markers, where questions function to uphold equity rights, shared-knowledge serve to strengthen relational association, and personal asides operate as a critical rapport-building tool that humanizes the mediator's communicative role, thereby fulfilling the sociality rights and obligations goal of nurturing interpersonal closeness in mediation interaction. Interactional goals, which balance transactional resolution with relational harmony, are pursued through combined strategies. Boosters anchor arguments in legal or normative grounds to advance transactional ends, while attitude markers and shared-knowledge nurture rapport and align with cultural etiquette in support of relational aims. This integrated analytical framework systematically links interactional metadiscourse to cultural dynamics and pragmatic strategy, thereby establishing a clear foundation for subsequent coding, analysis, and interpretation.

Data and context

Corpus description

This study draws on data from *Baixing Tiaojie*, a long-running, nationally televised mediation program in China. The program was selected for its representativeness of authentic Chinese mediation practices. All cases are based on real public disputes, mediators are certified professionals following standard procedures, and its focus on relational harmony reflects the institutional aims of China's formal mediation system (Hawes and Kong, 2013). The diversity of cases from across Henan Province enhances the generalizability of findings.

Sampling followed rigorous criteria. From an initial set of 50 episodes (2020–2023), five family dispute cases were selected based on: (1) coverage of key family conflict subtypes until theoretical saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2006); (2) variation in mediator experience (3–15 years) to capture strategic diversity within consistent institutional norms; (3) final mutually resolved outcomes. Each case involved a single mediator to control interaction effects (Heisterkamp, 2000). Representativeness was verified by confirming that the selected cases included all core metadiscourse patterns identified in the broader corpus, ensuring consistency and generalizability within the mediation discourse context.

The selected cases were transcribed from *Baixing Tiaojie* videos using *Feishu Miaoji* (a Chinese ASR tool for Mandarin transcription), with parallel Chinese-English transcripts generated to ensure linguistic rigor in cross-linguistic analysis. The translation process followed a rigorous protocol: first, the initial Chinese transcription was completed via *Feishu Miaoji* and manually proofread by two researchers to ensure accuracy (discrepancies were resolved by cross-referencing with original video recordings). Second, the verified Chinese transcript was translated into English by a bilingual researcher with expertise in mediation discourse, followed by cross-validation by another bilingual researcher to check for translation accuracy, consistency, and minimization of meaning loss/gain, particularly for culturally specific linguistic features. Discrepancies in translation were resolved through joint discussion until consensus was reached. Third, all analysis was conducted on the Chinese transcripts, with English versions used for reference. The final corpus totals 56,713 words: 33,692 Chinese words (original) and 23,021 English words (validated translation).

Table 1 Specific items and frequency of stance markers metadiscourse resources.

Stance Markers	Specific items(汉字+EnglishTranslation)	Frequency	Normalized Frequency (per 1,000 Chinese Words)
Hedges	有些 (some), 有时 (sometimes), 或许 (probably), 常常 (often), etc.	19	1.53
	可能 (may), 也许 (maybe), etc.	29	2.33
Boosters	事实上 (in fact), 肯定 (certainly), 必然 (inevitably), 不可能 (impossible), etc.	117	9.39
Attitude markers	重要的 (important), 明显的 (obvious), 极大的 (very large), etc.	7	0.56
Self-mention	我 (I), 我们 (we), 作为调解员 (as mediator), etc.	48	3.85
Total		220	17.67

Coding protocol, reliability, and analytical procedures

Corpus processing followed two sequential steps, with all coding and quantitative counts conducted exclusively on the Chinese transcripts to maintain linguistic rigor.

First, identification and classification: Guided by Hyland's (2005a) framework, interactional metadiscourse was categorized into stance devices (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions) and engagement markers (inclusive pronouns, questions, shared knowledge, personal asides, directives).

Second, corpus analysis was conducted as follows: (1) Quantitative coding: The Chinese mediation corpus was coded to quantify the frequency of each interactional metadiscourse subtype. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Normalized frequencies (per 1,000 Chinese words) were calculated. Basic chi-square (χ^2) proportion tests were conducted to compare the relative frequencies of categories, empirically supporting claims about the dominance of specific subtypes.

To ensure coding reliability, a rigorous intercoder agreement procedure was implemented. Two researchers participated, with the second completing 10 hours of standardized training (framework familiarization, practice coding, and discrepancy resolution workshops) prior to independent coding. A randomly selected 30% subset (10,108 Chinese words) was coded independently by both. Intercoder reliability, assessed using Cohen's kappa (κ) in SPSS, yielded an overall κ of 0.88, indicating excellent consistency (Landis and Koch, 1977). Per-category κ values were also high: hedges (0.91), boosters (0.89), attitude markers (0.87), self-mentions (0.86), inclusive pronouns (0.90), questions (0.85), shared knowledge (0.88) and personal asides (0.86). Discrepancies were resolved through joint review of transcripts, the coding manual, and the theoretical framework, with all decisions documented in a coding log for transparency (Neuendorf, 2017).

(2) Qualitative analysis: examples of interactional metadiscourse use were analyzed to explore how they regulate interpersonal relationships under Spencer-Oatey's (2008b) RMM framework, with a focus on alignment with cultural norms.

Interactional metadiscourse types and distribution of Chinese mediators

Interactional metadiscourse, consisting of stance markers and engagement markers, highlights the interactional relationship between the speaker and the listener (Hyland, 2005a, 2005b). This chapter focuses on identifying the core types and distribution patterns of interactional metadiscourse in Chinese family dispute mediation.

Types and distribution of the interactional metadiacourse's stance markers of Chinese mediators

Stance markers are pivotal in expressing the speaker's attitudes, enabling them to convey assessments, commit to positions, and align with listeners (Hyland, 2005a: 176). Encompassing evidentiality, affective expression, and

Table 2 Specific items and frequency of engagement markers metadiscourse resources.

Engagement Markers	Specific Items(汉字+EnglishTranslation)	Raw Frequency	Normalized Frequency (per 1,000 Chinese Words)
Inclusive pronouns	你 (you), 你们 (you all), 我们 (we), 大姐 (elder sister), 大哥 (elder brother), 你弟弟 (your younger brother), 你母亲 (your mother), etc.	276	22.17
Questions	Information-seeking questions: 这墙怎么这么脏? (How did the walls get so dirty?) 发生了什么事了? (What happened?) 你当时为什么没回去? (Why didn't you go back?) Rhetorical questions: 你们夫妻俩总得互相留点面子、给点尊严吧? (You two as a couple should always save each other's face and give each other some dignity, shouldn't you?) etc.	204	16.39
Shared knowledge	一般来说 (generally speaking), 通常情况下 (under normal circumstances), 自古以来 (since ancient times), etc.	60	4.82
Personal asides	换句话说 (in other words), 我的意思是 (I mean), 也就是说 (that is to say), etc.	41	3.30
Directives	根据《中华人民共和国民法典》 (According to the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China), 看看这个 (look at this), 想一想 (think about), etc.	0	0.00
Total		581	46.67

speaker presence (Hyland and Jiang, 2016a: 6), the core subtypes of stance markers identified in the family dispute mediation cases include hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions.

Quantitative analysis of stance marker usage reveals a total frequency of 220 instances across all subtypes. The specific items and their frequencies are shown in Table 1.

The distribution of stance markers in Table 1 reveals a clear pattern. Boosters emerge as the dominant subtype, constituting 53.18% (117/220) of all stance markers. Hedges and self-mentions are equally frequent, with 48 instances each, together accounting for 43.64% of the total (21.82% respectively). Attitude markers are the least utilized, comprising only 3.18% (7 instances).

Types and distribution of the interactional metadiscourse's engagement markers of Chinese mediators

Engagement markers enable the speaker (mediator) to acknowledge the addressee (disputant)'s presence and encourage their active participation in communication (Zou and Hyland, 2020: 1). Unlike stance markers that center on the speaker's perspective, engagement markers prioritize the addressee, emphasizing solidarity and integration between communicators (Hyland and Jiang, 2016b: 29). The core subtypes identified in the mediation cases include inclusive pronouns, directives, questions, shared knowledge, and personal asides.

Quantitative analysis shows that the total frequency of engagement markers in the corpus is 581 instances. The specific items and their frequencies are presented in Table 2.

Among engagement markers, inclusive pronouns are the most prevalent, accounting for 47.50% (276/581) of the total. Questions follow as the second most frequent subtype, with 204 instances (35.11%). The use of shared knowledge appeals (60 instances, 10.33%) and personal asides (41 instances, 7.06%) is less common. Notably, no directives were found in the corpus.

In aggregate, the corpus yielded a total of 801 instances of interactional metadiscourse, consisting of 220 stance markers (27.47%) and 581 engagement markers (72.53%). A two-tailed proportion test confirmed the statistical significance of this distribution disparity ($\chi^2 = 12.76$, $p < 0.05$), ruling out the possibility of random linguistic variation. This finding is further supplemented by normalized frequency data (see Tables 1 and 2): engagement markers registered a frequency of 46.67 instances per 1,000 words, whereas stance markers only reached 17.67 instances per 1,000 words. Taken together, these quantitative results clearly demonstrate that mediators exhibit a distinct preference for engagement-oriented metadiscourse in their communicative practices.

Interactional metadiscourse strategies for rapport management in Chinese mediation

This section examines how Chinese mediators use interactional metadiscourse to manage rapport. Guided by Spencer-Oatey's (2008b) rapport management model, the analysis focuses on three dimensions, including goal alignment, face maintenance, and rights-obligations balance, and traces how stance and engagement markers are deployed across key mediation stages (e.g., fact-finding, negotiation, de-escalation, communication maintenance) to achieve context-specific relational outcomes (Moore, 1988). Two core methods are employed to demonstrate strategic shifts across phases: (1) calculating phase-specific metadiscourse density ratios, and (2) conducting sequence-sensitive micro-analyses of mediator-disputant interactions. The discussion follows established principles of qualitative discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2009) and qualitative research norms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Metadiscourse strategies for interactional goal alignment

Within the Chinese cultural context, “*guanxi*” (interpersonal relationships) is inherently interest-driven, emphasizing instrumental exchange and reciprocal benefits (Yan, 1996; Zhai, 2007). Aligning conflicting interests thus constitutes the core interactional goal in mediation. Mediators primarily utilize engagement metadiscourse (e.g., questions, inclusive pronouns) and stance metadiscourse (e.g., boosters) to clarify interest-based disputes, guide narrative reconstruction, and facilitate goal alignment between disputing parties.

Fact-finding stage: question-driven interest clarification

During the initial fact-finding stage, mediators employ interrogative engagement markers to investigate the essential causes of interest conflicts, with a primary focus on identifying disputes over material interests dimension of *li*. This approach helps clarify the factual basis of disputes and lays the groundwork for subsequent negotiation. Metadiscourse density analysis reveals that information-seeking questions account for 68% of total engagement markers in this phase, reflecting the mediator's priority on gathering factual data rather than taking evaluative stances. See excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1: (M=Mediator; D=Daughter)

[Context: To ascertain the cause of the family dispute, the mediator questioned the couple's daughter.]

1. M: 是不是像你爸爸和爷爷说的那样? 你妈妈是不是把大部分钱都给你舅舅了?

Is this what your father and grandfather said? Did your mother give most of the money to your uncle?

2. D: 说白了就是钱的事。

It all boils down to money, plain and simple.

In excerpt 1, the mediator uses two yes-no questions to directly clarify the core interest conflict centered on material interests (i.e., the distribution of family financial resources). The interrogative structure not only efficiently gathers factual information but also signals the mediator's focus on interest-related issues, prompting the daughter to distill the complex dispute into a clear, interest-based problem. The turn 2 validates the effectiveness of this question-driven strategy and it eliminates irrelevant narrative details and anchors the mediation in the material *li* dimension that underpins the conflict. This strategy aligns with the primary goal of the fact-finding stage: to quickly identify the root cause of the conflict by centering on interest-related facts, thereby laying a solid foundation for subsequent alignment of multi-dimensional *li* interests.

Negotiation stage: inclusive pronoun-driven shared interest highlighting

During the negotiation stage, mediators employ inclusive pronouns to emphasize the shared interests of disputing parties. Metadiscourse density ratios show a marked shift from the fact-finding phase. Inclusive pronouns (e.g., 你

[you]) account for 52% of engagement markers, while the hedge/booster ratio drops to 1.1, indicating a shift toward assertive, consensus-building language. This fosters a sense of mutual responsibility and promotes collaborative problem-solving that balances economic concerns with relational harmony. See excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2: (M=Mediator; W=Wife)

[Context: A mediator investigated a wife's allegations of property destruction and attempted assault by her husband during divorce proceedings.]

1. M : 我进你家的时候, 发现家里还挺整洁的。但你看看这墙, 怎么这么脏? 乱七八糟的, 地上还有碎玻璃。这是怎么回事?
When I entered your house, I found it quite tidy. But look at the walls, how did they get so dirty? Everything's a mess, and there's broken glass on the floor. What happened?
2. W : 这都多亏了我们家男人, 全是我们家男人弄的。
My husband is entirely responsible for this.
3. M: 他砸家的时候你在场吗?
Were you (singular) there when he was smashing up the house?
4. W: 在。
Yes, I was.
5. M: 你在场? 你没拦住他吗?
You were? Why couldn't you (singular) stop him?
6. W: 我不敢拦, 我拦了他就打我。
I didn't dare to stop him. He would have hit me if I tried.
7. M: 他为什么要做这种事? 这是你们共同的家啊。把家弄成这样, 他自己也住不好啊。

Why would he do something like this? This is your (plural) shared home. If he's torn the family apart like this, he won't be able to live in peace either.

The mediator repeatedly uses inclusive pronouns such as “你” (you) and “你们共同的” (your shared) to emphasize the dual nature of the disputed property: as a material interest (shared economic asset) and as a symbol of relational/filial obligations (spousal bond and family stability). For instance, the statement “这是你们共同的家啊” (This is your shared home) highlights the mutual material interest in preserving the family property while invoking the relational obligation to maintain spousal harmony (Fukuyama, 1995). The low hedge/booster ratio (1.1) in this phase reflects the mediator's deliberate use of assertive language (e.g., “他自己也住不好啊” [he won't be able to live in peace either]) to underscore the practical consequences of the husband's actions, rather than hedging to soften criticism. This strategy guides the husband to recognize that damaging the shared home not only erodes his own material interests but also violates his relational obligations to his spouse, effectively shifting his focus from confrontation to collaborative protection of multi-dimensional *li* interests, thereby facilitating the negotiation of a mutually acceptable resolution.

Metadiscourse strategies for face-sensitivity maintenance

In Chinese collectivist culture, *qing* and *mianzi* are core elements of face-sensitivity in rapport management (Hwang, 1987; Fei, 1998; Zhai, 2021). Notably, *mianzi* is closely intertwined with the reputational considerations dimension of *li*, as protecting face is equivalent to safeguarding one's reputational interests. Mediators deploy hedges and kinship-based inclusive pronouns to protect the *mianzi* (and thus the reputational interests) of disputing parties and nurture *qing*, particularly during the tension de-escalation stage.

Tension de-escalation stage: kinship pronoun-driven face-giving

During the tension de-escalation stage, mediators use kinship terms (e.g., “大哥” [elder brother], “大姐” [elder sister]) as inclusive pronouns to reduce psychological distance, give face to disputing parties, and create an

empathetic communication atmosphere. This strategy is paired with a high hedge/booster ratio (3.2), as hedges soften evaluative language and kinship terms reinforce relational *qing* bonds. See excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3: (M=Mediator; H=Husband)

[Context: The mediator is handling a gambling-induced debt crisis, resulting in the wife's divorce petition and marital discord among the husband's siblings.]

1. M: 听说因为你的债务问题, 你姐姐和两个哥哥都要离婚了, 你和你老婆也闹矛盾了。他们都为你背上了三四十万的债务。说实话, 要是你生病卧床或者快不行了, 你兄弟姐妹肯定会毫不犹豫地帮你。但你自己也要想想, 赌博害人啊。要是你早点明白, 及时收手, 就不会现在欠这么多债, 还和老婆闹离婚了。因为帮你, 把你和老婆、兄弟姐妹之间的感情都伤了。作为男人, 要顾及兄弟姐妹之间的情分 and 面子, 承担起家庭责任。

I heard that because of your (singular) debt, your (singular) elder sister and both your (singular) elder brothers are getting divorced, and you (singular) and your (singular) wife are having serious conflicts. They've all taken on debts of three or four hundred thousand yuan for you (singular). To be honest, if you (singular) were sick in bed or dying, your (singular) siblings would undoubtedly help you (singular) without a second thought. But you (singular) need to think about this yourself. Gambling destroys lives. If you (singular) had realized this sooner and stopped in time, you (singular) wouldn't be drowning in debt now and get a divorce from your (singular) wife. By helping you (singular), it has damaged your (singular) relationship with your (singular) wife, and strained the bonds with your (singular) brothers and sister. As a man, one should value the affection among siblings, help each other save face, and shoulder the family responsibilities.

2. H: (沉默)

(Silence)

The mediator uses kinship terms such as “你姐姐” (your elder sister), “你哥哥” (your elder brothers), and “兄弟姐妹” (siblings) to emphasize the close *qing* bonds between the husband and his family, while simultaneously invoking his relational obligations dimension of *li* to protect his family's well-being. By framing the conflict as a violation of “情分” (affection) and “面子” (face), the mediator appeals to the husband's face-sensitivity, motivating him to reflect on his actions. The turn 2 validates the effectiveness of this strategy and effectively de-escalates tension by acknowledging the emotional ties between the parties, laying the groundwork for repairing relational harmony.

Communication maintenance stage: hedge-driven face protection

During ongoing communication, mediators use hedges to soften assertions and avoid face threats, which in turn safeguards the reputational considerations dimension of *li*, especially when pointing out the mistakes of disputing parties. The hedge/booster ratio in this phase is 2.8, slightly lower than the tension de-escalation stage but still far higher than the negotiation phase, reflecting a balance between face protection and normative guidance. See excerpt 4:

Excerpt 4: (M=Mediator; H=Husband)

[Context: The mediator investigated the situation where the husband smashed up the house and furniture, and mediated with the husband for the benefit of the mediation parties.]

1. M: 我们解决问题, 肯定有有效的办法能解决, 没必要那样做。毕竟你们是夫妻, 还有个孩子。你们之间还是有感情的。你们夫妻俩总得互相留点面子、给点尊严吧? 你把屋子砸成这样, 像什么样子? 你这样做, 两个人都没面子。她没面子, 你觉得你有面子吗? 大哥, 你这样也不好看啊。到现在, 那个卧室还是乱七八糟的。

When we're trying to solve problems, we can definitely take effective measures to resolve them. There's no need to act like this. After all, you're (plural) husband and wife, and you (plural) have a child together. There's still affection between you (plural) two. You (plural) two as a couple should always save each other's face and give each other some dignity, shouldn't you? You (singular) smashed the house like that. What kind of impression does that leave? What you've (singular) done leaves neither of you (plural) with any face. If she is

humiliated, do you (singular) really think you'll (singular) look good on your (singular) face? Brother, this doesn't make you (singular) look good either. Even now, that bedroom is still in complete disarray.

2. H: (唉) 我错了。

(Sign) I was wrong.

The mediator uses the kinship term “大哥” (elder brother) to establish an empathetic relationship with the husband, reducing psychological distance and giving face. When pointing out the husband's mistake, the mediator employs the rhetorical question “你们夫妻俩总得互相留点面子、给点尊严吧?” (You two as a couple should always save each other's face and give each other some dignity, shouldn't you?) instead of direct criticism. This hedged expression softens the tone, avoids direct face threats, and guides the husband to recognize the reciprocal nature of face in marital relationships. The turn 2 confirms that the strategy effectively maintains the husband's face while promoting self-reflection, ensuring the smooth progression of mediation and facilitating the protection of *li*-based reputational considerations.

Metadiscourse strategies for social rights-obligations balance

In Chinese mediation, the balance of social rights and obligations relies on the integration of *the rule of law* (formal legal norms governing disputes), and *the rule of etiquette* (traditional moral norms emphasizing social order and mutual respect) (Goh, 2016). Mediators use boosters to emphasize legal obligations and shared knowledge markers to invoke traditional moral norms, guiding disputing parties to fulfill their rights and obligations in line with both legal and cultural requirements.

Legal obligation clarification: booster-driven legal authority emphasis

Mediators utilize boosters to strengthen the authority of legal norms, clarify the legal obligations of disputing parties, and emphasize the legal consequences of non-compliance, particularly when such non-compliance infringes on the material interests and reputational considerations of others. The hedge/booster ratio of 0.7 in this phase indicates that boosters dominate the mediator's discourse, underscoring the non-negotiable nature of legal obligations. See excerpt 5:

Excerpt 5: (M=Mediator)

[Context: The husband's physical abuse of his wife stemmed from minor domestic conflicts. The mediator intervened to inform him of the legal and moral norms he had violated.]

1. M: 对你来说, 作为丈夫, 这样打老婆, 已经是家庭暴力行为了, 涉嫌家庭暴力, 是违法行为。你知道问题的严重性吗? 往小了说, 你是个男人, 力气比她大, 个子比她高。这个女人跟你过日子, 不是你的沙袋, 也不是什么供你打的物品。

To you (singular), as a husband, you (singular) would beat your (singular) wife like this, which has already been an act of domestic violence, suspected of being an act of domestic violence, and it is an illegal act. Do you (singular) understand how serious this is? To put it bluntly, you (singular) are a man, your (singular) strength is stronger than her, and your (singular) stature is taller than her. This woman is living with you (singular), not as a punching bag or an object for you (singular) to hit.

The mediator uses boosters such as “已经是” (has already been), “涉嫌” (suspected of), and “是” (is) to firmly define the husband's behavior as illegal domestic violence, emphasizing the authority of *the rule of law*. This strategy clarifies the husband's legal obligations to refrain from infringing on his wife's personal and material interests and the legal consequences of his actions, instilling a sense of legal accountability. Simultaneously, the mediator invokes *the rule of etiquette* by emphasizing the moral obligation of mutual respect in marriage, balancing legal and moral norms to guide the husband toward fulfilling his obligations.

Moral obligation guidance: shared knowledge-driven cultural norm invocation

Mediators employ shared knowledge markers to invoke traditional moral norms (*the rule of etiquette*), guiding disputing parties to fulfill their moral obligations, especially those related to the material interests and relational/filial obligations dimensions of *li*. The hedge/booster ratio in this phase is 0.9, slightly higher than the legal obligation phase but still oriented toward normative clarity. See excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6: (M=Mediator)

[Context: The wife seeks to offset a 50,000-yuan debt owed to her father-in-law with rental income managed by her parents-in-law, but the father-in-law disagrees with this arrangement.]

1. M: 眼前的事要分开说, 绝对不能混为一谈。就算要算账, 也要把事情弄清楚。而且你拿的那5万块钱, 是你父母那边给你弟弟的, 不是给你们夫妻俩用的, 对不对? 还有房租没结。要是你们俩商量着要用这笔钱, 可以用来抵房租。你觉得呢? 但你拿的那5万块钱, 明明是给你弟弟的, 这是借贷归还的事。俗话说, “有借有还, 再借不难。”所以我认为你这样做肯定是不对的。

The matter at hand should be kept separate. The two things absolutely cannot be mixed up. Even if you (singular) want to settle the accounts, you (singular) have to be clear about the facts. Moreover, the 50,000 yuan you (singular) took was given to your (singular) brother by your (singular) parents, not for you (singular) and your (singular) spouse to use, right? And there's still the unpaid rent. If you (plural) both agreed to use it, that money could have covered the rent. Don't you (singular) think so? But the 50,000 yuan you (singular) took was clearly given to your (singular) brother. That's a matter of returning what was borrowed. As the saying goes, “If you return what you borrow, you can always borrow again.” So I believe that what you (singular) did was definitely wrong.

The mediator uses the shared knowledge “俗话说” (as the saying goes) to invoke the traditional moral norm “有借有还, 再借不难” (If you return what you borrow, you can always borrow again), guiding the wife to recognize her moral obligation to repay the loan. Meanwhile, boosters such as “绝对不能” (absolutely cannot) and “肯定是不对的” (definitely wrong) emphasize the clarity of financial obligations, distinguishing between the loan (a personal material obligation to her brother) and the rent (a shared spousal material interest). This strategy integrates legal and moral norms, guiding the wife to fulfill her rights and obligations in a manner that is both culturally appropriate and legally compliant.

Cultural constructs and pragmatic functions of interactional metadiscourse

In Chinese cultural context, core cultural constructs such as *li*, *qing*, *mianzi*, *the rule of law*, and *the rule of etiquette* are deeply embedded in mediation discourse. They shape the selection and pragmatic functions of interactional metadiscourse resources, enabling mediators to implement culturally adaptive rapport management. This chapter explores how these cultural constructs shape the rapport management function of stance and engagement metadiscourse.

Qing and Mianzi: shaping the face-protection function of metadiscourse

Qing (affective bonds and collective welfare) and *mianzi* (face dynamics negotiated through indirectness) are core relational constructs in Chinese collectivist culture, emphasizing mutual emotional connection and social dignity (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Zhai, 2021). These two constructs jointly shape the face-protection function of metadiscourse, guiding mediators to select hedges and kinship-based inclusive pronouns to maintain the emotional bonds and social dignity of disputing parties, which is a prerequisite for effective conflict resolution.

As illustrated in excerpts 3 and 4, the Chinese cultural emphasis on *qing* motivates mediators to adopt kinship terms (e.g., “兄弟姐妹” [siblings], “大哥” [elder brother]) as engagement markers. These terms activate the inherent emotional bonds between disputing parties, nurture *qing*, and create an empathetic communication atmosphere that

reduces confrontation. Meanwhile, the cultural norm of *mianzi* drives mediators to use hedges and rhetorical questions (e.g., “你们夫妻俩总得互相留点面子、给点尊严吧?” [You two as a couple should always save each other’s face and give each other some dignity, shouldn’t you?]) to soften critical assertions and avoid direct face threats. Thus, *qing* and *mianzi* shape metadiscourse to prioritize face protection and emotional harmony, reflecting core Chinese values that diverge from Western individualistic face concerns (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The interdependence of *qing* and *mianzi* (Zhai, 2021) further enhances this shaping effect, as *qing* provides the emotional foundation for *mianzi* maintenance while the preservation of *mianzi* reinforces *qing* bonds. For example, in excerpt 3, the mediator’s emphasis on “情分” (affection) and “面子” (face) through metadiscourse not only protects the husband’s *mianzi* by avoiding direct condemnation but also reminds him of the *qing* with his family, prompting him to reflect on his actions and repair damaged relationships. This demonstrates that *qing* and *mianzi* jointly shape metadiscourse to achieve the dual function of face protection and emotional nurturing, which is crucial for resolving family disputes in the Chinese cultural context².

Li and the Rule of Etiquette: shaping the moral guidance function of metadiscourse

Rooted in Confucian thought, *li* is a tripartite cultural construct encompassing material interests, relational/filial obligations, and reputational considerations (Zhai, 2009). Together with *the rule of etiquette*, it shapes a moral guidance function in metadiscourse. This function leads mediators to strategically use shared knowledge, boosters and rhetorical questions to invoke traditional norms, clarify the dimensions of *li*, and align disputants’ behavior with cultural expectations³.

First, in terms of material interests, *the rule of etiquette* motivates mediators to use shared knowledge markers to invoke culturally embedded norms of reciprocal economic behavior, ensuring that material disputes are resolved in line with moral principles. As shown in excerpt 6, the mediator uses the shared knowledge “俗话说” (as the saying goes) to invoke the proverb “有借有还，再借不难” (If you return what you borrow, you can always borrow again). This marker links mediation discourse to the moral norm of fulfilling material obligations, making abstract moral duties related to debt repayment concrete and accessible. Meanwhile, boosters such as “绝对不能” (absolutely cannot) and “肯定是不对的” (definitely wrong) strengthen the authority of these moral norms, clarifying that confusing or evading material obligations (e.g., offsetting a personal loan with shared rent) violates cultural expectations of fairness in material transactions. This metadiscursive strategy guides disputing parties to recognize their moral duties regarding material interests, laying a moral foundation for resolving economic conflicts.

Second, regarding relational/filial obligations, *the rule of etiquette* emphasizes the primacy of familial harmony, shaping metadiscourse strategies that reinforce these obligations and guide parties to repair damaged relational bonds. In family dispute mediation, mediators often use moral appeals and kinship-based language to invoke *li*’s relational dimension. In excerpt 3, the mediator uses the statement “作为男人，要顾及兄弟姐妹之间的情分和面子，承担起家庭责任” (As a man, one should value the affection among siblings, help each other save face, and shoulder the family responsibilities) to highlight the relational/filial obligations rooted in *li* and *the rule of etiquette*. This metadiscursive strategy frames the husband’s gambling-related debt crisis not only as a material issue but also as a failure to fulfill his relational/filial duties to his spouse and siblings. By linking the dispute to these moral obligations, the mediator guides the husband to recognize the harm his actions have caused to familial relationships, promoting his willingness to repair bonds and resolve the conflict in a way that preserves relational harmony.

Third, in relation to reputational considerations, *the rule of etiquette* shapes metadiscourse to reinforce the moral value of maintaining a positive social standing, guiding disputing parties to avoid behaviors that harm their own or others’ reputations. This is often manifested through rhetorical questions and moral appeals that connect actions to reputational consequences. In excerpt 4, the mediator’s rhetorical question “你们夫妻俩总得互相留点面子、给点尊严吧?” (You two as a couple should always save each other’s face and give each other some dignity, shouldn’t you?) implicitly invokes *li*’s reputational dimension. “Face” here is closely tied to public evaluation and social

² Normalized frequency is calculated as (Raw Frequency / Total Chinese Words) × 1,000;

³ “Etc.” is omitted for clarity; full subtypes are listed in Appendix A.

standing. By framing the husband's act of smashing shared property as a violation of the moral norm to protect mutual reputation, the mediator guides him to recognize that his behavior harms not only his wife's reputation but also his own. This metadiscursive strategy aligns the dispute resolution process with cultural expectations of preserving reputational integrity, fostering mutual respect between parties.

In summary, *li* (composite interest encompassing material interests, relational/filial obligations, and reputational considerations) and *the rule of etiquette* jointly shape the moral guidance function of metadiscourse. Through the strategic use of shared knowledge, boosters, moral appeals, kinship-based language and rhetorical questions, mediators clarify moral duties across the three dimensions of *li*, ensuring that rapport management is aligned with traditional Chinese cultural values and facilitating the restoration of familial and social harmony.

The Rule of Law: shaping the legal accountability function of metadiscourse

The rule of law, as a formal cultural construct in modern Chinese society, emphasizes legal norms, rights protection, and accountability (Huang, 2015). It shapes the legal accountability function of metadiscourse, guiding mediators to use boosters and direct statements to clarify the legal obligations of disputing parties and emphasize the legal consequences of non-compliance, thereby ensuring that mediation practices are consistent with formal legal norms⁴.

In excerpt 5, *the rule of law* drives mediators to use boosters such as “已经是” (has already been), “涉嫌” (suspected of), and “是违法行为” (is an illegal act) to firmly define illegal behaviors (e.g., domestic violence). These boosters strengthen the authority and persuasiveness of legal norms, making the legal consequences of wrongful acts explicit and instilling a sense of legal accountability in disputing parties. This metadiscursive strategy not only educates disputing parties on relevant legal knowledge but also enhances the legitimacy of the mediator's guidance, laying a legal foundation for conflict resolution.

In Chinese mediation, *the rule of law* coexists with *the rule of etiquette* (Song and Yu, 2025), and this duality further shapes the integrated function of metadiscourse. For example, in excerpt 5, the mediator uses both boosters to emphasize legal accountability (e.g., defining domestic violence as illegal) and moral appeals (e.g., “这个女人跟你过日子, 不是你的沙袋” [This woman is living with you, not as a punching bag]) to invoke *the rule of etiquette*. This integrated metadiscursive strategy balances legal sanctions and moral education, realizing the dual function of legal accountability and moral guidance. Thus, *the rule of law* shapes metadiscourse to ensure that rapport management is based on legal norms, while coordinating with traditional moral norms to achieve effective and legitimate conflict resolution.

Synergistic shaping of multiple cultural constructs on metadiscourse

The rapport management function of interactional metadiscourse is not shaped by a single cultural construct but by the synergistic effect of multiple constructs (e.g., *li*, *qing*, *mianzi*, *the rule of law*, *the rule of etiquette*). This synergistic shaping enables metadiscourse to adapt to the complex cultural context of Chinese mediation, realizing comprehensive and culturally adaptive rapport management.

For example, in Excerpt 2, the mediator uses inclusive pronouns (e.g., “你们共同的” [both of you]) to emphasize *qing* and the relational/filial obligations dimension of *li*, while using direct questions to clarify facts related to material interests dimension of *li* and invoking *the rule of law*. This synergy of cultural constructs shapes metadiscourse to balance emotional nurturing (*qing*) and factual clarification (*the rule of law*), while addressing multiple dimensions of *li*, promoting both interest alignment and relational harmony. In Excerpt 6, the mediator uses shared knowledge to invoke *the rule of etiquette* (guiding moral conduct regarding material interests and relational obligations) and boosters to emphasize *the rule of law* (clarifying legal boundaries of material disputes), shaping metadiscourse to integrate moral guidance and legal accountability. This integration guides the wife to fulfill her obligations in a manner that is both culturally appropriate (aligning with *li* and *the rule of etiquette*) and legally compliant.

⁴ Directives have a raw frequency of 0 due to the focus on rapport-building rather than mandatory guidance in the selected mediation phases.

This synergistic shaping reflects the core cultural logic of Chinese mediation: prioritizing relational harmony while adhering to legal and moral norms. Interactional metadiscourse, as a linguistic tool, integrates the requirements of multiple cultural constructs, realizing the comprehensive function of face protection (*qing* and *mianzi*), moral guidance (*li* and *the rule of etiquette*), and legal accountability (*the rule of law*). This ensures that rapport management is culturally adaptive and effective, ultimately promoting the resolution of family disputes and the maintenance of social harmony.

Conclusion

This study investigates the discursive practices of Chinese mediators by analyzing mediation discourses from the Chinese television program *Baixing Tiaojie*. Grounded in Hyland's (2005a) interactional metadiscourse framework and Spencer-Oatey's (2008b) Rapport Management Model (RMM), this study focuses on how Chinese mediators strategically deploy interactional metadiscourse to manage rapport in family dispute resolution, and how cultural constructs shape the pragmatic functions of such metadiscursive practices. The findings systematically unpack the linguistic and cultural logic underlying Chinese mediation, yielding the following key conclusions:

Chinese mediators prioritize engagement-focused metadiscourse (e.g., inclusive pronouns, questions, shared knowledge) over stance strategies, with stage-adaptive deployment to address the three core dimensions of rapport management (goal alignment, face maintenance, rights-obligations balance). This strategy preference is driven by cultural constructs, particularly *li* (composite interest encompassing material interests, relational/filial obligations, and reputational considerations), *qing* (affective bonds and collective welfare), *mianzi* (face dynamics negotiated through indirectness), *the rule of law* (formal legal norms governing disputes), and *the rule of etiquette* (traditional moral norms emphasizing social order and mutual respect). Their synergistic interplay enables metadiscourse to integrate interest alignment, relational nurturing, and norm adherence, reflecting Chinese mediation's core logic of prioritizing harmony while upholding justice.

Theoretically, this study verifies and supplements the adaptability of Western metadiscourse and rapport management frameworks within Chinese family mediation contexts, offering a localized analytical perspective to interpret the cultural embeddedness of pragmatic linguistic strategies in indigenous conflict resolution scenarios. Practically, the stage-sensitive metadiscursive patterns summarized in this paper deliver targeted references for domestic mediator training to balance *li-qing-mianzi* in relational governance. For cross-cultural mediation researchers and practitioners, the cultural mapping mechanism of metadiscourse proposed can serve as a contextualized reference to cultivate targeted cultural awareness when handling disputes involving Chinese participants.

This study has several identifiable contextual and corpus limitations that constrain the generalizability of its findings. First, all discourse data are extracted from scripted television mediation programs. Such televised materials inevitably contain moderate dramatic modification and performance-oriented discourse adjustments for audience viewing effects, which creates subtle gaps between observed mediator speech and spontaneous discourse in offline private mediation. Second, the corpus is limited exclusively to domestic family conflicts including marital and intergenerational disputes; property, commercial and labor mediation cases are not included, so the metadiscursive regularities summarized cannot fully represent Chinese mediators' strategic behavior across all dispute categories. Third, the analysis only codes mediator utterances and excludes disputants' counter metadiscourse, ignoring two-way interactive coordination dynamics formed by both parties' linguistic choices. Fourth, the cultural mechanism discussion is confined to Chinese indigenous cultural values, without comparative data from Western mediation contexts to distinguish universal vs culture-specific metadiscourse rules.

To address these constraints, future research can collect unscripted field recordings of offline grassroots mediation, expand the corpus to diverse dispute categories, incorporate dual-party discourse coding, and launch cross-cultural comparative analysis between Chinese and Western mediation contexts. Such follow-up work will further refine the integrated cultural-pragmatic framework proposed in this paper and provide more universal insights for international mediation theory and practice.

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Data availability All supporting analytical documents underpinning the findings of this study are provided as independent supplementary files alongside the manuscript upon publication. These published supplementary materials include comprehensive statistical tables of interactional metadiscourse distributions, a standalone coding manual (Appendix A) that elaborates the full metadiscourse classification framework, operational definitions, spoken Mandarin realizations, tokenization rules, and inclusion/exclusion disambiguation criteria adopted in this research, Supplementary File 1 (Intercoder Reliability Summary Sheet) with category-wise Cohen's Kappa statistics from the double-coded corpus subset, Supplementary File 2 (Coding Discrepancy Resolution Log) documenting all representative annotation conflicts and consensus resolutions reached during reliability testing, and Supplementary File 3 (Annotated Coding Samples). The full five cleaned, de-identified Chinese mediation discourse transcripts are not published as open supplementary files due to copyright constraints of the original broadcast television mediation programs and privacy safeguards for participating disputants. The original full video footage, complete audio recordings, and unredacted raw transcripts are also not publicly available. All original television mediation audio-visual materials are fully copyrighted by the respective broadcasting institutions; only truncated de-identified text excerpts are used solely for non-commercial academic analysis in this research. The full anonymized corpus transcripts supporting the study's analyses are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable research request.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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