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Rènao: What does it mean to have a good time the Chinese way? An ethnopragmatic exploration of a Chinese cultural keyword

Abstract

The paper examines the main uses and the symbolic significance of the Chinese cultural keyword *rènao*. Often rendered in English with its literal gloss of ‘hot and noisy’, it has been viewed by both Chinese and Western scholars as primary in making sense of Chinese social behaviour, across a variety of contexts. The present study analyses two Chinese cultural texts – a report from a local temple festival and a debate over two different styles of feasting, which frequently rely on this salient cultural notion. While the formula *crowds, events, noise* in the psychological literature dealing with this Chinese social value is often confirmed by the described cultural data, it is argued that close attention to the meaning and form of the descriptive language used by the cultural actors yields valuable insights into indigenous viewpoints. In particular, the notion of *rènao* turns out to be closely intertwined with other prominent Chinese cultural concerns, such as the idea of *rénqíngwèi* (‘flavour of human feelings’), Chinese cultural identity, Chinese language, and a particularly complex culinary culture as described in the anthropological literature.

Keywords: Chinese language and culture, ethnopragmatics, Chinese social interaction

Rènao is a Chinese word often translated as lively, bustling, or exciting, but none of these translations capture the meaning well (Warden & Chen, 2008: 217).

1. Introduction

Unlike the Chinese notions of ‘face’ or ‘shame’, which have attracted considerable attention and research by many scholars in cross-cultural studies, examples of language-specific elaboration of a hypothesized universal affective

‘conceptual theme’ of ‘I feel something good’ (cf. Wierzbicka 1999: 50) seem to have received relatively little attention, in the context of Chinese language and culture studies. To address this imbalance, this paper focuses on the culturally significant Mandarin Chinese word *rènao* (roughly ‘lively’, literal morphemic gloss: ‘hot:noisy’) – often described as essential to the understanding of the culture-specific notion of ‘having good time’, consumer behaviour, or a positive and sought out social atmosphere in the Chinese context (cf. Link et al., 1989). While Laing (1989: 160) characterized *rènao* as ‘the atmosphere of cheerful noisiness, regarded as a positive indication of the socially well ordered, happy Confucian family’, the word itself and the cultural practices associated with it have also drawn the attention of some participants of Chinese-Western cross-cultural encounters (cf. for example, Salzman, 1990: 123).

Modern Standard Chinese (*Pǔtōnghuà*) textual examples and expressions described in this paper are presented in the commonly used *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* system of romanization. Grammatical abbreviations used in the glosses and translations from Chinese follow the linguistic terminology of Li and Thompson (1989: xxiii). Unless otherwise acknowledged, the translations from Chinese are my own. Examples of Chinese phrases and expressions from other authors quoted in this paper retain their original mode of transliteration and spelling. For a succinct account of the sociolinguistic background to the emergence of the many systems of romanization of Modern Chinese, see Norman (1989: 257-263). A glossary of key Chinese cultural expressions (including Chinese characters and their *pīnyīn* romanization) appearing in this paper is appended at the end of the article.

As for its theoretical methodology, this paper relies on the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to the study of meaning in culture, in particular on its subfield known as ethnopragmatics, characterized by Goddard (2006: 14-18) as specifically concerned with “culture internal accounts of speech practices”. Noting the issue of ‘terminological ethnocentrism’ plaguing much of the contemporary cultural description, Goddard (2006: 15) argues that “Ethnographic and sociological studies (...) often ‘re-code’ indigenous terms and viewpoints into those of the external observer, thereby losing touch with the indigenous view – point.” (see also Boski, 2012: 3-4 for a similar critique from a cross-cultural psychologist’s point of view)

Describing his arguments in favour of NSM-based approach to ethnopragmatics, Goddard maintains that unlike the analytical approaches which

directly rely on highly complex (technical) and language-specific (typically, English-specific) descriptive vocabulary, NSM offers some unique advantages to the scholars of language and culture which minimise the danger of ethnocentric bias creeping into the linguistic makeup of many forms of cultural description (Goddard, 2006: 15). Thus, while assessing the relative merits of various types of linguistic evidence employed in developing ethnopragmatic studies, Goddard mentions cultural keywords as one valuable source of insight into the communicative culture of a given society, in particular “terms for values, social categories, ethnopsychological constructs” are regarded by him as helpful in making sense of the cultural priorities of the languages in question.

Adopting an ethnopragmatic perspective elaborated in Goddard (2006, ed.), this study scrutinizes linguistic and symbolic evidence pertinent to the proposed cultural script intended to encapsulate the key affective and behavioural aspects of the analysed Chinese cultural concept of *rènao*. Such a cultural script would be aimed to “spell out different ‘local’ conventions of discourse using the metalanguage of universal semantic primes” (Goddard, 2006: 15). Given a generally acknowledged central role of festivals, feasting and food in Chinese culture (see for example, Simoons, 1990: 14-31), this paper examines two examples of Chinese media reports focusing, respectively, on the progress of a popular temple festival in a provincial city, and on the popular debate over relative merits and drawbacks of two different feasting styles, with different symbolic associations: the traditional Chinese way of *jùcānzhi* (collective style of taking meals, involving a lot of *rènao*) and the ‘modern’ *fēncānzhi* (individual style of taking meals, which tends to be perceived as ‘Western’ and lacking in *rènao*). In both cases, the issue of demonstrating versus not demonstrating a sufficient amount of *rènao* seems to be of primary relevance to the cultural actors of the reported events.

2. *Rènao* as a Chinese cultural keyword

Both Chinese and foreign scholars alike agree on the importance of the word *rènao* in Chinese culture (and across Chinese cultures) in their spatial and temporal differentiation. For example, Warden and Chen (2008: 216) claim that “the concept of *rènao* is common in all Chinese cultural settings”, while adding that what they highlight as the ‘the central concept of *rènao*’ (ibid.) is essential

in understanding consumers' behaviour in any Chinese cultural setting. Trying to clarify the complex nature of the cultural meaning of this word, they write:

The literal translation is hot and noisy which also is often literally true and leads Western visitors (...) to mistake *rènao* locations as chaotic and out-of-control – problems to be solved. For Chinese, however, *rènao* is so ordinary it is often cognitively taken for granted (Warden and Chen, 2008: 217).

In a similar vein, some scholars of early Chinese literary traditions describe *rènao* as “moments of merriment and cheerfulness” or “state of excitement” reproduced in many subtle psychological passages of Classical Chinese literature (see, for example, Santangelo, 2003, quoted in Warden and Chen, 2008).

Yu (2004: 132), in one of the anthropological studies touching upon the subject of popular culture in a Chinese context, singles out Chinese night markets as an example of a notable social institution of communal life, which has persisted through the upheavals of Chinese history. As with other culturally significant public spaces, it happens every evening that “customers visit night markets to consume food, purchase merchandise, and try their hands at games of chance – or simply to enjoy the ‘hot and noisy’ (*rènao*) atmosphere that is a distinctive feature of Taiwanese night markets” (p. 132). Thus, as Yu puts it,

to the Chinese people, *rènao* is a key concept and an important feature of any successful celebration. It is considered embarrassing or foreboding to hold a wedding, banquet, or in some cases, a funeral that lacks *rènao* – the emotion that transforms formal occasions into warm and interactive events (Yu, 2004: 138).

Social significance of this affect is present in that “*rènao* is also considered to be a manifestation of the human flavour (*renqing wei*) that is generated from enthusiastic human interactions” (Yu, 2004: 138). Yu's comments situating *rènao* within the larger field of the ‘flavor of human feelings (*renqingwei*)’ merit particular attention, given the acknowledged significance of the latter concept in the general art of social relationships in China (see, in particular, the descriptions presented in Yang, 1994: 119-126).

The attribute of *rènao*, viewed as an emerging feature of Chinese social space, imbues it with individually desirable qualities, which may result in a significant modification of a cultural actor's behaviour. According to Yu

(2004: 140), “being in a *rènao* place (like a night market) creates a subjective feeling of safety. (...) A physical and emotional sense of relaxation leads to what many informants believe is undisciplined behaviour.” Notable indications of this psychological stance are mentioned by the anthropologist – “Dressing down is perhaps more frequent than any other aspect of relaxed behaviour – wearing slippers instead of shoes and shorts instead of pants is part of what night market strolling is about”. Moreover, Yu draws attention to the likely psychological dynamics underlying such observed ways of acting by pointing out that other frequently-noted manifestations of relaxed behaviour involve “eating while walking along a street, eating food in an inappropriate manner, talking and laughing freely in public place, bargaining without considering one’s own status, rummaging through merchandise, and littering carelessly”. Significantly, as the Chinese scholar observes, “All of these are considered to be actions of people from lower social and economic classes – except when they are done in night markets.” Yu underscores the psychological significance of such activities, maintaining that while such behavioural transgressions are ‘both minor and specific’, they still serve an important function “as significant sources of pleasure in daily Taiwanese life” (ibid.).

3. Definitions of the lexical item *rènao* in Chinese sources – a preliminary semantic picture

From a descriptive linguistic point of view, the word *rènao* is an example of a parallel verb compound (V_1V_2 PVC), where “both elements signal the same type of predicative notion” (Li & Thompson, 1989: 68-70). English dictionary glosses of the word’s two constituent *zì* (i.e. monosyllabic characters/words) include such words and expressions as ‘heat, hot, fever, craze, popular’ and ‘noisy, make a noise, give vent, go in for’, respectively (cf. *HYC, A Chinese-English Dictionary*, 1988: 570). From a semantic point of view, however, it can be noted that the matching glosses used in both monolingual Chinese and bilingual Chinese-English dictionaries are not just lexical units denoting unmediated, internal, psychological states, but instead tend to convey an external manifestation of the underlying psychological state. For example, the lexical description of the analysed word contained in the monolingual *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn (XHC, Dictionary of Modern Chinese*, 1988: 958) distinguishes the following three prominent points of the word’s usage: (1) *rènao* can be used to describe a ‘scene’ (*jǐngxiàng*) – where its meaning is rendered with a four-syllabic ‘elaborate

expression' (*chéngyǔ*) *fánshèng-húoyuè* (roughly, 'thriving and brisk') and the examples include *rènao de dàjīe* / 'rènao main street'; *guǎngchǎng shang rénsān-rénhāi, shífēn rènao* / 'the square is a sea of people, very rènao'; (2) the meaning is described as 'causing an occasion (*chǎngmiàn*) to be lively, the spirit happy and cheerful' (*yúkuài*), exemplified with the following two sentences: *wōmen zhǔnbèi zúzhì wényú húodòng, lái rènao yīxià* / 'we are preparing some recreational activities, come rènao a little! /, and *dào le jiérì dàjiā rènao-rènao ba! /* 'the holiday has arrived, let everybody rènao a bit!' (3) a scene rich in *rènao*, as in *tā zhǐ gùzhe qiáo rènao, wàng le huíjiā le /* 'he only cared for watching *rènao*, and forgot to return home'. This tripartite division is also identified in bilingual Chinese-English dictionaries, for example, *HYC, Chinese-English Dictionary* (1988: 571) distinguishes three relevant aspects of the word's use, and contains the following translation: '(1) lively, bustling with noise and excitement, (2) liven things up, have a jolly time, (3) a scene of bustle and excitement; a thrilling sight'. The dictionary adds a couple of relevant expressions which confirm the general lexical picture presented above, such as *rènao de cài shìchǎng* ('a food market bustling with activity, a busy food market'), *nà tiān tāmen jù zài yīqǐ le, rènao le yī fān* ('On that day they got together and had a jolly time'), and a common phrase *kàn rènao* ('watch the excitement; watch the fun').

Popular Chinese online dictionaries contain a similar set of identified meanings – for example, the *Báidù Bǎikē* encyclopedic dictionary lists five basic explanatory points of the word's meaning, originally prefaced with the supplied English expressions [in square brackets] enumerated as follows: (1) [bustling with activity] *jǐngxiàng fánshèng-húoyuè*; (2) [fun] *yǒuqù de rén (huò shìwù)*; (3) [lively] *fēnfánshèngdà*; (4) [liven up] *shǐ húoyuè-qilai, shǐ yúkuài-qilai*; (5) [have a jolly time] *huānkuài, xìnggaōcǎiliè*. Chinese explanatory phrases used in this fragment consist of fixed phrasemes (typically four-syllabic expressions) whose figurative meanings yield insights into the semantic scope of the word *rènao*. Thus, the first four-syllabic expression conveys the positive meaning of 'greatly prosperous and lively', the third one means 'numerous and flourishing', the fourth one expresses the combined causative and inceptive meanings of 'to make (one) start being lively, make (one) start being happy and cheerful', while the fifth element conveys the meaning of 'happy and excited'. Only the second explanatory line lacks a similar verbal pattern, and relies on a key Anglo-American word *fun* (cf. Wierzbicka, 1999: 250) linked to the Chinese explanation roughly translatable as 'an interesting person (or thing)'. The same dictionary also enumerates the words *ānjìng* ('quiet') and *níngjìng* ('tranquil') as

the antonyms of *rènao*, and the words *xuānnào* ('noisy') and *xuānrǎng* ('clamour') as its synonyms.

Also helpful in a preliminary appreciation of the meaning of this Chinese word is a look at the scenes and circumstances tagged with the word *rènao* by Chinese Internet users on the major *Bǎidù* image search site (*Bǎidù Túpiàn*). A simple search for pictures tagged with this label yields a wealth of photos and visual depictions of Chinese festivals, busy streets, teeming disco floors, and crowds of spectators at daily street events. Celebration, food and loud festivities seem to be ever-present in the flow of uploaded images. Prominent related search terms linked on the website include: *rènao Chūnjié túpiàn* ('*rènao* Spring Festival picture'), *qúnli hǎo rènao* ('very *rènao* in a group'), *rènao de jìqū* ('*rènao* district'), and *Xīnjiāng bāzhā rènao chǎngjǐng* ('*rènao* scenes from a Xīnjiāng bazaar'). Following the linked pages brings more images of colourful, loud, and animated human interaction. On the other hand, a simple image search for the antonymic word *ānjìng* ('quiet, calm') results in a wealth of pictures of solitary women and children, as well as serene scenes of nature (trees and water in particular).

It has been noted that drumming (and more generally, percussive music) constitutes an integral part of festive Chinese atmosphere. For example, the definition of the word *rènao* in the *Bǎidù* Encyclopaedia (*Bǎidù Bǎikē*) is accompanied by a picture presenting drummers clad in red for the traditional celebration of the Lantern Festival (*Yuánxiāojié*). Percussive sounds (such as drumming) appear to be culturally rooted in the traditionally positive folk perceptions of noisiness as a force which could be used to drive away bad ghosts and other noxious forces. This cultural link between the traditional value of *rènao* and folk Chinese functions of music was aptly noted by an American classical musician living in modern China, who described one of his encounters with his Chinese hosts as follows:

He said that for the majority of Chinese who are peasants and laborers, music is enjoyed as a sort of background entertainment and is intended as an accompaniment to *rènao*, which means literally 'heat and noise'. *Rènao* is the Chinese word for good fun, the kind you might have at an amusement park in America, and noise and movement are essential to it (Salzman, 1990: 123).

However, the cultural prominence of the Chinese concept of *rènao* has been observed in other social settings as well. In a sociological paper devoted to the Chinese value of *rènao* and consumption metaphors, Warden and Chen

(2008: 228) regard it as both “a core traditional value” and “a metaphor for positive feelings”. The authors stress that the value of *rènao* is essential in making sense of Chinese consumer behaviour, as it induces people to refocus their activities from the traditional (communal) sphere to the modern commercial events and accompanying practices. As they explain, “If a consumer hears of a location with great price, lots of food and packed full of people, the immediate thought is of *rènao*” (Warden & Chen, 2008: 228). While observing that the traditional archetypal *rènao* locations, such as fresh food markets, night markets and temple fairs still remain popular, they note that some modern global retailers (e.g. McDonald’s restaurants) tend to co-opt certain design features of temple bazaars to attract more customers (Warden & Chen, 2008). Similarly to Yu’s anthropological study of Taiwanese night markets quoted above, Warden and Chen (2009: 218) single out three determining constituents of *rènao*, namely: events, crowds, and noise – noting that this particular combination allows an individual to gain “a feeling of social security through belonging to a social group.” Yet, they remark that the manifestations of the value of *rènao* observed in international contexts may result in a cultural clash, since their “emphasis on crowding and de-emphasis on organization, cleanliness and personal space are often antithetic to Western servicescape design values” (Warden & Chen, 2008: 228).

The following part of this paper probes the cultural significance of the descriptive language used in two Chinese media accounts of culturally significant popular events. The first text is a picture-set (*zǔtú*) report of a traditional temple fair in a Chinese town, where I focus on the key symbolic aspects of the depicted events and the cultural meaning of Chinese descriptive phrases which accompany them. The second one is a journalistic report (News.sina, 2004) of a popular debate about the advantages and disadvantages of two feasting styles emerging in the context of the Spring Festival (*Chūnjié*) celebrations, where the value of *rènao* is often mentioned in the reported voices of Chinese participants.

4. *Rènao* in cultural context: two Chinese scenes

As argued by the researchers quoted in the first part of this paper, the word *rènao* tends to evoke a number of popular, socially salient and ‘close-to-the-experience’ cultural practices, objects, activities and values. In the first part of this section, I am going to focus on the descriptive vocabulary of a Mainland Chinese

journalistic report from a local temple fair in the prefecture city of *Yāntái* in *Shāndōng* province (Jiaodong.net, 2011). Both the title of the report and the descriptive phrases accompanying the set of twenty-four pictures of festive scenes bring out the prominent aspects of cultural performance, and direct readers' attention to the salient elements of the reported scenes. The title of the report (below) uses the word *rènao* twice to praise the attractiveness of the local temple fair with the visiting public.

- (1) *Yāntái Yùhuángdǐng miàohuì rènao kāichǎng, hǎokàn hǎowán hǎo rènao*
 'Temple festival at the Yùhuángdǐng temple in Yāntái begins with *rènao*, it's good to watch, good fun, and good *rènao*.'

The picture-set follows the temporal development of the festival, focusing on the culturally salient aspects of the unfolding events which are introduced with the following captions, reproduced in *pīnyīn* transliteration and translated in the Table 1 below:

| Chinese caption | Free translation | Commentary |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Yāntái Yùhuángdǐng miàohuì rènao kāichǎng, hǎokàn hǎowán hǎo rènao</i> | 'Temple festival at the Yùhuángdǐng temple in Yāntái begins with <i>rènao</i> , it's good to watch, good fun, and very <i>rènao</i> ' | The word <i>rènao</i> occurs twice in the title, emphasizing the popular appeal of the event. |
| <i>zhòngduō mínsú biǎoyǎn liàngxiàng</i> | 'numerous folk performances appear onstage' | 'Folk performance' is mentioned. The occurrence of the verb <i>biǎoyǎn</i> ('to perform') is worth noting. |
| <i>biǎoyǎn xīyǐn le shàngwàn yóukè rù yuán guānkàn</i> | 'artists' performance attracted numerous tourists entering the area to watch' | 'Large numbers' (<i>shàngwàn</i>) are mentioned. |
| <i>xiǎochī tān qián yóukè rúzhī</i> | 'tourists are crowding before the foodstalls' | 'Stalls with snacks' (<i>xiǎochī tān</i>) are typical of such fairs. |
| <i>tánghúlu hé kǎoróuchuàn shì miàohuì bì chī měishí</i> | 'caramel apples and roast-meat skewers are the must-eat delicacies at the temple festival' | Traditional Chinese festive 'snacks' (<i>xiǎochī</i>) are mentioned as examples of food to try at the temple fair. |

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| <i>miàohuì shàng gāoqiāo biǎoyǎn</i> | ‘performers walking on stilts at the temple festival’ | Another visually salient type of performance is present. |
| <i>wànyú shìmín hé yóukè cānyù Yùhuángdǐng miàohuì</i> | ‘great numbers of townspeople and tourists participate in the Yùhuángdǐng temple festival’ | Another case where large numbers of different groups of people participating in the festival are mentioned |
| <i>gōngyuán nēi rénshānrénhǎi</i> | ‘huge crowds in the park’ | Emphasizing the large number of people with a set phrase glossed as ‘people-mountains-people-seas’ (i.e. huge crowds). |
| <i>huǒhóng de yāogǔ biǎoyǎn</i> | ‘fiery performance with waist-drums’ | Drumming performance as a prominent event at the fair (2 pictures). |
| <i>jīngcǎi biǎoyǎn xīyǐn le zhòngduó guānzhòng</i> | ‘brilliant performance attracted crowds of spectators’ | Attractiveness of the event to a very large number of spectators. |
| <i>gōngyuán nēi rén mǎnwéihuàn</i> | ‘vast crowds in the park’ | Using an emphasizing fixed expression <i>rén mǎnwéihuàn</i> (‘people-full-become-danger’) to stress the unusual popularity of the event. |
| <i>xìjù biǎoyǎn tóngyàng jīngcǎi</i> | ‘dramatic performance is equally brilliant’ | Praise for the folk opera performers. |
| <i>jīqíng yāngge duì</i> | ‘enthusiastic <i>yāngge</i> team’ | Yangko dance – one of the most popular and energetic folk Chinese dance forms |
| <i>guānzhòng bùduàn jiàohǎo</i> | ‘spectators’ unceasing applause’ | Stressing the unusual degree of praise expressed towards the performers |
| <i>liúxià měihǎo shùnjiān</i> | ‘preserving beautiful moments’ | Preserving the evidence of one’s participation in the event is valuable – the spectators are avid photographers |

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|---|--|--|
| <i>huájǐjù biǎoyǎn</i> | ‘performance of a <i>huájǐjù</i> ’ | Comic talk performance |
| <i>shòu guānzhòng xǐ’ài huájǐjù biǎoyǎn shòu</i> | ‘performance of the comic talk receives the audience’s appreciation (<i>xǐ’ài</i>)’ | compound emotion word <i>xǐ’ài</i> (roughly, ‘love’) used to describe the audience’s reaction carries the connotation of ‘being keen’ – hence, willing to do things such as clapping, applauding and smiling |
| <i>píyǐngxì biǎoyǎn</i> | ‘shadow play performance’ | Shadow puppet show – full of bright colours and lively performance |
| <i>Jiǎnzhǐ yìshù zhǎnshì</i> | ‘Paper-cutting exhibition’ | Displaying one of the most popular Chinese handicrafts |
| <i>Méishí zhǎnmài</i> | ‘Exhibition and sale of delicacies’ | Exhibition and tasting of food – an indispensable element of such events. |
| <i>Yùhuángdǐng miào huì hǎokàn hǎowán hǎo rènao</i> | ‘Temple festival at <i>Yùhuángdǐng</i> is good to watch, good fun, and very <i>rènao</i> ’ | The last caption restates the title of the entire photoset |

Table 1. Picture captions in a journalistic report from a local temple fair

Arguably, a number of meaning-related features of Chinese descriptive sentences and expressions which accompany the pictures highlight and emphasize the dynamic nature of the temple festival. The captions underscore and praise the enthusiasm of folk performers and positively describe the engaged spectatorship of the festival-goers. Below, I summarize the main verbal elements of the Chinese picture captions, used to convey the dynamic nature of a given cultural event:

- Perhaps the first element to be noted is the compound word *biǎoyǎn* (‘show:play’) often translated into English as ‘to perform, to act’ (V) or ‘performance, play’ (N). The word highlights the ongoing and active nature of the events, and it is used in such contexts as *mínsú biǎoyǎn* (‘folk performance’), *gāoqiāo biǎoyǎn* (‘walking on stilts performance’), *yāogǔ biǎoyǎn* (‘waist-drum performance’), *huájǐjù biǎoyǎn* (comic talk performance’), *píyǐngxì biǎoyǎn* (‘shadow play performance’).

The qualitative nature of *biǎoyǎn* ('performance') is conveyed with such compound modifiers as *huǒhóng* (lit. 'fire:red' – fiery, enthusiastic), *jīqíng* ('utmost:emotion' – passion), and *jīngcǎi* (lit. 'perfect:colour' – brilliant) aimed to convey both the commitment and spectacular virtuosity of the *yāogǔ* drummers and *yāngge* folk dance teams.

- Large numbers of participants, actors and events being present or presented at the site of the festival are important. The appearance of large numbers is conveyed linguistically in several ways, such as using emphasizing modifiers, e.g. *zhòngduō* (lit. 'heavy:many' – numerous), or *shàngwàn* (lit. 'over 10 thousand' – very numerous), using morphologically fixed (usually four-syllabic) expressions (*chéngyǔ*), to enhance rhetorical effectiveness of the text, e.g. *rénshānrénhǎi* (lit. 'people-mountains-people-seas' – huge crowds), *rénmǎnwéihuàn* (lit. 'people-full-become-danger' – people are so numerous that it can be dangerous). One can also note the phrase *yóukè rúzhī* (lit. 'tourists are as knitted, woven') i.e. very numerous.
- Appreciating and tasting food are prominent activities at the fair. As observed by some scholars quoted earlier in this paper, certain types of Chinese food appear to be strongly linked to the festive atmosphere of such events – and one caption identifies this type of popular appeal in a succinct way: *xiǎochī tān qián yóukè rúzhī* ('tourists are crowding before the stalls with snacks'). The important cultural category here is that of *xiǎochī* (lit. 'small:eat', usually rendered with the English noun 'snacks'). That this particular category of Chinese food appears to be virtually emblematic of truly *rènao* events has been amply documented by Yu (2004). Two examples of such dishes are identified in the captions: *tánghúlu* ('caramel-coated apples') and *kǎoróuchuàn* ('roast-meat skewers'). Unlike the 'proper' dishes of Chinese cuisine (i.e. *cài*, see Simoons, 1991: 15) both of these examples of *xiǎochī* are typically consumed when standing or walking (as opposed to sitting) and socializing with other people at the temple fair. Also, the exhibition and sale of various 'fine foods/culinary delicacies' (*méishi*) is identified as a notable feature of the temple fair in *Yāntái* city.
- Visual (or, perhaps, more broadly) sensory aspects of the event are prominent. Spectacular objects and activities constitute an indispensable element of the scenes qualified as *rènao* by Chinese cultural actors.

Thus, walking on stilts (*gāoqiāo*) is mentioned, as is Yangko folk dancing, well-known for its dynamic and colourful appeal. Notably, *two* pictures show virtuosic performances of a team of drummers (*yāogǔ*).

- The public, who are identified with such nominal expressions as: *yóukè* ('tourist, sightseer'), *shìmín* ('townspeople'), *guānzhòng* ('spectators') manifest their participation in the event by engaging in the following activities explicitly named in the captions: *guānkàn* ('watch, view'), *cānyù* ('participate'), but also by sharing their appreciation and interest which are conveyed by such linguistic expressions as: *bùduàn jiàohǎo* ('unceasing applause'), *xǐ'ài* ('love, be keen on') and taking pictures, described in one of the captions as *liúxià měihǎo shùnjiān* ('preserving beautiful moments'). The final caption of *Yùhuángdǐng miào huì hǎokàn hǎowán hǎo rènao* ('Temple fair of *Yùhuángdǐng* is spectacular, exciting and very *rènao*') was placed at the picture of a bespectacled boy leaving the temple fair area. While the text echoes the title of the whole photoset, it seems pertinent to observe that the first predicative directly preceding the word *rènao*, namely, *hǎokàn* ('good-looking, nice', but also 'interesting') – tends to suggest a more active dimension of the experienter's involvement with the subject, while the other predicative *hǎowán* ('amusing, interesting') carries a similar connotation of a potentially more active subjective engagement with the photographed scenes.

It has been frequently observed that food and cuisine possess a strikingly rich symbolic significance in Chinese culture. According to Simoons (1991: 14-15), "food plays such an important role in Chinese life as to lead many to characterize the Chinese as having a food-centred culture." While writing about the central social relevance of cuisine, Simoons rather clearly intended to aim at the concept of *rènao*, contrasting the overwhelming silence of "the typical bed-and-breakfast place in London" with "Chinese restaurants [which] are noisy places, for the Chinese like noise and dislike quiet, a perspective reflected in the Chinese word for a pleasant time, which, in translation means 'hot and noisy'" (ibid.).

In a similar way to the photo-story report described above, the following text is rather characteristic in that it, too, promotes the word *rènao* to a part of its title – as it explicates certain Chinese cultural practices and interactions where this value and its display are expected and highly appreciated, namely

feasting in a large family circle on the occasion of the most quintessential of Chinese celebrations – the Spring Festival (*Chūnjié*).

The festivities described in the news report (news.sina.com.cn, 2004) took place in the wake of a series of Beijing administrative authorities' decisions to reduce risks of SARS epidemic threatening parts of China at that time (i.e. 2004). One of the authorities' decisions involved promoting a certain change in feasting style arrangements, aimed at minimizing risks of contagion and strengthening the standards of hygiene in public places. In particular, the planned change involved encouraging restaurant-owners to furnish their clients with appropriate dining-table arrangements to consume their dishes strictly from their individual plates, rather than to pick their food from one common plate served to everyone. Called the 'separate system' (*fēncānzhī* – lit. 'separate meal system'), it was opposed to the traditional Chinese 'collective system' (called *jùcānzhī* – lit. 'together meal system') commonly practised in popular Chinese food establishments. However, the practice of having 'separate style' meals did not turn out to be particularly popular with the majority of Chinese customers. While the dictionary meaning of the compound *jùcān* reads 'dine together (usually on festive occasions; have a dinner party)' (*HYC, Chinese-English Dictionary*, 1988: 372), it seems that in the popular perception, eating in accordance with the traditional Chinese style of food consumption increases the sought-out social aspects of this activity and *rènao*, while the 'separate style' of *fēncānzhī* – officially praised as "hygienic", "scientific", and/or modern" is informally perceived as cold and unappealing.

Popular controversies regarding the two alternative styles of dining are the subject addressed in the following journalistic report. The place of the reported conversations is the famous *Quánjùdé* restaurant in Beijing where the author of the report was invited by the restaurant manager and some of his Chinese guests to participate in their family meal and listen to their views on the recently introduced dining policy and its social significance. In the following fragment of this paper I will quote from, translate and comment on some Chinese native speakers' opinions regarding different styles of taking meals, sociable behaviour at the table, and *rènao* atmosphere at the time of Spring Festival.

The essence of the problem is pinpointed in the title of the report, which explicitly identifies the Chinese cultural values pertinent to the issue of having culturally satisfying feasts:

- (2) *Chūnjié fēncānzhi jiàohǎo bù jiàozuò jiàngdī rènao qìfēn réngíngwèi bùzú*
 ‘Separate meal system at the Spring Festival is praised but unappealing: the atmosphere of *rènao* is lowered and *réngíngwèi* is insufficient.’

The phrasing of the sentence clearly conveys that restaurant meals served in accordance with the officially encouraged ‘separate meal system’ (*fēncānzhi*) are not popular with Chinese customers. Significantly, the key point of their complaint appears to be that while praiseworthy for some objective reasons, the ‘separate style’ is lacking in two respects, identified with two culturally significant words – *rènao* and *réngíngwèi* – the second one being another key Chinese social concept (cf. Yang, 1994), which refers to an important emotional bond expected to form in Chinese interpersonal relations, but found to be weakened here as well. The ‘separate style’ of consuming meals seems to be too cold and uninvolved to generate the expected warmth of human interaction. The journalist’s concerns are addressed in the following passage, where the restaurant manager describes the situation in their establishment during the last couple of days before the Spring Festival:

- (3) *Chūnjié zhīqián jīguān tuántǐ liánhuāncān, péngyou jùhuìcān shí céng yǒu kèrén yāoqiú fēncānzhi, qián jǐ tiān, yǒu sāngē lǎowài jiùshì yī rén diǎn yīgè cài, gèrén chī zìjǐ pánzi lǐ de cài, dàn zài Chūnjié héjiā tuányuán zhījī, fēncānzhi zìrán huì shǐ cānzhuō de rènao qìfēn jiàngdī, réngíngwèi bùzú.*
 ‘(He explained to the journalist that) as to the time before the Spring Festival the institutional group-meals, groups of friends getting together, formerly, there used to be guests requesting a separate-style meal, but in the last couple of days there were just three foreigners (*lǎowài*) requesting one meal per one person, where everyone would eat one’s dish from one’s own plate, but at the Spring Festival when the families reunite and get together, the separate eating style can only diminish the *rènao* atmosphere of the festive table, and create insufficient *réngíngwèi*.’

While the ‘separate style’ seems to have attracted only a few foreigners (*lǎowài*), the restaurant manager linked the unpopularity of the ‘separate style’ among their native guests to some distinctive Chinese cultural preferences, which he described in the following way:

- (4) *Zhōngguórénde yīnshí xíguàn zhōng, jùcān de jiǎngjiu kǒuwèi fēngfù, gè zhōng wèidào de cài zìjǐ dōu dǐ chángyīcháng, ǒu’ěr hái néng pèngdào kèrén bù ràng fúwùyuán wǎngxìà chē kōng pánzi, yīnwèi*

*zhuōzi shàng tài kōng xiǎnde méiyǒu qìfēn, fēncānzhi rénníngwèi
bùzú zhè yě shì jiātingcān, shēngrìcān, péngyoucān bìuyuàn jiēshòu
fēncān de gēnběn yuányīn.*

‘As far as the Chinese customs of eating and drinking are concerned, communal meals pay particular attention to the richness of flavours, one should try out every kind of dish oneself, once in a while one can notice that guests don’t allow waiters to remove the emptied plates, because if the table looks empty, it seems that there is no ‘atmosphere’ (*qìfēn*), that’s why the separate eating style lacks *rénníngwèi* and this is the basic reason why family meals, birthday meals, friends’ meals do not follow the separate feasting style arrangements.’

The manager concluded his explanation by enumerating the essential qualities of desirable atmosphere at a Chinese festive meal enjoyed by a large family. As the ‘separate meal’ (*fēncān*) manner of taking meals is likely to cause cultural discomfort to the Chinese customers, it is avoided on such festive occasions:

- (5) *Jīntiān lái de kèrén quán shì jiāyán, jīhū měiyī zhuō dōu yǒu lǎorén hé xiǎohái. Ànzhào zánmen Zhōngguó rén de chuántǒng, jiāyàn jiāngde shì fēngshèng, qìfēn hé rènao, suǒyǐ méiyǒu kèrén yāoqiú fēncān.*

‘The guests who have come today all take family feasts, there are old people and children at almost every table. According to our Chinese tradition, family feasts should be sumptuous, (rich in) atmosphere and *rènao*, therefore there are no guests who demand ‘separate style’ meals.’

The manager emphasized the affective closeness of the *jùcān* feasting style by using the inclusive first person plural pronoun *zánmen* (as in *zánmen zhōngguó rén*, ‘we.INC Chinese people’) in the introductory phrase which could be literally translated as ‘According to the tradition of us, Chinese’ – which, perhaps, better conveys a somewhat normative tone of his speech. The key words of the sentence are *fēngshèng* (‘sumptuous’), *qìfēn* (‘atmosphere’), and *rènao* (‘lively’). They all highlight the positive, desirable qualities sought in a festive family meal. It can be also observed that the person quoted appears to use these phrases as a sufficient explanatory reason why there were simply no native guests who requested any ‘separate style’ meal. In the following passage, the journalist points to another pertinent aspect of Chinese festive meals, which is related to a particular way in which the native guests interact at the table, so as to increase their affective closeness:

- (6) *Jìzhě zhùyìdào, jùcān de kèrén dàduō shì yījiārén huò qīnpéng-hǎoyǒu wéizuò yī zhuō, qīnmì-wújiān, rèrènao de jùcān, jīhū méiyǒu shíxìng fēncānzhìde.*

‘The journalist has noticed that the majority of the consumers are people from one family, or close friends (*qīnpéng-hǎoyǒu* ‘close relatives and good friends’), sitting around the table (*wéizuò yī zhuō*), *qīnmì-wújiān* (‘very close and intimate’), *rèrènao* having the meal together (*jùcān*), they haven’t practiced the ‘separate system’ (*fēncānzhì*) at all.’

The fragment mentions an important aspect of the popular style of Chinese feasting, namely a considerable physical and affective closeness. Symbolic nature of such proximity is stressed with two culturally revealing Chinese multisyllabic expressions, namely:

- *qīnpéng-hǎoyǒu* – this expression refers collectively to one’s close friends and relatives, expressively elaborating a closely related collective compound *qīnyǒu* ‘relatives and friends; kith and kin’ by adding two quasi-synonymic modifiers: *qīn* ‘close, intimate’ and *hǎo* ‘good’, which emphasize the positive quality of the named relationship.
- *qīnmì-wújiān* – this four-syllabic expression contains a synonymic compound *qīnmì* (lit. ‘dear:close’ – ‘close, intimate’) and *wújiān* (lit. ‘NEG:between’ – ‘not keeping anything from each other’, which emphasizes the emotional closeness and lack of distance in an interpersonal relationship.

For the people who can be described with such expressions, the appropriate way to sit at the table is also mentioned in the sentence: it is *wéizuò yī zhuō* (‘to sit around the table’) – i.e. in a way which enhances the intensity of interpersonal interaction, while at the same time making the physical contact much easier. One can also observe here the expressive reduplicated form of the predicative *rènao*, used here to name the expected quality of such interaction.

This particular feature of Chinese festive interaction can be gleaned from the following fragment of the journalist’s interview during which he talked to some members of a large Chinese family, who came to celebrate the festive occasion. The text situates the scene of the interview with the following sentence:

- (7) *Zài gāi diàn èr lóu bāojiān nèi jùcān de yī dà jiāzǐ rén jiēshòu le jìzhě de cǎifǎng.*

‘In a private room on the second floor of the restaurant’s building members of one family (household) were interviewed by the journalist.’

As one of the quoted customers hastened to explain in some detail, the ‘separate meal system’ (*fēncānzhi*) is not really appropriate for such people as themselves, i.e. for the people that he classified with the Chinese word *shúrén* (friends, acquaintances, an important Chinese social category term, see Ye, 2004: 213), i.e. the kind of people who are quite well-known to one another, and who are the opposite of category termed *shēngrén* (‘strangers’). To be noted are the kinship terms used in the introduction of the family members:

- (8) *Hùzhǔ Kāng nǚshì shǒuzhǐ duìmiàn jièshào shuō: ‘Zhè shì qìngjia yī jiā rén, zhè shì wǒ gēge yījiāzi, zhè shì nǚér, nǚxū ... wǒmen yī dà jiāzi rén jīntiān guònián jùhuì.*

‘Head of the household, Mrs. Kang, pointing at the people sitting opposite said: they are the whole family of my relatives by marriage, this is my older brother’s whole family, this is my daughter, my son-in-law ... we are one household and we are celebrating the New Year today.’

While the hygienic advantages of the *fēncānzhi* (‘separate meal system’) are clear to one of the journalist’s interviewees (introduced as a medical doctor – *dàifu*), he is also aware that the ‘collective meal’ (i.e. *jùcān*) can be socially more appropriate on such festive occasions as this one:

- (9) *Wǒmen yī dà jiāzi rén jīntiān guònián jùhuì. ‘Kāng nǚshì de zhàngfu xìng Zhāng, shì yīwei dàifu. Tā shuō: ‘Zuòwéi yīmíng yīshēng, cóng jiāng wèishēng de jiāodù jiāng, fēncānzhi dāngrán hǎo, dàn shúrén zhījiān chīfàn yībān dōu bù fēncān. Xiāng jīntiān wǒmen qīnrén jùcān dōu shì zìgèr jiālǐ rén, hùxiāng yě liǎojiě, suǒyǐ jiù gēng bù huì fēncān le.*

‘We people from one household celebrate the New Year today. Mrs Kang’s husband’s surname is Zhang, he is a doctor. He said: ‘As a doctor, speaking from the point of view of respecting hygiene, the ‘separate meal system’ is clearly good, but among the *shúrén* one doesn’t normally go for the ‘separate system’. On the occasion like today, we, relatives (*qīnrén*) take our meal together (*jùcān*), we are all one family, we know one another well, therefore we can’t really eat ‘separate meals’ (*fēncān*).’

Characteristically, the doctor makes use of two important Chinese social category terms: *shúrén* (‘acquaintances’) and *qīnrén* (‘relatives’) – to identify the kinds of people who normally make use of the *jùcān* (‘collective meal’) style to cement their affective (and/or extended) kinship relationship. Thus, the official decision to promote the *fēncānzhi* in similar food establishments wasn’t favourably received by the customers, who would visit the restaurants in groups of

relatives and friends. As the journalist commented, out of several well-known Beijing restaurants which he contacted for information concerning their customers' requirements with respect to the officially promoted *fēncānzhì*, their reply was invariably as follows:

(10) *Chúnjié qījiān jiāting tuányuáncān jīhū méi yǒu kèrén yāoqiú shíxíng fēncānzhì, suīrán zhèyàng, tāmen háishi gěi měiyī zhuō kēfàn dōu bǎishàng le gōngkuài gōngsháo.*

'Among the families and group meal consumers during the Spring Festival season there are almost no guests who request 'the separate meal system'. Even so, they supplied every set meal on the table with its set of chopsticks and spoons.'

Apparently, trying to conform to the official requirements 'to implement the separate meal system' (*shíxíng fēncānzhì*) some restaurant owners attempted set up their dining tables ahead of time, providing individual sets of chopsticks and spoons to go with every set meal (*kēfàn*).

While the controversies regarding the hygienic aspects of the two styles of consuming food seem likely to continue, one can sum up a number of the pertinent words and expressions surfacing in the cultural debate represented in the Chinese text in the form of the following table (Table 2):

| key Chinese expressions | <i>jùcān</i> ('collective meal') | <i>fēncān</i> ('separate meal') |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| - referring to people | <i>Zhōngguó rén</i> (‘Chinese people’) <i>shú rén</i> (‘acquaintances’) <i>péngyou</i> (‘friends’) <i>qīnpéng-hǎoyǒu</i> (‘close relatives and good friends’) <i>yī dà jiāzi rén</i> (‘people from one big household’) <i>zìgèr jiālǐ rén</i> (‘one’s own family people’) | <i>lǎowài</i> (‘foreigners’) |
| - referring to social interaction | <i>rènao</i> <i>rèrènao</i> (expressive reduplication) <i>qìfēn</i> (‘atmosphere’) <i>qīnmì-wújiān</i> (‘close no borders’) | <i>gèrén chī zìjǐ pánzi lǐ de cài</i> (‘everyone eats the dish from their own plate’) – solitary and unappealing <i>rénqíngwèi bùzú</i> – <i>renqingwei</i> (lit. ‘flavour of human feelings’) is insufficient |

Table 2. Pertinent words and expressions surfacing in the news report

As the restaurant manager insisted, their typical social meals – such as *jiātíngcān*, *shēngrìcān*, *péngyoucān* (‘family meals, birthday meals, friends’ meals’) were not even likely to be organized along the *fēncānzhi* pattern, as the meals organized along the lines described by him as ‘everyone eats the dish from their own plate’ sorely lack in the crucial values of *rènao* and *rénqíngwèi*.

However, it should be acknowledged that numerous administrative arguments put emphasis on the hygienic benefits of the ‘separate meal system’ (*fēncānzhi*), while a considerable number of visual representations available on Mainland Chinese Internet argue in favour of this way of feasting and, indeed, in favour of its ancient Chinese pedigree. For example, a webpage entitled *Fēncānzhi de túpiàn zhàopiàn zīliào* (‘Graphic and photographic resources on the separate meal system’, <http://www.putaotu.com>) collects various illustrations of of ‘separate style ways of serving and eating food’, including links to pictures and resources with such titles as the following:

- *wǒ jiā yě shì fēncānzhi* ‘my family eats separate meal system style, too’ – an educational webcomic for kids
- *fēncānzhi gèng yǒuyì jiànkāng bìmiǎn jiāochā gǎnrǎn* ‘separate meal system benefits health and stops transmission of infections’ – a report from a Chinese kindergarten
- *fēncānzhi gèng qīngjié gèng wèishēng* ‘separate meal system is cleaner and more hygienic’
- *xīcān shì fēncānzhi de, měi ge rén yīzhào zìjǐ de kǒuwèi* ‘Western cuisine follows the separate meal system, everyone follows their own taste’
- *Tiānjīn bùfēn fàndiàn tuīxíng fēncānzhi* ‘A part of restaurants in Tianjin carry out the separate meal system’
- *Zhōngguó gǔdài fēncānzhi* ‘Ancient Chinese separate meal system’ – with an appended image of a Tang Dynasty picture

On the other hand, *jùcān* style meals are more appropriate to strengthen the affective links with one’s fellow-university graduates, or friends, as expressed in the captions reproduced below:

(11) *Hěn gāoxìng cānjiā wǒ de yánjūshēng niánmò jùcān*

‘I am happy to take part in the end-of-the year *jùcān* of the graduate students’

Or with one's friends (*péngyou*), enjoying a casual visit at home, as in:

(12) *Péngyoumen línshí yuē jùcān, dàjiā dōu dào le qízhōng yīwèi péngyou chīfàn*

'Friends having a casual *jùcān*, everybody has arrived at the home of one of them to eat'

5. Conclusions: Towards a cultural script of 'rènao atmosphere' (*rènao qifēn*) in Chinese social interaction

As several empirical studies of everyday Chinese social practices have demonstrated, vivid manifestation of good (or even enthusiastic) feelings is by no means absent from Chinese culture, all too often credited with a blanket image of subdued affect. Warden and Chen (2009: 219), for example, note that "any location with lots of activity is positively described as *rènao*." Indeed, their tripartite formula aimed to capture the essential elements of *rènao* atmosphere, i.e. "crowds, events, noise" (ibid.) appears to work rather well in light of the linguistic evidence shown in this paper. Thus, visual representations of events and scenes marked by Chinese Internet users with the 'tag' (*bīāoqiān*) of *rènao* tend to conform to Warden and Chen's checklist, as described in the third section of this paper. It can be concluded that the notion of 'being in the same time and place with many other people' might constitute the first approximation of an important part of the relevant cultural script. However, another crucial semantic aspect of the word's meaning seems to be related to the type of activities pursued by the experiencer (i.e. things which a person does), and events (roughly, things that happen in the place where the experiencer is) enjoyed by this person. A number of scholars have pointed to the particularly significant symbolic role of food in Chinese culture (and across Chinese cultures). The enjoyment of a variety of Chinese dishes associated with festive occasions has been selected as one of the essential features of everyday Chinese culture (see e.g. Yu, 2004). Yet, it seems that it is not simply (or exclusively) the consumption of *xiǎochí* that constitutes the focus of an event characterized by *rènao* atmosphere. Arguably, events such as temple festivals, Chinese New Year celebrations, or meals with many friends offer the experiencer a considerable richness of visual and aural stimuli, not to be found in solitary contexts. Being together with others, as well as watching spectacular aspects of cultural performance, such walking on stilts (*gāoqiāo*), acrobatic folk dancing executed by teams of artists, or energizing

drumming, all communicate an empowering message to the cultural actors attending and responding to the ongoing events. Perhaps in this context one should again mention a common Chinese phraseme *kàn rènao* ('watch *rènao*'), describing the activity of watching a salient scene, and going where the crowds go (cf. Warden & Chen, 2009: 215-219). A prominent social role of sound-making (drumming, applauding, etc.) was also clear in the captions accompanying the photoset of a temple fair at *Yāntái* city described in the fourth section of this paper. It is probably this aspect of the meaning of the word *rènao* that is typically rendered with such English words as 'exciting' or 'bustling' – i.e. referring to subjective expectations tentatively incorporated in the script as 'many things are happening in this place now', and 'something good will happen'.

However, some well-intentioned social policies may adversely affect culturally-based everyday practices, and, so to speak, drain them of the valuable quality of *rènao*, as exemplified in the popular Chinese debate over two styles of feasting – the officially promoted *fēncānzhi* (lit. 'separate meal system') and the popular way of *jùcānzhi* (lit. 'collective/together meal system'). As the analysis of a sample cultural text dealing with this problem has shown, the 'separate meal system', while normatively presented as superior, tends to be perceived as fit for the *lǎowai* (a somewhat patronizing Chinese label for a foreigner) and devoid of two salient Chinese cultural qualities, encapsulated in the words *rènao* and *rénqíngwèi* (lit. 'flavour of human feelings'). Rather paradoxically, the availability of arranging 'separate meal system' feasts, sometimes advertised as an asset of Chinese food establishments, turned out to be unappealing from the point of view of native consumers (insofar as it was expressed in the analysed text).

While 'crowds' are often mentioned as essential to the desirable 'atmosphere of *rènao*' (*rènao qífēn*) – and, indeed, it seems that a sheer multiplicity of people, artefacts and sensory stimuli appearing in one place at one time are very important, one can hardly afford to disregard the significance of Yu's (2004: 138, see above) comments about close links between the concepts of *rènao* and *rénqíngwèi* (lit. 'flavour of human feelings'), captured in the title of the second Chinese text analysed in this paper. Reduced possibilities of personal interaction enforced by the 'separate meal system' (*fēncānzhi*) were hardly acceptable to the Chinese customers of a popular Beijing restaurant at the Spring Festival family meal. Consequently, they opted for a traditional *jùcān* ('collective meal') which provided them with ample opportunities to display their affective closeness. On the linguistic side, one should acknowledge the appearance of such characteristic features of Chinese style of verbal interaction as the use of kinship

terms in their addressative function, weaving in the traditional multisyllabic expressions (*chéngyǔ*) to underscore important cultural meanings, and relying on Chinese social category terms (such as *shúrén* ‘acquaintances’, *qīnrén* ‘relatives’) as essential to the subjective accounts of the cultural actors. It could be observed that these linguistic elements, while only natural to the Chinese participants, appear to contribute to the sought-out *rènao* atmosphere (*rènao qìfēn*) of festive events, as well.

Given the above observations, one could argue for the following tentative semantic script aimed to capture the essential elements of ‘*rènao* atmosphere’ in Chinese social interaction, which would need to contain the following components (a) – (f), where the two initial sentences of the script spell out the situational background necessary for the applicability of *rènao*:

- (a) Many things are happening in this place now.
- (b) Many people are in this place now, because they want to see these things.

Arguably, a prominent conventionalized expression which seems to shed light on the motivation of people eager to join others in the crowd is the common phraseme *kàn rènao* (‘watch *rènao*’) which – if taken literally – is focused on the experiencer’s intention to see certain things. However, this desire turns out to be eminently social. While the elements (a) and (b) are intended to capture the often-mentioned idea of a place ‘bustling with activity’ which appears in several dictionary explanations mentioned in the third section of this paper, it should be emphasized that the typical locations where *rènao* becomes a salient feature of the observed events predominantly involve crowded areas teeming with human activity (such as temple festivals, streets, supermarkets, restaurants, etc.) It could, perhaps, be suggested that the typical cognitive stance of an individual involved in an event characterized by a *rènao qìfēn* (‘*rènao* atmosphere’) is that of an experiencer. For example, the subjective engagement of festival goers at the temple festival described in section 4 of this paper was conveyed with captions and vocabulary focusing on the visual perception (*hǎokàn* ‘good-looking’, *guānkàn* ‘watch’, etc.) – in a similar manner, social sounds (and sound-making) were shown to be traditionally relevant to the everyday Chinese perceptions of socially enjoyable events. This experiential part of the postulated script could be formulated as the following components:

- (c) People can see and hear many things in this place.
- (d) People feel something good because of this.

Finally, the postulated script should contain a reference to the characteristic social mood generated by the ‘*rènao* atmosphere’, the feeling of ‘togetherness’ and a certain loosening of social behavioural norms, so aptly characterized by Yu (2004: 140, see section 2 of this paper)

- (e) People feel something very good, because they are with other people like them at the same time and place.
- (f) People think they can do some things which they can’t (shouldn’t) do at other times and places.

Glossary of Chinese cultural concepts and practices

- biǎoyǎn* 表演 performance
chéngyǔ 成语 fixed formulaic expression
Chūnjié 春节 Spring Festival
fēncānzhi 分餐制 separate meal system
fēngshèng 丰盛 sumptuous
jùcānzhi 聚餐制 collective meal system
kàn rènao 看热闹 watch the excitement
lǎowài 老外 foreigner (patronizing)
méishí 美食 fine foods
péngyou 朋友 friend
qìfēn 气氛 atmosphere
qīnmì-wújiàn 亲密无间 close friends on very intimate terms
qīnpéng-hǎoyou 亲朋好友 close relatives and good friends
qīnrén 亲人 relative
rènao 热闹 lively
rénqíngwèi 人情味 flavour of human feelings
shēngrén 生人 stranger
shúrén 熟人 acquaintances and friends
wéizuò yī zhuō 围坐一桌 to sit around the table

xiǎochī 小吃 snacks

Yuánxiāojié 元宵节 Lantern Festival

Zhōngguó rén 中国人 Chinese person/people

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