

# Interpersonal service quality of the Chinese: determinants and behavioral drivers

James O. Stanworth · Ryan Shuwei Hsu ·  
Huo-Tsan Chang

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**Abstract** The limited explanatory power of service quality models outside their nascent Western contexts is in no small part due to the significant role of cultures in constructing customers' interpretations. While the Chinese are globally significant, we lack understanding of service quality for these customers. We report service quality determinants and explain customers' interpretation as artifacts of Chinese culture. Our findings, based on a substantive multi-stage research design, report six service quality dimensions of professionalism, comfortableness, sense of sincerity, respect, active service and chin-chieh. We also report how behavioral drivers act to form evaluations of this Chinese service quality. Our proposed interpretation of Chinese service quality advances the discourse in this area in a way that provides both managers and researchers with a sound platform to understand customers' evaluations outside those familiar to the Western world.

**Keywords** Service quality · Chinese · Socially constructed · Culture

... our early findings suggest that merely exporting U.S.A. based quality measurement [...] to Asian country settings is not a guaranteed formula for success.

(Kettinger and Lee 1994, pp. 582–583)

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J. O. Stanworth · H.-T. Chang  
National Changhua University of Education, No.2, Shi-Da Road, Changhua City, Taiwan  
e-mail: jamesstanworth@btinternet.com

H.-T. Chang  
e-mail: changht@cc.ncue.edu.tw

R. S. Hsu (✉)  
National Taiwan University, No. 1, Sec 4 Roosevelt Road, Taipei City, Taiwan  
e-mail: ryanswhsu@gmail.com

The eagerness of global marketers to establish a competitive advantage based upon service quality excellence within emerging markets displays a degree of naïveté in respect to the influence of environmental factors upon consumption behaviour.

(Imrie et al. 2002, p. 10)

... if service quality is to be examined in [...] the rapidly expanding Chinese markets, there is a need for research into developing scales for the measurement of service quality that are valid within such distinctly different cultural settings.

(Meng et al. 2009, p. 780)

## 1 Introduction

While the rise of the Chinese customer is well documented, our understanding lags in explaining how customers in this distinct cultural context evaluate their service interactions. The Chinese diaspora reaches across China, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, and Hong Kong, spreading a world-view shaped by Confucian and Taoist philosophies. China houses over 20 % of the global population and its economy is predicted to exceed that of the USA by 2016 (International Monetary Fund 2012). The service sector already represents 43.4 % of China's GDP (World Bank World Bank 2012) and is growing at an annual average rate of 11.1 %. This trend is even more advanced in Taiwan (68.4 %) (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics of Taiwan 2012), Hong Kong (92.6 %), and Singapore (73.4 %) (World Bank 2012). While understanding service quality is important to both local and international managers for obvious economic reasons, it is challenging since the Chinese world-view finds on assumptions about interpersonal interactions that are distinct from those in the Western world.

Questions about the universal explanatory power of management theories anchor in assumptions embedded from their nascent and Western context that means management theory is less universal than we would like to believe (Boyacigiller and Adler 1991; Doktor et al. 1991). There is an emerging discourse on service quality that argues assumptions of universal relevance are inaccurate as culture frames the construction and interpretation of social phenomenon (e.g., Donthu and Yoo 1998; Mattila 1999; Raajpoot 2004; Tse and Ho 2009; Winsted 1997).

Studies reveal Western interpretations of service quality (WSQ)<sup>1</sup> do not apply in non-Western cultural contexts such as Japanese (Winsted 1997), middle Eastern (Raajpoot 2004), and Chinese (Kettinger and Lee 1994; Meng et al. 2009; Tse and Ho 2009; Zhao et al. 2002). Chinese settings reveal a lack of robustness in capturing and defining service constructs when restricted to Western-developed metrics (e.g., Smith and Reynolds 2002). While the dimension of *reliability*, for example, is clearly defined and holds well-recognized significance to customers in the Western

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that service quality research in the Western worlds is not homogeneous. In this report, WSQ is loosely defined as service quality studies that are explicitly or implicitly founded in the Western worldview which stresses the individualistic and independent evaluation of the service encounters.

world (e.g., Parasuraman et al. 1988), it lacks the same overriding significance in other cultures, such as the Chinese (Furrer et al. 2000). Researchers also argue that WSQ lacks dimensions that define the construct in Chinese contexts (e.g., Kim and Jin 2002; Kettinger et al. 1995; Winsted 1997). Culture, thus, plays a more significant role in understanding service quality than service theories so far account for (Tse and Ho 2009).

Researchers commonly treat culture as a mechanism that attenuates or amplifies predefined universal dimensions (e.g., of service quality) (Furrer et al. 2000). This approach is questioned since service quality should be socially constructed by customers in a way that is coherent with local socio-cultural norms or worldviews (Edvardsson et al. 2011; Leidner and Kayworth 2006). Worldviews are found in unarticulated assumptions that influence values ultimately manifested in artifacts and behaviors; such as service quality (Schein 2004; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). This rationale suggests that applications of Western approaches (e.g., SERVQUAL and variants) for Chinese customers lack the credibility of an appropriate interpretive framework. This aligns with Marshak's assertion that, "evaluating the meaning of an assumption, or set of assumptions, from a viewpoint other than its own cultural context would be inherently specious and probably pernicious" (1993, p. 395). We require an approach that fundamentally and critically examines service quality as a core artifact of Chinese culture, rather than a series of edge cases (e.g., Imrie et al. 2002; Kettinger and Lee 1994; Meng et al. 2009).

Identifying how evaluations are formed is central to developing an appropriate specification for service quality in any specific cultural milieu. Service quality dimensions describe determinants of quality in service encounters but in themselves do not reveal what customers perceive as driving the evaluations such dimensions measure (Brady and Cronin 2001). The attention customers give to employee behaviors in encounters makes them a natural candidate to understand their impact on evaluations of service quality and satisfaction (Bitner et al. 1990; Brady and Cronin 2001; Winsted 1997). A specification of employee behaviors that shape customers' judgments is significant as this guides managerial efforts to improve service (Rafaeli et al. Doucet 2008). Focusing on employee behaviors is also particularly apt for Chinese customers' as they emphasize decoding meanings from interpersonal interactions (Hwang 2011; Yang 1995). A focus on employee behaviors in Chinese cultural settings brings a degree of specificity not yet addressed in the Chinese service quality (CSQ) literature.

Taking the position that WSQ is an inaccurate specification for customers in Chinese settings, we arrive at two objectives for this study: first, to understand how Chinese customers' determine service quality in their interpersonal encounters, and second, to specify the drivers of these evaluations. The frame of our study, interpersonal interaction, is in some ways narrower than other service quality studies since we address the specific qualities of interpersonal interaction over a broader perspective that includes such aspects as the tangible service environment. Our findings advance the discourse on service quality by revealing a service quality dimensionality distinct from that found in the Western world but coherent to the Chinese.

This paper is organized as follows: we begin with the limits of Western measures in Chinese service settings. Next, attempts to construct a CSQ dimensionality are presented. We then discuss the relevance of employee behaviors to evaluation of service quality. Our methods, that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, follow. We present findings as a Chinese dimensionality of service quality along with behavioral indicators. Finally, we discuss research directions to deepen understanding of service quality in Chinese settings.

## 2 Service quality—Western measures in Chinese settings

... the “reliability” dimension of USA IISF SERVQUAL may not be as appropriate in the Asian setting [...] based on a Western time concept that is absolute and demands high standards of temporal precision.

(Kettinger et al. 1995, p. 582)

Under the Western worldview, service quality is understood as an attitude derived from customer perceptions of a dimensionality (Brady and Cronin 2001). Parasuraman et al. (1988, 1991) service quality model has an enduring appeal because it frames five dimensions that lend themselves to defining the customer’s service experience. Researchers continue to apply these WSQ dimensions in Chinese cultural contexts (e.g., Chow et al. 2007). This is in the face of increasing evidence about a lack of shared meaning across the service quality variables across contexts (Roy et al. 2001; Smith and Reynolds 2002). A priori assumptions of cross cultural values should not be assumed, rather, they should be subject to reflexive scrutiny and tested through rigorous grounding and data.

While the reliability dimension of WSQ is deterministic in Western cultural contexts (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Zeithaml et al. 1990), it has proven difficult to replicate in Chinese settings (To et al. 2013; Warden et al. 2012; Zhao et al. 2002; Zhou et al. 2002). The reliability dimension, an artifact of Western analytic thought (Nisbett et al. 2001), assumes customers rationally assess a service promise while anticipating a high degree of environmental control (Heath 2009; Weisz et al. 1984). The Chinese customer, in the absence of assumed environmental control, does not anticipate that they or service providers can fully predetermine the service outcome and so the reliability dimension loses its overriding sense of significance.

Researchers argue WSQ’s lack of explanatory power in Chinese settings means significant and defining dimensions are overlooked (e.g., Kim and Jin 2002). Kettinger et al. (1995) argues missing dimensions account for significant differences in how Hong Kong and Korean customers and their counterparts in the United States understand service quality. Winsted’s (1997) exploratory study of Japanese customers reports unique dimensions as artifacts of Japanese culture. Meng et al. (2009) argues an entirely new approach to service quality measurement is needed given WSQ inability to explain Chinese customers’ evaluations of retail service encounter quality. At the confluence of these perspectives, researchers acknowledge the strength of WSQ lies in its nascent Western context and its validity attenuates with cultural distance (Kim and Jin 2002; Lam 2002; Stanworth et al. 2007; Zhao

et al. 2002). As non-Western cultures are equally valid starting points to construct interpretations of service quality, it is pertinent to question, “How do Chinese customers evaluate service quality?” (Zhao et al. 2002, p. 253).

### 3 Toward Chinese service quality (CSQ)

Relationships dominance refers to the overriding potency of interpersonal relationship relative to individual and situational factors, as the determinant of social actions. Where relationships predominate, social actions follow not so much from the individual’s own volition, sentiments, or needs as they do from the individual’s perception of his or her relationships with other people.

(Ho 1998, p. 12)

Those emphasizing the individuated self through expressing self-desires and emphasizing individual benefits risk being criticized as small minded person or even labeled “a beast”.

(Hwang 1999, p. 171)

More than a billion people in the world today claim intellectual inheritance from the ancient Greece. More than two billion are the heirs of ancient Chinese traditions of thought.

(Nisbett 2004, p. 1)

In the absence of Christian theology, Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment, Chinese Confucian and Taoist philosophical legacies form a distinct worldview. This is the foundation for thought and behavior distinct from customers in the Western world (Nisbett et al. 2001). Simplistically referred to as collectivism (Hofstede and Minkov 2010), the Chinese worldview is better understood through the lens of relationalism (Ho 1998; Hwang 2000, 2011). This positions people and entities as interdependent with individuals having little control (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The social and situated circumstances of events are, consequently, naturally and irrevocably integrated into constructing reactions to artifacts, such as service quality (Nisbett et al. 2001; Nisbett 2004; Peng and Nisbett 1999; Weisz et al. 1984).

Chinese service quality, consequently, is inherently relational, rather than individually determined. Customers naturally take not only their own perspectives into account, but also those of the employee, and unfolding events and circumstances. As customers evaluate service they, therefore, give extensive thought to how well the encounter avoids inconvenience to others while achieving a positive and harmonious result for *all* involved. This frames customers’ thoughts beyond “getting what I want” (i.e., reliability) to account for others and related circumstances. This suggests that Chinese customers’ evaluations of service quality emphasize socially appropriateness over a focus individuated outcomes.

Within this distinct cultural system Feinberg et al. (1995) compare three contexts (i.e., the USA, Taiwan, and The Netherlands), finding dimensions, such as *friendly*, are formed and interpreted the same way across cultures. The difficulty with such work is the lack of unidimensional underlying meanings. Friendliness may be

**Table 1** Exploratory studies of Chinese customers' dimensions of service quality

Service evaluation criterion	Imrie et al. (2002)	Stanworth (2009)
1. Warm and positive attitude		
1. Chin-chieh	●	●
2. Friendliness	●	●
3. Politeness	●	●
2. Unsolicited and efficient service provision		
1. Active service	●	●
2. Went out of the way/policy and procedure		●
3. Responsiveness/passive service/ignored	●	●
4. Enthusiasm/willingness to help	●	●
5. Long queue time		●
6. Prompt/quick/wait delay/saving time		●
7. Access to staff		●
8. Hard sell/sale pressure		●
3. Giving respect and affirming social status		
1. Respect/Felt important	●	●
2. Attentive/caring	●	●
3. Patient	●	●
4. Facework	●	
5. Bargain/gift-giving/discount/surprise	●	●
4. Competent to service delivery		
1. Knowledgeable		●
2. Honest	●	
5. Product quality and store design		
1. Quality of product		●
2. Comfortable and pleasant store design		●

*Note* ● denotes those service evaluation criterion have been identified by existing exploratory research

universally important in service encounters, but the behaviors and their meanings are readily contested across cultures (see Fischer 1982; Lu 2010; Wierzbicka 1997). This problem is often repeated through the use of Western labels that eliminate nuance and, more seriously, assume universal meaning before any data is even collected. Feinberg et al. also conflate the distinction between behaviors (e.g., “smile”) and quality determinants (e.g., “friendly”). While a smile may be universal in its meaning, it is rather simplistic to assume within complex social settings the appropriateness of a smile is identical.

Following the rationale that CSQ themes derive from meanings embedded within the culture, two studies are of greater relevance to the current research. Imrie et al. (2002) use interview data to arrive at a framework of retail service quality dimensions consisting of seven dimensions and 20 sub-dimensions referred to as the Confucian relational ethic. Stanworth (2009) uses critical incident data to uncover hypermarket service quality and finds 17 dimensions and 37 sub-dimensions. These themes are summarized in Table 1.

Determinants of service quality for Chinese customers are distinct, with interpersonal factors forming a central theme as individuals amplify the signals that relate to relationships (e.g., with service employees) and attenuate personal preferences. This is rather different from the notion of the absolute reliability of promised outcomes that is so focal to customers in the Western world.

While these studies (Table 1) provide a first step toward understanding Chinese service quality, they are tentative and exploratory in nature. We require a more robust and parsimonious understanding of the dimensions used by Chinese customers to evaluate their service encounter quality. Current approaches also do not consider the important issue of how customers arrive at their evaluations of service quality. There is, thus, a need for a definition of CSQ determinants that includes a strong grounded explanation of how customer judgment drives evaluations.

#### **4 Drivers of service quality evaluations**

Researchers acknowledge our understanding is incomplete as to how service encounter dynamics relate to service quality evaluations (Boulding et al. 1993; Rafaeli et al. 2008). Customer-employee interaction, the service environment, and the outcomes are commonly identified as relevant influences on evaluations (Brady and Cronin 2001). Of these, employee behaviors receive particular attention in its direct influences on both customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al. 1990) and service quality (Brady and Cronin 2001; Winsted 1997, 2000). A focus on employee behavior appeals to managers as they are central to implementing customer contact strategies (Hartline et al. 2000; Mascio 2010) and has a disproportionate impact on encounter evaluations (Rafaeli et al. 2008).

A focus on employee behaviors is also particularly apt in Chinese cultural settings. This is important since culture shapes behaviors and communication (Gnanlet and Yayla-Kullu 2014). Specifically, under Chinese relationalism the need to understand interconnections within the environment means individuals are constant and alert social information collectors (Yang 1995). When making evaluations, individuals emphasize interpersonal behaviors (Hwang 2011; Leung and Chan 2003).

#### **5 Method**

##### **5.1 Stage 1: identifying Chinese service quality determinants**

The objective of this first stage is to define dimensions that Chinese customers consider significant to encounters. These dimensions help to form encounter evaluations (Collier and Bienstock 2009) where behaviors compliment this process (Brady and Cronin 2001; Winsted 1997). The dimensions of the service quality construct emerging in this stage provide a framework to derive relevant behavioral indicators in our second stage.

For our first stage, we sought respondent reactions to service encounters that were rich but not atypical. We selected the restaurant sector for its high degree of interaction with employees. Our approach is characterized as judgment sampling; where extreme cases are chosen for their ability to explain the typical or normal situation (Robson 2002). A snowball sampling approach was followed, emphasizing a relational orientation, where informants had experience with high-end restaurants. Sampling resulted in six focus groups, with six to eight members, ranging in age from 24 to 41 and distributed equally across genders. Members of a single focus group were all familiar with one another, increasing participants' willingness to openly share opinions (Fallon and Brown 2002).

The interview route was carefully designed, including introductory, opening, transition, key, and ending questions (Krueger and Casey 2000), to facilitate sharing of restaurant service experiences. We drew from Parasuraman et al. (1985) questions to focus on the service process and customer specific evaluations. Pilot testing helped to improve the clarity of questions and transitions to arrive at the following flow:

- Each informant provided a brief and memorable experience of restaurant service. Experiences were mapped to service stages timeline (e.g., meal service, billing).
- Informant discussed any obvious gaps in the stages on the timeline.
- In pairs, informants discussed service within the stages on the timeline.
- Informants provided instances of and explanations for pleasant and unpleasant experiences with service; description of an ideal service encounter on the timeline; the factors critical to assess service quality.
- The interviewer facilitated discussion of the stages with questions (e.g., “What happened?,” “How did you feel?,” “What did they do?,” and “What did they say?”), gradually understanding the informants' perceptions in their own words.

All the focus groups were conducted in Mandarin and then transcribed verbatim. Analysis followed the tradition of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) employing the software NVivo 8. One researcher started the analysis by developing an initial set of open codes, with in vivo labels, based on the transcripts. By beginning analysis before data collection was complete enabled the researchers to confirm and further explore issues of interest as well as deciding if further data collection was required (Miles and Huberman 1994). Analysis of the fifth focus group resulted in no new codes, representing theoretical saturation. Analysis of a sixth, and final, focus group confirmed saturation had been reached (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Qualitative data coding is improved through a process of interrater analysis (Butterfield et al. 2005). Therefore, two researchers, not involved with the focus groups, fitted the data to the 26 codes, derived from open coding. Discussion between researchers led to refinement of category labels, with a .91 level of overall interrater agreement, which is satisfactory for grounded theory data (Gremler 2004).

Axial coding draws out core themes by integrating open coding categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). For instance, informants' meanings given to the open

codes of sensitive, care, and active integrate in axial coding to the category of *active service*.

Expert interviews confirmed the face validity of emergent findings as distinct from the WSQ dimensionality (e.g., Butterfield et al. 2005). The comparability and significance of the findings also increase through comparison with existing relevant constructs (Polsa 2007; Seale 1999). We critically examined our findings with those in the literature; identifying points of alignment and divergence (see Table 1). This exhaustive and iterative process revealed CSQ dimensions of: *active service*, *chinchieh*, *respect*, *comfortableness*, *sense of sincerity*, and *professionalism*. Discussion follows in a later section.

## 5.2 Stage 2: identifying behavioral drivers of quality determinants

The second stage sought to identify behaviors relevant to customer perceptions of encounters, with the goal of creating appropriate measures for each quality dimension. Open questions invited respondents to identify behaviors associated with each of the six service quality dimensions from stage one (e.g., “What would a service employee do to make you feel respected?”). Pilot testing improved face validity and usability. Respondents were sampled for their experience with high-end restaurants (sample drawn from a current list of participants in executive education programs in three national universities). Of the total 162 questionnaires distributed, 11 were removed since they referred to non-restaurant contexts. The final sample consisted of 151 questionnaires that each provided an average of 23 behaviors from respondents with a mean age of 37.1 years and of which 50.3 % were male.

A total of 3,521 references to behaviors, in Chinese, were imported into NVivo 8 for analysis. One researcher began with one-third of the questionnaires (i.e., c. 50 responses), extracting an initial framework of 378 codes. A second researcher analyzed another one-third of the responses. Iterative discussions focused on improving the initial coding framework. Analysis of the final one-third, acting as a confirmation sample, required no changes to category codes—confirming completeness of the categories (Butterfield et al. 2005).

To reduce the code pool to a set of meaningful behavioral indicators, we set a cut-off point three occurrences within the transcriptions. This produced a comprehensive set of behaviors, eliminating those with low explanatory power, while avoiding unintentional elimination of important behavioral indicators. Next, following Winsted’s (1997) approach, tabulation of frequencies revealed indicators of dimensions (i.e., eliminating cross loading indicators). This step necessarily drew on research immersion to critically review and remove similar or irrelevant items (DeVellis 2003; Strauss and Corbin 1998). In a final step, expert interviews with restaurant managers produced a parsimonious set of behaviors. Using such experts is an appropriate check on the trustworthiness of the analysis (Spiggle 1994) and particularly apt in this study as managers are naturally drawing on their insight about the impact of employees’ behaviors on customers (e.g., Hartline et al. 2000). Thirty-nine critical behavioral indicators represented the six quality dimensions.

### 5.3 Stage 3: formative confirmation of CSQ through behavioral drivers

In this stage, our objective is to confirm our resulting behavioral indicators are effective drivers of customer evaluations. We developed an instrument to measure the performance of behaviors in our CSQ construct.

We critically examine the assumption that service quality is appropriately modeled as a formative construct (Collier and Bienstock 2006; Dabholkar et al. 2000; Parasuraman et al. 2005; Rossiter 2002) in the context of Chinese culture. Literature on Chinese psychology reveals customers draw on experience-based knowledge proximal to encounters (e.g., observation of employee behaviors) to form judgments (Nisbett et al. 2001; Yang 1995). Where raters' draw on proximal antecedents to evaluate service encounter performance, service quality is understood as a formed construct (Jarvis et al. 2003; Rossiter 2002).

The 39 critical behaviors, from the previous stage, acted as formative indicators, i.e., 6–7 indicators for each dimension. A 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*, was employed for respondents to rate perceptions of prevalence in encounters of the critical behaviors, following established approaches to measure service behaviors (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Winsted 1997).

Pretest of our instrument, with 25 customers of restaurants provided a final opportunity to make adjustments to improve the ease of completion of our instrument. The revised instrument was administered to a new purposive sample of 401 customers of restaurants with table service. Seven incomplete surveys were discarded, leaving a usable sample of 394. Respondent gender was almost equally split (male = 47 %) with a mean age of 27. Consumption patterns included meeting friends (54 %), family reunions (30 %), and dates (10 %).

Drawing on existing research (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Winsted 1997, 2000; Rafaeli et al. 2008), we theoretically speculated that behavioral drivers were present prior to the evaluation of service. This a priori theoretical underpinning led us to specify service quality as a formative construct with behavioral drives as indicators. This theoretical speculation afforded a rationale distinct from the dominant approach (i.e., reflective modeling) which is oriented on the reliability in the sense of internal consistency and composite reliability as well as validity in terms of convergent and discriminant validity. Four issues are relevant to assessment of a formative model: content specification, indicator specification, indicator collinearity, and external validity (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). Conceptualization critically determines a construct's formative or reflective nature (Diamantopoulos 2010; Edwards and Bagozzi 2000; Jarvis et al. 2003). Our systematic approach to developing service quality dimensions based on CSQ literature (e.g., Imrie et al. 2002; Stanworth 2009) and substantive Chinese psychology (e.g., Hwang 2011) means we are capturing the conceptual domain of service quality. This satisfies content and indicator specification criteria (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001).

Multicollinearity conceals the distinct impact of individual indicators, making it of particular concern in formative modeling (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). We regressed indicators on the global assessment item for each dimension. To increase the level of parsimony, we examined the variance proportions in the collinearity diagnostics, excluding between one and three indicators for each

dimension that did not uniquely contribute to the formative modeling, while taking care to avoid changing the conceptual domain of each service quality dimension. Eighteen behavioral indicators resulted, associated with six service quality dimension, which were further analyzed.

Based on Bollen and Ting's (2000) recommendation, we conducted a confirmatory tetrad analysis to examine if our model is formative. This approach statistically tests the null hypothesis that the measurement model is reflective. A rejection of the hypothesis suggests that the indicators are best specified as formative measures. Our analysis incorporated another latent variable (i.e., satisfaction), three reflective indicators, and three behavioral indicators from each dimension.

Specification of a formative model requires at least two reflective indicators for model identification (i.e., external validity), and these should capture the consumer's global evaluation of the dimension while also being reflective (Jarvis et al. 2003). Since our dimensions are new, and inclusion of too few indicators may damage construct validity (Hinkin 1995), we included four reflective indicators for each dimension. Responses were on a 7-point semantic difference scale. This scale is appropriate for measuring summative views of dimensions (Eagly and Chaiken 1993).

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Chinese dimensions of service quality

Chinese customers use six service quality dimensions to assess service: professionalism, a sense of sincerity, comfortable, chin-chieh, active service, and respect. The first three dimensions are new to both the CSQ and WSQ literatures and extend our understanding of CSQ beyond the confines of retail to include consideration of restaurants. We confirm the relevance of the remaining three service quality dimensions to both retail and restaurant sectors. In the next sections, we introduce the dimensions, attempting to construct meanings that appropriately encompass Chinese culture.

#### 6.1.1 Professionalism (*zhuān yè*)

This dimension refers to customers' focus on employees' capacity to contribute to the smooth and natural flow of the service experience. Customers, significantly, not only anticipate employee appropriate behaviors, but expect that they, themselves, will be guided toward appropriateness. This dimension derives meaning from impressions of employees' abilities, preparedness, and seriousness, to create service while also orienting customers toward co-creating service in a socially appropriate manner. Employee's detailed introductions help customers understand, for example, in Western dining, which of the multitude of cutlery is suitable for the current course. While employees' introductions to the store helps customers avoid causing inconvenience to other staff or diners, as for instance, they move about the restaurant.

### 6.1.2 *Sense of sincerity (chéng yì)*

Customers consider how employees demonstrate responsibility, benevolence, and a wholehearted, rather than calculated effort toward service. This dimension develops meaning as employees exhibit appropriate effort and intention to help customers by remembering simple tasks they have promised to do (e.g., filling cups or replacing dropped cutlery). Since service is co-produced, it is natural for customers to be the source of disharmonious misunderstandings or problems. Employees may attempt to blame customers for these and even their own oversights. A sense of sincerity builds from employees showing a generosity of spirit by not assigning blame and making an effort to solve service problems. A sense of sincerity also emerges from the rare situation of Chinese customers making explicit service requests. Employees demonstrate their appreciation that a direct request is a signal of urgency by taking responsibility and making prompt efforts to help the customer. Outside the specifics of the encounter, a sense of sincerity also emerges from gift-giving and offering of discounts, a common ritual in Chinese society that is reciprocal in nature and encourages return visits.

### 6.1.3 *Comfortableness (zì zài)*

This dimension refers to customers' feelings of being at ease and free of pressure. Underlying comfortableness is the Chinese social norm that customers (and employees) demonstrate appropriate public behaviors. While this is socialized into individuals' norms of behavior it requires continual effort to be aware of and appropriately respond to others. Comfortableness develops from employee behaviors that reduce the need to observe and be aware of being observed.

Customers report the ability of employees to keep a comfortable distance is particularly significant in reducing nervousness and feelings of pressure. In the inevitability of close contact, during service, employees send signals that customer decode. These non-verbal, but significant cues (e.g., slightly prolonged eye contact or subtly looking the customer up-and-down), hold the potential to communicate judgments about customer characteristics or upbringing. Employees take care to avoid communicating any unnecessary or negative judgments, helping customers feel at ease. For customers, employee ability to create a sense of free space also reduces pressure from other social sources of judgment (e.g., such as the presence of other customers), contributing to comfortableness.

### 6.1.4 *Chin-chieh (chīn chièh)*

This dimension concerns customers' feelings of warmth, familiarity, and closeness with the service provider. With overtones directed toward deepening relationship this suggests the possibilities of more than just pleasant or passing friendliness.

Impressions of chin-chieh friendliness form through warm greetings and patient attendance to customer needs. Customers reference genuine facial expressions that suggesting an invitation to natural and pleasant interactions. In interactions with employees, customer have opportunities to uncover common backgrounds (e.g.,

their joint ability to communicate in dialect), providing opportunities for feelings of chin-chieh familiarity to deepen. As employees express concern for customers, warm feelings build around the interpersonal connection.

Both Stanworth (2009) and Imrie et al. (2002) discuss the dimension of Chin-chieh, which reinforces the relevance of this dimension to CSQ. We also deepen the understanding of chin-chieh to include behavioral elements that underpin the way customers develop a sense of familiarity and warm feelings. These closely relate to signals embedded in the intricacies of developing relational connections (i.e., guanxi) (Chen and Chen 2004; Hall 1992; Tong and Yong 1998).

### 6.1.5 Active service (*zhǔ dòng*)

This concerns employees' ability to attentively observe and decode customers' needs and then sensitively respond with apparently unsolicited assistance. We find impressions develop from employees' ability to closely observe customers' implicit or unspoken requests and respond sensitively and appropriately. So, as the customer glances up, for example, employees notice them looking at partly eaten food or an empty glass and in a display of resourcefulness step forward to refill the glass or without prompting home-in on the issue with the dish. Customers report that when employees use a warm and natural tone of voice they become more passive and this facilitates active service. If customers explicitly impose their demands on an encounter, they may not account for unseen pressures on staff and so risk upsetting the balance between all the elements in the service flow (i.e., creating disharmony). In active service, customers rely on employees to interpret implicit cues (or on occasion explicit descriptions of needs) as requests for service, while responding in socially appropriate ways that avoid the potential embarrassment of having to refuse a direct customer request.

We give active service significance in CSQ and, following Imrie et al. (2002) and Stanworth (2009), reveal its operation is distinct from the typical Western customer's approach. In WSQ, judgments about service responsiveness rest on customers first making their needs *explicit* (Parasuraman et al. 1985). Chinese customers, by contrast, feel embarrassed to make explicit requests, relying on inferences and signals to communicate.

Concerns with face and harmony increase the relevance to active service. Making a request represents an opinion can generate a negative evaluation (loss of face) if it is inappropriate or reveals a lack of knowledge (Ho 1976). Customers avoid direct statements; instead, employing phrasing that infers preferences, while leaving latitude in how requests are filled. Employees are expected to understand the non-verbal and implicit cues embedded in this type of high context communication (Hall 1992).

### 6.1.6 Respect (*zūn zhòng*)

This dimension develops meaning from customer impressions of not being treated as insignificant. Respect draws particular attention to the negative service behavior (i.e., disrespect is especially serious). Employees communicate respect by

immediately acknowledging customers, serving them in the order they arrive while also exhibiting courteous use of language. Employees should avoid snobbish demonstration of favorable behaviors toward other customers based on superficial factors like appearance.

Imrie et al. (2002) argues that respect reflects customers' anticipation of a master–servant relationship, i.e., inferring respect is an employee role requirement. We argue that raising the complex issue of relationship status and roles (e.g., Chen and Chen 2004; Hwang 1987) may misdirect attention from customers' underlying and central concern: to avoid a loss of social status (face). Our findings indicate that customers are particularly concerned with at least maintaining their face and this is driven by employees demonstrating a minimum show of respect. For individuals losing, rather than maintaining or gaining face is of disproportionate significance (Ho 1976).

## 6.2 A formative model of Chinese service quality

We expand the domain of service quality by identifying six CSQ dimensions and reporting customer interpretation through 18 behavioral indicators (please see [Appendix](#) for those excluded items). Our specification treats CSQ as a first-order construct, i.e., each dimension appears driven by its associating behavioral indicators. Our approach, although distinct, is consistent with interpretations from within Chinese culture. After completing specification of our formative model, we established that all path estimates were significant between the indicators and their respective dimensions as well as for their associated reflective indicators. Table 2 reports our path analysis results.

Results of our confirmatory tetrad analysis support modeling of all six service quality dimension as formative: chinchieh ( $\chi^2 = 158.23$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ), active service ( $\chi^2 = 71.22$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ), respect ( $\chi^2 = 68.22$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ), comfortableness ( $\chi^2 = 72.11$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ), professionalism ( $\chi^2 = 71.32$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ), and sense of sincerity ( $\chi^2 = 68.04$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p$  value  $< .01$ ).

External validity of the formative model was examined through the multiple indicators and multiple causes model (MIMIC) proposed by Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer (2001). We applied the MIMIC model by specifying four paths from the formative index to each of our service dimensions, constraining the path of one of the indicators to one (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001; Jarvis et al. 2003). Data fit is good:  $\chi^2 = 3252.73$ ,  $df = 819$ , RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = .97, NFI = .96, NNFI = .97, PNFI = .92.

The validity of our proposed dimensionality was further assessed by examining whether this construct associated with other conceptually related variables. We examined the comparative importance of our six dimensions (see Table 3). Respondents in our stage three sample were asked two questions which conceptually relate to service quality: their perceptions of satisfaction with the experience (e.g., Dabholkar et al. 1996) and their perceptions of closeness with the service provider and employee. Respondents whose satisfaction was high could be hypothesized to perceived high service quality. Our inclusion of the second

**Table 2** Formative modeling of Chinese service quality

Model parameter	<i>T</i> value	Standardized estimate
<b>Chinchieh</b>		
CCB1: warm concerns → chinchieh	4.22	.22
CCB2: nice face to the customers at all time → chinchieh	4.10	.29
CCB3: no unpleasant face → chinchieh	2.84	.19
Chinchieh → chinchieh–not chinchieh		.98
Chinchieh → enthusiastic–cold	31.18	.92
Chinchieh → friendly–impolite	30.85	.91
Chinchieh → familiar–distant	19.13	.74
<b>Active service</b>		
ASB1: step forward if customers look around → active service	2.75	.22
ASB2: actively recommend special meals → active service	4.97	.17
ASB3: actively inquire customers' needs → active service	3.02	.27
Active service → active–passive		.87
Active service → sensitive–insensitive	27.07	.92
Active service → thoughtful–thoughtless	27.15	.92
Active service → attentive–inattentive	24.99	.89
<b>Respect</b>		
REB1: provide equal service for everyone and would not treat some people better → respect	2.76	.17
REB2: says please, thanks, excuse me, and sorry → respect	4.98	.31
REB3: first in first served → respect	3.02	.18
Respect → respect–no respect		.90
Respect → Significant–Insignificant	24.46	.87
Respect → fair–snobbish	24.05	.86
Respect → courteous–rude	25.66	.89
<b>Sense of sincerity</b>		
SIB1: never forget the promised service → sense of sincerity	3.81	.23
SIB2: responsive to customers' request → sense of sincerity	2.41	.16
SIB3: won't blame customers → sense of sincerity	3.33	.21
Sense of sincerity → with sense of sincerity–without		.89
Sense of sincerity → substantive–Fu yen	30.04	.94
Sense of sincerity → taking charge–full of excuse	29.69	.94
Sense of sincerity → generous–stingy	24.79	.87
<b>Professionalism</b>		
PRB1: specific and detailed introduction → professionalism	3.17	.21
PRB2: clearly introduce the store → professionalism	3.59	.23
PRB3: deliver the food in the right order → professionalism	3.99	.24
Professionalism → professional–unprofessional		.89
Professionalism → prepared–underprepared	26.50	.90
Professionalism → seriousness–trivial	25.46	.89
Professionalism → competent–incompetent	23.64	.86

**Table 2** continued

Model parameter	<i>T</i> value	Standardized estimate
Comfortableness		
CFB1: won't look customers up-and-down → comfortableness	3.97	.24
CFB2: keep certain distance with customers → comfortableness	4.01	.26
CFB3: give customers a quiet and uninterrupted space for meals → comfortableness	2.81	.17
Comfortableness → comfortable-uncomfortable (psychologically)		.89
Comfortableness → relaxed–pressured	26.96	.90
Comfortableness → safe–embarrassed	25.85	.89
Comfortableness → comfortable–uncomfortable (physically)	24.06	.86

**Table 3** Comparative impact of service quality dimensions on outcomes

Independent variable	Satisfaction		Closeness with the service employee		Closeness with the restaurant	
	General dominance	Relative weight as % of $R^2$	General dominance	Relative weight as % of $R^2$	General dominance	Relative weight as % of $R^2$
Chinchieh	.066	14.3	.045	16.8	.019	9.8
Active service	.067	14.6	.063	23.7	.036	18.6
Respect	.067	14.5	.058	22.0	.022	11.2
Comfortableness	.076	16.4	.030	11.2	.039	19.9
Sense of sincerity	.059	12.8	.036	13.5	.024	12.6
Professionalism	.127	27.4	.034	12.8	.054	27.8
$R^2$	.46		.26		.19	

We followed Budescu's (1993) procedure of dominance analysis to examine the relative importance of the dimensions. Satisfaction was measured with four emotion-laden item adapted from Brady and Robertson (2001). This scale showed high reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Closeness was measured by single-item, pictorial measure of closeness developed and validated by Aron, Aron and Smollan (1992). We changed the point of reference to service employees and restaurant for each measure

question fits the notion that in Chinese culture interaction experiences are central to developing closeness between people and organizations. This hypothetically relates positive experiences in interactions with a deepening sense of closeness between customers, employees, and the firm (e.g., Chen and Chen 2004). Table 3 shows the results are consistent with these hypotheses. These findings provide additional support for the validity of our CSQ construct.

## 7 Discussion

The current discourse of service quality has been framed as a construction from within Western (and largely North American) contexts. In sharp contrast, we have

markedly limited understanding about how the distinct relational culture of the Chinese shapes customers' evaluations of service quality. This reflects both how far our understanding of such issues as service quality has still to advance (Akehurst 2008). The lacuna in Chinese customer theory, particularly, sits uneasily within the growing significance of the service sector in Chinese markets. By revealing specific determinants and behavioral drivers of CSQ, we are building foundational knowledge on this important issue.

### 7.1 Chinese service quality

Our analysis reveals Chinese customer construction of service quality as distinct from WSQ, supporting the assertion service quality is a socio-cultural construction (e.g., Edvardsson et al. 2011). Calls to fundamentally depart from WSQ interpretations of service quality can be headed within the Chinese service context (e.g., Meng et al. 2009; Tse and Ho 2009). The dimensions of Chinese service quality, in particular: professionalism, comfortableness, and sense of sincerity, are novel: as yet, neither surfaced in the emergent literature on CSQ nor present within WSQ research.

Comfortableness is an unanticipated dimension. There is little written about the sense of social pressures felt by customers within service encounters (although some work considers the employee perspective (e.g., Groth et al. 2009; Hochschild 2003). For Chinese customers, relationalism social forces are always prevalent and have acquired different meanings from ritualistic customs, such as greetings and courtesy. Consumers understand themselves, and others, is through a relational fabric, requiring an awareness of and empathy for the thoughts and feelings of others (Ho 1998). Individuals invest considerable effort in observing their environment so they can behave appropriately (Bedford and Hwang 2003; Ho 1998; Hwang 2011). The onus on maintaining an empathetic awareness is not troublesome but requires energy. Our research suggests reducing this burden is important to Chinese customers—an issue not directly addressed by current models of service quality. This dimension is important (Table 3) to the domain of CSQ and requires further examination.

Professionalism is another significant dimension surfaced here. Chinese customers' emphasize the appropriate of their own and others' behaviors and less on employee knowledge and skill (i.e., Western aspects of assurance and reliability). Chinese concern with avoiding harm to others frames the notion of socially appropriate behavior (Yang 1995). Professionalism in service encounters involves employees demonstrating and helping customers understand appropriateness. We argue Chinese concern with appropriateness attenuates emphasis on specific service goals (i.e., reliability) in the intersubjective process of accounting for themselves, others and employees, within encounters. Our position aligns with Chinese relationalism where individuals prize socially appropriate thoughts and behaviors (Hwang 2011; Lau 1979).

A sense of sincerity is the final unexpected dimension emerging from the analysis. This dimension concerns customer impressions about employee intentions toward the service relationship. Our data reveals the Chinese locus of attention is

employee cues of dedication. This fits the Chinese understanding of sincerity, as individuals cultivate and make the best use of their native endowments to reveal their true selves (An 2004; Sim and Bretzke 1994). Studies of service quality, so far, focus on reliability as reflecting a Western orientation toward tasks, deadlines, and outcomes (Chen 2002). The Chinese customer orientation toward people and flow has been excluded. Perceptions of environmental control, embodied in Western thought, are not prevalent in the Chinese value system (Ji et al. 2000). For Chinese customers, outcomes (service reliability) are assumed to be subject to unknown environmental influences, making it more reasonable to focus on direct observation of sincerity embodied in employee cues about their effort toward service. Among these cues, discount and gift-giving emerged in their relationship to situations where people are, “linked not by family but by the concept of reciprocity” (Joy 2001, p. 240). These relational signals show employee sincerity and appreciation while developing a sense of obligation in the customer to reciprocate through repurchase (Hwang 1987; Joy 2001).

## 7.2 Interpretation of service quality determinants through behavioral drivers

How customers arrive at an evaluation is an important and integral part of understanding service quality. While employee behaviors significantly influence service quality outcomes such behaviors are rarely integrated as indicators (Brady and Cronin 2001). This issue has also been omitted from the nascent CSQ literature (Imrie et al. 2002; Stanworth 2009). We address this topic as our interpretation of CSQ is reinforced through the use of specific and multiple measures as behavioral indicators.

Studies represent WSQ as a hierarchical construct, i.e., as second or even third order, and few present it formatively (e.g., Dabholkar et al. 1996). The few going this route report the construct as formed of second order dimensions, while treating the indicators as reflective (e.g., Collier and Bienstock 2006).

Our approach, in contrast, represents CSQ as a first-order construct, with use of behavioral drivers as formative indicators. We argue our approach finds strong construct validity through the qualitative approach that gives it deep grounding while also fitting theoretical arguments that an emphasis on abstraction (hierarchical representations) is an artifact of the Western mind. As: “East Asians rely less on rules and categories and more on relationships and similarities in organizing their worlds than do Americans. East Asians preferred to group objects on the basis of relationships and similarity, whereas Americans were more likely to group objects on the basis of [abstract] categories and rules” (Nisbett et al. 2001, p. 301).<sup>2</sup> Our

<sup>2</sup> The preference for abstraction creates a sense of the decontextualized (i.e., acultural inference) that invites the assumptions of universal applicability referred to in the paper’s opening paragraphs. Under this Western approach contextual factors are either assumed absent or reduced to, and treated as, separate variables (Ji et al. 2000). This acontextual focus characterizes the “rock bottom” approach to methodological individualism while the inclusion of contextual factors represents a weaker version of the same ontological position (Hedström and Swedberg 1996). Under Chinese relationalism actors, entities and objects are understood as contiguous. This directs attention to these interconnections in a way that differs from the Western preference for seeking and ascribing (abstract) properties to the target objects (e.g., Nisbett et al. 2001). The situated nature of Chinese shapes thought and behavior contrasts with the individualist Western view (Chiu 1972).

first-order construct allows for Chinese holistic thought processes about these relationships to emerge (Nisbett et al. 2001; Yang 1995). The Chinese customer understands meanings about service encounters embedded in situ in the relationships where the customer co-exists with employees, significant others, and strangers (Ho 1998; Hwang 2000). Evaluating service quality, following these arguments, relates concrete dimensions relevant to relationships in context in a way that makes pre-established (fixed) hierarchies hold less significance.

By engaging with relationalism researchers appreciate Chinese cognitive behavior does not favor resolving logical inconsistencies. Rather, there is a preference for holistically understanding a situation and seeking an expression of balance among elements (Peng and Nisbett 1999; Peng et al. 2006). A sense of *chinchieh* creates feelings of familiarity that, in a prelude to deepening relational closeness, reduces psychic distance in a way that eases service encounters (Leung and Chan 2003). Comfortableness associates with impressions of reduced effort to social awareness. Taking a holistic and relational perspective on these dimensions forms an opportunity for distance combined with interpersonal sensitivity that alleviates frictions in the service encounter. A deeper understanding about how these dimensions play out is just one of many potential issues inviting further research on the CSQ.

Our conceptual and empirical arguments justifying CSQ as a formative first order model also touch on on-going debates concerning formative approaches (Bagozzi 2011; Collier and Bienstock 2009; Diamantopoulos 2008). This position invites further critical investigation, as we suggest in future research directions, and a robust conclusion can only emerge by extending theoretical understanding in order to avoid the risk of misspecification.

### 7.3 Managerial implications

Managers understand that service quality offers a path to success but currently lack the contextualized understanding that gives them meaningful and so actionable insights for servicing Chinese customers. While customers, from a superficial perspective, engage in similar encounters across contexts—say check-out in a store or order-taking in a restaurant—they differ markedly in how they construct meanings and evaluations about these service interactions. The Chinese customers' perspective is a challenging reality for managers as they find that existing formulations of service quality lack the required explanatory insights (Warden et al. 2012). While the reliability dimension, critical to interpretations of WSQ, readily holds an assumed universal significance for managers our findings reinforce the notion that universal faith in this dimension is misplaced. While managers and researchers continue to apply Western service quality models (e.g., SERVQUAL) in Chinese context (e.g., Chow et al. 2007; Tsang and Qu 2000) we argue these are of questionable validity. Although statistical reliabilities and internal consistency scores, as reported in such studies, are important they do not explain how well applications of the scale capture the underlying unobservable construct (i.e., Chinese service quality) they purport to measure (Churchill 1979). We argue our grounded approach and careful execution of procedures anchor our CSQ dimensions

in context and they can therefore be considered to possess good validity. Managers should then engage with these dimensions when servicing Chinese customers.

Managers seeking a path to service success with the Chinese customer need to understand not only our dimensions of service encounter quality but also how these are contextualized and so gain significance in the Chinese context. Drawing on our findings we raise some important and potentially surprising issues that managers should consider as they manage service quality for Chinese customers.

For Chinese customers direct requests are often an undesirable necessity (e.g., something is overlooked) and represent, by local standards, a rather blatant assertion of individual needs (Hwang 1999). Chinese customers, instead, prefer an active service approach that focuses on empathetically reading the subtleties of signals about needs and then responding in a way that prevents embarrassments by accounting for circumstances and those relevant in situ. Managers should appreciate that often once the customer actually makes a request they are getting late in attempts to harmoniously manage service and so achieve positive perceptions of service quality.

The importance of accounting for others in context extends to our dimension of professionalism. While the notion that customer wants to perform their roles well may be general, it is the Chinese customers' concern with appropriateness that sets this dimension apart. Appropriateness is important to Chinese because it follows Confucian stipulations to avoid harm to others while try to benefit all (Hwang 2011). Managers should appreciate that customers are not just concerned, in the Western sense, with skills and abilities but how to employ these in the specific and social circumstances of the service setting.

The dimension of comfortableness is a further reminder that Chinese relation-ism positions service as an interconnected and balanced phenomenon. For Chinese customers the public stage where encounters take place requires constant scanning and responding to the environment. This leaves individuals open to critical but subtle observation and judgment (Yang 1995). For the Western customer pressure often narrows to overbearing service staff; as a Western senior retail executive remarked to us, "customers don't want the irritating pressure of mosquito service in the store." Managers should understand that Chinese customers' need comfortableness not as a result of the metaphorical mosquito but in a general desire to reduce the investment in social performance so they can feel at ease.

Chinese customers focus on the extent to which they feel the sincerity of the efforts of those serving them over a (Western) orientation on outcomes. This fits Chinese emphasis on people, harmony and co-existence over Western task orientation, efficiency and deadline orientation (Chen 2002). The emphasis on interpersonal dimensions raises the prospect that a service provider, despite a service lacking (Western) reliability, could demonstrate sincere efforts to serve the customer and be rated positively for their service quality. Such insights invite researchers to provide valid managerial insights that resolve such a priori paradoxical ideas (Chen 2002).

A final observation for managers concerns our measures. The majority of WSQ measures employ abstract questions while relating to a specific service provider. This approach does not fit well with the concrete, specific and situated thought

patterns of the Chinese (Nisbett et al. 2001). Our approach, focusing on behaviors, more naturally relates to customers' locus of attention, i.e., observing and considering others behavior and expression. Service employees need to be sensitive to understand the human affection (*ren-qing*) and good at reading the situation and customers' (facial) expression. By tapping into this high context communication patterns (Hall 1992) managers can directly relate to how encounters inform customers' judgments of service quality.

## 8 Limitations and future research

We sought expressions of interpersonal service quality grounded within Chinese culture. Given the complexities of culture, this study is exploratory in nature and has a number of potential limitations. Since Chinese construction of service quality is distinct from Western interpretations, our findings do not fit neatly into a generalizable model (e.g., Kettinger et al. 1995; Meng et al. 2009). It is difficult to envisage a generalizable set of dimensions that apply across Chinese and Western customers and provides enough specificity to have any managerial use. Researchers argue, with increasing authority, that measures should be treated as appropriate only to their nascent culture (Tse and Ho 2009; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Winsted 1997).

Our findings may be sector specific given our sample drew from the restaurant sector. Our findings, though, that show some fit within the emerging CSQ construct moderates this argument. Our qualitative analysis sample of restaurant customers exhibited similar findings to retail sector customers (e.g., the dimensions of *chin-chih* and active service) (Imrie et al. 2002; Stanworth 2009). We believe, though, that further research is useful to completely specify the CSQ construct and understand how it relates to important outcomes in the Chinese customers' mind.

We are concerned that researchers may seek to impose a rigid formulation to application of the dimensions to understanding service encounter quality with Chinese customers. Where Western customers consistently value reliability, regardless of context, this emphasis on a single dimension may not hold for the Chinese customer. During our analysis an interesting, but suggestive, finding reveals customers vary the significance of CSQ dimensions according reference to relational closeness (see Table 3). This potentially means CSQ is best understood as dimensions with varying situated significance in a way that also fits with our finding of CSQ as a first-order construct. There is some empirical and conceptual support that Chinese customers construct situated interpretations so that products hold malleable meanings (Eckhardt and Houston 2008). Chinese customers, drawing on assumptions on relationalism, hold thoughts that are situation centric rather than individuated. *Chin-chieh* may be appreciated when the customer needs service but can be annoying when they want to be left alone (e.g., comfortableness). Respect gives prestige when the customer needs to show their social status but can be annoying when they just want to relax. Researchers can usefully examine how a relational perspective enriches our understanding of the CSQ construct and its operation.

While we remain anchored in how the Western mind constructs and interprets the impacts of service quality it appears as one of the most exhaustively researched issues in service management. Theoretical explanations of service quality constructed coherent to a particular socio-cultural context avoid embedding and retaining the “parochial dinosaurs” of inappropriate narratives in researchers’ explanations (Berry 1989; Boyacigiller and Adler 1991). Researchers engaging in reflexivity become increasingly aware of how to move beyond the deeply embedded Western assumptions to engage with alternative cultural *systems* of interpretation. We believe the CSQ provides a route into new ways of understanding service quality and so breathes life into this apparently exhaustively researched domain.

## Appendix

Items excluded during the analysis:

### *Chin-chieh*

Used the dialects that customers are familiar with  
 Paid extra attention for those who were in need (e.g., the elder, the youth, and the pregnant)  
 Praised customer’s look and dress  
 Used warm greeting (e.g., I haven’t seen you for a long time)

### *Respect*

Asked for permission before providing service  
 Asked for permission before cleaning the table  
 Focused on serving me/us and did not distracted by phone or other service employees

### *Professionalism*

Dressed neat and tidy  
 Clearly expressed and handled my/our questions well  
 Delivered every meal correctly

### *Sense of sincerity*

Gave me/us free samples  
 Admitted their mistakes  
 Provided useful discount package

### *Active service*

Actively filled my cups  
 Paid attention to my table all the time  
 Considerately oriented me/us throughout my meals  
 Served me/us attentively

*Comfortableness*

Did not bother me  
Gave me/us privacy and did not ask irrelevant questions  
Did not keep staring at me  
Pretending he or she knew me/us well

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