

# The Face View of China and Foreign Countries under Cross-cultural Communication\*

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**Abstract**—“MianZi” is something that everyone is pursuing, it is the combination of “Lian” and “Mian”. It refers to the psychological feeling that is obtained from the comments of others on our speech and behavior. “Having face” is the psychological feeling when one person obtains affirmation and praise, and “losing face” is the psychological feeling of suffering criticism or negation. “Lian” and “Mian” are quite different in their meanings. Pure face is beautiful and fascinating. It is just like a ordinary man, even though he looks very average, but when he is with a little decoration, a little powder, he looks charming at once. But in many times, there are always some people who want to win others' approval so that they can win face for themselves, so they do not hesitate to use improper means to achieve their personal goals, such faces are disgusting and rebarbative. The concept of “face” embodies people's values and relates to social morality. It should play an active role in promoting the harmonious development and stability of our society.

**Index Terms**—MianZi, psychological feelings, values, morality

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese view of face is of great significance from ancient times to the present time. The concept of “face” embodies people's values to the world, to life and to everything. In different cultural atmosphere, different understanding and feelings of “face” influence people's behaviors. Just as you can see, on the one hand, the “face” view of western countries is a reflection of western culture and on the other hand, the “face” view of China stands for the characteristics of Chinese culture. From this point, exploring and discussing the different “face” views under different cultures is helpful for us to give full play to the positive role of the “face” view, with which we can use its education function to promote the harmonious development and stability of our society. At the same time, it is helpful for us to study the foreign cultures and promote the cultural exchange and extend mutual contacts and development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW OF FACE VIEW

It can be seen from the dictionary that “Mian Zi” originally means the front of human face, the surface and appearance of the objects. Later it is extended to face, face value and so on. As a result, it is usually regarded as something that is related to fame, reputation, prestige, goodwill, credit, integrity, loyalty, etc. In terms of the two words “Lian” and “Mian”, the history of the latter is much longer than that of the former one. As early as the 4th century BC, the word “Mian” had appeared and represented a symbolic meaning which refers to the relationship between an individual and his or her society. Comparing to this, “Lian” is a more modern word which has no such a long history. But from the sense of medical, it is the faces of human, the front of the head, which is from the forehead to the chin. The “Mian”, contrast to “Lian”, mainly refers to a person's “dignity”, “face”, “good name”, “self-pride” and “esteem”. The earliest allusions that were quoted in the Kangxi dictionary came from the Yuan Dynasty (1227 AD to 1367AD). The word appeared to come into being in northern China and gradually replaced the word “Mian” in a physical sense and gradually gained some symbolic meanings. At the same time, the word “Mian” which is combined with the abstract function word “Zi”, derived various meanings which it did not have before. But even so, “Mian” has more meanings than “Lian” for the reason that everyone of us has no more than one “Lian”, but it is no denying that we have many “Mian”---the good one, the bad one, the real one, fake one, the honest one, the disguising one and the tricky one. To some degree, the view about face significantly reflects the characteristics of Chinese culture. However, face is not limited to China, nor is it only the product of Oriental culture. Originally, it is used by the English community in China, with reference to the continual devices among the Chinese to avoid incurring or inflicting disgrace. The exact phrase appears not to occur in Chinese, but “to lose face”, and “for the sake of his face”, are common. In this way, it is absolutely reasonable that people in Western countries translate “Lian” and “Mian” into “face”. Except for that, there are many other expressions like “countenance” and “visage” which have the same meaning with “face”. As a

\* This paper is supported by USST Humanities and Social Science Foundation 2017, (NO: SK2017ZD05)

consequence, there are many statements about face that are similar to that of in China. Such phrases as “lose face” and “save face” are often used in western countries. For example: She had been trapped beyond any chance of a face-saving lie. This sentence is the perfect one to illustrate the use of face in the West.

As a matter of fact, the concept of “face” is first introduced to the Western countries by Chinese anthropologists, Ms. Hsien Chin Hu (1944). On the basis of this concept, American scholar Erving Goffman (1967) discussed interpersonal relations in detail and provided a lot of data for sociolinguistics research. In his view, “face” is something that one pursues in the process he interacts with people. He makes adjustments to adapt to the communication. So, Goffman thinks such interaction is just like a kind of performance in which everyone shows their images by the appearance, information and behaviors. All of these can represent their ability and convey the message that they deserve respect. Brown and Levinson (1987) made a systematic study on “face”, and put forward the view of “face saving”. Scollon, R and S.W. Scollon (1995) further deepened the face view, and pointed out that face is sometimes full of paradoxes. But in later times, many scholars believed that face has different cultural characteristics in different cultural backgrounds. People in a culture choose strategies of face according to the cultural expectation and requirement.

### III. CHINESE “FACE” THEORY

As is mentioned earlier, the notion of “face” in Chinese culture consists of two parts which are “Lian” and “Mian”, (Mao, 1994) whose definition was also studied by Ms. Hsien Chin Hu with semantic analysis in the first time. She defined “face” as “public recognition of a person's reputation and status achieved through success and ostentation”; and “Lian” as the respect from community for right behaviors and actions of one individual who accords with the social and internal ethical standards. (Ho, 1994)

The Chinese view of face is mainly derived from the spirit of “literati and bureaucrats” in the ancient times, and its main cause lies in “fear” of being “marginalized”, that is, so-called respect. Our country has been influenced by Confucian culture for a long time. From the start of it, Confucian culture has been teaching people to pay great attention to “propriety”, “righteousness”, “honesty” and “shame”, which are the four dimensions of the country, if all the four dimensions have been taken into consideration carefully, then the country will be rich and strong, the people in this country will all behave well and comply with the manners and etiquette. Confucius also held the opinion that “If one does not know the rites, he then has nothing to support himself, as a result, he can not have his own foot stand on the world,” meaning that everyone should act in accordance with the rules of etiquette, otherwise they will lose fame and face. Therefore, expressions of the concept of face which are most frequently used to describe Chinese daily life and communication are as follows: losing face, shameless, thick-skinned, decency, giving face, saving face and so on. Therefore, “face” view in Chinese culture is deeply rooted in its history and traditional culture. Such sentences as “People want faces, trees want skins”, “having no appearance to see old father and people in Jiangdong (the name of a place in Chinese history)” and “slapping one's face until it's swollen in an effort to look imposing” are all the best examples that vividly describe the face psychology of Chinese people. In addition, since ancient times, the concept of rank and superiority in the hierarchical system of China, such as “monarch and subject, father and son, old and young” and many other relationships showing the social status also showed the attitude of Chinese view of face. The way of preserving face carried out by those with higher status or higher rank is to safeguard their authority and positions. In such a hierarchical system, the relationship between people is vertical, which means that it emphasizes that individuals should strictly accord to their position in the hierarchy to regulate their own words and deeds, to the greatest extent from the group or society to which they belong to make sure they can achieve the standards of social ethics.

### IV. WESTERN VIEW OF FACE

Brown and Levinson define face as the personal image that every member of society wants to earn for themselves in the public. (Brown & Levinson 1987:61) By communicating with others, this image can be damaged, lost, maintained, or enhanced, and therefore must be constantly attended to be in interpersonal interaction. In their view, politeness is the various rational behaviors of a Model Person (MP) to satisfy his face wants. A Model Person has two special properties --- rationality and face. And they think face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. It refers to that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. They are in favor of the fact that every social participant has two kinds of face, one is the positive face and the other is the negative face. Positive face is the hope of getting the approval, love, appreciation, praise and respect of others. It is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction .i.e. to the freedom of action and freedom from imposition. And of course, Negative face is opposite to positive face and it refers to an individual's right of freedom of action and his/her need not to be imposed upon by others. In another word, positive face is the positive consistent self-image or “personality” (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by others. Negative face means the people do not want to pose threats to hearers, nor do they want to be posed. Anyone who keep this kind of face view will convey a message that they don't want to be forced by others in any forms and in anytime, their behavior is free from interference and hindrance, and they have the freedom to choose their own actions. (Brown & Levinson, 1987:62.)

## V. DIFFERENCES OF FACE BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

Because of the different cultural backgrounds, the view of face in China and the Western countries also reflects differences between the two sides. In the first place, Chinese take care of face, so they will do many things to “win face”, “struggle for face” and “save face”. Because of the influence of core value which names “harmony between nature and man” in traditional culture and the thought of “benevolence” put forward by Confucius, Chinese people always attach great attention to harmonious interpersonal relations, maintaining of social public order. They put their eyes on the “public face”, that is, in public places, if there is a conflict or collision, in order to make everyone “feel they have face”, Chinese always persuade themselves to cool down and not to quarrel with others face to face as soon as possible to maintain harmony on the scene. And, In daily life, “face struggle” is synonymous with “glory struggle”, “losing face” has the same meaning with “feeling shameful” and “being disgraceful”. From all the statements above, what the conclusion can be got is that the Chinese people's so-called “Lian” has a close relationship with “glory”, “courage”, “people”, “shame”, “manner”, etc. Face contains the meaning of “respect”, “love”, “praise”, “flattering”. It can be seen from this that the Chinese people's respect for face is also reflected in “human society” and “relationships”.

Considering the “human feelings” and “relation”. Chinese people always want to save face for others when dealing with their own relations with them. In many cases, Chinese minimize the benefit but maximize the cost to themselves so that they can keep the relation with others. And given the politeness principle, Chinese are accustomed to minimizing disagreement between self and others but maximizing agreement between each other even if someone is wrong, it should not be pointed out face to face. Even if they have suffered losses from the so-called “related” people or who they call “friends”, they can do nothing but bear all these bad things. This is what the famous Chinese saying goes ---A dumb person eats the bitterest medicine *Coptis chinensis*, he can not tell anybody that how terrible the taste is but feeling bad in his mind. He keeps silent in some matters for fear that others will think they are stingy and make them feel losing face if they speak it out.

Chinese love face, which may also refer to the courage or the backbone of spirit. As Lin Yutang described and analyzed face in 1936, the Chinese face can not only be washed and shaved, but it can also be humiliated, appreciated and contested. Face, som-times seems the most important thing in our life, so, for saving face, it is worthwhile to do everything, even losing all the property and wealth, and nobody thinks it is too much. Therefore, Chinese face has something to do with “integrity” and “dignity”. For example, the story *Do not eat food in handouts* is such a story that describes a person who was so hungry but he refused to accept the food from others because the person who gave him the meal was not polite enough to him, which hurt the hungry person's dignity and made him feel insulted, so this person resolutely did not eat anything, and finally he starved to death. This story conveys the right view of face. There are also many other examples about “good face”. Those people who believe “An honourable death is better than a disgraceful life” and “An upright man prefers death to humiliation” are worthy of admiration. Chinese respect for face, which is also reflected in the attitude toward their vanity. In many places of China, especially some rural and country areas, many people think that when their daughters or sons get married or their families pass away, they hold the opinions that the greater the ceremony of marriage and funeral are, the better they will feel. They believe that doing like this can be a symbol of a “decent” performance and they hold the opinion that their sumptuous meals can show their richness. When treating, Chinese people are always accustomed to serve dishes as many as possible to show their generosity and keep constantly advising the guests eating more. Obviously, there are a lot of dishes already, but Chinese will definitely keep saying, “There is a little to eat, everybody just has a light meal.” All these things are done to let themselves have the chance to not lose face in front of people and get approval from others, and it is much better if they get praise and the envy from others. In the contrast, Westerners usually order only what guests like or what they like when they take an order, and when they finish their meal and ready to leave, they pack up the rest of the food without wasting it. But if Chinese take away the leftovers, they feel shameless and will be regarded as mean.

The Chinese view of face is also reflected in vanity and comparison. Nowadays, many parents in China tend to send their children to study abroad. In their eyes, it seems that sending their children abroad has more “foreign flavour” than at home. But as a matter of fact, many of these children are students that have not been admitted to university in China or have not been admitted to a good university, so they have to spend their own money to study abroad, by which way they can hide from the questioning. There are also some children who are sent abroad because their parents think that their neighbors' children have gone abroad and their families are not worse off than others, so they also send their children abroad to show that they are not poorer than others. But the result of sending children abroad is that they have to save money on food and expenses, otherwise they cannot afford the high fees of school. But what surprises us is that many children who go abroad do not necessarily study hard. Many of them are unable to keep up with the curriculum because of their different living habits, language difficulties and many other reasons, so they have not learned anything at all. What is even worse, some students behave badly and contract all kinds of bad habits during the time they stay abroad. It is common for the Chinese people to swallow insult and humiliation silently in order to preserve face. As the famous Chinese saying goes, “Domestic shame should not be made public”. It describes that some Chinese care about face and even encounter disreputable matters that are harmful to their families (in general, even some disrepute things about the country), sometimes also known as family troubles, such as impiety of their children, husbands' ill-treating to wives, women are raped by bad people, hen-pecked man, and many other things. Rather than speak them out, Chinese will keep their mouths shut for fear of being laughed at. Hence, when Chinese solve family disputes, the most

frequently sentence they say is “You have to swallow all the pain even you break your own teeth”. So, from this point, we can conclude that Chinese view of face is group-oriented, to which individual subordinate. By way of contrast, one feel not difficult that Chinese view of face does not contain the element of “negative face” defined by Brown and Levinson.

Unquestionably, the process of saving one’s face leads to curious results in other countries than China. Because westerners attach much importance to personal awareness and personal needs. So the face view in West countries emphasizes the feeling of satisfaction to freedom and personal desire of individual action. There is little difference in “positive face” between West countries and China, because when they are appreciated by others, it is almost the same between East and the West. However, Westerners attach greater importance to “negative face” than Chinese. In China, it is perfectly normal to give up one’s seats to “the old”, “the young”, “the sick”, “the disabled” and “the pregnant women.” Because all these people are considered to be in need of help, and that the right behaviors are when we meet them, we should offer our hands to them without second thought. For those people. They feel good when they are treated politely and finally they receive the help from others. What impresses us most is that these think it is the kindness of others, and in response to the kindness of others, they will choose to accept it. In Western countries, the behavior of “offering one’s seat to others” does not have the same effect as that of in China, and sometimes it may even cause misunderstanding and unhappiness to others. Because Westerners think that they no longer need help, so others’ offering help means that they regard him as a weak person and it is a behavior of disrespect for him. As a result, most of the time, westerners start by asking “May I help you?” to show respect to each other. Similarly, “negative face” is also reflected in different eating habits. Chinese hospitality urges them to constantly serve food for the guests and persuade them to “eat more”, which in fact violates the Westerners’ right of freedom because they don’t like to be forced. Therefore, they just simply say “Enjoy your food” or “Help yourself” to show respect for each other. Face view is also very different in form of address. In China, it is typical of people to call the elders whose age are same or approximately same with their seniors grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, big brother and sister, even to outsiders who are not related by blood at all. This is in line with the “politeness principle” of Chinese face view. For those whose ranks are higher than themselves, people always look respectful and address each other with official positions, such as “Minister Zhang”, “Chief Li”, “Manager Wang” and so on. On the contrary, calling one’s name directly is considered disrespectful or impolite. But Westerners stress the idea that everyone is equal, with the exception of some special relatives. High officials seldom dictate to their subordinates or act as he pleases without considering the feelings of others, nor do they consider it a “face-saving” behavior to order others to do anything in front of other employees. On the contrary, they believe that mutual respect, equality and friendly cooperation are “face giving” to each other.

#### VI. THE REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES OF “FACE” BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

The different views of face in China and Western countries have their own features based on their respective cultural characteristics. In order to better understand face view, it is necessary to go deep into specific culture to explore the reasons for their differences.

The western culture originated from the ancient Greek culture in the 20th century. Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher of history, once pointed out that the Greek city-states have laid foundation for the consciousness of freedom, of free thought in the West. Therefore, the western culture has been imprinted with democracy and freedom since its birth, especially the humanism in the Renaissance Period, which emphasizes “humanity” and opposes “God”, advocates the liberation of individuality and opposes religious shackles and asceticism. Affirming human nature and human values and demanding the enjoyment of the world lead to the pursuit of individual value in Western countries. The “negative face” in Western face view is formed in this kind of value pursuit.

Chinese culture originated from the Confucian culture two thousand years ago. Confucianism emphasizes “courtesy” and “manners”. In such a cultural system, the individual is a part of society, and has the obligation and responsibility to do his or her duty to make contribution to the construction of harmony in our society and the stability of the community. It is precisely in this relationship that the Chinese people have formed the habit of maintaining the image of the group and standardizing their own behaviors for the sake of “collective face”. Through which way, they try their best to reach the standard of social morality, get collective approval, gain face for themselves.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

The cultural differences between China and the West lead to different connotations of “face”. The face view in China is centered on collectivism, while westerners pay more attention to the “negative face” theory, which is centered on individualism. Both views have their instructive function to our interpersonal communication. As far as I am concerned, Chinese culture can absorb experience and lessons from the western theory of “negative face” so that we can make it correspond to China’s cultural view of “Do as you would be done by”, which can better promote the relationship among people. Apart from this, as Chinese are vulnerable to the influence of vanity and face psychology of “human relationship”, and they are apt to do things against morality and law for the sake of gaining face for the time being. As a result, here come several suggestions: 1. Everyone should clarify the relationship between face and dignity. They have to keep it in mind that dignity is good, it is a valuable quality that cannot be lost. Without dignity, even if we earn face,

it is only false, untrue and meaningless, and people cannot get true spiritual satisfaction from it. Also, do not seek face in the name of dignity. 2. We should have the courage to discipline ourselves and dare to fight against vanity. Vanity is a bad psychological reaction and is a psychological defect of human. Once dominated by vanity, blind striving of face will make one suffer enormous mental and economic pressure, which one cannot actually afford. 3. We can not give up the principle when pursuing face. No matter what we do, we should have our own bottom line, don't do things that are contrary to morality and you can not just save your own face by hurting others or damaging somebody's reputation. 4. Don't ignore the consequences when paying much attention to face. Any purposeful behavior has its corresponding consequences. We should take care of face in appropriate way and never do anything beyond our ability. 5. Always be kind and do somebody a favor when he or she is in need, only in this way can we better keep our face more brilliant and charming.

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