Power, integrity, and mask – An attempt to disentangle the Chinese *face* concept

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Abstract

Using the term *face* to explain interactional phenomena has been important in language pragmatics since Brown and Levinson (1987) adopted Goffman's (1955) concept in their theory of politeness. Haugh (2013:46) argues that face needs to be theorized it in its own right, apart from im/politeness, and that in order to have a better conceptualization of face, it is essential to draw "from various other emic understandings" to provide new and "under-explored analytical opportunities in the study of interpersonal phenomena". This paper identifies and explores three distinctive facets entangled in the Chinese face concept that are not fully apparent in Goffman's face conceptualization nor examined in the research on Chinese face: (1) power/favor/relation face – one's social power and connection, (2) moral/honor face – one's dignity and integrity, and (3) mask/image face – one's façade to impress others. Understanding the complex and multifaceted Chinese emic notion will enrich our knowledge of the face conceptualization and provide more effective analytical tools for explaining social and interpersonal interaction in general.
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1. Introduction

Starting with Goffman's (1955) seminal paper on facework, face "has become seemingly indispensable in the discussion of various aspects of social interactions, particularly politeness" (Haugh, 2009:1). In the last few decades, scholars and researchers in pragmatics and other social fields have tried to use face as a key concept in analyzing social and personal interactional behaviors (Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010:2073) after Brown and Levinson ([1978]1987) used it in their theory of universal politeness. Yet its conceptualization and application in research still remains vague and has been a subject of debate (Haugh, 2009:1; Ting-Toomey, 1994:2). Thus, scholars have advocated reexamining Goffman's face concept (Arundale, 2009:33; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003:1455; Haugh, 2013:46; O'Driscoll, 2011:22) and separating face from im/politeness as a distinct object (Haugh, 2013:46). In order to use face as an effective analytical tool to explain more interactional phenomena and to theorize it in its own right, Haugh (2013:46) calls for researchers to draw "from a wider range of emic conceptualizations of face" so as to provide "relatively under-explored analytical opportunities in the study of interpersonal phenomena".

Examining the emic Chinese face concept, the author believes, could be a good starting point in achieving such a goal due to its recognized influence on Goffman's face and facework (André, 2013:74; Arundale, 2009:38; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003:1462; Haugh, 2012:112; Hinze, 2012:16; Ho, 1976:867; Kádár and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011:8; Kipnis, 1995:148; Qi,

2011:279).[1] The connections between Goffman's theoretical tradition and the Chinese concept of face, Haugh (2012:112) points out, "is readily apparent when one considers the basic collocations involving face in Chinese that underpin much of the latter theorization of im/politeness" because "the major face collocations underpinning early theories of face and politeness all have equivalents with Chinese collocations", including the terms *lose face* and *save face.* However, Goffman's face, just as André (2013:68) claims, is "largely divorced from its historical Chinese roots."

The notion of face is highly salient in Chinese society (Hinze, 2005:171; Qi, 2011:280), and a variety of expressions relating to the concept are used ubiquitously in the Chinese language to explain social and personal behaviors. "Although many different cultures have a notion of face," Yang (1994:140) asserts, "perhaps few of them have as much cultural elaboration on face as the Chinese." In a 2006 online survey, 83.3% of Chinese respondents believed that face was very important in social life and personal interaction (Zhang, 2006:6). That is because, as "the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated" (Lin, 1936:191), face "helps Chinese orchestrate their daily lives, influencing the way they interact with one another, bringing the delicate philosophical nuances to face into the realm of daily existence" (Chang and Holt, 1994:98). That may explain why face was labeled as "'a characteristic' of the Chinese" by Arthur Smith (1894:16), one of a few early westerners who discussed or mentioned it in their writings.[2]

In the past several decades research on Chinese face has brought more understanding to this folk notion. Yet the concept still remains very confusing. That is because, the author argues, many researchers have followed Hu's (1944) moral/social division of Chinese face in their study, and failed to differentiate the conceptually distinct facets of face entangled in this multifaceted notion. Some researchers focus more on interpreting Chinese face by distinguishing between the semantic differences represented by *liǎn* (脸) and *miànzi* (面子),[3] two Chinese lexemes for the English word face. The goal of this study is to disentangle this multifaceted Chinese face concept by identifying and exploring three facets of the concept: (1) power/favor/relation face – one's social power and connection, (2) moral/honor face – one's dignity and integrity, and (3) mask/image face – one's façade to impress others.[4]

After a brief review on the Chinese face research in section 2, the ideological foundation of the Chinese face concept, the Confucian relationships and reputation, are discussed in section 3. Section 4 focuses on the three facets of Chinese face and their distinctive features and different values that are associated with them. Then in section 5, some similarities and differences between the three facets will be identified and examined, including the effect of audience and witness, the collective nature of these facets, and the blurred division in losing different faces. Before the conclusion, in section 6, some contributing factors to the complexity and confusion of this Chinese folk notion will be discussed, such as the two lexemes, *liǎn* and *miànzǐ*, which are semantically different but conceptually exchangeable; using English as a metalanguage; as well as the loose use of face in Chinese face research. It is hoped that the analysis and discussion in this study will help to disentangle this complicated Chinese folk notion and to stimulate more *emic* research on the face concept both of Chinese and of other cultures as well.

2. Brief review of research on Chinese face

The Chinese face concept emerged as a fascinating and intriguing topic both to Chinese and westerners before it became a research topic for academia. "The word 'face'," Smith (1894:16) stated, "does not in China signify simply the front part of the head, but is literally *a compound noun of multitude*, with more meanings than we shall be able to describe, or perhaps to comprehend" (emphasis added). Though face is pervasive in the Chinese language and "face-talk and idioms of face occupy a very conspicuous place" (Cheng, 1986:331) in daily conversation, few Chinese can pinpoint what it is. Lu Xun ([1934]1991:130), a well-known Chinese writer and critic, once said: "[W]hat is this thing called *miànzi* (*face*)? It is fine if you don't think about it because you will get confused when you ponder on it".[5] Lin Yutang (1936:190–191), a famous Chinese writer and translator, describes the abstract Chinese face concept in his book *My Country and My People* in the following paragraph:

"Face cannot be translated or defined. It is like honour and is not honour. It cannot be purchased with money, gives a man or a woman a material pride. It is hollow and is what men fight for and what many women die for. It is invisible and yet by definition exists by being shown to the public. It exists in the ether and yet can be heard, and sounds eminently respectable and solid. It is amenable, *not to reason but to social convention*. It protracts lawsuits, breaks

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[1] Goffman (1955:213) also acknowledged the influence of the Chinese face concept on his face definition. In a footnote, he cited five sources. Except one, which cited an American Indian face concept (Mauss, 1954), the other four (Hu, 1944; Macgowan, 1912; Smith, 1894; Yang, 1945) all discussed Chinese face in their works.

[2] Other westerners include Bard (1905), Macgowan (1912), and Russell (1922).

[3] Other spellings are *lien* and *mien-tzu*, which are from the Wade–Giles system to transliterate Chinese characters with Romanized letters. In this paper *pinyin*, another system of Romanization of Chinese characters, is used.

[4] This study is thus a second-order (researcher's) analysis of a first-order phenomenon, namely the Chinese emic face concept.

[5] "但"面子"究竟是怎么一回事呢?不想还好,一想可就觉得胡涂". All citations from Chinese in this paper are translated into English by the author.