How does face as a system of value-constructs operates through the interplay of *mianzi* and *lian* in Chinese: A corpus-based study

Ling Zhou*, Shao-jie Zhang*

School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Normal University, No. 5268 Renmin Street, Changchun 130024, Jilin, PR China

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore how face as a system of value-constructs operates through the interplay of its two forms *mianzi* and *lian* in the Chinese language and culture, based on the data analysis of V+*mianzi* and V+*lian* collocations drawn from a Chinese oral corpus. The major findings permit three observations. First, face operates as an inseparable whole of *mianzi* and *lian* representing a system of value-constructs which exerts constraints on its representations. *Mianzi* tends to be more positively evaluated aspects of face, while *lian* tends to be more negatively evaluated aspects. Second, *mianzi*, is other-oriented as a social self; it represents the public self-image, capability, dignity, and reputation as the salient components of its internal value-constructs. *Reputation* is a distinguishing component of *mianzi* and public self-image is its most salient component. In contrast, *lian* is self-oriented as a personal self; it represents the public self-image, capability, dignity, and morality as the salient components of its internal value-constructs, and has morality as a distinguishing component. Third, face operates as a dual unity of other-related *mianzi* and self-oriented *lian* which interact with each other to determine face gain and face loss via self- or other-judgments or evaluations of people's behaviors or conducts based on the values assumed in social interaction. In addition, there is a large proportional overlap between the value-constructs of *mianzi* and *lian* which coexist and depend on each other to meet individual, relational, and collective face needs.

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1. Introduction

Face in Chinese is expressed by the two forms *mianzi* and *lian*[1], each of which has its own unique features. This makes face in Chinese too intricate to be explained by Goffman's definition of "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (1967:5) or by Brown & Levinson's redefinition of face as "the public self-image that everyone wants to claim for himself" (1987:61). To respond to the current call for research on culture-specific aspects of face (Culpeper et al., 2010; Haugh, 2012; Matsumoto, 1988; Terkourafi, 2009), we undertake an empirical study of *mianzi* and *lian* to search for an integrated understanding of face in Chinese.

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* Corresponding authors.
  E-mail addresses: vivianzhou80@163.com (L. Zhou), zhangsj10@163.com (S.-j. Zhang).

[1] Christopher Earley (1997) viewed *mianzi* and *lian* as two forms of face. We adopt his view in this article.

Face can be represented implicitly or explicitly in Chinese social interactions. Explicit face is normally represented through conventional expressions, for instance, V+*mianzi* and V+*lian* collocations together with their lexical and syntactical variations. Implicit face, however, emerges in the immediate situation without any linguistic markers. Such conventional expressions provide resources for face needs in social interaction (Zhou and Zhang, 2013). This study will focus on an analysis of explicit face to explore how it operates through the interplay of *mianzi* and *lian* to reflect a system of values in interpersonal communication. Addressing this issue requires investigating how face is represented by *mianzi* and *lian* in discourse, and then determining the face-sensitive factors that underlie use of *mianzi* and *lian*. On the whole, the current study, supported by a corpus-based analysis of V+*mianzi* and V+*lian* collocations, aims to explore the intrinsic nature of *mianzi* and *lian* by focusing on how face as a system of value-constructs operates through the interplay of its two forms from the self-other interactive perspective.

2. Conceptualizations of *mianzi* and *lian* in past studies

The concepts of *mianzi* and *lian* have long been rooted in Chinese culture. *Mianzi* is found as early as the fourth century B.C. in the ancient texts of *Shi Ji* written by a well-known historian Si Maqian. Compared with *mianzi*, *lian* is a more modern term which can be traced back to texts available in the Yuan Dynasty (1277–1367), which provide the earliest references (Hu, 1944). Thus both *mianzi* and *lian* are historically embodied in traditional Chinese culture; they have attracted great interest and attention from Chinese scholars in history[2]. Lin Yutang (1931) was the first Chinese scholar to give an account of the Chinese concept of face in literature, followed by another scholar, Lu Xun (1934). The understanding of *mianzi* in its culture-specific aspects has been based on their studies. According to Lu Xun (1934), *mianzi* is closely interrelated with personal identity and social status. Different identities and statuses demand various aspects of *mianzi* in interpersonal communication. Similarly, in Lin Yutang's account (1936), *mianzi* stands for one of the Chinese principles, together with Fate, and Favor, which are considered to be three unchangeable elements. Therefore, face is historically considered as a typical cultural factor which constrains social interaction in the Chinese socio-cultural context. The Chinese *mianzi* culture, which primarily takes roots in the Chinese feudal family system and the Confucian Ethical Code (Liang, 2011), reflects long-term historical consolidation. The feudal family system was built on the Confucian Ethical Code, a set of behavioral principles or norms based on individual's identity and social status, which was generally known as "*Li*" adopted to govern or regulate people's behaviors in order to establish a good moral order in society and maintain a harmonious relationship between people. During the long time period of the feudal society, an ethics-centered family system gradually came into being. Chinese people held the idea that family members should be strongly tied to their families so that, if one family member gains his/her honor, he/she will bring the honor to all the other family members, and, if one family member damages his/her honor, he/she will damage the honor of all the other family members. Thus, this essential part of the notion of *mianzi* can be historically traced in Chinese culture.

Despite the fact that some of the defining characteristics of *mianzi* have been described, none of these descriptions provides a definition that has been generally accepted. The first definitions of *mianzi* and *lian* appeared in an anthropological study of Hu (1944), who provided the first clear distinction between *mianzi* and *lian*, a distinction, however, that drew criticism from other researchers. *Mianzi*, in Hu's words (1944:45), "stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation", and *lian*, "is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation… and represents the confidence of society in the integrity of the ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community". Some scholars in China favor Hu's differentiation between *mianzi* and *lian* (Jin, 2006; Mao, 1994). For instance, Mao (1994) agrees that *mianzi* is a reputable image, which is ascribed to someone by members of his community, while *lian* is mainly one's moral reputation. Compatibly, Jin (2006:254–257) replaces *mianzi* and *lian* with Social Face and Moral Face based on Hu's account. Thus, Hu's distinction between *mianzi* and *lian* can be regarded as a pioneering endeavor. However, following her study, scholars from China have proposed different conceptualizations of *mianzi* and *lian*. Ho (1976:868) basically accepts Hu's division between *mianzi* and *lian*, but disagrees that *mianzi* is "altogether devoid of moral content", because the two terms can replace each other on some occasions. *Lian*, in his words, is more innate than *mianzi* (Ho, 1976:870), and he seems to define face from an interactive perspective not based on invariant semantic meanings of *mianzi* and *lian*. In his account (1976:883), "face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others…" It is not identical to identity, status or honor, but "ties together a number of separate sociological concepts, such as status, authority, prestige, and standards of behavior." Yu (2001) preserves the distinction between *mianzi* and *lian*, but deploys other terms such as "*mianzi* face" and "*lian* face" based on the role that physical face plays as a part of our bodies in terms of their metonymic and metaphoric use. He suggests a biological and social division of face, which echoes the special contribution that cognitive linguistics makes in bridging the human body and meaning (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, and Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

Some other Chinese scholars conceptualize *mianzi* and *lian* from a psychological, rather than a socio-cultural perspective (Chen, 2006; Cheng, 2006; Zhai, 2004, and Zhai, 2011). In this perspective *mianzi* and *lian* are more interaction-oriented, more

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[2] It is widely known that Arthur Henderson Smith was the first foreigner to inform the Western world about China and Chinese by writing *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), from which, possibly, Lu Xun (1934) was first made aware of the fact that "face" was an important topic catching the foreigner's eye. From then on, the importance of face in Chinese culture was a topic of considerable comment from the 1890s right through the 1930s among "China hands".