



Building mutual affection-based face in conflict mediation: A Chinese relationship management model

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ABSTRACT

Many aspects regarding face and the importance of its management in interpersonal interaction have been explored; however, little is known about the inter-relationship between face, emotion and relational work in communication, especially in regard to conflict. Drawing from Chinese data on interpersonal conflict mediation, this article examines how *qingmian* (mutual affection-based face) is interactionally achieved and (re) established between the participants when it is at risk. A *Qingmian*-Threat Regulation Model (QTR) is developed to analyze the *qingmian*-oriented relationship management in Chinese context. In view of the findings, this study proposes a refinement of Arundale's (1999, 2006, 2010) concept of face that incorporates affection and morality, thus providing new insights into culture-specific face as well as the dynamics of interpersonal relationship maintenance in interaction.

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1. Introduction

In Chinese culture, it is generally accepted that the creation or the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) is heavily based on everyday *renqing* (favor) and *mianzi* (individual face) practices. This article explores how a third-party mediator repairs the two conflicting parties' *qingmian* (mutual affection-based face) and manages to foster harmony in interpersonal conflicts. Using a combined emic-etic approach and Arundale's (1999, 2006, 2010) Face Constituting Theory (FCT), this study focuses on how *qingmian* is interactionally achieved and how it coordinates with *renqing* and *mianzi* practices among insiders during the mediation process.

From the etic or culture-general perspective, face is understood here as “participants' understandings of relational connectedness and separateness conjointly co-constituted in talk/conduct-in-interaction” (Arundale, 2010: 278). From the emic perspective, the culturally important concept of *qingmian* is key to understanding relationship management in Chinese. In this study, *qingmian* is defined as the emotional ties between at least two acquaintances based on long-term *renqing* and *mianzi* practices. The essential distinction between *qingmian* and *mianzi* lies in that the former foregrounds interaction at the intersubjective, affective and relational levels, while the latter means “personal dignity, honor, respect, or simply public identity and personal reputation” (Huang, 2011: 38). *Qingmian* is used as a superordinate term to cover both *renqing* and *mianzi* practices, while reciprocal *mianzi*-saving/giving in front of others can be a means of achieving *qingmian* and strengthening the bonds of affection between two parties.

There has been growing interest in the roles of *renqing* in Chinese relationship management in recent decades. A common thread in these studies is that *renqing* constitutes a core characteristic of *guanxi* practice (Fei, 1947; Hwang, 1987; Chang and

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Holt, 1994a; Yang, 1994; Yan, 1996). For instance, Fei (1947) argues that *renqing* is a reciprocity (*bao*)-based principle whereby people maintain and strengthen their mutual relationship with each other over the long term. Similarly, Hwang (1987) contends that *renqing* is both a principle and a practice for maintaining interpersonal harmony and affiliation within in-group members. *Renqing* and *mianzi* are inseparable within reciprocal relationships. One maintains mutual face by displaying, acknowledging or reciprocating *renqing* (Chang and Holt, 1994a, 1994b; Chang, 2008; Chang, 2013). Disregarding the norm of reciprocity can therefore seriously damage a person's social reputation, leading to a humiliating loss of face (Hwang, 1987). Due to this loss of face, the possibility of any future exchanges within the *guanxi* network is threatened (Standiford and Marshall, 2000).

A number of scholars have noted in passing that relational tensions or conflicts may be caused by *renqing*, such as settling accounts (Fei, 1947), dilemma of *renqing* (Hwang, 1987), mismatch of *renqing* expectations (Zhai, 2007), emotional debts (Chang and Holt, 1994b) and calculating behavior (Fukushima and Haugh, 2014). Fei (1947), for instance, argues that “to settle accounts or to be completely square with somebody means to break off relationships, because if people do not owe something to each other, there will be no need for further contact” (Fei, 1947; translated by Hamilton and Zheng, 1992: 124–125). Hwang (1987) highlights the dilemma of *renqing*: a benefactor has to decide whether to give *renqing*, while the beneficiary has to consider whether to accept or repay *renqing*, and risks of face or feelings being hurt exist between both parties. Fukushima and Haugh (2014) point out that excessive and unwanted *renqing* (i.e., attentiveness) may be regarded as calculating and occasion evaluations of impoliteness by people. These studies lead the author to consider the relational management revolving around *renqing*. Little research has, however, been conducted concerning actual interpersonal disputes associated with the problems of *renqing* and *mianzi*, and even less is known about third-party mediation of *qingmian*-related conflicts. This study will concentrate on the roles of *qingmian* in causing, influencing and resolving conflicts during interpersonal dispute mediation.

Mediation can act as an alternative dispute or conflict resolution (ADR) practice and thus achieve harmonious interpersonal relationships. In this study mediation refers to the intervention of a third party to help two parties resolve their disputes or conflicts and reach a resolution. Although some scholars have investigated mediation discourse in relation to mediator neutrality (Fraser, 2001; Jacobs, 2002; Heisterkamp, 2006; Marinova, 2007; Deng, 2008; Garcia, 2012), mediators' relational management (Morasso, 2011; Chang, 2013; Stokoe and Sikveland, 2016) and disputants' talk (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1997; Wagner, 2009; Stewart and Maxwell, 2010), mediation remains relatively understudied in pragmatics. Moreover, a majority of studies are concerned with Western mediation practice, whereas little is known about the mechanisms of Chinese mediation. Mediation has been a preferred dispute resolution method throughout Chinese history (Wall and Blum, 1991). Cultural factors including *mianzi*, *renqing* and *guanxi* are believed to be most important in influencing Chinese mediation (Chang and Holt, 1994a; Jia, 2004; Law, 2011; Chang, 2008; Deng, 2015), but very few studies have examined their interrelationships in interaction. Chang's (2013) study is an exception, in that she analyzes mediators' face practice vis-à-vis *renqing* in Taiwanese business negotiation context, indicating that face is emotionally invested and interactionally achieved. This study argues that *renqing* practice in a non-business context is different from in a business context, where the primary concern is to maximize self-interest.

Utilizing data from a Chinese documentary series involving interpersonal dispute mediation, this article explores how *renqing* or *mianzi* practices is invoked by mediators to repair the disputants' *qingmian*. This paper proposes a model of *Qingmian*-Threat Regulation (QTR) and a revised notion of face by incorporating affection and moral order. Specifically, three issues are addressed: What kinds of *qingmian*-threats are present in interpersonal disputes? How do mediators regulate the threatened or damaged *qingmian*? What are the implications of *qingmian* in Chinese for face and relational management at the etic level?

2. Methodology

2.1. Data, participants and settings

The data used in this study are drawn from a television conflict mediation program (a documentary series) in China, *Feichang Bangzhu* presented on the Hebei TV channel, and their translated versions are used in the following examples because of space limit. This program takes place in real life settings aiming to promote interpersonal harmony by resolving the conflicts between the participants. These conflicts are mediated by experienced folk mediators who know how to deal with people. A total of 40 conflict mediation episodes involving *renqing* and *mianzi* were sampled for this study. All are successful cases in which the relationships between the disputing parties are restored and improved to some degree. Each mediation session involves a single mediator in order to “reduce the complexity involved in identifying and describing specific mediator behaviors that might otherwise be the result of the interaction between mediators” (Heisterkamp, 2000: 35). Two parties are in an offender-offendee relationship, being acquainted with each other as they are family relatives, friends or neighbors.

Firstly, the triggers of interpersonal conflicts, which are *qingmian*-threatening, are identified. Those interpersonal conflicts caused by unmet *mianzi*-giving and unfulfilled *renqing* (Yan, 1996; Zhai, 2007, 2014) were selected. According to the related notions of *renqing* (Hwang, 1987; Jin, 1988; Chang and Holt, 1994a; Yan, 1996; Zhai, 2007, 2014; Fukushima and Haugh, 2014), unfulfilled *renqing* is further divided into two dimensions; namely, disregarding reciprocity and neglecting attentiveness. These *qingmian*-threatening behaviors may be reflected in the offender's linguistic and non-linguistic cues, such as his emotional reaction via complaints. Complaints are usually accompanied by negative emotions, like self-conscious emotions (e.g., embarrassment, sadness and shame), and other-condemning emotions (e.g., anger, disgust and contempt) (Culpeper, 2011: 62). Secondly, the mediator's intervention processes, which show his regulation of *qingmian*-threats for the purpose of managing the interpersonal relationship between the disputing parties. Soliciting the offender's *renqing* and *mianzi*

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