

Cultural “Face” and Model of Politeness in Intercultural Classroom

Xin Li

Hailiang Education and Research Institute, zhejiang hangzhou, 310000, China

ABSTRACT. When “face” relates to society, it has social meanings and could be complex as well. Face could be maintained and lost in different situations. Through analyzing the main characteristics of face and Chinese face with reference to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness, this paper discussed how face might influence student’s behavior in communication-oriented intercultural classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Face, Mianzi, Lian, Face-threatening acts(ftas), Behaviors, Intercultural classroom

1. Brief introduction about face

1.1 Definition of Face

Face could be a simple word. At a general biological level, face is a part of a person’s head from forehead to chin. When face related to society and have social meanings, it could be complex as well. Face is a concept that is important and meaningful to most people, but one that is hard to define precisely.

In Goffman’s definition, face is a person’s individual consciousness of his or her public image. In order to save or gain this public image, the person has to talk, act and also behave under the expectation by himself, otherwise, he will be “out of face.” Here, public image is established by person him or herself, however, public image could be negotiated. In 1995, Scollon and Scollon illustrated that face is a negotiated public image during the communication and in this communication event, public image is mutually granted by each other (Scollon and Scollon, 1995). In other words, we have the desire for others to evaluate us positively, thus, we act and behave positively. Things cannot always happen as we expect. As the popular phrase “out of face” conveys, we do not receive respect from others that we want. People may criticize us and in the communication event, one’s public image could threatened by other’s public image. Thus, negotiation is important. A person can act in the ways that help him or her to build their own public image, but allow him or her to respect others’ need for their public image.

1.2 Characteristics of Face

According to Goffman and Scollon, we could summarize one of the characteristics of face is self-oriented. People have the desire to establish their sense of worth, dignity and identity. Another characteristic is shown by Goffman. He asserts that a person who is conscious of his or her face is rational and calculated. When an individual has a communication with others, they are likely to seek information about him or herself. They also like to bring in the information about him or her already possessed (Goffman, 1969, P9). That is to say, when people interact with each other, they talk with purpose. When they communicate with others in getting and sending off information, they need some strategies. The third feature of face is interacting. As Brown and Levinson puts, face concepts are cultural beliefs that an individual is self-oriented who interacts with "others as unique and self-contained individuals" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Individuals are more like interactants, on the one hand, they decide what to send, on the other hand, they maintain, define and demonstrate their competence as an interactant.

1.3 Positive and Negative Face

What's more, face could be positive or negative. Positive face involves the desire of an individual in a culture that he or she wants to be desirable to at least someone (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, positive here means a person who is willing to build up a relationship, show closeness to others and desire for approval. Negative face is not that negative. It refers to the desire of every individual be unimpeded by others (ibid). People want to keep distance and have rights to non-distractions.

2. Overview of face in China

2.1 Mianzi(Face) in Chinese History

Mianzi (Mandarin) and lian, which in Chinese Language both refer to face, play a significant role in Chinese daily life. When scholars try to figure out the concept of face in China, they often relate face with Chinese culture. Face in the context of China is not considered as psychological desire, but as societal norms (Gu, 1990).

Back to history, Confucian had illustrated some ideas related to face and explained face several times. In Confucian Analects, the philosopher Tsang said, "I daily examine myself on three points: whether, in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful; whether, in intercourse with friends, I may have been not sincere; whether I may have not mastered and practiced the instructions of my teacher" (Legge, 1893). People were encouraged to examine themselves every day and they need to examine themselves whether they have protected their face or not. Thus, we could see that face in China are interwoven with Chinese culture. In 1994, Ho suggested that in China face is a field concept, that is to say, we cannot

analysis face individually, instead, we need to analysis face in the relationship or relation network. His suggestion of how to analysis Chinese face was echoed by other scholars like Hwang in 2000. He suggests that Chinese face could be regarded as a united concept (Hwang, 2000).

Chang and Ho in 1994 argued that Chinese face rooted in relations, in Chinese we called guanxi. Guanxi is also shared by in-group members and different situations (Chang & Holt, 1994, P101). For example, when someone did bad things, like raped the bank and went to jail, both his parents and his friends were shamed and they both lost face. Ho in 1994 had used one word to describe this phenomenon, that is relationalism.

2.2 Mianzi and Lian

Cheng defines mianzi in terms of human dignity. Mianzi represents “one’s dignity and social respectability” (Cheng, 1986). But it should be mentioned that although mianzi and lian are both interpreted into face in English, there are some slightly different. In 1944, Hu distinguished mianzi and lian. Lian represents the moral values of a person whereas mianzi represents the honor or reputation that emphasize in Chinese society (Hu, 1944). The reputation and honor are often gained from success. In 1977, King and Myers further defined lian as a “moral face” for people and mianzi as a positional and social face (King & Myers, 1977). Gao and Ting-Toomey further explicated lian is often “internalized” whereas mianzi is often “externalized” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In other words, lian refers to a moral bottle line and these moral virtues are the basic requirements to people which could protect one’s public image. Mianzi, however, pays more attention to dignity, decent, honor and reputation. It relates to social position and social respect. Sometimes, lian and mianzi could overlap together and this happened in different situations.

2.3 The Renqing and Guanxi Related to Face(Mianzi)

From the moral sense of Chinese face, we could get a general idea about face in China, but to understand interpersonal communication in China, we need to focus on the “emotional, relational and particularistic” aspect of Chinese society (Yum, 1988). Unlike Indo-European languages, Asian languages have a wide range of expressions involving 'face' terms (Ervin-Tripp et al, 1995). There are two words that are closely related to face in China.

The first word is renqing, in English we can say emotional reciprocity principle in China. In 1987, Hwang claimed that mianzi (face) is on the basis of the amount of renqing that exists in proportion to relationship (Hwang, 1987). For example, when someone does you a favor, which means he or she respects you and is willing to give you mianzi (face), then you own a renqing to this person and you are expected to return renqing to this person in the future. The returning behavior is according to reciprocity principle and if you are not return renqing to that person, he will lose mianzi (face) to you. Mianzi (face) and renqing influence each other. However, the

reciprocity principle cannot always be equal. Hwang had noted that renqing and mianzi are quantifiable in terms of the size and degree (ibid), which means they are affected by many other factors like status, wealth and may also implied hierarchical relationship.

The second word related to face is guanxi (relationship). Goffman has also illustrated guanxi, that to use his term, it produces consequences that impact one's self development in society, or social life. Relationships could influence one's social life and it is the social role that determines one's social behavior. In Goffman's definition, face is self-oriented whereas in Chinese, face is role-oriented. All in all, mianzi (face), renqing (reciprocity principle) and guanxi (relationship) are significantly interwoven together. They can be "borrowed, struggled and added" (Hu, 1994, P61).

2.4 Characteristics of Chinese Face

Thus, we could conclude some of the features of Chinese face. Most importantly, Chinese face is not individual, instead, is a field concept which means one's own action may not affect one's face, but others in the relationship may affect one's face.

Secondly, compared with the face mentioned in part one, Chinese face are full of emotional reciprocity principles and are not rational. When someone gives you mianzi (face), it is expecting for you to return back, otherwise, you will make others lose face. Sometimes you may have no purpose but to follow the rules and principles in society.

Thirdly, Chinese face could be role-oriented. The face itself is not only related to the Chinese traditional culture but also rooted in Chinese relationships. The society is a huge relationship network and everyone is an in-group member. Every individual has their own roles and their roles implied their social status, their relationship with others. When they want to gain, or maintain the face from others, their roles are the basic part in the face.

2.5 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Face

It is noticed that Chinese people place too much emphasis on the face and that could lead to some disadvantages in society. Firstly, it could be a barrier of effective communication. In China, sometimes face could be influenced by social status and wealth, etc. Sometimes one may threaten his own face to protect someone's face, someone who is ranked higher in the society. Take the company for instance, when discussing with the boss for some advice, the employees are likely to keep silent and let the boss talk. They are threatening their own positive face to make sure the boss is the cleverest among them.

This situation could happen in the Chinese classroom as well. Students are trying to protect the teacher's face in the classroom and likely to keep silent in order to pretend they understand.

Secondly, money spent on mianzi (face) could be a huge waste in China. In 1995, Pye conducted a survey on 168 business men. 73% of them said they have social meetings in the restaurants and 68% sent gifts (Pye, 1995 as cited in Spencer-Oatey, Helen, 2009). However, face also have some benefits in our daily life. According to Goffman, its function as a transactional symbol could help us to create social order (Goffman, 1967). Also, face could help Chinese people to constrain themselves. Face have expected moral virtues and once individuals want to keep face, they need to meet the moral virtues lines.

3. Model of politeness

3.1 Brief Introduction to Model of Politeness

Brown and Levinson in their well-known model of politeness proposed the notion of face threatening acts and explained these communication acts like criticism, requests, disagreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987). They claimed that these acts inherently threaten the face needs of the hearer and they named these act face-threatening acts (FTAs). FTAs are not only from speakers to hearer, or hearers to speakers. It could both ways. When speaker ordering, or warning the hearer, hearer's negative face is threatening. When speaker criticizing, or disagreeing the hearer, hearer's positive face could be threatening. In turns, when hearer accepting offer or thanking to speaker, speaker's negative face could be threatening and when hearer apologizing it may threaten speaker's positive face.

3.2 Face Threatening Acts

If possible, everyone wants to keep their face but most communication acts pose a risk to face. Thus, we need to minimize the FTAs in order to keep face. In 1987, Brown and Levinson gave the possible FTA strategies.

Imagining in the classroom, one student has forgotten a pen and wants to get a pen from someone. What can the student do? He can say nothing but searches in the bag, hoping someone notices that he forgot the pen. This act is called not do FTAs and it is the politest act. However, if no one has noticed, then he needs to talk to others. Once he talks to others, this act is called do the FTAs. He can talk to himself like I forgot the pen, and this full of hint act is called off record or he can also talk to classmates and this act is called on record. How he could talk to classmates? He could shout at them like give me a pen and this bald act has doing nothing to reduce the threat to the hearer's face. Or he can do some face saving acts with redress. He can keep distance with others and ask "could you please lend me a pen?" This is negative politeness and if he wants to make hearers have a sense of closeness, he can claim the same background like "dude, lend me a pen, ok?" He can use positive politeness as well. This example also shows how face could influence student's behaviors in the classroom.

4. How face could influence behaviors in classroom

4.1 For Chinese Students

In each culture, both teachers and students have a very strong expectation about what a normal classroom is like (Stubbs, 1983). When Chinese and Western students come into one intercultural classroom, they might behave differently and have some misunderstanding on each other.

The face of Chinese students could influence their relationships with teachers. In China, however, students are supposed to respect teachers and there is a high-power distance between teachers and students. According to Scollon and Scollon, kinship relationships in the face system are an emphasis group of people that descend from the common ancestor. This relationship is hierarchical, like between fathers and sons, the older and the younger, the ruler and the ruled (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). In Chinese philosophy, this hierarchy emphasizes relationships like teacher and student's relationship. As the Chinese saying goes, "once a man acted as your teacher even for one day, He will be like your father forever." Thus, the relationship between teacher and students is a hierarchical relationship and both sides are accepting this power distance. The teacher is regarded as a leader who has more knowledge and experiences at least in the area he or she is teaching. In a Chinese classroom, students never called their teacher by his or her name.

Also, in Chinese classrooms, it is believed that the purpose in the classroom is to learn some knowledge and seek for truth, students will be getting trained to behave correctly and properly. What students should do in the classroom are listen to the teacher and accept what the teacher says.

However, because they were told to respect teachers and listen to the teacher, when they come into an intercultural classroom, this acceptance of power distance is still existing in the teacher and student relationship. When a teacher asks questions, a Chinese student might keep quiet and wait for someone to answer. He tries to protect negative face in the classroom and when he asks questions to teachers, he may think that this act will threaten teacher's face. Also, he is likely to threaten his own face to protect teacher's face. When teacher tells some knowledge, he prefers to accept it and keeps it in mind without critical thinking or tries to discuss with teacher. In other words, he tries to avoid to be smart than teacher by threaten his own positive face.

Face could also influence relationships with other students in the classroom. In a discussion, for example, Chinese students are likely to keep quiet and to be a good listener instead of a good speaker. When they have disagreements in the discussion, they keep it in mind and might discuss it after class because they want to keep a kind of harmony in the classroom. When they have communication with peers, they could be more active because they want to have a good impression with others. They are more likely to work in groups and co-operate with others.

Face could influence the classroom performance of Chinese students as well. A Chinese student also wants to maintain their face in the classroom and this motivation

makes him want to receive some positive feedback. As we mentioned before, Chinese students are likely to keep quiet in the classroom and seldom speak out and ask questions in the classroom. However, once they want to have positive feedback from others, they will show his or her kindness in the classroom, which is also a part of Chinese face. Thus, in the classroom, a Chinese student shows much respect to teachers, like thanks for teacher's teaching and not interrupting the teacher's speech. What's more, a Chinese student could keep good relationships with other students. As for the performance in the classroom, they seldom ask questions and come up with new ideas to discuss with teachers.

4.2 For Western Students

The face of western students could also influence the relationship between teachers and the power distance are relatively low compared with Chinese students. In a Western classroom, the teacher and students regard themselves as members of the same group and both teacher and students could enjoy the same status in the group.

Zhao, who has discussed intercultural classroom discourse, suggested that western students have the freedom of participating in the classroom. They could participate in the discussion of the hypotheses before they find out the truth (Zhao, 2007). What's more, students usually called the teacher by his or her first name. Because the relationship is relaxed between teacher and students, students could interrupt the teacher in the classroom and are willing to establish a close relationship with teachers. They are more willing to show their positive face, which means they are trying to challenge the teacher in the classroom and try to keep a close relationship with the teacher.

When a western student has discussion and communication with classmates, they are likely to show their negative face, that is to claim their rights and the desire to express their own ideas without resistance. Also, when other students have compliments to them, they usually accept it. In a classroom discussion, for example, western students are more likely to express their idea and to be a good speaker instead of a listener. When they have disagreement in the discussion, they immediately point out and have another discussion with that problem because they want to seek the truth and have competition with others.

Face could also influence western student's classroom performance. A western student is likely to speak out in the classroom and actively participate in the classroom activities like discussion. When he or she has some problems or questions, he or she will immediately ask the teacher. They are trying to express their own public image and get positive feedback from both teachers and other students. Once they have challenged the authority of the teacher, the teacher's positive face could be under threat. Thus, in the classroom, a western student could show less respect to teachers and regard them as members of the same group. They interrupt the teacher during the speech, ask questions more often and have discussion with the teacher during the class. For the classmates, they prefer to compete with them and show their negative face.

Unlike Chinese students to keep harmony and keep silence in the classroom to protect the teacher's face, western students are more likely to show their own face and may threaten the teacher's positive face and other student's face. As a group member, they also allow themselves to respect others' need for positive image in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

Face is important in our daily life and it can be maintained and lost in different situations. Many scholars in the area have given the definition of face. Face also has some characteristics like self-oriented, individual, rational and interacting. However, Chinese face are quite different from the face mentioned above. Chinese face (mianzi) is a concept of group and mianzi refers more to the dignity and honor of one person. Face in China bring some advantages like keeping social order and also bring some disadvantages like wasting money and interrupting effective communications.

When we have communication, our face may be under the threat. If possible, everyone wants to keep their face but most communication acts pose a risk to face.

More Situations in Intercultural Classroom.

Chinese students are behaving much more differently compared with western students. Their behaviors are influenced by their face. Because the data are relatively old in China, more research of interpersonal communication in contemporary China is needed.

In further research, maybe some new changes could have happened in China. Also, there are many factors that could influence a student's behaviors in the classroom and face is only one of them. The research results give Chinese students a good explanation of classroom performance and maybe they could use some of the strategies to get better performance and new relationships in the communication-oriented intercultural classroom.

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