

# Face Concept of China and the West and Cross Cultural Communication

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**Abstract:** Cross cultural communication is the communication that occurs between people from different cultural backgrounds, and cross-cultural communication ability has become a fundamental survival skill for people. Face culture is a common phenomenon in Chinese and Western cultures, and it is also a specific reflection of specific cultural values in language under the background of cultural diversity. As a complex social psychology, it plays an important role that cannot be ignored in cross-cultural communication. With the rapid development of economic globalization, communication between countries continues to deepen, and cross-cultural communication also becomes frequent. In order to smoothly carry out cross-cultural communication and achieve the goal of harmonious communication, appropriate strategies are particularly important. This article is based on the face theory and proposes cross-cultural communication strategies guided by the face view of China and the West: emphasizing historical and cultural differences, emphasizing personality and thinking differences, and strengthening the cultivation of cultural empathy ability.

**Keywords:** Face Concept; Cross Cultural Communication; Face Theory; Cultural Difference

## 1. Introduction

As a part of the essence of the traditional Confucian culture, "face" not only has its rich connotation penetrated into all levels of social life in China since ancient times, but also reflects the social psychology with deep images in Chinese culture. Mr. Lu Xun pointed out in his article 'Speak of Face' that 'Face is the guiding principle of the Chinese spirit'. Famous modern scholar Mr. Lin Yutang once pointed out in "The Chinese" that face is "abstract and unpredictable, but it is the most delicate standard for Chinese people to regulate social interaction". Ms. Hu Xianjin, an early anthropologist studying in the United States, pointed out in her book "On the Concept of Face in China" that "face represents a reputation that is widely valued in China, rising step by step in the course of life. The reputation gained through success and boasting is also the reputation accumulated through personal efforts or the ability to operate, which is called reputation". In the eyes of Westerners, the concept of face emphasizes a personal centeredness, which emphasizes the independent development of individuals and promotes the achievement of personal development. Famous American sociologist Goffman proposed the famous theory of face behavior, which comprehensively discusses the concept of "face", that is, face is a ritualized social interaction behavior [1,2]. In other words, the interactive behavior between social individuals needs to rely on certain norms to operate normally. Face represents individual behavior that conforms to specific social norms, as well as the social support that individuals receive through their understanding and application of the concept of face.

Face culture is a common phenomenon in Chinese and Western cultures, and it is also a specific reflection of specific cultural values in language under the background of cultural diversity. As a complex social psychology, it plays an important role that cannot be ignored in cross-cultural communication. Chinese people equate "face" with personal dignity, believing that face is recognition and respect for oneself, and we must not lose face in any way. China is a society where human relationships are quite prevalent. Only when you give others face can others give you face. Therefore, the concept of face in Chinese people is like an invisible "face", and "face" is "face". In Western countries, face and politeness are linked together. American anthropologists Brown and Levinson define "face" as "a personal image that every member of society wants to earn for themselves in the public. The concept of face is an important component of cultural differences between China and the West [3,4]. With the rapid development of economic globalization, communication between countries

continues to deepen, and cross-cultural communication also becomes frequent. Analyzing the differences in face concepts between China and the West is very important for improving cross-cultural communication skills.

## **2. Face Theory**

American sociologist Goffman proposed the issue of "face" from a sociological perspective, believing that face is the positive social value that people earn for themselves in social interactions, and the self-image that individuals express according to the standards of social approval. Based on this, British anthropologists P. Brown and S. Levinson further studied the issue of "face" and concluded that face is "a personal image that every member of society intends to earn for themselves in the public". Through communication with others, this image can be damaged, maintained, or enhanced. Face has characteristics that span different cultures and is universal.

Brown and Levinson set that people participating in social communication activities are "typical people", who are "rational people with a need for face", who hope to gain face in social communication and have normal communication skills. The face of "typical people" is the "personal image" presented in social communication. Brown and Levinson believe that every typical person has two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire of each member of society to receive praise and affirmation from others for their wishes, while negative face refers to the individual's desire to have their behavior free from interference or obstruction, enjoy autonomy and freedom, and not want to be imposed. In social communication, people often lose face due to an action, sentence, etc. Therefore, in social communication, we should respect each other's positive face while also taking care of negative face, so as not to make both parties feel embarrassed. This is the face preservation theory established by Brown and Levinson based on Western culture.

Brown and Levinson believe that every conversation is a face damaging behavior, where both the positive and negative faces of the speaker are threatened. The damage may be to the face of both the speaker and the recipient; It can be either a positive face or a negative face. Brown and Levinson classify face threatening behavior into four categories: language behaviors that lead to a loss of positive face for the listener, such as opposition, argument, criticism, contempt, mockery, complaint, rebuke, insult, suspicion, etc; Behaviors that cause negative face damage to the listener, such as commands, warnings, reminders, requests, and threats to express strong personal opinions; Behaviors that cause the speaker's positive face to be damaged, such as apologizing, thanking, accepting compliments, etc; Behaviors that cause negative face damage to the speaker, including expressing gratitude, accepting proposals, and giving promises.

## **3. Cross cultural communication**

Cross cultural communication refers to oral communication conducted by communicators from different cultural backgrounds using the same language in a specific communication scenario, which includes three meanings [5]:

### ***3.1 Both parties in communication must come from different cultural backgrounds***

Cultural background differences are a broad concept that refers not only to differences between different cultural circles, but also to differences between subcultures within the same cultural circle. Based on the analysis of current cross-cultural communication practices, communication errors caused by cultural background differences are most likely to cause conflicts among Chinese people in their interactions with people from European and American countries. Although there are cultural differences in China's interactions with countries in the Asian region, including Japan, South Korea, and some Southeast Asian countries, they usually do not create significant obstacles because China and these countries belong to the Eastern cultural circle, and there are many similarities in cultural orientation and communication norms between them.

### ***3.2 Both parties in communication must use the same language for communication***

If one party uses one language and the other party uses another language, communication cannot proceed. Since both parties in communication come from different cultural backgrounds and use the same language, the language used for communication may be the mother tongue for one party and the

second language for the other party, but there is also a situation where both parties in communication are in the second language. For example, if Chinese people communicate with Japan, they cannot speak Japanese, and Japanese people cannot speak Chinese. However, if both parties are familiar with English, they will choose to communicate in English.

### ***3.3 Both parties in communication focus on real-time oral communication***

There are various ways of cross-cultural communication, which can be verbal communication or nonverbal communication, including goods, pictorials, physical objects, images, and performances to other materialized forms of symbols; It can be on-site two-way communication or one-way communication through media, including television, radio, newspapers, and advertisements; It can be oral communication or written communication, including letters and official documents. From the perspective of foreign language teaching, cross-cultural communication mainly refers to real-time oral communication, that is, face-to-face conversations between two parties.

## **4. The problems faced in cross-cultural communication**

Cross cultural communication faces many new problems [6]: firstly, cultural cognitive stereotypes. Due to the inherent ideology, cultural background, and cognitive environment of different ethnic or national populations in different cultural backgrounds, they have formed an inherent understanding and perspective on the civilization and culture of other countries, which affects cross-cultural communication. The second is the cultural barrier. Affected by the specific natural environment of different countries and ethnic groups, as well as unique political systems, legal systems, religious beliefs, ideologies, customs, and cultural traditions, people sometimes use their own culture as a standard and reference to judge other cultural circles, causing resistance to understanding and identification. The third is the solidification of cultural transmission methods. Currently, cultural products still need to further meet the cultural information needs of enhancing international discourse power. Fourthly, the mechanism for cultural exchange and cooperation needs to be improved. From a domestic perspective, cultural exchange and cooperation mechanisms in various regions need to be improved, and encouraging policies and measures for folk cultural exchange need to be strengthened; From a foreign perspective, there are significant differences in cultural foundations among different countries, which to some extent affects the development of cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation

## **5. Cross cultural Communication Strategies Guided by the Face Concept in China and the West**

The concept of face in Chinese and Western cultures has different connotations due to their different cultures. In interpersonal communication, the concept of face is often expressed through verbal forms such as addressing each other, expressing gratitude, disagreeing, and receiving praise. In cross-cultural communication, neglecting the use of face preserving strategies may lead to conflicts or contradictions. In order to smoothly carry out cross-cultural communication and achieve the goal of harmonious communication, appropriate strategies are particularly important.

### ***5.1 Pay attention to historical and cultural differences***

The long history of China's agricultural society has emphasized collective cooperation and interdependence among individuals. The values born in this historical context are the values of collectivism, emphasizing the function and strength of the collective, emphasizing the sociality of humans, the unity of humans and society, and the individual being subject to the collective. At the same time, the Confucian ethical ideology that emerged under the cultural conditions of agricultural society also emphasizes harmony and unity, as well as the unity of individuals, collectives, and society[7]. Therefore, the face of Chinese people is based on social group awareness, emphasizing recognition of their social status and reputation, as well as recognition of their needs by society. The history of Western countries is a history of ethnic migration. In the process of continuous migration and exploration, different ethnic groups have merged, blood relationships have become increasingly distant, and the manifestation of self-worth between people has become increasingly evident. In this historical context, individualistic values that highlight and emphasize oneself emerged. The formation of modern Western capitalist private economy further emphasized individualism and self-awareness. Therefore, the "face" of Westerners emphasizes self satisfaction and respect for personal wishes, rights, and privacy, which is the defense of "face".

### ***5.2 Pay attention to differences in personality and thinking***

Compared to Westerners, Chinese people have a more introverted personality, without the publicity and directness of Westerners. When their own interests are threatened, they always do not speak out directly, but adopt a humble approach. It is better to sacrifice one's own interests than to allow others to be praised and satisfied, in order to show one's politeness and comity, in exchange for being recognized by the group as a "face". Westerners have an extroverted personality, and they will directly fight for their rights, so that their rights are not affected, thus defending their "negative face". Chinese people's thinking belongs to the "circular" type of thinking, and people are accustomed to pursuing harmony and dialectics from the whole to the part. Their thinking is characterized by generalization and ambiguity, and more emphasis is placed on "etiquette". When there is a conflict between the cooperative principle and the politeness principle in verbal communication, the politeness principle will be chosen to try not to harm the other party's face [8]. Westerners belong to the "linear" mindset, accustomed to moving from parts to the whole, emphasizing logical analysis, and being good at solving specific problems better. When there is a conflict between the principle of cooperation and the principle of politeness, they will choose the principle of cooperation and convey sufficient information to the other party in the best way, so that their ideas can be respected by others, in order to save their "positive face".

### ***5.3 Strengthen the cultivation of cultural empathy ability***

Cultural empathy refers to the psychological experience, emotional displacement, and cognitive transformation that the communicative subject undergoes in cross-cultural communication to ensure smooth communication between different cultures, that is, consciously transcending the psychological constraints of the national language and culture, and standing in another cultural mode for thinking. Due to the existence of different cultures and ethnicities between different countries and regions, it is necessary to think from different ways of thinking about ethnic cultures. In the process of cultivating cross-cultural communication skills, communicators find a fit between different cultures, integrate multiple cultures in the context of globalization, and conduct cultural analysis from multiple perspectives in order to truly adapt to the development of the times[9]. Cultural empathy is a subjective consciousness, and only by consciously learning and understanding culture from the perspective of subjective consciousness can communicators free themselves from the constraints of local culture at both the psychological and emotional levels, thereby achieving the goal of harmonious coexistence with people in different cultural backgrounds.

## **6. Conclusions**

Cross cultural communication is a type of communication behavior, which can be interpersonal communication or communication between individuals and groups in terms of types of communication. The continuous development of economic globalization and information networking has made globalization an irreversible trend. People from different regions and cultural backgrounds are increasingly forming a stance of survival as world citizens, and cross-cultural communication ability has become a basic survival skill for people. Cross cultural communication is the communication that occurs between people from different cultural backgrounds, and close cross-cultural communication is an important feature of today's world. The "face" culture, as a common component of Chinese and Western culture, has specific differences due to the different cultural backgrounds between the two. Overall, the Western "face" culture that emphasizes the maintenance of negative face and the Chinese "face" culture that emphasizes the maintenance of positive face have distinct characteristics, which are important factors affecting the normal cross-cultural communication between China and the West. Different cultural backgrounds lead to certain differences in people's lifestyles, value orientations, and ways of thinking, which to some extent hinder the normal progress of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, in order to minimize cultural conflicts and communication barriers caused by differences in "face saving" cultures between China and the West, appropriate "face saving" cultural strategies should be adopted to ensure the normal progress of cross-cultural communication.

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