



# Discussion on Intercultural Communication from the Differences between Chinese and Western Concepts of Face

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## Abstract

To encourage people to intentionally take face culture and country variations into consideration in intercultural communication, this article introduces the distinctions regarding face issues in China and western countries, as well as the causes behind them. Additionally, it will offer some recommendations for efficient cross-cultural communication in terms of face-related problems.

## Subject Areas

Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics

## Keywords

Intercultural Communication, Face, Facework Strategies, Differences among Cultures

## 1. Introduction

We are all social beings who cannot live isolated and we cannot live a life without continuous interaction with people around us in which the appropriate way of interaction is of paramount importance. Speaking of this, we cannot ignore an issue concerning to face. Face refers to a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him. It is a vulnerable identity-based resource because it can be enhanced or threatened in any uncertain social situation. Facework refers to a set of communicative behaviors that people use to regulate their social dignity and to support or challenge others' social dignity. Face and facework deal with interpersonal self-worth difficulties and issues with other people's identities (Ting-Toomey, 1998) [1]. It may be argued that

every single person in the world is affected by the face issue because it is connected to one's dignity, honor, and social standing. Even though intercultural communication is a universal phenomenon, there are still significant cultural distinctions, hence it is important to take these into account to have effective and successful intercultural communication.

## 2. Literature Review

Bazarova *et al.* (2013) [2] seek to investigate how cultural differences in communication styles may affect expertise recognition and influence in face-to-face (FtF) versus text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC). Kádár *et al.* (2013) [3] examine manifestations of verbal aggression in an intergroup context between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese on computer-mediated communication (CMC) discussion boards. By employing the techniques of presentation, analysis, discussion, comparison and contrast between Chinese culture and western culture in the teaching content, the learners can obtain the knowledge of both cultures, expand their cultural awareness, increase their tolerance of the existence of difference, understand the new and different cultural patterns and develop a perspective of cross-cultural awareness (Ran, 2016) [4]. Huang *et al.* (2017) [5] then review the ancient origins in Eastern religious and philosophical thinking concluding with an account of the development of the term in the East until recent times. Huang *et al.* (2017) [5] discuss next, when these different arenas of use and development interact, understandings become contested and issues of privilege vis-à-vis knowledge sources can be seen. Western teachers working in China often experience cultural conflicts arising from, for instance, the ways that Chinese students perceive face and express criticism. To better understand these face-concerned conflicts, Lv (2018) [6] explore the role and significance of email for a group of Chinese students to communicate pedagogical criticism with their western teacher as part of an undergraduate program in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The research method of semi-structured in-depth interview is used to interview 23 Chinese people from one Chinese enterprise in Saudi Arabia, who have worked there for at least one year (Zhao, 2019) [7]. Miao (2020) [8] take the question of how toothers' face into consideration in intercultural communication. The Face Negotiation Theory that was initiated by Ting-Toomey explains that there are various approaches to resolving intercultural conflicts that exist (Syarizka *et al.*, 2021) [9]. Other influential work includes Gertsen *et al.* (2012) [10], Zhang *et al.* (2019) [11].

## 3. Face Culture

### 3.1. Face Culture in China

In China, face culture can be easily understood, but it is difficult to give a clear and definite definition to it due to its abstractness. In recent years, a widely accepted definition of the face is from Mr. Hu Xianjin, an anthropologist who has made a trip to America. He thinks that face represents a kind of reputation or

image which is of great importance to Chinese people, which requires one's painstaking effort to establish and maintain, and it is accumulated from all the compliments and success received in one's life. People should depend on the social context to establish this kind of reputation (Hu, 1988) [12]. Anyway, it is a symbol of the degree to which the value of a person is recognized in his society and it can be satisfied only when his value and demand are recognized and accepted. Face can be translated into "mian zi" or "lian" in China, but there are some distinctions between them. When we refer to someone as losing their "lian", which is a moral concept, we are referring to them as acting in a way that not only violates social norms but also denigrates the group to which they belong. However, "mian zi" is primarily concerned with one's dignity or shame. Without the conscious effort to preserve and safeguard each other's faces, no good communication can be accomplished.

### 3.2. Face Culture in Western Countries

In western countries, studies on face and facework are a lot. Goffman proposed that life is a stage on which every person wears a mask, which changes from condition to condition. People will use facework to maintain the face established in a social context. One feels good when he protects his face and feels shamed when he loses face (Goffman, 1967) [13]. Brown and Levinson proposed the positive face and negative face in which the former refers to a desire to be recognized, praised, and appreciated while the latter refers to a desire not to be intervened in his own business (Brown and Levinson, 1978) [14]. Ting-Toomey proposed the face negotiation theory based on Brown and Levinson, she holds that various elements such as individualism-collectivism, power distance, and so on influence the use of various facework behaviors in intergroup and interpersonal encounters (Ting-Toomey, 1998) [1]. To better understand the face theory, there are some concepts to be explained.

#### 1) Individualism and collectivism

The two opposing value orientations of individualism and collectivism in each culture can be used to explain why each culture has a different face concern. Individualism is the propensity to place more weight on one's "I-identity" than their "We-identity", as well as their values over those of their community. On the other hand, collectivism tends to prioritize the interests of the entire team over individual feelings. Personal interests must yield to collective goals, and if necessary, individual preferences and feelings can be sacrificed to further the group's interests. The reputation of an individual is intimately related to the organization or community to which he belongs.

#### 2) Power distance

Power distance is the degree to which less powerful members of institutions acknowledge that power is distributed unfairly, according to Hofstede (1991) [15]. Power is the degree of control and obedience between two or more interactants when they are settling their disagreements. People from big power dis-

tance cultures frequently accept unequal power distribution and a power hierarchy, whereas those from small power distance cultures strive for equality of status, rights, and power distribution. People with high prestige and great power typically treat their appearance as their authority; therefore, if their appearance is publicly threatened, their authority is also at stake. Furthermore, when high-status individual embarrasses themselves in front of a large audience, like at an international conference, it reflects poorly on the society or nation to which they belong. The unequal allocation of power is normal to low-status individuals in wide power distances, and they accept the varied treatment of their faces as given. They believe that respecting their boss or anyone else with a greater rank than they do is both important and natural. A person of higher status is typically equal to a person of relatively low status in terms of facework in a small power distance country, on the other hand. The one that has a relatively low status will defend their face in a conflict situation without showing so-called reverence to his superordinate as long as they have a point.

### 3) Facework strategy

Since face is an indispensable part of a person's life, we should consciously mind the face issue to ensure that the communication can go on smoothly without the potential danger of interruption due to the face loss of either side. Therefore, we need some strategies to maintain and save face on both sides.

Preventive facework strategies and restorative facework strategies are two typical facework strategies in conflict situations. Preventive strategies aim to prevent the potential acts that may impair one's image while restorative strategies try to make up for the actions or expressions that have threatened one's face. Preventive strategies consist of avoiding, ignoring and obliging, and so on, which is likely to take action when someone realizes the conflict is brewing before the person he is talking to expresses his displeasure directly. Restorative strategies try to reestablish the lost face or show some tolerance to the person to give room for retrieving his face. Besides, the two strategies can use either situational accounts or dispositional accounts in which the former tends to explain the conflict by referring to external elements such as the traffic jam, the malfunctioning clock, the bad weather, etc. while the latter tend to use internal reasons to blame themselves such as lack of ability, lack of responsibility and so on. Furthermore, different facework strategies may bring about different conflict-management styles. Generally speaking, the avoiding and compromising style belongs to the preventive strategy, which tends to protect others' faces in the process and avoid the expressions and behaviors that may impair the face of others to maintain the relationship. However, confronting and dominating style belongs to the latter one, which tends to find a solution to make up for the face-loss incidents, such as explanation with situational accounts.

These concepts talked above are related to each other, cultures of collectivist orientation often have a large power distance and tend to use preventive facework strategies in conflict situations. On the contrary, cultures of individualism orientation often have a small power distance and tend to use restorative face-

work strategy to alleviate conflicts. There is a profound historical and cultural differences that can make explanations for them. The more we understand the cause of the differences, the more inclusive we will be. Differences here we especially refer to those between China and other western countries.

### 3.3. Reasons for the Differences Talked Above between China and Western Countries

China is a typical collectivism-oriented culture and large power distance country and there are profound historical reasons. Firstly, China has a profound Confucian culture that attaches great importance to the traditional virtue of respect, courtesy, and decency, which is a norm advocating the differentiated superiority and inferiority and hierarchical order, which is also the reason for the existence of large power distance. The way people call others and the family members of others and the way they call themselves and their family members show that the Chinese have the awareness of attending to other people's faces in ancient times. They usually adopt a self-deprecating tone to give a face to others. For example, they use “令” (ling your) as a prefix when speaking of their family members to express their respect for them and thus give a face to the person he is talking to. What is more, they use a self-deprecating prefix to deprecate themselves to give a face to their interlocutors. Secondly, the awareness of collectivism originated from the self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy in which generations of one family were confined to the land they live on and isolated from the outside due to the policy of physiocracy and restriction of business. As a consequence, family collectivism came into being which gives priority to the interest of the team and individuals should first consider the group rather than their feelings. They should depend on each other and stick together to make the best use of their strength and thus accomplish an optimal effect. Under this kind of historical background, collectivism value orientation has long been a tradition in which people are supposed to maintain the face of others while maintaining their face.

Western countries, however, mostly belong to the individual value orientation, which is the reason for the formation of their face culture. In early times, people lived a nomadic life with frequent long-distance migration. Unlike people of ancient times in China who lived together and depended on each other, they did not develop an interdependent neighborhood relation and blood relation and therefore they have low group consciousness. Besides, during the Renaissance from 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a kind of Humanism arose in which human thoughts, human dignity, and human rights were valued, and discrimination and prejudice were criticized. Under the influence of Humanism, people realized that they should defend their rights and care more about themselves rather than others. As a result of it, they are not likely to sacrifice their face to protect others' faces. What is more, when they enter into an industrialized society, people migrate from here to there due to job changes or living environment and do not have a long and stable relationship with others. Under this condition, they do not

need to pay too much attention to utilizing face to negotiate a relationship with neighbors and they put more emphasis on their freedom of themselves to behave, speak and do everything they want as long as they do not break the laws. In this way, the wish, rights, and freedom of individuals can be fully recognized. Besides, the spirit of contract in western culture is another reason for the formation of individualism value orientation. There are a lot of factors that brought about this kind of spirit, among which the ancient Greek culture, Christian culture, and commercial development in modern times played a significant role. Aristotle, an ancient Greece philosopher, whose moral philosophy contains rich contract thought and proposed the principle of giving and take in his description of fairness and justice, which is the prototype of contract thought. Based on this implication, people continue to explore the principle of contract based on fairness, for instance, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French thinker Rousseau's famous work "*The Social Contract*", which exerts a big influence on people, and people tend to do things according to the contract thought, featuring fairness, justice, and freedom, which is also the reason for the formation of small power distance. Everyone is endowed with equal and unalienable rights since birth and they should receive equable rights and rewards based on their performances. When involved in a conflict, people would like to turn to laws and norms to defend themselves rather than make a compromise for the sake of others' faces.

#### 4. Intercultural Communication in Face-Associated Issues

As we can know, people from different cultures may take different attitudes toward face-associated issues in which apologies, disagreements, refusals, and suggestions may involve. It should be noted that the methods taken by people to deal with them vary from person to person and from culture to culture. Therefore, we should first have some knowledge about the tendency of the person whom we are going to communicate with and take according to actions to achieve better communicative goals and avoid unnecessary conflicts due to misunderstanding and cultural differences. We are supposed to be mindful in the whole communicative process about whether the way we express our intention or feel is appropriate, and whether their face has been impaired in some way or another by attending to their timely feedback and considering cultural differences when we feel offended. Besides, we should try to be trustworthy and trust others in the whole communication process, which means we need to trust the person we are going to talk with to express something with good intentions, even in a seemingly improper way. This kind of trust originated from our understanding and tolerance of cultural differences. Being trustworthy means we should try to be a person whose words are regarded as reliable by doing what we have said and saying what we believe is right, which is also an important way to build our face in front of our interlocutors from the outset. What's more, we should consciously apply the knowledge related to face and facework to intercultural communication situations to achieve a better effect.

### 4.1. Apologies

An apology is one of the ways to maintain the face of others in conflicts and it belongs to a kind of restorative strategy, which we have discussed above. In our daily social life, an apology is a very common expression for inappropriate behaviors or words. It may be used when someone interrupts another person when he is speaking or doing something, when someone breaks the expectations of others and on any occasion that someone feels he has done something wrong or improper, and when he brings unnecessary trouble to others. Naturally, people from different cultural contexts and cultural backgrounds have different understandings and different expression strategies. Cultural differences can lead to different options of apology strategies. It is so important in that the appropriateness of the apology is closely related to the success of the communication because when the apology is needed means the face of someone is threatened or at stake, which is a symbol of their status or reputation and naturally a constant pursuit in the social life, so the apology represents face-saving behavior and the appropriateness of the expression for an apology is associated with the success or failure of the face-saving behavior. Generally speaking, the Chinese tend to use such apology strategies as explanatory apologies and compensatory apologies more than western people. For example, when a father does not keep his promise to take his child to the playground, he will say: "I am sorry that I don't keep my words because I have been so busy these days and I will buy you a big toy to make it up for you, is that ok?" or when the boss said something that is not proper to his employee, he may say: "I did not mean it yesterday, and what I have said was out of my concern for you, anyway, I am sure you can do a better job in the future" which is also a symbol of the power distance issues. In a large power distance culture like China, the superordinate seldom make a direct apology for their improper behaviors and is more likely to use their power to justify their improper behaviors at the same time the employees will not offend their boss in a public way and do not expect a direct apology from their boss for the sake of the face of their boss or else their jobs may be at stake. However, when there are employees who are from western culture and do not share a common power distance culture with the Chinese, they may behave as they used to do in their own culture and may threaten the face of their boss in an unconscious way. In such cases, as boss, should consider the cultural differences and not be supposed to regard their different actions toward him as an offensive symbol. Instead, he should respect their culture and accept the way they express their apology and their expectations for receiving apologies from any person who has done something improper, including their boss. When they are misunderstood, they may expect an apology from their boss like this: "I am sorry, due to my misunderstanding I blamed you for someone else's mistake. Please accept my apologies". Furthermore, western people can make apologies for sneezing or coughing in public for the reason that they think their behaviors may influence others while the Chinese held that we cannot take control of this kind of natural



physiological response so we rarely apologize for sneezing or coughing in public. Therefore, if we sneeze or cough in front of a western person in intercultural communication, maybe we should make an apology to him and regard their apologies for something like this as normal to maintain face each other.

Apologies are a good lubricant to keep a harmonious relationship in human interaction. The necessary knowledge about it and the proper selection to make an apology is of great importance to maintain the face of others and also serves as an effective way to keep a harmonious relationship with people from different cultures.

## 4.2. Disagreements

When there is communication, there must be disagreements and when there are disagreements, there must be face-loss. Therefore, to find a suitable way to express our disagreement and at the same time reduce the face-loss to the lowest degree and maintain or reestablish the face of the person who is disapproved is of great importance. When it comes to expressing different ideas, it should be noted that the cognitive process in sentence organization varies from culture to culture. Due to different social and historical traditions, there are different modes of thinking with their cultural characteristics. Generally speaking, the Chinese are thought to be more euphemistic than people from western cultures and tend to use a kind of roundabout way to express their ideas. For example, when describing a thing, Chinese are more likely to give an introduction of the background information of the person involved, when and where the incident happened, and give a comment last, which is always the most important point of the whole description. However, western people tend to directly describe the thing and their feeling about it, and the background information comes next. Based on this, we can understand that there are also differences when they want to express their disapproval. Chinese may use a kind of yes-but expression, in another word, they may first agree or praise part of what you have said and then put forward their opinions and add an explanation that their ideas are just for reference and are open for arguments while western people, featuring bluntness and candidness, may express their disapproval directly without a long polite expression. In such a case, the person from China may have a feeling of face loss and think that the western people are challenging his reputation and authority. Consequently, there will be a conflict in which appropriate facework strategies are needed. When the Chinese are disapproved by his foreign boss, he may use dispositional explanations such as: "I am so sorry that I did not have a careful reading and I will change it right now" or: "you are right and it is so stupid and unmindful of me to make such a mistake" without any defense for themselves in that to some extent they think it is more important to attend to the face of their boss than arguing for the truth. On the other hand, western people tend to defend themselves as long as they have a point because they think everyone is equal and should be treated in the same way. When there is something wrong with the



words of their boss, they will point out them directly. It is not to say that they do not care about the face issue in the communication, but they tend to take a restorative facework strategy, which is a past-oriented option, to save or reestablish the impaired face of their interlocutor. For example, they may say: “Anyway, I will work out another scheme for you to choose”. When the issue they were arguing about is still at issue and apparently, he noticed that he may have threatened the face of his interlocutor, which also shows that western people tend to find a solution to deal with the situation while Chinese tend to maintain the relationship between them by avoiding the potential conflict and use an indirect way to express their ideas such as emails or roundabout expressions. Therefore, in intercultural communication, we should consciously apply our knowledge about face culture and consider these differences to facilitate better and more effective communication and negotiation.

### 4.3. Refusals

Refusals can be said to be one of the most face-threatening behaviors because it means you refuse one’s demand, recommendation, or request, which can lead to a feeling of disappointment, unhappiness, and even humiliation. Once the expression is hard for the inviter to accept, the communication is likely to fail. Therefore, it is more important for us to carefully attend to the face of the person we are going to refuse. The most common way to refuse may be: “I would like to but...” or: “it is a pity that I cannot do it because...” to express their readiness first and then explain the reason why they have to refuse his kind offer. There is no big difference in refusing friendly invitations among different cultures and they are all likely to use an indirect expression to protect the face of the inviter. However, when it comes to some unreasonable requests, there may be some differences between China and western people. When a foreign teacher is told suddenly that there will be a conference in 15 minutes, he will be surprised and refuse because it is not a scheduled thing and no one can occupy his time randomly except himself while a Chinese may feel it natural to have an agent conference. In such a case, the person who is rejected may feel offended and that he has lost his face in public and feel humiliated. Therefore, we should consider the cultural differences and not assume that they are challenging our face on purpose when we come across something like this. Instead, we should attend to their face and respect their culture and take according to actions appropriately to maintain their face in a foreign country. Only when we use a proper way to deal with refusals, can we notice that the conflict is brewing before the interlocutors articulate their dissatisfaction and lead to an effective and harmonious intercultural communication without the potential danger of communication failure.

## 5. Suggestions for Intercultural Communication

Giving advice and making suggestions are common in our daily interactions with others. However, there is also a big difference in making suggestions due to

cultural differences. As we have mentioned above, a face can be divided into a positive face and a negative face. Western people pay more attention to protecting their negative face, in other words, they value the freedom to do and to think and do not like to be forced to do something, even with a friendly intention. Chinese, on the other hand, tends to uphold their positive face, hoping to be accepted and appreciated by their community to establish their status and build a reputation. As far as the face is concerned, when we put forward a piece of advice, we may impair the negative face of others. For example, when we advise our friends who are about to go outside in deadly cold weather, we usually adopt a direct way: "It is cold outside, put on more clothes". In our opinion, this is a kind of expression to express our concern for them and as receivers we will not feel uncomfortable while a person from western culture may consider it as an expression that threatens their negative face and feel uncomfortable being intervened. Therefore, to maintain their negative face, western people tend to use more euphemistic expressions such as the subjunctive mood. Western people may say: "If I were you, I would put on more clothes." in the same situation talked above to express their suggestion indirectly so that the listener will not have a feeling of compulsion and a sense of resistance due to face loss. In such a comparison, we can conclude that western people are more likely to adopt an indirect way than Chinese in giving advice and tend to give more freedom to their listeners to decide whether their suggestions are accepted or rejected to maintain their negative face. Therefore, we should consider these differences when we try to make suggestions in an intercultural situation. We are supposed to use a more indirect way when talking to people from western cultures and have a better understanding of their expression modes to improve the negotiation and collaboration between us.

## 6. Conclusion

From the analyses above, it can safely be said that nearly every activity involving conversations can be associated with face loss and face gain in that every single person in this world is not live isolated and should be treated as a relation complexity, which means they need to depend on the relationship they build up with others who are closely related to his family, career, and all kinds of social activities in which the proper treatment towards face issues can directly affect the development of the relationship which has long been carefully established and maintained. With the promotion of international exchanges and cooperation, communication between people from different cultures has been an integral part of our social life, either for learning or for business cooperation or something else. Therefore, the face theory developed by scholars both at home and abroad gives us a way to better understand the differences between different cultures and the cultural and historical reasons for them. They help us to have a different perspective to look at some incidents we used to find difficult to understand and have more implications to improve mutual understanding. We should carefully

attend to the face culture and the differences to take corresponding strategies based on mutual understanding to promote the establishment and development of friendly and cooperative relations. Only when we consciously consider face-related cultural differences can we better respect some behaviors and expressions and thus build a harmonious relationship with people from different cultures.

## 7. Limitations

This work mainly analyzes the differences between the face culture of China and Western countries from the perspective of value orientations and more factors are waiting to be further explored.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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