



Transcultural Dictionary of Misunderstandings European and Chinese Horizons

The Transcultural Dictionary of Misunderstandings. European and Chinese Horizons is the result of an initiative which forges a radically new path for promoting transcultural understanding by studying culture-bound keywords. The stimulating idea is to create and address with intention that which is generally held to be by all means avoided: namely, misunderstandings.

The experiment starts with a level of communication that is not political per se but cultural. Cultures have no rigid borders like nation-states. They are more dynamic and meandering, open to influence, and translatable. Like cultures themselves, keywords are saturated with history, long-term experience, values, and collective emotions. They carry a load of tacit knowledge and implicit axioms that have the advantage of not having to be unpacked, explained, or spelled out.

Working through various semantic layers of keywords on both sides helps to create a more transparent language for transcultural dialogue. The creation of such a language is the effect of producing, exchanging, and working through misunderstandings on both sides. Within the framework of transcultural dialogue, misunderstandings turn out to be an innovative tool for mutual learning by seeing oneself through the eyes of the other.

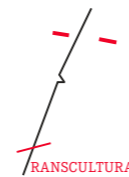
It is high time for researchers in various parts of the world to join forces and translate basic concepts from one language and culture into another. Every translation is a transformation, marking similarities and differences which can lead to an uncovering of new ideas, values, and cultural practices. This unconventional dialogue is a great source of inspiration because it works through hardened assumptions and misrepresentations, unsettles schematic thinking, and leads to unexpected insights and new points of contact.

Aleida Assmann

Professor of English Literature and Literary Theory,
University of Konstanz, Germany



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Transcultural Dictionary of Misunderstandings
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跨文化
誤解
辭典

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European and Chinese Horizons

Edited by Huang Ping, Alain le Pichon,
Tinka Reichmann, Zhao Tingyang



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HUANG Ping (黄平)

Alain le Pichon

Tinka Reichmann

ZHAO Tingyang (赵汀阳)

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edited by Alain le Pichon



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Face

面子

Miàn Zi

WENG Naiqun
Stefano Della Torre

面子 Miàn Zi

Chinese perspective

WENG Naiqun

The Chinese phrase “面子 (mianzi)” consists of two characters “面 (mian)” and “子 (zi)”. “面 (mian)” is a variant of the ancient Chinese hieroglyph mainly referring to the front part of the head, with “脸 (lian) (face)” referring to the front part of the head. “面 (mian)” also has many derivative meanings, such as “见面 (jianmian) (meet)”, “表面 (biaomian) (the surface of an object)”, “方向 (fangxiang) (direction)” and so on. In ancient times, “子(zi)” referred to descendants, and later specifically to sons. It can also refer to the seeds of the plant or eggs of animals, etc. In the phrase of “面子 (mianzi)”, “子(zi)” is a fictitious word with no real meaning.

“面子 (mianzi) (face)” is a very important concept in interpersonal relationships in Chinese society and culture. Its meaning does not refer to a specific part or organ of the body itself, nor specific to the face itself. Rather metaphysical socio-cultural meaning it is given refers to “尊严 (zunya) (dignity)” and “声望 (shengwang) (prestige)”. These two socio-cultural concepts can be turned into individual power and influence in practice.

Anthropologist Hsien Chin Hu’s article entitled *The Chinese Concepts of “Face”* published in *American Anthropologist*¹ states that according to anthropologists and psychologists, “the desire for “prestige” is pervasive in all human societies.” In other words, in his view, the Chinese concept of “face” is an example of a universal phenomenon.

The first chapter of the book *Chinese Characteristics*, published in 1894 by the British missionary A.H. Smith (1845 – 1932), who had lived in China for twenty-two years, described the particularly important concepts of “face” in Chinese characteristics and the corresponding behavior with dramatic performance. Although the famous modern Chinese writer Lu Xun believed that there were “errors” in Smith’s writings, he

1. N.S., 46 1944.

still gave the book a high evaluation. Two weeks before his death, he reiterated his hope in a short essay that the book would be translated into Chinese and published, so that the Chinese people could use it as a mirror for self-examination.

In *The Gifts*, when analysing elements in the ethnography of Franz Boas about the Kwakiutl and Haida Indian noblemen of the Northwest Americas, Mauss points out that they have the same concept of “face” as in Chinese mandarin or officer. In a potlatch of their noblemen, they have to show off their wealth. Among their popular stories, one tells of a great mysterious chief who had never held a potlatch that he had a “rotten face”. Mauss argues that “the expression is more apt than it is even in China; for to lose one’s face is to lose one’s spirit, which is truly the “face”, the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit and wear an emblem or totem. It is the veritable persona which is at stake: it can be lost in the potlatch just as it can be lost in the game of gift-giving, in war, or through some error in ritual.”²

In his famous book entitled *My Country, My People* (吾国吾民) (1935), Lin Yutang (林语堂) discussed that “the three immutable laws of the Chinese empirical thought system, whose perpetual invariance is beyond Roman Catholic dogma and whose authority exceeds the federal constitution of the United States of America [...] Their names are: 面情 (mian-qing), 命运 (ming-yun) and 恩典 (en-dian).” Later on, several scholars believed that Lin referred to “面情 (mianqing), 命运 (mingyun) and 恩典 (endian)”,³ that is “面子 (mianzi), 命运 (mingyun) and 人情 (renqing)”. They translated these three terms into English as “Face, Fate, Favour”.

In his article entitled *On Face-Work*, Erving Goffman pointed out that “in our Anglo-American society, as in some others, the phrase “to lose face” seems to mean “in wrong face”, “to be out of face”, or “to be shamefaced”. The phrase “to save one’s face” appears to refer to the process by which the person sustains an impression with others that he has not lost face. Following Chinese usage, one can say that “to give face” is to arrange for another to take a better line than he might otherwise have been able to take, the other thereby “gets face” given to him, this being one way in which he can gain face.

As an aspect of the social code of any social circle, one may expect to find an understanding as to how far a person should go to save face. Once the person takes on a self-image expressed through face, the person

2. M. Mauss, *The Gift*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York . London. p. 37-38.

3. Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People*, Jiangsu People’s Publishing House, November 2014, p.172.

will be expected to live up to it. In different ways in different societies, the person will be required to show self-respect, abjuring certain actions because they are above or beneath the person, while forcing oneself to perform others even though they cost dearly.⁴

A society concerned about *renqing* is bound to be a society that emphasises “face”. It is easy for an individual to grow up in such a society to learn that the more power a person holds, the more complex their social network; when he deals with others, the more likely it is that the other party will find it hard to refuse his requests; when he does some things on his own, he is less likely to fail. Therefore, in social life, he must not only try his best to expand his actual power, but also strive to make all kinds of “face-work” to show off identity, status, wealth, knowledge as well as interpersonal relationships, so that others dare not easily refuse requests.

Valuing face is not a mindset unique to the powerful. In Chinese society, face is not only about the privilege that an individual may enjoy, but also about the possibility of being accepted by others. Therefore, most people believe in valuing face, and “taking care of their own and others ‘faces’” has also become a conscious and unconscious creed and behaviour in personal life. A person who “pays attention to face” will not only use the above and other “face-work” to “fight for face” for himself, but also try to take care of the face of others; if he cannot take positive action to “adding face” to others, at least he must give a “perfunctory face” to the other party. If others intercede with him and he does not “give face” but instead strictly refuses, the other party may feel very “faceless” or even hold a grudge, and as soon as there is an opportunity, they will deliberately give him a “bad face” and finally make “everyone faceless”. On the other hand, if he accepts the other party’s request and does a favour for the other party, he will feel that his status is affirmed and “gain brilliance on the face”, and the other must return the favour in the future, so that “everyone has face”. In some social settings, some Chinese even use symbolic actions to gain each other’s “face”. In this sense, “face” is similar to “*renqing*”, where reciprocity is involved.

Fairbank pointed out in the fourth edition of his book *America and China* that the Chinese type of humanism included a concern for the dignity of the individual but from a social point of view. “Face” has been a social matter. Personal dignity has been derived from right conduct and the social approval it has secured. “Loss of face” came from failure to

4. Goffman, E. 1955. “On Face-Work”. *Psychiatry* 1955 (18): 213-231.

observe the rules of conduct so that others saw one at a disadvantage. Personal worth was not considered innate within each human soul, as in the West, but had to be acquired. Chinese humanism recognised that some persons had more gifts than others – human beings, though good by nature, were not equal in their capacities; there was no theory that each had an immortal soul.

On the contrary, right conduct was attuned to a hierarchical society in which some people dominated others because of their status. The centre of Confucian moral life, *ren* (仁) or “benevolent love (仁爱)”, was a distinctly un-Christian though logical doctrine which called for loving others in a graded fashion, beginning with one’s own father, family, and friends.”⁵

Numerous studies have shown that the concept of “face” is not unique to China but is in a sense universal. Obviously, the notion of “face” has some connection to “a category of human mind” explored by Mauss and his colleagues that entails that the concept of “person / *personne*” and “self / *moi*” that are mainly associated with “law” and “morality”. Mauss particularly emphasised that the above research was mainly based on ethnographic socio-historical research methods. It is through many ethnographic sources of different eras, different regions, and different social cultures that it is revealed how people shape the concepts of “person” and “self” based on different systems of laws, religions, customs, social structures, mentalities, ethics and morals. In China, where Han Chinese are the majority, this important concept related to interpersonal relations and maintaining the ethical and moral order of traditional society and the root of “face” is Confucian ethics and morality. But it is constantly evolving with the development and change of social culture. Due to the socio-cultural differences of different races, ethnic groups, and regions as well as the differences in age, gender, economic production, and industry categories under the same social culture, and the hierarchical differences in social structure relations, the connotation and practice of “face” in China are also complex and diverse. Therefore, when exploring and discussing the concept of “face”, the investigation of its time and space, that is, history and locality, is an important way to understand its essence. The concept of “face” in Chinese social culture is a kind of presentation of the concept of social “role”, “person” and “self” embedded in people’s social life in the context of Chinese social culture.

5. Fairbank, J.K.(1983) *The United States and China*, Fourth edition, revised and enlarged. Harvard University Press. p.135.

Face

European perspective

Stefano Della Torre

In the Latin language, three synonyms existed for the anterior part of the human head: *facies*, *visus* and *vultus*. The English term “face” comes from the Latin *facies*, just as the identical French word. French also has “visage”, from *visus*.

The etymology of *facies* is uncertain: some authors refer to *fax* (flame, light) and to the Greek verb *phaino* (to appear), others refer to *facere* (to make). On the other hand, *visus* comes from *videre* (to see), as a past participle: it means “what is seen”.

Therefore, the face (the visage) is meant as a part of the body, which stands out and is the first to be seen and observed.

The face encompasses many other parts, whose form, colours, and dimensions distinguish populations, families, and individuals. The description of a person is always detailed on forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, chin. The portrait of a person is centred on the face, and before fingerprints it was the way to identify human beings as individuals.

A never-ending synecdoche interplay links the words “front” (forehead) and “face”, used to describe a topological condition (to take place in front of something or somebody), which may carry several more meanings, linked to fear or challenge, to honesty or comparison. The verbal form “to face something” signifies the direction in which the head turns, but can carry a variety of meanings, more or less related to morality or destiny. In that sense, many popular sentences refer to the face as the focus of dignity: “to lose one’s face, to risk one’s face...”.

On the other hand, “face” can become a synonym of “surface”: the face of a coin, the faces of a cube, the face of the Earth. But coming back from the world of metaphors to the world of humans, the face is where the feelings and the character of a person can be detected, as humans move their facial muscles in order to communicate, with or without complete control of such movements. Hence another never ending series of everyday language uses of the word, playing on the facial expression

as the sign of various states: health, happiness, sadness, hunger, rage... For centuries, representing feelings and emotions was a crucial issue for many famous artists, who wanted to pick up by their brush the instant of a facial expression, often ending up with a caricature.

As the expression of the face can be controlled, the problem arises that the face itself can tell the truth, that is, it can express sincere feelings and the authentic inner being of the person, or it can show what the person wants to seem like. Therefore, sometimes the word “face” takes the meaning of an apparatus to hide the reality. This happens often with a popular derivative noun, “*façade*” (which exists also in French), used in architecture to mean the frontal part of a building, which used to be designed with special and self-consistent decorative patterns. It is not guaranteed that the *façade* patterns correspond to the internal structure.

Therefore, besides countless popular uses, the most interesting point about “face” is that this word points out the place where the identity, the character and the feelings of a person can be detected, but it can be also an external representation, the staging of an identity, a character, and feelings, which are not the real ones. The inner being could be disguised by a face mask, but the face itself can become a mask. The context will clarify whether “face” is referring to authentic realities or it is used to describe a hiding device.

面子 Miàn Zi

Face

Final remarks

WENG Naiqun, Stefano Della Torre

WENG Naiqun

In China's long social and cultural history, whether from historical records or cultural relics, there have been rich "masks" and the appearance of objects with the same symbolic meaning as "masks", as well as corresponding written records. In today's social and cultural life, especially in the folk celebrations of the New Year's Festival, as well as many religious ceremonies, the presentation of "masks" is often included.

From a semiotic point of view, "mask / persona" is a "materialised" expression of "face", that is, symbolism. It is a metaphysical representation of the social role, which Moss discusses. In this sense, "face" and "mask" intersect. The former presents "dignity" and "prestige" in social behaviour, while the latter presents social "roles" in representation. The former is alive and has subjectivity, while the latter is a solid symbol prescribed by social culture.

Due to the word limit, it is not possible to discuss the interesting relationship between "mask" and "face" in the submitted text.

Stefano Della Torre

In European languages, the word "face" has many meanings and uses, but the most interesting point is its relationship with the sphere of identity / dignity and the expression of feelings. As this expression could be sincere or not, ambiguity can arise, which can be found in the senses of the word "façade" (deriving from face). Then also the concept of "mask" can be usefully cited, as it helps very much to understand this point.