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A Comparative Study of the Typical Features of a “public figure” in Chinese and Western Cultures

ABSTRACT. *The article analyzes politeness as one of the key aspects of culture. Both Chinese and Western cultures with their unique characterological features are studied in the article. Intercultural barriers and communication failures that spring up in the process of communication between members of Chinese and Western cultures result from different understanding of politeness and value-based priorities of the abovementioned linguocultural communities. The goal of the article is to analyze the cultural background, axiological aims and the strategies of polite interaction in Chinese and Western cultures on the basis of different interpretation of polite behavior in these societies. According to the author, the task of prime importance is to improve understanding of politeness by communicators by way of taking into account socio-cultural and sociolinguistic differences. As a result, communication participants can reduce and/or eliminate the problems caused by different ideas about politeness. And at the same time, politeness can become an integrating and consolidating factor in interaction between members of two different cultures. In order to describe cultural differences, the author uses the conception of “public figure” suggested by an American sociologist Erving Goffman, associated with reputation and self-determination within the frames of culturally-specific socio-psychological characteristics. The norms of polite behavior are connected with the differences in the culture of the “public person” in China and in the West: a considerable distance between personal and public space is typical of the latter, whereas in China, the “public figure” is more significant and their positive presentation often contains euphemisms, formulas of self-humiliation and traditional non-verbal signals.*

KEYWORDS: *politeness; cultural values; strategies of polite behavior; public figure; complements; nonverbal communication means; Chinese culture; Western culture.*

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1. THE DEFINITION OF “FACE”

The first person to define the Face is the Chinese anthropologist Hu Xianyu. She believes that “Face is a reputation that is widely valued in China. It is due to the high step in life through success and boasting. The reputation gained is also the one accumulated through personal efforts or deliberate management. If you want to get this kind of affirmation, you must rely on the external environment at all times.” [Hu Xianyu 2010]

In the West, the concept of Face was first proposed by Erving Goffman, the famous American sociologist. Goffman defined the Face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself /herself by the line others assume he/she has. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes and the way to achieve Face is through the action taken by a person who makes whatever he or she is doing consistent with Face” [Erving Goffman 1961].

The definition of Face proposed by American sinologist Fei Zhengqing is the most widely cited. He pointed out that “Face” is the social, and personal dignity and honor obtained from their proper behaviors and social approval. “Losing Face” means it does not receive proper recognition in society because it does not comply with social laws. So it is in an unfavorable position that a person in the society does not agree with [Fei Zhengqing 1984].

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDYING “FACE”

Firstly, it is conducive to the elimination of communication barriers. The culture of each nation has its own foundation, its own history of development and its own status quo of group identity. Different geographical environments and historical backgrounds determine different cultural conditions. The issue of “Face” must be involved in the communication between various ethnic groups. Therefore, clever maintenance of

Face can eliminate the obstacles in communication.

Secondly, it is good to prevent communication frictions. Due to cultural differences and the lack of cross-cultural communication knowledge between the two sides, the exchanges between Chinese and the Westerners may create new frictions. For example, the Chinese people's modesty may be regarded as hypocritical by the Americans; the Anglo-American may simply regard it as "indifferent" and thus damage the Face of the other party. Chinese-style concerns may hurt the Face of the Americans and deprive them of their privacy. Therefore, clarifying the differences between Chinese and Western "Face" can effectively prevent communication friction.

Thirdly, it is conducive to broadening horizons and promoting cultural exchanges. On the one hand, the development of a nation depends on its own national power. On the other hand, it relies on cultural exchanges. The supplement and enrichment of foreign cultures can enhance its vitality and thus gain new vitality. The comparative study of the "Face" between China and the West enables the Chinese and Western people to understand each other's differences in the "Face" aspect, learn from each other's strengths, and promote cultural exchanges.

Lastly, as far as teaching Chinese as a foreign language is concerned, the "teaching" of Chinese teachers and the "learning" of foreign students is a process of cultural collision and communication, and also the process of understanding Chinese culture by foreign students. They can understand one aspect of traditional Chinese ideology through the comparison of the differences between Chinese and Western "Face". It also helps to enhance their understanding of their own culture and cultivate interest in Chinese culture, thus improve Chinese learning efficiency.

3. REASONS TO CAUSE THE DIFFERENCES OF FACE IN CHINA AND THE WEST

3.1. Different Natural Environment Impact

The environment has a great influence on the formation of human culture. Different environments will create different cultural types and consequently social and cultural psychology. China's geographical environment is "Inland Type", which has led to the closure and independence of cultural phenomenon. The western geographical environment is "Marine Type", which has resulted in the openness and absorption of cultural phenomenon. Western autonomy and openness have deeply influenced the values, interpersonal forms and attitudes of its people. This shows that China and the West have different understandings and manifesta-

tions in the cultural aspect of "Face" because of their different environments.

For thousands of years, China has always been a self-sufficient society dominated by agriculture. The economic structure has cultivated the Chinese people's character of being old-fashioned and self-satisfied. Harmony between man and nature is the form of interpersonal communication that the Chinese have always been pursuing. Therefore, the Chinese will first consider what others will think, and how to say in order to maintain a harmonious social relationship. On the contrary, Western individualism and openness make the views on Face quite different from the Chinese way. In the modern Western society, people seek to realize their personal value, attach importance to individual rights and personal privacy. Thus, they will be candid in doing things, or pay attention to achieving equality between people. For example, Churchill, one of the greatest Prime Ministers in the British history, once lost the election in the Leadership Election. When Sir Richard Pim visited him and told him the result of the election, Churchill said: "They have the right to oust me. It's democracy! That's what we've been fighting for!"

3.2. Different Value Concepts

More than 2,000 years of feudalism influenced by Confucianism and Taoism have made collectivism deeply rooted in China. Collectivism is mainly manifested in two aspects — group orientation and others orientation. That is to say, individuals are subordinate to society, and personal interests should be subordinated to the group and national interests. When they obtain their achievements, they will first mention the collective's contributions. But the West was influenced by the "Renaissance" movement from the 14th to the 17th century, and they promoted the spirit of individualism which gave more weight to the personal devotions. Individualism was part of their humanism spirit, and gradually became the cultural icon of the West. Individualism emphasizes individual rights, and releases individuality as its own code of conduct. This kind of self-concept is dominant and deeply rooted in the minds of Westerners.

The differences in the value orientation between China and the West make them show great differences in the view of "Face". One of the reflections of the Chinese Face's influence is the positive Face. The negative Face does not exist in Chinese culture. The Chinese always think that "I am useful to others, and to society." They hope that their actions will be praised by others and recognized by the society. The value of the individual is reflected in the dedication. In the communication, they would give the other person a full Face through com-

plicity or self-abasement to achieve communicative harmony. Chinese people will often consider other people's opinions before doing things. Even the opinions of strangers will be heard in order to make things complete or earn a good Face. On the contrary, westerners attach importance to the process of self-realization. They pay attention to individual abilities, and hope to obtain recognition from the society through their own efforts. If so, they feel very Face-saving.

In addition, Chinese people often use collectivism as a criterion to treat others' affairs as their own ones. Therefore, they are also willing to give others a hand. Additionally, they feel free to evaluate or state their opinions on other people's career or marriage, or even ask others to follow their opinions. At the same time, the other party is willing to listen to the others' opinions and take the opinions for their reference. This is seen as a violation of privacy and interference with other's rights, and deeply disliked by the Westerners. Westerners emphasize negative Face. They value individual freedom very much, so they weigh private rights first, and do not want others (including parents) to interfere with their personal affairs. Thus, they are not likely to ask others about their personal affairs. In general, the influence of Chinese collectivism and Western individualism on Face is mainly reflected in the difference between positive Face and negative Face.

3.3. Different Social Relationship

The inner spirit of the implementation of "Ritual" in the feudal period of China was focused on maintaining the patriarchal hierarchy. Xunzi once said that "There is no equality between the rich and the poor, or the poor and the other poor" [Kong Fan 1975]. As time goes on, the hierarchical concept of Confucian like the relationship between "King and Minister; Father and Son" has never been shaken in Chinese people's minds. The Chinese still strictly abide by the concept of "Hierarchies have seniority". For example, students should respect teachers and teachers should care for students. But westerners emphasize the sense of equality based on human nature, that is, "people are equal in life." This concept has penetrated into the fields of life for the Westerners.

The two significant differences between China and the West in social relations make them have a big difference in their Face. For example, in the use of address forms, the Chinese address others respectfully while themselves humbly as giving the other the Face. Westerners treat equal communication as both sides having a Face. In addition, Chinese people pay attention to people's family background. People with good family backgrounds will natu-

rally be respected and they will have Face, while those at the bottom of the society are faceless. Westerners are rarely proud of their prominent family background. They believe that everyone has equal opportunities. No matter what class they are in, they can have Face and obtain achievements as long as they work hard.

3.4. Different Culture Values: Shame Culture VS. Guilt Culture

Chinese "Face" was derived from Shame Culture. Chinese Shame Culture is the result of Confucian shame civilization developed through thousands of years. Confucius regards Shame as an external requirement for people's behavior. Mencius ever remarked shame as the inherent presupposition in accordance with "no shame, no heart" (无羞恶之心, 非人也) and "A man can not be shameless and shameness is one kind of shame, too." (人不可以无耻, 无耻之耻, 无耻也) [Mencius 2015]. The characteristic of Shame Culture is to take other people's idea as the standard of their actions. Therefore, the people's behavior in such a culture is often restricted and dominated by external social factors and standard norms.

Guilt Culture is the base of the spiritual world in the West. In a society of sin-sense culture, if people violate the moral standards, they will feel that they are guilty. They promote people's goodness by advocating the establishment of absolute standards of morality. In the Guilt Culture based on Christianity, the religious obligations of individuals far exceed the requirements of the family and oneself. For example, in the New Testament, Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me, he does not hate his wife, children and brothers, sisters, even their own lives, he can't be my disciple." Consequently, the Guilt Culture encourages or requires people to highlight and value themselves highly. It is this influence of cultural heritage that makes the Face of the West form a negative Face or a Self-Face, emphasizing the freedom of individual action and the satisfaction of personal desires. As we can see from the importance of "privacy" in Western culture, Western people are extremely sensitive to age, income, family status, etc. They really dislike other people's interference with their own affairs, so even family members do not interfere with each other's lives. If you pay too much attention and intervene in others' personal affairs, Westerners will think that this is a kind of detriment, so the westerners will feel that they have no Face.

3.5. Different ways of remarking: Indirectness VS. Frankness

Chinese and Westerners have different ways of dealing with problems. Chinese people like to wind about or express their ideas indi-

rectly. So they focus on “understanding by insight” (意会). When conflicts occur, they will also try to avoid contradictions or use euphemisms to avoid Face Lost. Quite differently, westerners emphasize “literal meaning of the words”, that is, bluntly express their own ideas. In the conflicts and contradictions, they are also straightforward and try to solve the problems, discuss the problems or express ideas and opinions directly. The different handling methods in China and the West are mainly influenced by high and low contexts. In a high-context culture, when people communicate, more information is internalized in the minds of the communicators, and the implicit code is loaded. In the low-context culture, on the contrary, when people communicate, most of the information is loaded by explicit code.

3.6. Different Life Attitudes: The Golden Mean VS. Radicalism and Innovation

One of the most important characteristics of Chinese society is the Golden Mean (中庸). The “zhong (中)” means calm and unbiased; the “yong (庸)” refers to not seeking to transcend, but keeping a normal state. The Doctrine of the Golden Mean is the ideal realm pursued by Confucianism. In the life of the world, the ideology and morality of Confucianism advocates the idea of benevolence, the righteousness, the rites, the wisdom, and the integrity which should be used as a guide for everyone’s behavior. And people should always take them into consideration in their daily behaviors. A person can feel proud of being modest, but oppose to excessive revealing oneself. Therefore, the greatest function and significance of the Golden Mean is to adjust or reconcile. Chinese deal with everything following this strategy, so Chinese people use various methods to make each other have Face in communication, and sometimes even sacrifice their own Face to maintain the other’s.

On the other hand, Western radicalism and innovation are mainly manifested in their behaviors — they are fearless, surpassing self and highlighting self. Westerners are good at showing off themselves to others. The praises from others can be accepted frankly and naturally. These two cultures lead to different facets on Face. Chinese people often use a lot of humility and compliments in their communication, while Westerners are more likely to win the praise from others or social recognition with their ability. When others praise him for his excellent work, he will accept it because he believes that it is what he won through his own efforts.

4. DIFFERENT STRATEGIES OF MAINTAINING FACE IN CHINA AND THE WEST

4.1. Differences on Addressing

The addressing can tell you whether they have Face. Sometimes an appropriate address can make the other person have Face. If you don’t understand the culture, casual addressing will create some friction between the communicators. For example, Chinese people are used to adding “old (老)” before or after the surname of others to express respect. “Old + surname” is a respectful title, like “old Li” and “old Zhao”. “surname + old” is a highly respected and accomplished senior such as “Li Lao”, “Zhao Lao”. In the West, people in countries such as Britain and the United States dislike the word “old”. When the word “old” is used to refer to them, they will probably feel displeased and feel very faceless because they think that if they are old they just have no ability and lose competitiveness.

4.2. Differences in Greetings

Firth ever described the greeting as recognition in the social interactions among people [Firth 1957]. The most important thing is to establish or destroy the social relationship between people, or to recognize others as the one in a whole society, or in a certain social environment. At the beginning of people’s communication greetings play a vital role in various communications. It allows the two parties to start a pleasant and harmonious conversation. It can also make the two parties terminate a conversation, create frictions and damage the Faces of both sides.

The Chinese use a lot of words with concerns when greeting to show the intimacy. The person you are talking to will feel happy with the greetings if you can offer feedbacks. The feedbacks to some specific questions will make them feel that the two sides are more than a nod of acquaintance. Such greetings as “Hello!” are more formal to the Chinese and do not apply to intimate friends. Chinese people pay attention to the positive Face, so they will try their best to get the group’s affirmation, get recognition from the society, and want to win more Face. Western greetings are relatively simpler. When greeting, they try to avoid touching the privacy of the other party. Therefore, people in the Western countries pay more attention to the negative Faces. They do not want others to interfere with their own lives. Therefore, they attach great importance to the individual freedom, and emphasize individualism greatly.

The biggest difference between Chinese and Western greetings is that in the topics. Chinese are much influenced by the Confucianism. They highlight the mutual care among people,

so they treat other people with enthusiasm, openness and honesty. As a result, there will be some specific topics and greetings according to the different situations, such as “Where are you going?”, “Did you eat?”, “You are getting fat / thin!”, and “Long time no see!” If you use these greetings to say hello to the Americans, they see the greeting as highly inappropriate (except “Long time no see”) because these greetings violate their privacy. They are most likely to respond with “You’ve nosed into my affairs!” to express the discomfort. In the Anglo-American society, people advocate individualism. They consider self-centeredness, personal privacy and personal independence sacred and inviolable. They will not ask questions about age, income, family, politics or religion. If Westerners don’t understand Chinese culture, they often get annoyed because of the greetings at the very beginning of the communication. There is another example. If Chinese asks, “Did you eat?” Westerners would mistake for asking him to have a dinner together. In the end, it will cause the illusion of inviting them to eat but you just break the promise if you don’t treat them a dinner. Westerners handle with everything logically. Therefore, Chinese greetings such as “You are off today?” can’t be accepted.

4.3. Differences on Acknowledgments and Apologies

Making Acknowledgments and apologies is a polite act that maintains the Face of the other person. The acknowledgments and apologies in China and the West have the same and different aspects concerning the strategy of Face maintenance. The Westerners pursue individualism, and always avoid “Infringement” behaviors. Therefore, thank-you and apology are used very frequently. No matter how big or small events are, “thank you” is always used. Even the couples are polite to each other. At any time the wife prepares a cup of coffee for her husband, the husband will say “Thank you”. Similarly, when the husband moves the chair for his wife, the wife will also say: “Thank you”. Apologizing is often heard in the western countries as well. In situations when you ask others to do you a favor, or ask questions, or talk to a stranger, or interrupt a conversation, or ask for a leave, you will say “I’m sorry/Pardon me/ Excuse me”. What’s more, when you want to cough, snore, sneeze, fart, or accidentally rub your shoulders when walking, you will say “I’m sorry.” Differently, Chinese acknowledgments and apologies are used less than that in the West. I often heard such a doubt as “Why is there no apology for your mistake?” in the past. This was a true portrayal of the Chinese people’s reluctance to admit their own mistakes. However, with the harmonious development of

society and the improvement of people’s manners, it is also becoming common to apologize for some small mistakes in China today.

4.4. Differences on Compliments and Modesty

As a positive politeness strategy, compliment is an effective means to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. It is a lubricant for good interpersonal relationship and helps both parties maintain their Face and protect their integrity. In the article “Complimenting in Speech”, Holmes pointed out that the complimentary language was a good aspect (such as quality, character, skill, etc.) that is positively evaluated by other people (especially the listener).

Many scholars at home and abroad have studied the complimentary language in different countries and found that most of the topics of compliment are involved in these two aspects — one is appearance; the other is achievement and ability. Chinese people’s compliments on appearance mainly focus on complexion, age, and weight. The compliments of achievement and ability mainly concentrate on identity, status, wealth, capability, good personality, and morality. The Chinese have always been humble, and the compliments on these topics have responded modestly accordingly, which constitutes China’s unique system of reverence and humility. The Chinese value the original and natural appearance, so the compliments of the external appearance mainly come to the natural charm. The compliment to the weight mainly goes to health. The compliment to the age mainly refers to “old” and “young”. “Old” is used to compliment one’s qualifications, longevity and high morality; “Young” is used to compliment the age and the appearance of the young, such as “You are in a more lively spirit. (你老越活越精神了!)”

“If working hard, even a cowboy can be President.” The United States and some other western countries advocate equal opportunities. In communications, they are very direct when complimenting people only based on the facts. Additionally, westerners are extroverted, straightforward, active, adventurous and independent. When facing compliments they generally accept them and respond with “Thank you”. Therefore, Pomerantz believes that the western countries generally adopt the four types of strategies responding to compliments: (1) Acceptance Strategies — recognize the words of the compliment as compliments and accept them. (2) Rejection Strategies — refuse to accept or question compliments and do not directly respond to compliments. (3) Amendment Strategies — appreciate the words of the compliment as compliments, but not accept them all. (4) Combination Strate-

gy — a combination of two or more of the above strategies [Pomerantz 1978].

Most occasionally, westerners adopt acceptance strategies, which are wholly or partially accepted. “Thank you” or remaining modest in response and pointing out some shortcomings are most frequently used. Contrary to China’s attitude of humility and refusal in complimenting, Westerners generally adopt the principle of approval in order to avoid threats to the Face, so there are fewer choices to adopt the “rejection strategy”.

4.5. Differences in Euphemisms

Whether in China or in the West, when people face indecent affairs, or unlucky events in communication, they will not express them directly but in a euphemistic way. They will replace the words that are easy to cause anger or threaten people’s Face. This is called euphemism. The use of euphemisms is a common phenomenon in various languages throughout the whole world. It is an important strategy for people to maintain Faces of two sides in the intercultural communication. For example, in China the death of an emperor is called “驾崩”, the death of other’s parents is called “仙逝”, and the death of the martyrs is called “捐躯”. In the western countries, there are also a lot of euphemisms about death — be at rest, be no more, be gone, be out of pain, be asleep in the Arms of God, be promoted to glory, be taken to paradise, pass away, go to west, answer the final call, depart to God, breathe one’s last, join the majority, pay one’s last debt, settle one’s account, or throw up the cards. As a result, Neaman defines euphemism as “substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit offensive one, there-by veneration the truth by using kind words” [Neaman 1990].

4.6. Differences on the Non-verbal Communication

The Western countries use the handshake to express courtesy when they meet or depart the same as what the Chinese do. In addition, the Westerners often use symbolic hugs and kisses to express their closeness. However, there is no such etiquette as embracing and kissing in public in China. Chinese have always been very implicit in emotional expression due to the long-term suppression of feudal ethics. If you don’t understand the culture of the country you are in, you will probably let the other side lose Face.

In China students usually stand up to answer teachers’ questions in class. When Chinese students are ready to answer questions or have problems, they must raise their hands and stand up to answer. Otherwise, they will be regarded as impolite and intrusive to the teacher.

The teacher will have no Face. In a discussion class, students in the West like group work, while Chinese students prefer solo work. The western teachers can sit in the middle of the platform or in the middle of the students to discuss with them. In China it is just the opposite. The class is generally dominated by teachers and students are the passive listeners. The situation has been changing recently. More and more teachers adopt student-centered teaching method.

5. CONCLUSION


No matter in China or in the West, Face is a symbolic icon representing the position and the value in society, or the praise and recognition from the society. Faces also become people’s social norms and social behavior standards to a certain extent. Because of the different concepts and ways of thinking between Chinese and the Westerners, there are certain differences between the Chinese and Western Face theories. Chinese emphasizes the mutuality of Face and pays attention to the norm and role of Face in society. Relatively speaking, Chinese place more importance on the Face than the Westerners and form a typical “Face Culture”. Chinese people would rather sacrifice their own to preserve the others’ Face. They often use euphemisms, compliments, and self-humiliation, non-verbal ways, etc. to maintain each other’s Face. These Face maintenance strategies are very practical in China, but they might be counterproductive in the West. Western culture highlights equal chances and consistency. Accordingly, Westerners often have the consciousness to protect the individual freedom and rights; hence they adopt certain strategies to mitigate the threat of speech or acts in order to preserve the Face of the communicators.


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Сравнительное исследование характеристик «социального лица» в китайской и западной культурах

АННОТАЦИЯ. Статья посвящена анализу вежливости как одного из основных аспектов культуры. Материалом для исследования послужили китайская и западная культуры, обладающие своими уникальными характерологическими признаками. Межкультурные барьеры и коммуникативные неудачи, возникающие при общении между представителями китайской и западной культур, обусловлены разным пониманием вежливости, различными ценностными приоритетами указанных лингвокультурных сообществ. Цель статьи — анализ культурного фона, аксиологических установок и стратегий поддержания вежливости в китайской и западной культуре на основе различного понимания вежливого поведения в указанных лингвокультурных сообществах. Автор статьи видит своей сверхзадачей улучшение понимания со стороны коммуникантов вежливости на основе учета социокультурных и социолингвистических различий. В итоге участники общения могут редуцировать и(или) элиминировать проблемы, вызванные разными представлениями о вежливости. Одновременно с этим вежливость может стать объединяющим и интеграционным основанием при общении представителей двух разных культур. Для описания культурных различий используется концепция «социального лица», предложенная американским социологом Эрвином Гофманом (Erving Goffman), связанная с репутацией, самоопределением в рамках культурно обусловленных социально-психологических характеристик. Нормы вежливости связываются с различиями в культуре «социального лица» между Китаем и Западом: для последнего характерна значительная дистанция между личным и социальными странством, а в Китае «социальное лицо» более значимо, для его позитивной презентации чаще употребляются эвфемизмы, формулы самоуничижения и традиционные невербальные сигналы.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: вежливость; культурные ценности; стратегии поддержания вежливости; социальное лицо; комплименты; невербальные средства коммуникации; китайская культура; западная культура.

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