

FACE AND STEREOTYPED NOTIONS ABOUT CHINESE FACE BEHAVIOR¹

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The present paper investigated both Chinese and Western views of face. It attempted to answer two questions: (1) Is face behavior unique to or distinctive of the Chinese and other peoples who have been influenced by them, or is it a universal phenomenon? (2) What are the factors which have contributed to the formation of the stereotype that, as a people, Chinese attach an overriding importance to face? After a critical review of both Chinese and Western literature, the following conclusions were reached: (a) serious conceptual and methodological difficulties (specifically ethnocentric bias) are often present, even in studies reported in the social science literature, which render the validity of the investigators' conclusions ambiguous and suspect; (b) there is a consensus of opinion that the rituals of face behavior operate to avoid confrontation and to conserve the traditional Chinese socio-political structure characterized by the dominance of vertical authority relationships; and (c) observers are unanimously agreed that Chinese attach great importance to face although there is disagreement on whether or not this is unique to them. Upon further study of this point of disagreement, it was concluded that a more accurate formulation of the matter would be that the Chinese are simply more conscious of the significance of face in social processes than are other peoples. This greater awareness on the part of the Chinese was partly traced to their language, which has been richly endowed with symbolic representations of face behavior since early history. It was further pointed out that it might be more meaningful, conceptually, to study the variations in face behavior in different cultural contexts, rather than to try to show which ethnic groups attach a greater degree of importance to face.

The subject of face is one which is likely to arouse a great deal of interest not only among students of Chinese society but also among behavioral scientists as well. Since their early encounters with the Chinese people,

Westerners have been ingrained with the notion that face is a matter of utmost importance to the Chinese – even surpassing perhaps that of life and death. Furthermore, there is a tendency to interpret or explain much of what they see in Chinese society in terms of face. The present paper aims to examine both Chinese and Western views of face. Specifically, it attempts to answer two related sets of questions: (a) Is face behavior unique to or distinct of the Chinese (and

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perhaps also other peoples who have been heavily under Chinese influence for centuries)?² Or, is it found in other societies as well, i.e., universal? (b) What are the factors which have contributed to the formation of the stereotype that, as a people, Chinese attach an overriding importance to face? What degree of truth is contained in this stereotype? Before attempting to answer these questions, I shall first turn to a critical review of the literature on face.

Critical Review of the Literature

One of the first prescientific writers on face in Chinese society was Arthur Smith (1894), an American missionary who had spent twenty-two years in China. He regarded attaching great importance to face as one of the outstanding Chinese characteristics — which was “often wholly beyond the intellectual apprehension of the Occidental” (p. 17). He interpreted face behavior as a kind of dramatic acting. Thus, “in order to understand, however imperfectly, what is meant by ‘face’, we must take into account that fact that as a race the Chinese have a strong dramatic instinct” (p. 16). Occidentals cannot comprehend Chinese face behavior, because “all these acting, role playing have nothing to do with realities. The question is never of facts, but always of form” (p. 17). His view — that so overriding is the Chinese concern for face that even objective reality and abstract principles are sacrificed for it — is shared by many others, e.g., the psychiatrist Weston La Barra (1946: especially 378-382), and the anthropologist Stover (1962). Writers such as these have contributed to the formation of the stereotype of Chinese face behavior — a stereotype which is apparently widely held even among the Chinese themselves. Lin Yu-tang (1935), one of the best-known literary spokesmen of his time to present the traditional ethos of the privileged Chinese upper class to Western audiences, depicted “face” as one of the “three Muses ruling over China” (p. 195), (the other two

being Fate and Favor).

More recently, in their paper, “A Study in Westernization”, Agassi and Jarvie (1969) asserted that the desire to gain face, and conversely, the fear of losing face are “to a startling extent overriding motives” (p. 139) in Hong Kong. Face goes hand-in-hand with Chinese conservatism, “super-conformism,” and their “superiority-ideology.” By contrast, “face is a minor and rather different social institution in the West” (p. 141). Agassi and Jarvie, however, did not offer an argument for saying that face was of minor importance in the West or explain how it was different. They wrote with the conviction that they had grasped the underlying principles for understanding Chinese behavior: “Combined with one other factor, namely the traditional view that the Chinese way of doing things is not simply the best, or the right way of doing things, but the only way of doing things, face explains almost too much” (p. 140). But what has been *explained*? The explanation is of the same order as saying that a schoolboy does not do his homework because he is “lazy,” that habitual criminals commit crimes because of their “criminal tendencies,” or that alcoholics cannot stop drinking because of their “weak will power.” Even if they are right, Agassi and Jarvie have only *described* attaching overriding importance to face as an outstanding Chinese characteristic. The trouble is that these authors have confused description or labelling with explanation. They have failed to delineate the functional relationship between the phenomenon of face behavior with their antecedent conditions. No gain in knowledge or analytic sophistication has been achieved over studies by earlier writers unschooled in the methods of social science. Ho (1972) has criticized “A Study in Westernization” (which should be more accurately titled “A Study in Superficial Westernization”) as a telling example of disregarding methodological issues in field studies of foreign cultures. While Arthur Smith first derived his experiences in China

from his servants and then found "every Chinese an epitome of the whole race" (p. 74), Agassi and Jarvie generalized their impressions based on limited observations and reports from informants (university students, government officials, etc.) to the people in Hong Kong, and then to the Chinese in general. All fell to their own ethnocentric bias.

To my knowledge, the first study of face within the framework of social science was that of Hsien-chin Hu (1944). To this day, Hu's article has remained a standard source on the Chinese concepts of face and is still widely cited. She made an important distinction between two concepts of face: *lien* and *mien-tzu*. Although these two concepts are interrelated, i.e., not entirely independent, "their referents clearly belong to two distinct sets of criteria for judging conduct" (p. 62). *Mien-tzu* "stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country (America): a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation" (p. 45). *Lien*, on the other hand, "represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community. *Lien* is both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction" (p. 45). In her article, Hu provided many illustrative examples of expressions concerning *lien* and *mien-tzu*, and showed how these expressions were used in Chinese social intercourse. Hu apparently did not treat *mien-tzu*, unlike *lien*, as a personal tribute. She stated, "*Mien-tzu* differs greatly from *lien* in that it can be borrowed, struggled for, added to, padded — all terms indicating a gradual increase in volume" (p. 61, italics for "lien" added). *Lien* was shown to occupy a far more important position than *mien-tzu* in terms of the imperatives for conduct in Chinese society: "Once *lien* is lost, *mien-tzu* will be hard to maintain" (p. 62).

The distinction Hu made between *lien* and

mien-tzu has been well-accepted by subsequent writers on face, and no challenge of it, to my knowledge, has been posed. One can certainly accept the notion that two different sets of criteria apply to judgments of face — one involving judgments of character and the other involving what may be broadly conceived of as the moral aspects of one's social performance. Nevertheless, there are a number of points on which further clarification is in order.³ Firstly, Hu claimed that the two sets of criteria for judging face are "distinguished by two words (*lien* and *mien-tzu*) which, on the physical level, both mean 'face'" (p. 45). She also asserted that, "while *lien* is a word with one concrete and one figurative meaning, the word *mien* has developed a variety of meanings, both concrete and figurative" (p. 55). In ordinary usages, however, *lien* may be taken to mean *mien-tzu* in some verbal contexts. Thus, the expression "mei yu *lien*" (having no *lien*) may be used instead of "mei yu *mien-tzu*" and "tiu *lien*" (to lose *lien*) instead of "tiu *mien-tzu*" when these expressions refer to failures in measuring up to some specific requirement in one's social performance — even though one's integrity of character is not in question at all. On the other hand, "pu yao *lien*" (not wanting *lien*), an accusation that the person concerned does not care what others think of his character, clearly applies to one's moral conduct rather than to one's adequacy or competence in social performance. We see thus the meaning of *lien* varying according to its verbal contexts. Furthermore, as stated by Hu herself, "*lien* is included among the conditions determining the amount of ego's *mien-tzu*" (p. 62). Accordingly, the concept of *mien-tzu* is not altogether devoid of moral content. The conclusion reached, therefore, is that the distinction between different sets of criteria for judging face, however justified, cannot be anchored in a linguistic distinction between the two terms, "*lien*" and "*mien-tzu*". We may continue to use them in the sense that Hu has defined, bearing in mind that their

meanings vary according to verbal contexts and are not completely differentiated from each other.

The second point needing clarification concerns the conditions under which *mien-tzu* is bestowed by society upon the individual. Hu appeared to have treated *mien-tzu* as something which was achieved — “through getting on in life, through success and ostentation”. It is true that *mien-tzu* can be enhanced through active striving. However, as Hu herself recognized, the claim to *mien-tzu* “will differ with the status of the family, personal ties, ego’s ability to impress people, etc.” (p. 62). It is well-recognized that, particularly in traditional Chinese society, social status is more often ascribed than achieved. The claim to *mien-tzu*, therefore, may be a function of an ascribed status of the individual in the social group, and is quite independent of his efforts or ambitions. The individual himself may well not be particularly eager to acquire more *mien-tzu* above and beyond that to which he is already entitled; but he can hardly afford to be indifferent when his due *mien-tzu* is challenged or in danger of being lost — that is, if he cares to maintain a minimum level of effective social functioning at all. It is thus necessary to speak of an active aspect of face dynamics, that of striving to enhance one’s *mien-tzu*, as well as of a passive aspect, that of maintaining what one is already entitled to.

Despite the general belief in its great significance in Chinese social processes, there has been little attempt to formulate a theory of face within a structured theoretical framework of the social sciences. However, unlike other writers who have remained largely on the descriptive level, Stover (1962) has presented a theory of Chinese social interaction in which face is a key concept. According to this theory, given its hierarchical structure with a built-in permanency of statuses, social exchange is essentially one between unequals; role and personal feelings

are dissociated in formalized social behavior. Interaction must therefore proceed within a “highly structured, ritually stabilized role-system” (p. 374). It is within such a social organization that face functions to preserve the equilibrium of hierarchically ordered statuses. Face is “the social ideology legitimizing status rectitude” (p. 375). This ideology is unstable, i.e., “unknown to the Chinese themselves.” It “relates to the conservation of inequalitarian principles of Chinese group organization” (p. 367).

Stover finds the common-sense interpretation of face as “a name for *other-oriented self-esteem*” (p. 6) to be insufficient. He writes:

Attempts to render Chinese face intelligible on a cross-cultural basis, using our own society as a point of reference, are open to the possibility that the Anglo-American concept of face may be imposed. The danger is that *mien-tzu* may be taken as a synonym for other-directed self-esteem, i.e., as a quality for the *persona*. Our view is that the Chinese concept of face, and its function in the society, is unique and that it should be interpreted in terms of the culture in which it flourishes. Sociological theory which employs the word “face” as a universal category for prestige is simply irrelevant to our study. (pp. 332-333)

Loss of *mien-tzu* should not be “confused with embarrassment as a cross-cultural category, as Goffman (1955-1956) uses it in sociological discourse;” rather, “the good manners and polite courtesies of the Chinese — said by them to express concern for the feelings of others — are in actuality impersonal and ritualized techniques” (p. 337). Stover’s theory is thus particularistic to Chinese culture, and is not a general theory of face behavior which claims to have applicability across cultures. Nevertheless, questions concerning the uniqueness of Chinese face behavior may be raised. Is it not reasonable to ask whether or not similar forms

of face behavior can be found in other societies, at least in those which have been heavily under Chinese influence, e.g., Japan? Furthermore, there is no necessity to impose the Anglo-American concept of face in studying face behavior cross-culturally. Admittedly, the concept of face cannot be equated with that of prestige: neither of the two concepts, though overlapping in meaning, are reducible to the other. (For a detailed discussion of the distinction, see Ho, 1976: 878-880).

Stover repeatedly rejected the "home-made models" or "native views" of Chinese social behavior, i.e., what Chinese say about themselves, as "unsophisticated" or "imperfect from the anthropological point of view." Specifically, the Chinese model of friendship is "an example of disparity between the native view and social reality" (p. 320). And, face "*is the name Chinese give to the legitimacy of responding to the symbolic representation of proper behavior, and of permitting these constructions to stand for social reality*" (p. 370). For guiding him to this understanding, Stover gave credit to Arthur Smith: "In one line, A.H. Smith has embodied the whole of our conclusions about face behavior. 'The question is never of facts, but always of form'" (p. 370). But why and on what basis should Stover's or Smith's interpretation of social reality take precedence over that of the "natives?" From the methodological point of view in cross-cultural research, this raises fundamental questions about what "social reality" entails. Elsewhere (Ho, 1972), I have made the point that

the observational reports of the foreign investigator should not be equated with the actual behavior of the people under study; rather, they contain data on the interaction between members of two cultures — as they are perceived by the investigator. Accordingly, these observational data require further analysis, inasmuch as the interactional process itself should be an object of study. (pp. 2-21)

Let us, therefore, examine further how Stover has construed his version of Chinese "social reality."

A major methodological limitation of Stover's study is that the data from which his generalizations derive support were based entirely upon his participant-observation of an upper-class Chinese household living in the United States. Although he was aware of this limitation and defended his methodology, it does raise the question of how different his conclusions might have been had he done his field work among low-class peasants living in China. A more serious problem is Stover's tendency to fit behavioral data into what seems to be his preconceived theoretical framework, for the sake of consistency in interpretation at the expense of reducing their complexity to an oversimplified common denominator. He may be right in drawing our attention to the relationship of face to formality and the maintenance of status hierarchy. Unfortunately, however, his generalizations were meant to apply to *all* social transactions among Chinese. He made two basic assertions concerning these transactions: (a) that they "must be determined by prestructured formulae," i.e., ritualized, and (b) that they are essentially between unequals rather than those of "equivalent gratifications." But what about friendship, "which are said by Chinese to lie beyond the realm of ritual solidarity" (p. 374)? Concerning this question, Stover said, "Chinese friendships are only *symbolically* role-systems of equality, and . . . ties of friendship embody the role-stabilizing mechanisms of their inequalitarian prototype" (p. 258). In order to preserve friendship, "*the superordinate partner (or 'status superior') must determine that the social content of the relationship shall in fact consist of role-equality*" (p. 257). Thus, in actuality, even close friendships represent a case of "formalized informality," or "enforced equality," and "the very unambiguousness of informality . . . is maintained by formal

controls" (p. 259). Consequently, "Chinese find it discomfoting to engage in interpersonal relationships outside highly structured ritually stablized role-systems" (p. 374).

In effect, Stover is saying that real friendship, even supposedly between equals — in the sense of having intimacy, effective involvement, and mutual confidence — is highly constrained, if not outright illusory: "since the organizational properties of friendship do not permit the Chinese to become disengaged from their customarily distantiated positions in social behavior" (p. 259). "The 'informality' of friendship is morally justified . . . as an expression of 'sincerity' and 'human feelings' which is really Chinese double-talk for a concern for status" (p. 249). Friendship between equals is simply a contradiction of terms, since, according to him, "the definition of friendship specifically repudiates the application of unequal responsibilities" (p. 258). Here, I must ask: Is friendship between unequals then conceptually impossible in Chinese society, or in any society? Does Stover's characterization of Chinese friendship bear resemblance to "social reality?" The entirety of face behavior has been reduced totally to a matter of maintaining the permanency of hierarchically ordered statuses "at all costs." In such a reductionistic theory, "facts" are sacrificed for "form," equality, informality, and "interpersonal freedom" have been argued out of existence; intimacy, affective involvement, and even the concern for human feelings or esteem have been relegated to nonsignificance in *all* Chinese interpersonal relationships (excepting possibly those within the family which Stover did not discuss). Is this what we are prepared to believe? A world in which statuses are permanently fixed is a static world, and a totally ritualized world yields no room for the expression of human feelings. What happens in the dynamic world in which a person's face and his status co-vary? How does face relate to life in the real world which is not devoid of human feeling? Stover has

not answered these questions. (His views are basically unchanged, as presented in a later publication, Stover & Stover, 1976: 202-207).

The concept of face has been utilized in the analysis of Chinese sociopolitical behavior in a number of recent studies. Hinker (1969: 158; 172-173) interpreted Chinese reactions to forced compliance partly on the basis of face. In his study of authority and conflict in social processes underlying Chinese politics, Solomon (1969: 271-310) argued that the fears of social isolation and the concern for face, developed through sensitivity to shame, make the acceptance of group norms preferable to personal assertiveness. "The adult expression of this sensitivity is embodied in the complex calculus of 'face,' of social approbation for successful management of life's interpersonal responsibilities and ridicule for failures. One could 'lose face' by not observing properly the rituals of deference to others and by not fulfilling the obligations which were implied by the social pattern of authority and dependence" (Solomon, 1971: 109). In a similar vein, Wilson (1970) maintained that the concern for face is learned early in the socialization process of Chinese children, largely through shaming techniques involving threats of denying love. He further contended that this concern for face may be intimately related to "values that support a predominately vertical group structure and centralized authority pattern" (p. xi) in Chinese political systems. Ho (1974) related face to meeting social demands, emphasized the reciprocity of face, and argued that traditionally it has the functional significance of avoiding conflict or, more precisely, confrontation in Chinese social processes.

Most writers on the subject of face, whether social scientists or lay persons, Chinese or Westerners, have taken for granted or tacitly assumed that face behavior is characteristic of only the Chinese, or more inclusively, Orientals. However, it must have

occurred to many keen observers that the concern for face, so basic to Chinese social life, may well be one of the universals of human society. Hu (1944) began her paper as follows "While the desire for prestige exists in every human society, the value placed upon it and the means for attaining it vary considerably . . . society may have formed different conceptions of even the most universal aspects of human life" (p. 45). Hu thus appears to have treated face as a particularistic Chinese manifestation of the universal category, i.e., prestige. Issacs (1958) clearly rejected the view that face behavior is unique to the Chinese, who he maintained, however, have developed a great knack for it. He stated: "There is nothing uniquely Chinese about the business of gaining, saving, or losing 'face' — it goes on *in some form* in every society. But the Chinese acquired a great skill for it, turning it almost into an art form, full of formal conventions, yet extraordinarily satisfying in its effects" (p. 385, italics added). Writing within the framework of sociological theory, Goffman (1955, 1956, 1959) interpreted what he calls "face-work" as a subtle type of interpersonal encounter calculated to avoid embarrassment, or loss of poise, and to maintain for others an impression of self-respect — in short, as a game of "self-elevation and other derogation." Face was defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is the image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (1955: 213). Goffman was explicit in stating that face-work is found in all societies, though it is manifested in different ways in the ritual elements of social interaction. He acknowledged that his terminology of face-work was borrowed from the Chinese usage, and drew his knowledge of face in Chinese society from the work of Hu and from Martin Yang's definition of face as "consciousness of one's own prestige" (Yang, 1945: 169). However, it must be pointed out that Goffman's conception of face does not

follow entirely that of the Chinese. Face-work is meant to refer only to the immediate respect or lack of it shown to oneself by others in specific encounters; in other words, it is entirely situational. As he explained it, "the person's face clearly is something that is not lodged in or on his body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted." (p. 214).

In his recent paper, Ho (1976) defined face as follows:

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person claims for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and of the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to the person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgments of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him. In terms of two interacting parties, face is the reciprocated compliance, respect, and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party. (p. 883)

The arguments of the paper can be conveniently summarized in the following propositions.

1. *Mien-tzu* should not be characterized in simple quantitative terms. In general, a person's *mien-tzu* is commensurate with his social status; it is, however, not fixed in amount, but varies according to the social situation and the group with which he is interacting. Furthermore, the claim to *mien-tzu* may rest on a variety of grounds — on the basis of an ascribed versus an achieved status, and on personal versus nonpersonal factors.

2. Losing face and gaining face are not to

be regarded as simply opposites of each other. Both losing face and gaining face must be specified as being relative to the level of expectation, i.e., to what is originally claimed by the individual. Face is gained when social performance goes above and beyond duty, expectations, or requirements. It is lost when, and only when, (a) conduct or performance falls below the minimally acceptable level, (b) the individual, either through actions (or inaction) of his own or of other people closely related to him, fails to meet certain essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies, or (c) under particular circumstances, one's reputation or *ming-yu* has suffered irreparable damage, though through no fault of one's own (e.g., in the case of a woman being raped in traditional Chinese society when "chastity" was a moral imperative). While it is not a necessity for an individual to strive to gain face, he must avoid losing face and maintain his face to which he is already entitled in order to function effectively in society.

3. Reciprocity is inherent in face behavior. The concern for face exerts a mutually restrictive, even coercive, power over each member in his social network. Social control based on face, however, should be distinguished from that based on authority.

4. To say what face is not would serve to delineate the concept more sharply. Thus, face is not a personality variable; rather, it is what other people have recognized and extended to the individual. Face is not a standard of behavior; rather, standards of behavior, which are culturally prescribed, must be observed if face is to be maintained. Face is not status; rather, the claim to face is commensurate with status, whether achieved or ascribed. Face is not honor and dignity; rather, honor or dignity may be among the ingredients which an individual has included in his definition of face. Finally, face is not personal prestige; rather, prestige is one of the sources to the claim of face.

5. Defined at a high level of generality, face is universal. It is a useful construct in the analysis of social interaction, particularly in (a) the maintenance of one's standing in society through meeting social expectations, (b) potential conflicts arising from discrepancies between what a person claims from others versus what is extended to him by others, (c) the reciprocity of social control, and (d) those aspects of social behavior which lie beyond the realm of individual responsibility and subjective volition. A study of the variations in which face behavior is manifest in diverse cultural settings would sensitize social scientists to the deficiencies in current conceptualizations of man's social existence, which are traceable to their preoccupation with individualism.

6. Face is not a superfluous concept according to the principle of parsimony in science. Its distinctive meanings are not reducible to other constructs already available in the repertory of scientific terms. Therefore, it is believed by the author that a case has been made to justify the incorporation of the term "face" into the vocabulary of social science as well as for the serious study of face behavior in social processes.

In conclusion, several salient points seem to emerge from the critical review of the literature above: (a) Serious conceptual and methodological difficulties are often present, even in studies reported in the social science literature, which render the validity of the investigators' conclusions ambiguous and suspect. Ethnocentric bias constitutes a major source of these difficulties. (b) There is a consensus of opinion that the rituals of face behavior operate to avoid confrontation and to conserve the traditional Chinese sociopolitical structure characterized by the dominance of vertical authority relationships. (c) Observers are unanimously agreed that Chinese attach great importance to face; there is disagreement, however, on whether or not this is unique to them.

Stereotype of the Chinese Concern for Face

Accepting the proposition that face behavior is universal, we are still left with the question: What are the factors that have given rise to the stereotype that Chinese are particularly, even excessively, concerned with face? Is there any truth to this stereotype? Formulated empirically, the question becomes: Do the Chinese, as a people, in fact attach a greater degree of importance to face in comparison with other peoples? To say the least, the question is a difficult one to answer, and presents a challenging exercise in methodological considerations in cross-cultural research.

To begin with, validity in interpersonal perceptions is a problem of great concern to the psychologist. It has long been known that the same stimulus object or situation can be perceived differently by various people under different conditions. The problem of judging persons needs to be examined even more closely when members with different cultural backgrounds are involved. For one thing, difficulties in communication often become almost insuperable. I find it quite difficult to accept the readiness with which Agassi and Jarvie (1969) dismissed the issue of language barrier as irrelevant in their interpretation of face behavior among Hong Kong Chinese. Social science literature is replete with studies on communication failures due to language barriers and how these failures make it difficult for peoples of different national groups to achieve mutually satisfactory relationships (e.g., Campa, 1951; Saunders, 1954). But language barriers constitute only a part of the difficulties in communication. Nonverbal communication presents an even harder problem for the foreigner to master (see, for example, Morsbach, 1973). In a study of emotional expressions in Chinese literature, Klineberg (1938) noted that there are both similarities as well as dissimilarities between Chinese and Westerners in how their

emotions are expressed. He pointed to the possibility of misinterpreting the behavior of other peoples by failing to understand their facial, motoric, and gestural expressions, which he called "emotional language" (Klineberg, 1940; 1964: 136). That such errors of interpretation can be an important barrier to friendly relations between peoples of two cultures was suggested as early as 1894 by Hearn (1894: "The Japanese Smile", 656-683).

Moreover, failures in communication can also be traced to the mutual ignorance of the other's culture, particularly the unwritten or implicit codes of conduct which are generally understood and observed by members of the same group. Even among educated national delegates to the UNESCO, clashes have occurred which can often be traced to their different cultural orientations (Telberg, 1950). The behavior of other peoples often appears strange to us because we naively have our own frame of reference in judging them. Consequently, an action not interpreted in its proper social context is likely to give rise to much misunderstanding. It is not surprising, therefore, that newcomers to a culture, not cognizant of the subtle implicit codes of conduct of the local people, often find themselves in awkward and even embarrassing situations, since their usual approach to interpersonal interactions seem no longer applicable. Disoriented, they are tempted to view the other people as "inscrutable."⁴ Thus, in the words of Agassi and Jarvie (1969: 136), the Westerner "has met The Inscrutable East" — describing the frustrations experienced in his encounters with the local people of Hong Kong. But, of course, to say that the East (or the West) is inscrutable is an admission of ignorance. Stereotyped notions have an amazing ability to survive!

The preceding discussion points to a major difficulty in the comparative study of face behavior cross-culturally — that different standards of behavior, rooted in cultural value

orientations, are involved in how face is judged in different societies. Take, for instance, the different styles of ostentatious displays of wealth and influence to enhance one's face. Traditionally, Chinese are well-known for arranging elaborate birthday feasts (particularly for those of high generational rank), weddings, funerals, etc. — often well beyond their means. To Westerners (and many present-day Chinese), such extravagant observance of ceremonial occasions may imply what appears to them as an excessive concern for face. But we can also see the significance of conspicuous consumption, as in “keeping up with the Joneses,” in demonstrating or enhancing one's social standing, or what Chinese call face, in Western societies. In both instances, the desire for gaining face operates, but is expressed through different social actions. That is, within each society, the degree of importance attached to an action and the likelihood that this action involves face judgments are correlated; but the same action may assume different degrees of importance, and thus not entail face judgments to the same extent, in different societies. Another example, which dramatizes the differences in value applied to face judgments, is in the area of sexual and courtship behavior. In traditional Chinese society, a girl who was known to have lost her virginity, would certainly lose face; it was a serious matter, one which sometimes might result in her committing suicide as a last resort to regain her face. On the other hand, an American female college student who does not have a date on a weekend may also feel a loss of face, particularly if it is known to her and her peers that “everyone else” seems to have one.

That the Chinese concern for face takes precedence over the requirements of objective reality is often spoken of in conjunction with another stereotype, namely, “Chinese indirection” (see Issacs, 1958); La Barra, 1946: 378; Smith, 1894; Stover, 1962: 366-367). This “indirection” refers to the

style of communication in which one's opinions and intentions are not openly stated with “straightforwardness”, but are conveyed through intermediaries or indirectly and would thus necessitate that the other parties make their own inferences about one's opinions and intentions. Again, differences in the codes of conduct have contributed to the formation of this stereotype. Chinese “indirection” probably can be best interpreted in the light of the Confucian emphasis on harmony, or the negation of conflict, as a prime principle for social relationships. The Confucian motto, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others,”⁵ is embodied in the reciprocity of face behavior; to give face to others is no less important than to safeguard one's own. In fact, one may even lose face by not showing a proper regard for the face of others. The idea of pushing people to the limit is abhorred: One must *liu-mien-tzu* (leave or spare *mien-tzu*) even for one's defeated adversaries. Extending a due regard for the face of others has the functional significance of avoiding embarrassment, open conflict or confrontation in traditional social processes, and “indirection” is one of the behavioral manifestations of this regard.

The traditional Chinese mode of dealing with conflicts thus allows for mutual face-saving. However, inherent in this mode is the danger that it can lead merely to confrontation avoidance without a genuine resolution of underlying conflicts. The idea of needing to show a regard for the face of others is, of course, not entirely alien to Western societies. Although this regard does not seem to have priority over conflict resolution, it would be naive, as I have argued, to believe that face does not figure in social processes involving conflict in Western societies. The Chinese view would be that Western man is more prone to have open interpersonal conflicts precisely because of his lack of appreciation for the importance of protecting the face of others.

We see thus that great variations can be found in what constitutes face in different cultural contexts. By applying his own value orientations in viewing Chinese face behavior (in all likelihood, unknowingly), the Westerner would feel that Chinese are overly concerned with matters that appear to him as not as significant as what has been attached to them — in other words, with face. This is yet another instance of what can happen when members of different cultural backgrounds, each ignorant of the other's, interact. Furthermore, we need to be aware of the historical context in which Westerners came into contact with Chinese during the last hundred years or so — not as equals, but as nationals of victorious countries coming to a country near starvation, torn by internal strife, repeatedly defeated in war, and in imminent danger of being dissected and colonized by the world's great powers. Given this context, it is understandable that ethnocentric bias might have been reinforced in the interpretation of Chinese behavior.

Now, I do not wish to imply that the whole question concerning stereotypes of Chinese face behavior can be fully dealt with just by pointing at ethnocentrism as a convenient explanation. Ethnocentrism may not be the only factor responsible for the formation of the stereotypes. It is natural to associate face with people who have a well-developed language for representing face behavior. The very fact that the English word "face" derived its figurative meaning from the Chinese (see *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 1944; *Webster's Dictionary*, 1958) lends itself to the strengthening of the association. The Chinese language must be credited for having captured the symbolic representation of face behavior since ancient times. As early as the fourth century B.C., the word "*mien*" had already acquired its figurative meaning (Hu, 1944: 45). The many expressions pertaining to face, which had been added to the language in the course of Chinese history, constitute a rich source of verbal data for the study of

face behavior. At the same time, they reflect the high degree of awareness that Chinese have of the significance of face in social exchanges. Included in this awareness is the undesirability of being excessively concerned with face. The expression "so-and-so *ai mien-tzu* ('loves *mien-tzu*')", for instance, carries the negative connotation that the person so depicted is too concerned with the image or external front he wants to project to others.

In conclusion, to say simply that Chinese attach an overriding importance to face would not, in itself, add much to our knowledge of their social behavior. A more accurate formulation would be that they are *more conscious of the significance of face in social processes* than are other peoples. After all, they have had the benefit of a language for the symbolic representation of face behavior since early history. Lacking such a language, however, does not mean that face behavior is absent or unimportant in a society. What needs to be considered is what matters are likely, and what are not likely, to involve the question of face — i.e., what matters are considered important, and what are not. Thus, instead of attempting to show which ethnic group attaches a greater degree of importance to face than do other groups, a more meaningful conceptual approach would be to study the variations in face behavior in different cultural contexts. In this regard, a study of the changes in face behavior in Chinese before and after the People's Republic of China came into being in 1949 would be particularly instructive.⁶ A great number of generalizations by early writers about Chinese behavior and character now seem to us rather absurd when we turn to look at contemporary Chinese society.

But what is this thing called face? It is all very well if you don't stop to think, but the more you think the more confused you grow. There seem to be many kinds: each class in society has a different face. There are certain

limits to face, and if you fall short of the limit you lose face, if you don't mind losing face you are shameless, while if you rise above that limit you gain face. Different people lose face in different ways. For example, we think nothing of it if a rickshaw man sits by the roadside stripped to the waist to catch lice, whereas if a rich man's son-in-law sits by the roadside stripped to the waist to catch lice he loses face. It is not that a rickshaw man has no face, only that he does not lose it in this case; but if his wife kicks him and he lies down to howl, he loses face. This rule for face-losing applies to the upper classes too. And it might seem that the upper classes have more opportunities of losing face, but this is not necessarily so either (Lu Hsun, 1934).

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FOOTNOTES

2. There are many expressions pertaining to face behavior in Japanese: *Kao* (face), *men* (face or mask), *metsu* (mien-tzu), *taimen* (t'i-mien; see footnote 3), *kōgan muchi* (brazen-faced and shameless), *tetsumempi* (brazen-faced), *tsura no kawa ga atsui* (thick-skinned), *kao o akarameru* (get red in the face, with the connotation of shyness), *sekimen suru* (get red in the face, with the connotation of shame), *taimen o kegasu* (to disgrace one's t'i-mien), *kao ga tatanai* (cannot face), *kao ga tsubureru* (lose face), *memboku o nakusu* or *memmoku o nakusu* (lose face), and *kao o tateru* (save someone else's face). For a discussion of face in Japan, see Doi, 1973.

According to Mauss (1954:38), face is also of great importance to North-West American Indians – no less than it is to the Chinese. He stated, "Kwakiutl and Haida noblemen have the same notion of 'face' as the Chinese mandarin or officer."

3. One of these concerns the meaning of *t'i-mien*. Hu (1944:55) stated, "In *t'i-mien*, 'good looking', the concept of beauty is associated with that of social approval. A person good to look at is said to be *t'i-mien*, but he may also 'act *t'i-mien*' by showing himself generous." She appears to have implied that esthetics is a criterion for judging *t'i-mien*. I believe that Hu is in error, on this point. Physical beauty or looks have little, if any, to do with *t'i-mien*. It is also possible to speak of the *t'i-mien* of groups, organizations, and even nations, as in *kuo-chia ti t'i-mien* (the *t'i-mien* of the nation), where "*t'i-mien*" comes very close in meaning to "honor" or "dignity". For example, during the years of the Vietnam War, one often came across in the Chinese press the statement, "The only way for the United States to *t'i-mien* (gracefully or with honor) leave Indo-China is for her to withdraw all her armed forces from it." (Interestingly enough, however, to many observers it is precisely the fear of losing face – or what has been called "credibility" – that constitutes one of the reasons for the continued armed presence of the United States in Indo-China. In an interview with reporters from Japan's Asahi newspaper, Premier Chou En-lai was quoted as saying, "There are certain people who say that face will be lost if military power is withdrawn; however, withdrawing troops is the best possible method of gaining face." It is obvious that face also matters in international politics).

4. As in the expression, "The inscrutable Oriental," It should be noted that Orientals seldom describe

Occidentals as "inscrutable," although they are, of course, just as likely to become disoriented in unfamiliar cultural situations. Does it mean that Orientals tend to view differences in behavior between ethnic groups more readily in terms of their cultural differences?

5. As is stated in *Lun Yü* or *Analects* "Tsze-kung asked, saying, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' The Master said, 'Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others'" (XV. xxiii; translated by James Legge). Also, in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, "When one cultivates to the utmost the principles of his nature, and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity, he is not far from the path. What you do not like when done to yourself, do not do to others" (XIII. iii; translated by James Legge). The motto taken from *Lun Yü* is the more popularized version. It is interesting to note that, whereas the Golden Rule in the Bible (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you) is a prescription for desirable actions, the Confucian motto is a prescription against undesirable actions.
6. For a discussion of Chinese Communist efforts to eradicate the traditional styles of face-related behavior, see Ho (1974), Hu, et al. (1960: 493-4), and Stover (1962: 356-8). Erza Vogel, Edger H. Schein, Robert J. Lifton, and Richard H. Solomon have studied in depth the sociopolitical process of cohesion and conflict, with which face is related, in the People's Republic of China.