

Key Culture Concepts: Face

THE CULT OF “FACE”

“China-Mike”

Of all the idiosyncrasies of Chinese culture, the concept of “Face” is perhaps most difficult for Westerners to fully grasp. And because “saving face” is such a strong motivating force in China, it’s also one of the most important concepts in understanding the Chinese Mind.

GAINING AND LOSING FACE IS SERIOUS BUSINESS

So don’t treat this concept of face too lightly....especially if you’re doing business or spending a long time in China. Foreigners working in China (who don’t appreciate the full cultural importance of face) often complain that their Chinese counterparts are “too sensitive” about being offended or having their feelings hurt. Similarly, many ex-pats in China—as well as other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore—can tell you stories of how their local friend suddenly stopped talking to them (probably because they somehow caused them to lose face).

And from the Western perspective, it is true—the Chinese are generally more sensitive to any perceived slights having to do with losing face since it’s so ingrained in their culture. This cultural thin-skin is largely a product of culture that has valued social harmony as the prime rule (and generally avoided criticism). In the West, many of these slights are seen as minor and quickly forgotten. But in China, failing to appreciate face can cause serious problems. While an American businessperson might be respected back home for his frankness and being a “straight-shooter,” he would likely be viewed in China as uncultured, overbearing, and rude.

SO HOW DO YOU DEFINE IT EXACTLY?

As a sociological construct, the Chinese concept of face is difficult to define. The closest translations are along the lines of “pride”, “dignity” or “prestige”. But these don’t tell the whole story.

Face-management is much more than just impression management (or “protecting and enhancing your ego”) in the Western sense. Of course, no one — regardless of culture—wants to look bad or have their ego bruised. But the Chinese concept goes beyond the narrow Western concept of face (and is perhaps closer to the Arab concept of “honor”).

WESTERN FACE VS CHINESE FACE

Unlike “Western face”—which is more self-oriented and individualistic — Chinese face is more other-directed and relational. In other words, it’s less about your own personal pride or ego, and more about how one is viewed by others. Unlike Western face, Chinese face can also be given or earned. It can also be taken away or lost.

GUILT-BASED VS SHAME-BASED CULTURES

Without digging too deep sociologically, suffice it to say that this social phenomenon of face has a lot to do with the teachings of Confucius. He taught that if you lead people “with excellence and

Key Culture Concepts: Face

put them in their place through roles and ritual practices, in addition to developing a sense of shame, they will order themselves harmoniously.”

Here we see that the flip side of gaining honor is avoiding shame. Thousands of years ago, China developed into a shame-based culture. This is in contrast to Western cultures, which are more “guilt” or “conscience-based”.

In China, shame isn’t just personal feelings—again, it’s a relationship-based thing that serves as a form of social control. Any sort of family or clan-kinship shame is covered up. This is also in stark contrast to the US, where airing your dirty laundry and private business on talk shows is seen as socially acceptable.

YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH!

Western cultures tend to think in terms of “truth” and “rightness” (where being innocent and right is most important). Westerners are taught to respect objectivity and facts. The law applies equally to everyone the same and our behavior is something that should be directed by our consciences.

In contrast, Chinese society has always functioned on the basis of personal relationships rather than objective customs and laws. Indeed, the rules and laws laid down were often to serve those in power (and often arbitrary and ever-changing). Complicating matters, Confucian teachings say that you’re supposed to treat people differently depending on your relative statuses.

As a result, Chinese “ethics” has never been based on universal principles of good and bad. Instead, they’re more based on the circumstances of the moment—a system that the West calls “situational ethics” (much to the chagrin of people doing business in China). Similarly, the Chinese concept of the “truth” is not black or white either. The emphasis is less on always telling the objective “truth,” and more about what the situation and relationship calls for.

This difference helps explain the cultural differences on lying. The Chinese will go through great lengths to protect face (their own as well as others). In fact, it’s perfectly acceptable to tell a lie—even a bald-faced one—if it serves to protect face. China’s culture of shame doesn’t think of lies in terms of “right” and “wrong.” Instead, the goal of Chinese truth is often to protect the face of an individual, group, or even nation. In these situations, both parties can usually read between the lines and know when the “truth” is being re-packaged to help protect face (and they unfortunately will often assume that Westerners will know as well).

TIPS FOR GIVING FACE:

Praising someone publicly (especially in front of their elders or boss).

Treating someone to an expensive meal or banquet (the most common face-giving technique that makes Chinese business and society run).

Key Culture Concepts: Face

Giving sincere compliments and showing that you're enjoying oneself when being treated out.

Giving an expensive gift, especially an imported one.

AVOID THESE FACE-LOSING SITUATIONS:

Openly criticizing, challenging, disagreeing with, or denying someone.

Calling someone out on a lie.

Not showing proper deference to elders or superiors.

Turning down an invitation with an outright no (instead, they usually say "maybe", "yes, maybe", "we'll do our best", "let's think/talk about it later," or "I need to discuss it with so-and so first").

Being late on a flimsy excuse (demonstrates that you don't respect or take them seriously).

Interrupting someone while they are talking.

Being angry at someone – mutual loss of face for both parties.

Revealing someone's lack of ability or knowledge (such as being able to speak English).

<http://www.china-mike.com/chinese-culture/understanding-chinese-mind/cult-of-face/>

Discussion Questions

1. Before you read this piece, had you ever thought about "face" before? If so, what did you think about it?
2. The author mentions that "while an American businessperson might be respected back home for his frankness and being a 'straight-shooter,' he would likely be viewed in China as uncultured, overbearing, and rude." How should the importance of face affect our communication style while living in China?
3. Can you explain the differences between guilt-based cultures and shame-based cultures? How might this difference affect the way we share the good news?
4. "Situational ethics" are the norm in China, and have been for centuries. What challenges does this concept present to us as both teachers and bearers of good news?
5. Cheating among students in China has a lot to do with face. What do you think the connections are between cheating and face?
6. If "revealing someone's lack of ability or knowledge" can cause loss of face, how do we handle this as teachers who will undoubtedly encounter students with poor English?
7. Were there any tips mentioned at the end which you found strange or surprising? Any that you think may be difficult for you to get used to?