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## **FACE: A CHINESE CONCEPT IN A GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY**

**Xiaoying Qi**

**University of Western Sydney**

*Abstract*

The concept of face, as it is developed by Goffman, has strong conceptual links with the notion of a 'looking-glass' self outlined by Adam Smith and developed sociologically by Cooley. It also has links with the Chinese concept of face, which relates to the transfer of social science concepts from one cultural setting to another. By discussing the specificity and universality of face the paper indicates the significance of the Chinese concept of face in a global sociology. The paper goes on to examine aspects of the treatment of the Chinese concept of face and in doing so presents a more comprehensive account of a sociological conceptualisation of face. The paper then considers the relationship between face and emotions in indicating the mechanisms that underlie face. Finally, a distinction is made between face as an embedded social process and as an object of social contestation.

Key words: face, *mianzi*, *lian*, emotion, conformity, Goffman.

## FACE: A CHINESE CONCEPT IN A GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY

### Introduction

The question of the mobility of social science concepts from one cultural setting to another has recently been raised as a matter of significance for the development of social science 'on a world scale' (Connell 2007). The application of concepts drawn from non-Western experience and social theory in the development of a 'global' social science raises questions concerning the capacity of 'local' concepts to provide explanations of non-local, even universal phenomena. An early and unrecognised instance of such a development is Goffman's now classic elaboration of the concept of face. While not highlighting his reliance on the Chinese conception of face, which he nevertheless acknowledges in a footnote at the beginning of his discussion (Goffman 1972: 5-6 footnote 1), Goffman's argument is therefore an instance of the benefits of cross-cultural borrowing in achievement of theoretical development.

The present paper shows that sociological analysis of the concept of face can continue to benefit from discussion of Chinese distinctions and conceptualisations. This is because while face is indeed a universal phenomenon, namely the social anchoring of self in the gaze of others, the Chinese experience of face highlights aspects of face that are less visible in non-Chinese societies. The notion of face is therefore appropriate in demonstrating the benefits, indeed, intellectual necessity under conditions of globalisation, of incorporating non-Western concepts into mainstream theorizing in generation of a global social science. The importance of face in modestly contributing to this development derives from its elemental role in human sociality in general, and at the same time its high salience in Chinese society in particular. In demonstrating the value of drawing on Chinese experience and understanding of face in elaborating a concept basic to Western social science (as we shall see in Smith and Cooley as well as Goffman) the remote and exotic becomes familiar, and cultural distance is bridged in social science understanding that therefore ceases to be either Western or Eastern but is now shared.

In the discussion to follow it is shown that while there may be specific and distinct cultural elements which determine different aspects of face and while the rules according to which face operates may vary, the imperatives of a self-awareness of social evaluation is universal. In examining treatments of the Chinese concept of face it will be shown that differences between two terms, *lian* and *mianzi*, both of which mean face, raise issues of the distinction between different contextual consideration of face, including its moral and social aspects. Through further discussion of additional distinctions within the concept the paper goes on to provide an account of face which reflects both its comprehensiveness and dynamics. The experience of face generates emotions of various sorts within the individual, which are significant in understanding the mechanisms of face. Finally an additional dimension of the complexity of face is in the fact that it can function not only as a means of social interaction but can become an object of self-conscious consideration and intentional management.

### The specificity and universality of face

Terms such as *mianzi* (face), *guanxi* (interdependent relations), *renqing* (reciprocal favour or benefit) and *huibao* (interdependent obligation), for instance, are readily seen to be indicative of characteristically indigenous Chinese socio-cultural

phenomena, in the sense that they uniquely derive from the Chinese historical experience. It is widely accepted, as Buckley, Clegg and Tan (2006: 276) indicate, that '[t]he need for *mianzi* is intrinsic to various aspects of personal and interpersonal relationship development in China'. *Mianzi* or face is an inevitable and unavoidable aspect of interpersonal encounters, connections and relationships in almost every aspect of social life in China, ranging from informal personal interactions to the most ordered and formal elements of organisational and institutional relationships. It is one of the keys in understanding Chinese politics, economics, business, and education at every level. Hence: '[n]early all Chinese and Western researchers identify face as a major dimension of Chinese culture' (Cardon and Scott 2003: 9).

Face, in the sense presented here, even as a term which is original to Chinese culture, cannot be seen as an exclusively Chinese phenomenon: 'concern for face is not solely an "Asian" phenomenon, as it is found in individuals from all societies and ethnic groups' (Lau and Wong 2008: 52). Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) similarly argue that 'the mutual knowledge of [a person's] public self-image or face, and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction, are universal'. The insight that individuals, irrespective of their cultural background, cannot disregard the opinions or appraisals of others in their own self-understanding, led Goffman (1972: 44) to remark that 'underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same ... [in the sense that one] is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honour, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise'. Through their social relationships individuals seek the approval or respect of others and typically desire to achieve a position of approbation in the social group to which they belong.

The universality of face is widely acknowledged. Zhu (2003: 316), for instance, says: 'people, despite their various cultural backgrounds, are believed to possess self-image/value and want their self-image/value to be appreciated and respected by other members of the community'. This point is reinforced by Hwang *et al* (2003: 74) when they describe face as 'an important pancultural construct to explain the desire for social acceptance'. Ho (1976: 883) similarly argues that face should be regarded as a concept of central importance in sociology 'because of the pervasiveness with which it asserts its influence in social intercourse, it is virtually impossible to think of a facet of social life to which the question of face is irrelevant'. The consensus of a number of writers, from a broad social science background, holds that face includes a socially formed self-image that is essential to the dynamics of the individual's relations with others regardless of their cultural background or national context. The qualification, that while face itself is universal, features important to it in any particular culture may not be general across them all (Ho 1976: 881-2), shall be considered below.

In considering the universality of face it is relevant to mention that the word 'face' may be absent even when the concept is discussed or applied. The term 'looking glass' self, developed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish thinker Adam Smith, captures the details of the relationships of face outlined above:

We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct. If in this view it pleases us, we are tolerably satisfied... if we are doubtful about it, we are often, upon that very account, more anxious to gain their approbation, and ... we are altogether

distracted at the thoughts of their censure, which then strikes us with double severity (Smith quoted in Barbalet 2001: 108).

By imagining how they are seen by others individuals are directed in their behaviour by a self image or face that comes out of their social relations.

A person may not know or be aware of their dependence on the opinion of others, on the importance of face in their own self-image and behaviour, a particularly relevant consideration for understanding face in individualistic cultures in which persons believe themselves to be self-sufficient and autonomous. The point has been made by Cooley, who also uses the term ‘the reflected or looking glass self’ (Cooley 1964: 184) and introduced it into modern sociology:

Many people ... will deny, perhaps with indignation, that ... care [of what others think of them] is an important factor in what they are and do. But this is illusion. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men show coldness or contempt instead of the kindness and deference that he is used to, he will perceive from the shock, the fear, the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we daily walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up (Cooley 1964: 208).

This ‘outgoing of the imagination towards another person’s point of view’, Cooley (1964: 206) observes, ‘means that we are undergoing his influence’.

While there are differences in the degree to which face is regarded as an object of explicit concern that may influence behaviour directly, the underlying processes of face – even if a person is not aware of them – are as general as human society itself. While being an underlying aspect of all social behaviour, face may also be a distinct and distinguishable cultural object in which an explicit concern for face is itself a factor in motivating the actions and influencing the behaviour of individuals. In this case a set of culturally explicit rules will operate by which face is understood as a thing that may be achieved, lost, saved and in any event is required to be at least maintained. Such rules, and the considerations and distinctions they draw upon, arguably indicate aspects of the more universal mechanisms of face. In the next section aspects of the Chinese treatment of face will be discussed in order to prefigure features of face which are broader than the particularly Chinese experience of face.

### **Distinctions within the concept of face**

In a pioneering anthropological account of the ‘Chinese concept face’ the distinction between two Chinese words which both mean face, *lian* and *mianzi*, is explored (Hu 1944)<sup>1</sup>. We shall see that the distinction between these words raises a number of relevant concerns for an understanding of face in general, and the impact of face on self formation and social relations.

The idea that the Chinese concept of face can be regarded as having two component parts, one moral (covered by the term *lian*) and the other social (covered by the term *mianzi*), corresponds to this linguistic distinction. *Lian* is defined by Hu (1944: 45) as ‘respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation ... it represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego’s moral character, the loss of which make it impossible for him to function properly within the community’. *Mianzi*, as distinct from *lian*, according to Hu (1944: 45), ‘stands for the kind of prestige ... [of] a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation ... For this kind of recognition ego is dependent at all times on his external environment’.

The differentiation of *lian* and *mianzi*, representing moral and social aspects of face respectively, is not confined to Hu's account. Earley (1997: 56), for instance, defines '*lian* as a set of rules for moral conduct and *mianzi* as a person's position within a social structure ... *lian* reflects the enactment of "correct" behaviour, whereas *mianzi* reflects an outcome state of social interaction'. But the distinction between moral and social aspects of face, which is not without significance, cannot rest on this linguistic division: the concept of *lian* in fact is not limited to moral connotation and *mianzi* does not necessarily exclude a moral sense. *Mianzi*, Ho (1976: 868) says, is 'not altogether devoid of moral content' and the two terms, *lian* and *mianzi*, 'are not completely differentiated from each other in that the terms are interchangeable in some contexts'. Even in the examples given by Hu, *lian* may be devoid of a moral aspect, as when a lecturer is unable to answer students' questions, he then will have 'his incapability ... proven and his *lien* [*lian*] lost' (Hu 1944: 48). At the same time Hu (1944: 57) provides an example of *mianzi* which shows that it may have moral implications: '[e]verybody knows that X is incapable of holding that job. But of course, he and so-and-so were schoolmates, so so-and-so wanted to give him some *mien-tzu* [*mianzi*]'. Even if Hu believes that an incompetent's achieving a position of employment through nepotism is without moral relevance, X's employment in a job everyone knows he is incapable of holding is not merely social positional.

Indeed, the case for a simple dichotomy between *lian* as moral face and *mianzi* as social face is further weakened by the fact that the concept *lian* does not have a clear cut moral connotation in a number of common Chinese concepts in which *lian* is a part of the expression or term. These include, for instance, such concepts as *zhanglian* (to increase face), *shanglian* (to give face), *fanlian bu renren* (total denial of relations between previously close friends), *da zhonglian chong pangzi* (falsification of credentials and worth to achieve face), *sipo lian* (reckless disregard for previous good relations), *silian* (long face, sulky), *heilian* (bad cop of the 'good cop, bad cop' couple), *honglian* (good cop of the 'good cop, bad cop' couple), among others. If a person believes or feels that he or she has lost *lian* or does not have *lian* when facing others, it does not necessarily indicate that they have transgressed moral standards. For instance, a person who has failed a university entrance examination may be unable to face their parents, teachers and others who had high expectations of him or her. While this is not a situation of moral failure it would conventionally be described as *meilian jian fumu*, as a situation in which the person has no face in front of parents.

Another possible way of distinguishing between *lian* and *mianzi* is to say that the two terms refer to different levels of severity in an incident related to face or to the 'amount' of face a person possesses or has lost or gained. Hsu (1996), for instance, suggests that *lian* may refer to face-relevant situations of great significance or gravity, in which moral wrongdoing may then appear to be an important element of the situation, whereas *mianzi* signifies face in less important or more mundane incidents. A different approach, however, which also avoids the moral/social distinction of *lian* and *mianzi*, operates in terms not of the significance of the situation but the sense of dignity of the person. According to Cheng (1986: 336):

The *mien-tzu* of a person is the uppermost limit of his dignity and social respectability whereas *lien* is ... the minimum social respectability a person has in the society regardless of his actual social position, prestige, wealth or power.

The alternative positions set out here, represented by Hsu (1996) and Cheng (1986), are not necessarily opposed. When *lian* relates to the lower limits of respectability then the marginal impact of moral transgression will be much higher than it would be for *mianzi*, this latter being the upper limits of dignity and therefore a moral space with relatively more latitude than found with *lian*. What is clear in both Hsu's and Cheng's account is that *lian* and *mianzi* can be distinguished in terms of the gravity of the situations which provokes them and not necessarily in the types of values, moral or pragmatic and positional, associated with those situations.

It is worth noting that although she made the distinction between *lian* and *mianzi*, Hu (1944: 62) recognises that '*lien* [*lian*] and *mien-tzu* [*mianzi*] are not two entirely independent concepts'. This is because *lian* and *mianzi* can be used interchangeably in most situations. For instance, both '*zhanglian*' and '*zengjia mianzi*' can be used to mean 'to enhance face' while '*shanglian*' and '*gei mianzi*' may both represent 'to give face'. When referring to a situation of 'to gain face', either '*zheng lianmian*' or '*zheng mianzi*' can be used; 'to maintain one's face', either '*baochi ... lianmian*' or '*baochi...mianzi*' can be used. Both '*shiqu lianmian*' and '*shiqu mianzi*' can mean 'to lose face'.

One possible explanation for the failure in the relevant discussion to find a common basis for the differences between *lian* and *mianzi*, and indeed for the less frequent reference to *lian* (which has not been of concern here), is that *mianzi* is a more variable term which has more applications, and as a consequence it has become the more studied term in academic research. As Cheng (1986: 331-332) notes, '*lien* [*lian*] is a concrete term and a more confined concept than *mien* [*mian*], while *mien* can be said to be more general and less concrete but has more meaning content than *lien*. This should explain why *mien* essentially has more social, moral, civil as well as valuational content than *lien*'. Indeed, my own preference is to use the single term, *mianzi*, while at the same time acknowledging that face has both moral and social aspects which are necessarily interrelated and also that there are differences in the degree to which experience of the power of face can influence self appraisal and a person's behaviour.

### **Further distinctions within the concept of face**

In the English language, in which a singular term for face applies, the explicit distinction between *lian* and *mianzi* is unknown. And yet, as we shall see, another dichotomy emerges, namely the distinction between positive and negative face. According to Goffman (1972: 5):

*face* may be 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 an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes.

While this statement is a useful summary of the concept of face, it may be misleading to insist, as Goffman does, that the social value a person claims for himself must be positively approved. To say that it is 'positive' makes sense in so far as loss of face requires a subtraction from an existing stock of face, which can be assumed to be a positive quantum. But this is not the usual understanding of positive in the context, which is rather taken to be a normative evaluation. This is the way in which Goffman is usually interpreted and no doubt wished to be understood. For face to be meaningful, however, the question is not whether the evaluation is positive in this sense but whether it is socially shared or current. And what is socially shared or approved at one time in a particular social situation and with regard to a specific

social group may be understood quite differently at another time and for a different social group. This is not clearly captured in Goffman's statement.

The idea that a person's having face is associated with that person's 'positive' self evaluation can be understood not normatively but quantitatively in the sense that a loss of face would amount to a subtraction from an existing stock of face. The issue of positive evaluation, in this sense, then, relates to a quantitative relationship between what a person possesses of face and what is socially given – or taken – against the amount of face a person has at any given time. This is what 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself' amounts to and it is how Goffman should be understood.

Difficulty with use of the terms positive and negative in the context of face can be indicated further by briefly considering a view of face which its proponents claim builds on Goffman's research. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61-2) say that 'the public self-image that every [social] member wants to claim for himself' consists of two components, negative face and positive face, with negative face as 'the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others' and positive as 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others'. Brown and Levinson develop their 'politeness theory' of face by relating face to its significant role in human communication, in which negative face ('please excuse me') yields to the other and positive face (expectation of praise) asserts self over the other. The difficulty here is that rather than being a general theory of face, a thin aspect of face is used to develop a theory of communication. The point to be taken from this example is that face must be understood as something possessed by individuals and that is provided to them or taken from them by a complex of social interactions. Whether the face is positive or negative is not a matter of definition but arises from the interactions themselves. But what has been said here suggests that inherent in the distinction between positive and negative face is another distinction, between internal and external or subjective and objective aspects of face.

The relationship between a person's self image and their social standing in the formation of face is noted by a number of writers (Ho 1976: 803; Cheng 1986: 332). The subjective dimension of face is the value or self-regard of a person in their own estimation, in their self-esteem, as it relates to their social relationships and to society at large; while the objective dimension, on the other hand, is the social standing a person possess through the recognition they receive from others in the same society or from a specific person on a given occasion. Cheng (1986: 332), in particular, acknowledges the difference between how a person may imagine they are seen by others and how that person is actually seen by others. The question is not whether others view a person objectively in the sense of a clear, rational or even scientific appraisal but that the person is an 'object' of another's appraisal as opposed to being the 'subject' of their own assessment.

The distinction between subjective and objective aspects of face corresponds with accounts which regard face as the result of dual sources: 'the evaluation of self based on internal and external (to the individual) judgments concerning a person's adherence to moral rules of conduct and position within a given society' (Earley 1997: 43). On this basis face manifests two phases or parts: '[f]irst, there is a distinction between face tied to rules of conduct versus face as a position in a social hierarchy. Second, there is a distinction between the sources of these perceptions, namely, internal versus external reference' (Earley 1997: 55). It is curious that Earley here confines considerations of face to 'adherence to *moral* rules of conduct' when social evaluation of all sorts of competences relating to diverse types of actions and events

can have consequences for loss – and gain – of face as we have seen above. But that matter aside, the distinction he draws between internal and external processes is continuous with the other distinctions referred to above.

What emerges from the preceding discussion in this section and the previous is a more complete appreciation of the component parts and also the underlying processes of face which indicate the complexity of its referents to moral as well as social factors, to differences in the gravity of situations which provoke face considerations and also to the internal or psychological aspects of a person's face as well as the more directly public or social appraisals productive of face. Thus a definition or understanding of face can be constructed which recognises the following elements that emerges from the critical analysis of the concept of face conducted through the preceding discussion.

The first thing to notice is that face is always a self image. That self image can be conceptualised as having two inter-related forms: face is an image of self possessed by a person through their interest in how they are regarded or judged by others, and face is a social representation of a person reflecting the respect, regard or confidence others have in them. Secondly, the evaluations of self which are constitutive of a face state (the state of gaining, losing, recovering or maintaining face) are necessarily socially current and never personal or idiosyncratic, and therefore the evaluations leading to face function in terms of the self's successful performance of actions socially understood as representing or reflecting those values (in the case of gaining, recovering and maintaining face) or unsuccessful performance, negligence or negation of those values as represented in actions or expressions of attitude (in the case of losing face). Third, the particular values salient for face can be moral, pragmatic or utilitarian, and social positional.

It is important to emphasise that while the particular content of the values mentioned above is not fixed, and therefore that there is variation between different societies and through time in a single society, social values are the essential currency of face. Judgements of right and wrong, of capacities to perform skilled accomplishments and of social standing relative to others all relate to a sense of a person's fulfilment of obligations to him or herself as a member of a social group and contributor to a social network and therefore also to the group or network itself. Finally, the idea that face is socially provided to persons or taken by them through the fulfilment of 'obligations' means that social judgements of a person's performance against the values salient for face is always in terms of social expectations. The social approval and disapproval generative of face, then, has a continuously prospective element, connected with what is socially expected. Attributions of face are never fixed or static but dynamically subject to change both in terms of the individual's behaviour and its social appraisal and also in terms of the values and expectations which govern those appraisals.

What have not been identified in the definition of face set out above are the mechanisms that align a social evaluation of a person's face with the self image possessed by the face 'holder'. This is the question of the interaction between inner and outer processes, between a person's own perception of his or her social self-image or face and the perception other people form of that person's social 'worth' or 'standing'. When face is seen to be subject to not only external or social judgment but also to internal assessments, then the relevance of emotions becomes central to face considerations and to the internal mechanisms of face.

## **Face and emotions**



Face arises in social interactions or relationships which are in turn responsible for emotional experiences, and it is these latter that underlie the processes of face. The social basis of face provides it with contingent or conditional qualities which are experienced in terms of emotional feelings. The conditionality of face is captured in Goffman's (1972: 10) statement that 'while [a person's] social face can be his most personal possession and the centre of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it'.

Face is what a person feels about his or her image as it is seen through the eyes of others, of the person's social group, community or a wider public. When a person sees his or her own image in this social 'mirror' constituted by others, as discussed above in the account of the 'looking-glass' self, that person's emotional state will inevitably be affected by the vision their imagination presents and will be involved in the processes of feeling pride, embarrassment or whatever state the individual's face is formed through and responds to. As Goffman (1972: 6) observes: 'a person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him'.

Face, therefore, is not to be detached or separated from emotion but, rather, face is infused with different emotions and exists in terms of them. As Jia (2001: 31) argues, 'emotion intertwines and overlaps with *lian/mianzi*'. Viewing oneself through the eyes of others, one's face may be enhanced (gain face), maintained (unchanged face), protected (saved face), or reduced (loss of face). In gaining face, persons experience feelings associated with pride, honour and dignity. When a person maintains his or her face, in Goffman's (1972: 8) words is 'in face', then that person 'responds with feelings of confidence and assurance'. When a person saves his or her own face, which unlike the maintenance of face requires not merely social acceptance of a given state but the purposeful activity of the person directed to his or her presentation to others, that person is likely to feel a sense of relief and security. When a person loses face, or as Goffman (1972: 8) puts it, is 'in wrong face or out of face', then 'he is likely', Goffman continues, 'to feel ashamed and inferior because of what has happened to the activity on his account and because of what may happen to his reputation as a participant'. Depending on the seriousness of the matter and a person's perception and psychological bearing, the feelings that they will experience may range from embarrassment to shame, from incompetency to inferiority. There is confirmation of this perspective in the findings which Redding and Ng (1982: 215) report that strong feelings of pride, satisfaction, and confidence followed from gaining face while strong feelings of shame accompanied losing face.

The emotional components of face are not simply a product or residue of experiences of face and changes in face, they are the drivers of the dynamic motion of the face states, including the gaining, losing, recovering and the maintaining of face. In social terms emotions arise out of the interactions between persons and in that sense are social products. Subjectively emotions give direction to and energise actions. The importance of emotions to face, then, is not simply that changes in face states produce emotional responses but in the fact that the particular emotions produced by different face states are the mechanisms that lead to the stabilization of or to changes in those face states. The feeling of shame, for instance, associated with the loss of face, provides its subject with a painful signal of the social disapproval of his or her transgression and motivates a withdrawal from the society of others. The shamed isolation of an individual is itself a penalty that brings with it various painful deprivations which motivate remorseful shame that signals to others the subject's

recognition of his or her transgression and also the person's sorrow about their previous behaviour and a desire to make amends. This is the beginning of recovering face and is facilitated by the emotional components of face. As a subjective experience, then, emotions are directed to not only internal feelings but also to particular ways of relating to and interacting with others. This is connected with a further aspect of face, namely, the way in which one person's experience of face is supported and encouraged by their emotional feelings, and by feelings-related actions of others.

Since face is crucial to each person's normal operation in their own social networks, a person is expected not only to look after their own face but also to maintain the face of others. There are frequently social obligations to give face, maintain and also save the face of another in order for a person to perform their own role or maintain their own position in their social circumstances and location. That is why a person also has 'feelings about the face sustained for the other participants', as Goffman (1972: 6) puts it. By enhancing the face of another, one may achieve a sense of power, fulfilment or joy depending on the relationship between the two persons and also possibly the motives of the face giver. By rescuing the face of another, one may have feelings of benevolence, or empathy or guiltlessness. There are two possible orientations, as Goffman points out: 'a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the others' face' (Goffman 1972: 14). A person's achievement of face therefore involves not only what society provides to him or her but also what that person offers to others in society. Each of these is accomplished through the emotional experiences that social interaction conveys.

While most studies of face have confined themselves to the social production of an individual's face, there is another side of face, then, in which a person's face is also the consequence of what they provide to other members of society. This matter is less frequently discussed even though it is an essential aspect of face and one which is given greater relief in the context of a recognition that face functions in terms of emotional experiences, and of the reciprocal nature of emotions.

### **The dual forms of face**

It can be seen from what has been shown above that face is a complex but efficient force of social control in social interactions, which includes incentives and sanctions enforced through both subjective and socially current perceptions and expectations. Individual experiences of face will necessarily be pleasurable or painful, depending on whether face is gained, say, or lost. The role of these and other emotional feelings is central to the way in which face, as a social force, promotes social conformity. Although he does not use the term face, Barbalet (2001: 108) finds these processes in Smith's understanding that 'social harmony and order are maintained, not by the subject's feelings for others, but by the subject's feelings concerning how they are regarded by others'. These mechanisms of face operate instantly, efficiently and automatically. In order to maintain face, a person will tend to represent themselves or behave in a way that leads to their social acceptance or respect. The positive or negative response from other members of a society toward that person then reinforces such behaviour and leads to continual and further conformity. When it encourages socially approved behaviour, then face enhances social harmony and stability. In this vein it has been suggested that in Chinese society concern for face similarly serves to 'regulate the perceived appropriate social behaviour of the Chinese, thus maintaining social harmony' (Lau and Wong 2008: 53).

One of the problems with social conformity or harmony as a valued outcome of social relations, including those of face, is that the possible costs for not only individual independence but also for society as a whole, depend significantly on the specific content of the object or nature of what is conformed to. In a landmark social psychological study of conformity Asch, reporting an experimental situation in which the majority of participants were instructed by the investigator to give completely erroneous responses to the subject of the experiment, found that 'three-quarters of the subjects in the study were swayed at least once by the majority responses, only one quarter remained completely independent' (quoted in Scheff 1988: 402). In discussing Asch's conformity experiments Scheff (1988: 403) indicates that people find it extremely painful to perceive or imagine that they are negatively evaluated by others. When face leads to the approval of error (factual or moral), inappropriate or wrongful behaviour, vanity or the overvaluing of socially trivial characteristics such as celebrity or sporting success, and when face consideration rewards inconsequential or misguided achievements, then behaviour designed to maintain or achieve face can arguably be seen as a destructive force. During the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) in China, for instance, illiteracy was socially encouraged and education was condemned. Perhaps everyone in China at the time was familiar with the social praise of and the giving of face to Zhang Tiesheng for handing in a blank examination paper. In this way young people in China during the Cultural Revolution gained face by avoiding school, joining *Hong Weibing* (Red Guard) and tormenting and harassing distinguished intellectuals. In this instance face was part of the process which led the country to chaos and destroyed not only social justice but the best interests of countless young people.

As a mechanism for the maintenance of social order, and especially conformity, the impact of face on a person and indeed on their society will be dependent on the nature of the social order to which conforming behaviour is orientated. Face only entails the tendency to take pleasure in social approbation and to experience pain in meeting social disapproval or condemnation. At the same time, and through the same processes or mechanisms a person may feel that their own preferences or values are subverted in circumstances in which fear of loss of face, for example, leads to conforming on the grounds of a matter that independently of social approval may have been simply shrugged off or ignored. Under such conditions a face-focussed individual may jeopardise not only his or her normal social functioning but his or her own best interests and the interests of their associates. The question raised by these considerations is the possibility of the reification of face, the generation of face as a conscious project of social relations.

It has been shown that face can be seen as a consequence or outcome of social interactions, encounters and relationships, and that face gives rise to emotions that are experienced as either pleasure or pain. It is possible, then, that face considerations may go beyond a mere mechanism associated with social approval and disapproval of the thing that gives rise to face or subtracts from it, and that face itself becomes an object of self-conscious consideration. It is possible, then, that persons may be engaged in the construction of face as a self-conscious project, not only to achieve the pleasure of social approval and avoid the pain of social disapproval or censure, but also to engage in a politics of face as an explicit social practice. Indeed, this may be a normal aspect of face under certain circumstances as when there is an absence in a society of other explicit bases of social control or conformity, such as law or organised religion that functions in terms of a sin-morality – neither of which has traditionally operated in China, for example. Under these circumstances face work

becomes more or less disengaged from the everyday and normal exchanges between individuals and becomes instead a matter of primary concern; rather than an effect of social interactions it becomes the purpose of social engagements. This is a second order of face when face becomes an explicit and conscious purpose of interaction rather than a means of interaction.

What has been shown in the discussion above, however, is that in those societies in which face is an explicit object of social relations, rather than simply a means through which social relations are conducted, the processes involved are a highly visible form of those which govern the operations of a mere socially embedded form of face work, which both Smith and Cooley summarised in terms of a 'looking glass' self.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of the argument above has been to indicate distinctions within face states, namely moral, pragmatic or utilitarian and positional valuations. Also, by distinguishing between external and internal processes of face, the importance of the integral connection between emotions and face has been highlighted. A further contribution of the paper is the distinction between face as an embedded social process and as an object of social contestation.

The preceding discussion has clarified key elements of face, and the processes underlying it, by drawing upon, among other things, examination of the Chinese concept of face. The value of cultural borrowing in the development of social science has therefore been demonstrated in the generation in this paper of a comprehensive account of face. Indeed, by drawing upon the Chinese conception of face it is possible to discover details of the complexity of face, as the present paper has demonstrated.

The significance of conceptual refinement for advancement of sociological theory is indicated in Merton's classic discussion of the relationship between theory and empirical research in which the 'basic requirement of research is that the concepts, the variables, be defined with sufficient clarity to enable the research to proceed' (Merton 1968: 169). The task of conceptual refinement and innovation is necessary, according to Merton, to identify and understand previously neglected objects and relationships and thereby advance social theory (Merton 1968: 146-7). One source of conceptual development in a globalized world, as Goffman hinted, can be cross-cultural. Underlying the discussion of face in the present paper, therefore, is a demonstration of a more general point concerning the development of sociological theory by introducing, in this case, Chinese concepts.

The origin of social science in European and North American historical experiences has not inhibited its universalistic pretensions (Connell 2006). It is frequently mentioned that the application of Western social science to non-Western societies is either exploitative, with the non-Western case simply mined for data, or generative of flawed description or theory (Hamilton 2006: 50-74, 220-36). One possible response to the asymmetrical 'theory flow', from the metropole to the periphery (Appadurai 2001; Castells 1996; Hannerz 2008), practised in the present paper, is to incorporate into standard or Western social theory concepts drawn from non-Western cultures and fashioned through non-Western, in this case Chinese experiences. Not only does this go toward redressing the imbalance, it also enriches sociological theory in general, and in particular, the theory of face.

## **Note:**

<sup>1</sup> Relative to its importance in Chinese social relations there are surprisingly few sociological discussions of face in Chinese sources. One obvious explanation is that face is so basic to social relations between Chinese persons that it is simply taken for granted and has failed to attract Chinese sociological investigation. While this is no doubt true, it is also important to note that sociology was first introduced into China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by American missionary sociologists, bringing with them American textbooks and pursuing American research interests in which face and related characteristically Chinese elements had no place (Wong 1979: 11-19). When sociology underwent sinicisation, from the 1930s, it was directed to the study of minorities, agrarian class structure and issues of structural change (Wong 1979: 19-36) and again the topic of face drew no sociological attention. Only when Chinese writers attempted to explain Chinese society to foreigners did face become a research theme, and then the discussion of face by Chinese sociologists (Hu 1944; Ho 1976; Hsu 1996; Hwang 1987a; Jia 2001) and social commentators (Lin 1936: 186-93) was in English. More recently, since China has 'opened its doors' there has risen in China and in Taiwan an interest in comparing Chinese and non-Chinese societies, face has become a topic about which there is Chinese-language discussion among Chinese sociologists and especially psychologists (Hwang 1987a; Hwang 1987b; Lu 1996; Zhai 1994; Zhai 1995; Zuo 1997). It is interesting in this context to notice that Ho later published a Chinese version of his (1976) paper in a book (Ho, Peng and Zhao 2006), and similarly Hwang's (1987a) paper was simultaneously published in Chinese (Hwang 1987b).

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