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What Is Face Anyway?

Jiying Song,¹ Gonzaga University, USA

Abstract: Face-saving is not a unique Chinese cultural phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to discuss what face really is from a cross-cultural perspective. The author uses Berger and Luckmann's theory of socialization as the background and introduces what face means and what contributes to face in China. Then the author discusses the concept of face in several Western terms: impression management; politeness; collectivism; and identity. Finally, the author draws a face model at an institutional level and concludes that it is necessary to integrate cultural perspectives on face, social behavior, and identity formation.

Keywords: Face-saving, Chinese Culture, Mianzi (面子) and Lian (脸), Cross-Cultural Perspective, Social Behavior, Identity Formation, Impression Management, Politeness, Collectivism

Introduction

Leaders can have a negative impact on organizations when they knowingly or unknowingly attempt to “save face”; that is, try to protect their standing or reputation. From my experience of growing up and working in China and living in the United States for the last several years, I find that the phenomenon of “face” exists in both countries, yet misunderstandings or a lack of understanding of face are common.

First, face may be misunderstood as a cultural stigma. Some scholars claim that face is “indicative of characteristically indigenous Chinese socio-cultural phenomena” (Qi 2011, 280). Others regard saving face as “a shortcut by Chinese to build their network and tapping into other’s social resources” (Buckley, Clegg, and Tan 2006, 276). Still others tie face culture with particular groups of people; for example, people from Hong Kong are considered to be from a face culture (Kim, Cohen, and Au 2010). However, such stigmas unfairly stereotype and homogenize these cultures.

Second, properly understanding face has long been essential to understanding general Chinese psychology and behavior and is particularly significant today because cross-cultural interactions are prevalent (Zhai 1995). In 1894, Smith asserted that face is “a key to the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese” (17). More recently, scholars still agree that face is the core factor of the Chinese value system and the key to understanding Chinese social behavior (Domino, Affonso, and Slobin 1987; Redding and Ng 1983; Stover 1974; Zhai 1995). In fact, face is the “most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated” (Lin 1935, 200). Nevertheless, despite its importance, there is still a general lack of understanding of face in the West.

Finally, while many assume that face is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, the West actually has its own version of face (Goffman 1955; Mead 1934). Considering Western face can enrich the emotional awareness and leadership effectiveness of both Chinese and Americans. This new understanding may convert cultural stigma into mutual respect and nurture reciprocal relationships among people from different cultures. Thus, a cross-cultural study of face and a theoretical integration of face, social behavior, and identity formation are needed.

The purpose of this article is to discuss what face really is from a cross-cultural perspective and to explore cultural perspectives on face, social behavior, and identity formation. I will address the concept of face at a personal level in Chinese culture and in the West. First, I will present Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory of socialization as the background for this

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discussion. Next, I will introduce what face means and what contributes to face in China. Shifting focus from China to the West, I will then discuss the concept of face in terms of impression management, politeness, collectivism, and identity. Finally, I will construct a face model at an institutional level in order to help readers understand face more comprehensively. I conclude that face is a universal social phenomenon, although it may exhibit varying focal aspects in different contexts, and it is necessary to integrate cultural perspectives on face, social behavior, and identity formation.

Socialization as the Background

First, it is helpful to understand where the concept of face comes from and to which realm face belongs. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, 129), society is “an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three moments of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.” Two persons come together with their own habitualized actions and work out a reciprocal typification that is transparent to both of them; at this stage, each person will be able to predict the other’s action and their interaction becomes “there we go again” (57). The authors further explain that when two persons add a third party, such as a child, they start to externalize and objectify their reciprocal typification into an objective institution through signs and sign systems. The authors state that when this process passes to subsequent generations, this predictable typification evolves into an unalterable and self-evident institution through externalization, objectivation, and legitimation. Berger and Luckmann claim that during this process, a body of knowledge is born and passed on; the information is learned as objective truth and internalized as subjective reality. Through this process of generating objective realities, “there we go again” becomes “this is how these things are done” (59). This process is “deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’” (Barden 1990, 53). A good example of the product of this process is an ethical tradition. Barden defines an ethical tradition as “the accumulation of wisdom in a society over generations; as communally suggested, and, often, communally accepted, answers to recurrent kinds of ethical questions; as the communally accepted way of dealing with recurrent situations” (53). The concept of face arises during this process and is expressed as a set of cultural values (see Figure 1).

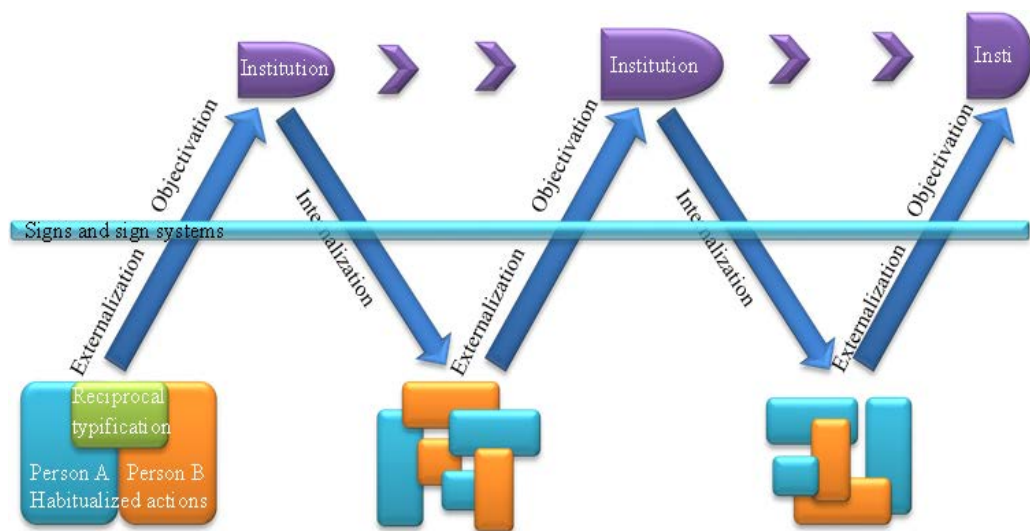


Figure 1: Socialization as the Background
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Face in Chinese Culture

The traditional concept of face is Chinese in origin, and the term is a literal translation of Chinese *lian* (or *lien*, 脸) and *mianzi* (or *mien-tzu*, 面子) (Ho 1976; Zhai 1995). The face being discussed here is psychological rather than physiological: “It is not a face that can be washed or shaved, but a face that can be ‘granted’ and ‘lost’ and ‘fought for’ and ‘presented as a gift’” (Lin 1935, 199). Lin explains this abstract and intangible concept in Chinese culture:

Face cannot be translated or defined. It is like honor and is not honor. It cannot be purchased with money...It is hollow and is what men fight for and what many women die for. It is invisible and yet by definition exists by being shown to the public...It is amenable, not to reason but to social convention...it is prized above all earthly possessions. It is more powerful than fate and favor, and more respected than the constitution...It is that hollow thing which [people] in China live by. (200)

Face is something Chinese live and die for, as evident in the old saying “A person needs face as a tree needs bark.” Ho (1976) claims that face is a powerful social motive that is distinct from authority, standards of behavior, personality, status, dignity, honor, and prestige.

Ho (1976) interprets face 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” (883). Face is never an individual thing, and reciprocity is the key to understanding face (Ho 1976). This brings us back to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) reciprocal typification, which is externalized and objectivated into a certain kind of institution and social norm. Within this social norm, “the roles of individual responsibility and subjective volition are circumscribed in social interactions” (Ho 1976, 882).

Hu (1944) makes a linguistic distinction between *lian* and *mianzi*; but *lian* and *mianzi* are more like two sides of one coin. Zhai (1995) defines *lian* as the image and expression of an individual based on the attitudes of the generalized others; *mianzi* is the psychological status generated from the judgment of *lian* by others toward the performed expression of an individual.² In this sense, *lian* and *mianzi* are like the “I” and “me” in Mead’s (1934, 175) understanding of the self: “The ‘I’ [or *lian*] is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ [or *mianzi*] is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself [or herself] assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized ‘me’ [or *mianzi*], and then one reacts toward that as an ‘I’ [or *lian*].” According to Mead: “The ‘I’ of this moment is present in the ‘me’ of the next moment” (174). This is true for *lian* and *mianzi* as well; the *lian* of this moment is present in the *mianzi* of the next moment, and the *mianzi* of the next moment will generate the *lian* of the moment after. *Lian* and *mianzi* shape and are shaped by each other; the concept of face arises during this process.

Although we can understand face in the light of Mead’s (1934) concept of self, face in Chinese culture has particularity because of its specific social and historical origin. The social characteristics of Chinese society derive from the Chinese family system: from the family system, family mind arises; from the family mind, certain laws of social behavior arise (Lin 1935). Social education starts in the home through establishing the “right” behaviors and mental attitudes within the family. According to Confucianism, social order will be ensured if everyone knows his or her place and acts accordingly (Lin 1935). The following five cardinal human relationships historically governed Chinese society: king and subject; father and son; husband and wife; brother and brother; and friend and friend (Lin 1935). Since the Chinese concept of family is expandable and all peoples within the four seas (i.e. the whole world) could be brothers (Confucius 2014), all five cardinal human relationships could be identified in family norms.

² Author’s translation and paraphrase of Zhai’s (1995) writing in Chinese.

Early Roman and European civilization was based on both a merchandise economy and a respect for the laws to protect those involved in such interactions. In contrast, for the ancient Chinese, the first task of social life was to sustain stability and harmony within the family; China was an agricultural society, and family was the basic unit of a self-sufficient economy (Lin 1935; Zhai 1995). As agricultural techniques evolved, productivity was mainly based on the experience of farmers, who passed on these techniques from generation to generation without much change. Within the self-sufficient economic form, people hardly needed to exchange commodities outside of the family. Of the four classes in Chinese society, the farmers had higher social standing than the merchants, the scholars, and the artisans because of the agrarian focus of society (Lin 1935). This family-based, self-sufficient economic form contributed to the harmony-oriented, collectivist Chinese culture (Lin 1935). Within this harmony-oriented Chinese society, “a personal, human touch always colors the Chinese conception of law and government” (Lin 1935, 196). For the Chinese, face is an invisible social force moving the whole society.

In ancient China, harmony is “the most precious fruit of Ritual” (Confucius 2014, 22). In “The Doctrine of the Mean” (1893, 422), which was written in the fifth century BCE, it says: “The path proper to the Sage...embraces the three hundred rules of ceremony, and the three thousand rules of demeanour.” With these multiple and strict social rules, people are constrained and have to play their roles with formality (Zhai 1995). From the perspective of an outsider, the “Chinese have a strongly dramatic instinct” (Smith 1894, 16). Famous Chinese author Lu Xun (1881–1936) refers to the formalized behavior of Chinese social interaction as a spectacle, which has a front stage and a back stage, with differences of face of the individual in the front stage and the back stage (Lu 1948).³

Face in the West

Face is not a unique phenomenon to Chinese culture, but is distinctively human and can be found in other cultures as well (Ho 1976). According to Lohse (1968), the Greek word *προσωπον* appears first in Homer and denotes the “face” or “countenance” of an individual. *Προσωπον* sometimes is used for “form” or “figure,” since face presents the whole appearance of a figure. In the Hellenistic period, *προσωπον* with the sense of “person” indicates a person’s position in society. Epictetus (1957, 260) says in his *Enchiridion*: “You are an actor in a drama...see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the character [*προσωπον*] assigned you.” Thus, face becomes a public self. Lohse (1968) further suggests that *προσωπον* is closely related to the Latin word *persona*, which means “mask,” “role,” “person,” and “prominent personage”; probably under the influence of *persona*, *προσωπον* took on the sense of representing a person legally in the sixth century. To note an interesting cultural observation, in traditional plays, both Chinese and Romans use masks to represent different persons.

Impression Management and Face

American missionary Smith (1894) was the first in the West to consider face as one of the most important Chinese characteristics. Goffman (1955) began face studies in the 1950s. Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective resonates with Lu’s (1948) metaphor of spectacle. Goffman (1955, 213) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes.” Goffman’s definition of face has some commonalities with the Chinese understanding of face. First, the existence of face has to do with social interaction (Ho 1976; Lin 1935); second, face originates in the judgment from generalized others (Ho 1976; Zhai 1995); third, the criterion of the judgment is the rules of the group or social norms (Confucius 2014; Lin 1935; Zhai 1995); and fourth, the image of an

³ Author’s translation and paraphrase of Lu’s (1948) writing in Chinese.

individual (*I/lian*) and the psychological status from being judged by others (*me/mianzi*) are inseparable (Zhai 1995).

Goffman (1955) names the actions taken by a person to maintain face, to avoid losing face, or to gain face as “facework.” Bound by thousands of rules of ceremony for two millennia, Chinese people engage in facework to a high degree. Face is distinctively human, and so is facework. During an encounter, a person behaves with self-respect and considerateness in order to maintain one’s own face as well as the face of other participants (Goffman 1955). Goffman claims that “maintenance of face is a condition of interaction” (216). The best example to support Goffman’s claim can be found in Garfinkel’s breaching experiment. In this experiment, the orderliness of greeting-response sequences was breached by asking “What do you mean?”, which broke commonly accepted social norms and made it hard to sustain interaction (Garfinkel 1967). This study of the violation of social norms shows that people tend to keep things socially acceptable and anticipatable to each other (Lock and Strong 2010). This illustrates the maintenance of face with the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness (Goffman 1955). According to Garfinkel (1967, 76), it is the “common sense knowledge of social structures.”

In order to discuss Goffman’s (1959, 238) dramaturgical perspective of face, one must first introduce his concept of social establishment, which is “any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place.” Goffman suggests that we can study any social establishment profitably from the point of view of impression management. Impression here is “a means by which the recipients can guide their response to the informant without having to wait for the full consequences of the informant’s actions to be felt” (248). By setting the stage of a spectacle, we can play out the drama of impression management and face.

As shown in Figure 2, the stage is set within a social establishment, which consists of individual and audience (generalized others) at the opposite ends of the horizontal line, and mind and body at each end of the vertical line. The horizontal and vertical lines function more like fluid transitions rather than solid walls. The left side of the vertical line is the back region, where the performance is prepared; and the right side is the front region, where the performance is presented (Goffman 1959; Lu 1948). The upper part of the horizontal line, leaning more toward mind and invisibility, contains the character of the individual and the character performed; the lower part, leaning more toward body and visibility, is where the individual as potential performer and performer stays. I add the dimension of body and mind to Goffman’s dramaturgical stage for the following reasons. First, because the self is embodied (Giddens 1991); second, because body has its ontological dimension—“I exist for myself as a body known by the Other” (Sartre 1956, 351); and third, because “mind develops and has its being only in and by virtue of the social process of experience and activity” (Mead 1934, 223–24). This framework is not static, but dynamic, with mutual influences between the back and front regions (Goffman 1959), and between mind and body. Within the social establishment is an inter-subjective social reality (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012); the self is neither an organic being with a specific location, nor a cause of this staged and performed scene, but a product of this scene (Goffman 1959).

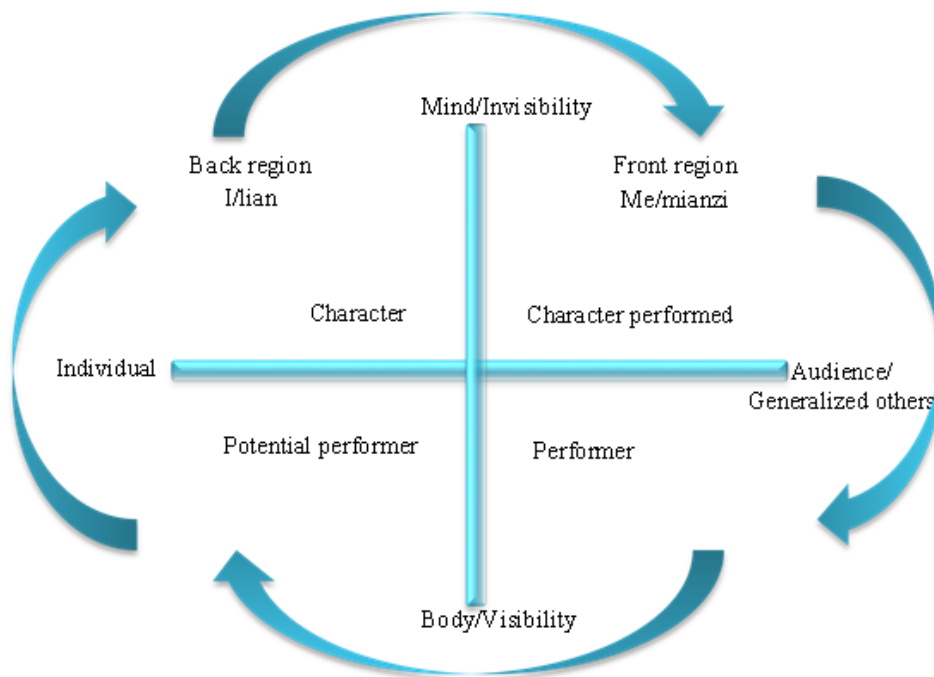


Figure 2: Impression Management and the Face within a Social Establishment
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To better understand impression management—the main focus of the dramaturgical approach—it is helpful to pay attention to performance disruptions, which threaten face (Goffman 1955; 1959). Goffman (1959) regards performance disruptions as inevitable and having consequences at personality, interaction, and social structural levels. Individuals will make efforts to avoid disruptions or to correct the ones not avoided; they may save their own face, avoid losing face, maintain face, or give face to others in order to counteract these disruptions (Goffman 1955; 1959). In other words, people may take concealed or visible moves to alter their situation as participants in strategic interaction (Goffman 1969). Two of the undeniable forces within strategic interaction are the institutional and social norms by which the individual functions. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the impression management of the self (as shown in Figure 2) in light of the institutionalization within society (see Figure 1).

According to various institutional and social norms, the same performance disruption can be interpreted differently, which leads the individual to take divergent approaches of impression management. For instance, in China, paying respect to your teacher is a virtue, and one way of doing this is not to question your teacher, especially in front of others. Confucius (2014, 26) praises his disciple Hui by saying: “I can talk with Yen Hui all day, and he never disagrees. He seems like a fool. But thinking about how he is when alone, I realize that he reveals my most essential principle. Hui is no fool.” Within a Chinese setting, if a student raises a question that the teacher is not able to answer (performance disruption), the teacher may feel as if he or she is losing face and think: “I am too soft in my control of the classroom, and this student even questions my authority” (individual’s perception of *me/mianzi* from the attitudes/actions of others). Then, the teacher’s face (physiological face) turns red (bodily visible reaction during social interaction), the teacher becomes upset and tries to think of a way to deal with the situation (internally withdraw into the back region and process it in the mind), and finally the teacher decides to do something to give the student the impression that the teacher is in control (*I/lian* as the expression of an individual based on the perception of *me/mianzi*). However, if this performance disruption happens in an American classroom, the teacher may think of this as a

good opportunity to facilitate a deeper conversation from the student's question. In an American setting, asking hard questions may not embarrass the teacher in a face-saving context. Thus the American teacher interprets and reacts to the same performance disruption differently. He or she may regard the disruption not as a face threat, or a less severe face threat, and he or she may not feel the need to defend his or her own authority in order to save face; but he or she may still operate consciously or unconsciously in light of impression management, moving back and forth between front and back region, between body and mind.

Furthermore, if people pursue face to the extreme of regarding it as the only goal of social interaction, impression management will happen more at the front stage, or even get stuck at the front stage, which leads to the separation of *I/lian* and *me/mianzi*. Lin (1935) gives such an example in 1930s China—the official in the metropolis is gaining face by driving at 60 miles per hour with the speed limit of 35; if his car hits a person, the policeman comes, and the official gets away by showing his name card, so he is gaining greater face. On the one hand, if people set gaining face as the goal of social interaction, they may take dangerous, unethical, or illegal methods (as this official does) in order to impress others and gain a bigger or better sense of *me/mianzi*. On the other hand, pursuing face as the goal of social interaction cannot happen without a supportive social environment; in this case, without the compromise of the policeman. The social norms existing in the institution in Figure 1 are internalized as subjective reality into the self of Figure 2. The extreme requirement of giving up face, just like the extreme desire for gaining face, results from discord between *I/lian* and *me/mianzi*. On the contrary, the harmony between *I/lian* and *me/mianzi* results in authenticity. Within social interactions, authenticity has a personal dimension as well as a social dimension; it entails personal integrity (at the back stage) as well as social and historical commitments to the wider community (at the front stage) (Guignon 2004).

Politeness, Collectivism, and Face

Based on Goffman's (1967) study of face and impression management, Brown and Levinson (1978) develop a politeness theory, which addresses how impressions are managed using linguistic politeness strategies. They assume that all humans are rational and have positive face and negative face. By positive face, Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to the positive self-image claimed by interactants; in other words, one's desire that he or she be desirable to others. By negative face, they mean the basic claim to personal space and rights to non-distraction; in other words, one's desire that his or her actions be unimpeded by others. The authors suggest that the most profound interrelations between language and society are found in action and interaction. Since the vast majority of these interactions are less well-bounded and less ritualized, they prefer strategic analysis rather than rule analysis. According to the authors, people use positive politeness to imply common ground and minimize social distance; while using negative politeness to put a brake on the interaction, in order to create or keep social distance. Brown and Levinson describe individuals at the front region (see Figure 2), but some individuals may get ready to move to the back region. Merkin (2012) points out that the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been challenged by the studies of both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) politeness strategies concerning social distance bring individualism and collectivism to our attention. According to Hofstede (2001), individualism and collectivism are not necessarily good or bad, but actually are the two poles of one cultural dimension—individualism refers to a society in which people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family only; collectivism is defined as a society in which people belong to in-groups which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty. Within an individualist society, individuals stay physically and mentally more at the back region and pay more attention to *I/lian* than *me/mianzi*; within a collectivist society, individuals stay more at the front region and care more about *me/mianzi* than *I/lian*. Hofstede uses the concept of face to

“describe the proper relationship with one’s social environment” (230). From Hofstede’s positivist perspective, face is more like a variable used to measure or moderate the relationships within social interaction. However, I would argue that face, like the self, is a product of social interaction and has its own complexity.

Identity and Face

Giddens (1991) is not satisfied with Mead’s (1934) I/me formula in relation to self-identity: He considers Mead’s “me” as a social identity, Mead’s “I” as “the unsocialised part of the individual,” and Mead’s I/me relation as unable to connect these two (Giddens 1991, 52). Thus Giddens proposes the concept of self-identity, which is “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (53) as seen in “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (54). On the one hand, Giddens’ concept of self-identity still has the trace of Mead’s I/me: “the self as reflexively understood” (53) is equivalent to “me”; “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (54) is equivalent to “I”; and the notion of keeping a narrative going is the relation between “I” and “me.” Giddens tries to use one concept—self-identity—to cover “I,” “me,” and their relation. On the other hand, it is inaccurate for Giddens to call Mead’s “I” as “the unsocialised part of the individual” (52). At the end of his discussion of the self, Mead (1934) points out that an individual’s private or subjective content of experience does not conflict with the theory of the social nature and origin of the self; only by taking the attitudes of others toward oneself within social relationships is an individual able to integrate their private content of experience to oneself and enter one’s own experience as an object. Thus, for Mead, there is no unsocialised part of an individual.

As mentioned above, Giddens (1991) calls Mead’s “me” a social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 40) first coined the term social identity, which consists of “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he [or she] perceives himself [or herself] as belonging.” Tajfel and Turner (1979) use the concept of social identity as a way of explaining intergroup behaviors, social conflict, and social change (see also Postmes et al. 2006; Ye, Ollington, and de Salas 2016). To regard social identity as “the extension of self beyond the level of the individual” (Huang, Chen, and Chien 2015, 35), or as socially deterministic (Jetten and Postmes 2006), is problematic. If we understand Tajfel and Turner’s social categories to which an individual belongs as part of the generalized others, we can discuss social identity at a personal level within the framework shown in Figure 2. Intergroup relationship is beyond our discussion here. Mead’s “me” is one’s social identity in the front region (Giddens 1991), because this “me,” *mianzi*, or self-image is formed from the attitudes of others. Meanwhile, self-identity, “I,” or *lian* in the back region exists in the capacity to keep a narrative going (Giddens 1991).

As Taylor (1989, 47) puts it: “In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.” Our social identity enlightens how we have become, while our self-identity drives where we are going: “The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” (Giddens 1991, 75). During this dynamic process of becoming (Taylor 1989), as shown in Figure 3, an individual not only moves between the front region and the back region, between body and mind, but also moves forward temporally. The self, expressed through face (Goffman 1967), is a product-in-making of this process.

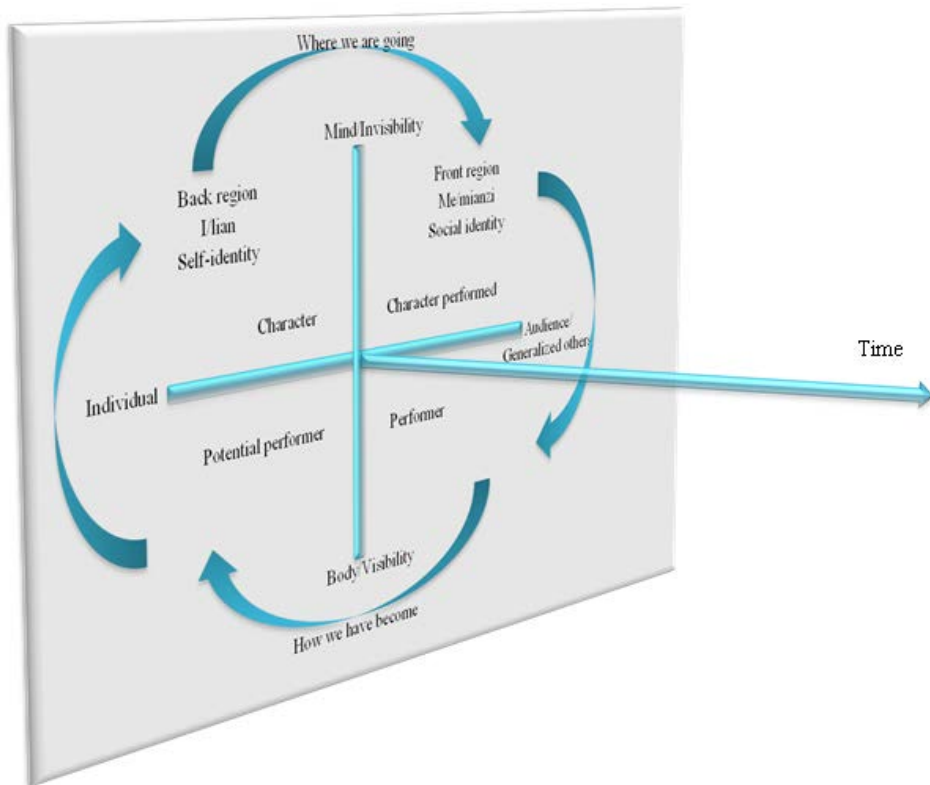


Figure 3: Identity, Face, and Becoming
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Face Model at an Institutional Level

The complexity of the concept of face blurs the boundary of face and makes it hard to define the unit of our analysis. Dewey and Bentley (1949) present three levels of understanding of human behavior: self-action, inter-action, and trans-action. By self-action, they mean “where things are viewed as acting under their own powers” (108). At this level of understanding, entities such as individuals, processes, and structures can generate self-action (Emirbayer 1997). The second level is inter-action, “where thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 108). Like billiard balls, the action takes place among the entities while the entities remain the same (Emirbayer 1997). In contrast to these two levels of understanding, Dewey and Bentley (1949, 108) propose trans-action, where systems are “employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities’, ‘essences’, or ‘realities’, and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements.’” Emirbayer (1997) labels this point of view as relational, in which the units involved in a trans-action derive their identity from the roles they play within that trans-action; and the primary unit of analysis should be within this dynamic, unfolding trans-action. Face can thus be interpreted as relational and sustained within trans-action.

Face can also be understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how individuals fit their acts together and orient themselves by identifying the social environment they are in and by interpreting and defining each other’s acts (Blumer 1986). Interpretation and negotiation are happening at the front stage and the back stage during social interaction. Blumer interprets symbolic interactionism with the concept of joint

action, which refers to “the larger collective form of action that is constituted by the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants” (70). He says that joint actions can range from a reciprocal typification of two individuals to a complex alignment of the acts of institutions; by identifying the joint action, such as a marriage ceremony as “a marriage ceremony,” the individual has a key to interpret the act of others. He criticizes Goffman (1959) in that his dramaturgical approach, limited to face-to-face interaction, ignores the macrocosm in which its micro-level analysis is embedded. Through the concept of joint action, Blumer (1986) bridges the macrocosm with the microcosm—the socialization and institutionalization of a society and the development of self and face. Thus, we get our unit of analysis of face from combining the macrocosm of socialization and institutionalization (see Figure 1) and the microcosm of the development of self in terms of I/*lian*/self-identity and me/*mianzi*/social identity (see Figure 3). This combination is depicted in Figure 4.

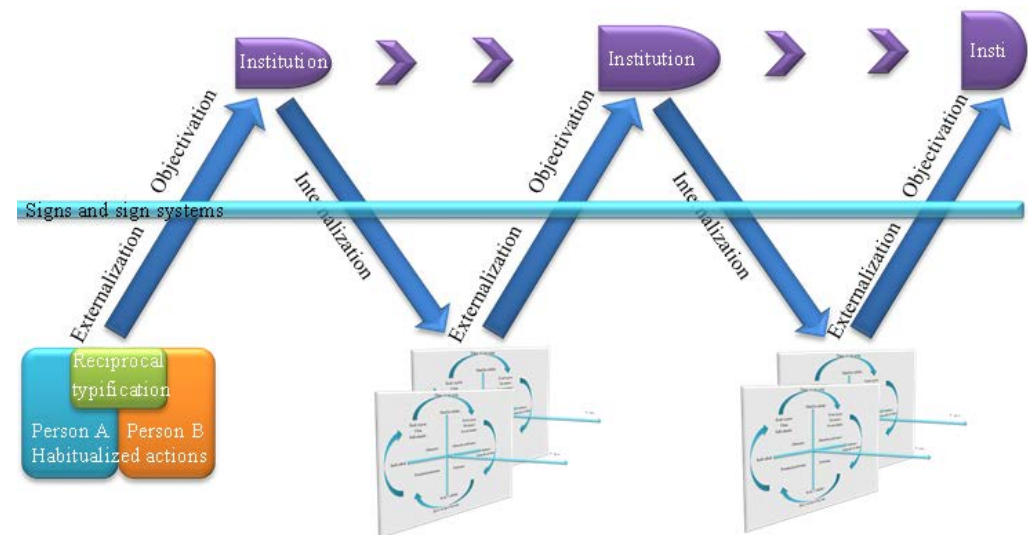


Figure 4: Face Model at an Institutional Level
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Conclusion

Face is not a unique cultural phenomenon found only in China, but is distinctively human. Within social interactions, an individual’s me/*mianzi*/social identity is formed through the attitudes of others within the light of internalized reality and institutions; this process reflects how we have become (Taylor 1989). Where we are going arises when the individual acts from the position of I/*lian*/self-identity, and thus functions as a cell of externalization and objectivation (Taylor 1989). The development of self, represented by face, combines with the process of socialization. A more collectivist society (such as China) consists of people who may pay more attention to the me/*mianzi*/social identity at the front stage; while a more individualist society (such as the United States) consists of people who may pay more attention to the I/*lian*/self-identity at the back stage. The aforementioned discussion of face from a cross-cultural perspective leads me to the conclusion that an integration of cultural perspectives on face, social behavior, and identity formation is necessary. This article has been an effort in that direction. Meanwhile, the frameworks and face model developed through this article can help scholars conduct future research concerning face at a personal, organizational, or global level.

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