What Is Face?

If you have lived in China, you probably know how important "face" is. Even though it has similar metaphorical meanings in other languages, "face" is much more nuanced in Chinese and is difficult to translate or define. It is tightly woven into the fabric of Chinese society, and permeates every aspect of social life. Is it really an essential way of life in China, or is it an outdated concept? Let's take a closer look.

There are two common phrases for "face" in Chinese – "lian (脸)" and "mian zi (面子)". Although seemingly identical and often used interchangeably, they are actually quite different conceptually. One can gain and lose "mian zi", but can only lose "lian"; because "mian zi" is more about one's social status, and "lian" is more about one's moral standing. I will focus on the first meaning because I pretend not to judge people on their morals.

Why is face so important in China? Chinese societies are more collective than individual, and "Social Harmony" (at least the appearance of it) can be undermined by open disrespect and embarrassment. "Face" is the facade of respect, authority, and prestige; it is the glue that keeps the social structure in place by publicly showing the social pecking order.

The prestige does not have to be real; what is important is the perception, and the bar for that is set very low. How low, you say? All it requires is plausible deniability. Let's look at a well-known story of the Emperor's New Clothes. The child's announcement that the Emperor is naked does not seem to give any new information; everyone already knows that. Yet he starts a chain reaction that does not end well. When the child was not subsequently reprimanded for his open assertion, it confirmed everyone's suspicion and removed all doubt. Face is lost when deniability is no longer plausible, and the most innocuous of comments can strip away the thin layer of hypocrisy to which we cling dearly and destabilize a delicate situation.

The concept of face, like all other social constructs, evolve over time as collective attitudes change. For example, in 2010, the speed skater Zhou Yang won an Olympic Gold medal and made the grave mistake of thanking her parents before her country, triggering condemnation from Chinese officials to the bewilderment of westerners. In 2011, Li Na became the first grand slam winner from Asia, and despite not paying the usual political homage, was reluctantly embraced by the state-backed media. Earlier this year, the swimmer Fu Yuanhui endeared a whole nation with her idiosyncrasies and candidness, without even mentioning the motherland. In just a few years, what was once perceived as a face-losing faux pas now garners barely a shrug.

Everybody wants to save face, and that makes us behave irrationally. We dig in and double down even when we know our position is untenable, and go to great lengths to twist the facts and frame the issues, because admitting to making a mistake will make us lose face. Much like a naughty child refusing to make eye contact with his parents to continue his rampage, we feign ignorance as long as possible, often to the point where it is obvious we are fooling no one. In fact, people will seemingly say anything to weasel out of a face-losing situation, as shown in this recent example.

> We are a nominated zipper supplier for a bag brand in the US - that means that bag factories are required to purchase zippers from us. A few days ago this brand informed us that there were big quality issues with the zippers from one of the factories. We thought that was very strange, because this particular factory had stopped buying from us years ago. Of course no effort was spared to cover this up, because admitting so would make the factory lose face. The conversation between the brand's representative and the factory went like this:
> "We keep getting returns because of zipper failures. This never happened before."
> "Uh, this looks like a design problem."
> "We've been using this design for ages, and never had this problem before; it's clearly a zipper issue."
> "Well, maybe the end user is using it improperly."
> "Look, let's get to the bottom of this. Set up a meeting with the zipper supplier."
> "Uh, well, uh, there's no need for that. Tell you what, don't worry about it, you won't have this problem again, because we won't buy from them in the future."

Just like that, with a clever use of implicature, we were thrown under the bus. Face is everything when doing business in China, and the waters are deep indeed.

The special skill needed to finesse these delicate situations is called tact, also known as EQ. It requires keen observation, empathy, reciprocity, and educated guessing. We don't learn it by taking "Face Management 101", but by fumbling through our everyday interactions, by tasting our own toes. We use ambiguity to provide an "out", and use allusion and overtures to hint at what we want. We learn the difference between replying privately and to a group chat, often the hard way. We come to embrace the power of "cc:", and the even greater power of "bcc:". We realize often too late, that some things can be suggested implicitly, but once explicitly said aloud cannot be unheard. We shroud our intentions with questions like "Would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?", which has never been really about a caffeinated drink.

Face is not an outdated concept, but rather an advanced skill that trades in the elusive commodity of social relationships. It is especially important in hierarchical societies like China, where things are rarely straightforward and true intentions are often veiled. Having a keen awareness of the situation and artful indirect speech can often avoid unintentional embarrassments, giving others face while saving your own. But what happens if someone else says something offensive that cannot be unheard - is it possible to simultaneously express outrage while still saving face for that person? Tough, but this one comes close: "I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear that incredibly insensitive comment. So, about our project …."

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