

Research on Face Perception Differences between Chinese and Western Culture through Analysis of the Movie Saving Face

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Abstract: As a specialty of china, face culture has ingrained in the ideology of Chinese people for a long time. We should take the question how to save our and others' face into consideration in intercultural communication. As a cultural phenomenon, face perception has a great influence on interpersonal relationship, which means we should select polite manner to communicate so as to maintain harmonious social relationship. In the course of communication, however, it is usually very hard for both sides to comprehend mutual face because of different thinking mode, communicative mode, cultural background, and geographical environment, which give rise to a stressful condition between speakers and hearers, and even bring about communicative difficulties among people from different cultures. It is an urgent task to settle this matter in cultural exchanges. By contrasting the differences between Chinese and western face perception, this paper tries to figure out the major reasons which result in the differences, so as to improve the mutual understanding between Chinese and western culture, further to help us to avoid pragmatic errors during the process of intercultural communication, and ultimately to promote people's intercultural communication competence.

1. Introduction

To be keen on face-saving is a common social phenomenon existing in all the nations around the world. However, different nations have different understandings towards the concept of face. During the process of interaction, people in the west usually find it difficult or even impossible for them to utterly understand the Chinese "face". So it is of vital importance to study the topic and work out the different meanings of face in different cultures. Anyone who knows little about the distinctions may not be able to effectively communicate in cross-cultural communication.

1.1 Theories Related to Face

There are different theories related to face, which laid root for the face conception. The famous theory that is connected with face includes, face-saving theory, politeness theory, face-negotiation theory.

In the basis of goffman's research, brown and levinson, ting-toomey put forward the face-negotiation theory. Face-negotiation theory holds the view that social interaction is a performance has its own norms, under the gaze of the audience the participants preform the roles decided by social members, and manipulate the audience's attitudes towards themselves in a reasonable and skillful way to maintain their own face.

Politeness theory researchers think that face is generative mechanism of polite language. The aim of using polite language is to reduce the impact degree of face-threatening behaviors, and to moderate the relationship between the participants. So they view the gains and losses of face perception as a criterion to measure the courtesy and straightforwardness of languages. Politeness theory focuses on analysis and recognition of the threatening behaviors in the communication and the application of various face strategy.

1.2 Significance of the Study

It has been a long time for the Chinese people to take the face problem into account during the process of communication. Face, as a significant cultural factor, which determines the way people

act in a large part and casts ubiquitous impact on social interaction. Meanwhile, in the course of cross-cultural communication, the face problem is also a crucial factor that cannot be neglected. By discussing the differences of face perception between western and Chinese, and analyzing the reasons why differences are generated in the course of communication, we can adopt different language strategies to maintain both sides' face so that the purpose of communication can be realized. What's more, it can help us evaluate the functions of positive face and negative face in society. To be specific, to achieve the goal of cross-cultural communication resoundingly is of vital importance for all of English learners. Through the study of face problems in diverse cultures, we can effectively improve our cross-cultural communication abilities, open our eyes by understanding more knowledge related to culture and strengthen specialized language skills.

2. Different Face Perception between Chinese and Western Cultures

Intercultural communication has become common and significant with the development of the social economy. It is critically important for an individual who wants to make more progress and to contact people from different cultural backgrounds triumphantly. While face is a pretty common concept existing in many cultures, the conception of "face" has been defined in various ways in different cultures. Distinguished Professor Erving Goffman has viewed "face" as "something that is diffusely located in the flow of events." In Brown and Levinson's book *"Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomenon"*, they considered "face" as "the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself or herself." As a social image, face is so valuable that everyone will fight tirelessly to maintain it for themselves and for others.

In China, in spite of the abstraction nature of the conception of face, it is a specific criterion to adjust the social interaction. Chinese usually regard face as *mianzi*. Generally speaking, the meaning of *mianzi* in China can be explained from two perspectives: firstly, it refers to one's dignity and self-esteem, secondly, it refers to one's glory and reputation. It is so important that every Chinese will try their best to keep it in any situation.

Under this situation, there is an increasing number of domestic and international scholars focusing on developing a systematical face theory so as to facilitate people in intercultural communication.

2.1 Face Perception in Western Culture

The American preacher, Arthur Henderson Smith is the earliest person who centers on the Chinese face. In his book, *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), he has commented that "face" is complicate to Chinese, and its connotative meaning is so profound that we cannot totally describe.

Erving Goffman, an outstanding Canadian sociologist, who does some deep researches of face theories, after that, from the perspective of sociology, he come up with his face theory in his essay: *On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction* in 1950. According to his researches he defines face as a person's positive and affirmative social value that an individual chases in social interaction. He reckons that face is a kind of social value and positive image that individuals have when contacting with others. Everyone tries to pursue it at any cost in any situation.

Goffman had also uncovered some characteristics of face. Firstly, face is the positive social value that an individual advocated, that is to say, only the person who does something positive can he earn his face. Secondly, face can only be realized by other social members' evaluation. In other words, if a person thinks highly of face and how others are thinking about him, he may attach more importance to his image when communicating with others. Thirdly, face appears when the occasion require in the process of social communication. That is to say the individual will make effort to build face and form some sorts of relationship in order to maintain the communication or talking continue.

On the basis of Goffman's face theory, Brown and Levinson, two outstanding English scholars, publish their distinguished book *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena*, in which they discuss the face management view. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has made huge

contribution to the study of speech acts. Their politeness theory includes three aspects: face, face-threatening acts and face-saving theory. They define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (213). “Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Brown 215). In general, people cooperate (and assume each other’s cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face” (Brown 66). Brown and Levinson’s contribution is proposed the opinion that face theory has some common features existing in different cultures. They think the abstract concept of face has universal trait, its central idea is to understand the strategies based on different acts in communication, and those acts are based on people’s different needs.

According to Brown and Levinson, the face of an individual consists of two kinds of desires: firstly, the desire to be favored by others; secondly, the desire to be unimpeded by others in one’s acts. Furthermore, they indicated that we could divide the participants’ face into two kinds of face: Negative face and Positive face. Brown and Levinson give their definitions that are related to positive face in two ways: as “the want of every member that he wants be desirable to at least some others executors”, or alternately, “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ claimed by interactants”. Negative face was defined as “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions will be unimpeded by other social members”, or “the basic pursuit of territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, for example, the freedom of action and freedom from imposition”. In brief, positive face means hoping getting others approval, fondness, appreciation and esteem. Negative face refers to the individual does not want to be interfered, nor disturbed or compelled by others or dedicated their benefits, in other words, they are pursuing the right of being themselves.

Brown and Levinson reckon that positive face and negative face broadly existing in human cultures, it is inevitable that the face-threatening acts, which refers to an act that intrinsically damages the face of the hearer or the speaker by acting in a way that against the wants and desires of the other, appeared and both sides’ two kinds face will be impacted in the process of communication. That is to say, both of the speaker and hearer are facing the threat of positive face and negative face. The face-threatening acts approximately can be divided into four categories: first, the words and actions that threatens listeners’ negative face; second, the words and actions that threatens the listener’s positive face; third, the words and actions that threatens the speakers negative face; fourth, the words and actions that threatens the speakers positive face. The huge number of face-threatening acts may bring some undesirable situation, under the circumstances, Brown and Levinson advise people to use politeness strategies to protect face and decrease the threatening degree of those acts.

On the basis, Scollon voices his opinion that face is a contradictory conception which includes two sub-concepts: involvement and independence. During the course of communication, on the one hand, the speaker should take care of the other side. On the other hand, the speaker should maintain independence to some extent and show respect for the listener’s independent needs as well. The contradiction of face is manifested when the speaker pays more attention to the listener, which will definitely menace the speaker’s rights and independence. However, the listener’s rights and independence will be infringed and the attention to the listener will be decreased when the speaker tries to preserve his own rights and independence.

2.2 Face Perception in Chinese Culture

Face perception, as one of the significant signs in Chinese culture, has attracted a great deal of scholars to research this question. The topping Chinese anthropologist, Hu Hsien-Chin, the first scholar who has made further study of face and has written a paper about face theory named Chinese Face Perspective in her book *Face and Favor: Chinese Power Game*. From her view, the “face” in the Chinese culture consists of two parts: *lian* and *mianzi*. *Lian* refers to one’s moral traits in social life. If an individual does something that is not in accordance with the social rules or runs counter to the social moral standards, he or she will be criticized by society or other social members

and will lose his or her face. *Mianzi* refers to the promotion of one's prestige. People can heighten it by gaining support or praise. In Hu's view, face marks an individual's main social reputation that people can acquire by a good deal of manners, such as being wisdom in their daily life and working hard persistently. Both these two aspects of *lian* and *mianzi* are connected with the conception of face in Chinese culture. *Lian* refers to the moral character which is acquired by oneself and *mianzi* refers to fame that is given by societal members or society. As a result, people always spare no efforts to maintain their *mianzi* and to protect their *lian*. Additionally, Hu has presented some other relative face perception, for instance, *gei mianzi*, (giving face), *liu mianzi*(giving someone an opportunity to reacquire lost honor, granting face), *zheng mianzi* (earning one's face), *shi mianzi*(losing face).

It is an emblematic and momentous social psychological phenomenon. From the view of Chinese people, face is of vital importance, sometimes, people even think that it is more important than life. The Chinese always attempt to protect their face as well as the others' face when communicating with other social members. They usually elevate others status by belittling themselves. When it comes to criticize people they often first praise them then point out their disadvantages.

Generally speaking, we can comprehend the meaning of face in Chinese culture from two aspects. Firstly, face works as a symbol of individual's identity and ideal image, and the totality of individual's social status and social value., further, the behaviors of the individual must comply with requirements of his status and image in Chinese culture. There are some generally accepted standards of moral norms and ideal personality which standardize the words and actions of the individual. One will earn his face when his words and deeds comply with the universal standard, otherwise, he will lose his face. Secondly, face is the mark of an individual's interpersonal relationship and his social influence of which Chinese speak highly. In Chinese culture, face is regarded as the criterion of the interpersonal influence of individual, during the process of interpersonal communication, taking care of others face so that a harmonious relationship will be reached, which means giving others face considerately, and, if the individual does not giving the other face, which will make the other lose face. In a broad sense, this kind of face has the same requirements with Brown and Levinson's positive face.

3. Differences of Face Perception between Chinese and Western Cultures Reflected in Movie Saving Face

3.1 An Introduction to Saving Face

Saving Face, an American romantic comedy directed by Chinese-American director Alice Wu in 2004, which narrates a story happening in a Chinese community in New York. The film centers on Will, an excellent and promising Chinese-American surgeon, and her unmarried and gravid mother. The protagonist Will is an outstanding surgeon, it is high time for her to get marry while she still does not have a boyfriend. Moreover, she also is unwilling to dress herself as other beautiful girls. In fact, she is a lesbian, however, her mother does not know so that her mother often urges her to join in some parties held by associations and friends from Chinese community in order to let her find a suitable boyfriend and get married. On the one hand, Will is afraid of telling her mother the truth. On the other hand, she is loath to date with any young man introduced by her mom and her mother's friends. One day, she encounters a pretty ballet dancer Vivian and soon they have a love affair.

Dramatically, Will's grandparents find that Will's mother is pregnant and rejects to tell others who is the baby's father. Will's grandfather is a well-beloved Chinese professor who has received good traditional Chinese education. In his points, it is a shameful thing for a single woman having a baby, which will let the whole family lose face in the local Chinese community. So he forces her to leave his home until Will's mother gets married with a man matching her. Will's mother cannot help but living with her daughter Will momentarily, meanwhile, Will is try her best to introduce some suitable males to her mother. After a short time, Will's grandparents discover a man named Lao Zhou with good condition they believe that the man can perfectly match Will's mom. So they urge

Will's mother to marry with him right away. On the day of her mother's wedding, Will accidentally finds that the baby's father is Xiao Yu who is at the same age with her. Finally, Xiao Yu recognizes the relationship with Will's mother and says he loves Will's mother, at the end of the movie they live together blissfully.

As for Will, she has been affected by both traditional Chinese culture and American culture, to some degree, therefore sometimes she is quite confused. For one thing, she loves Vivian, for another thing, she is lack of courage to tell other family members her sexual orientation and the relationship with Vivian. Therefore, Vivian feels disappointed and sad about that. Then Vivian goes to Paris plaintively when she gains an opportunity to Paris to further develop her career. After a few months, Will meet Vivian again, and Will tells the public that she loves Vivian bravely. Then they get together happily.

Two major clues in this film: Will is lesbian and her single mother is pregnant. Both of the two things are shameful in Chinese community and will lead the whole family lose face.

3.2 Differences of Face Perception Reflected in Language

There are some differences in the form of address in western and Chinese culture. In western, salutations can be used in two forms: reciprocal address form and nonreciprocal address form. It will be affected by power, solidarity and other social factors when using these two kinds of salutations. When the both sides of speaker and hearer are equivalent in social power, both sides choose the same salutations, such as: title + last name. when they are unequal in social power, one using the formal salutations and the other will choose informal one, for example, on a first- name basis. In addition, the degree of intimacy and sex also are the factors influencing call way.

In Chinese culture, the politeness principle of self-denigration is completely exhibited in salutations. Influenced by social structure kinship and clan, the using of salutations shows the tendency of power. People often add some affixes in the surname and name, for example, Xiao Yu and Lao Zhou, in order to consider the other sides' positive and show harmonious interpersonal relationship. There is a characteristic call way for Chinese people, they usually are habituated to utilize the noun of blood relationship to call those people who are not the members of your families, for example, they call the people who are not their kin but older than their brother or sister. It is a demonstration of collectivism in Chinese culture. However under the background of western culture it is amazing and hard for them to accept.

In the movie, Will's neighbor Jay, an American, calls Will's mother Mrs. Gao, while Vivian, who has been affected by the Chinese traditional culture, calls Will's mother aunt. Actually, it might be an impolite way to call your friends or neighbors Mr. and Mrs., in Chinese people's view, which show an alien relationship with each other. If an individual, who is younger than you or his social position lower than you, does not address you in a respectable way in front of others. You might think that he does not give you face. While in the view of American, it is a very common thing in their daily life, the form of address does not have any denotative meanings.

3.3 Differences of Face Perception Reflected in the Relationship between Parents and Children

As we all know, in China, people always regard children as their spiritual ballast. The concept of family is rooted deeply into the heart of Chinese people. Children are closely related to their parents, even they have grown up enough, got married and had their own families. They still have to live with their mothers and fathers, at least a certain time. And taking the responsibility of looking after parents means living with them and complying with their instructions. As a Chinese child, if you do not provide for your parents, all your neighboring families and relatives will make carping comments on you for a long time. It even will affect the position of the individual. Furthermore, if parents live a shabby life while children live a luxury life, parents' condition might make their children lose face. It may be wonderful explanation for those persons who realize their value and get certain social position bring their parents to the cities to live a modern and comfortable life regardless of their parents' will.

However it is completely diverse in America, when children reach the certain age of adult,

parents will not live together with their children and interference with their personal issues. When children become independent, they will not rest on their parents, meanwhile, parents will support themselves and not bank on their children. Both of two sides have their own freedom to select their life styles that they are wanted.

In the beginning of the film *Saving Face*, Will's mother, unwed and forty-eight years old, still lives with her parents. When Will's grandfather know that Will's mother is pregnant, he says: I am a respected professor, however, my daughter has a baby but we do not know who is the baby's father, how others might think about me and laugh at me; you do not want your face I still want my prestige. And in order to save his face, he gets her daughter out of their home. Will's mother has no choice but to ask her daughter for help and live with her. When Will's colleague knows that she is astonished and asks why her mother does not buy a house and live alone, Will answers that it is crazy for a Chinese daughter not to take care of her mom. In addition, when Will's mother lives with her, she helps Will to rearrange her house and pays more attention to her private affairs. All of that, shows us a closely relationship between parents and children, and both sides' condition will greatly influence each other's face. However, it is contradicted in western countries.

4. Differences of Face Perception Reflected in Interpersonal Relationship

People highly value friendship in both cultures, but, there still are some different things. In Chinese culture, if people have a higher social status they will have a good deal of friends. Many people will take the others' social position, financial situation and interpersonal relationship into consideration when they are going to make friends, especially in the world of adult. To some degree, they regard friends as instruments that can offer some help when they need. However, in western cultures the situation is different. When people make friends they may attach more importance to the individual's qualities and personalities.

There is a scene in the film *Saving face*, Will's mother invites her friends to play mahjong when Will's mother is pregnant, while all of her friends make excuse that they are too busy to play mahjong. Actually, they think that the issue that Will's mother is pregnant is disgraceful and might make them lose face. Just as the saying goes: When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter, it is an ordinary thing in China, the individual's friends will leave him alone and even pretend not to know him when the individual does something shameful. They fear that their friend's deed make them lose face. However, Vivian's American friends do not leave her but respect her choices when they know that Vivian is a lesbian. That is an excellent example of negative face.

5. The Reasons Leading to Different Face Perception between Chinese and Western Cultures

As we have discussed above, people from different backgrounds assert disparate voices towards face. The Chinese, compared with westerners, might pay more attention to their face. In addition, the Chinese people highly value others' face and the collective face, however, westerners only center on their own face. It is due to that face has various kinds of conceptions which back on the context, and are derived from different cultural backgrounds, communication models and geographical environments.

5.1 Cultural Background

Confucianism is a vital factor that affects all aspects of Chinese people, for example, thinking model and value. The idea of "oneness of man and nature" and "benevolence" proposed by the Confucianism has a very important role in the formation of face culture. The thought of "oneness of man and nature" highlights the harmony between human beings and nature, and contends a harmonious philosophy. Therefor people make great effort to produce a harmonious interpersonal relationship and living environment, and avoid conflicting with others under the influence of this thought. The best way for avoiding the conflicts with others is to give others enough face.

"Benevolence" is a person's moral standard, it requires that people find their own position and be a gentleman under the discipline of ritual. If a person is benevolent, he can realize his social value

and fight face for the community he belongs to. Otherwise, he may lose his social position that is of vital importance for Chinese people. Therefore, the Chinese people attach more importance to saving face, because it is not only reputation but also indispensable for people to live.

In western countries, humanism, which is generated from the process of opposing the medieval theocracy, has made great contribution to the formation of face culture. Humanism underlines the individual's rights and value, and creates the individualism whose core is individual freedom. With the establishment of modern capitalism that is mainly characterized by democratic spirit, and the augmenting of population mobility in western countries. It is difficult for them to form settled group, let alone a beneficial group. These sorts of social traits make the western people become independent, creative, open-minded, and straightforward. Under this circumstances, the individual rights, personal struggle and self-improvement become their life goals.

5.2 Geographical Environment

The Chinese civilization is generated from the plain with rivers flowing. With loamy soil, fitting climate, all that provide natural condition for ancient Chinese to farm. Agricultural civilization is prosperous for thousand years, and people tend to live in a familiar surroundings due to the inflexibility of agricultural civilization. In this social circumstance, inhabitants all are acquainted with each other and interdependent with each other, then, they gradually form a big family in a long time. Under this condition, collectivism is forming. As a member in a collective society, individuals must take their responsibilities in the course of protecting the survival of the group. In order to exhibit the sociality of the individual, they gradually form a habit of neglecting individual's value, however, highlighting the value of the group. Little by little, the Chinese form a thinking mode that the individual must obey and depend on the collectivity, in addition, the individual cannot advocate individual heroism that will damage the benefits of collectivity and make the essential collectivity lose face. Generation by generation, the collectivism come into form, as a result, they all attach more importance to others' face and mutual face. Collectivism is the most remarkable factor. Chinese people deem that each individual pertains to a fixed collectivity, and the individual must comply with the rules of the certain collectivity.

When it comes to the concept of face in western culture, it is deeply affected by ancient Greek and Roman culture generated from maritime civilization. The limited living space in island compels western ancestors to abandon farming and engage in maritime trade, which leads to the generation of commercial civilization emphasizing contract and competition. The cruelty of business competition pressurized them to keep their individual benefits from violating, which indicates that they think person profits is supreme in interpersonal communication, additionally, they hope that their rights and freedom not to be interfered by anyone, in other words, pay more attention to maintain their negative face.

5.3 Communicative Mode

The communication mode is another factor that makes great contribution to the differences of face culture. Edward T. Hall, a distinguished American anthropologist, differentiates communication into high-context communication and low-context communication. High-context communication refers to communication in societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time(Edward 75). Many aspects of communication are not made explicit because the both sides know what to express and what to think from years of interaction with each other. Chinese belongs to high-context communication.

In the process of communication, Chinese people always choose an implicit and indirect way to show their opinions. And a word or a sentence usually may contain several meanings. High-context communication is more likely to pay more attention to the environment around the speaker and hearer and verbal communication is not the major way for them to convey information. For instance, in the film *saving face* Will invites her neighbor Jay to have supper with her mother one night. When Jay comes in the room with his shoes, Will's mother is anger while she just rolls her eyes and says to Will, she does not told how Jay should do directly. When starting having dsupper, Jay eats lots of soy sauce. Will's mother thinks that it is harmful to Jay's health, however, in order to save

Jay's face, her mother does not tell Jay the truth.

Low context communication refers to communication in societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, communication may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave (Edward 75). For example, in the movie when Will tells one of her colleagues that tonight she must to meet Vivian's friends although there are several patients waiting for her to treat. However, her colleague, an American, tells her directly that she should dress her overall and get work immediately and abandon the hope that she can meet Vivian in time.

5.4 Thinking Mode

The different face considerations are the reflections of different thinking mode. The Chinese's thinking modes is characterized by visualization intuition and entirety while American's thinking models has the traits of logic analysis and the linearity. Due to the influence of Chinese traditional society, the Chinese attach more importance on intuition and emotion. Their experiences and feelings are involved in the course of thinking, and we can find this example in lots of poems in which the authors connected sentences with pictures and images filled with pretty sceneries. They usually assess others in line with their experiences and feelings when communicating with other social members. The Chinese society is filled with a variety of human relationships, and face will be highlighted in the communication.

By contrast, American thinking models are logical, direct and simple. According to Robert B. Kaplan's research, the American people's thinking mode is a vertical straight line. Hence, Americans are thinking logically and directly and having little emotion implicated so that they do not care much about face and human relation in the process of social communication.

We can draw a conclusion that the Chinese and the American have different thinking models from the above analysis. The Chinese thinking mode is emotional and circular in order to give others face and show their respect indirectly and politely way in communication. By contrast, the American thinking mode is direct and straight, they pay more attention to what they think important rather than others' face.

6. Conclusion

From what have been discussed above, we get to know that the Chinese face conception is a reflection of collectivism based on the Confucian culture deriving from agricultural civilization while the western face perception is a reflection of individualism based on private ownership derived from industrial civilization. So during the process of communication, we'd better utilize different strategies when communicating with persons from different cultural background. In the modern society, communication is vitally important for people's personal development and career success. Therefore, we have to take care of each other's face in the course of communication so as to achieve the goal of communication.

Furthermore, from the film *Saving Face*, we can know that life is our own, we can take others' opinions into consideration but the final decision relies on ourselves. We cannot neglect ourselves just to please others. In fact, face, love, respect and family all are essential elements for a happy life, and face should not be the fetter of a happy life. If our deeds and actions do not damage the society and others' profit, we have the right to choose our own life-styles. With the springing up of new things in modern society, when we hold tolerant attitudes in the process of social interaction, we could live a more enjoyable and comfortable life.

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