Comparison of the Differences in Face Perceptions Between China and the West

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Abstract: The current review aims to investigate the differences between the views of face in China and Western countries in the theoretical and practical aspects and demonstrate external manifestations of cross-cultural conflict. The study started by bringing in theories about 'face', involved comparing views from different researchers, and listed out some specific daily activities to illustrate how the face issue works in diverse countries. Significant differences were discovered in the views of 'face' in various cultures, and the gap was found to be more obvious in the activities in people's daily lives than in theories, which leads people to treat things and act differently. Although more research is needed to identify the differences in nature and birth of theories, findings suggest a need to pay attention to these differences and how to use them to show respect for people from China or other Western countries in intercultural communication.

Keywords: face, China, west, lian, mianzi

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Policy Information

In the era of increasingly popular globalization trends, the 'China and Globalization Report' points out that in 2023, as China enters a new stage of epidemic prevention, international tourism and international studying abroad will experience a strong recovery, continuously promoting the development of humanistic globalization. In 2023, as the number of international students returns to pre pandemic levels, the economic contribution of international students to destination countries will also be close to returning to pre pandemic levels. International students' majors in STEM will still be concentrated, but international students in fields such as social sciences, humanities, and arts will continue to increase. With the relaxation of China's entry quarantine and visa policies, the demand for outbound travel and overseas investment will be released, and the number of Chinese students studying abroad and studying in China will be significantly restored. This will help to calibrate the Western perception of China, eliminate international public misunderstandings of China, reduce misunderstandings between both sides, enhance the country's soft power construction, and promote new developments in understanding and communication between China and foreign relations.

1.2. Previous Research

Cross cultural communication is a hot topic in the field of social sciences. Liu links movies with conflicts in cross-cultural communication [1], Qi interprets the concept of 'face' in Chinese culture from a global sociological perspective [2], and Ho believes that the concept of face has universality [3]. Although the above studies involve the face and its related concepts, they have not directly discussed the differences in the concept of the face and have less relevance to the problem of the face in daily behavior.

1.3. Main Idea

This article starts from the definitions and theories of the concept of face in both China and Western countries, combines them with practice, and compares them from both theoretical and temporal perspectives. It objectively analyzes the cultural background hidden behind the differences, providing a cultural background for resolving conflicts caused by cultural differences, and providing conditions for future cross-cultural communication research.

2. The View of Face in Western Countries

2.1. Goffman's Theories

Goffman's theories are agreed by many people, and he defined the face as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' [4]. He claimed people's feeling of face is determined by the situation of society; it is the societal rules that build people's view of face. Also, the face is not still attached to one; instead, it can be evaluated by activities happening at some time. Importantly, people pay attention to faces during particular activities, but it's essential to maintain face in simple life.

2.2. Brown and Levinson's Theory

Brown and Levinson claim that 'face' is 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' [5], which consists of two related aspects: negative face and positive face. Positive face is the want that an adult wants to make others consider reasonable, and negative face is the want that people's area and behaviors are not prevented by others [5]. According to the two concepts, there are two redressors for positive face and negative face: positive politeness and negative politeness [5]. During a conversation, when the speaker shows his opinion, it is the behavior of protecting the speaker's view that the listener agrees and applauds him; conversely, it is the behavior of protecting the listener's negative face that the speaker does not impose his own will on the listener, so they are both the conducts to maintain bilateral face. When it comes to positive politeness, its measure is to create a favorable impression or feel that one's values have been recognized by the listener (e.g., In the after-sales service process, customer service usually places sentences with an apology at the beginning to alleviate customer dissatisfaction with the quality of the product. 'We are very sorry for the inconvenience caused to you'), and the measure of negative politeness is to speak vaguely, leave the listener with a choice, or clearly, indicate that they do not want to affect the other person's freedom to act, etc. (e.g. In interpersonal communication, it is also easy for people to have different opinions on the evaluation of a certain person, and this situation can evolve into conflicts in communication. If you want to alleviate conflicts at this time, many people will choose to change the topic to avoid disputes). In a nutshell, Brown and Levinson's theory provides some theoretical support for people's social interaction activities to promote smooth communication. In addition, face is also an image that individuals have in a relational situation and its character is determined by all the participants [6],

meaning how one person's face is relevant to people around him.

2.3. Application of Face in Western Countries

In Western countries, some words about face like 'in wrong face', 'to have a wide face', 'have the face'. 'have egg on one's face'. When people are in the 'in wrong face' situation, it means that their social image is not in accordance with the line they hold onto all the time. 'to have a wide face' means you have a lot of friends at first, now it can be understood as 'you have a wide friendship circle on social media'. 'have the face' is always used when people want to condemn the other and it means one person did something which can cause damage to others without thinking and he do not have any guilt to others. In other words, the person does not care about his image towards public and public recognition. 'Have an egg on one's face' can show a person is in a situation where he is not respected by others and loses his dignity. The slangs above can show a negative effect, and they can also be called 'lose face'. Conversely, one can 'save one's face' when he keeps his public image from being hurt and maintains a good impression to the public. Similarly, people can use 'give one's face' in China, similar to 'save one's face'. However, it often comes with a sense of purpose. In general, the one given the face can gain a better result from it, but no one says 'I give your face' in daily communication, instead, when people receive requirements from others, they will do this behavior.

2.4. Social Discipline and People's Behaviors

In society, people are always taught by the rules that it is not polite to witness others losing face and do nothing [4]. In this situation, two kinds of people are suitable for public opinion: people who can keep calm to others' embarrassment and those who cannot feel sad or other negative senses for themselves' embarrassment. The former is called 'heartless'; the latter is called 'shameless'.

As for 'save face', people have two tendencies: one is the desire to protect themselves; the other is to protect others. When they save their own face, they are mainly defensive. To illustrate, they can take actions to prevent them from being embarrassed by choosing topics carefully at the start of every communication and change their lines in time to finish a conversation. When they save others' faces, they are mainly protective. To be specific, people obey social rules and manage to show their politeness and respect when they have conversations with others.

Face-work is an important concept in the Western view of 'face' because it is always needed when a person is losing his face. Who will take part in doing face-work is not the most important; it is solving the questions that is the most essential, because it is an issue which is not only about individuals but also about the social rule forming in the whole society, and it means the symbol of power and care for the weakness. For example, In the Victorian era of England, afternoon tea was very popular among the nobility, and the etiquette of afternoon tea was considered very important by the nobility at that time. The process and dress requirements of afternoon tea were very cumbersome, but in the eyes of the nobility, it was one of the ways they made new friends in the upper social circle. More importantly, they used this cumbersome etiquette to demonstrate their power and maintain their face. Nowadays, society is focusing on cultivating a sense of respect for the weak (disabled, pregnant women, elderly, etc.) among people. In recent years, more and more volunteers have participated in sign language learning and helped hearing-impaired people, and the government has invested more in public welfare facilities, which means that face work also plays a certain role in caring for vulnerable groups.

3. The View of the Face in China

3.1. Origin and Development of 'Face' in China

Regarding face, it can be traced back to Confucius' work 'Spring and Autumn', in which it refers to 'status', which is a requirement and standard for social morality and ethics. In other words, it teaches people how to be a person (how to complete oneself) and realizes their own value in the identity bestowed on them by society [7]. Face is an important social concept in China; as Lin Yutang said, face, along with fate and grace, is one of the three major goddesses who rule Chinese society [8]. 'face' also appeared in Luxun's works [9]. In his opinion, the face is changeable. In other words, it can change and transform depending on social class, wealth and other factors, so sometimes similar things done by the poor and the rich respectively are completely different in fact. Lu's interpretation of face is formed from the perspective of social status and has a strong sense of the times, which is not completely identical to face in modern communication because in the change of historical background. Hu, Hsien Chin is a famous scholar studying Chinese face culture, and she divided the 'face' concept into two aspects: lian and mianzi. The two aspects focus on morality and social image [10]. The 'face' is a social constraint for maintaining moral standards and, an internalized self-restraint force. However, mianzi is entirely different. It can be lent, added, fought for, and perfunctory, which is firstly based on the accumulation of wealth, fame and ability. The former tends towards personal internal conditions, while the latter tends towards personal external conditions.

3.2. Branches of 'Face'

Lian and mianzi are widely applied. When they are used in people's daily lives, 'no lian' is more serious than 'no mianzi' because the former is an insult to personal character; The latter expresses a reputation that has not met one's expectations. In social interactions, people tend to maintain their 'mianzi'. In most cases, 'mianzi' can be acquired through various means, even through ways that people are unwilling to acknowledge as' no lian'. When scolding someone for being 'no lian', it is actually an insult to their moral character and personality. In a famous Chinese TV drama, 'Ode to Joy', Ying Qin's mother despises his girlfriend Qiu Yingying's past romantic experience and uses insulting language to personally attack her. Qiu Yingying's friend Qu Xiaoxiao scolds Ying Qin's mother for 'no lian' because she has not done anything morally corrupt, and Ying Qin's mother has repeatedly sought help from Qiu Yingying, while in turn slandered her, her behavior is unethical, so Qu Xiaoxiao gave her a 'no lian' evaluation. As for mianzi, for example, in the drama 'Go Ahead', Tangcan's mother only cares about how much money Tang Can can earn as an actress and tries every means to extract her value. When her career progresses smoothly, she will show off to her relatives and friends around her. However, when Tangcan encounters setbacks in her career and has no job, she dislikes taking her daughter out and thinks it will make her 'no mianzi'. 'No mianzi' means she may be looked down on by others and lose her sense of superiority, which can damage her image towards the public.

3.3. Differences in Application and Meaning

It is worth mentioning the tendency of use to mianzi and lian. Zhou claim that mianzi is positive and lian is negative [11]. However, it is hard to define because both have negative and positive language situations. Phrases including 'lian' often have negative meanings like 'no lian' and 'lose lian', while there are also words like 'increase lian', which is called 'zhang lian' in Chinese. Conversely, words about 'mianzi' can be applied in both positive and negative situations like 'have mianzi' (few people say 'have lian'), 'increase mianzi', 'fight for mianzi'. Interestingly, 'mianzi' and 'lian' have identical meanings under some situations. To be specific, if a child scores high in the college entrance

examination and enters a well-known university, their parents will say that he increases their lian. In this case, it can also be said that their parents have mianzi because of this matter. In such a context, the meanings of lian and mianzi converge because they both mean that this makes his parents proud and helps to establish their positive public image. Although this is not entirely the same as the concept of 'lian' in the previous text, from another perspective, whether it is 'achieving good grades' or 'entering a good university', it cannot be classified as a personal character. This statement is reasonable, so this term can also be understood according to the concept of 'mianzi'.

In a word, although 'face' concept is divided into two parts in China as 'lian' and 'mianzi', they constitute the Chinese view of the face and exert influence on people's communication.

4. The Differences Between the Two

4.1. Theoretical Level

At the theoretical level, the view in Western countries is simpler than that in China. Chinese scholars have a more detailed definition and scope of face, as in Western scholars' research, face is referred to as face, and there is no further classification under this term. In China, people value both mianzi and lian, and in cultural psychology and practical operations, regardless of which one is lost, they will consider it a behavior that is disadvantageous to maintain their public image. In addition, Western understanding of the face is more focused on the relationship between single persons and the public or a certain person within the public group, and they focus on protecting the image of each individual person; The Chinese people's understanding of the face is the relationship between an individual and the entire collective in a group. They hope that in communication, face can create a harmonious atmosphere between the individual and the group they belong to. In some situations, the concept of 'face' as a whole cannot accurately characterize things, like Lian and Mianzi. For example, when a businessman becomes wealthy by selling counterfeit goods, evading taxes, and other means, he has mianzi but no lian in front of unknown people, because money has created a relatively high social status for him; When a boy confesses to a girl and is rejected, he has no mianzi but has lian, because it does not involve moral issues. Conversely, if only face is used to describe it, it will be collectively referred to as 'lose face'. Also, Oetzel et al. provide some opinions about that. They claim that members in the context of collectivism worry about their own faces when facing members of external collectives and worry about the faces of others when facing members within their own group; In the context of individualism, both internally and externally, they are concerned about their own face, which derives from main social trends of thought [12].

4.2. Practical Level

Compared with theory, there can be a clearer understanding of this difference in practice. Usually, when an American woman is praised for her beautiful bag, she will say thank you; When a Chinese woman is praised for her beautiful bag, she will deny it. This is because in Chinese culture, people are taught to be modest by social morality, especially when facing praise; they cannot directly respond with gratitude. The first thing to do is to refuse and lower their status. This is not a way of belittling oneself, but a way of showing respect to others. In this way, the person being praised will be regarded as a polite person, and the receiver of the information will also improve his image in the process. However, this is an inappropriate behavior in the United States, where self-denial is equivalent to self-humiliation and damaging one's own face [13]; So, in most cases, they rarely humble themselves.

In the Analects of Confucius, there is a saying that 'Property suggestions reciprocity. It is not proprietary not to give out but to receive, or vice versa'. Therefore, in China, the value of gifts is very important. Usually, the more valuable a gift is, the more respect and affection it shows for the other. During holidays, people like to choose beautifully packaged gifts. If the gift is cheap, people will feel

ashamed. In Western countries, the value of gifts is not as important as the meaning they contain. Giving valuable gifts is suspected of bribery and can cause unnecessary trouble for the other party, so people avoid giving valuable gifts. When receiving gifts, Chinese people often refuse them multiple times before accepting them and put them aside until they finally open them privately; In Western countries, gifts are given in public, and the recipient will open the gift in person to praise it. These two methods are completely opposite, but both are aimed at protecting the other's face and avoiding losing face.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore the differences in face values between Chinese and Western cultures in cross-cultural communication, as well as their performance in practical applications. Based on the theory of Goffman et al. and listing the examples that occur in daily life, this article obtains results in both theoretical and practical aspects. Although this study clearly illustrates the relationship between the manifestation of this difference and cultural background, there are also limitations to some extent. Due to the fact that most of the materials come from theoretical works, they cannot fully align with the theory in practical operation. Further research is needed primarily at the practical level to address the cultural roots and resolution strategies of conflicts caused by face issues in cross-cultural communication. This study fills the gap in comparing the differences in face values between China and the West from both theoretical and practical perspectives, and questions some existing theories through communicative behavior, providing theoretical support for conflict resolution in cross-cultural communication.

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